

## GREAT BIBLICAL COMMENTATORS

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### Shiur #09: Rashbam, Part I

#### A. Biography

As is well-known, Rashi did not have any sons, but he did have three daughters. One of his daughters, Yokheved,<sup>1</sup> married R. Meir ben Shmuel, and they had four sons: Yitzchak, Shmuel, Yaakov and Shlomo. These sons grew up to be the first of the Tosafists. R. Yitzchak became known as the Rivam<sup>2</sup> (dying in his father's lifetime); R. Shmuel ben Meir became known as the Rashbam, whom this lecture will discuss; R. Yaakov, known by his nickname Rabbeinu Tam, was one of the great leaders of 12<sup>th</sup>-century French Jewry and the first of the Tosafists in this era; R. Shlomo (named after Rashi) dealt mainly with interpreting *Tanakh*, and he may have composed a volume of halakhic rulings as well.

To our dismay, just as with Mahari Kara in our previous lesson, we know very little information about the Rashbam. The Rashbam lived in northern France, in the city of Ramerupt, not far from his grandfather's city of Troyes. The years of his birth and death are not conclusively known, although they are generally assumed to be circa 1080 and 1160 respectively. For his livelihood, he sold milk and wool from the sheep he owned. Apparently, the Rashbam wrote a commentary for all twenty-four books of *Tanakh*, but all that survives is a commentary on the Torah,<sup>3</sup> along with part of his commentaries to the books of *Ketuvim*.

The Rashbam studied Torah with his father and with his grandfather, Rashi. Aside from his commentary on the Torah, the Rashbam was one of the great Talmudic commentators; his words were cited a great deal by the Tosafists,

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<sup>1</sup> Her name is not known definitively.

<sup>2</sup> There is another Tosafist known by the acronym Rivam; his name was Rabbi Yitzchak ben [Rabbi] Mordechai.

<sup>3</sup> The commentary of the Rashbam on the Torah survived in one single manuscript, and even it was lost in the period of the Holocaust. The manuscript is missing the commentaries from the beginning of the Torah until the eighteenth chapter of *Bereishit*, as well as the final two chapters of *Devarim*. In addition to this manuscript, the commentary of the Rashbam on *Bereishit* 1:1-31 has been discovered; in 1984, Moshe Sokoloff discovered the final sentences of the Rashbam's commentary on the Torah.

and his commentaries to *Pesachim* and *Bava Batra* were printed in the Vilna edition of the Talmud.

The Rashbam debated the Christians of his time,<sup>4</sup> and apparently understood Latin (see his commentary to *Shemot* 20:12). The Rashbam also involved himself with poetry, and expression of his skill can be found in a number of places in his commentaries. For example, on the last verse of the book of *Bereishit*, “And Yosef died at one hundred and ten years old; he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt” (*Bereishit* 50:26), the Rashbam writes:

To bring him up in the coffin was his fate,  
When His anger and fury would abate;  
Crossing Jordan, they sing and celebrate,  
“I am the Rose of the Sharon,” they state.<sup>5</sup>

## B. The Rashbam’s Interpretative Approach

### The Methodology of the Rashbam

The Rashbam, like the other 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>-century French exegetes we have mentioned in previous lessons (Rashi and Mahari Kara), did not write an introduction to his commentary (as opposed to the Spanish exegetes, whom we will study in the future). We may learn of his interpretive approach by way of the declarations woven into his commentary. For this purpose, we will cite his words at two pivotal points in *Bereishit* — the beginning of the book and the opening of its final act, the Yosef narrative:

The **enlightened** (*ha-maskilim*) will understand that all of the words of our rabbis and their derivations are true and genuine. This is what is stated in Tractate *Shabbat*: “I was eighteen years old, but I did not know that the verse never loses its simple meaning.”<sup>6</sup> The essential laws and derivations are based on extraneous verses or variations in the syntax; the simple meaning of the text has been written in a language which lends

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<sup>4</sup> See note 21 below.

<sup>5</sup> The Rashbam goes on to write a short poem in honor of the conclusion of *Parashat Vayechi* and *Bereishit* as a whole:

Vaychi has reached surcease.  
I will now say my piece,  
Before my Pride, my Glory, until decease,  
To make my strength increase,  
May my exiles return in peace.  
And if my splendor is lost to caprice,  
Before Whom I am cast from womb cerise  
Let my aroma be pleasing as the offering’s grease  
From the empty pit grant release,  
The words to their very end.

