

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

GREAT BIBLICAL COMMENTATORS
By Dr. Avigail Rock

Dedicated by Aaron and Tzipora Ross and family in honor of the yahrzeits of our esteemed grandparents: Neil Fredman (Shmuel Nachamu ben Shlomo Moshe HaKohen, 10 Tevet), Clara Fredman (Chaya bat Yitzchak Dovid, 15 Tevet), and Walter Rosenthal (Shimon ben Moshe, 16 Tevet).

Dedicated in loving memory of Richard J. Silvera A”H by his children Hillel ('91), Albert and Michelle

Dedicated by the Wise and Etshalom families in memory of Rebbetzin Miriam Wise, ל”ר, Miriam bat Yitzhak and Rivkah, whose first yahrzeit is on 9 Tevet.

יהי זכרה ברוך

Lecture #7b:
Rashi, Part IV —
Rashi and Christianity (conclusion)

The Selection of the Jewish Nation

According to Christianity, the Jewish People were once indeed the Chosen Nation, but they were eventually rejected for their sins and replaced with the Christians – “Israel in spirit” in place of Israel in flesh. In order to combat this claim, Rashi stresses in many places in his commentaries that even if the Jews sin, they remain God’s treasured people. Similarly, Rashi seeks in his writings to encourage the nation and prevent them from giving up on redemption out of feeling that they do not deserve it. Rashi relates to this in numerous places, and we will analyze a few examples:

A) Genesis 6:6 states: “And God reconsidered (*va-yinnachem*) that He had made man in the earth, and He was saddened to His heart.” This verse could serve as ammunition for the Christian claim; if God could reconsider and regret the creation of man as a whole, they might argue, it is certainly feasible that God might regret His selection of the Jewish People. Therefore, Rashi explains the word “*va-yinnachem*” in the following manner:

“And God reconsidered that He had made” — it was a consolation (*nechama*) to Him that He had created him [man] of the lower beings, for

had he been one of the upper beings, he would have caused them to rebel.

According to this explanation, the word “*va-yinnachem*” does not mean “And He regretted,” but “And He was comforted” or “And He consoled Himself.”

The source for this *midrash* is *Bereishit Rabba*, Ch. 27:

“And God reconsidered that He had made” - R. Yehuda said: “It is regrettable for Me that I created him below, for if I had made him of the elements of heaven, he would never have rebelled against me.”

R. Nechemia said: “I take comfort in the fact that I created him below, for if I had created him above, just as he caused the lower beings [humans] to rebel against Me, so he would have caused the upper beings [angels and the heavenly host] to rebel against Me.”

R. Aibu said: “It is regrettable for Me that I created in him the impulse to do evil, for if I had not created the impulse to do evil in him, he would never have rebelled against me.”

Said R. Levi: “I take comfort in the fact that I made him from the earth.”

In this midrash, four different opinions appear to explain the verse. According to the first and third ones, the term “*va-yinnachem*” indicates regret (and Rashi therefore does not cite these interpretations), while according to the second and fourth views, the word indicates consolation. (Rashi ultimately chooses the second view over the fourth because it fits better with the language of the verse, “that He had made man in the earth.”)¹

B) In *Devarim* 29:12, we find the phrase, “And He will be to you as a God.” Rashi explains:

“And He will be to you as a God” — Since God has given you His word and sworn to your forefathers not to exchange their offspring for another nation, He therefore binds you through these oaths, so as not to provoke Him to anger, **because He cannot separate Himself from you.**

C) In *Vayikra* 26:44, the verse says (at the end of the Reproof):

¹ A similar idea is found in the story of the Binding of Yitzchak, in which God seems to change His mind as well. First, he asks Avraham to bring Yitzchak up as a burnt-offering, and afterwards he reverses himself. Rashi explains God’s command, “And bring him up as a burnt-offering” (*Bereishit* 22:2):

“And bring him up” — He did not say, “Slaughter him,” because the Holy One, Blessed be He, did not want him to slaughter him, but rather to bring him to the mountain to prepare him as a burnt-offering; once he brought him up, He told him to take him down.

But despite all this, while they are in the land of their enemies, I will not despise them nor will I reject them to annihilate them, thereby breaking My covenant that is with them, for I am the Lord their God.

Rashi explains:

“But despite all this” — Moreover, even though I will mete out this retribution upon them which I have described when they are in the land of their enemies, nevertheless, **I will not despise them... to annihilate them, thereby breaking My covenant that is with them.**

In other words, it is not merely that the Holy One, Blessed be He, forms His covenant with the Jewish People initially; even the punishment of exile cannot be seen as God’s abandonment of his nation. Even this harsh retribution is only temporary, because God is present with them in exile, and with them He will return from exile.

