

GREAT BIBLICAL COMMENTATORS
By Dr. Avigail Rock

Lecture #08: Rav Yosef Kara

A. Introduction

R. Yosef Kara (1060-1130), known as Mahari Kara, earned his surname because of his occupation as an exegete of the Bible (*Mikra*); he thus earned this title of respect for one who studies *Tanakh*. Mahari Kara lived most of his life in France, in Rashi's city of Troyes, and for a certain period, he lived in Worms, Germany.

Mahari Kara was very close to Rashi, and apparently was his student. He transcribes Rashi's commentaries, and Rashi mentions him in his commentary a number of times (e.g., *Mishlei* 18:22). Rashi's grandson, the Rashbam, also mentions Mahari Kara in his commentaries (see *Bereishit* 37:12), and apparently the Rashbam was influenced by Mahari Kara's exegetical approach.¹

It is not clear if Mahari Kara wrote a continuous commentary on the Torah itself; it may be that he wrote only interpretations of dozens of individual verses. Even these comments have not survived in a complete manuscript, but rather have reached us by way of other people's citations.² It may be that what prevented Mahari Kara from writing a complete commentary on the Torah was Rashi's primogeniture. In any case, as a transcriber of Rashi's commentaries, it may be that our current version of Rashi contains many interpolations originating with Mahari Kara's pen.

Mahari Kara composed a commentary to most of the books of *Nevi'im*.³ His commentaries to *Nevi'im Rishonim* are considered some of the most significant and creative in medieval exegesis, and he is a commentator known for

¹ We will deal with this point at length when we study the Rashbam's commentary on the Torah.

² A. Berliner, *Plethath Soferim: Beiträge zur Jüdischen Schriftauslegung im Mittelalter* (Breslau, 1872).

³ The commentary of Mahari Kara to the book of *Yechezkel* was written by one of his students. This may be derived from a number of places in the commentary, e.g., "This is how my master, R. Yosef son of R. Shimon, explained according to the simple meaning of the text" (14:5), as well as, "And my master R. Yosef explains in another way" (33:27). However, there is no doubt that the style and methodology in the commentary to *Yechezkel* are those of Mahari Kara.

independent and critical thinking.⁴ Among the books of *Ketuvim*, we have Mahari Kara's commentaries on *Iyov* and the five *Megillot*.

Although Mahari Kara has not received the exposure he deserves for his great comments, there is no doubt that his interpretive approach influenced the exegetes of his time, including Ri Bekhor Shor, the Rashbam, Radak, and Ralbag. Thanks to Bar-Ilan University's Haketer project, there has been a resurgence in the popularity of his commentary on the books of *Nevi'im*.

I have decided to dedicate a lesson to the exegetical approach of Mahari Kara, despite the fact that we have only very few of his commentaries on the Torah, due to the great importance of his interpretive approach. This significance is expressed in three points:

- A. Mahari Kara sticks to the *peshat*, much more so than Rashi, and he feels no obligation to cite any *derash* at all. In this, his commentary may be considered trailblazing.
- B. Mahari Kara displays a great sensitivity to literary technique and style.
- C. Mahari Kara delineates exegetical principles that may be applied elsewhere in *Tanakh*.

We will now elaborate on each of these points.

B. Mahari Kara: A Pioneer of *Peshat*

Rashi famously make a declaration of intent in his commentary on *Bereishit* (3:8):⁵

As for me, I have come for no purpose other than the simple meaning of Scripture and the aggadic material which harmonizes the words of Scripture, each word according to its properties.

Nevertheless, we have seen that Rashi, for various reasons, veers from this path.

Without a doubt, the very idea of Rashi to write a biblical commentary not chained to Midrashic material was certainly an innovation in the lands of France and Germany; still, in practice, his remarks are based, to a great extent, on the corpus of *midrashim*. Mahari Kara actually applies Rashi's intent, virtually never citing the words of the Sages. He is aware that his approach is innovative, and it may very well be that his commentaries received a great deal of criticism from

⁴ We may see evidence of Mahari Kara's critical thinking in his challenge to the Sages' attribution of the book of *Shmuel* to the prophet of the same name: "Our Rabbis, of blessed memory, say that Shmuel wrote his book, and He Who lights the land 'will turn the darkness into light before them and make the rough places smooth'" (*I Shmuel* 9:1).

