

# CHAPTER AK: THE TEMPLE GIFT SYMBOLISM

## WHAT DOES DERASH MEAN?

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**AK.1 – Overview:** Throughout Rashiyomi we refer to the Tabernacle in the desert as the Desert Temple to emphasize that it was the first Temple and functioned like a Temple. The day the Temple was completed was a very joyous occasion. Each of the tribal governors brought a gift expressing the intense emotions of the moment. Rashi analyzed the symbolism of these gifts.

This naturally leads us to a broader topic. Is *symbolism*, *peshat*, the spontaneous natural reaction to a text. Is the symbolism, *derash*? There is even one commentary that advocated that *peshat* and *derash* are the same when it comes to symbolism. More fundamentally, we can simply ask, “How should we perceive symbolism?”

**AK.2 – Is Symbolism Common in Rashi?** It might be thought that symbolism doesn’t occur that often in Rashi and hence this is a side-topic. One can even point to the few passages where Rashi gives elaborate symbolic interpretation such as by the Temple consecration (Nu7), by the Red Heifer (Nu19), and by Tzitzith (Nu15).

But in fact, symbolism occurs throughout the Rashi commentary on the Bible. Here are some examples of symbolic interpretation: 1) the interpretation of dreams such as those of the butler and chef dreams in Genesis 40, 2) the interpretation of poetry such as Jacob’s blessings (Gn49), Moses’ Farewell song (Dt32), and Moses’ blessings (Dt33). Furthermore, over 20% of the Torah deals with the Temple and the Temple offerings, and scattered throughout these passages are symbolic interpretations brought by Rashi. Thus, in fact, symbolic interpretation is very common; in fact, we list symbolism as one of the four major Rashi pillars. So we can’t avoid this issue.

**AK.3 – Should We Study Symbolism:** The study of symbolism is complicated by the fact that the Grecian Jews (notably Philo) introduced symbolic analysis and this had a danger of discouraging performance. Thus the reaction was, “You perform commandments because it is God’s will, not because it symbolizes something.” Indeed, if for example, you eat Kosher to symbolize avoiding personalities associated with animals, for example pigs, (Ramban’s approach on Lev. 11), then all that is important is the *idea* of avoiding behaving like a pig; the abstention from eating ham is *only* a symbol. Indeed, the idea among those influenced by Grecian philosophy seemed to be, that rational thought is important and anything symbolic *only has importance for the rational concept involved but not for the performance per se*. In fact, the Rambam’s treatment of offerings, in his Guide to the Perplexed was historically motivated by the fact that intelligent rational Grecian Jews were turned off by the offerings and were leaving Judaism.

We have already answered this in our discussion of *peshat*. Consider for example two husbands who come home to their wives on their seventh anniversary:

I: One husband hands his wife a bouquet of 7 crimson roses and says, “Happy Anniversary”

II: Another husband remarks that he saw a bouquet of seven crimson roses (on sale) and thought it symbolized nicely their 7 years of marriage. He however, did not purchase anything and did not give his wife anything.

We note several things about these examples. First, the *spontaneous immediate* reaction to seeing a husband give a bouquet of seven crimson-red roses and saying, “Happy Anniversary” is that “This is a symbolic gift; the 7 roses correspond to the 7 years of marriage and the redness symbolizes intimacy.” This reaction is something spontaneous and instantaneous, which is the criteria we gave for a *peshat* interpretation.

Second, clearly, in case II, the wife will feel hurt that her husband was so cheap that he couldn’t buy a bouquet of roses as a symbolic gesture on their anniversary. The contrast in these two examples points to the fact that use of actual physical symbols is an important component in a healthy emotional relationship. The same is true of our relationship with God (Cf. Malachai Chapter 3). Furthermore, a relationship is deepened when the two parties understand the inner meaning of the symbolic fact. While it may be historically true that Grecian-influenced Jews left Judaism in favor of Grecian rational philosophy, they were in fact being quite irrational. If one wants a deep emotional relationship, whether with a fellow human or God, actual physical symbols must be both used and understood.

**AK.4 – Sign, Symbol, and Parable:** In order to intelligently discuss symbolism we must distinguish the three terms, *sign*, *symbol*, and *parable*.

Sign: A stop sign for example is not a symbol. It is designated to indicate stopping but there is no relationship between the white on red color or the octagonal shape and the concept of stopping. In other words, it is a sign, a declared relationship rather than a natural symbol.

Symbol: Contrastively, the crimson redness of the rose is symbolic of a marriage. Redness is a color uniquely associated with intimacy and hence by its form symbolizes an intimate relationship. Following R. Hirsch, a sign is a symbol, if the sign relates to the symbol in one of four ways: i) form, ii) function, iii) linguistic association in the underlying language or iv) cultural association in the underlying culture. Merely declaring a relationship however creates a sign not a symbol.

