

Peshat, Derash, and Beyond: Interpreting the Torah

HUC-JIR L.A., BIB 621-A
Spring 2018/5778
Mon., 1:20-3:40 p.m.

Dr. Tamar Ron Marvin
tmarvin@huc.edu

course website:
<https://hucpeshat.ajs.hcommons.org/>

Course Description

To study *parshanut* is to join an enduring, multivalent, polyvocal conversation about the meaning of the Torah. Building upon rabbinic modes of interpretation, medieval Jews innovated new ways of reading the Torah text; this course will examine the contexts, methods, sources, and impact of their foundational commentaries, recorded on the pages of *Miqra'ot Gedolot*. Through the in-depth study of a selection of *parshiyot* from Vayiqra, Bamidbar, and Devarim, students will emerge grounded in traditional methodology and prepared to engage knowledgeably and creatively in their own work interpreting the Torah text.

The course will focus on the development of different schools of interpretive methodologies; we will approach *Miqra'ot Gedolot* not as a unitary, disembodied text, but as one made up of distinct voices influenced by each commentator's time, place, method, and, sometimes, by one another. As such, we will consider individual voices and regional conversations before moving, in the second half of the course, to a full intertextual dialogue. The texts that we study will take us from early Ashkenaz to "golden age" Sefarad and through to the close of the medieval period of the Rishonim—but also on a narrative progression through the complex *parashot* of the last generation of Israelites in the desert as they approach the Land of Israel and prepare to enter. Our study will culminate with a sustained unit on the strange story of Bila'am as interpreted by the great commentators, before turning briefly to the intriguing matters raised by the death of Moshe and ending with a consideration of the legacy of the commentators in modernity.

Throughout the course, we will probe the pathways by which the medieval Torah commentaries have been transmitted to us, asking questions about why and how they were written and used by their authors and first audiences, and what impact they have had on Jewish tradition. Students will have the opportunity to present their own commentary and supercommentary in three written *derashot*, as well as in a final project writing their own line commentary on a set of *parshiyot*, in dialogue with classical *mefarshim*.

Course Objectives

1. To attain a familiarity with and deep understanding of the concerns, methodologies, and interpretations of (1) individual commentators, (2) schools of commentary, and (3) intertextual conversations;

2. To gain facility with the classical texts of Torah commentary, developing an individualized process for working through *parshanut*;
3. To contextualize the commentators historically and culturally and appreciate the textual and material problems presented by the study of premodern texts;
4. To culminate with the ability to contribute knowledgeably and creatively to traditional materials.

Course Expectations

You are, first and foremost, expected to be an active participant in your own learning and in the formation of a respectful, engaged discussion space in the classroom. This means that you should come to class prepared to discuss the assigned materials, as follows:

- You should be comfortable reading the *Miqra'* and able to explain it, i.e., what is the context, what is happening in the text?;
- You should be able to identify potential issues in the *Miqra'* and suggest what the commentator(s) will address;
- You should be able to capably read and translate the commentary;
- You will have looked up any references you identify within the texts, such as other *pesuqim* cited in the text.
- You should have an idea to propose about the content of the commentary, e.g., what is Ibn Ezra getting at here?

Please note: This does *not* mean that you should be able to do all of the above flawlessly and without having any questions or doubts. Preparation means doing a careful, close reading of the material, a skill we will practice together and actively develop a process for in class. It means you will know, for the most part, what you're unsure about on class day. Maybe you couldn't find the midrash referenced (maybe you didn't realize it was referenced), maybe you are unsure of the *niqqud* of that unfamiliar word, maybe you are stumped by an entire comment—not only is that okay, all of that is the reason we are working on this material! The idea is to have spent focused time with the text, so that you can bring these questions to class and get closer to the ideal presented in the bullet points above.

Texts

You may use any text of *Miqra'ot Gedolot* that you own or prefer, which will serve as our main text for the course. The commentaries we will be working on that are included in most editions of *Miqra'ot Gedolot* are: Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Radaq, Ramban, Rashbam, Ḥizquni, and (just a little bit of) Seforo. These are usually standard, but if they are not included in your edition, please plan to get them on your own. (Not sure where/how? Ask me.) We will be working with a few other commentaries and rabbinic sources as well, and I will provide you with copies of these.

- *Torat Hayyim* (Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 7 vols.) can be purchased as a set on Amazon (usually quick-ship and at a competitive price, but worth checking) and online Judaica retailers. This is the edition I will be using, so if you prefer to follow along in the same text, you may wish to purchase this one.

- *Ha-Keter* (Bar-Ilan), a new, scholarly edition, covers not just the *Humash*, as does *Torat Hayyim*, but some of Na"Kh, with more volumes being currently produced. You can purchase volumes separately online (in US\$) from Bar-Ilan University Press, in either small or large trim size: http://www.biupress.co.il/website_en/index.asp?category=156

Please bring a print copy of the *Miqra'ot Gedolot* text with you to class with you for every meeting. You are welcome to bring a photocopy of the pages we are working on if you wish, for instance, if you want to refer to a different edition of *Miqra'ot Gedolot* than you own or if you don't want to mark up your book. I encourage you to look at variant editions (including digital editions) while working on the text and do bring in and share interesting differences that you note.

