

CHAPTER AA: SYMBOLISM

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[Note This week's issue is being combined with a repeat of last week's issue. The reason for this is that symbolism is a difficult topic and it is good to review all the principles in one place. This week's issue begins below "AB" for those who wish to jump there. However, rereading last week's issue will facilitate understanding]

AA.1 – Introduction. Symbolism is a controversial interpretive topic. On the one hand, it is appealing, emotionally powerful, and morally exhortative while on the other hand it does not appear to be the straightforward simple meaning of the text (*peshat*). While we are in no position to discuss, at this point, *peshat and derash*, we can make significant contributions at this point by showing that the biblical text requires of its readers a symbolic interpretation to certain passages.

This entire issue is based on the writings of R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, whose contributions to symbolism were several centuries beyond his time. Hirsch actually dealt with the problem of whether a symbolic interpretation is the *peshat* of the text, required by its readers.

This may appear counterintuitive. So, we start with Hirsch's famous set of three categories. This will be following by application to this week's Torah reading, Terumah.

AA.2 – Category I of Biblical Symbols: Quite simply, Hirsch says, "Suppose the biblical text declares explicitly that a commandment is a symbol?" Doesn't that obligate the reader to interpret that commandment symbolically?

In fact, there are 4 biblical commandments which are called symbolic: Tefillin (Ex13-16), Shabbath (Ex31-13), the Egyptian Passover (Ex12-13), and circumcision (Gn 17:11).

People are always eager to attack any *proof* that passages must be symbolic. In this case, they distinguish between a sign and a symbol. The argument seems to be that these 4 commandments are signs not symbols.

To answer this (and to continue without our examples) we need a definition of symbol

A symbol is an activity or object such that the performance of that activity or the use of that object is intended to remind the user of *other* activities or objects.

Quite simply, then, a sign, simply reminds without any connection, while a symbol has intrinsic connection. It follows that if God says "rest on the sabbath" because "I created the world in 6 days and rested on the 7 days" it is seen that our rest activity is an activity that reminds of another activity namely that of God's rest. Since the connection between *rest* (of myself) and *rest* (of God) is intrinsic, we see that this is not just a sign but a symbol. The same can be said of the other symbolic commandments. Tefillin for example is not just sign about God's redemption, it rather contains the biblical parshahs talking about this redemption and hence it is a symbol not a sign.

AA.3 – Category 2 of Biblical Symbols: Suppose, suggests Hirsch, that a commandment is not called a symbol or a sign but nevertheless we are told that doing one activity has as its purpose the

reminding us of other categories. Then *by definition* we are dealing with a symbol. So, if the bible. Nu15-37:41 tells me to wear Tzitzith” in order to remind me of the (other) biblical commandments” then the Bible has declared Tzitzith as a symbol.

AA.4 – Category 3 of Biblical Symbols: In the final category, Hirsch considers, activities laden with emotional experiences, activities such as forgiveness, love, spiritual desires. Hirsch points out that the objects used to accomplish these emotional categories are well-known symbols and that justifies their symbolic classification.

Perhaps some examples from secular practice will help. If on a TV show a person gives his wife on their 10th anniversary, a bouquet of 10 red roses and says that this “tells her about his love for her,” would anyone doubt that this is *intended* to be interpreted symbolically. Hirsch, in his critical analysis of this event, would point out that the 10 roses corresponds to the 10 years of marriage, and that redness is a well-known symbol of love.

In examining this example, we are using the definition of *peshat* that I advocated in 2006 and 2007, “The author intended meaning of a statement.” You simply ask one question: “Does it appear reasonable that the author intended this meaning?” If the answer is yes that we have *peshat*.

Anyone watching the television show alluded to above would agree that the husband intended his gift of 10 roses as a symbol. That is all that matters.

Hirsch, continues, if Temple procedures speak about deep human emotions – guilt, forgiveness, peace, spiritual aspiration – and if furthermore the bible uses objects, for example, blood, with known symbolic interpretations, then we can consider these items as intended to be symbolic.

