

## CHAPTER AE: BIBLICAL PUNS- PARSHAH AND PASSOVER

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### *SheMiNi-Passover*

### *A Happy and Joyous Passover*

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**AE.1 – Introduction, Puns.** We have several times explained that a major Rashi method is use of author-intended puns. Puns and inuendoes are Figures of Speech which are a major sub-method of the Rashi Meaning method. In other words, Rashi did not suffice with using pure dictionary meaning; rather, Rashi also insisted that many biblical words are intended as puns and inuendoes pointing to meaning which is *peshat*, the straightforward natural interpretation of the verse in context. In fact, Avineri a great Rashi scholar who compiled a wide variety of Rashi texts and explored Rashi method notes that there are well over a 1000 coined terms in Rashi. Avineri did not explicitly state the obvious conclusion, that this is a Rashi method, but he provided the support for it.

Before continuing, we wish to emphasize that puns are *peshat*, the straightforward natural interpretation of the verse in context. We support this with other scholarship and with a simple example.

In the secular world, there are several scholars, for example, Empson and Heller, who see puns as simply another literary style. Puns are governed by grammatical rules like any other literary device. There is no need to single them out. Puns are intended by the author who expects the reader to read their content. There are to be sure, secular scholars, Bates and Eco, who see puns as not author-intended, as homily, equivalent to *derash*. These scholars see puns as something read into the text by the reader. Hendel added to the school of scholars who see puns as author-intended by showing that authors will use specific cues and statistical anomalies to convey a pun and when these cues and anomalies are present, they indicate author intent.

Perhaps a simple everyday example, not from the Bible, will illustrate this idea. Consider the following statement which, for example, could have been made on a movie or book where a person named Abe is dating (and pursuing) a woman named Rose. At a dinner date, Abe might say:

Pass me the Rosens

I think everyone agrees that this sentence is heard as a pun. Abe not only wants raisins; Abe wants Rose herself. The fact that one sentence has two meanings does not contradict that both those meanings are *peshat*, the natural, author intended meaning of the verse *in context*. As to the possible objection that one meaning, passing the raisins, is the real *peshat*, while the pun, passing Rose, is an inuendo, we would respond that they are both author-intended. If we wish to understand the dialogue, we must acknowledge that this is what transpired. To use Hendel's criteria of cues and statistical anomalies, in this sentence, there is a statistical anomaly; *raisins* is

spelled *rosens*. This statistical anomaly points to deliberate intention. Puns that are based on deliberate misspellings are called metaplasmus.

**AE.2 – Grossman’s book *Rashi*:** With this background we discuss the source of today’s examples. Abraham Grossman is a modern Rashi scholar. He recently wrote a very good comprehensive book, *Rashi*, in which he discusses all aspects of Rashi, his life, his contributions to Talmud, Bible, prayer, and his influence on surrounding communities and human history.

In his book, Grossman, following the great Nechama Leibowitz, a well-known Rashi popularizer, cites the following explicit description by Rashi of his method.

....Explanations should follow i) grammar, ii) meaning, or iii) the sequence of the text (context) (Is. 26:11)

Based on this Rashi, Grossman incorrectly assumes that the *only* drivers of Rashi comments are the grammar method, and the paragraph structure method which itself is part of the grammar method, and the meaning method (Grossman like many scholars combines grammar and meaning into one category the grammar-meaning).

Grossman’s fallacy is seeing the above Rashi comment as exhaustive and complete. Actually, Rashi simply mentioned two of many criteria in Is 26:11. Why didn’t he mention other criteria? Because his goal was to explain why he was rejecting various midrashim on Is 26:11 and for that purpose it *sufficed* to mention grammar and context. However, Rashiyomi posits that Rashi had 4 pillars of exegesis: Grammar, parallelism, symbolism, and meaning including figures of speech. Because Grossman was not aware of the other Rashi methods, he incorrectly states the following:

He [Rashi] did not always insist on these criteria

He uses rabbinic midrash that fail to meet his two criteria of linguistic and substantive compatibility

In other words, Grossman looks at Rashi comments which can not be explained using grammar or meaning: But then, he doesn’t understand them using grammar and meaning. There are then two approaches

(Grossman) Rashi did not always use his own criteria. He deviated since his goal was not just biblical commentary but also addressing the emotional and spiritual needs of the Jews of his time

(Rashiyomi) Rashi did not always use the grammar-meaning and context methods. Sometimes he used other methods such as parallelism and figures of speech.