<sup>6</sup> This is a statement of R. Kahana, *Shabbat* 63a.

itself it be expounded in this way. For example, “These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created (*be-hibaram*)” (*Bereishit* 2:4) is understood by the Sages as an anagram, “*be-hibaram*” to be read as “*be-Avraham*.” This is based on the verbosity of the text; the word “*be-hibaram*” is superfluous. Now, I will explain **the commentaries of the early authorities** to this verse, to let people know why I did not explain as they did. (*Bereishit* 1:1)

The lovers of **enlightenment** may understand **and be enlightened** by what the Rabbis have taught us, namely “that no verse loses its simple meaning.” This is true even though the essence of the Torah comes to teach us and to edify us with lore, law, and legislation, by way of allusions in the simple meaning and the verbosity of the text, as well as the thirty-two hermeneutical principles of R. Eliezer son of R. Yosei the Galilean and the thirteen principles of R. Yishmael.

The earlier authorities, due to their piety, were inclined to deal with the derivations, which are the essence; because of this, they were unaccustomed to the depth of the simple meaning of the verses. For this reason, the Sages advised that one should not raise his children on biblical recitation (*Berakhot* 28b), and they also said (*Bava Metzia* 33a): “Delving into Scripture is good, but not great... delving into Talmud – there is nothing greater than this.” Based on these dicta, they were not well acquainted with the simple meaning of the verses, as it says in Tractate *Shabbat*, “I was eighteen years old, but I did not know that the verse never loses its simple meaning.”<sup>7</sup>

Rabbeinu Shlomo, my mother’s father, Illuminator of the Exile, who explained *Torah*, *Nevi'im*, and *Ketuvim*, has dedicated himself to explain the simple meaning of the verse, and even I, Shmuel, son of his son-in-law R. Meir, of blessed memory, argued with him, in his presence, and he conceded to me that if he had the opportunity, he would have to write other commentaries according to the simple meanings which arise anew daily (*ha-peshatot ha-mitchaddeshim be-khol yom*). Now, the **enlightened** will see what **the early authorities explained**. (*Bereishit* 37:2)

We may derive the following point from these words of the Rashbam on the nature of his commentary:

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<sup>7</sup> We may see in these words of the Rashbam a certain leniency towards those who follow the path of *derash* (as opposed to the combative approach of Mahari Kara). It may be that this thread is a result of opposition to the school of *peshat* that arose in France. Thus, on the one hand, the Rashbam understands the source of the errors of the early authorities, because they were not experts in the work of *peshat*, while on the other hand, he strives to defend himself and his *pashtan* colleagues, who are faithful to the Sages and fulfill the words of the Sages themselves that “no verse loses its simple meaning.” See also A. Grossman’s *Chokhmei Tzarfat Ha-rishonim* (Jerusalem, 5741), pp. 468-471; E. Touitou, *Ha-Peshatot Ha-Mitchaddeshim Be-Khol Yom: Iyunim Be-Feirusho shel Rashbam La-Torah* (Ramat Gan, 5763), p. 73.

A) The target audience of the commentary is the enlightened (*ha-maskilim*); we will discuss below whom this refers to.<sup>8</sup>

B) Aside from the *maskilim*, we also have “the earlier authorities” (*ha-rishonim*). This is a term that is now used to describe the medieval authorities, but obviously the Rashbam does not mean this, but rather the commentators (such as Rashi) who were swayed by Midrashic sources. Perhaps they even thought that they were explaining the verses in accordance with the *peshat*, but according to the Rashbam, their commentaries do not express the simple meaning of the verse.<sup>9</sup> If so, the enlightened are those who study *Tanakh* without relying on any Midrashic material.

C) Despite the Rashbam’s desire to explain the verse according to its simple meaning,<sup>10</sup> it is important for him to emphasize “that all of the words of our Rabbis and their derivations are true and genuine.” In other words, the Rashbam’s pursuit of pure *peshat* does not take away from his regard for the Sages’ traditions; the words of the Sages are reliable and valid, and in fact the *derash* is the essence – the data of these derivations are more important than the data derived from *peshat*.