AA.5 – The Temple: We have started off lightly, since this is a complex topic. The punchiest proof that the (desert) Temple is symbolic is the famous verse, Ex25-08, “They [the Jews] will make Me a Temple, and I will dwell among them.” We have here an explicit statement, that the Temple is not for God dwelling in it, but for God dwelling in them, the people. In other words, the Temple in its intent is to remind one of something else, the Temple is not for God to dwell in but for God to dwell in the people and hence it is symbolic.

AA.6 – Symbolic Meaning: On Ex25-24 discussing the golden rim surrounding the Temple Table Rashi states, “This is symbolic of the crown of royalty; because the [word] “table” has a connotation of wealth and greatness as can be inferred from the idiom “the table of kings”.

Here Rashi uses the very powerful figure of speech, synecdoche, by which a particularly good example becomes the word by which an entire category is named. In this case, the “table of kings” is different than the “table of paupers” or “the table of ordinary folks”.

The gist of this, is that by creating a Temple for God to dwell amongst us, God invites each sector of the Jewish people to join. The Temple Table invites the rich, the wealthy, the royal, to have God present in their midst. It creates this invitation by virtue of the Temple utensil, the table, and which symbolizes not God’s House, but the Jewish people amongst which God dwells, in this case, the segment of the Jewish people who are rich, wealthy, and royal.

True, we would like to know more details. We would like to know *how* the rich, the wealthy, and the royal, invite God into their midst. But as often happens in symbolic passages, the passage is about the idea not the details.

Rashi therefore suffices with a simple statement of *what* is being symbolized.

CHAPTER AB: SYMBOLISM

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AB.1 – Introduction – Review of symbolism: Last week we spoke about the way we recognize that the Author intends that a certain passage is symbolic. Following R. Hirsch's approach, the Author can either i) explicitly tell us that a certain activity or object is symbolic, ii) explicitly connect the activity or object with some *other* activity or object thereby indicating that the first activity or object is symbolic, not of primary value for itself, but of value for what it reminds us about other activities and objects, or iii) link very deep and personal emotions – emotions such as guilt, love, aspiration – to specific objects and activities which are known to have symbolic motif.

We apply these principles to analyze the Biblical text along with the Rashi comments on the daily offerings made in the Desert Temple. Using the lens we just introduced, the lens of linkage of one object or activity to another object or activity, we obtain insight into the symbolic nature of these passages, an idea brought down in Rashi's commentary.

Additionally, we obtain very important knowledge about the flavor of a symbolic interpretation. As we mentioned above, a symbolic interpretation, can be the *peshat*, the Author-intended meaning of a passage. However, symbolism, unlike say grammar, is by its nature emotive and unprecise. We will see that controversy over symbolic details does not imply uncertainty of the *peshat* of the passage; rather, the controversy over symbolic details may easily co-exist with the symbolic *peshat*, it may even enrich it.

AB.2 – The Biblical and Rashi Texts Ex29-38:46:

v38-v41 *This is what you should make on the altar: young sheep, two a day, daily....*

So far, the text is simply telling us about a procedure, the daily offering

v42 *The daily elevation offering, for all generations, [offered at] the entrance of the desert temple, that I may meet with you there, to speak to you*

Here the text links the offering activity to another activity: That of meeting with God through prophecy. This explicit linking establishes that the activity of daily offerings is symbolic of another activity, our relationship with God.

Rashi too adapts this interpretation. Rashi mentions some controversies on *how* the prophetic relationship with God is established but the discussion on this will be deferred below.

v43 *I will meet there with the Jewish people*

Rashi: I will meet there in prophecy (speech). It is analogous to a King establishing a meeting place to speak to his servants

Rashi here continues the theme of linkage established earlier. The Temple and the offerings are activities serving to establish other activities, prophetic meeting with God

Vv43 And the Desert Temple will be sanctified with my Presence

V44-45 I will sanctify the (Desert) Temple and the altar, and Aaron and his sons I will sanctify to be Priests to me

And I will dwell amongst the Jewish people and be their God

The verse here again links the activities of Temple and altar holiness with the activity of dwelling among the Jewish people. Notice how v44-45, echoes and mirrors, Ex25-08

Ex25-08 They [the Jews] will make me a (Desert) Temple, and I will dwell amongst them.

It is the same linking of activities – 1) the Temple object and procedures as mirroring 2) God's dwelling amongst the Jews through prophetic communication.

