

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

GREAT BIBLICAL COMMENTATORS
By Dr. Avigail Rock

This week's *shiurim* are dedicated in memory of Israel Koschitzky *zt"l*, whose
yahrzeit falls on the 19th of Kislev. May the worldwide dissemination of Torah
through the VBM be a fitting tribute to a man whose lifetime achievements
exemplified the love of *Eretz Yisrael* and *Torat Yisrael*.

Dedicated to Maya Bernstein & Noam Silverman -
In honor of the Birth of their daughter, Niva Hallel

Lecture #6b:
Rashi, Part III —
The Moral and Educational Philosophy of Rashi (cont.)

C. SENSITIVITY TO THE DISADVANTAGED

In his commentaries, Rashi displays great sensitivity towards the people in society who are indigent or powerless, who have no defenders.¹ This compassion for the disadvantaged is expressed in numerous ways. We will focus on his commentary on *Vayikra*.

At the end of the first chapter, Rashi declares that the economic situation of the pauper does not decrease his or her value in God's eyes. In explaining the phrase "a fire-offering of a pleasing fragrance," he writes:

Now, regarding birds, it says here, "A pleasing fragrance," and regarding animals (v. 9), it says, "A pleasing fragrance" as well. Thus, we may see that whether the offering is a large animal or a small bird, the fragrance is pleasing to God. This teaches us that it makes no difference whether one offers much or little, provided that one directs the heart heavenward. (Rashi, *Vayikra* 1:17)

¹ The Torah declares, "Do not oppress any widow or orphan" (*Shemot* 22:21), and Rashi explains this: "The same applies to all people, but the Scripture speaks of the usual situation, since [the widows and orphans] are weak and they are often mistreated."

A similar idea is cited by Rashi in the next verse, “And if a person [literally, soul] offers” (ibid. 2:1):

Regarding all the sacrifices which are donated voluntarily, the only instance where Scripture uses the word “soul” is in the case of the meal-offering. Now, who usually donates a meal-offering? Only the poorest of people do so. Nevertheless, the Holy One, blessed be He, says: In my eyes, it is as he has offered his very soul!

Returning to the bird-offering (1:17), Rashi uses a technical detail to stress that the Torah worries about the rights and dignity of the weak. The Torah commands that when offering a bird, the priest “shall cleave it by its wings, but not sever it; then he shall burn it on the altar... a pleasing fragrance to God.” Rashi (ad loc.) explains:

“By its wings” — with its wings. There is no need to pluck the feathers of its wings.

“By its wings” — the actual feathers. But surely even the most unsophisticated person finds the smell of burnt feathers repulsive! Why then does Scripture command, “Then he shall burn it”? So that the altar should appear content and enhanced by the offering of a pauper.

In other words, offering the wing feathers on the altar is designed to create the image of a satisfied altar; a featherless or wingless bird appears to be a very small offering, while the wings add a bit of volume and beauty. Thus, the pauper, who is bringing something of the small amount that he or she owns, feels good about the offering.

Later in the book, this concept is extended to interpersonal laws. The Torah states (ibid. 25:35), “If your brother becomes destitute and his hand falters beside you, you shall support him, alien or resident, so that he may live with you.” Rashi directs our attention to the fact that in charity, timing is everything:

“You shall support him” — do not allow him to fall down and collapse altogether, making it difficult to pick him up again. Rather, “support him” when his hand falters. To what can this be compared? To a load on a donkey — as long as it is still on the donkey, one person can grab hold of it and keep it in place. Once it falls to the ground, however, even five people cannot pick it up.

Throughout the Torah, Rashi is wont to cite the halakhic *midrashim* which emphasize the severity of the prohibitions of taking advantage of the weak, whether in terms of the sin or in terms of the punishment.

