

CHAPTER AI: MULTIPLE EXPLANATIONS IN RASHI, PART II

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AI.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.

We analyzed this phenomena last week and came to the conclusion that

- Secular scholars including Shapira, used a geographical-historical approach. They asked what the surround cultures of Rashi’s time were doing. In fact, there was a Renaissance in Rashi’s time and non-Jewish scholars used a pluralistic approach containing several explanations. Since Rashi has multiple explanations we *conclude* that Rashi adopted this approach
- Rashiyomi argues that Rashi was more influenced by the analytical-historical tradition started by Ben-Asher who introduced Grammar, the correlation between form and meaning (especially in verbs, words denoting activity). This grammatical tradition was developed over two centuries. Rashi in fact argued that the analytic approach applied to correlation between meaning and i) words (verb conjugations, ii) sentence structure (grammatical syntactic function), iii) paragraph structure (consecutive ideas in the same paragraph), iv) and also to an entire narrative (what is called today discourse analysis).
- Rashiyomi further argues that the two approaches can be combined. We can say that the content (i.e. true meaning) of the Rashi comment is driven by analytic considerations but the *form* of the Rashi (multiple explanations) was influenced by the surrounding cultures of his time.
- Rashiyomi further argues that this synthesis of historical and analytical never happened. Therefore, the geographic-historical approach negatively influences the search for Rashi method; after all, if the plurality is *explained* (not just *presented*) by surrounding cultures, we need go no further. Thus, the historical approach detracts from devotion of needed energies to Rashi methods to explain the Rashi. As we showed last week, there was no plurality in the Rashi analyzed even though the *form* was that of multiple opinions and approaches!!! Rather, the Rashi analyzed last week showed there were three distinct items in the paragraph discussed to which we applied grammatical rules (one involving sentence form, one involving consecutive paragraphs, and one involving overall narrative

called today discourse analysis). Thus, the three opinions *supplement* each other and therefore there is no plurality of dissenting opinions.

Today we give a second example of plurality. It is very interesting that Shapira missed this example in this count of 157 instances of plurality. There is a biblical phrase *Avoid this prohibited behavior and instead Revere God*. There are five such verses. There are Rashi comments on only 4 of them. No single Rashi comment has multiple explanations. However, three of the Rashi comments use one explanation while the fourth uses a second explanation. Thus, we *appear* to have plurality, albeit in the aggregate of Rashi comments. Our solution this week will be different from the solution last week. We are not arguing for *complementary* comments; in fact, we can't.

AI.2 – The Biblical Texts, *Revere God*: The five verses, their content, and the Rashi comments on them are presented in the Table immediately below.

Table for Section AI.2: List of Five Verses with *Revere God*.

	Prohibition	Possible Subterfuge	Biblical Remedy
Lv19-14b	Don't give bad advice to a person who is unaware it is bad; don't stumble a blind person	For the bad advice, one can claim, "I really thought this was good advice and I was trying to help him."	<u>Any prohibition where only you know (in your heart) about the violation but no one can prove it</u> states "Revere God" who knows all thoughts
Lv19-32b	Show honor to the elderly [Don't sit in 'his' seat; don't directly 'contradict him'; stand before him.	One can claim, 'I was doing something else and didn't notice him	<u>Any prohibition where only you know (in your heart) about the violation but no one can prove it</u> states "Revere God" who knows all thoughts
Lv25-17a	Don't tease your fellow Jew [don't verbally tease; don't give improper advice]	One can say about the tease 'I was just joking; it was a light remark which I thought he/she would enjoy'. For the improper advice one can say 'I was trying to help not hurt'	<u>Any prohibition where only you know (in your heart) about the violation but no one can prove it</u> states "Revere God" who knows all thoughts
Lv25-36a	Do not take interest	Lender might argue, I	<i>Why does it say</i>

	on loans (usury).	am not taking interest, just compensating myself for the lost revenue(interest) I would obtain in a bank Lender might similarly argue 'I didn't charge him interest; I gave the money to my non-Jewish partner and he charged interest (so no Jew violated the interest laws)	<i>'Revere God' Because people find it hard to part with possible earned money through interest; they can argue 'I could have invested in a bank and received interest; I am not charging interest to the lender, just asking him to compensate me for my loss. I am not taking anything more'</i>
Lv25-43	Do not overwork a Jewish slave with burdensome work (who has sold himself to acquire money to meet poverty needs or to pay off a theft)	There is no Rashi. However, one can argue that the slave owner can argue 'I am not overworking him; just giving him routine maintenance that I need.'	No Rashi. But the arguments above that i) only the slave owner knows of the sin and ii) no one can prove it, applies.

The Table should be clear. We briefly summarize one or two examples. There is a prohibition against giving bad advice to people. Rashi's explains 'How do you prove the advice is bad; the presenter could argue that he/she was trying to help the person'. Any matter where i) the presenter alone knows his act was meant to cause harm and ii) no one else can prove it is given the conclusion *Revere God*, that is, *Revere God who knows your real inner thoughts*.