D) Despite the fact that the *derash* is the essence, even the Sages, the masters of *derash*, have emphasized that *peshat* is an independent stratum: “No verse loses its simple meaning.”

E) The distinction between “the simple meaning of the verse” and its Midrashic permutations is not a distinction between a correct interpretation and an incorrect interpretation; both of them are true readings of the Torah that exist alongside each other. The basic meaning of the Torah is *peshat*; the meanings derived from allusions and extraneous and verbose language is *derash*. Indeed, the Rashbam does not reject the interpretation defined as *derash*. Sometimes, he will set out his interpretation alongside the *derash* — not as confrontation, but rather as an alternative based on *peshat*.<sup>11</sup> The Rashbam does contend with a reading that presents itself as *peshat* (like the interpretations of his grandfather Rashi), if it does not respond to the criteria of the Rashbam for *peshat*.

## The Rashbam’s Definition of *Peshat*

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<sup>8</sup> Before we define who exactly the *maskilim* are, it clear that the reader already feels a streak of elitism in Rashbam’s commentary. A commentary which opens with the words “Let the *maskilim* understand” is certainly not designated for the simple people, and this stands in opposition to the commentary of Rashi. Perhaps this is one of the reasons that the Rashbam’s commentary never gained the popularity which his grandfather Rashi’s did. (In our coming lessons, we will raise some other hypotheses as to why this interpretation has not been as popular.)

<sup>9</sup> “...Rabbeinu Shlomo, my mother’s father, Illuminator of the Exile, who explained Torah, *Nevi’im* and *Ketuvim*, has dedicated himself to explain the simple meaning of the verse.”

<sup>10</sup> The French exegetes of the 11<sup>th</sup> century have an inclination to follow the *peshat*, as established in E. Touitou’s “*Ha-Renaissance shel Ha-Mei’a Ha-Shteim Esreh*,” in *Ha-Peshatot Ha-Mitchaddeshim Be-Khol Yom*, pp. 11-33.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, his commentaries to *Bereishit* 39:10, 46:8, 49:1.

With these methodological rules, the Rashbam identifies the innovation in his commentary as the dogged pursuit of *peshat*. However, we must still understand how the Rashbam explains the concept of the “simple meaning of the verse.” To do this, we must look at his final remarks on the Torah:<sup>12</sup>

If the observers see older commentaries which incline towards another *peshat* based on a different approach, they must take note that **these are not the way of the world (*derekh erez*) according to human wisdom, or according to the interpretation of the verse** it is not so. Indeed, I have explained it well **according to the verses** and according to **the way of the world**.

Thus, these are the principles of *peshat* according to the Rashbam:

A. **“The way of the world according to human wisdom”** — the commentary takes into account common sense, logic and nature.

B. **“According to the interpretation of the verse”** — the commentary cannot be detached from other verses; it must be understood as part of the general context in which it is placed and as being integrated in the sequence of verses in which it is found.

Let us sharpen the distinction between a *pashtan* and a *darshan*, one who uses *peshat* or *derash* respectively in order to interpret the verses, in the Rashbam’s view. While the *pashtan* explains the verse according to **“the way of the world according to human wisdom, or according to the interpretation of the verse,”** the *darshan* will seek sources outside of the biblical world and outside of that which is accepted, adopted, and logical. The *darshan* will add incidents into the story and utilize concepts from the historical, ethical, and religious world that do not arise directly from *Tanakh*.

### **“The Way of the World”**

An additional interpretive rule that the Rashbam indicates in his methodological guidelines the interpretation according to “the way of the world” (*derekh erez*), and this is a very broad concept for the Rashbam. While for the Sages this phrase means pleasant social norms<sup>13</sup> or honest labor,<sup>14</sup> it appears that for the Rashbam, this term denotes that which is widely accepted or practiced. Sometimes, he does not use the phrase *derekh erez* explicitly, but it is clear that his intent is to refer to that which is widely accepted or practiced. We will see in the following examples how different verses are interpreted by use of

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<sup>12</sup> This is not found in the printed version; it is cited by Touitou, p. 75.

<sup>13</sup> For example, “The way of the world preceded the Torah” (*Tanna de-Vei Eliyahu*, ch. 10).