To prove and support his point Grossman presents four examples on pp 86-87 of his book. We will look at these examples today and in so doing we will also explain a difficult biblical interpretation in the Passover Haggadah.

**AE.3 – Example 1 of Grossman: Lv 13:2:** To fully understand this verse we are about to cite, we follow the Maharzu, a commentary on the Midrash Rabbah, one great source of midrashim.

Maharzu states that we must use parallelism to understand Lv 13:2, which addresses which animals are kosher, since this passage is repeated (in parallel) in Deut 14. Here are the verses.

Lv13:2 These are the *beasts* that you are permitted to eat from all *animals* in the world  
Dt14:4 These are the *animals* that you are permitted to eat.

One more step is needed before citing Rashi, Grossman, and the Rashiyomi explanation. The biblical word for a beast is a *lively* since beasts tend to be wilder, more lively, than animals. For those who know Hebrew, *chai* is a root which means life. For example, at toasts, we say *lechaim, for a good life*. The biblical word for beast is *chaiyah*. The English citation of the verse brought below reflects this citation. It will help us in understanding the Rashi comment which uses a pun.

Lv13:2 These are the *livelies* that you are permitted to eat from all *animals* in the world  
Dt14:4 These are the *animals* that you are permitted to eat.

Rashi comment:

[Why does Lv13:2 mention *livelies* and *animals*?] To teach you that those who observe the laws of Kashruth will merit a share in the world to come of eternal *life*.

Before presenting Grossman's misunderstanding of this passage we present the Rashiyomi approach: The parallelism clearly points to a deliberate intent on the part of the Author: After all, why mention *livelies* at all if the chapter is speaking about animals? This points to an Author-intended pun: The play on words of *lively* and *eternal life*. This pun justifies the Rashi comment and further justifies it as *peshat* just as *pass me the Rosens* is *peshat*.

**AE.4 – Example 1 of Grossman Continued:** We now cite Grossman's critique of this Rashi as well as our responses.

Objection #1: "Rashi offers a plain meaning interpretation, mentioned in Hulin 70b, according to which beasts" are included within the category of "living things", that is, *hayah* is a general noun that includes *behemah*."

Response #1: But this chapter *exclusively* speaks about four animals: the camel, hare, coney, and pig. Neither of these animals is a *wild beast*. Furthermore, Grossman, ignores the parallelism with Dt14-04 where quite simply the chapter uses *animal* to introduce the four animals discussed. Because of both i) the parallelism and ii) the lack of mention of *wild beasts*, it is clear that the introductory phrase of Lv13:2 is inconsistent with content and therefore is used for a pun.

Objection #2: (Main objection) "Is it conceivable that Rashi did not sense the magnitude of the divide between this midrash and the plain meaning of the verse?"

Response #2: Of course, Rashi sensed this divide. Just as there is a divide between *pass me the raisins* and *pass me Rose*. The whole point of the grammar of puns, is that puns add an extra sentence, with a totally different meaning. The pun is nevertheless *peshat*, if

author-intent is indicated through some cue. In this case the cue arises from the two items mentioned in response #1: i) the parallelism and ii) the lack of mention of *wild beasts*.

Objection #3: “It is [consequently] evident that he – like the author of the *midrash* – was motivated by pedagogical considerations whose purpose was to energize the Jews to avoid forbidden foods and to emphasize the advantage they enjoyed over the non-Jews who ate them.”

Response #3: We can only infer this consequence, if the *midrash* is not *peshat*. Then we can say that Rashi chose a non-*peshat* meaning *in order to* uplift the spirits of this readers. But as we just saw, the Rashi comment is the simple *peshat*. However, Grossman’s point has some validity: It is not Rashi, but God Himself, who wished to uplift the spirit of the downtrodden slaves who left Egypt by promising them a share in the next world, in the eternal life, if they abstain from forbidden foods!

**AE.5 Example #3, Rivkah’s refusal**: The following example is illustrative how modern scholars are *quick* to attribute non-logical motivations to commentator comments and *further assume without doing simple checks* that there is no logical basis for a comment. This example is particularly good since the explanation is crisp and punchy and totally overlooked.