D) In the passage of repentance (*Devarim* 30:3), it says, “The Lord your God will bring you back from captivity.” Rashi explains:

“The Lord your God will bring you back from captivity” — It should have been written in the causative, but it is written in the simple [literally, “God will come back”]. Our Rabbis derived from this that the Divine Presence appears to reside with Israel in the distress of their exile; when they are redeemed, He has written, redemption will be His, for He will return with them.²

E) Rashi also stresses that the sins of the nation of Israel do not take away from God’s love for His nation. In *Devarim* 10:12 (after describing the Sin of the Golden Calf), commenting on the words, “And now, Israel,” Rashi explains: “Even though you have done all of this, He still has compassion and affection for you.”

The Jewish Nation as a Moral People

Christianity indicts the Jews for theft, exploitation, and fraud.³ Rashi, in dozens of places in his commentary, identifies the great caution of the nation of Israel from theft. Aside from many other instances, the idea of punctilious honesty appears in the context of each one of the Patriarchs in Rashi’s commentary to *Bereishit*.

² A similar idea appears in Rashi’s commentary to *Shemot* 3:14: “I will be as I will be’ — I will be with them in this trouble, as I will be with them in the subjugation of other kingdoms.”

³ John Chrysostom, who became archbishop of Constantinople in 398, wrote eight homilies against those joining the Jewish faith, *Adversus Judaeos*. The Jews, according to Chrysostom, are thieves, cheaters and exploiters. See: http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/chrysostom-jews6.html#HOMILY_I, #6.

A) Concerning Avraham, the Torah records, “And there was a quarrel between the herdsmen of Abram’s cattle and between the herdsmen of Lot’s cattle” (*Bereishit* 13:7). Rashi (*ad loc.*) famously explains:

“And there was a quarrel” — Since Lot’s herdsmen were wicked and they pastured their animals in fields belonging to others, Abram’s herdsmen rebuked them for committing robbery...⁴

There is no doubt that Rashi’s commentary here is tendentious, because the previous verse says exactly what the quarrel was about: “And the land did not bear them to dwell together, for their possessions were many, and they could not dwell together” (v. 6). In other words, there was not enough pastureland for both Avraham and Lot to share.

B) Concerning Yitzchak, when Yitzchak requests that Esav will catch him some game, “And hunt for me” (*Bereishit* 27:3), Rashi explains: “From that which is ownerless, and not from that which is stolen.”

C) Concerning Yaakov, Rivka says that Yaakov should bring her two kid goats so that she may prepare them for Yitzchak. Rashi adds to Rivka’s words (27:9):

“And take for me” — They are mine; they are not stolen – for Yitzchak had written this for her in her marriage contract to take two kid goats every day.

One might wonder how Rivka had a right to take the goats, as “what a woman acquires, her husband acquires” (*Nazir* 24b); therefore, Rivka reassures Yaakov and explains that she is asserting a monetary right.

In addition, according to Rashi, the mandrakes picked by Reuven are ownerless (Rashi, *Bereishit* 30:14), and Moshe leads his sheep into the wilderness in order to avoid theft (Rashi, *Shemot* 3:1).

D. Esav’s Character in Rashi’s Commentary **The Demonization of Esav in Rashi’s Commentary**

In many places in Rashi’s commentary, there is strong, piercing criticism of Esav. It is not only that Rashi never has a positive word for Esav;⁵ even apparently neutral acts of Esav are judged in a negative light by Rashi. He makes

⁴ See also Rashi’s commentary to *Bereishit* 24:10.

⁵ This is as opposed to the view of Esau in a number of *midrashim*, in which the Sages praise him for honoring his father.

sure to blacken the face of Esav even when the things are not required at all to explain the *peshat* of the verses.⁶ What is the meaning of this hatred of Esav?

As we have noted previously, many view Esav as a symbol of Christianity. The relationship between Yaakov and Esav recalls, to a great extent, the struggle between the nation of Israel and another people or faith which hopes to inherit the place of Israel incarnate. When the nation of Israel must contend with an enemy threatening its very existence, the question of who is chosen and who is rejected once again arises in its full strength. Esav is the “designated enemy” — sometimes as Edom, sometimes as Rome, and sometimes as Christianity.⁷ The hatred of Esav is actually hatred for the Christians, who claim that they are the chosen people and that the nation of Israel incarnate is rejected.

We will now analyze Rashi’s references to Esav in a number of domains.

