GREAT BIBLICAL COMMENTATORS
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Lecture #05:
Rashi, Part II

A.   INTRODUCTION: WHEN DOES RASHI USE *MIDRASHIM*?

Rashi's commentary is composed, for the most part, of adapted *midrashim*. In the last lecture, we stressed the great ability of Rashi as a Midrashic filter; he selects those *midrashim* which are most appropriate in terms of fitting in to the continuity of the verses. We have dealt with the criterion of Rashi for choosing *midrashim*, but not with the impetus to turn to Midrash in the first place. In the current lesson, we will try to answer the following question as well: What requires Rashi to turn to *midrashim* that apparently do not explicate the *peshat*?

We may indeed find a number of types of motives for Rashi to turn to *midrashim*.

B.   A DIFFICULTY IN THE VERSES

First of all, Rashi turns to *midrashim* when he has a difficulty in the verse and finds no way to reconcile it using *peshat*.[1]

We will bring two examples of this:

I)   When Yosef is sent by Yaakov to find his brothers and arrives in Dotan, the verse says, "And a man found him when he was lost in the field" (*Bereishit* 37:15). Rashi (ad loc.) cites the following

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[1]   In the previous lesson, we noted that the definition of the concept of *peshat* is beyond the scope of this framework, so we will suffice with Sarah Kamin's definition (*Peshuto Shel Mikra U-Midrasho shel Mikra* [Jerusalem, 5740]): "*Peshat* is not the narrow, literal explanation of some element or another or of a given expression, but an explanation which takes into account all the linguistic foundations, in their permutations, and gives to each of them a meaning, according to the rules."

> midrash:[2] "This is Gavriel, as it says, 'And the man Gavriel' (*Daniel* 9:21)."

It appears that Rashi is motivated to bring this *midrash* in order to solve a twofold problem.

1)   The terminology "And a man found him" (rather than: And a man saw him) indicates that the man was looking for him (because one finds that which one is looking for).

2)   Yosef asks the man, "Please tell me where they are pasturing" (37:16), indicating that it is clear to Yosef that the man standing opposite him knows where his brothers are (as he does not ask the man **if** he knows where they are).

If we assume that "the man" is an angel and that Yosef knows this, the problems are solved: the angel looks for Yosef in order to help him, and it is obvious to Yosef that he knows where they are.

II)   In *Shemot* 2:23, the Torah says, "And the king of Egypt died, and the Israelites groaned due to the work." Rashi (ad loc.) cites a *midrash*:[3] "He was afflicted with leprosy,[4] so he would slaughter infants and bathe in their blood."

Obviously, the words of the *midrash* add to the *peshat* in a striking way, but Rashi appears to be motivated by a difficulty in understanding the verse: if the king dies, why do the Israelites groan? Should they not be rejoicing that their subjugator is dead? The *midrash* explains that we are not talking about true death, but rather leprosy, which is akin to death (a concept mentioned by the Sages a number of times); this so-called death was the reason for groaning, since the leprosy causes him to bathe in the blood of children. In other words, the Midrashic explanation manages to connect, from a logical point of view, the death of Pharaoh with the Israelites' groans.

C.   THE TORAH DOES NOT SPEAK IN THE HUMAN VERNACULAR

The rule that "The Torah does not speak in the human vernacular" (which we will explain presently) is the factor that motivates Rashi to explain verses according to the Midrash in dozens of cases, despite the absence of any difficulty in these verses. We will bring a number of examples of this:

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[2]   *Midrash Tanchuma, Vayeshev* 2.

[3]   Based on *Shemot Rabba* 5:34.

[4]   **Translator's note**: For convenience's sake, we use the term "leprosy" for *tzaraat*, despite the fact that in *Tanakh*, *tzaraat* is a physical manifestation of spiritual infirmity, not Hansen's disease, which is bacterial in nature.

I.   In *Parashat Chayei Sara* (*Bereishit* 24:10), the Torah says: "And the servant took ten camels of his master's camels." Rashi cites a *midrash*[5] in his commentary on this verse:

> They were distinguished from other camels, because they were muzzled to prevent pilfering, so that they would not graze in others' fields.[6]

Rashi's words are beautiful and hold an important message for all of us – the importance of taking responsibility not only for the damage we do ourselves, but even for damage which is caused as a result of our property. But what was the impetus for Rashi's commentary? At first glance, the simple meaning of the verse poses no problem — there is not even one word that is not understood, and the context is clear and obvious. Is there a certain difficulty that forces Rashi to cite the *midrash*?

