



Seventy Faces of Torah -

A Brief Overview of Exegesis

Shiv'im Panim laTorah: “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 13:15*). 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 *chaz'l* (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 meaning which is only hinted at by the text.
3. *Derash* - The implicit meaning of the text.
4. *Sod* - The 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
סוּד	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.



מתאונקת לשם שמים

Eilu v'Eilu Divrei Elohim Chayim

אֵלוּ וְאֵלוּ 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

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!!!