⁵ See our first lesson on Rashi.

the scholars of his generation because of this. Indeed, there may be evidence to this in the fact that there is only one extant manuscript of his commentary, as opposed to the hundreds of manuscripts of Rashi's commentary on the Torah, which testify to its wide circulation. An additional expression of the criticism directed toward his commentaries may be seen in his remarks to *I Shmuel* 1:20:

I know very well that all of the aggadic and Talmudic masters will gloat⁶ over this explanation, for they will never set aside the explanation of our rabbis... But the wise will understand... to see the truth of the matter.

Mahari Kara makes a number of basic assumptions about *peshat* and *derash*:

A. Even the Sages, who wrote the *midrashim*, believed that *peshat* is the essence. The aim of *derash* is only for ethical purposes, "to make the law great and glorious" (*Yeshayahu* 42:21), and not to provide an explanation missing in *Tanakh*.

B. *Tanakh* does not require external facts in order to explain it; it cannot be that the verse speaks ambiguously and relies on aggadic material in order to be understood.

The first assumption can be found, among other places, in Mahari Kara's commentary on *Yeshayahu* 5:9:

Incline your ear and bend your back to the verse, because each and every verse which the Rabbis expounded... though they express the *midrash* about it, they are the ones who ultimately say of it, "No verse loses its simple meaning." Thus, there is no better attribute in the verse than its simple meaning.⁷

The second assumption may be seen, for example, in his commentary to *Shoftim* 4:5:

It is not the way of the prophet, in any of the twenty-four books, to leave his words ambiguous, requiring one to derive them from aggadic sources.

In a sharper way, in his commentary to *I Shmuel* 1:17, Mahari Kara claims that the inclination of exegetes to explain the verses according to the *derash* springs from their ignorance inability to understand appropriately the *peshat* of the verses:

Know, when a prophecy is written, it is written *in toto*, with its explanation and everything that is needed, so that the coming generations will not stumble due to it. Its context is not deficient, and one need not bring

⁶ That is, they will malign them.

⁷ See also his comments to *I Shmuel* 1:17, cited below.

evidence from another place, nor a Midrashic interpretation, for the Torah is transmitted perfectly, written perfectly, with nothing missing in it. The Midrashic interpretations of our Sages serve [only] “to make the law great and glorious.” However, anyone **who does not know the simple meaning of the verse** is inclined after the Midrashic interpretation of the matter, similar to one swept away by the surging river, whom the depths of the ocean cover — he grabs anything which may come into his reach in order to save himself! **Nevertheless, if he were to set his heart to God’s word**, he would search out the meaning of the matter in its simple sense, and he would be capable of fulfilling what is said (*Mishlei* 2:4-5): “And if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of God and find the knowledge of God.”

C. Mahari Kara’s Sensitivity to Literary Technique and Style

In Mahari Kara’s comments, we see a certain literary sensitivity; he pays attention to formal structures in *Tanakh*, tying them to the meaning of the verse and relating to different stylistic phenomena in *Tanakh*. The following are a number of examples:

A. Mahari Kara often notes *lashon nofel al lashon*,⁸ alliteration and paronomasia. Take the following example from *Yeshayahu* 10:30-31:

Cry out, daughter of Gallim! Listen, Laisha! Poor (*aniya*) Anatot!
Madmena flees (*nadedda*); the people of Gevim take cover!

Mahari Kara explains:

This is based on the *lashon nofel al lashon* of Anatot and *aniya*, as it says in the adjacent verse, “*nadedda Madmena*” – that is, the city is called Madmena because they fled from before it. Similarly, we find “Ekron will be uprooted (*tei’aker*)” (*Tzefanya* 2:4), and “For the waters of Dimon have been filled with blood (*dam*)” (*Yeshayahu* 15:9).⁹

In other words, according to Mahari Kara, when the prophet wished to describe the destruction of the cities mentioned in the verse, he chose the term “*aniya*” because of the phonetic similarity to Anatot, and he chose “*nadedda*” because of the similarity to Madmena.

