

The RashiYomi NewsLetter

The 10 RashiYomi Rules, Vol 30 #2

Their Presence in this Week's Parshah, Ha'aZeeNu

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He [God] found him [the Jews] in a desert

*In a chaotic place, wailing and desolate
He surrounded him*

He gave him understanding

He guarded him like the eye pupil

(Dt32-10a, c, d, e, f)

This verse occurs in the farewell poem of Moses to Israel. In discussing the meaning of this verse, we will examine:

- I. The context in which it is said
- II. The four explanations of the Sifre, an ancient legal and Midrashic source which was one of the primary sources Rashi used for commentary
- III. The 2 explanations that Rashi presents
- IV. The relationship of Rashi's two explanations and the Sifre's four explanations
- V. The conclusion of the RashiYomi Newsletter
- VI. A brief discussion of *how* Rashi selected from competing explanations, and *how* RashiYomi arrived at a summary conclusion given the wide diversity of explanation.

I: The context in which the above verse is said

The context of the above verse is a statement of the *nationhood* of the Jewish people. Here are phrases from preceding verses:

- *Is He [God] not your Father who nested you*
- *When the High One made nations, He also created boundaries for the Jewish nation*

- *Jacob [Israel], is God's portion, His nation, the cut of His inheritance*

After this background, **Dt32-10** is stated:

- *He found him [the Jews] in a desert*
- *In a chaotic place, wailing and desolate*
- *He surrounded him*
- *He gave him understanding*
- *He guarded him like the eye-pupil*

So, the context is clearly Jewish nationhood, or in more detail, the Jewish nation as God's nation.

II: The four explanations of the Sifre

Both Rashi and RashiYomi first examine the traditional explanations of a verse before stating their own comments. Although Rashi relied on many sources, two very important sources are the Sifre and Midrash Rabbah. The four explanations are summarized in Table 1 immediately below.

Just to be clear, each interpretation in the Sifre, explains the four verbs in **Dt32-10**

- *Found*
- *Surrounded*
- *Understanding*
- *Watched*

These verbs are underlined in our citation of this verse.

We have added to the Sifre the *theme* of each explanation. For example, the theme of the first explanation is that the verse refers to Abraham.

The theme of the second explanation is the receipt of the Torah by the Jews.

After identifying the four verbs and a theme, each interpreter tried to tie events to the words. Some of these associations are superficial and may even appear stretched. For example, the phrase *He surrounded them* is taken to refer to the surrounding of Mount Sinai at the giving of the Torah. Here the interpreter who was interpreting the verse as referring to receipt of the Torah selected the best association of *surrounded* with the events of receipt of the Torah. This association can further be supported by a word play on *surround* which besides occurring in **Dt32-10** also occurs in **Ex19-12** at the giving of the Torah when God told Moses, *Border the nation to surround* [the mountain].

Theme	Found him	Surrounded him	Gave him understanding	Watched him
Abraham	God discovered Abraham as loyal to him	Refers to Abraham's trips (his travels were in circles like a round) (Gn12-01)	Refers to Abraham giving understanding to the masses about God (Till then, only the elite knew God)	God protected Abraham on his journeys
Jews – Receipt of Torah	God discovered Jews as loyal to him to receive the Torah	Refers to circular surround of Mount Sinai at receipt of Torah	Refers to the giving of the Ten Commandments	Refers to the initial fear at hearing Gods voice
Jewish Nation	Refers to God finding food and water for Jews in wilderness	Refers to the Jewish circular encampment	Refers to territoriality. Nations could not benefit from miracles like manna	Refers to God fighting for Jews (Nu10-35)
Jews in History	Jews faithful to God despite 4 terror beasts of human history	With elders and leaders	With prophets	God protected the Jews in history

Table 1: Four explanations of the Sifre to **Dt32-10**

In summary, the four Sifre explanations reflect a three-step process of

- Selecting a theme
- Focusing on the verbs in **Dt32-10**
- Finding the *best* association between these verbs and the events of the theme.

Some associations are stretched.

III: The Two Explanations of Rashi

Rashi presents two explanations, his own, and the explanation of the Onkelos Aramaic translation. They are presented in Table 2.

