Little is known about the Jewish Diaspora in the Byzantine Empire during the Middle Ages and even less about its literature. For many years, these details have been treated as a “black hole” of sorts, and conventional wisdom holds that the majority of Jewish works composed in this region during the Early Middle Ages have not survived. Some of the prominent works that *have* reached us from the period between the 9th to 12th centuries include historical works such as the anonymous *Sefer yosifon* and the *Chronicle of Aḥima‘atz* penned by Aḥima‘atz Ben Palti‘el; talmudic works, such as *Sefer halakhot qetzuvot* and Nathan ben Jehiel of Rome’s *Sefer ha‘arukh*; commentaries on midrashim, such as an anonymous commentaryon Bereishit Rabba and Vayiqra Rabba (published by Lerner) and Rabbi Hillel’s commentary on Sifra and Sifrei; and anonymous apocalyptic works such as *Ḥazon dani‘el* and *Shi`ur qomah*. We must also mention Rabbi Shabbet‘ai Donnolo’s *Sefer ḥakhmoni*, a commentary on *Ber‘aita deshmu‘el* and *Sefer yetzira*. Even this partial list points to cultural vitality and an intensive religious literary output, some written under favorable circumstances and entailing the comprehensive treatment of all parts of Jewish literature.

From the 11th century onwards, we begin to find biblical commentaries composed by Byzantine Jews. Prominent names include Tuvia ben ‘Eli`ezer (who lived on the cusp of the 11th and 12th centuries), author of *Leḳaḥ tov* on the Pentateuch and the Five Megillot; Shmu‘el of Roshina, author of *Sefer roshina* (12th century); Menaḥem ben Shlomo, author of *Sekhel tov* on the Pentateuch (12th century); and Rabbi Meyuḥas ben ‘Eliyahu (it seems 12th century). While some researchers (such as Richard Steiner and Gershon Brin) have characterized this list of exegetes as a “Byzantine exegetical school,” a dedicated study of the topic continues to be a desideratum, and scholarship has only now begun to take its first steps in this direction. A preliminary (but comprehensive) review of the aforementioned commentaries indicates that the Byzantine exegetes developed an unprecedented and innovative approach to the study and interpretation of Scripture.

The proposed study will address three primary questions:

The first: is the portrayal of the Byzantine exegetical school as an organic group with common characteristics and features an accurate one? My preliminary review of the aforementioned commentaries uncovered more than a few shared features, for example, the systematic presentation of *peshat*-oriented interpretations; a clear distinction between *peshat* and *derash*; an attempt to ground rabbinic *derashot* in the text of Scripture; a heightened awareness to the sequence and progression of the biblical text; systematic statements about *derekh hamiqra‘* (“the way [or method] of Scripture”); lengthy halakhic discussions; and anthologies of *halakhot* intended for practical guidance.

The second question: what drove exegetes during this particular period and in this particular region to pursue a new and unprecedented mode of Scriptural exegesis? Does this shift represent an internal-Jewish development or the mark of external influence – perhaps a response to contemporary Christian or Karaite exegesis? Are the exegetes whose works have reached us the initiators of this groundbreaking shift, or perhaps they were preceded by earlier developmental stages that have been lost to history? Is there any connection between the Jewish-Byzantine exegesis and the Septuagint? Is there any relationship between this style of exegesis and that of Saadia Gaon? Were Saadia Gaon’s exegetical writings even available to the Jewish-Byzantine exegetes?

The third and final question is the relationship between Byzantine *peshat*-oriented exegesis and later forms of *peshat*-oriented exegesis developed in North France – namely those of Rashi and his disciples. The hallmarks of this French exegesis can already be discerned in Jewish-Byzantine commentaries – for example, attention to grammar and language, a focus on realia, and the formulation of principles. Could it be that these Byzantine writers influenced Rashi and his circle?

It should be noted that some of the commentaries we have mentioned have, in the last few years, been published in good editions (some better than others). Others, however, (especially Rabbi Meyuḥas ben ‘Eliyahu’s commentary on Genesis and Exodus and Rabbi Menaḥem ben Shlomo’s *Sekhel tov*) only exist in poor or partial editions. A return to manuscript evidence is, therefore, necessary if we wish to properly restore the missing information.

In summary, I believe a focus on the Jewish-Byzantine school of Scriptural exegesis is an issue of paramount importance—not just for understanding biblical exegesis in the Byzantine Empire, but also for understanding other exegetical schools in the Middle Ages.

In the coming academic year (2019–2020), I shall be taking a sabbatical from Bar-Ilan University, and will dedicate some of my time to the proposed study.