⁸ *Lashon nofel al lashon* is mentioned in a number of places in Rashi’s commentary as well, but Rashi only notes this phenomenon in five places in *Tanakh*, whereas the phenomenon is far more widespread in Mahari Kara’s writings. It appears to me that there is good reason to attribute the instances in Rashi’s commentary to interpolation of Mahari Kara’s commentary.

⁹ We should note that Mahari Kara brings numerous examples that commentators such as Ibn Ezra and the Radak ignore, even though they also frequently note the phenomenon of *lashon nofel al lashon*.

B. Mahari Kara pays close attention to rhythm and meter.¹⁰ Sometimes, he argues that a verse repeats a phrase exactly in order to maintain the balance and the rhythm of the text — or in Mahari Kara’s words, “to complete the meter.”¹¹ It appears that what he refers to with the phrase “to complete the meter” is to maintain the same length in each of a verse’s two clauses (apparently the number of syllables). For the same reason, Mahari Kara claims, the verse may also be abbreviated. For example, the verse states (*Yeshayahu* 43:6):

I will say to the north, “Give them up!” and to the south, “Do not hold them back.” Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth.

Mahari Kara explains:

“To the nations in the south, ‘Do not hold them back.’ Bring my sons and my daughters from afar and from the ends of the earth...” This is true of many verses: the measure of the meter will shorten it by one word.

In the continuation of his commentary to this verse, Mahari Kara writes:

Sometimes, the verse expresses the word with another sound, because of the weight of the meter... All of this is determined by the meter.

C. The literary structure of prophecies: Mahari Kara explores the connections between different prophecies and different narratives that come one after the other, and he finds associative connections between them. Mahari Kara expresses an essential rule in terms of the structure of the prophecies in his remarks on *Yeshayahu* 4:6:

Indeed, from the beginning of the subject until here, I have seen all of the verses attached one to its fellow like the clasps in the loops, and if I would have come to give the *derash* between them, I would separate between each verse and its fellow...

One may find an example of a literary reading in his commentary to *Yeshayahu* 3:16: “God says: The women of Zion are haughty, walking along with outstretched necks...”

Above [in previous prophecies], it says of this issue, “The arrogance of man will be brought low and the pride of people humbled” (2:17), because

¹⁰ One of the domains in which Mahari Kara comments at length is the exegesis of poetry. It appears to me that when he comes to explain the biblical text, he does so under the influence of poetic structures.

¹¹ See, for example, his commentary to *Yechezkel* 16:6.

until this point it has been talking about human arrogance and pride, so it continues with the prophecy of the arrogance of the women of Zion.

An additional example is Mahari Kara's explanation of the connection between the story of Delila and Shimshon and the story of Mikha's idol, which appears immediately afterward in the book of *Shoftim*:

The passages are adjacent because of the amount of filthy lucre in each, here one thousand and one hundred of Delila (16:5) and there one thousand and one hundred of Mikha's idol (17:2-3), both of which are money for sinful purposes.

In the passage of Shimshon and Delila, the Philistines offer a bribe in this amount to Delila to compensate her for her assistance in binding Shimshon; in the passage of Mikha's idol, Mikha's mother dedicates this amount to idolatry. Mahari Kara notes that the associative link is expressed not only with similar words, "one thousand and one hundred of silver," but also in the similar context: in both cases, the silver is designated for a negative aim, "money for sinful purposes."

D. Rules Crafted by Mahari Kara

Mahari Kara was the first exegete in France and Germany who formulated the rules for interpretive methods that may be applied in additional places.¹² Thus, despite the fact that Mahari Kara did not compose a full commentary on the Torah, his commentary on *Nevi'im* should be seen as a tool for understanding the simple meaning of the Torah; in his commentaries on *Nevi'im*, Mahari Kara formulates interpretive principles which hold true in the Torah as well.

