

CHAPTER AJ: THE 10 DOTTED BIBLICAL WORDS

ISSUES RELATED TO THE MEANING OF PESHAT

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AJ.1 – Overview: A fundamental goal of the Rashiyomi Newsletter is showing that all Rashi comments are *Peshat*. This is certainly not the mainstream view. Today we will review several issues connected with *Peshat*.

Peshat as used when discussing Rashi, generally refers to the *plain meaning of the text*. It is typically contrasted with *Derash* which unfortunately is frequently translated as *homilies and exegesis read into the text*. In Section AJ.2 we cite several definitions of *Peshat*. We will deal with definitions of *derash* in a later chapter. This citation of definitions is a little bit scholarly so certain readers may wish to skip Section AJ.2. It is perhaps enough to know that *peshat* is the *plain meaning of the text*. Nevertheless, I believe the collection of opinions will give the reader a good feel for this term.

In the remainder of this chapter starting with Section AJ.3, we focus on the inadequacy of two terms, *Peshat* and *Derash* (P&D) to capture the rich spectrum of interpretation. Thus the Rashiyomi Newsletter proposes to achieve the goal of showing that all Rashi comments are *peshat* by introducing a rich set of terms that can capture many different types of textual interpretation.

AJ.2 – Review of Definitions of Peshat by Others: Perhaps the most well-known definition of *Peshat* is that of Halivni; *peshat* is the meaning of a sentence based on its context and placement in a sequence of verses.

Note that Halivni basically follows Lowe's definition of *Peshat* as the plain meaning of Scripture, the contextual sense of a scriptural verse.

Hendel defined *Peshat* as the intuitive spontaneous reaction of the biblical native speaker to the statement of its verses; an effortless immediate reaction to the statement of a verse. In passing, Hendel in his important 1980 paper in *Tradition* gives the same definition for *Peshat* and *Derash* (He claims that *peshat* and *derash* are one and the same; true *derash* like true *peshat* is the spontaneous reaction to a verse); we will deal with *derash* in a later chapter.

Schwartz defines *Peshat* or characterizes Halivni's characterization as a means of expression that would have been comprehensible to average Hebrew speaking humans at the time of the writing; this definition is highly similar to Hendel's definition which he doesn't cite.

The Mizrachi, a famous commenter on Rashi, defines *Peshat* as a meaning close to the plain sense of the text.

Faur defines *peshat* as *sensus communis* the sense that the community of speakers uniformly sees in a verse.

Ahrend believes *Peshat* refers to the place where the river flows, that is, the flow of the scriptural passage.

Garfinkle and Lockshin (who reviewed Halivni's book) make some important observations: the definition of *peshat* as "what we all sense a text really means" is too elusive. This does lead to other definitions; unfortunately they go in the opposite direction and make *peshat* too complex; nevertheless we can cite them.

Garfinkle citing Greenstein defines *peshat* as acknowledging historical, linguistic, and literary contexts of a phrase, verse, or periscope.

Maori gives three criteria for an interpretation to be *peshat*: (1) whether the explanation (and what follows it) is logically coherent; (2) whether it fits the context; and (3) whether it is compatible with the grammar of the language. If something has all three criteria it is *peshat*; otherwise, it is *derash*.

Qamin gives more detail: *Peshat* is an explanation in accordance with the text's vocabulary, syntax, context, literary form and structure in their mutual relationships. Thus, an explanation according to the method of *peshat* takes into consideration all the linguistic elements, the way they are combined and interact, while giving each element a meaning within the complete structure

Both Qamin and Gelles, two scholars who did doctoral theses on Rashi in the 20th century suggest that there is no clear distinction between *Peshat* and *Derash*. Gelles speaks about Rashi as *partnering* P&D. Qamin speaks about Rashi as creating an amalgam of P&D with the *derash* begin close to the meaning of the text. As noted earlier we will deal with *derash* in a later chapter. We agree with Qamin and Gelles; we build on them by providing a detailed and richer vocabulary to discuss P&D. In fact, in this chapter we already introduce certain distinctions which will clarify the spectrum of P&D. They however did not provide details on the spectrum and amalgam of P&D.

Garfinkle points out that no one believes that *peshat* is the literal meaning of a text since every language has idioms and *by definition* an idiom is a collection of words whose meaning is different than the literal translation. Interestingly, Grossman in his book, *Rashi*, mistakenly cites Qamin as believing *Peshat* is the literal meaning of the text; however, this is not what she said.

Finally several scholars deal with *peshat* as used in the *Talmud* versus *peshat* as used by Rashi and later scholars. Several people think *peshat* and *derash* had different meanings in the Talmud then as used by Rashi. Since our goal is not historical, we will therefore confine ourselves to opinions on Rashi's use of the term.