In order to respond to this question, we will expand the scope a bit by explaining two approaches to biblical exegesis. There is a basic argument between two schools of *parshanut* regarding expounding the language of *Tanakh*: the academy of R. Yishmael versus the academy of R. Akiva.

R. Akiva believes that the Torah is divine, and it therefore cannot contain any superfluous phrase, word, or even letter in it; God intends that every element have meaning. Therefore, R. Akiva would derive "mounds of laws from every jot and tittle" (*Menachot* 29b). On the other hand, R. Yishmael, who of course agrees with the basic assumption of the Torah's divine origin, counters that God nevertheless has written the Torah for human beings, and it is therefore expressed in the style that people use when speaking or writing — "The Torah speaks in the human vernacular." Therefore, if there is any redundancy or superfluity in the biblical terminology, the extraneous elements do not teach us anything, because this is how people talk.

The argument between R. Akiva and R. Yishmael appears in many places, and, *inter alia*, in *Sanhedrin* 64b. There, they argue about the use of three similar terms in two consecutive verses (*Bamidbar* 15:30-31) **"…*ve-nikhreta* ha-nefesh ha-hi… hikkaret tikkaret** *ha-nefesh ha-hi"* — "that soul shall be cut off."

> "*Hikkaret tikkaret*": "*Hikkaret*" in this world; "*tikkaret*" in the next — this is R. Akiva's view.
> R. Yishmael said: But the previous verse has stated *"ve-nikhreta"* — are there then three worlds? Rather, *"ve-nikhreta"* in this world: "*hikkaret*" in the next; "*tikkaret*" — that is because the Torah speaks in the human vernacular.

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5   *Bereishit Rabba* ad loc. (with some minor changes).

6   Indeed, the concept of the importance of avoiding stealing and any hint of larceny appears many times in Rashi's comments. See Rashi's commentary on *Bereishit* 13:7; 27:3, 5, 6-9; *Shemot* 29:36; Leviticus 1:2, 16; etc.

There is no doubt that Rashi adopts R. Akiva's approach, according to which every word has meaning and significance. Therefore, one should be precise with biblical language, and even when the reader has no difficulty understanding the verses, one may derive information from some extraneous element in the text. We shall see that Rashi indeed sees himself as a *pashtan*, but according to him, *peshat* has a wider definition, including giving significance to every additional detail. A method such as this is very demanding, as it requires the exegete to justify every word and even every letter, which the strict *pashtan* usually dismisses as "human vernacular." Indeed, Rashi does not always find in the framework of *peshat* a satisfying explanation for the superfluous language in the text, and he therefore must consult the Midrash in many circumstances. However, in every case, he employs Midrash as part of his overall purpose – to explain the *peshat* of the verses.

At this time, we may return to the example that we cited above: "And the servant took ten camels of his master's camels." It is clear to the reader that the camels are "of his master's camels" — it would not occur to us that the servant took his own private camels! If so, why do we need the phrase "of his master's camels"? The Midrash responds that there is some unique quality in these camels, and it even specifies what it is – the camels would always go out muzzled.[7]

Thus, Rashi uses the *midrash* not only in cases of redundant language, but even in cases in which the verse mentions superfluous details. An additional example of a *midrash* that appears in Rashi because of superfluous details may be found later in the same tale:

II. Twelve verses after the servant sets out with the camels, he takes out gifts for the girl who has watered them (*Bereishit* 24:22): "And it was, when the camels had finished drinking, that the man took a golden nose ring, weighing a half-shekel, and two bracelets for her hands, weighing ten of gold." Rashi cites the *midrash*,[8] which attaches significance to the weights and features of the jewelry.

"A half-shekel" — this alludes to the shekels of Israel, "a half-shekel per head" (*Shemot* 38:26).
"And two bracelets" — this alludes to the two Tablets paired together.
"Weighing ten of gold" — this alludes to the Ten Commandments on them.

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7   How does the Midrash derive that this is what makes the camels unique? It appears that it derives this from another detail in the continuation of the story of the servant in Lavan's house, which also appears superfluous: "And he loosed the camels" (ibid. v. 32). What does this detail add to the narrative? It appears that the text here indicates that until this point, the camels were muzzled. Indeed, there as well, Rashi explains consistently: "He unfastened their muzzles [which he had put on them] so that they would not graze in others' fields."

8   *Bereishit Rabba* ad loc.

