

CHAPTER X: THE GRAMMAR PILLAR: GRAMMAR vs. MEANING

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X.1 – Introduction. There are four pillars underlying Rashi interpretation: Meaning (including dictionary meaning as well as figures of speech), grammar (including conjugational grammar as well as more general grammar), parallelism (including consecutive verse parallelism and distant verse parallelism), symbolism (both of objects and passages), and meaning (including dictionary meaning as well as figures of speech). Of these four pillars, dictionary meaning and grammar are the best understood.

The traditional view of Rashi's approach to grammar, as explained by many scholars, is that Rashi followed the grammar of his day and time but greatly advanced it with his own unique signature. More specifically, Rashi believed in 2-letter roots since the leading grammarian of the day, Menahem, used the 2-letter root approach in his *Mahbereth*. Dunash, another leading grammarian also believed in 2-letter roots though with some differences to Menahem. Since modern grammarians now *know* that the 3-letter root theory is the more accurate approach to grammar, it follows that Rashi was a product of his time. However, Rashi often disagreed with Menahem and several scholars have shown he blazed his own grammatical path (with other scholars disagreeing).

This chapter argues for a totally different point of view. Rashi used a database approach to grammar that is, he approaches each grammatical form as something new to be understood by a scholarly and comprehensive review of all similar forms. Since databases are a relatively modern concept, we can re-formulate this approach in terms of *lists*. Throughout these chapters, to understand a grammatical conjugation, a *list* of similar forms will be presented. To summarize:

Rashi understood grammar as the interaction between word-form and meaning, that interaction being justifiable not by appeal to current or former authorities but by appeal to lists of that form and the meanings associated to the members of the list.

The fact that Rashi agrees with Menahem say 50% or 90% of the time (or more or less) is therefore only a coincidence. It simply means that Menahem's analysis was consistent with biblical lists very often. This should not surprise us. But it is a mistake to say Rashi *relied* on Menahem or approached grammar through *the current authorities*. Rather, Rashi approached each grammatical question freshly.

This and the next few chapters will examine several examples of this suggested approach.

X.2 – Meaning: Besides *lists*, one other important ingredient is needed to analyze the Rashi approach to grammar, *meaning*. For one cannot assert that a grammatical form is associated with a meaning unless one fully understands the meaning of the verses with the grammatical form one is studying.

X.3 – Example Ex13-18c. The following Rashi aptly illustrates the conflict between meaning and grammar.

Biblical text: When Pharoh let the nation [Jews] go, he didn't lead them over the Philistine roads *lest the nation regret when they saw war* [warriors] and desire to turn back to Egypt.

[Therefore] God circled the nation [the Jews leaving Egypt] through desert roads. The nation left Egypt *chamushim*.

Rashi:

(Explanation 1) *Chamushim* only means armed

(Explanation 2:) Another matter: *Chamushim* means *mechumashim*, fifth-ed. Only 1 in every five Jews left Egypt, the other four having died during the plague of darkness.

X.4 – Meaning versus Grammar: Critical examination of this Rashi shows a tension between an approach to biblical interpretation based on meaning versus an approach based on grammar.

This is the first instance where *lists* are used. The process is therefore reviewed slowly. There are only 3 other instances of *chamushim* in the Bible: Joshua 1:14, 4:12, Jud 7:11 and in each of them the meaning is clearly *armed*. In fact, Rashi cites Joshua 1:14 which is the command (to be *armed*) which is fulfilling in Joshua 4:12. This use of lists is also clearly expressed by Rashi

Chamushim only means armed

From a grammatical point of view, the situation is clear. The verse, Ex18-13 should be interpreted to mean *The Jews left Egypt armed*.

But this is the grammatical approach. There is also the meaning approach. Meaning should always follow context. The following verses, surrounding the verse text we are studying, discussing the Jews leaving Egypt, seem to contradict that the Jews were armed:

*God did not lead the Jews by the Philistine roads lest the nation regret when seeing war

*Pharaoh came near to the Jews [he pursued them after leaving]; the Jews saw Egypt pursuing they were very afraid; they started screaming to God

*They said to Moses: Aren't there enough graves in Egypt that you took us out to the desert to die,

*What have you done to us to take us out of Egypt

*Isn't this what we said in Egypt: Leave us alone and we will work for the Egyptians, for it is preferable to us to work for Egypt than to die in the desert.

The context is clear. This is not a nation who is emotionally secure in knowing that God performs miracles and helps them. They are a frightened and insecure nation who see no point in fighting. The idea that they would be given weapons seems ludicrous since they did not have the emotional stamina to fight. Furthermore, this context is not provided by an isolated verse but rather the five verses just listed all saying the same thing.

X.5 – Peshat versus Derash: There are many approaches to these mysterious words *peshat* and *derash* which have haunted scholars for centuries. Multiple opinions will be examined in later chapters including a new harmonizing position. Right now, we suffice with Halivni's description. We didn't choose Halivni because he developed this position; he didn't. He relied on others. We chose him because he wrote an entire book recently on this very subject. Here is how he defines *peshat* and *derash*.

Peshat is the natural interpretation of a verse in context using known philological and grammatical concepts

Derash is an interpretation of a verse out of context, just a reading of phrases with some clever point, perhaps moral or exhortative, but without relation to the surrounding text.

Thus, at first blush it would appear that

Chamushim based on philological and grammatical concepts can only mean armed (*Peshat*)
Chamushim as meaning *fifth-ed* seems like a play on words that contradicts the surrounding text that says the Jews left Egypt (not that the majority had died)

But the definition of *Peshat* requires both i) natural meaning and ii) philological-grammatical context. True, the grammatical context implies it means armed, but the surrounding text contradicts this meaning. If anything, the surrounding text implies that the Jews were terribly frightened, they couldn't bear to see war, or think of anyone, even God himself, fighting for them.

From this point of view

The peshat, the context, would accept that the Jews left fifth-ed
The derash, would be to interpret it as armed, since that interpretation only interprets the one word *chamushim* without critically examining the context and surrounding verses.

X.6 – Similar Forms: We need one more ingredient to complete our analysis. So far, we seem to be arguing for the following principle to defend Rashi

If the context of a verse says one thing but the grammatical form says its opposite than one is justified in creating an arbitrary new meaning so that the verse fits in context

That is not correct! One cannot *arbitrarily* create new meaning. However, although there are *no* other examples where *chamushim* means *fifth-ed* there are other examples where numbers indicate a splitting into a number of parts. Thus, from the word *eser*, meaning ten, we obtain *maaser*, a tenth, and *asirith*, tenth, and *issaron*, a tenth of a known measure. Similarly, from *arbah*, four, we obtain, *reviith*, a quarter. Thus, there is ample precedent, in both Hebrew and other languages, of transforming a number into a word meaning a certain part of a whole. We can now finally formulate the principle by which Rashi's translation of *chamushim*, as fifth-ed, is *peshat*:

If multiple surrounding contexts to a verse contradict the known grammatical meaning, then one is justified in re-translating the word in question to be consistent in context, provided this transformation follows known and similar patterns of word meaning.

We think this the proper way to defend this Rashi, *chamushim* means fifth, as the true *peshat* of the verse.