

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

GREAT BIBLICAL COMMENTATORS
By Dr. Avigail Rock

Dedicated to Liora & Ari Tuchman - In honor of the Bat Mitzvah of Danelle
Sophia and in Honor of the Birth of their son, Adin Emanuel

This week's shiurim are dedicated in memory of Hershey Hawk z"l
by Dr Jerry Hawk

Lecture #6a:
Rashi, Part III —
The Moral and Educational Philosophy of Rashi

A. RASHI AS AN EDUCATOR

In our previous lesson, we discussed the question of what motivates Rashi to expound a verse. Does Rashi explicate the verses only when he finds some difficulty in them, with the sole motive of clarifying the text? This is what Professor Nechama Leibowitz argues, in the footsteps of a number of Rashi's supercommentaries. Or does Rashi see himself as obligated not only to explain the verses, but even to educate the community and to transmit messages by way of *parshanut* when these opportunities happen to fall into his lap? Indeed, a not insignificant number of modern scholars of Rashi maintain that the latter is true.

We have noted that the first approach compels the student to find the difficulty that Rashi tries to resolve for each and every verse which Rashi expounds. Nevertheless, there are times that there is no escape from saying that Rashi does not always have a difficulty in the verse; at least in some circumstances, his desire is to educate and to shape the viewpoint and life practices of the members of his generation, and this is what motivates him to expound the verse.

Regardless of the position we maintain regarding Rashi's motivations, there is no doubt that Rashi — whether intentionally or unintentionally — has become one of the great developers of Jewish education throughout all generations.

We may say that Rashi is directly responsible for shaping a significant part of the ethical and educational tradition of the Jewish nation. We might even go far enough to say that in this sphere, his success may be even greater than in the exegetical sphere. Parents and other educational figures construct the values and the outlook of the Jewish child upon the rock-solid foundations of Rashi's commentaries on *Tanakh*; these words serve as their guiding light.

Every Jewish child who is about to hit his classmate or playmate immediately hears the resounding voice of the kindergarten teacher quoting: "Whoever raises a hand against his fellow is called a *rasha* (evil one)" (Rashi, *Shemot* 2:13, based on *Sanhedrin* 58b).¹

We all remember that it is better to say a little and do a lot; this is, after all, Avraham's behavior, while Efron (who is, of course, a non-Jew) acts in the opposite way (Rashi, *Bereishit* 23:16, based on *Bava Metzia* 87a).

The seriousness of publicly shaming another was emphasized in our youth when we learnt of Tamar: "Better that one leap into a fiery furnace than shame one's fellow in public" (Rashi, *Bereishit* 38:25, based on *Berakhot* 43b).

The importance of prayer is derived from Rashi's commentary as well. On the verse, "And God took account of Sara..." (*Bereishit* 21:1), Rashi explains, "This section² was juxtaposed to the other to teach you that whoever asks for God's compassion for another, when he needs the same thing, he is answered first" (based on *Bava Kamma* 92a).

The authority of the official leadership, which we must respect even if we do not like it, is recalled with Rashi's phrase: "Yiftach in his generation is like Shemuel in his generation" (Rashi, *Devarim* 19:17, as cited from *Rosh Hashana* 25b). And who does not remember Rashi's famous example of the difference between taking revenge and bearing a grudge (based on the *Sifra ad loc.* and *Yoma* 23a):

X says to Y, "Lend me your sickle," and Y replies, "No!" The next day, Y says to X "Lend me your ax." If X says to Y, "I will not lend it to you, just as you did not lend to me!" — this constitutes revenge.

Now what constitutes bearing a grudge? X says to Y, "Lend me your ax," and Y replies, "No!" The next day, Y says to X, "Lend me your sickle." If X says to Y, "Here it is for you; I am not like you, who did not lend me!" —

¹ Usually, this threat is voiced without mentioning the term *rasha*, following another of Rashi's dicta: "It threatens, but it does not delineate the punishment" (*Shemot* 22:22; a similar expression appears in *Bereishit* 4:15).

² In 20:17, Avraham prays for Avimelekh and his household.

this constitutes bearing a grudge, for X keeps the hatred in his heart, even though he does not take revenge.

Of course, the source of all of these statements is the Talmud and Midrash, but most of us first encountered and came to know them from Rashi's words.