<sup>14</sup> For example, “Torah study is pleasing with the way of the world” (*Avot* 2:2). This can be understood by what follows in the *mishna*: “Any Torah which has no labor with it will ultimately be nullified and will lead to sin.”

explanations that take account of common sense and practice and human nature:

A) In *Bereishit* 38:24, Yehuda condemns his daughter-in-law Tamar to death by burning. The commentators are shocked by the severe punishment. Rashi's explanation, following Midrashic sources, is that Tamar was the daughter of a priest, and the daughter of a priest is burned for adultery (*Vayikra* 21:9).<sup>15</sup> The Rashbam follows the *peshat*: "According to the simple meaning, this was their custom, because she was bound to marry the levir." Rashbam answers the question using an explanation that this was the common custom in that era.

B) Yaakov declares his innocence in his work for Lavan: "These twenty years I have been with you, your ewes and goats have not miscarried, and the rams of your flock I have not eaten" (*Bereishit* 31:38). The question arises: what is the great virtue that Yaakov did not eat the rams of the flock? The Rashbam explains this according to the custom:

It is the way of shepherds in the wilderness to eat of the male lambs, but Yaakov declined to do so, despite the fact that this was the accepted practice.

C) Explaining the repetition in Esav's words to Yaakov, "Feed me, please, of this red, red stuff" (*Bereishit* 25:30), the Rashbam refers to human nature: "When one is in a hurry to make a request of his fellow, he repeats his words."<sup>16</sup> Here, we are not talking about a social norm, but rather human nature; nevertheless, the principle is similar.

### **Rashbam's Rules for Understanding the Biblical Lexicon**

The Rashbam formulates a number of rules for comprehending the biblical lexicon. We will demonstrate a number of rules in the Rashbam's formulation:

A) "It is the way of the verses to duplicate their words" (*Bereishit* 49:3). "My strength" and "my power" are synonymous, and even though they appear next to each other in this verse, "Reuven, you are my firstborn, my strength and the first of my power," there is no need to find a different meaning to each word, because this is the way of the verses.

B) In his commentary to the verse, "And it was at that time, and Avimelekh and his chief of staff... 'And now swear to me...'" (*Bereishit* 21:22-23), the Rashbam writes the rule: "Similarly, every 'And it was at that time' must be explained based on the event." In other words, when the Torah introduces a

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<sup>15</sup> In *Gur Aryeh*, one may find an exhaustive analysis of the status of an unmarried priest's daughter, but here is not the place to elaborate.

<sup>16</sup> Perhaps in this way one may explain God's words at the Binding of Yitzchak, "Avraham, Avraham..." (*Bereishit* 22:11) – God hurries to prevent him from performing the slaughter.

passage with “And it was at that time,” this does not indicate the simple chronology; rather, it is an expression which comes to tell us that this event is closely tied to the previous event. In this case, the event prior to the treaty with Avimelekh is the miracle done for Sara, who gives birth to Yitzchak in her old age; it is for this reason that Avimelekh is interested in making a treaty with Avraham’s family. In a similar way, the Rashbam explains the expression introducing the following passage, the Binding of Yitzchak, “And it was after these things...” (*Bereishit* 22:1), even formulating it as a general rule: “Every place in which it says ‘After these things’, it is connected to the preceding passage.” Thus, “these things” are tied to the previous narrative. Here, the Rashbam explains that the *Akeida* is a punishment for making a treaty with Avimelekh.

### C. Comparing the Rashbam and Rashi

In order to evaluate and understand the methodology of the Rashbam, we must compare his commentary to that of his grandfather, Rashi. We should note that the Rashbam displays a great deal of respect towards his grandfather,<sup>17</sup> having learnt a great deal from him, but this does not prevent him from arguing on his views, sometimes in a caustic manner. Here are a number of examples which will sharpen the distinctions between the method of the Rashbam and the method of Rashi:

A) *Bereishit* 1:16 tells us, “And God made the two great luminaries, the great luminary to rule over the day and the small luminary to rule over the night, as well as the stars.” The obvious difficulty in the verse is that at its beginning, it states that the “two great luminaries” are created, but at the end of the verse, one is described as great and one as small.