Naturally, this particular information in the Sages' allegory has no basis in the *peshat* of the verse, but the motivation for this commentary is the superfluity within the *peshat*. Why is it so important for us to know the exact weight and quantity of the jewelry that Rivka receives? The response of this *midrash* is that these details have great significance, and it searches for other instances in *Tanakh* where these numbers are mentioned.[9]

D. MAINTAINING THE INTERNAL LOGIC AND SEQUENCE OF THE TEXT BY FILLING IN LACUNAE

In addition to the above-mentioned examples, Rashi is accustomed to cite Midrashic material when he is interested in the chronological or thematic sequence of the Torah, in order to fill in gaps and to create — using *midrashim* — a logical narrative sequence. Filling in the gaps sometimes is accomplished by the reconstruction of a particular event, as we shall see in the first two examples below, or through a dialogue (sometimes a monologue), as we shall see in the third example.

I. In *Bereishit* 37:29, the Torah states, "And Reuven returned to the pit, and behold, Yosef was not in the pit; so he tore his garments." Why is Reuven so shocked to find Yosef gone? Was he not present when the brothers sold him? Where else could he have been? Rashi explains:

When [Yosef] was sold, [Reuven] was not there, for it was his day to go and serve his father (*Bereishit Rabba* 84:15).
Alternatively, he was busy with his sackcloth and his fasting for disturbing his father's bed (*Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* 25).

II. After Yaakov serves Lavan for seven years, a wedding feast is held, but Lavan tricks Yaakov and gives him Leah instead of Rachel (*Bereishit* 29:14-28). The Torah states (29:25): "And it was in the morning, and behold she was Leah…" How could it be that Yaakov did not notice this earlier? The Midrash (*Megilla* 13b) cited by Rashi responds that Rachel was also in on the ruse:

"And it was in the morning, and behold she was Leah" — but at night, she was not Leah,[10] because Jacob had given signs to Rachel, but when she saw that they were bringing Leah, she said, "Now, my sister will be put to shame." So she readily transmitted those signs to her.

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9   One may delve into the words of the *midrash* and claim that the deeper meaning of the Sages' words here is that through Rivka's act of kindness, she merits to be the ancestress of the nation of Israel, which will ultimately receive the Torah and build the Tabernacle. Alternatively, one may say that Rivka's actions are as "weighty" as the Tablets and the Tabernacle.
10 In other words, she did not act like Leah, but rather like Rachel.

III. In the passage of the Binding of Yitzchak, the Torah begins (*Bereishit* 22:1) by saying: "And it was after these things (*devarim*)…" Rashi cites two *midrashim* to explain this reference, taking the word *devarim* (things) in its literal sense, "words." The reference cannot be to the events of the previous narrative (the treaty with Avimelekh), as this would have been the reader's assumption without any such introduction. Apparently, "these words" have a greater significance, and Rashi understands that a difficult trial such as the Binding must have a precipitating event, specifically a precipitating proclamation:

Some of our Sages say (*Sanhedrin* 89b) that this was after the words of Satan, who was accusing and saying, "Of every feast that Avraham made, he did not sacrifice before You one bull or one ram!" [God] said to him, "Does he do anything but for his son? Yet, if I were to say to him, 'Sacrifice him before Me,' he would not hold back."

Others say that it was after the words of Yishmael, who was boasting to Yitzchak that he was circumcised at the age of thirteen and he did not protest. Yitzchak said to him, "With one part you intimidate me? If the Holy One, Blessed be He, were to say to me, 'Sacrifice yourself before Me,' I would not hold back."[11]

An additional manifestation of Rashi's tendency to fill in gaps is his inclination to identify anonymous characters in *Tanakh*. If people are mentioned, they must be important, and as a *pashtan,* he is compelled to find out who those people are. Thus, for example, after Moshe has slain the Egyptian overseer, the Torah reports (*Shemot* 2:13): "He went out on the second day, and behold, two Hebrew men were quarreling, and he said to the evil one (*rasha*), 'Why should you strike your fellow?'" Rashi (ad loc.) identifies this pair as "Datan and Aviram; they were also the ones who saved some of the manna (ibid. 16:19, 20)."

We have here a twofold identification: the two men (*anashim*) here are the same *anashim* who save the manna overnight, in direct defiance of God's command via Moshe, and those people were Datan and Aviram. This identification continually recurs in Rashi's commentary: in *Shemot* 4:19, God tells Moshe that he may return to Egypt "for all the *anashim* who seek your life have died," and Rashi ad loc., following the Midrash, identifies these *anashim* as Datan and Aviram (and describes their death as metaphorical, referring to their financial situation). The impetus for this identification is clear: the term "*anashim*" appears in each verse, and this is the term that Moshe uses to warn the people to keep

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11 The distinction between these two *midrashim* is in the question of who initiates the test and what the aim of the test is. According to the first *midrash*, God is the initiator, and the point of the test is to demonstrate and publicize Avraham's behavior. According to the second *midrash*, the initiator is Yitzchak, and the aim of the test is to demonstrate and publicize his behavior. It is clear that the second *midrash* is very distant from the *peshat*, and as we shall see in a future lecture, this *midrash* has polemical religious echoes.

their distance from Datan and Aviram as the earth is about to open its mouth (*Bamidbar* 16:25-26):

> Moshe arose and went to Datan and Aviram… He spoke to the congregation, saying, "Get away, please, from the tents of these evil men (*ha-anashim ha-reshaim*), and do not touch anything of theirs, lest you perish because of all their sins!