Hirsch also cautions us against creating symbolic interpretations unless we are asked to. We are asked to if one of three situations happens: 1) an object or service is declared as symbolic (for example Shabbath or Tefillin), 2) an object or service is declared to have the purpose of reminding us of some other object or service (for example, Tzitzith is never called a symbol, but we are explicitly told to wear them *in order to remind ourselves* of God’s commandments.) 3) The object or service uses known symbolic items on an occasion with intense emotional impact. For example, it is required to interpret the act of the husband giving his wife roses because it happens on their anniversary an occasion of intense emotional importance. Hirsch says that most of the offering procedures which deal with intense emotional events – joy, satisfaction, guilt, a desire to elevate oneself, the expiation of sin – fall into this category.

Hirsch further argues that once it is established that an act or service is symbolic, and only once it is so established, should we apply the four methods, i)-iv), of symbolic interpretation. We should not however, simply interpret the symbol capriciously.

Parable: Finally, a parable is a story based on symbolic themes where the symbolic meaning of the story components recur in an organized manner. The key approach to interpreting a parable is identification of the theme, which then generates interpretation of the entire story. Hirsch lays down this very important principle on Gn41 when dealing with the wine and chef butler's dreams: "The theme here is that numbers symbolize days; and the 3 vines are symbolic of 3 days similarly the 3 baskets are symbolic of 3 days. Once this theme is established: "In 3 days (3 vines) you will make wine again and pour it into Pharaoh's cup. " The entire interpretation follows naturally from the theme.

Examples of biblical chapters built on parables are Ecclesiastes 12, Psalm 80:9-18, Isaiah 5:1-7, or the very famous parable reprimand of Prophet Gad to King David when he murdered someone's husband took the person's wife, 2Sam12. This again reinforces the idea that symbolism and parables occur throughout the bible; they can't be ignored and must be dealt with.

**AK.5 – The Underlying Biblical Passage:** Remarkably, the gifts of all tribal governors were identical and the Bible repeats the same description by each gift. These may all be found in Nu7. We cite here the underlying biblical passage.

- I. His offering was
- II. one silver bowl, 130 in weight
- III. A unique throwing pan of gold, 70-coin weight in holy-coin weight
- IV. Both filled with flour mixed with oil for a restful (Minchah) offering
- V. A unique golden ladle, 10-gold weight, filled with incense.
- VI. A unique oxen, a unique ram, and a unique lamb for an elevation offering
- VII. A unique goat for a sin-offering
- VIII. For a peace feast, two oxen
- IX. 5 Rams, 5 male-goats, and 5 lambs,

**AK.6 – The Underlying Rashi:** We now cite the Rashi interpretation (sometimes in my own paraphrase) by repeating the list. To assist the reader in interpreting this passage we mention the parable theme governing it:

Human-prophetic history, started with Adam, continued to Moses, and climaxed with the Temple which will give all people, the masses, the right to be prophets and make the Jewish nation into a kingdom of priests (prophets) and a holy (prophetic) nation (Ex19-05)

With this theme let us interpret the biblical passage. Interpretations are in blue italics.

- I. His offering was  
*An expression of gratitude on building the Temple where prophecy would reach out to all individuals not just leaders*
- II. one silver bowl, 130 in weight  
*The first prophet was Adam. He left his wife, Eve, and lived with a non-prophetic woman for a long time, but finally returned to Eve at 130 which marks the event of his return to prophecy. Here, ordinary people are compared to copper, while Adam and other prophets are compared to silver*
- III. A unique silver throwing pan of gold, 70-coin weight in holy-coin weight  
*A reference to the next great prophet, Noah (also "silver"), who introduced diversity into the world and the theme of 70 distinct world nations (Gn11)*
- IV. Both filled with flour mixed with oil for a restful (Minchah) offering  
*Noah's name literally means "restful"; Both Adam and Noah brought rest and peace to the world by using prophecy to build up the world over its corruption*
- V. A unique golden ladle, 10-gold weight, filled with incense.  
*If non-prophets are copper, and Adam/Noah are silver, then Moses is golden. Moses is known for giving the 10 commandments which is the first major outreach to an entire nation prophetically. The incense is a perfume offering and connotes satisfaction. It is also a symbol of the mystery of prophecy (Lv16)*
- VI. A unique oxen, a unique ram, and a unique lamb for an elevation offering  
*The first part of the symbolic parable dealt with the progression of history from silver Adam, to silver Noah, to Golden Moses who sought to make an entire nation prophetic. We now review from a different perspective: leaders vs. the people. The patriarchs and Joseph were great leaders but did not try to give prophecy to all. Jacob is known as the shepherd, the father of the Jewish people, who are compared to Sheep. Isaac led two great nations, the Arabs (Esau who eventually repented and married and joined Ishmael the Arabs)) and Jews both of which are compared to Sheep. Hence, he is the ram, the leader of these nations. Abraham although not teaching prophecy to the masses was like an Ox in God's field; he was the father of many nations constantly plowing human soil to make it fertile, to develop the potential of each person. Abraham is known for his kindness for helping each individual to achieve.*
- VII. A unique goat for a sin-offering  
*Joseph although not called a prophet was also a leader type. He did not try and convert his brothers to prophecy but did work (like Abraham) like an ox to better all people.*
- VIII. For a peace feast, two oxen  
*We now return to the Temple consecration. We still have prophetic leaders such as Moses and Aaron. But Moses used prophecy to educate the masses; Aaron used prophecy to rectify marriages a prerequisite for prophecy.*
- IX. 5 Rams, 5 male-goats, and 5 lambs,