Biblical Text:

Gn24-53:58 ...They [Eliezer who had just secured an agreement that Rivkah will become Isaac’s wife] awoke in the morning and he said, “Let me depart to my master.” Her [Rivkah’s] brother and mother said, “Let the young lady stay with us a year or 10 months, and then go.” And he said, “Do not delay me since God has made my journey successful, let me depart and I will go to my master.” They say, “Let us call the young lady and personally ask her.”

They called Rivkah and said to her, “Are you [really] willing to go with this person,” and she said “I am going”

Rashi:

I will go by myself even if you don’t want.

Here is a verbatim citation from Grossman [pg. 87]

Replying to her family’s question, Rebecca says she is willing to go with Abraham’s servant: “Will you go with this man?” And she said, “I will go” (Gen 24:58). Rashi comments “I will go of my own will, even if you do not with it”

Grossman continues with the following [uncalled for] evaluation of Rashi

[Attempt #1] Rashi may have selected this *midrash* because Rebecca used the verb ‘I will go’ instead of simply replying ‘Yes’.

[Response #1] But he was familiar enough with biblical style to know that there was no really problem here requiring explanation.’

[Comment #2] In any case, there is no linguistic or substantive basis for the interpretation. [Therefore] he evidently cited the midrash he wanted to portray Rebecca in a positive light, as one who rejected her father's house, a place of idolatry and deceit.

Notice what Grossman is doing. He is denigrating Rashi commentary (midrash) from a careful reading of the text to expose nuances to a mere moral exhortation, in this case, moral praise for Rebecca. This denigration is obtained by apodictically stating 'there is no linguistic or substantive basis for the interpretation.' To support this statement, Grossman, cites "Attempt #1" which he obtained from standard Rashi commentators and refutes it [his refutation is correct; the Rashi commentators did not understand Rashi]

**AE.6 – The Rashiyomi Approach.** The Rashiyomi approach to this is to encourage review of the four pillars, *grammar, parallelism, symbolism, meaning including figure of speech.*

We use the powerful meaning-synonym method which exploits natural nuances of synonyms. The explanation of the Midrash lies in the

Use of the verb *they said*, rather than *they asked* for a question [Note: The previous verse explicitly identifies this as something they wish to *ask*]

A universal rule of style (in all languages) is that *saying a question* should be interpreted *cynically*. This principle is held by secular scholars and in other languages. We have therefore translated this verse with the elliptic word *really* to reflect the cynical tone

They said [to Rivkah], "Will you [really] go with this person?" She said, "I will go."

Now we perfectly understand Rashi. Rashi was exploiting the synonym method

Asking a question – normal style [all languages]

Saying a question – indicates cynicism in tone.

In other words, the question *is heard* cynically. Therefore, when she responds, "I will go" (or even if she said "Yes") she is not answering the question but answering their cynicism. And since she is countering their cynicism Rashi is correct in summarizing this as she saying to her mother and brother:

"Don't act shocked; I made up my mind. I am going even if you don't want me."

To summarize it was the phrase

*say* [a question] versus

*ask* [a question]

that motivated the Rashi comment.

As to Grossman's remark that Rashi wanted to portray Rebecca in a positive light, we would subtly modify this, Rashi is explaining that God Himself wants to portray Rebecca in a positive light!

**AE.7 – The Four Sons, Exegesis, Passover Haggadah:** Using the distinction between *say a question* and *ask a question* we can solve the famous problem of the four sons included in the Passover Haggadah. Here are the relevant biblical texts

Dt06-20 When your son asks you tomorrow, “What are these testimonies, statutes, and ordinances”

Ex13-14 When your son asks you tomorrow, “What is this”

Ex13-08 ----- And you will tell your son

Ex12-26 When your children say to you, ‘What is this service to you”

Classifying these four types of son follows the underlined grammatical cues

Ex13-08 has neither a verb of *ask* or *say* → He is the apathetic son who doesn’t care to ask

Ex12-26 describes cynically *saying* a question → He is the wicked son

Ex13-14 Uses a simple pronoun *this* rather than a detailed description of law → He is simple

Dt06-20 reflects differentiation *testimonies, statutes, ordinances* → He is wise

Before proceeding, I acknowledge my teacher, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchick, *the Rav*, for pointing out that the proper translation of *ayno yodayah lishol* is *apathetic, doesn’t care to ask* rather than *simple, doesn’t know to ask*. The Rav explained that the four sons are typologies. There aren’t just four sons; there are myriads of sons. Each son has his/her own learning style, which is some combination in some proportions of *wise, cynical, wicked(cynical), apathetic*. If we were to translate *ayno yodayah lishol* as *simple* we would lose a basic typology.