In this lecture and the next, I have gathered a number of examples of educational topics that are very close to Rashi's heart, so much so that at every opportunity he interweaves them into his commentary. By way of these examples, we may build a model of the ethical and educational philosophy of the greatest of all teachers: Rashi.³

B LASHON HA-RA

To Rashi, speaking ill of others — *lashon ha-ra*, here used as a term including slander, gossip, defamation and the like — is anathema. He notes how serious this sin is in a number of places; according to him (as we shall see presently), the sin is so serious that it is the cause of exile.

When Moshe encounters two quarreling Hebrew men and rebukes the assailant, he is shocked to learn that his killing of the Egyptian slave-driver the previous day has become public knowledge: "And Moshe was afraid" (*Shemot* 2:14). After explaining this reaction literally, Rashi (*ad loc.*) continues:

Midrashically, it is interpreted to mean that he was worried because he saw that were delators⁴ among Israel. He said: If this is the case, perhaps they do not deserve to be redeemed!⁵

Explaining the next phrase, "And he said, 'Indeed, the matter is known,'" Rashi continues to develop this approach:

Its Midrashic interpretation, however, is this: The matter I was wondering about, why the Israelites are considered more sinful than all the seventy

³ As we have noted above, the source of all of these points is ultimately the words of the Sages. Nevertheless, we will attribute the resultant educational philosophy to Rashi, because he selects certain *midrashim* and cites them, while ignoring others.

⁴ This is a term for informers from the Latin that has found its way into both Hebrew and English. How does Moshe know that it is Hebrews, not Egyptians, who have informed on him? Before he kills the Egyptian, "he turned this way and that, and he saw that no man was there" (*Shemot* 2:12); therefore, the only person who could have told the tale was the Hebrew whom Moshe had saved from his Egyptian attacker.

⁵ It may be that the impetus for adding this *midrash* is the question of how a person at Moshe's spiritual level would be in fear of mere humans. According to this *midrash*, this is not the fear of personal peril, but rather a concern for the fate of the Jewish people; perhaps, God forbid, they do not deserve redemption due to their perfidy.

nations that they deserve to be subjugated in cruel servitude, has become known to me. I see that they do indeed deserve it.

It is not only the Jewish nation that is punished by the privations of exile due to the sin of *lashon ha-ra*; this is true of the individual as well. For example, Yosef informs on his brothers, as the verse notes (*Bereishit* 37:2): “Yosef brought their evil report to their father.” Rashi (*ad loc.*) describes at length both the slander and the punishment of Yosef for bringing *lashon ha-ra* to his father. In fact, he writes, all of the troubles which befall Yosef are a punishment for his *lashon ha-ra* concerning his brothers:

“Their evil report” — any evil he saw in his brothers, the sons of Leah, he would tell his father: 1) That they ate limbs from living animals, 2) that they demeaned the sons of the maidservants by calling them slaves, and 3) that they were suspected of illicit sexual relationships.

For these three, he was punished:

For the tale of limbs from living animals, “they slaughtered a kid goat” (*Bereishit* 37:31) when they sold him, but they did not eat it alive.

For the report that he told about them that they called their brothers slaves, “Joseph was sold as a slave” (*Tehillim* 105:17).

For the tale of illicit sexual relationships that he told about them, “his master’s wife lifted her eyes...” (*Bereishit* 39:7).

According to Rashi, Moshe Rabbeinu’s experiences described in chapter 4 of *Shemot* demonstrate that even leaders and great men such as he must be careful to avoid *lashon ha-ra*; indeed, they are forced to pay for this sin if they stumble in this severe crime.⁶

When Moshe Rabbeinu is sent to redeem the Israelites from Egypt, he doubts whether they will trust in his account that God has indeed revealed Himself to him: “But they will not believe me” (v. 1). God’s response to Moshe is to give him two signs (vv. 2-8); at first glance, their aim appears to be to convince the Jewish People of the trustworthiness of Moshe Rabbeinu. However, according to Rashi, the two signs that Moshe performs allude to his own sin – slandering the Jewish people with the statement “But they will not believe me.”

The first sign is changing the staff into a serpent, and Rashi finds in this two allusions to Moshe’s sin. The first allusion precedes the sign itself, when God asks Moshe (v. 2), “*Ma-zeh be-yadekha?*”, “What is this in your hand?” On the

⁶ It is noteworthy that while Rashi generally tries to justify the acts of the Patriarchs and other role models (see more on this topic later in this series), in regard to the sin of *lashon ha-ra*, he does not mince words.

basis of the Midrash,⁷ Rashi directs our attention to the strange compound word “*ma-zeh*,” composed of “*ma*” (what) and “*zeh*” (this).