*The rams, male-goats, and lambs symbolize the Jewish people who have leaders (Rams), and herd animals (goats and lambs). Unlike previous generations when the leader was all-important – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph – now the individual is important each one armed with the five books of Moses which are a blueprint for entering the prophetic state.*

**AK.7 – What Symbolic Themes are used in Rashi’s interpretation:** The interpretation I presented is a bit overwhelming. To appreciate the *peshat* we should summarize the symbols used. Then we can discuss to what extent the above is *peshat*. The blatant symbols used include

70 – 70 nations

10 – 10 commandments

5 – 5 Chumashim

Incense – *Symbol of prophecy* (e.g. Is 6, Lv16)

Rest offering – a pun on *Noah’s name* which also means restful

Sheep, goats – *the Jewish people* (a commonly used motif in the bible)

Rams – *Leaders* of the sheep

These symbols are common and known to biblical students. Having seen these more blatant symbols, Rashi may have then seen the symbolic motif of the entire passage, the parable theme, as the development of human prophecy. Most of the other symbols then follows.

For example, it is not immediately obvious what 130 means; however, *given* the other symbols, we can search the bible and find 130 as a critical year for Adam. In fact, 130 does not occur too often at all in the entire bible and the only other occurrence in Genesis is the age of Jacob when he met Pharaoh and reunited with his family.

Similarly, the idea that ox, ram, lamb corresponds to the patriarchs is also not obvious. The position here is that once the major aspects of the parables are identified we can then “fit in” the rest.

In summary, the basic idea is that a review of the *obvious* symbols coupled with a discovery of the parable theme of *prophecy for the masses* is the first step in interpreting this symbol. After that, it is routine to look up the other items and fit them in.

**AK.8 – The Actual Rashi text:** The above explanation is mostly consistent with the actual Rashi text. However, Rashi does provide some *gematrioth* associations based on the sums of numerical positions of the Hebrew letters of the underlying biblical words. We have left out mention of these *gematrioth*. We will show in a later chapter that Rashi never really believed that explanations of biblical texts come from *gematrioth*. Rather, he used the *gematrioth* as a vehicle to help the reader remember his explanations.

**AK.9 – But is this Peshat?** A basic criterion of *peshat* is spontaneous reaction. The symbolic interpretation given does not seem spontaneous. One needs to do work to arrive at it. Is it really Peshat? To answer this question will require clarifying our criteria for Peshat. To do so we first present another example using a thematic symbolic interpretation; however, this example is not *Peshat*. This will also give us an opportunity to clarify the term *derash*.

## AK.10 – Isaac’s blessings to Jacob (Gn27-28:29):

Biblical Text:

God will give you from the dew of heaven  
And from the plumpest of the ground  
And much grain  
and wine.

Although Rashi does not adopt this explanation, the Sifrey in Haazinu offers a thematic parable interpretation, with the parable theme *being blessed with learning*. The Sifrey’s interpretation is presented below in the blue text.

Interpretation of Sifrey Haazinu

God will give you from the dew of heaven – *Written Torah* [Torah came from heaven]  
And from the plumpest of the ground – *Mishnah, legal oral law* [Fat with laws]  
And much grain- *Talmudic analysis* [Like grain that is heavily processed for use]  
and wine – *Agaddah, the story part of the Talmud*; [stories are like wine, punchy & cute]

As can be seen the theme *learning* is partitioned into the four major branches of Jewish learning: i) Written Torah, ii) Oral Torah (Mishnah), iii) Talmud, iv) Aggadah. These themes are linked to the verse via keywords: i) Heaven clearly corresponds to the written Torah which came from Heaven, iv) wine clearly corresponds to the stories which bring happiness like wine; the other two correspondences are not immediately obvious but follow rather smoothly since (iii) Talmudic analysis would correspond to grain, something not edible except through much preparation, and ii) the Mishnah, oral law, has many more laws than the written Torah and hence corresponds to plumpness.