Rashi explains the verse in this way:

They were created equal, but the moon was diminished because it challenged and said, “It is impossible for two kings to share one crown!”<sup>18</sup>

The method of Rashi is categorically that of a *darshan*; in order to solve the problem, Rashi fills the gap by describing an event that is not mentioned at all in the text. According to the Rashbam, the *peshat* of *Tanakh* should be understood on its own, without consulting any external information; all data must be either explicit in the text or implicit in human logic or accepted practice. Therefore, this explanation of Rashi, even though it is responding to a legitimate *peshat*-based question, is not defined as *peshat*.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> When the Rashbam disputes Rashi, he generally does not mention him by name, but rather refers to him as “the Commentator.” However, when he agrees with him or praises him, he refers to him as “Rabbeinu Shlomo.”

<sup>18</sup> This appears in *Chullin* 60b.

<sup>19</sup> Rashi, who does not classify this explanation as Midrashic, apparently believes that this interpretation can be called *peshat*.

With this in mind, let us look at the Rashbam's brief remark: "The small one' — of the two great luminaries." With this explanation, the Rashbam deals with the problem<sup>20</sup> without utilizing any outside information. There are two great luminaries (apparently, in comparison to the stars), and of these two, the moon is smaller.

B) In *Bereishit* 21:17, the angel tells Hagar that she should return to the side of her ailing son: "Do not fear, for God has heard the voice of the youth as he is there." The difficulty of the verse is the extraneous phrase "as he is there;" it is clear that God has heard him in his present location.

Rashi explains:

"As he is there" — according to the deeds that he does now he is judged, and not according to what he is destined to do. For the ministering angels were accusing and saying, "Master of the Universe, for one who is destined to kill Your children with thirst, You are bringing up a well?!" And He answered them, "What is he now, righteous or wicked?" They replied, "Righteous." He said to them, "According to his present deeds I judge him." This is the meaning of "as he is there."

In order to solve the problem of the extraneous "as he is there," Rashi explains, in light of *Bereishit Rabba* (53:14), that the word "there" is not a geographical location, but rather a chronological note, and he adds in a complete conversation between the angels and God. The Rashbam supports explaining the verse based on the text itself and not utilizing facts which do not appear in it, and therefore explains it in the following way:

Because she could not see him, as she had distanced himself from his location, it had to give the location — "as he is there," He gave him the water.

Not only doesn't the Rashbam's remark require the use of elements external to *Tanakh*, the verse is well-explained specifically in the context of the passage. In the previous verse, the Torah tells us that Hagar distanced herself from the youth, and therefore the angel has to explain to her that God has indeed heard her prayer, and the water is available next to Yishmael, in his place.

C) In *Shemot* 2:6, Pharaoh's daughter finds the baby Moshe in his makeshift ark: "And she opened, and she saw him, the boy." The difficulty in the verse is the extraneous language, "and she saw him." "*Va-tireihu*" already

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<sup>20</sup> It appears that the Rashbam would not have bothered to explain this verse at all, were it not that he wanted to dispute Rashi's explanation.



includes the direct object (the final “*hu*” is not part of the verb, but rather a pronoun); the addition “the boy” is thus extraneous. Rashi explains:

Whom did she see? “The boy” — this is the simple meaning...

In other words, according to Rashi, despite the fact that we know that Pharaoh’s daughter would naturally see Moshe upon opening the ark, the Torah adds another two words and stresses that she sees the boy there. The Rashbam opposes this forcefully:

Whoever explains that she saw the boy is in error. Who would fail to understand that when she opens the ark, she would see the boy inside? Rather, this is what it means: she opened the ark and looked at the infant, to see if it was male or female, and she saw that he was a boy — in other words, male, not female. Furthermore, she saw that he was circumcised, and therefore he had been hidden...

In other words, there is no reason to stress that she actually saw the boy, since this is obvious; the verse is emphasizing that Pharaoh’s daughter sees that the infant is male, and not just male, but circumcised as well. Thus, Pharaoh’s daughter knows that she has found a Hebrew boy hidden because of the decree of “Every son born must be cast into the Nile.”<sup>21</sup>

D) Yaakov’s blessing to Dan states: “Dan will judge his people [when] the tribes of Israel are as one” (*Bereishit* 49:16). Rashi pinpoints the realization of this prophecy with Shimshon:

He will exact his people’s revenge upon the Philistines... and this prophecy was expressed about Shimshon.