The prohibition of defrauding is mentioned twice in Scripture. In *Vayikra* (19:13), we read, “Do not defraud your fellow;” in *Devarim* (24:14), we read, “Do not defraud your poor or destitute hiree, from among your brethren or from among your aliens.” According to Rashi, the Torah views the offense as more serious when it is committed against a pauper; indeed, one who transgresses and takes advantage of the indigent violates two prohibitions simultaneously:

“Do not defraud your [poor or destitute] hiree” — But has this not already been written? Indeed it has, but this makes the transgressor liable for two negative commandments for a poor person: 1) “Do not defraud your poor or destitute hiree” of his wages; 2) “Do not defraud your fellow,” which proscribes doing so [even] to a rich person. (Rashi, *Devarim* 24:14)

A few verses later (24:17), Rashi applies the same logic to the justice system that he does to labor relations:

“Do not pervert the judgment of an alien or an orphan” — The Torah has already proscribed doing so even to a rich person: “Do not pervert justice” (ibid. 16:19). However, the Torah repeats it here in reference to the poor person in order to make the transgressor liable for two negative commandments. Since it is easier to pervert the judgment of a poor person² than that of a rich person, the Torah proscribes once and then repeats.

In other places in Rashi’s commentary, we see that God Himself serves as a guardian of the weak. For example, in *Shemot* 22:25, the Torah states: “If you take your fellow’s garment as security, return it to him until sunset.” Rashi comments:

“If you take... as security” [literally, “If you take a security, you shall take a security”] — The Torah employs duplicative language, indicating that one may end up taking the security many times.

The Holy One, blessed be He, says: How greatly are you in My debt! For your soul ascends to Me every night, gives an account and tally, and is found wanting before Me, but I return it to you nevertheless. You as well must take and return, take and return.³

² Note that Rashi uses the term “poor person” to describe an oppressed person (in this case, an alien or orphan), not specifically one who is financially disadvantaged.

³ This is a payment which is taken from a borrower who does not have the cash to pay a debt. When the creditor takes the collateral garment of the pauper in this case, he must return it to that individual every morning, so that the pauper will have something to wear throughout the day, and at sunset the lender takes the garment once again, until the next morning, and so on and so forth (until the pauper pays his debt).

This *midrash* implies that the creditor must return to the pauper his collateral daily, since this is how God acts with every person when He returns his soul to Him; in other words, God, as it were, represents the poor, and the bounty which God bestows upon us must therefore be shared with the pauper.

A similar idea is expressed in the previous verse (22:24): “If you lend money to My people, the pauper among you...” Rashi comments:

“To My people” — do not act towards [the borrower] in a demeaning manner when you lend to him, for he is with Me.

Rashi is suggesting a homiletic reading: instead of vowelizing the word “*ammī*” (My people), it may be understood as “*immi*” (with Me). Thus, the pauper deserves respect, since God is in his corner, and disrespect for the pauper is thus disrespect for God.

Rashi reiterates this idea in his comment to *Devarim* 16:11. The verse describes the joy of the festival of Shavuot:

And you shall rejoice before Lord your God, you, and your son, and your daughter, and your servant, and your maidservant, and the Levite in your gates, and the alien, and the orphan, and the widow in your midst...

Rashi explains:

“The Levite... and the alien, and the orphan, and the widow” — [God says:] These are My four, corresponding to your four — “Your son and your daughter and your servant and your maidservant.” If you will gladden Mine, I will gladden yours.

If a person gladdens the Levite, alien, orphan, and widow, “My four,” then God will gladden “your four” — son, daughter, servant, and maidservant.

Rashi even teaches us that empathy for the pauper can lead us to sympathy. Returning to the verse in *Shemot* 22:24, Rashi examines the phrase “the pauper among you:”

“The pauper among you” — Look at yourself as if you were the pauper.

Rashi writes similar things about the welfare of the aliens, the strangers or converts. In the next chapter, the Torah states: “You know the soul of the alien” (23:9), and Rashi explains:

“The soul of the alien” — [You know] how hard it is for him when people oppress him.

The Jewish people know how difficult it is for the aliens when they are oppressed, because the Israelites were aliens in Egypt, and they were also oppressed, “And we cried out to God... and He saw our suffering... and our oppression” (*Devarim* 26:7).

