

CHAPTER AH: **APPROACHES to MULTIPLE RASHI EXPLANATIONS**

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AH.1 – OVERVIEW: A common occurrence in Rashi comments, is the presence of more than one explanation; that is, multiple explanations. Shapira found 157 such occurrences or about 2% of all Rashis (the percentage is higher in Genesis).

The simplest issue associated with multiple explanations is, “Which one is correct?” or perhaps “Is there one correct one?” Rabbi Schneerson argued that when multiple explanations occur Rashi was not satisfied with either one and felt that each explanation had something of value. Contrastively, Shapira who used a geographical-historical approach, argued that plurality of explanations was intrinsically methodological for Rashi. Shapira cites a general trend among scholars in Europe during Rashi’s time to emphasize plurality.

AH.2 – Historical Approaches: The reason the geographical-historical approach is used is because scholars were unaware of all Rashi methods and therefore looked on the plurality as arbitrary; in such a case it is indeed justified to ascribe approach to a general historical trend. This and the next chapter presents an alternative, based on the fundamental thesis we have been advocating that all Rashi comments, at least in content, are based on four exegetical pillars, *grammar (both conjugational and essay grammar), parallelism (both consecutive verselets, distant verses, and paragraph/intensity parallelism), symbolism (both individual symbols and parables), and meaning including figures of speech*. We shall show that applying these principles yields a simple explanation of all Rashi phenomena.

Just to be clear: We are saying that the *primary* explanation of Rashi comes from applying the four exegetical principles we enunciated. However, Shapira is correct that the geographical historical setting of Rashi’s time, (probably) influenced Rashi’s choice of the *form* in which he presented his explanations. We have several times used this distinction between *form* and *content* (the true reason for the Rashi comment).

We would further respond that Rashi by using the *grammatical*-historical approach. Starting with Ben-Asher a few centuries earlier, Jewish scholarship recognized *grammar*, the study of consistent relationships between narrative and lexical form and meaning, as a subject in its own right. Although, the historical context shows an emphasis on conjugational grammar (the form of verbs and their meanings), we argue that Rashi employed grammar in its wider sense as the correlation between either word-forms and meanings, sentence-forms and meanings, paragraph-forms and meanings, or even entire narrative-forms and meanings. The example today will illustrate this. To summarize, the widespread geographic tendency in Rashi’s time to use a *form* of plurality of reasons influenced Rashi’s *form*, but the growing development of *grammar*, the relationship between word, sentence, paragraph, and narrative form and meaning, was the primary influence on Rashi. Those scholars ignoring the grammatical influence are missing the major parts of the Rashi comment.

AH.3 – The Exclusivity of the Historical Approach Discourages Research and Learning:

The geographical-historical approach very often discourages needed work on Rashi method (though as pointed out above it need not; it can and should be used in conjunction with it). The whole point of the geographic-historical approach is an emphasis on form. Consider these two historical approaches:

- (1) **History of surrounding areas (Geographic):** *The form of Rashi's comment is 'multiple explanations' just as the form in the scholars in surrounding geographic areas (Europe) of his time is 'multiple explanations.' We therefore conclude that Rashi simply borrowed this form so his readers would feel the most modern treatment,*
- (2) **History of Midrash (Tradition):** *Rashi cites three opinions and the Midrash Rabbah presents the identical three opinions; hence, Rashi was simply citing the Midrash and using the plurality form.*

In both these historical approaches, one based on current approach in surrounding countries (geographic) and one based on Midrashic sources (tradition-historical approach) there is frequently *no* serious discussion of Rashi methods as an alternative or supplemental explanation. The above two approaches explain the multiplicity and therefore the reader does not feel *the need* to examine further. Contrastively, as we will show in this and the next chapter, an approach using *method* gives very deep insights into the Rashi comment. Suddenly, the form doesn't matter; what matters is that method has been applied.

With this background, let us begin the analysis with a citation of a multiple-explanation Rashi.

AH.4 – The Cursor: The biblical and Rashi texts are cited.

Biblical text: Lv24-01:12

[Previous paragraphs discussed the laws of the Temple Candelabra and the Temple bread loaves] The son of a Jewess went out, (and he was the son of an Egyptian in the midst of the Jewish community), and they fought in the camp, the son of the Jewess and the son of the Jewish man. The son of the Jewess cursed God, so they brought him to Moses; his mother's name was *Hello-How-Are-You*, the *daughter of Wordy*, from the tribe of Dan.

Rashi Text: Went out: From where?