This linking is the essence of establishment of Author intent of symbolic meaning.

V46 And they will know that I am the God their Lord, who took them out of Egypt for purposes of dwelling amongst them I am God their Lord

This verse climaxes the symbolic links made throughout the chapter. The Temple, The offerings, the Sanctification ceremonies, these are all activities whose purpose is not themselves but rather awareness that God is our Lord, He took us out of Egypt and He desires to dwell amongst us through prophetic relationship. It is this linking, which establishes the *peshat* of the passage, which tells us that the Author intended that these activities be perceived as symbolic.

AB3 - Controversy: Before proceeding, consider by contrast an arbitrary difficult biblical passage. Rashi might come along and tell us the meaning of a word or the grammatical conjugation. Then that meaning or grammatical conjugation would be unambiguous, without controversy. Indeed, if it had controversy, we wouldn't really have learned the straightforward meaning of the text.

But symbolism does not require lack of ambiguity. On the contrary, the ambiguity, the uncertainty, that may enrich our appreciation of the symbolism.

Consider the husband who brings home a bouquet of 10 roses on his 10th anniversary. He gives them to her and says, "To show my love for you."

Isn't this clearly a symbolic procedure, a linking of the gift of an object with a deeply personal emotion, love. So, we are certain that the husband's intent is symbolic, the roses symbolically indicate his love. However, we are not certain on the details. Maybe the ten corresponds to the 10th anniversary and the redness is a symbol of the rich blood flow and color characteristic of intimacy. But maybe the redness corresponds to a red dress she wore when she got engaged. Maybe the

tenness is symbolic of her use of her hands and fingers (she might be a pianist and her recitals are part of their relationship; or she might be an artist who knows how to delicately describe through pictures). Maybe further, the husband and wife each have different emotional associations with the redness and tenness; perhaps they are not thinking of the same thing.

This brings us to the point: We are certain of the symbolic nature of the gift; this symbolic nature is author intended. This is all we are certain about. To *appreciate* this symbol, we might discuss various *possible* meanings of the symbol. These discussions are speculations. They should not, in our opinion, be taken as serious alternate points of view. It is unlike a legal controversy where each side believes and defends their position. Rather, it is not a controversy; it is a speculation. So, one person might speculate approach A and another person might speculate approach B. We should not read into this an actual controversy; rather it is collaborative speculation whose sole purpose is to make us appreciate the fact of the symbolic.

This idea, that controversy on symbols has a totally different flavor than a controversy on law, is new and is a main point of our approach. We believe that too much is being read into speculations thereby legitimizing an activity that was never so intended. The job of the serious student of Rashi, is to identify the core symbol, the core linkage of symbolic activity and other activity that are to be linked through symbolism.

BB.3 – Application to the Daily Offering Paragraph: Rashi contrasts Ex29-42 and Ex25-22

Ex29-42 A daily offering, for all generations, at the entrance of the Temple, that I may meet with you there to speak to you [prophecy]

Ex25-22 And I [God] will speak to you [Moses] from on top of the ark cover between the two between the two Cherubim that are on the Ark of Testimony.

Based on these verses Rashi cites a controversy

Some hold that the main place of prophecy is the ark cover and Ex29-42 should be reinterpreted to refer not to the Altar and the Daily offering but to the entire Desert temple

Others hold that the main place of prophecy is Ex29-42, the Temple Altar, the place of the daily offerings.

We are taking this controversy as a speculation, the purpose of the speculation being to enrich our understanding of the basic symbolism of the Desert Temple. We do not perceive this as a legal controversy (where does prophecy happen). As with the couple with the 10th anniversary, there are different emotional associations with the Temple objects and prophecy. The altar is personal, it symbolizes the daily continual relationship between God and the Jewish people symbolized as sheep. Perhaps the essence of prophetic intimacy with God comes primarily from the altar. On the other hand, others, may see prophecy as the climax of the Temple objects, the ark-cover that introduces us to the holy of holies which is the climax of the Temple. These people might see the prophecy as something to be worked on until a climax, prophecy ensues.

It would be a mistake to see, as in Jewish law, that one of these points of view is right and one is wrong. Rather they are speculations and complements that enable us to understand the Temple symbolism and the richness of the Prophecy symbolized.