We will demonstrate a number of examples:

E. Pre-Emption.

Sometimes, there appear in *Tanakh* verses that seem to be superfluous or misplaced. Mahari Kara explains these verses on the basis of the assumption that the verse mentions information which will be important later on in the text.¹³ We may see an example of Mahari Kara's application of this rule in *Shemot* 16:35, which reads, "And the Israelites ate the manna for forty years, until they came to a settled land." It is not clear why in the middle of the story of how the Israelites first receive the manna, the Torah must describe how long it continued to fall. Mahari Kara explains this in the following way:

¹² The first to compose rules that serve to understand the *peshat* was ibn Janach, but he wrote in Arabic, which was not known by most residents of France and Germany, and his rules were mainly rules of syntax and grammar.

¹³ The expression of the rule in the language of Mahari Kara is: "And so is the way of many verses, that it pre-emptively teaches one something without which one might otherwise wonder about later on" (*I Shmuel* 1:3).

There is a great need for the verse to state this, so that one will not be perplexed¹⁴ by the words “Who will feed us meat?” (*Bamidbar* 11:4) – did the quail not come up every evening and cover the camp? Why should they cry for meat of craving? Therefore, it pre-empts and teaches you that the quail were temporary.

In *Shemot* 16, there are two foods that God grants the Jewish people, the manna and the quail (vv. 12-13), while in *Bamidbar*, the Torah describes how, about one year later, the Israelites complain about not having meat. The reader may wonder: what happened to the quail? For this reason, Mahari Kara explains, the Torah pre-emptively tells the reader that the Israelites continued to eat the manna for forty years – implying that the quail were a special, limited-time offer. Thus, the point of this verse is to pre-empt the future question that the reader would have asked without this indication.¹⁵

Let us examine an additional example in which Mahari Kara applies this rule in order to explain biblical details that appear totally superfluous in context. When David flees before Shaul to Nov (*I Shmuel* 21:2-10) and is assisted by the priest Achimelekh, the following verse appears in the middle of the conversation between David and the priest (*ibid.* v. 8): “And there was a man from the servants of Shaul servants... and his name was Doeg.” Immediately after this verse, the narrator returns to the conversation between David and Achimelekh. Mahari Kara explains:

This is so that one will not be perplexed when reaching the verse, “And Doeg the Edomite answered... ‘I have the seen the son of Yishai come to Nov’” (*ibid.* v. 9), saying, where did Doeg come from?

¹⁴ Mahari Kara often uses the phrase, “So that one will not be perplexed,” when he defines a certain verse as prefatory; see also *Shofetim* 1:16, 4:11, 13:19, etc.

¹⁵ An interesting question relates to whether Rashi was aware of the phenomenon of prefacing or if this was an innovation of Mahari Kara. In *Bereishit* 9:8, the verse tells us, “And Cham, he was the father of Canaan.” The location of the verse is problematic, because the story that appears immediately prior is Noach’s drunkenness and the passage of the generations of the sons of Noach appears only after this narrative. Rashi explains:

“And Cham, he was the father of Canaan” – Why is it necessary to say this here? Because the chapter proceeds to deal with Noach’s drunkenness, in which Cham sinned, and because of him, Canaan was cursed. Since the generations of Cham had not yet been written, and we would not know that Kanaan was his son, it is necessary to say here, “And Cham, he was the father of Canaan.”

It appears that Rashi explains the verse on the basis of the assumption that one verse prefaces another, giving certain information so that what follows will be understood by the reader. Nevertheless, the distinction between Mahari Kara and Rashi sharpens the difference between them: while Rashi is only explaining the local verse, Mahari Kara formulates the rule which may be applied to other places.

In the coming lessons, we will see how the Rashbam, apparently influenced by Mahari Kara, expands this rule and applies it in numerous places.