Rabbi Levi says, went out from his world

Rabbi Berechyah says: Went out from the previous paragraph which describes a requirement to have bread-loaves on the Temple Table for a week contrary to the custom of Kings who eat warm loaves every day

The Baraitah (Sifrey) says: Went out liable from Moses court. He had attempted to pitch tent in the Dan-ite territory but was stopped because his lineage was matrilineal not patrilineal; he sought relief in court and when overturned he cursed.

Further Rashis explain as follows:

The Egyptian (father) was in the midst of the Jewish people signifying that he converted. The fight in the camp was a fight on territorial rights: those opposing him asserting that only those with patrilineal descent from Dan were allowed entry into the Danite camp.

In the next three sections we use Rashi *methods* to explain the three cited explanations of *went out*.

AH.5 – He Went Out: The biblical verb meaning *go out*, *went* almost always occurs with either an indication, either explicit or implied, of a) *from* where the going out took place, b) *to* where the going out took place, or c) *purpose*. For example, *the town maidens went out to draw water* (Gn24:06), indicates explicitly the purpose (drawing water) and although not using the preposition *from* indicates implicitly from where they came (from the town); Gn08-17 presents a command by God for Noah to leave the ark and therefore the following verse Gn08-18 just says *Noah went out* implying from where he came since the place from which Noah left had just been discussed; Gn25-24 speaks about the completion of pregnancy and therefore Gn25-25 which states *the first one came out, a redhead*, indicates implicitly from where he came since the completion of the pregnancy and the implied delivery was just discussed.

Contrastively, Lv25-10 which simply *opens* a paragraph with *The son of a Jewess went out* violates usage. We are not told where he came from, to where he was going, or why. In such a case, when a verb is missing its usual grammatical accompaniments, it suggests a new nuance of meaning. In English, we have the idiom *he went out of his mind*. In other words, he simply went berserk. This echoes the R. Levi opinion *he went out of his world*. The Rabaynu Becahyai commentary explains that *since each person is a small world, the Midrash describes going berserk as leaving that world*. Here Rabbaynu Becahyai explains how the English metaphor *going out of your mind* is mirrored in Hebrew by *going out of his world*.

A similar treatment of verbs without accompaniments occurs in Nu16-01, *Korach took; (and with him) Dathan and Aviram...*. As the grammarians point out, *take* is a transitive verb; you take *something*. But the verse does not indicate that anything was taken. Rashi here interprets *take* with a nuance and cites other verses with similar nuances: *Korach took hold of himself* (and asserted his rights over the communal leaders).

In interpreting and defending R. Levi's statement, we have used the Rashi Grammar method. Notice that we have not used conjugational Grammar but rather the grammar of sentence syntax function (what accompaniments does a verb need).

AH.6 – Consecutive Paragraphs: Throughout the Bible and secular literature, consecutiveness of sentences and paragraphs typically indicates connection in meaning. This principle is used in both religious and secular scholarship; it is also a requirement in the college teaching of composition; a student with incoherent paragraph juxtaposition is adversely graded. True, consecutiveness does not have to indicate *temporal* consecutiveness, but no one disputes that it indicates *some* connection.

The immediate preceding two paragraphs discuss the production of oil for the Temple Candelabra and the preparation of the Temple loaves which stood on the Temple table.

Suddenly, we are told the story of the cursor. R. Berechya therefore sees the relationship of the consecutive paragraphs as *cause and effect*.

The preceding chapter speaks about the Temple table. Loaves of bread remain on it a week, sometimes longer. This does not appear respectful. The cursor undoubtedly, instead of properly asking for an explanation, poked fun at the law. Clearly, the disrespect he saw in the Temple loaves was one factor in his not mining cursing God which is also a sign of disrespect.

Again, here, we have justified R. Berechya's opinion by a well-known grammatical rule, albeit the grammar of paragraphs within a narrative. This rule of interpreting consecutive paragraphs as indicating causation is used by Rashi elsewhere (e.g. Gn04-01 and Gn21-01).

Before closing, we should answer the cursor: Why does the Temple table have loaves of bread laid on it for an entire week? The answer is simple: The Temple, as is well known, is not for God but for us, the Jewish people. The Temple symbolically instructs us how to become holy. To become holy, a very important point is not to demand perfection in material things. Stale bread is not as tasty as freshly cooked warm bread, but people should learn to be satisfied with it. Note: The Temple utensils deliberately provide for aeration and support so that the loaves do not become moldy or crushed. However, after we have eliminated the possibility of disease and ugly form, we should show satisfaction with nutritious food even if it is not perfect.