It might seem at this point that I should quote the citations from Rashi that each of the above scholars cited and answer them. Gelles makes the interesting point that Rashi in over 900 places states that he is *giving the Peshat* (without actually defining it).

The approach of Rashiyomi will be different to citation of quotes and their interpretation. We focus first on verse examples since they make us aware of needed underlying concepts. Only *after* we have a rich enough vocabulary can we then examine citations. Our vocabulary is simply not rich enough at this point to show how to interpret Rashi passages with *Peshat*.

AJ.3 – Peshat Depends on What We the Observer Thinks a Text Means: We open this section with a summary of a beautiful point made by Frima-Kensky. She pointed out that the days when we could speak about what the text really means, the objective meaning of a text, are gone. Everyone today acknowledges that the reader or observer interacts with the text. Therefore we cannot speak about what the *Peshat* of the text is; rather we must speak about the *peshat* of the text as perceived by us the readers.

The following example very powerfully illustrates this point. The following biblical text and Rashi are talking about the flood. Recall a flood came in Noah's lifetime and wiped out all life. Only Noah and the creatures with him in his ark survived.

Biblical Text: Gen. 7:23 All living things...on the earth were erased; only (Ach) Noah and those with him in the ark remained

Rashi: The *peshat* is *only Noah* survived. However, the Midrash Aggadah [states:] He [Noah] was moaning and dripping blood from dealing with all the wildlife. And there are alternative opinions that Noah delayed the lion's meal, who smote him.

To explain the Midrash, we note that the word *ach*, which Rashi initially says means *only*, indicates limitation. So *Noah* himself was limited: Either because a lion smote him (loss of flesh) or because of dripping blood from overwork.

Before proceeding, we emphasize how powerful the argument is that *Peshat is the plain meaning of the text; Midrash is a fanciful homily read into the text*. This certainly *appears* to be what is happening here. It certainly *appears* that Rashi is deviating from *Peshat*, plain meaning, and engaging in *Derash*, homily and fancy. Indeed, how can anyone claim that the text is talking about a lion? However, this appearance is based on how we the reader perceive the text.

Contrastively, we now show (startingly) that the Midrash *is* the real plain meaning and the what Rashi calls *peshat* is a misreading of the text.

AJ.4 – Frima-Kensky' Warning – The Observer can't be objective: Hendel in two articles shows that the Hebrew word *ach* means *most of*. When used adverbially it means *most of the time*, that is, *usually* or *probably*. We will examine the idea that *ach* means *most of* in a future chapter. We will review the four dozen occurrences of *ach* in the Torah. For the moment let us assume this translation as correct. Here is how I (the person who translated *ach* as *most of*) reads the biblical text and Rashi.

Biblical Text: Gen. 7:23 All living things...on the earth were erased; *most of* (Ach) Noah and those with him in the ark remained

Rashi: The *peshat* is *only Noah*. However, the Midrash Aggadah [states:] He [Noah] was moaning and dripping blood from dealing with all the wildlife. And there are alternative opinions that Noah delayed the lion's meal, who smote him.

Notice how the translation *most of Noah remained in the Ark* immediately and naturally (*flow of words in context, spontaneous reaction, immediate reaction*) suggests that part of Noah was lost. The two opinions brought down – loss of weight/blood from overwork and loss of limb from a lion smite – now make sense; in fact. They are in fact consistent with *the plain sense of the text, the peshat*, which says that *most of Noah* remained in the Ark, not all of him!

To summarize, our conception of what Rashi means by *peshat and derash* heavily and strongly depends on how we ourselves read the text.

A second point about *peshat* emerges from this example. Grossman cites Rashi on Is 26:11 which explains that a verse must follow i) rule of grammar and ii) rules of sentence sequence (Context). Grossman erroneously generalizes this to Rashi's definition of *Peshat*: An interpretation following rules of grammar and context.

Contrastively, we did not use *grammar* or *sequence of verses* to arrive at the *peshat* of Gen. 7:23. We rather used the nuances of a word. This example suggests that to understand *peshat* we must first carefully identify Rashi *methods*; these methods must clearly include more than *grammar* and *verse sequence*.

To close this example we review what *P&D* mean in this example:

Peshat in this single example, Gen. 7:23, means *an overly simplistic reading* of the text, the reading of the *simple* reader (*pashut*). The simple reader misinterprets *ach* as meaning *only* when in fact it really means *most of*.

Derash in this example indeed indicates the *spontaneous reaction of a native speaker* to a verse. If you told the person on the street, "Did you hear: The flood destroyed the world but *most of Noah* remained." The spontaneous and intuitive reaction would be, "Most of? Well what didn't remain?"