	Found him	Surrounded him	Gave him understanding	Watched him
Rashi	God discovered Jews as loyal to him to receive the Torah ¹	i) Surround Jews with Clouds ³ ii) Jewish camp surrounds Temple ⁴ iii) Jews surrounded Mount Sinai at giving of Torah ¹	Gave Jews the Torah ¹	Protected Jews from i) Scorpions and serpents ⁵ ii) Nations ¹
Onkelos	God found food and water for the Jews in the desert ²	Jewish camp surrounds Temple ⁴		

Table 2: The two explanations of Rashi. For the explanations of the footnotes see the next section.

IV: Relationship of Rashi and Sifre

The relationship of Rashi and the Sifre, that is how the two explanations of Rashi compare with the four explanations of the Sifre are summarized with the footnotes in Table 2. In this section we review these footnotes. The numbers below refer to the five footnotes in Table 2.

- 1) Rashi here follows the 2nd explanation of the Sifre presented in Table 1. The 2nd explanation deals with receipt of the Torah. Rashi follows this explanation with all four verbs:
 - *Found him*: Refers to God finding Jews who wanted to receive the Torah
 - *Surrounded him*: Refers to Jews surrounding Mount Sinai when they received the Torah
 - *He gave them understanding*: Refers to the giving of the Torah.
 - *Protected him*: Refers to God protecting the Jews from foreign enemies.
- 2) Onkelos, cited by Rashi, follows the 3rd explanation of the Sifre presented in Table 1.

The 3rd explanation deals with Jewish nationhood. So Rashi's 1st explanation deals with receiving the Torah while Rashi's 2nd explanation deals with Jewish nationhood. Rashi is not content to simply cite Onkelos and rely on the fact that it is the 3rd explanation of the Sifre. Rashi finds *support* for Onkelos' explanation by citing a verse where *find* means give food. **Nu11-22** uses the verb *find* to indicate providing food just as the Sifre, which Onkelos cites, says.

- 3) This is new. None of the 4 explanations of the Sifre mention the clouds of glory indicating prophecy. Since the other two explanations – surrounding the Temple and surrounding Mount Sinai – deal with prophecy, Rashi thought it appropriate to *add* the surrounding with the clouds.
- 4) The configuration of the Jewish camp, Jews surrounding the Temple, is mentioned by both Rashi and Onkelos and corresponds to the third explanation of the Sifre, Jewish nationhood. Notice how Rashi, who has following the 2nd explanation of the Sifre now adds something from the 3rd explanation. Also notice the *addition of Onkelos* to the Sifre. It is not just the circular encampment of the Jews but the fact that they surrounded the Desert Temple the seat of prophecy. The Sifre just mentions circular encampment while Onkelos *adds* the central point of the Desert Temple in the middle.
- 5) This is also new. Rashi *adds* to the explanation that God protects the Jews from foreign enemies, that God protects Jews from natural dangers in the wilderness. This *added* explanation is supported by **Nu21-04:09** which explicitly mentions this protection.

We can summarize this as follows:

- Rashi's first explanation follows the Sifre's 2nd explanation (giving of the Torah)
- Rashi added some items from other explanations and some of his own (like being surrounded by clouds) which were consistent with the theme of prophecy. Rashi also changed the Sifre's *giving of the ten commandments* to *giving of the Torah*.

- Rashi cites Onkelos who cites the 3rd explanation of the Sifre, dealing with Jewish nationhood, but Rashi only cites the Onkelos on the first two verbs.

V: The Rashiyomi Newsletter Explanation

	Found him	Surrounded him	Gave him understanding	Watched him
Rashiyomi	Food and Water¹	Prophecy²	The Torah³	Divine Protection⁴
Jewish Nationhood	God provided food and water for Jews in desert. Rashi cites Nu11-22 to support the use of <i>find</i> for providing food and water.	God surrounded the Jewish nation around the Temple. So, while they camped, there were 3 tribes on the North, South, East and West with the Temple in the middle.	God gave the Jews the Torah.	Through the prophets and the Torah God protected the Jews from both 1) Natural dangers like snakes Nu21-04:09 and 2) Foreign Enemies Nu11-35 .

Table 3: Rashiyomi explanation of Dt32-10

The footnotes describe where Rashiyomi obtained its opinions. In the next section we explain *how* and *why* Rashi and Rashiyomi selected certain interpretations. As above, the footnote numbers refer to the footnotes in the above Table 3.

1) Rashiyomi adapts the 3rd of the Sifre interpretations which describes the creation of the Jewish nation. Notice, that Rashiyomi adapts the Rashi supplementation of the Sifre which cites **Nu11-22** for using the word *find* to mean *provide* food and water.

