The Rashi Database Project

VERSION NUMBER: Version 4

PESHAT: THE SPONTANEOUS REACTION OF NATIVE SPEAKERS FAMILIAR WITH WORD NUANCES

WHAT IS NEW IN THIS ISSUE

- We analyze the famous controversy on whether the *new king* that arose in Egypt was really someone *new* or the same king with now different policies. We show that there is no controversy. We also show that the underlying issue was a desire for assimilation with the Egyptians. Thus, this re-analysis is very relevant to our own situation in America.

VERSES: Ex01-08a, Ex01-08b

Biblical text: A new king arose in Egypt who did not know Joseph.

Literal Rashi text: Rav and Shmuel. One held it was actually someone new while the other held it was the same king but with new policies.

My explanation:

Controversy or complementarity: This text certainly sounds like a controversy; two opinions. But in my doctoral thesis I point out that if a verse has 2 problems then the 2 opinions present, not controversy, but two different scholars addressing two aspects of the verse. In other words, one of Rav and Shmuel would always emphasize the newness of policies while the other emphasized the change in people.

Three verse issues: To fully understand this verse we note three issues with it:

A. The biblical style indicating new kings is typically *so and so died and was* <u>replaced</u> *by so and so* (Gn 36:31-39). This verse uses a different style *a new king* <u>arose.</u>
B. The phrase *new king* can equally refer to a *new king* or *new kingdom (new government).*
C. Unlike English, Hebrew will not always distinguish between descriptions of the real world and wishes or potentials about it.
   - For example, Is10:19 literally is translated: *the remaining trees in the forest will only be a few in number;* <u>*a child will write them.*</u> The underlined phrase is better translated as <u>*a child could write them.*</u> The difference between *will write* and *could write* is exactly the difference between a real-world description and a potential description. English has the auxiliary verb *could* to indicate this while in Hebrew, potential is inferred from context.

Approaches to the grammatical issues: There are a variety of ways to deal with these 3 issues:

A. Ibn Ezra argues "This new king was not a descendant of the former Pharohs; rather it represents an overthrow of the government by someone new." The Midrash Rabbah argues that the Egyptians were

concerned about excessive Jewish presence and wanted decrees against them which Pharoh refused because of all the favors that Joseph did. So, the people removed the king from his throne. He was allowed back on it when he *renewed* his policies against the Jews.

B. Even if the king was a new person the important aspect of the reign was his new policies.
C. It is very unreasonable that whoever was king did not know of Joseph. Either he knew him personally, or he knew about him from the history books since Joseph was a vice-king and tremendously benefitted Egypt. So, the statement *who did not know Joseph* should be interpreted as *suppressing knowledge of Joseph and acting as if he didn't know him.* This is another example of Hebrew not distinguishing between real-world events *he did not know Joseph* and *wishes for real-world events;* so that in this verse, *he did not know Joseph* (a real world statement) means *he wished Joseph was unknown and acted accordingly.*

Textual issues in the midrash: Before continuing we have noted 3 issues (not 2) in the verse. The Maharzu, a commentary on the Midrash Rabbah points out that there is corruption in the various texts: Some of the themes come from the TB Sotah 11, some come from the Midrash Tanchumah, and finally some are in the Midrash Rabbah. Additionally, the grammatical basis for the interpretations we have given above reflect not modern grammarians but actual statements in the Midrash Rabbah.

Social context: But the above is only grammatical and descriptive. It doesn't explain the underlying societal forces shaping what happened. The midrash identifies two concerns among the Egyptian people:

* Jews were successful; the Egyptians wanted to assimilate with them; similarly, the Jews liked the Egyptians and wanted to assimilate. One opinion in the Midrash Rabbah asserts that they stopped circumcising themselves when Joseph died in order to facilitate assimilation (Moses however circumcised them as they left Egypt).

* Jews were multiplying rapidly. Some Egyptians were concerned about the Jewish presence and wanted decrees against them to prevent their proliferation. We already saw above one approach in which Pharoh tried to override the people but failed since they dethroned him.

Putting it all together: Combining the grammatical and social issues we would interpret the passage as follows:

> *Although the Jews descended as only 70 people, they had helped the Egyptian economy and multiplied intensely. There were 2-3 forces at play. The Jews liked the Egyptians since they achieved honor and prestige among them. Many Egyptians wanted to marry into Jewish families because of their success. Other contingents of Egyptians were however concerned about excessive Jewish presence and wanted it curtailed. Although Pharoh tried to inject some sanity into the process, the people overruled him. The result was that you had Jews assimilating and a segment of the Egyptians concerned about their excessive presence. Additionally, God, as punishment for the Jews wanting to assimilate, changed the love of the Egyptians towards the Jews to hatred.*

Thus, this interpretation is relevant and is consistent with numerous assimilation prototypes going back to the Greeks, Christians, Moslems, the Enlightenment, and our own 20th century situations such as the one with Germany and the current situation.