A) ***Esav is a villain in utero:*** In *Bereishit* 25:22, it is said of the pregnant Rivka, “And the boys struggled inside her.” Rashi explains:

Our Rabbis interpreted it as an expression of running. When she passed by the entrances of the study halls of Shem and Ever, Yaakov would run and struggle to come out; when she passed the entrance of an idolatrous temple, Esav would run and struggle to come out.

B) ***Esav (not Yaakov) is a cheater and a thief:*** Just as Rashi describes the Patriarchs as scrupulous in avoiding theft, he sees Esav as having no compunctions about this. When Yitzchak requests of Esav to hunt on his behalf, he needs to stress that Esav should not steal any animals (*Bereishit* 27:3, as we have noted above: “And hunt for me,” which Rashi explains, “From that which is ownerless, and not from that which is stolen”). Yitzchak is scrupulous about avoiding theft, but Esav is not. Rivka also believes that Esav is a thief; concerning Rivka’s words (quoting Yitzchak), “to hunt for game to bring” (*ibid.* v. 5), Rashi says: “What does it mean ‘to bring’? If he would not find game, he would bring from that which is stolen.”⁸

The verse describes Esav as “knowing hunting” (*Bereishit* 25:27), and Rashi explains what the intent is:

⁶ See Grossman’s book, *Rashi*, pp. 104-6.

⁷ What is unique about these enemies as opposed to other enemies, such as Egypt or Babylonia, is that these try to seize the status or place of the Jewish nation.

⁸ See also Rashi’s comments to *Bereishit* 26:34, which is analyzed at greater length below.

He knew how to trap and to deceive his father with his mouth and ask him, “Father, how do we tithe salt and straw?” His father therefore thought that he was scrupulous in his observance of the commandments.⁹

This is opposed to Yaakov, described in the verse as “an innocent man”. Rashi explains:

“An innocent man” — He was not an expert in all these matters. Like his heart, so was his mouth. A person who is not astute at deceiving is called innocent.

At the time that the Christians accuse the Jews of being inveterate thieves and cheats, Rashi undertakes to prove Yaakov’s innocence on the one hand and to present Esav as a cheater and thief on the other.¹⁰ This idea runs through his entire commentary to *Bereishit* 27.¹¹

C) Esav is a murderer, adulterer and idolater:

a) Esav is a murderer: In *Bereishit* 25:25, Esav is identified as “ruddy,” and Rashi explains: “This is a sign that he will be a person who sheds blood.” Furthermore, when Esav comes in from the field and finds Yaakov making stew, he is described as “faint”, and Rashi explains: “And he was faint — from committing murder, as it is said (*Yirmeyahu* 4:31): ‘For my soul is faint before the murderers.’” Similarly, when Yaakov rebukes Shimon and Levi at the end of his life, Rashi explains Yaakov’s words, “Their weapons are stolen instruments,” in the following way:

“Stolen instruments” — This craft of murder is in their hands wrongfully, for it is Esav’s blessing. It is his craft, and you [Shimon and Levi] have stolen it from him.

b) Esav is an adulterer: On *Bereishit* 26:34, “And Esav was forty years old, and he married...,” Rashi explains:

“Forty years old” — Esav is comparable to a swine, as it is said (*Tehillim* 80:14): “The boar from the forest gnaws at it.” This swine, when it lies down, stretches out its hooves, as if to say, “See, I am a kosher animal.” **So, they rob and they plunder and then pretend to be honorable.** During the entire forty years, Esav kidnapped wives from their husbands and violated them. When he was forty years old, he said: “My father married at forty; I, too, will do the same.”

⁹ See also Rashi’s comment to *Bereishit* 25:28: “‘For hunting was in his mouth’— ...and its *midrash* is: in the mouth of Esav who would hunt him and trick him with his words.”

¹⁰ This tendency is very prominent when one takes into account the *peshat* of *Bereishit* 27, according to which Yitzchak wants to bless Esav, but Yaakov acquires the blessings through “guile” (as Yitzchak himself puts it in v. 35).

¹¹ See Rashi’s comments to the following verses in *Bereishit* 27: 19, 24, 35.

The words I have emphasized in Rashi's comments clearly have a broader purpose - not only to explain why we are told that Esav was forty years old when he got married, but to express an idea that Rashi wished to transmit to his contemporaries about the Esav of his time. I have no doubt that these words are, in fact, a reference to the Christians, who represent themselves as saints, but in fact are evil.

c) Esav serves idols: In 25:27, the Torah says, "And the youths grew up, and Esav was..." Rashi points out:

"And the youths grew up, and Esav was" — As long as they were small, they were not recognizable through their deeds, and no one scrutinized them to determine their characters. As soon as they became thirteen years old, this one parted to the study hall and that one parted to idol worship.