In making these associations we follow the R. Hirsch criteria of using function and form. For example, Agaddah (stories) and wine both function by making one happy. Torah and dew resemble in form since they both come from heaven.

**AK.11 – *Peshat* vs. *Derash*:** Notice how Isaac’s blessing and the prince gifts are both interpreted using the same method, thematic symbolic interpretation, the parable. We now argue that the Prince gifts are *peshat* while the *Isaac blessing* is not. The defense of this position will further clarify our criteria for *peshat* and *derash* and in fact further clarify our understanding of these terms.

The reason the *Isaac Blessing* interpretation is not *Peshat* is because a fundamental principle of symbolic interpretation is that one should only interpret passages symbolically if one is *required* to so interpret. Requirement is indicated in the text by either i) explicit declaration of something as a symbol, ii) explicit declaration of something as meant to remind one of something else, or iii) use of symbolic items connected with deep emotional events. None of these three criteria are present here. While the blessing may have been an important emotional moment, the items in the blessing are clearly intended as material gifts (similar to the blessing to Esau in Gn27-39:40); furthermore, the items involved *dew, plump items, grain, wine* are not standard symbols for Torah.

Thus an important requirement for symbolic interpretation is absent and hence the Isaac-blessing interpretation must be rejected as not *Peshat*.

But if it is not *Peshat*, what is it? We here begin to introduce the understanding of *derash*.

*Derash* refers to process, the process of applying principles to verses  
*Peshat* refers to outcome, the evaluation of a particular verse interpretation

Using this process-outcome distinction we can understand that

The symbolic interpretation of the *Isaac-blessing* passage is a correct application of some principles of the *derash process*, but

In this particular case, *the derash outcome*, the resulting interpretation is not *peshat*, because one requirement of the *derash process* has not been satisfied.

By contrast the application of the *derash process*, thematic symbolic interpretation, to the Prince-Gift passage, is a correct (and complete) application of the *derash-process* and is therefore also *Peshat*.

We will have more to say in later chapters. For the moment, we notice that since *derash* is *process*, and *peshat* is *outcome*, any particular instance of *derash* may or may not agree with the *peshat* and may or may not be true. This is very important; unfortunately, because this process-outcome distinction was not fully grasped, when other scholars noticed that some sources say *derash* is *peshat* while other sources say they are different, they came to the erroneous conclusion that there is controversy between people, places and times (the geographical-historical approach). Had they used the historical analytic approach, these scholars would have realized that the status of a *derash outcome* does not depend on people and place but rather on the *derash-process* used.

**AK.12 – Non Spontaneous Peshat?:** We have left to clarify one item. If the criteria for *peshat* is immediate spontaneity, then it would appear that the prince-gift passage interpretation is not *peshat*.

To clarify this, recall that the actual definition of *peshat* is that it is the spontaneous reaction of a *native speaker who is familiar with the subject area*. For example, we recall (from the previous chapter) that adults, who are experts in intimacy and drunkenness, could instantly recognize a request from a man who had been drinking for 7 days for his wife to appear and show her beauty (with subsequent removal of his wife from office for refusing), that there was most probably a request for some strip event. This is something spontaneous and instantaneous on the part of most adults. However, a child would not have such spontaneity because a child is not an expert.

This applies to the *prince-gift* passage. First, the native speaker be familiar with the use of animal imagery to describe the Jews and leaders. Literally dozens of times throughout the bible, the leaders of the land are the rams and oxen while the populace are the sheep of the nation. If this imagery is not spontaneous to you. then like the child with the request for display of beauty, you would not see the prince-gift interpretation as obvious. In other words, spontaneity is only present in native speakers imbued with the biblical culture.

We can add to this that certain biblical numbers are well known: The 10 commandments, the 70 nations, etc. What I am claiming is that someone who spoke the language and used the metaphors would be able to respond to this passage instantly.

On a deeper level, the theme of this passage is prophecy. This again is an emotional issue. If you are an adult you are empathic to a drunk's request for a display of beauty; if you are not an adult you are not so empathic. *Peshat* is determined by those with empathy for the issues; to *them* it is spontaneous.

Returning to the prince gifts: The people seeing these symbols, the Jews of the desert, yearned for prophecy and were students of prophetic history. They were well aware that their freedom from Egyptian slavery was driven by their prophetic encounter with God. How exciting it must have been for the Jewish nation to be the first instance of national prophecy. With this empathic awareness the symbolic-parable theme and its application does not make sense.



In such a case, all we can do is apply *derash-process* to show how those familiar with animal imagery and prophecy would respond. That is, in this case, the *derash* points to a spontaneous response in certain groups of people.