

## **PRINCIPLES OF RABBINIC INTERPRETATION** by

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Throughout the history of Rabbinic Judaism, the Torah has been investigated and analysed by means of various principles of interpretation. These hermeneutical rules are simply statements of deductive reasoning. Hillel, a contemporary of Herod the Great, compiled a list of seven such rules.

Let us focus upon the first principle in Hillel's list, kal va-chomer (simple and complex). This is a logical deduction that can be drawn from a simple truth about a less obvious situation, or from something known about something unknown. For example, "Silence becomes a scholar; how much more a fool" (Tosefta Pesahim 9:2). Notice the key phrase "how much more", which appears in most rabbinic simple-to-complex reasoning.

The tractate Yevamot in the Mishnah preserves a halachah or rabbinic ruling inferred from Deuteronomy 23:3 and 23:7 by means of this principle:

No Ammonite or Moabite may be admitted into the congregation of the Lord, and this is a permanent prohibition. Ammonite and Moabite women, however, may immediately be admitted (after conversion). Egyptians and Edomites are prohibited only until the third generation, regardless of whether they be males or females.

Rabbi Simeon said, "This is deduced by the kal va-chomer principle. If where Scripture permanently prohibited the males it permitted the females immediately, how much more should the females be permitted immediately where Scripture prohibited the males only until the third generation?" (Yevamot 8:3)

Two further examples from the Mishnah illustrate this type of reasoning in non-halachic contexts.

If, speaking of a light commandment which deals with something that is worth only an issar, the Torah said, "in order that you may prosper and have long life", how much more for weightier commandments in the Torah? (Hullin 12:5)

Once again the phrase "how much more" signals the use of simple-to-complex reasoning, used here to urge the observance of all the commandments, whether they are major or relatively insignificant. The specific commandment referred to, found in Deuteronomy 22:6-7, commands that a mother bird be released when caught with her young. At that time a bird was valued at one issar, about one twenty-fourth of a day's wage.

In the following passage, simple-to-complex reasoning is used to teach something about the nature of God:

Rabbi Meir said, "While the man is in agony, what does the Tongue (a euphemism for God) say?"

"My head is hurting! My arm is hurting! If the Scripture has thus spoken: "I agonise over the blood of the wicked", how much more over the blood of the righteous that is shed?" (Sanhedrin 6:5)

This passage is referring to Deuteronomy 21:22-23, which speaks of a criminal who is being put to death. Rabbi Meir expounds the Hebrew words *kilelat elohim* as "a painful thing of God", rather than "a curse of God", and the inference therefore is that when even a criminal is enduring pain, God says, "I am in pain".

The use of simple-to-complex reasoning is proportionately as frequent in Jesus' teaching as it is in that of other rabbis. The Mishnah is approximately six times the size of the Gospels, and it has exactly six times as many occurrences of this hermeneutical principle: eighteen in the Mishnah to three in the teachings of Jesus. Like Rabbi Meir, Jesus used the "If...how much more..." pattern when speaking of God's great care for His children, as in the following passage:

Which of you would give his son a stone if he asked for bread, or a snake if he asked for a fish? If you, then who are bad, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more your father in heaven will give good gifts to those who ask him. (Matthew 7:9-11).

There is another passage in which Jesus employed simple-to-complex logic to prove God's reliable care for His children. Worrying about the concerns of everyday life, Jesus warned, is distrust of God and an affront to a heavenly father who is unfailing in providing for His children:

Look at how the wild flowers grow. They don't toil or spin. I tell you, even Solomon in all his splendour was not dressed like one of these. If thus God clothes grass in the fields, which is here today and tomorrow is used to stoke an oven, how much more can He be expected to clothe you, O men of little faith. (Matthew 6:28-30).

A third example of Jesus' use of simple-to-complex reasoning comes from Matthew 10:24-25, and is so Hebraic that in translating it from Greek back to Hebrew, the syntax need not be altered except in the case of one word. A literal translation of the Greek will help illustrate how non-Greek and non-English are these words of Jesus.

A pupil is not above his teacher, and a slave is not above his master. It is enough for the pupil that he will be like his teacher, and the slave that he will be like his master. If they (people in general) have called the Baal ha-Bayit Baal Zevul, how much more the sons of his house.

The reference to Baal ha-Bayit and Baal Zevul is an example of Hebrew word-play. Baal ha-Bayit means "master of the house" and is a term often used by the rabbis to refer to God; Baal Zevul means "Beelzebul" and refers to Satan. In idiomatic English the passage would be expressed as follows:

A pupil is no better than his teacher, nor a slave better than his master. What is good enough for the teacher is good enough for the pupil, and a slave should not expect to receive better treatment than his master. If the householder has been called "Satan", it is only natural that the members of his household will be called the same.

There is a fourth passage in which Jesus uses simple-to-complex reasoning, although the key phrase "how much more" does not actually appear in it:

Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me. Weep for yourselves and for your children. For a time is coming when the cry will be, "How fortunate are the women who are childless, the wombs that have never borne and the breasts that have never nursed!" Then they will call to the mountains, "Cover us!" and to the hills, "Fall on us!" If this is done to the "Green Tree", what will happen to the "dry trees?" (Luke 23:28-31).

Not only did Jesus make use of the rabbinic kal va-chomer principle of interpretation in this passage, He also used the rabbinic teaching technique of alluding to Scripture. The expression "Cover us, fall on us!" is from Hosea 10:8, and points toward the events of Jerusalem's destruction. The "Green Tree", taken from Ezekiel 20:47, also hints at the impending catastrophe, but beyond that at Jesus' role as Messiah. The people who heard Jesus say these words as He was going to His crucifixion certainly understood that His oblique reference to Himself as the "Green Tree" was a bold messianic claim. It was also a warning, for Jesus was telling the people, "If this terrible thing can happen to me, how much more to you".

As in the preceding example, Jesus contrasted Himself with others: if He is called "Satan" His disciples will certainly be called "Satan"; if He is crucified, those who are weeping for Him can only expect the same fate or worse.

It is worth noting that another rabbi made a similar statement some 150 years prior to Jesus, also while on his way to be crucified. Yose ben Yoezer, one of the earliest rabbis known in rabbinic literature, was not only a great scholar but also was referred to as the "most pious in the priesthood" (Hagigah 2:7). The statement he made while carrying his cross to the place of execution is structurally identical to that of Jesus, and it explicitly contains the key words of the kal va-chomer formula:

If it is thus for those who do His will, how much more for those who anger Him (Midrash Psalm 11:7).

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