The Rashbam responds strongly to this supposition:

Whoever applies it to Shimshon does not know the depth of the simple meaning of the verse at all. Is Yaakov coming to prophesy about one man who fell into the hands of the Philistines under bad circumstances? God forbid! He is prophesying about the tribe of Dan, which was “the rear guard of all the camps” (*Bamidbar* 10:25)... This is because throughout all those years, whether in Moshe’s time or Yehoshua’s time, it went after all of the banner camps, and it had to fight all of the nations that would pursue them... and to exact vengeance from the nations, because they were

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<sup>21</sup> Apparently, the Rashbam also adds external information: the fact that Moshe was circumcised. Presumably, the Rashbam believes that it is not enough that Pharaoh’s daughter saw the boy in order to know that he was “of the Hebrew boys” (as she herself says at the end of the verse), and it is clear in *Tanakh* that every Jewish male is to be circumcised. Therefore, when it says that Pharaoh’s daughter sees a boy, it is clear that she would see that he is circumcised, and so it is understood how she knew that he was “of the Hebrew boys.”

warriors. Therefore he said, “Dan will judge his people,” i.e., he will avenge his people...

Both Rashi and the Rashbam agree that these blessings are prophecies (and this is the simple meaning of the verse). According to Rashi's view, we are talking about a specific prophecy about Shimshon. Rashbam has some difficulty in saying that Yaakov is predicting the career of a problematic person (“who fell into the hands of the Philistines under bad circumstances”<sup>22</sup>), and it is not logical that Yaakov would apply the prophecy of Dan, which sounds very positive, to a character with such a tragic end. Therefore, the Rashbam explains that we are talking about a prophecy about the entire tribe of Dan, which was very active in combat during the era of Moshe and Yehoshua.

#### D. Original Interpretations

The Rashbam's commentaries are original and creative; his avoidance of Midrashic material allows him to look at the verse in an innovative, direct way. We will bring a number of examples of this:

A) Arguably the Rashbam's' most innovative interpretation is that of the sale of Yosef (*Bereishit* 37), in which the Rashbam proves, based on the verses, that it is not the brothers who sell Yosef, but rather the Midianite merchants who take him out of the pit.<sup>23</sup> This is how the Rashbam explains it:

“Midianite men, merchants, passed by” — Because they [the brothers] sat down to break bread, and they were a bit distant from the pit, so as not to

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<sup>22</sup> The Rashbam poses a rhetorical question: “Is Yaakov coming to prophesy about one man?” This appears to indicate that beyond the problematic fate of Shimshon, “who fell into the hands of the Philistines under bad circumstances,” the Rashbam finds it difficult to apply this prophecy to an individual (and not an entire tribe). However, in his commentary on Binyamin's blessing (*Bereishit* 49:27, s.v. “*Binyamin*”), the Rashbam explains that the verse talks about King Shaul; this would indicate that, according to his view, there is no problem for the prophecy to deal with a specific individual.

<sup>23</sup> According to Professor E. Touitou, the Rashbam enumerates his methodological principles specifically at the beginning of the Yosef narrative because of Jewish-Christian polemics. This is what he writes in his book, *Ha-Peshatot Ha-Mitchaddeshim Be-Khol Yom*, p. 100:

The story of Yosef is understood in the eyes of Christianity as a definitive prefiguration of the experience of their messiah: we have twelve brothers (parallel to the twelve apostles in Christian tradition) and one of them, specifically Yehuda (parallel to Judas Iscariot), sells his brother (as Judas does to Jesus). Yosef is thrown into a pit and saved from it (Jesus dies and is resurrected). The betrayed brother not only fails to take revenge on the betrayer, but saves him from distress and saves his family from famine (Jesus saves humanity). The story of Yosef and its Christian interpretation was very popular in the Christian street in the medieval era... The Rashbam sees appropriately to direct the reader's attention to a simple explanation of the Yosef narrative that refutes the Christian exegesis. The verse that is determinative in this context is verse 28 in chapter 37, which describes pulling Yosef out of the pit and selling him to the Ishmaelites. According to the Rashbam's approach, it is not the brothers who sold Yosef, but rather the Midianites. Thus, the Christian explanation has no foothold at all.

eat over blood, and they were waiting for the Ishmaelites whom they had seen. However, before the Ishmaelites arrived, other men, Midianites, passed by that way, saw him in the pit and pulled him out. It is the Midianites who sell him to the Ishmaelites. We should say that the brothers did not even know about this, even though it is written, “that you sold me to Egypt” (*Bereishit* 44:4); we may say that their actions brought it about, so they are accessories to his sale. This is what appears to me based on the deep way of the simple meaning of the verse. Indeed, “Midianite men, merchants, passed by” indicates that this was happenstance, and they sold him to the Ishmaelites... (Rashbam, *Bereishit* 37:28)