Thus, the Haggadah commentary and midrash are based on the Database method a submethod of the Parallelism method. The Midrash compares the four sons using the two dimensions

The verb used to describe their question – *ask, say, blank*

The level of detail in describing commandments – *this*, [testimonies, statutes, ordinances]

**AE.8 – Example #4, Joseph meets his brothers in Dothan:** Here are the texts which I have translated using comparable English analogies, foreshadowing my explanation.

Bible:

Gn37-15 A person found him [Joseph], and indeed, he was wandering in the field.  
The person asked, “What are you seeking?”

And he [Joseph] said, “I am seeking my brothers. Can you please tell me where they are sheparding?”

The person said, “They have traveled from here. [I know that] Because I heard them saying, ‘Let us go towards *Omla*.”

Joseph went after his brothers, and found them – in *ImLaw*

Rashi:

Omla – They seek legal (law) ways to kill you. According to the *peshat* Omla is the name of a place. No passage ever leaves its *peshat* meaning.

The Rashiyomi explanation of this Rashi is as follows: A principle in all languages is that repetition connotes emphasis. In this case, the name of the city is repeated. Here is the actual verse and two alternatives which sound perfectly reasonable.

Actual text:

The person said, “The have traveled from here. [I know that] Because I heard them saying, ‘Let us go towards *Omla*.”

Joseph went after his brothers, and found them – in *ImLaw*

Alternative version 1:

The person said, “The have traveled from here. [I know that] Because I heard them saying, ‘Let us go towards *Omla*.”

Joseph went after his brothers, and found them *there*

Alternative version 2:

The person said, “The have traveled from here. [I know that] Because I heard them saying, ‘Let us go towards *Omla*.”

Joseph went after his brothers, and found them

After stating the name of the place, *Omla*, the rules of style (in any language) require brevity, a lack of repetition of the word. The text could have said *He found them* or *He found them there*. Notice, we are not making a comment on *the extra word*; indeed, if you submitted this text to say a secular English teacher, they would have also suggested improving the essay by non-repetition of the word, perhaps a simple use of the pronoun *there*.

Rashiyomi regards this repetition as a cue for a pun. Think of how this could be said cynically in English. “I heard they went to Omla.” “Yes,” you respond, “They are in I’m Law”. This is a pun on the name.

Notice how we can now interpret Rashi’s comment that “Passages do not leave their *peshat* meaning.” This has been incorrectly translated as “Biblical passages *only* have their *peshat* meaning.” We would respond to this by citing the “*Pass me the raisins*” – “*Pass me the Rosens*” – “*Pass me Rose*” – example we gave above. We define *peshat* as the author intended meaning of the text. As can be seen from the way adults hear *Pass me the Rosen,s* a sentence can have two *peshats*! Rashi’s point is that although the pun is true, the non-pun part of the sentence is also true, the brothers had gone to Omla.

**AE.9 Dothan – Omla.** We have left to explain why we translated the Hebrew name of the place, *Dothan* as *Omla*. We also have to present Grossman’s analysis of this text.

The Biblical word, *Dothan* comes from the word *dath*, *religion*, with a terminal *nun*. Terminal *nuns* very often indicate intensity. For example, *riv* means to dispute. *Yerivun* means to have a fist fight. *Dath* itself means religion. So, *Dothan* would be an intense form of *religion*. Rashi treats this as “*They are going to make their own religious laws.*” So, we follow suit and translate this as *I am the Law* or *Omla*. To emphasize the pun, we translate this as *Imla*. The purpose here is to capture the nuances.

This is another example of *skillful English translations*. The sole purpose of this translation is to make intuitive to a native speaker what Rashi is saying. We in no way are officially translating the word.

