

As we begin the Torah anew, it seems appropriate to ask a general methodological question. What I'd like to do this week is begin a discussion of the relationship between midrash and text, via leading questions as ever. Let me note polemically at the outset that the relationship between midrash and text is not synonymous with the relationship between midrash and (what is commonly referred to as) peshat, and that treating midrash and peshat as dichotomous is the source of much error and misinterpretation.

Let's focus on Genesis 4:10 "kol dmei achikha tzoakim eilai min haadomoh". This verse is commonly translated (by R. Saadia Gaon among others) as "The voice of your brother's blood cries out to me from the land", but literally it would be more accurate to translate "The voice of your brother's bloods cry out to me from the land" - the Hebrew is consistently plural.

Rashi cites two explanations for the plural "bloods":

- a) Hevel's blood and that of his descendants
- b) Kayin wounded Hevel many times, not knowing how to kill.

The Yerushalmi offers a third explanation, that "his blood was scattered on the twigs and rocks".

The midrash offers II Kings 9:26 as evidence for a). Can you figure out what the evidence is? (Hint: Read IKings 21:9-20).

In any case, though, the external evidence is not independently compelling (see for example Tehillim 106:38). Nonetheless, Onkelos cites a), leading me to suspect either that he finds the plural uniquely significant in this verse, or that he finds the reference to descendants necessary in context.

Which, and why?

A related question: Assuming the significance of the plural, which of the three explanations above is the most likely explanation of the verse? Why?

.A second, possibly related issue, is why Hashem describes the blood as crying out to Him, rather than merely crying out. The midrash offers a metaphor: if one person kills another in the presence of a third party capable of restraining the murderer, do we not seek satisfaction from the one who stood by?

Meshekh Chokhmah offers a much sharper formulation of this contention that the blood(s) cried to G-d because they felt Him responsible. He suggests that Hevel accuses Hashem of causing his death by rejecting Kayin's sacrifice in Genesis 4:1-6.

Alternatively, we might say simply that Hashem is the source of justice, or that the blood cried out to anyone who could hear and understand.

Which of these explanations seems most likely, and why?

Third issue: Why is it necessary to mention that the bloods cry out "from the land"? Note that this is picked up strongly in Kayin's punishment. How would explanation c) above account for these words?

Overall question: Does the usefulness of the interpretation cited above depend on their being correct explanation of the specific textual phenomena discussed? For example, must we reject b)'s narrative as non-Torah based if R. Saadia Gaon is correct that the plural is insignificant?