

CHAPTER AB: A COMPLEX RASHI

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AB.1 – Introduction. Frequently, the Rashiyomi digest presents a verse and a Rashi comment and then shows how application of a Rashiyomi rule gives rise to this comment. Many of the comments explained are straightforward. However, some Rashis are complex. We don't often explain these difficult Rashis. Today we explain one such Rashi.

We mention some of the interesting features of this Rashi comment:

- Rashi cites a Midrash that a certain phrase is “extra and hence left open for word links from which we derive exegetical content.” This certainly does not appear to be an application of Rashiyomi rules. In fact, it appears fanciful and homiletic, the type of Rashi comment that invites the response “This is not the straightforward meaning of the verse.” We will explain this Rashi comment.
- Rashi gives a very simply explanation to the verse. From this explanation he derives Jewish law. But the Jewish law he derives is not the accepted one. Such discrepancies between the accepted Jewish law and the simple straightforward meaning of the verse seem to suggest as some modern scholars have asserted, that “there are two approaches to reading the text: The simple straightforward method and the Talmudic method. It should not bother us that there are two different methods.” The position of Rashiyomi is that it should bother us. We will show an uncomplicated way that the straightforward meaning of the verse is fully consistent with a different legal ruling without resorting to the idea of multiple ways to read the text.

AB.2 - The Biblical Text: Ex34-18:23

- Observe the Passover Holiday:
 - Eat Matzoh 7 days that I have commanded you at the time of Springtime because in Springtime you exited Egypt
 - *All openers of womb [firstborn] belong to me
And all livestock bearing a male, by the opening [of the womb] of ox and sheep
The opening [of wombs] of asses shall be redeemed with a lamb
(and if not redeemed it will be decapitated)*
 - *All first born of your children shall be redeemed
Do not appear before my face, empty handed*
- Six days work and on the 7th day rest, from plowing and harvesting rest
- And a holiday of weeks make for your, when the wheat ripens
- And a holiday of gathering at the circle [end of] the year
- Three times a year all your males will appear before the face of the Lord, Lord, God of Israel

AB.3 Rashi Text (Paraphrased): The paragraph deals with the holidays (as listed in Lv23): Passover, Shavuoth, Succoth as well as Sabbath.

However, the small-font italicized text is a parenthetical insert not directly related to the holidays. It appears out of place.

We however gain insight into this text by comparing it with Ex13 where the Exodus and Passover are mentioned along with the commemoration of the Exodus by the requirement to redeem the first born, the symbolic rationale being that God redeemed us from Egypt by killing the firstborn of the Egyptians and sparing us and therefore we redeem our firstborn since God acquired these firstborn by sparing them when He killed the Egyptian firstborn.

From this point of view there are three commandments in the biblical paragraph above mentioned in connection with Passover: 1) Eating Matzoh, 2) Redeeming the first born of animals and 3) redeeming human firstborn. All these items reflect commemoration of the Passover holiday. Interestingly, the eating of Matzoh must occur on Passover but the redemption of the firstborn (animals or humans) can happen any time during the year. Nevertheless, these are all commemorations of Egypt. They fit into the paragraph.

AB.4 - Rashi Grammar Rule: What Rashi rule justifies this analysis? The **grammar rule** justifies this reading since grammar, besides dealing with the conjugation of verbs, also deals with paragraph organization. A fundamental principle of grammar and skillful writing is that paragraphs should reflect underlying themes which are developed. In this case, the “theme” of the biblical paragraph cited above is “The Jewish commemorative holidays” and this theme is developed through reference to Passover, Shavuoth, Succoth and Sabbath. Furthermore, the Passover paragraph subtheme is developed through the mention of three commandments commemorating the Exodus from Egypt: matzoh, redemption of animal firstborn, and redemption of human firstborn.

Some people do not think of the paragraph rule as an important Rashi principle. They feel more comfortable translating words and conjugating verbs. But the grammar organizational rule is just as important as any other grammar rule.

AB.4 - Do not appear before my face empty-handed: This phrase at the end of the second hollow bullet is underlined. It is not included in Ex12 which mentions the redemption of the firstborn. But it resembles the text in Dt16-17.