**AE.10 – Grossman’s comments on Rashi:** Now that we have presented the biblical text, the Rashi, and the Rashiyomi explanation let us compare what Grossman says.

The word *dotainah* which clearly means ‘to Dothan’, presents no difficulties that would warrant reference to that *midrash*, which is removed, linguistically and substantively, from the simple meaning. What criterion, then, did Rashi use in selecting midrashim to be incorporated into his commentary?

We have already answered Grossman.

[Response #1] The word *to Dothan* doesn’t present difficulties, but the word Dothan in the next verse, repeated unnecessarily and contrary to grammatical style, does present a difficulty.

[Response #2] As we have explained several times, Grossman viewed Rashi through the lens of grammar and meaning. Grossman was unaware of the principles of parallelism and figures of speech including puns. Almost by definition, an inuendo in a pun is removed grammatically and linguistically from the non-pun meaning; but both meanings are Author-intended.

Grossman continues with points he has made before and which we have answered.

[Grossman #1] Rashi’s statement that he considered only the plain meaning of the text should be taken as merely a declaration of intent.

[Response #1] All Rashi comments are *peshat* and follow rules of secular discourse provided we use the four Rashi pillars of exegesis, *grammar*, *parallelism*, *symbolism*, *meaning including figures of speech*. Rashi frequently used puns when the text cued the reader that a pun was intended. In such a case the verse naturally has two meanings both of which are Author-intended, both of which are *peshat*.

Grossman continues

[Grossman #2] In writing his commentary on the Bible, Rashi set himself two goals, whose value, he believed, exceeded that of linguistic and substantive exegesis: To educate Jews and to fortify them and equip them for the difficult confrontation with Christian supersessionist propaganda. He attributed overriding importance to these goals



and invested great effort in their achievement. When he found a rabbinic midrash that promoted one of these goals, he did not hesitate to cite it, even if it was far removed from the plain meaning of the verse.

[Response #2] At the very least, we can certainly see that Grossman is not trying to denigrate Rashi but rather attribute goals of the highest moral norm. As we have explained above, we would modify Grossman's point as follows: Rashi only gave the simple straightforward meaning, the *peshat* of the text. It was not Rashi who wanted to uplift the spirit of the Jews of the middle ages, rather, it was God Himself, who wanted to uplift them, and he uplifted them through the Torah whose message is applicable in all ages.

**AE.11 Example 2, The Demons in Noah's ark:** Here are the verses and Rashi:

Biblical Text: Gn06-19 God orders Noah to save the animals

From all living, from all flesh, two of each, bring to the ark, to preserve their lives with you, male and female they should be. From the birds by species, from the animals by species, from all crawlers by species, two from each will come to you to live

Rashi:

From all flesh: Even the demons

Grossman simply demurs:

Could Rashi have had any linguistic or contextual rationale for citing that midrash?

**AE.12 - Rashiyomi Response:** This is a particularly subtle point in learning Rashi:

Very often Rashi will explain on one verse the textual problem of another verse. This can be very annoying to the serious researcher who thinks Rashi is explaining a problem with the verse he is commenting on when in reality he is commenting on another verse.

In this case, Rashi is commenting on God's order to evacuate the ark, after the flood is over. Here is how God orders the animals to evacuate

Gen 8:19

All the beasts with you  
From all the flesh  
Amongst the birds  
Amongst the animals  
Amongst all crawlers, crawling on the ground  
  
Take out with you.

Here we use the parallelism method. The parallel structure of the phrases suggests a bulleted list. It would appear from this list that there were five types of animals in Noah's, ark, 1) beasts, 2) flesh, 3) birds, 4) animals, 5) crawlers.

Rashi therefore commented on Gen 6:19 as follows. We read the verse as follows:

From all living (*chay*) from all flesh, two of each...  
From the birds by species  
From the animals by species  
From the crawlers on the ground by species

In other words, we read *chay* (living creatures) and *flesh* as an introductory phrase introducing the birds, animals, and crawlers.

This is a reasonable reading. However, in light of Gn 8:19 there appear to be five categories not three. Furthermore, the Hebrew word for beasts, *chayah*, has the same root as *chay* living creatures. Rashi therefore *reinterprets* Gn 6:19 *because of* Gn 8:19 as follows:

From all beasts (*chay* = *chayah*)  
From all flesh, two from all bring to the ark to keep alive with you,...  
From the birds by species  
From the animals by species  
From the crawlers on the ground by species, two of each will come to you...