At this point we point out a subtlety in Hendel's definition of *peshat* as the *spontaneous* reaction to a verse. *Spontaneity* implies a metric, an evaluation method: *How long before the average person realizes that most of implies something is missing*. If the realization happens immediately then this must be the *peshat*. We will return to this Rashi in Section AJ.10 which the reader may wish to read now.

AJ.5 – Puns Can Be Peshat: Consider the following secular example. A man named Abe is dating a woman named Rose. On a dinner date Abe says:

Pass me the Roisens

Recalling that *peshat* is the natural, spontaneous meaning of a verse in context, we here agree that Abe is using the vehicle of the *pun*, to make a pass at Rose. By mispronouncing *raisins* as

Roisen Abe is indicating that he not only wants Rose to pass the Raisins, but wants Rose to pass herself to Abe.

Notice how this example fully exploits the various definitions of *Peshat* given above. The text doesn't say that Abe made a pass but the natural interpretation *in context* is that that is what he asked. In passing, there is a school of secular scholars who see puns as just another literary tool subject to its own grammatical rules.

We emphasize that one definition of *derash* is that *it carefully reads the verse and injects multiple meanings having nothing to do with the entire verse; such an approach is based on the belief in the Divine nature of the law*. This definition fails and fails miserably. Everyone who hears this sentence understands that Abe was making a pass. No one claims that Abe's sentence was said prophetically (or under any conditions of holiness!). This example, points to the approach of Rashi: Examples first; discussion of texts second. This example proves that a sentence can have two meanings, and both are *peshat* where *peshat* is defined as *the natural flow of the verse, meaning in context, the spontaneous reaction to the verse, the sense of the community on this verse, how the average speaker reacts to a verse*.

AJ.6 – A Midrash Resembling the Roisen Example: The book of Esther opens with the majestic 6-month wine party that King Achashverosh gave.

Esther 1:10-11 On the 7th day (of the party) when the King's heart was *good with wine*, he commanded those who serve him to bring Vashti the Queen before the King in royal crown so that the nations and princes could see her beauty because she was indeed very good looking.

Midrash Esther Rabbah: He in fact ordered her to appear naked.

The aftermath was that she refused, the King got angry (for disobeying) and she was removed from office.

The point I wish to make here is that this Midrash is not fundamentally different to the secular Roisen midrash we brought in the last section. True, the text doesn't say he ordered her naked. But *in context, the 7 days of wine, the emphasis on showing off his wife's beauty naturally suggests a strip act*.

This example highlights that the *peshat, plain meaning*, need not be in the text. As long as it is the natural way we hear the text, it is *peshat*.

Another point to emphasize: This interpretation is *peshat* to *experts in the field*. Most adults have expertise in intimacy and wine and *to them* the Midrashic reading is *natural, the flow of the text, and in context*. Contrastively, a young child, who lacks adult experiences and emotions might question how the Midrash arrived at its conclusion.

We finally mention a very important point about Midrashic form. The actual midrash says that there was discussion that Vashti should come naked. I have changed this to a request for a strip act. Is this justified on my part? Does it disagree with the Midrash? (Is this an example where

Frima-Kensky would reprimand me for bringing my own reader conceptions of wine parties to distort the Midrash?)

My feeling throughout Rashiomi, is that just as we read the text and Rashi using literary principles of *peshat*, so too we read the Midrash itself through the principles it used. In this case the principle used is the *natural reading of the context (order to bring Vashti) in the context of 7 days of drinking wine and her refusal*. From the text, there is no way to prove whether Achashverosh wanted her naked or wanted her to do a strip act. It would be a mistake to read too much into the Midrash: Rather, we read the Midrash through the lens of *in context* and both interpretations (naked, strip act) are consistent with it.

AJ.7 – A Simple Secular Example of Tone: Jacob wants to play ball (on a weekday! After school) with his friends. Consider the following two versions of a dialogue between Jacob and his father.

Version I

Jacob: Can I play ball after school with my friends?

Father: No

Version II

Jacob: Can I play ball after school with my friends?

Father: **No!**

Although the words used in both versions are identical, they clearly have different interpretations. The use of bold, italics, and an exclamation point in the second version point to a non-verbal emphasis. We might call this an *emphatic no*.

True: We don't know *why* there is emphasis: i) Could it be that Jacob had been asking this repeatedly? ii) Could it be that he previously was allowed to play, but now that his grades are suffering his parents said he can't. Although we don't know the reason for the emphasis we do know the fact of emphasis. Had there been a reading of the text versus just a written text, this would be even clearer.

We therefore say that the *peshat* of Version II, is that there is an emphatic no. This idea, an emphasis that is i) neither verbal ii) nor specified or clear is introduced by Hendel in an article Biblical Formatting, in which he argues that *non-specific emphasis* can be a transparent part of the meaning of the text even if we aren't fully aware of the reasons and details for the emphasis and even if the emphasis is indicated by non-verbal means. Let us next examine a biblical example of non-verbal nonspecific emphasis.