However, by the prohibition of taking interest on loans, Rashi gives a different explanation:

The Torah said *Revere God* because people are attached to money, and in their mind as long as they don't make a profit on the interest but just charge the borrower for lost interest the lender could have achieved say in a bank (or in a secure business deal) there is nothing wrong,

AI.3 – These and These are the words of living God. The opening statement of this section is a famous Talmudic dictum which appears to justify plurality. We will give a different explanation and thereby explain the plurality of the Rashi comments.

The learning of Torah, *Talmud Torah*, is not only a command to be aware of *final results* (what is permitted and what is prohibited), it is also a command to be involved in the *process* of

inference and learning. Both the process and the final outcome are *equally* fulfillments of the commandment to learn. Let us apply this to our situation.

Process: Suppose you are just starting out in learning these verses. *When you start out*, you don't have before you all five verses where it says *Revere God*. You only have one verse, the first verse you read which may be the verse prohibiting taking interest. *If* all you have is this one verse, then it is the most natural to link the natural desire of people for money with the 'caution' *Revere God*. That is, the formulation of this explanation of the connection of monetary avarice with the statement *Revere God* is a fulfillment of the commandment to learn.

Final Outcome: Now suppose you have all five verses before you. They don't all deal with money. Your statement that *Revere God* is linked to monetary avarice is no longer *consistent* with all 5 verses. You therefore have to come up with a second explanation. This explanation, that *Revere God* is stated when the violation of the prohibition cannot be proven by outsiders and is only known to the transgressor makes *sense* and is fully *consistent* with the five examples. Additionally, it is consistent with the various traditional sources such as the Torath Cohanim and the Talmud Bali. Thus, this explanation is the true one. However, the person who arrives at the true explanation is not superior in fulfillment of the command to learn to the person who arrived at the explanation based on one example. They are both, and equally, fulfilling the commandment to learn. In the Talmud's lingo, *these and these are the words of the living God*.

Before leaving this example, we make a historical note. Chasidus arose because of the massive abuse by scholars of unlearned Jews. For example, a Jew who claims that *Revere God* is linked to *monetary avarice* would be made fun of; they would be ridiculed for only citing one verse instead of five. The *scholar* might suggest that the Chasid is ignorant, not knowledgeable of all cases, and should not be making inferences. But this isn't true; the formation of inferences is an equal fulfillment of Talmud Torah to the scholar.

In short, the scholars at the time Chasidus arose did not respect *attempts* at learning as equal to *final outcomes*. Chasidus arose as a reaction to this abuse. However, Chasidus never dealt with the real problem which is the equality of *process* and *final outcome*. Even today, someone who comes up with an explanation based on a paucity of examples would be made fun of in some way even if only lightly; e.g. instead of complementing the person for a legitimate inference they would be told that their inference did not use all examples. I call this making fun (even though the criticizer simply said that not all examples were being used) because it belittles the *act* of learning which *equally* involves *process* and *final outcome*. Unfortunately, it is way beyond the scope of this newsletter to fully analyze Chasidus but I think it worthwhile to point out an important failing on the part of scholars that gave rise to it.

We note that the one verse on which there is no Rashi comment no longer bothers us. Yes, historians may be interested why Rashi omitted to comment (Perhaps because earlier in the same

Torah portion he already explained it). However, it is clear that this explanation that Rashi stated three times applies.

In summary, in the previous chapter *Rashi plurality* was really the listing of *complementary* explanations. There was no plurality. In this chapter, *Rashi plurality* addresses both the beginning student and the advanced scholar.

AI.4 – Contemporary Scholarship: We close this Chapter, similar to our analysis in the last Chapter, with a review of the approach of secular scholarship. In a very detailed book, *What's Divine about Divine Law*, the author, Christine Hayes, uses a geographic-historical approach to analyze these five verses. It turns out in ancient cultures, the cultures surrounding the Torah when it was written, there were three approaches to the relationship between deity and observer: i) The deity coerces the observer for lack of observance, ii) the deity shows the logic and universal benefits of the observance, iii) the deity *wills* and *decrees* that this law hold. (A fourth approach is that of the Talmud: iv) although the law is perfect, part of that perfection is the ability for the perfect Torah to change and adapt to new situations and times). These four approaches correspond to four conceptions of morality: something is moral if i) an authority coerces it, ii) an authority wills and decrees it, iii) the law has universal appeal, iv) the law is principle based and adaptive to the current times.

Thus, when this author found certain commandments with *Revere God*, the author glibly said, 'These commandments reflect the *coercive* conception of the deity' (pg. 22). No further analysis is given. Similar to what we showed last week, the geographic-historical explanation is considered *sufficient* to explain the text. The explanation given by Hayes should have been supplemented with the methods of this chapter; however, there was no need to; the surrounding culture explained *everything*. It would have been a simple matter for this author to use a CD-ROM, to look at verses with *Revere God*, and show that other factors entered. For example, the author could have said, in these verses where subterfuge is possible the Torah employs a morality conception based on coercion. It is this lack of focus – not asking the question *where does coercion apply* – that leads us to contrast the geographic-historical approach as holistic versus the grammatical-historical approach which is analytic.

Thus, both this week and last week, although the geographic-historical approach, can be combined with the analytic-historical approach, it isn't. It is rather (mis)used to justify a text without any encouragement of further research into Rashi methods.

We hope these two chapters have opened the serious student's eyes into how to best approach Rashi and explanations based on plural opinions for their own sake.