F. Parallelism

When a verse concludes with two clauses, the verse sometimes duplicates the subject at the opening of the verse.¹⁶ One example of this is the verse (*Yeshayahu* 43:25): “I, I am the one Who wipes away your transgressions for My sake, and I will not recall your sins.” Mahari Kara views the double opening as paralleling the two clauses that follow in the verse: I am the one Who wipes away your transgressions for My sake; and I am the one Who will not recall your sins.

Another example is the puzzling structure of *Yehoshua* 22:22:

“Lord God of gods, Lord God of gods, He knows, and Israel, it shall know; if it is in rebellion or if in trespass against God, do not save us this day.”

Mahari Kara explains:

Why is “Lord God of gods” repeated?... God knows that it is not in rebellion, and God knows that it is not in trespass.

Since the verse concludes by speaking of knowing that the eastern tribes are innocent of two counts – rebellion and trespass – the verse opens by referring twice to “Lord God of gods.”

It appears that one may apply this rule to other places in *Tanakh* as well. For example, God’s double address, “Avraham, Avraham” (*Bereishit* 22:11), may be explained according to the view of Mahari Kara using the succeeding verse: “Do not send your hand towards the youth, and do not do anything to him” (*ibid.* v. 12). One should accordingly read the verses in the following way: Avraham, do not send your hand towards the youth; Avraham, do not do anything to him.¹⁷

G. Rashi’s Influence on Mahari Kara

Despite the great independence of Mahari Kara, we find that he often relies on Rashi’s commentaries. In order to demonstrate this, we will compare the commentaries of Rashi and Mahari Kara on *I Shmuel* 15:1-9 (the *Haftara* reading for *Shabbat Zakhor*). First, let us see the verses themselves:

- 1) And Shmuel said to Shaul, "God sent me to anoint you to be king over His people, over Israel; and now listen to the sound of the words of God.
- 2) So said God of Hosts, 'I remember that which Amalek did to Israel, how they laid for them on the way, when they came up out of Egypt.
- 3) Now,

¹⁶ As Mahari Kara puts it: “When it intends to discuss multiple matters, it multiplies the words before it” (*Yehoshua* 22:22).

¹⁷ We may similarly explain the duplication in God’s address, “Moshe, Moshe” (*Shemot* 3:4), on the basis of the two commands in the succeeding verse: “Do not draw nigh; take your shoes off your feet.”

go, and you shall strike Amalek, and you shall utterly destroy all that is his, and you shall not have pity on him; and you shall slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and donkey." **4)** And Shaul called the people together, and he counted them with lambs, two hundred thousand footmen, and ten thousand, the men of Judah. **5)** And Shaul came as far as the city of Amalek, and he fought in the valley. **6)** And Shaul said to the Kenites, "Turn away and go down from among the Amalekites, lest I destroy you with them, for you did kindness with all the Israelites, when they went up out of Egypt." And the Kenites turned away from amidst Amalek. **7)** And Shaul struck Amalek, from Chavila until you come to Shur, which is before Egypt. **8)** And he seized Agag, the king of Amalek, alive; and he completely destroyed all the people by the edge of the sword. **9)** And Shaul and the people had pity on Agag, and on the best of the sheep and the cattle, and the fatlings, and on the fattened sheep, and on all that was good; and they did not want to destroy them; but everything which was vile and feeble, that they utterly destroyed.

The following chart illustrates the commentaries of Rashi and Mahari Kara on these verses:

	Text	Rashi	Mahari Kara
	And now, listen to the voice of the words of God.	Once you acted foolishly. Now, take heed.	In other words: if you did not listen at first, when you did not keep your promise, for I said, "Wait for me seven days, until I come to you" (<i>I Shmuel</i> 10:8), now listen, so that you will not violate God's command.
	How they laid for them on the way, when they came up out of Egypt.		How they laid an ambush for them on the way... Many verses require that we add a word.
	Ox and sheep	For they were sorcerers, and they would assume the shapes of animals.	So that they may not say: "This ox is of Amalek;" "This sheep is of Amalek;" the same is true of a camel or a donkey, for were it not so, it would not be wiping out the memory of Amalek.
	And he counted them with lambs.	He told everyone to take a lamb from the king's flocks, and afterwards he counted the lambs.	He took a lamb to put in the hands of each and every one, and afterwards he counted the lambs.
	Vile	<i>Nemivza</i> is like	