AJ.8 – The 10 Dot Phenomena: There are 10 biblical verses where words have dots on them. They are listed in several places such as i) The Mesorah, ii) Avoth DeRabbi Nathan, iii) Pirke Rabbi Eliezer, iv) Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah 3:13. Several Talmudic tractates mention the dotting as does the Sifrey. According to the Maharzu most sources consider this part of the original biblical text at Sinai. The Bamidbar Rabbah suggests that Ezra the Scribe introduced

them (While not changing the words of the biblical text nor their pronunciation, he added dots on top of them).

The general interpretive approach is to view these dots as non-verbal non-specific emphasis. The dots function similar to the modern strikeout. Using this idea, we now read the following biblical text (using strikeout instead of dots) and the Rashi comment (following the Midrash Rabbah and Talmud)

Numbers 3:14,15,16,39 God said to Moses at Mount Sinai to say over. Census the Levites by ancestry and family....Moses censused them according to the word of God as commanded...The total census of the Levites that Moses ~~and Aaron~~ censused (singular verb in Hebrew) by family by the word of God all males above 1 month, was 22,000.

Rashi: The word Aaron is dotted (crossed out) to indicate that [although he counted] he himself was not counted among the Levites

Some supporting comments to the Rashi: Notice how i) the command, and ii) the obeying the command both request Moses (but not Aaron) to census. Also, Hebrew has singular and plural verbs. Although the subject is plural (Moses and Aaron) the Hebrew verb used is singular (*vayifqod* not *vayifqedu*). Rashi clarifies that although Aaron performed the census with Moses (as is explicitly mentioned in the Chapter 1 and 2 census) he himself was not counted (among the Levites) and indeed we find that his children were appointed tribal governors over the Levites but not him. In the language of the written text he was stricken out (dotted) from the census.

We have already previously discussed the *peshat* nature of this passage. The idea of some limitation *is* the natural reading of the text in context, but the reading involves nonverbal cues. In modern writing, bold, italics, underline, strikeout, and bullets are used to indicate non-verbal, non-specific meaning while in biblical Hebrew alternative methods (in this case dots) are used. It is clear, as shown in the previous section, that we can't just ignore these non-verbal, non-specific cues. True, we may not know what the point of the emphasis is, but we do know it is there. It is in this very precise sense that we can say that the *peshat* of the verse is a non-verbal, non-specific, limiting emphasis. Rashi gives one possible approach to this limitation (just as the Midrash suggested that the King wanted Vashti to appear naked vs. a strip act). all we are certain of is that the dots indicate a limiting non-verbal nonspecific emphasis. Rashi simply gives one possible interpretation. Rashi would claim that the *peshat* is the fact of non-specific limitation, not the particular interpretation he gave.

Hendel's article (available here, [Biblical Formatting](#)) traces the use of non-specific nonverbal emphasis. W

AJ.9 – Summary: We started the chapter with a statement that

Peshat is the spontaneous, natural flow of a text in context.

Based on the preceding sections we now augment this definition

Peshat is the spontaneous, natural flow of a text in context, as heard by an expert in the field, even if this natural flow is only hinted at with innuendoes and puns, and even if this

natural flow is non-verbal, non-specific, general emphasis. Additionally, what is Peshat and what is Midrash depends heavily on how we the reader read the text; the tools of grammar and sentence sequence are two important tools but there are others.

In the next few chapters we will clarify further the language and terminology with which we will discuss *peshat*. Only after this language is introduced, can we begin to fully address the citations that others have brought to prove their point.

AJ.10 – The *HowPeshat*: Although it is good literary practice not to coin terms, I need a term to deal with one frequent aspect of many Rashis that is neither *peshat* nor *derash*.

Recall the *most of Noah* Rashi from Section AJ.4. There, two opinions were brought on why *most of Noah* was left: i) He suffered blood (and weight loss) from the cold ark conditions and the continuous maintenance, ii) he suffered a blow from a lion who was brought his meal late.

How do we deal with these two opinions? Are they *peshat*? Are they *derash*? If not, what are they?

I suggest that these explanations are explanation of *how* the *Peshat* happened. That is the Peshat is that *most of Noah* was left in the ark; but we don't know how; we don't know what was missing. At this point, each scholar can speculate on what *might* have happened. I think it is a mistake to view these alternatives as controversy. They are rather *speculations*; perhaps a combination of them, perhaps a 3rd possibility, is what really happened. We will call these explanations, often brought by Rashi, as *howPeshhat* to emphasis that they are not coming out of nowhere, they are not definitive (but rather speculation), but they do enrich our understanding of the Biblical text.