From the point of view of the four basic Rashi exegetical pillars, it is not sufficient to explain the underlying passage by a link to another verse. We must explain how the underlined phrase fits in with the grammar rule, more specifically with the sub-paragraph theme of commemorating the Exodus.

We suggest that the key is not the word “empty handed” which occurs here and in Dt16-17 but the phrase “be seen before My Face.” The Jewish slaves who were redeemed from Egypt were said to have a face-to-face encounter with God (Dt05-04). In a very real sense a person who was a slave and then became redeemed and free has seen God’s face; that is, the prophetic encounter which transforms a slave to a free person is described as “being in the presence of God’s face.”

Taken from this point of view, this underlined phrase concludes the chapter by stating that generally, any person who gets redeemed by God, is being seen by the face of God and because of the awe of this moment this person must redeem himself so he can resume ordinary life.

AB.5 The Actual Rashi Comment:

Do not appear before my face empty handed: According to the simplistic meaning of the verse, this is a separate matter [from the rest of this verse] and is unrelated to the firstborn, because there is no obligation to appear [in the Temple] in the commandment dealing with the firstborn. Instead this is another warning, [meaning] and when you ascend [to the Temple] on the festivals, you shall not appear before Me empty-handed, [but] it is incumbent upon you to bring burnt offerings (Chag. 7a) whenever appearing before God.

[Rashiyomi comment: So Rashi is showing how a simplistic interpretation which ignores the requirements of the Rashiyomi grammar rule of paragraph unification would see this verse clause as separate]

According to the way it is interpreted by a Baraita, this is a superfluous verse [for this was already stated in Exod. 23:15], and it is free [i.e., has no additional reason for being here]

[Rashiyomi comment: We would rephrase this as follows: This underlined verse does not continue a list of commandments related to the Exodus.]

Rashi phrases the rest of his comment in terms of Gezayrah shaveh certainly not one of the Rashiyomi rules! We would rephrase the rest of the Rashi as follows

This concluding phrase, and do not be seen by my face empty-handed, is a general statement that anyone who goes through a redemption, from slavery to freedom, from being an ordinary son to a firstborn, etc. stands before the “Face of God” and because of the awe of that moment instantly belongs to God; that person must therefore redeem himself so that he can resume an ordinary life. It would then follow that when a slave goes free, and there is an obligation on the former master to supply him with a parting gift, that gift should be similar in value to the redemption amounts of people list in Lv 27.

Notice how Rashi’s primary purpose is not the derivation of the law but rather the clarification of the terminating clause that we underlined. The verse is describing the redemptive experience. It does so generally. Rashi following some opinions in the Talmud uses this as a *basis* to give the value of the farewell gift to the slave. This application is consistent with the meaning of the biblical narrative following the Rashiyomi rule of paragraph organization.

But law, in any country, very often follows a narrow approach. If you wanted to ascertain the value of the farewell gift you should examine other laws where a slave is valued. This is in fact what the Talmud does. There is a law about an ox goring a slave (to death) in which case a fixed flat fee of 30 shekels is paid, the worth of the slave. This particular law is much more specific and therefore determines the law of how much value the farewell gift should be.

That does not mean the law reads the bible differently. The law, halachah, would certainly agree that the simple meaning of the text is that people who go through a freedom transformation must

redeem themselves before God. But this principle is heuristic and exhortational; it is not a legal obligation.

AB.6 Summary: To recap our approach:

- We have used the Rashi grammar organizational rule which states that every paragraph must be unified with a theme and development
- We have applied this to the biblical text to show that three commandments are listed as commemorative of the Exodus
- Because the bible concludes these three commandments with the general phrase that when in God's presence we should not go empty-handed it interprets that the experience of freedom is so overwhelming that we feel we belong to God unless we redeem ourselves allowing us to resume an ordinary life.
- One could apply this philosophical principle to the legal arena; the Talmud following requirements of specificity, however, chooses a more specific case where slaves are evaluated to establish the value given to a slave in his farewell gift.

We believe the analysis for this Rashi points to a path to deal with Rashis based on what appear to be obscure principles and show that they too can be reformulated as straightforward meaning of the text.