This commentary of the Rashbam solves a number of problems in the verses. For example, the brothers see an Ishmaelite caravan from far away (v. 25), but immediately afterwards we are told about the Midianite merchants (v. 28), and they are the ones who sell Yosef to the Ishmaelites. Without the commentary of the Rashbam, it is not clear to the reader what role the Midianites play in the narrative.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, in the verse “Midianite men, merchants, passed by, and they pulled and brought Yosef up from the pit,” the brothers are not mentioned at all, while the Midianites are; it therefore makes sense that they are the subject of both halves of the sentence — they pass by and they are the ones who pull Yosef out and sell him to the Ishmaelites.

Some other questions resolved by the commentary of the Rashbam are where Reuven returns from (“And Reuven returned to the pit,” v. 29) and why Reuven does not know that Yosef has been sold and why his brothers do not tell him that Yosef has been sold when he says (v. 31), “The boy is gone! And I, where can I go?” According to the Rashbam’s commentary, neither Reuven nor his brothers know that Yosef has been sold, because while they are sitting and eating their meal; as they are waiting for the Ishmaelite caravan, the Midianites come and remove Yosef from the pit without the brothers’ knowledge. When Reuven reaches the pit in order to rescue him, before his brothers can sell him, he sees that Yosef has disappeared, and then he turns to his brothers with the cry, “The boy is gone!” Thus, the brothers are as perplexed as Reuven by the mysterious disappearance of Yosef.

B) Concerning the Hebrew midwives, the verse (*Shemot* 1:20-21) states:

God did well by the midwives, and the people multiplied and became very strong. And it was when the midwives feared God, that He made houses for them.

Rashi’s commentary is well known:

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<sup>24</sup> See Rashi and ibn Ezra, who struggle in their commentaries to explain this verse.

“God did well by the midwives” — what was this benefit?

“He made houses for them” — the dynasties of the priesthood, the Levitical family, and the royal family, which are called houses...

Rashi explains that the making of houses is the definition of “God did well by the midwives,” but this interpretation is not a good fit in the context of the verses because between “God did well by the midwives” and “...He made houses for them” we find a totally different subject: “And the people multiplied and became very strong.” Therefore, the Rashbam explains:

“That he made houses for them” — to keep watch over them, lest they go to the Hebrew women in labor.

In other words, Pharaoh is the one who makes houses for the midwives, putting them under house arrest, so that they could not go out and assist the Hebrew women giving birth. In this way, there is no need to tie the making of houses to the reward bestowed by God, and the verses may be read in sequence.

C) When Yaakov’s sons tell him that Yosef is alive and a viceroy in Egypt, the Torah says the following about Yaakov: “And his heart skipped, for he did not believe them” (*Bereishit* 45:26). The Rashbam, following Rashi, explains the difficult phrase in this way: “‘And his heart skipped’ — his heart changed, to say that this is not the truth.” His intent is to explain that Yaakov has a change of heart – that is, opinion – and he stops believing them.

Afterwards, the Torah states (v. 27):

And they told him all of Yosef’s words that he had said to them, and he saw the wagons that Yosef had sent to carry him, and the spirit of their father Yaakov was revived.

What convinces Yaakov? The Rashbam explains that in the verse, two factors are mentioned. First, “And they told him all of Yosef’s words that he had said to them;” he explains, “that he cried on their necks and they knew for certain that he was their brother” — in other words, there has been a positive identification. The second factor is seeing the wagons, because they are royal property, and it would be forbidden to take them out of Egypt without special permission.

Yaakov’s conviction is described in the verses by the statement, “*Rav!* My son Yosef is still alive” (v. 28), and it is not clear what “*Rav!*” means. (Rashi and ibn Ezra offer unconvincing explanations.) The Rashbam explains that it means “enough:” Enough of my disbelief! From now, on Yaakov believes that “My son Yosef is still alive.”

In this lesson, we have dealt with the Rashbam's commentary on some biblical narratives; in our next lesson, we will deal with his unique approach to halakhic passages.

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