AH.7 – Territorial Dispute: In the past few decades, there has arisen a new branch of secular biblical scholarship called discourse analysis. Discourse analysis pays special attention to biblical story construction, layout, and detail.

Most biblical stories, including the 3-verse story of the cursor are remarkably terse. They do not read like a novel. The discourse analysts state that the biblical Author gives the *minimum* background needed to understand the story. Thus, a biblical story should be analyzed in three stages, background, main story, and follow-up / consequence.

The main plot of the cursor story is the act of cursing God. The other material in the mere three-verse story is background. The discourse analysts argue that this background must be the minimal background needed to understand why the cursor cursed God. Here is a bulleted list of the various points in the three verses:

- Cursor was son of a Jewish woman and an Egyptian man *in the Jewish community* (Rashi: He converted)
- There was a fight *in the camp*
- There is another figure *the Jewish man*. We are not told anything about this mysterious person but the article *the* seems to suggest something specific. Also, the verse reemphasizes a contrast: *the Jewish man and the son of the Jewish woman*
- The name of the cursor's mother is given and moreover she is given matrilineal description while patrilineal description is the norm in the bible. The mother's name has clear meaning in Hebrew and would be translated as *Hello-How-Are-You* daughter of *Wordy*.
- The tribe of the cursor is mentioned (actually the tribe of his mother): Dan.

The Baraithah, Torath Cohanim, using this minimal background constructs and fills in the details of the story shedding character light on why the cursor cursed God

- It is known that one cause of cursing is monetary or territorial dispute
- The keywords (*fought*) *in the camp* and the contrast, *Jewish man* vs. *cursor who was only Jewish by his mother* is emphasized
- Most probably then, the cursor wanted to live in the Dan-ite sector of the camp but was opposed by others there on the ground that he only had matrilineal descent. (Such disputes on the status of those with matrilineal dispute occur even today, e.g. whether sons of a Jewish women whose father did not convert should be buried in the Jewish portion of a military cemetery particularly if they died in battle, the supreme sacrifice of one's life for one's country)

We can either say that 1) the dispute gave rise to the curse or alternatively, 2) we can say that the cursor sought judicial relief and cursed after an adverse court finding (The actual wording of the Midrash).

Finally, the story background offers supportive items motivating the curse:

- The cursor went berserk
- The cursor made fun of Jewish laws (like the Temple bread-loaf laws)
- His mother was a chatterbox (Always talking and not carefully thinking about what they say)

AH.8 – No Need for *Plurality of Form*: We can now fully respond to Shapira's argument that Rashi and in fact the Midrash were being pluralistic as a matter of *method, for the sake of being pluralistic*, following the general trend in scholarship of his time.

Not so! We have just seen that all three opinions are based on Rashi method as advocated throughout these chapters. That is, there is no *controversy* but *complementarity*. Let us now restate the entire story using all three contributions with Rashi observations in brackets.

[After hearing about the Temple loaves, there was this incident] A person went berserk (went out of his mind). He was son of a Jewish woman and an Egyptian man in the midst of the Jewish people [the Egyptian had converted]. There was a dispute in the camp proper [about territorial rights between] someone who is patrilineally Jewish and this person who was maternally Jewish [Possibly they went to court and a decision adverse to the person with matrilineal descent was given]. The person with matrilineal descent cursed God. They brought him to Moses. His mother [had been a chatterbox] [always saying] HelloHowRU, following her mother Wordy [a chatterbox]. This all related to the tribe of Dan.

The story as just translated shows no plurality of opinion. It shows multiple *contributions*. There is absolutely no reason to assume any controversy. The Rashi rendition of the story also appears as *peshat*, that is, *the natural reading of the story in context*. *Peshat* does not require *proof*; it

requires that a native speaker, familiar with how people curse, would hear this story this way. It is stated discretely (the name of the cursor is never stated) though his mother is disgraced.

AH.9 – Geographical-Historical vs. Geographical-Grammatical Approach: We again emphasize that had we only used the geographic-historical approach of Shapira emphasizing the plural form and not discussing in depth method, we would never have seen the need to probe for the underlying reasons of the three statements in Rashi and the Midrash; we would have seen the opinions as controversy rather than as complementarity. And again we emphasize, this is not necessary: We can view Shapira's argument as an argument explaining Rashi form and supplementing the deep explanation based on the four exegetical pillars, the Rashi method.

Another example is given next week.