This is why it is written as one word: so that it may be expounded: “*Mi-zeh*,” “from this” in your hand you deserve to be stricken, for you have suspected the innocent.

In addition, the sign itself, turning the staff into a serpent, is seen by Rashi (v. 3) as an allusion to Moshe’s sin:

He alluded to him that he told *lashon ha-ra* about Israel, seizing the occupation of the Serpent.⁸

The second sign is Moshe’s hand becoming covered with leprosy⁹ (v. 6), and Rashi brings the *midrash* which connects this sign to the sin of *lashon ha-ra*:

This is an allusion to the *lashon ha-ra* that he had told by saying, “They will not believe me;” therefore, he was stricken with *tzaraat*, just as Miriam was stricken because of *lashon ha-ra*.

God then declares: “If they will not believe you, and they will not hearken to the call of the first sign, then they will believe the call of the latter sign” (v. 8). Rashi explains that the second sign (the leprous hand) is more convincing than the first sign (the ophidian staff), because with the second sign Moshe is punished:

“Once you tell them, ‘I was stricken because of you, because I told *lashon ha-ra* about you,’ they will believe you.”¹⁰

According to the *gemara*, *lashon ha-ra* is one of the seven sins punished by *tzara’at*:

⁷ *Midrash Tanchuma, Shemot 23.*

⁸ The association of snakes with the sin of *lashon ha-ra* also appears in Rashi’s comments to the following verse: “God sent against the people the venomous snakes, and they bit the people, and many people of Israel died” (*Bamidbar 21:6*). Rashi writes: “‘And they bit the people’ — let the snake, which was stricken for speaking evil, come and punish those who spread slander.”

⁹ **Translator’s note:** For convenience’s sake, we use the terms “leprosy” and “leper” for *tzara’at* and *metzora* respectively, despite the fact that in *Tanakh*, *tzara’at* is a physical manifestation of spiritual infirmity, not Hansen’s disease, which is bacterial in nature.

¹⁰ It appears that what motivates Rashi’s interpretation of these signs is the fact that Moshe is required to perform the signs while he is still standing by the Burning Bush, before he arrives in Egypt at all, without even one person around to witness these phenomena. The aim of performing these signs afterwards, before the Israelites, is quite clear - Moshe needs to convince them that God did indeed speak to him - but what is the point of performing them at the Burning Bush? According to the comments of Rashi, the answer is profound; they serve as a rebuke and punishment for Moshe.

R. Shmuel bar Nachmani said in the name of R. Yochanan: Plagues are caused by seven things: by *lashon ha-ra*, by bloodshed, by vain oath-taking, by sexual immorality, by arrogance, by robbery and by greed. (*Arakhin* 16a)

From among these seven possibilities, Rashi chooses the sin of *lashon ha-ra* as the exclusive offense that causes the punishment of *tzaraat*; ever since the publication of Rashi's commentary on the Torah, the punishment of *tzara'at* (by itself!) is known throughout Jewish communities as the fitting punishment for the sin of *lashon ha-ra*! Rashi even justifies the idea of tit-for-tat inherent in the punishment of *tzara'at* when he explains the verse, "He shall reside alone; outside the camp must his residence be" (*Vayikra* 13:46), the rule governing the *metzora*:

"He shall reside alone" — even other impure people must avoid him.

Our Sages said (*Arakhin* 16b): Why is he different from other impure people, that he must remain isolated? Since, with his slander, he caused a separation between a man and his wife or between a man and his fellow, he too, shall be separated!

I do not know why this topic of *lashon ha-ra* is so imperative for Rashi. It may be that Rashi, as a communal leader and rabbinic judge, saw up close the extremely harmful results that the sin of *lashon ha-ra* can cause. In any case, it is clear to me that it is Rashi who succeeded in inculcating the severity of the sin of *lashon ha-ra* in the consciousness of the Jewish People, long before R. Yisrael Meir Kagan wrote his magnum opus on the topic, *Chafetz Chayim*.¹¹

Translated by Rav Yoseif Bloch

¹¹ The sin of *lashon ha-ra* appears in Rashi's commentaries in the following places as well: *Vayikra* 14:4, 19:16; *Bamidbar* 33:18; *Devarim* 22:14, 27:24, etc.