		<i>nivzeh</i> (despised), and the <i>mem</i> is superfluous.	
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This comparison yields a number of observations:

1) Rashi's explanations are the basis for the commentary of Mahari Kara. Therefore, if Mahari Kara agrees with Rashi's words and sees no reason to clarify them further, Mahari Kara will not make any notes. Mahari Kara logically thought that the word "*nemivza*" in verse 9 demanded explanation, but because Rashi had explained it sufficiently, Mahari Kara does not add anything.¹⁸

2) Sometimes, it appears that Mahari Kara is reiterating Rashi's words without introducing anything new. However, a precise reading of Mahari Kara's words shows that Mahari Kara is not repeating Rashi's words verbatim, but is rather sharpening and explaining his words. So, for example, in the explanation of v. 1, "And now listen," Rashi claims that Shmuel is asking Shaul to rectify his mistake, listening to God's word instead of ignoring it, as the king had done previously. Mahari Kara adopts this explanation, but adds the information required by the reader who is not familiar with the verses.¹⁹ In v. 4 as well, "And he counted them with lambs," Mahari Kara expresses Rashi's words in a clearer way.

3) When Mahari Kara opposes Rashi's interpretation, he explains the text in a very different way than Rashi. This is what we find in the explanation in v. 3: Mahari Kara opposes the Midrashic explanation cited in Rashi's commentary concerning the need to exterminate the animals (due to the reasons mentioned above – Mahari Kara tries not to bring commentaries which do not arise from the simple meaning of the verses). He therefore explains in his remarks that exterminating the animals is the fulfillment of the *mitzva* to wipe out the memory of Amalek.²⁰

4) When Rashi does not explain something in the verse that requires an explanation, Mahari Kara fills in the gap. For example, in v. 2, "How they laid for them on the way," there is some difficulty, as the verse omits what precisely Amalek laid for Israel; Mahari Kara explains that the intent is "how they laid an ambush for them on the way." The use of such abbreviated language is a common phenomenon in *Tanakh*.

¹⁸ See also v. 12, s.v. "*Nichamti*;" v. 16, s.v. "*Heref*;" v. 21, s.v. "*Reishit ha-cherem*." All of these do not require explanation because the basic assumption of Mahari Kara is that whoever reads his commentary has previously studied Rashi's commentary.

¹⁹ It is possible, in some ways, to view the commentary of Mahari Kara as a supercommentary of Rashi.

²⁰ This relationship is similar to the relationship of the Tosafists to Rashi's commentary on the Talmud.

Rashi's influence on Mahari Kara may be seen not only in the latter's exegesis, but also in Rashi's educational approach, which is expressed a great deal in Rashi's commentaries.²¹ One example his explanation of the verse (*Shmuel* 2:3), "Do not keep talking so proudly, let your mouth speak superiorly, for God is a God who knows, and by Him deeds are weighed." First, Mahari Kara explains the verse as two clauses.

"Do not keep talking so proudly" – You, the creatures, may learn from Me that you should not talk so proudly.

"[Do not] let²² your mouth speak superiorly" – its meaning is: do not bring out superior sayings from your mouth, of the same root as "become old, yes, and grow superior in power" (*Iyov* 21:7).

Afterwards, Mahari Kara brings examples of "superior sayings" which it would be better not to say at all:

Namely, each of you should not abuse his fellow with words. If you see an unfortunate person, do not harass [insult] him with his afflictions; if you see a person with no strength, do not disrespect him; do not mock a childless woman as barren; if you see a luckless person, do not mock him...

Translated by Rav Yoseif Bloch

²¹ See Parts III and IV of our lesson on Rashi.

²² The word "a" (do not) does not appear in the second part of the verse, but according to Mahari Kara, the "a" in the first part relates also to the second part.