2) Rashiyomi continues with the 3rd of the Sifre interpretations, Jewish nationhood. There are some subtleties here which we didn't fully cite above. The Sifre simply refers to *Jewish camp surround North, East, South, and West*. Rashi citing Onkelos explains what they were surrounding: The Desert Temple which was the place of prophecy in the wilderness.

3) Here Rashiyomi uses the 2nd, not the 3rd of

the Sifre explanations. The 3rd of the Sifre explanations which we have been using till now speaks about territoriality. It says that if other nations tried to take our manna they failed. But this has nothing to do with *understanding*. For that reason, Rashiyomi cited the 2nd of the Sifre explanations, the giving of the Torah. This is consistent with the theme of prophecy.

4) Here, Rashiyomi cites the 3rd interpretation of the Sifre dealing with the creation of Jewish Nationhood as augmented by Rashi who based on verses included protection from both foreign enemies as well as natural dangers.

We can summarize as follows: Rashiyomi adapted the 3rd explanation of the Sifre which corresponds to Rashi's 2nd explanation, the explanation of Onkelos. This explanation explores the creation of the Jewish Nation. However, Rashiyomi, following Rashi, changes the Sifre 3rd interpretation of *gave them understanding* to refer to receipt of the Torah since this is consistent with the theme of Jewish nationhood and consistent with the meaning of *understanding*.

Here is still another way to look at this: What is a nation? It is a group of people with something in common, typically language, land, and culture, that unite to provide country citizens with their needs such as basic necessities, exposure to national culture, and protection from enemies. Thus, the four words of the verse indicate a hierarchy

- Provision of basic necessities
- Jewish commonality in acceptance of prophecy
- The Torah, the highest manifestation of prophecy
- The Torah and prophecy unite to protect Jews against foreign and natural enemies.

VI: How Interpretations Were Selected

How and why did Rashi select one interpretation out of four? How and why did Onkelos select one interpretation out of four?

How and why did Rashiyomi select an interpretation from the competing explanations of the Sifre and Rashi?

To answer these questions, we discuss method. First, any interpretation of **Dt32-10** must be consistent with its *context*. The surrounding verses as we saw in Section II deal with God's creating the Jewish nation. But then we immediately see that the proper interpretation of **Dt32-10** is the interpretation dealing with creation of Jewish nationhood.

The other interpretations are exercises in interpretive tools that for example could be used to console Jewish communities going through perilous times.

The idea of using *context* to ascertain the intended meaning of the text was advanced by HaLivni in his book *Peshat and Derash*. While I have been harsh on HaLivni for ignoring the importance of parallelism, he nevertheless made some very significant contributions. He defines the *peshat* in terms of the contextual meaning. This is very useful, for example, in Rashis like the one we are examining.

HaLivni is of the bizarre opinion that during the period of the Sifre concern with intended meaning was not prevalent; other concerns drove biblical interpretation. Not so! The Talmudic Rabbis were more aware of grammar and rules of interpretation than most modern scholars. When they deviated from the intended interpretation, they did so the same way a Rabbi at a funeral would eulogize a deceased by taking a verse out of its context. Such a eulogy does not indicate ignorance of rules of interpretation but simply is a customary license of Rabbis, who in their pastoral capacity, are consoling people.

For this reason, Rashi cited Onkelos. The Rashiyomi Newsletter argues that when Rashi gives two explanations the 2nd explanation is the true one. Although Rashi only cited Onkelos on the first two of four verbs – *found*, *surround*– he supplied the interpretation of *protect* using

the Sifre's 3rd explanation. We have explained above that Rashi cited the 2nd explanation of the Sifre for *gave understanding* since he felt the territorial interpretation of *understanding* was farfetched.

These ideas are summarized in Table 4:

	Found	Surround	Gives understanding	Guard
Rashi yomi	Provided food and water	Circular camp around Desert Temple	Receipt of Torah	Protect from foreign nations and natural disasters
Source:	Sifre, interpretation #3	Sifre, 3 rd explanation	Sifre, interpretation #2	Sifre, 3 rd explanation
Source:	Onkelos	Onkelos with addition about Temple	Rashi (Note: Rashi felt Torah receipt more consistent with understanding then territoriality)	Rashi
Source:	Rashi, explanation #2	Rashi, explanation #2 with addition about Temple		

Table 4: Final interpretation of Rashi yomi with sources

Conclusion

This Rashi digest has traced the interpretation of **Dt32-10** through the Sifre, Rashi, Onkelos, and Rashi yomi. While these sources offer a wide diversity of interpretation, we showed that Rashi and Rashi yomi selected interpretations consistent with the biblical context. Exercises like this are very useful to appreciate the rationality of Rashi and Rashi yomi. Decisions are criterion-based on fundamental literary criteria. This does not contradict the rabbinic license to distort a verses' true meaning during a pastoral counseling or consoling session.