Secondary Source Readings

These will be provided to you; refer to the course schedule for due dates.

Harris, Robert A. "Jewish Biblical Exegesis from Its Beginning to the Twelfth Century," in *The New Cambridge History of the Bible, Vol. 2: From 600 to 1450*, ed. Richard Marsden and E. Ann Matter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 596–615.

Kanarfogel, Ephraim. "Midrashic Texts and Methods in Tosafist Torah Commentaries," in Michael Fishbane and Joanna Weinberg, ed., *Midrash Unbound: Transformations and Innovations* (Portland, Ore. and Oxford: Littman, 2013), 267–283.

Nikolsky, Ronit. "Interpret Him as Much as You Want: Balaam in the Babylonian Talmud," in *The Prestige of the Pagan Prophet Balaam in Judaism, Early Christianity and Islam*, ed. George H. van Kooten and Jacques van Ruiten (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008), 213–32.

Sarna, Nahum M. "Abraham Ibn Ezra as Exegete," in Isadore Twersky and Jay M. Harris, ed., *Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra: Writings of a Twelfth-Century Jewish Polymath* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 1–27.

Septimus, Bernard. "Open Rebuke and Concealed Love: Nahmanides and the Andalusian Tradition," in Isadore Twersky, ed., *Rabbi Moses Nahmanides (Ramban): Explorations in his Religious and Literary Virtuosity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 11–34.

Simon, Uriel. "Interpreting the Interpreter: Supercommentaries on Ibn Ezra's Commentaries," in Isadore Twersky and Jay M. Harris, ed., *Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra: Writings of a Twelfth-Century Jewish Polymath* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 86–128.

Talmage, Frank. *David Kimhi: The Man and the Commentaries*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975 (Chapter 3, "The Way of *Peshat*").

Viezzel, Eran. "The Secret of the Popularity of Rashi's Commentary on Torah." *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 17 (2014), 207–217.

Resources to have on hand:

- A Tanakh: I recommend using a Hebrew-only text (such as Koren) so that you are not distracted by the English translation; but any version of the JPS Tanakh (1999 revised text, the most recent) is a good study tool.
- A Hebrew dictionary that you are knowledgeable about and that works for you. For Hebrew/Aramaic-English, I recommend Jastrow for working with medieval commentators, and it'll work fine for most non-problematic words from the Miqra' as well. The BDB (Brown-Driver-Briggs Lexicon) is the standard student reference (Heb-Eng) for Biblical Hebrew, but you may like to use or supplement with Even Shoshan (Heb-Heb), Alcalay (Heb-Eng), or others.
- A dictionary of *rashei teivot* (Hebrew abbreviations): most commonly, *Otzar Rashei Teivot* by Shmuel Ashkenazi and Dov Jarden, which is widely available at Judaica bookstores.
- Encyclopedia Judaica: Updated in 2007, this encyclopedia (not to be confused with the *Jewish Encyclopedia* in the public domain) should be your go-to for looking up accurate contextual information (e.g., the basic biographical outline of an unfamiliar figure).

We will go over these and additional resources available to you in your preparation for class, such as study tools for individual commentators and quality online sources.

Assignments & Assessment

Following is an overview of the assignments that students will receive as a way to practice skills, demonstrate mastery of the material--and, importantly, try out and contribute their own ideas. Assignment sheets with greater detail will be distributed well in advance of due dates, but for your reference, here is a brief description:

1. Attendance, class preparation, and active participation (50%)

Please refer to the bullet points in the "Course Expectations" section directly above for a detailed description of what class preparation means for our course. Active participation means ably reading, translating, and explaining the texts when called to do so; being prepared to knowledgeably add to others' remarks; and being engaged in class discussions. Of course, for this you'll need to be in attendance.

2. Written Assignments (30%)

Students will write three *derashot* (2-3 pp.).

- For Assignment 1, students will write a *derash* incorporating and/or responding to a Rashi comment or comments from those we have studied together. **Due Feb. 12.**
- For Assignment 2, students will write a *derash* in response to a *devar Torah* of their choosing: this can be a written piece, a *shi'ur*/podcast, or another source; the source should be identified, summarized, analyzed, and applied to your work. **Due Mar. 12.**
- Assignment 3 will be an original *derash* on a subject of your choosing, incorporating at least two commentaries. **Due Apr. 9.**

3. Final Project (20%) – Due Wed., May 12

For their final project, students will select a set of *parshiyot* to work on, in consultation with the instructor, and write their own line commentary on it, with reference to the classical *mefarshim* (approx. 5 pp.).

Please refer to the percentages as a reflection of the relative weight given to each area. This means that the effort that you put into weekly preparation and in-class discussion is really important, with room for exploration, mistakes, and learning.