Again, we emphasize the subtlety: Rashi found nothing the matter with Gn 6:19 *until* he read Gn 8:19 which suggested a reinterpretation, that five types of animals came to the ark.

**AE.13 – But who are demons?** There are still many problems and the above is just a sketch. But Rashi does not speak about another type of animal. He speaks about demons! We have to explain this also. First, we note that the commentaries on the Midrash Rabbah from which Rashi obtained his comment point out that some rabbinic authorities believed in demons while others did not. But that still doesn't answer the question about what the 5<sup>th</sup> type of creature which seems intrinsic to the verse was.

To answer this, we use the Rashi symbolism method another major Rashi method ignored by Grossman (as a method of *peshat*).

Recall, that in Jacob's blessings to his children he called Judah a lion, Dan a serpent, Yissachar a donkey, etc. Similarly, the Jews are called the Sheep of God, God's flock. Now Judah is a person not a lion, Yissachar is a person not a donkey. Nevertheless, the bible *identifies* people or personality types with animal types. We can either interpret this in terms of prophets or personality types. Judah functions like a lion; he is strong and able to defend his people and attack enemies. Yissachar can bear burdens like a donkey.

Throughout Genesis I take the animals by and large to refer to people similar to Jacob's dreams. Returning to the ark, we would argue that Noah did not save the animals, but rather the prophets of Noah's time who had personality types (souls) symbolized by animals.

We now see, that Judah, the Lion, is a beast, the Jews, the sheep, are animals, snakes (Dan) are crawlers, and although there are no people explicitly compared to birds in the Bible, we can equally extend this list to them. It would follow that God told Noah that in

addition to saving himself he should save all the prophets of his time. Based on this I do not believe animals entered the ark; rather prophet people entered the ark and were spared from the flood.

We can now return to the demons. The Hebrew word for demon, *shayd* comes from *shad* breast similar to the word for goat, *ayz*, coming from *az*, *brazen*. The demons are called the people of the breast. The midrash explains they were not-completed prophets (without explaining what that means). It would appear that these *shaydim*, breast-people, had some of the powers and skills of prophets but not all of them and used their powers for satisfaction of physical needs. They are loosely translated as *spirits* possibly because of the emotional anguish they cause their victims with their flirtations. The bible itself does not call them *breast people* but *flesh people* with a similar connotation of emphasis on the physical.

Examining the verses cited above and others, we see that the prophet animals (beasts, animals, birds) came *by themselves*, to the ark, while the non-prophet demons, *had to be brought by Noah* to the ark.

The above should be considered an outline. To defend it, we would have to review numerous passages such as Bilam talking to his donkey, or the snake talking to Eve. It doesn't make sense that donkeys and snakes talk. It makes more sense that these were certain types of prophetic creatures and the Bible is calling them by their animal name.

In describing saving the world, God wanted all types saved and that is what the flood story tells us. A more thorough analysis of this approach will take place later when we analyze symbolic passages. For the moment, the above should suffice to answer Grossman: Namely, Rashi was not commenting on Gn 6:19 which looks perfectly good, rather, Rashi was commenting on Gn 8:19 and *applying* that commentary to Gn 6:19. We infer that there is a type of living creature call *flesh* just as there are beasts, animals, birds, and crawlers. All these types were saved from the flood.

**AE.14 Summary:** We summarize our response to Grossman's four examples. We uncovered certain patterns

Grossman has no problem accepting grammatical and linguistic arguments or arguments from context

Grossman was unaware of puns, whose Author-intent, is indicated by cues

Grossman was unaware of nuances of synonyms such as *say versus ask* a question

Grossman was unaware of parallelism as the source of commentary.

Grossman was unaware of symbolism as a major Rashi method

A major purpose of Rashiyomi, is to expose serious students of Rashi, whether they be Yeshiva students, Rabbis, or academic scholars, that Rashi is currently viewed using two pillars of exegesis when in fact four pillars are used. The use of puns, symbolism, synonyms, and parallelism does not justify arbitrariness. On the contrary they obey rules. A major purpose of Rashiyomi is to bring and clarify the rules of these other methods to the attention of serious students of Rashi.