D) Yaakov's Deserved Birthright and Blessing:

a) Esav is born first, and the birthright should apparently be his. Rashi therefore explains that the birthright reaches Yaakov justly:

"And afterwards, his brother emerged," etc. — I heard an aggadic *midrash* which interprets the verse according to its simple meaning: He [Yaakov] held onto him lawfully, to restrain him. Yaakov was formed from the first drop and Esav from the second. You may observe this in a tube that has a narrow opening. Insert two pebbles into it, one after the other. The one that entered first will emerge last, and the one that entered last will emerge first. The result is that Esav, who was formed last, emerged first, and Yaakov, who was formed first, emerged last. Thus, Yaakov came to restrain him so that he [Yaakov] should be the first to be born, as he was the first to be formed, and he would open her womb and take the birthright by law. (Rashi, *Bereishit* 25:26)

The source for this is *Bereishit Rabba*, Ch. 63:

A matron asked R. Yosei ben Chalafta: "Why did Esav issue first?"
"Because the first drop was Yaakov's," he answered her. "For consider: if you place two diamonds in a tube, does not the one put in first come out last? So too, the first drop was that which formed Yaakov."

Rashi quotes the *midrash*, but we must nevertheless pay attention to how he quotes it and what he adds. The essential addition is the final line in Rashi's commentary: "And Yaakov came to restrain him so that he should be the first to be born, as he was the first to be formed, and he would open her womb and take the birthright by law." The significance of this point is that Yaakov is not trying to

take by strength that which does not belong to him, but rather to “take the birthright by law.” Therefore, the accusation that Esav hurls at Yaakov, “He has tricked me twice,” (27:36) is not correct.

b) Rashi believes that God Himself wanted Yaakov to receive the birthright. On *Bereishit* 27:1, Rashi justifies Yitzchak’s blindness: “In order that Yaakov would take the blessings”!

c) Not only is God interested in Yaakov’s success in receiving the blessings, even Yitzchak is on his side. After Yaakov receives the blessing by cunning,¹² Yitzchak concedes that the blessings deserve to go to Yaakov and not to Esav:

The Midrash Tanchuma asks: Why did Yitzchak shudder? He said, “Perhaps I am guilty of an iniquity, for I have blessed the younger son before the older one, and thus altered the order of the relationship.” Thereupon, Esav started crying, “He has tricked me twice!” His father said to him, “What did he do to you?” He replied, “He took my birthright.” Yitzchak said, “That is why I was troubled and shuddered, for I was afraid that perhaps I had transgressed the line of strict justice, but now that I know that I actually blessed the firstborn, ‘He too shall be blessed.’” (Rashi, *ibid.* v. 36)

E. “Know What to Respond”

These tendentious interpretations of Rashi cannot be seen only as encouraging the Jewish community at a time of persecution; it appears to me that Rashi’s aim is to teach his generation how to answer theological challenges - in Mishnaic terms, “Know what to respond to the heretic” (*Avot* 2:14). We may find echoes of this in Rashi’s interpretation of *Shir Ha-shirim* 7:9-10:

I said: Let me climb up the palm tree, let me grasp its boughs, and let your breasts be now like clusters of the vine and the fragrance of your countenance like apples.

And your palate is like the best wine, that glides down smoothly to my beloved, making the lips of the sleeping speak.

Rashi explains:

“I said: Let me climb up the palm tree” — I boast of you among the heavenly hosts, that I should be exalted and hallowed through you in the lower realms, for you will hallow My name among the nations.

“Let me grasp its boughs” — and I will grasp and cling to you...

“And let your breasts be now” — and now, cause my words to be realized, that you will not be seduced to follow the nations, and may the good and

¹² Rashi stresses that Yaakov did not trick Yitzchak, but rather acted with wisdom or cunning; see Rashi, *Bereishit* 27:35.

wise among you be steadfast in their faith, to retort to those who seduce them, so that the small ones among you will learn from them.

“And your palate is like the best wine” — be careful with your answers that they should be like the best wine.

The community of Israel responds:

“That glides down smoothly to my beloved” — I am careful to answer them, so that I will remain steadfast in my faith.

This lecture concludes our series on Rashi's commentary. As we pointed out in our first lecture, Rashi's writings certainly deserve extensive and deep study.

Translated by Rav Yoseif Bloch