D. AFFECTION FOR FOREBEARS OF ISRAEL

Rashi expresses great affection for the forebears of Israel, the Patriarchs, the Matriarchs, and the Twelve Tribes. This regard is expressed in two areas. The first is an attempt to minimize — to the level of obscuring the very progression of the biblical text — the negative traits or acts which are attributed in Scripture to Israel’s forebears and its role models. The second is the glorification of acts that seem to be insignificant. There are a number of examples of Rashi’s forgiving attitude towards the ancestors of the Jewish People, and we will cite a number of them from the Book of *Bereishit*:

1. Avraham asks God about the future provision of the Holy Land (15:8): “By what shall I know that I will inherit it?” Rashi stresses that Avraham does not actually doubt God’s ability to fulfill the blessing, but he needs to know how his descendants will merit to receive the land and hold on to it: “He said to Him: ‘Let me know — by what right will they endure in it?’”
2. In Yitzchak’s words to Esav, he describes Yaakov’s trickery in the following way: “Your brother came with guile (*be-mirma*), and he took your blessing” (27:35). Rashi follows in the footsteps of Onkelos, rendering “*be-mirma*” as “with cleverness (*be-chokhma*).” When Yaakov’s sons hatch a scheme to kill the men of Shekhem, the Torah notes, “And Yaakov’s sons answered Shekhem and Chamor with *mirma*” (34:13); Rashi translates the word *mirma* as *chokhma*.⁴
3. When the Torah states (30:1), “And Rachel saw that she had not borne a child to Yaakov, and Rachel was envious of her sister,” Rashi explains that Rachel is not jealous, but rather “envious of her good deeds,” by which she had merited giving birth to so many sons.
4. The verse reports (35:22), “And Reuven went, and he slept with Bilha, his father’s concubine;” Rashi explains that “he disarranged his bed.”

⁴ In the case of Shekhem, the alteration from the *peshat* of the verse is more significant, since the guile is also mentioned by the objective biblical narrator, who calls it *mirma*, while Rashi explains that the reference is to *chokhma*. On the other hand, in the case of Yitzchak, *mirma* is mentioned only by Yitzchak himself; one may understand that even though Yitzchak himself evaluates it as *mirma*, in fact, Yaakov’s actions are not so deplorable, and they are in the category of *chokhma*, not *mirma*. As we shall see below, Rashi is not overly concerned with setting aside the literal meaning of the words employed by the objective biblical narrator in order to convey a moral message.

When Yaakov describes what Lavan has done to him in swapping Leah for Rachel, he uses the identical term: “And why have you beguiled me?” (*Bereishit* 29:25). Rashi does not explain that the meaning of the word *mirma* there is *chokhma*, but rather leaves it without explanation, with the understanding that the reader will interpret it according to the usual meaning – that Lavan has tricked, misled, or defrauded Yaakov.

5. When the brothers' hatred of Yosef becomes overpowering, so that "they could not speak peaceably with him" (37:4), Rashi points out that this redounds to the brothers' credit; they did not act in a duplicitous manner, pretending to like him.⁵

Conversely, as we have said, when it comes to the forebears of Israel, Rashi also glorifies actions which seem meaningless. Interpreting the words of the verse (30:14), "And Reuven went in the days of the wheat harvest," Rashi explains:

This tells you how the tribes were praiseworthy, that it was the time of harvest, but [Reuven] did not stretch out his hand in thievery to steal wheat or barley, but an ownerless thing, which no one cares about.

Another example is Rashi's interpretation of the verse (22:1), "And Avraham said, 'Here I am,'" when God tests him:

"Here I am" — This is the reply of the pious. It is an expression of humility and an expression of readiness.⁶

Next week, we will complete our analysis of Rashi as an educator and moral authority.

⁵ This explanation of Rashi teaches us the importance of honesty in his worldview.

⁶ A similar idea is applied to Yosef's use of the term when his father addresses him; see *Bereishit* 37:13.