APPENDIX

THE 10 RASHI RULE CATEGORIES A Lightning Summary with Examples

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Rule I-REFERENCE: EXAMPLE: Dt26-05d We went down to Egypt with a few people explained by Gn46-27: with 70 people

Rule II-MEANING / Lexicography / Dictionary: EXAMPLE (Connectives) KI means IF,PERHAPS,RATHER,BECAUSE,WHEN,THAT (Rashi on Gn18-15a Gn24-33a) **EXAMPLE (Nuances):** YDA means FAMILIAR, not KNOW (e.g. Dt34-10a) egg Gn04-01 Adam was FAMILIAR with his wife **EXAMPLE (Idioms)** ON THE FACE OF means DURING THE LIFETIME (Rashi on Nu03-04a Gn11-28a Ex20-03c Dt05-07a) **EXAMPLE (Synonyms)** Marchese means pot; Machinate means frying pan (Lv02-05a, 07a) **EXAMPLE (Homonyms)** SHAMAH can mean listen, hear, understand: (Gn42-23a) They didn't appreciate that Joseph understood them (Note: They knew he was listening) **EXAMPLE (Metonymy)** (Lv02-11a) Don't offer ...any honey as sacrifices RASHI: honey includes any sweet fruit juice

Rule III-GRAMMAR: EXAMPLE: BA-ah means Candelabras means COMING(Gn46-26a) **EXAMPLE:** Whiptail conjugation has different rules if 1st root letter is Trade (Gn44-16a)

Rule IV-PARALLELISM: EXAMPLE: (Ex20-04) Don't POSSESS the gods of others Don't MAKE idols RASHI: So both POSSESSion & MAKING of idols are prohibited

Rule V-CONTRADICTION: EXAMPLE: (Nu04-03, Nu08-24a) Levites start Temple work at 25; Levites start temple work at 30. RASHI: They apprentice at 25 but start actual service at 30.

Rule VI-STYLE: RABBI ISHMAEL RULES:

EXAMPLE: (Simple verses should be generalized): (Rashi Pesachim 6) (Dt25-04a) *Don't MUZZLE an OX while THRESHING* RASHI: Don't STOP any WORKING ANIMAL from eating

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Rule VII-FORMATting: EXAMPLE (*BOLD indicated by Repetition*): Ex12-09c) COOK it in water (So COOKED-COOKED is understood the same way bold is understood by modern reader) RASHI: Preferred to COOK it in water; But COOK it at all costs(Even if you don't have water) **EXAMPLE:** (*BULLETS indicated by Repeating keywords*) (Ex03-11a) Who am I - **THAT** I should go to Pharaoh - **THAT** I should take the Jews out of Egypt RASHI: Repeated word **THAT** creates BULLET effect - Pharaoh was a difficult king (Bullet one) - Jews were not yet ready for freedom (Bullet two) **EXAMPLE** (*Climax assumed in any Biblical list*): (Dt19-11a) *If a man HATES, SPIES, CONFRONTS & KILLS.* RASHI: Bible identifies 4 stages to murder (indicated by capped words)

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Rule VIII-DATABASE: EXAMPLE: *God spoke to Moses to say over* introduces about 7 dozen biblical commandments; *God spoke to Aaron to say over* only introduces 2 commandments. RASHI: (Lv10-03b) Aaron was silent when his sons died because they served in the Temple drunk; hence he merited that the commandment prohibiting priests to work in the Temple drunk, was given to him

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Rule IX-NON VERSE: EXAMPLE: (Use of Algebra)(Ex38-26b) *Temple donations of silver were 100 Kikar and 1775 Shekel from 630,550 half-shekels* RASHI: So one Kikar of silver = 3000 Shekel.

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Rule X: SYMBOLISM: EXAMPLE: (Use of puns) Moses made a copper snake for people to look up to when bitten by snakes (so they should pray and recover) RASHI: (Nu21-09a) The Hebrew root for copper and snake are identical (Cf. The English *copperhead*) Moses made the metal snake copper colored to symbolize the snake