An additional linguistic connection is what the quarreling Hebrews say to Moshe: "Who made you a lord and a judge over us?" (*Shemot* 2:14). Similarly, Datan and Aviram say to Moshe (*Bamidbar* 16:13): "Will you now lord it over us?" There is also a conceptual link: in both instances, the speakers are challenging Moshe's authority. Thus, the identification is logical.

E.   RASHI AS AN EDUCATOR

In all of the examples which we have cited so far, we have seen that Rashi is motivated to cite Midrashic material in light of the difficulties in the text; whether these were linguistic or other issues, what motivates his commentaries is solving problems in understanding *Tanakh* (with all of the caveats mentioned above).[12] But does Rashi cite Midrashic material only because of difficulties in the verses, with the aim of resolving those difficulties? Alternatively, does Rashi at times cite *midrashim* even without having found any difficulty in the biblical text, merely because he believes that these *midrashim* have a significant message for his audience?

I had the privilege of studying with Professor Nechama Leibowitz of blessed memory. She was of the opinion[13] that Rashi is a pure *parshan*, and his aim is solely exegetical:

> Rashi enlists *midrashim* only when they respond to a question which arises from the text of the verse, when they resolve a difficulty, solve a problem or fill in a gap — i.e., when they help the reader to understand the text written. He does not cite *midrashim* in order to decorate the words of the Torah with pearls of rabbinic wisdom, nor does he bring them for a mere sermon, a moral lesson or anything of that sort.[14]

The famous question posed by Professor Leibowitz, recurring in her lessons and writings, is, "What is bothering Rashi?" This is the crystallization of

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12   Rashi sometimes uses the phrase: "This verse demands to be expounded" — literally: "This verse says, 'Expound me!'"

13   In this, she followed in the footsteps of the supercommentaries R. Abraham Lévy-Bacrat in *Sefer Ha-Zikkaron* and R. David Prado in *Maskil Le-David*.

14   Nechama Leibowitz and Moshe Ahrend, *Peirushei Rashi La-Torah: Iyunim Be-shitato,* Vol. II (Tel Aviv 5750), p. 460.

her methodology. According to her, Rashi relates to a verse only in a case in which he is troubled by its simple understanding.

This position is not universally accepted. Some supercommentaries[15] and modern scholars challenge this view; they believe that despite the fact that Rashi essentially aims to explain the verses and cites Midrashic material when it explicates the *peshat*, he does sometimes deviate from this course. When the verse and its *midrash* constitute excellent opportunities to transmit a spiritual or ethical message, Rashi cites the *midrash* even though there is no exegetical need for it. This is the opinion of, for example, Professor A. Grossman:

> The basic assumption of Rashi is that since the aim of the Torah is to educate one to believe in God and keep His commandments, the commentator must embrace this purpose and not suffice with commentary alone. In many cases, one may accomplish this purpose — to educate towards faith and to strengthen weak knees — by using *midrashim* which dovetail with the language of the verses, thus accomplishing two aims: to explain and to educate simultaneously. However, in cases in which the homily seems crucial from an educational point of view, one must cite it, despite the fact that the connection between it and the language of the verse is very shaky. The famous question which was so beloved by Nechama, "What is bothering Rashi?" is appropriate for many of his comments, but not all of them.[16]

I am inclined to accept the approach of Professor Grossman. Rashi indeed cites Midrashic material in order to explicate the verses, but he brings a significant number of *midrashim* which are not only not conducive to the *peshat*, but are in fact not needed at all for the purposes of understanding the *peshat*. This is because of Rashi's view of his obligations in the public interest and his strong will to encourage and to educate the audience of readers.

God willing, our next lecture will be dedicated to Rashi's educational and ethical methodology, as expressed in his comments on the Torah.

Translated by Rav Yoseif Bloch

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15   See R. Eliyahu Mizrachi and R. Yitzchak Yaakov Horowitz in his *Be'er Yitzchak*.

16   *"Pulmos Dati U-Megamma Chinukhit Be-Feirushei Rashi La-Torah," Pirkei Nechama — Sefer Zikkaron Li-Nechama Leibowitz*, pp. 187-205.