



Seventy Faces of Torah -

A Brief Overview of Exegesis

Shivim Panim laTorah (שבעים פנים לתורה) - "The Torah has 70 faces." This phrase is sometimes used to indicate different "levels" of interpretation of the Torah. "There are seventy faces to the Torah"; turn it around and around, for everything is in it" (*Bamidbar Rabba "Naso" 13:15; Avot 5:26*). The Torah is a work of literary art, written by the LORD Himself, and therefore shares characteristics with all other works of art.



The Jewish sages typically allow inference within four main categories, with several levels of meaning coexisting simultaneously within a given *pasuk* (verse):

1. *P'shat* - The plain (historical/grammatical) meaning of the text.
2. *Remez* - The allegorical meaning of the text.
3. *Drash* - The moral or imperative sense of the text.
4. *Sod* - The mystical or esoteric meaning of the text.

The initials of these four general categories yield the acronym "PaRDeS" (meaning "orchard" or "garden"), said to be a reference to the ultimate restoration of mankind in the restored Garden of Eden or Paradise:

פַּרְדֵּס Pardes - Orchard, Garden

Hebrew	Letter	Meaning
פְּשָׁט	פ (p)	<i>P'shat</i> - Simple, literal
רֵמָז	ר (r)	<i>Remez</i> - Hint, Suggestion
דְּרָשׁ	ד (d)	<i>D'rash</i> - Insight
סוֹד	ס (s)	<i>Sod</i> - Mystery



Each of these four categories of exegesis is discerned based on literary cues within the texts of the Tanakh. In fact, the first step of studying our holy books is to discern each and every textual detail. Textual anomalies (such as oversized letters, undersized letters, backward letters, etc.) and apparent inconsistencies are not accidental or the result of scribal errors, but are considered sacred to the text itself. Therefore, once discovered, they must be explained. This is the starting point of all our textual exegesis.

Moreover, in the Jewish tradition each of the levels has their own reasoning procedures specific to that level. For example, there are 13 general rules of interpretation for reasoning on the Derash level (Rabbi Yishmael's rules).

Note that according to some within Rabbinical Judaism, PaRDes stands for:

- *P'shat* - the 24 Books of the Written Torah.
- *Remez* - the Six Orders of the Mishnah, the Oral Torah.
- *Derash* - the Talmud and the Shulkhan Arukh, the source of Jewish Law.
- *Sod* - the Zohar of the Kabbalah, the secret of mystical tradition.

Why 70 faces to the Torah?

As the face, so the eye... There are seventy ways of "looking" at the Torah. The Hebrew word for "eye" is 'Ayin. **Ayin** is one of the letters of the Aleph-Bet and has the numerical value of seventy. Also, the Tanakh indicates that 70 has a sacred significance:

- 70 Jewish souls that descended to Egypt
- 70 elders were chosen by Moses
- 70 sages of the Sanhedrin
- 70 years of King David
- 70 years of the Babylonian exile
- 70 Nations of the World
- 70 words of Kiddush

Each generation of the study of Torah adds to the ongoing life of the Torah as it is lived in our people.



מתאונקין לשם שמים

Eilu v'Eilu Divrei Elohim Chayim

אֵלוֹ וְאֵלוֹ דִּבְרֵי אֱלֹהִים חַיִּים

Eilu v'eilu divrei elohim chayim

"These and these are the words of the Living God" (*Talmud Eruvim 13b*)

There are some arguments (regarding interpretation) that come from a person's pride, and there are others that are *machloket l'shem shamayim*, "a disagreement for the sake of Heaven"... Each of us needs wisdom and grace to discern which is which whenever we engage in such *machloket* (debate). The axiom *eilu v'eilu* appeals to a sense of charity we should exhibit whenever we encounter others who have views that differ from our own.

If you argue with and contradict others, you may win some times win a battle, but you will never win the war, since the animosity that develops may alienate you from your friend. On the other hand, if you humble yourself and regard the other person's importance, peace will ensue. "A gentle response will turn back anger" (Proverbs 15:1).

In Pirkei Avot (chapter 5) there is also a statement: "Any *machloket* which is for the sake of Heaven (*l'shamayim*) will stand. Any *machloket* which is not for the sake of Heaven will not stand." If we are going to disagree with others, let *love* be our guiding principle!

An Exegetical Warning

Regarding religious language there are three basic options. *Univocal* speech is that which has only one meaning; *equivocal* speech is that which has many meanings, and *analogical* speech has an "additional level" of meaning (i.e., *ana + logos*) that is similar to *univocal* but *transcends* it to apply to a different order or aspect of reality. Those who believe that Scripture is God's divinely inspired word generally hold to univocal and analogical reading of the texts, using grammatical-historical methods to discover the context and the *original intent of a given author*, though with the rise of postmodern Christianity, equivocal reading has become fashionable. The problem with equivocal readings, however, is knowing where the semantic line should be drawn regarding



significant interpretation and meaning. Postmodern Christianity tends to disregard the primacy of original intent in favor of the reader's intent to locate meaning in a given text, and that of course leads to subjective interpretations of various kinds. Generally speaking Jewish interpretive tradition quotes the Scripture: "One thing God has spoken; two things have I heard" (Psalm 62:11) to suggest that pluralistic interpretations are possible, and this has led to the saying *shivim panim la'Torah*, the Torah has "seventy faces," by which is meant that there are multiple facets of a given text and each has their place, though each will be grounded in the most basic level, called *p'shat*, or the plain sense of the original author, and any other facets inferred or derived will ultimately be consonant with that fundamental level. We also see this pluralistic approach in mystical readings of Torah with the division of four general semantic levels described using the term "Pardes," an acronym that stands for *p'shat* (plain sense), *remez* (allegorical sense), *drash* (moral sense), and *sod* (mystical or mysterious sense). Yeshua, of course spoke in parables and analogies all the time, and moreover as a prophet he also spoke mysterious and miraculous words that foretold the future, and so on, though his message of salvation -- that is, that he was to offer up his life as the sacrificial Lamb of God to repair for the sins of the world -- was intelligible to all "with ears to hear," even if sometimes people misunderstood his meaning.

I should add, however, something I think is **very important** in this regard. Do not attempt to do "deeper analysis" of the Scriptures until you have first mastered P'shat. This is why Rashi is so important to us. "What's troubling Rashi?" is the **FIRST** step to exegesis -- first be sure you understand the plain, historical meaning of the text before you launch out into speculations and mystical readings!



Hebrew for Christians

Learn the Language of the Kingdom!