VERSES: Ex01-*08a*, Ex01-*08b*, Ex01-*07a*, Ex01-*10a*, Ex01-*11a*, Ex01-*11b*, Ex01-*12c*, Ex01-*15a*, Ex01-*16a*, Ex01-*21a*, Ex02-*01b*, Ex01-*20a*, Ex01-*11d*

VERSE ID	Text of Biblical Verse	Hebrew Word	Figure of Speech	Brief Explanation
Ex01-07a	Jews swarmed	insect	Denominative	To guard = to do the act of a guard; to insectify = to do the act of insects (Swarm) (A)
Ex01-10a	thorn in my side		Denominative	To guard = to simulate the act of a guard (guarding); to thorn = to simulate the thorn - to repel, to hate (cf. the English *Repulsive*)
Ex01-11a	Note this:		Grammar - Interjection	The phrase *note this* is an interjection. Rashi did not have word for "interjection," so he spoke about "nuance of attention" This really means interjection
Ex01-11b	deliver, give birth		Grammar - Piel	Modern grammarians believe that the Piel conjugation can refer to the causative. Rashi here disagrees. The Piel in this verse refers to the *teamwork* of the midwives and mothers. Piel traditionally indicates intensity; in this verse it indicates intensity by referring to the teamwork of midwife and mother. (Thus, the midwife is not someone who *causes birth but rather* collaborates with the mother *to give birth*
Ex01-12c	deliver, give birth		Grammar - Piel	Modern grammarians believe that the Piel conjugation can refer to the causative. Rashi here disagrees. The Piel in this verse refers to the *teamwork* of the midwives and mothers. Piel traditionally indicates intensity; in this verse it indicates intensity by referring to the teamwork of midwife and mother. (Thus, the midwife is not someone who *causes birth but rather* collaborates with the mother *to give birth*
Ex01-15a	Benefited them		Grammar - Hifil	Rashi explains that the verb is in causative (*benefited* rather than *good*)

Ex01-16a	Reeds	end	Meaning - Form	The word for *reeds* comes from the word for *end* since reeds are characterized by "only having ends (and no middle)" NOTE: Modern scholars explain "Reeds grow at the end of Marsh")
Ex01-21a	honor; good name	house	Synecdoche	Cf. "Made him a palace"=made him king;" "house" = location associated with people of distinction and honor ©
Ex02-01b	Two people fighting	sparking	Synecdoche	Cf. English "They made sparks with each other"
Ex01-20a	Tax officials		Synecdoche	"Tax" can refer to taking services (building cities); it usually (synecdoche - good example) refers to taking money (D)
Ex01-11d	Fortified cities	shelter	Synecdoche	The root means *shelter;* By synecdoche it can refer to *providing warmth or giving benefit. By metonymy it can refer to the homeless* (who needs shelter)

NOTES:

A) Rashi literally says they gave birth to six children at a time. This has led some to erroneously think that Rashi was commenting on the six words in the verse i) fruitful, ii) multiply, iii) swarm, iv) become backbones, v) very vi) very (much). However, Rashi never plays such counting games. Rather as I have explained in my thesis the six at a time is the Rashi form in which he expresses himself. The actual simple meaning of the verse is that the Jews swarmed and multiplied quickly. One can still ask, "So why didn't the verse simply say, the Jews swarmed and filled the land" What is the purpose of all the extra verbs and adverbs (fruitful, backboned etc.) While this is a good and correct question it is not the question Rashi deals with. Rashi only comments on the word *swarmed*.

Literally, the word should be translated insectified a denominative meaning behaving like insects that multiply. My own opinion is that the four verbs in the verse refer to different approaches to the number of children in a family.

Fruitful would have a nuance of one or two children who would appear like a fruit hanging from a tree. When there are a small number of children each one can be given individual attention.

Swarmed would have a nuance of many children at once. There is more of an emphasis on building a community without the opportunity of individually attending to each child.

Backboned would have a nuance of being a backbone or pillar in the community. It could refer to a situation where children are married off very young so that within 50 years you might see 4 generations of children (The emphasis is on multi-generational children rather than a lot of children in each birth).

Multiply would have a nuance of many. It would not be as much as swarmed and backboned but would be more than fruitful. The point here is that each type of family (individual attention to children, multi-children families, swarming, and backbones) makes contributions to the overall society. The text then indicates that the Jewish community had multiple family types.

B) Radak interpreted *avnayim* as the womb from the root *beth-nun*, child. Radak argues that the midwives would know the gender while the baby is coming out. However, Rashi gives a precedent for naming a workspace by what it is made of (In Jeremiah 18:3, the artisan workspace is called the stone. Additionally, the verse could simply mean see and watch the delivery table and not necessarily mean to literally wait to see when the child comes out

C) Interestingly, until recently, people with property were considered the citizens while people without property had lesser rights. This distinction affected even serious crimes like theft and murder.

D) One can use here the *what is bothering* Rashi approach. The verse speaks about tax officials but does not mention taking any monetary taxes: Pharoh appointed tax officials; the Jews built fortified cities for Pharoh. Rashi therefore explained the tax as referring the service of building. That of course is correct but the linguistic justification for calling a service like building a city, tax, is the figure of speech, synecdoche, wherein monetary tax is a good example (synecdoche) of tax which can refer to levying any type of item of worth.