Policies & Attendance Requirements

- **Attendance:** Missing more than two class meetings will result in a lowered grade, illness and emergencies excepted. If you will be absent from class, let me know as soon as possible.
- **Assignment Submission:** Written assignments are due in hard copy at the beginning of class on the day marked on the schedule.
- **Late Assignments:** Late assignments will be accepted only if arrangements are made beforehand, emergencies excepted. If you require an accommodation for an assignment or test date, the more time we have to work out an equitable solution, the more flexibility you can receive.
- **Office Hours:** By appointment, and I will generally be in the classroom before each meeting should you wish to drop in or go over any questions before class (but it's always a good idea to confirm).
- **Email:** I'm available to you to answer any questions or concerns you may have via email and am usually able to respond quickly.

Course Schedule

| Date | Topic | Assignments |
|-----------------------|--|--|
| Jan. 22 | Introduction: What is (and is not) Parshanut? Forms, Methods, Sources, Transmission | <u>Texts</u> : In-class: Sa'adyah to Bereshit 3 Methodological comments (source sheet) |
| Ashkenazic Approaches | | |
| Jan. 29 | Derash: Rashi | <u>Shemini</u> : Nadav and Avihu <u>Texts</u> : Rashi to Vayiqra 10 <u>Reading</u> : R. Harris, "Jewish Biblical Exegesis from Its Beginning to the Twelfth Century" |
| Feb. 5 | From Derash to Peshat: Rashi, Rashbam, Hizquni | Be-ha'alotekha : Miriam's Affliction <u>Texts</u> : Rashi to Bamidbar 12 Rashbam to Bamidbar 12 Hizquni to Bamidbar 12 <u>Reading</u> : E. Viezel, "The Secret of the Popularity of Rashi's Commentary on Torah" |
| Feb. 12 | <i>Con't.</i> | Shelah : The Generation of the Desert <u>Texts</u> : Bamidbar 13-14 <u>Reading</u> : E. Kanarfogel, "Midrashic Texts and Methods in Tosafist Torah Commentaries" (sec. I & II) *Assignment 1: Derash based on Rashi |
| Sefaradic Approaches | | |
| Feb. 26 | Peshat: Ibn Ezra | Qorah : The Revolt against Moshe <u>Texts</u> : Bamidbar 16 <u>Reading</u> : N. Sarna, "Abraham Ibn Ezra as Exegete" |
| Mar. 5 | <i>Con't.</i> | Huqat : Striking the Rock <u>Texts</u> : Bamidbar 20 <u>Reading</u> : F. Talmage, <i>David Kimhi</i> , Ch. 3, "The Way of Peshat" |
| March 12 | Qabbalah: Ramban | Huqat : Striking the Rock <u>Texts</u> : Bamidbar 20 <u>Reading</u> : B. Septimus, "Open Rebuke and Concealed Love: Nahmanides and the Andalusian Tradition" *Assignment 2: Responsive derash |

Miqra'ot Gedolot: Reading the Commentators Together

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|--------------------------------|---|--|
| Mar. 19 | Miqra'ot Gedolot: Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Radaq, Ramban, Rashbam, Hizquni | Balaq: Bila'am and Ma'aseh Pe'or (Bamidbar 22-24) Texts: All commentators on Bamidbar 22 Additional texts: Bamidbar 31:8, 16; Yehoshua 24:6; Micah 6:5; Avot 5:19; Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:3; Sifrei Devarim sec. 357, par. 40; Bava Batra 14b |
| Mar. 26 | <i>Con't.</i> | Balaq: Bila'am and Ma'aseh Pe'or Texts: All commentators on Bamidbar 22 (con't.) Reading: R. Nikolsky, "Interpret Him as Much as You Want: Balaam in the Babylonian Talmud" |
| Apr. 9 | <i>Con't.</i> | Balaq: Bilaam and Ma'aseh Pe'or Texts: All comments on Bamidbar 23 & 24 Additional texts: Rambam, <i>Moreh ha-Nevukhim</i> II, 41 *Assignment 3: Original derash |
| Apr. 16 | Textual Issues: Miqra'ot Gedolot | Ve-Zot ha-Berakhah: The Death of Moshe Texts: Ibn Ezra to Devarim 1:2 & source sheet; all commentators to Devarim 34:5-12 Additional texts: Bava Batra 14b-15a |
| Conclusion | | |
| Apr. 23 | Supercommentaries, the Early Moderns, and Modern Responses | Texts: Seforno Avi Ezer to Ibn Ezra Re'em to Rashi <i>The Torah: A Modern Commentary</i> , rev. ed., ed. W. G. Plaut to Reading: Simon, Uriel. "Interpreting the Interpreter: Supercommentaries on Ibn Ezra's Commentaries" |
| Apr. 30 – May 30: Reading Week | | *Final Paper: due Sun., May 6, <u>via email</u> by 11:59 p.m. |