

CHAPTER AL: NUANCES and FIGURES OF SPEECH

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REQUEST FOR QUESTIONS: *The Rashi's covered in this issue show how to approach Rashis with Gematrias (association of words whose numerical values are the same (the numerical value of a word is the sum of the positions of its letters in the alphabet). This was in fact motivated by a reader comment (a thank you) to my explanation of the gematrias in Rashis in last weeks' parshah.*

Questions come and go in cycles on Rashiyomi. If you have any question on any Rashi please feel free to email it to Rashiyomi@Gmail.Com. (All comments will be acknowledged anonymously unless the contributor wants attribution by their first name, full name, or affiliations.)

ISRAEL – DISAPORA: *Since for the next few weeks the weekly Torah portion in Israel and US (diaspora) are different, issues will cite Rashis from each parshah and the web site will have double listings.*

AL.1 – Overview: The Rashi comments selected for this week's issue illustrate the following very important points that any serious student of Rashi should master since these themes recur frequently:

- **Gematrias:** We show how to deal with Rashi comments that *seem* to be based on numerical games with letter positions of words. We explain that Rashi never intended these numerical games to be *the reason* for the derivation; rather they are cute punchy mnemonics to facilitate a reader remembering the comment.
- **Nuances, Figures of Speech, hyponymy:** An illustration may be more helpful than an abstract explanation. Suppose (in English) you were telling a story about a person: You could choose among several competing words to describe 'person': *humans, gentlemen (ladies), men (women), the masses*. In certain sentences you could use any of these terms with the same effect. In other sentences, the choice of word could imply specific nuances: For example, *gentlemen/ladies* denote people of refined character; *the masses* by contrast could connote a wide variety of people some with inferior character.

This choice of competing words and the consequent nuances also affects interpretation of biblical texts. The interpretation of nuances of selected biblical words is compounded by the fact that we are not native biblical speakers. We do not hear the biblical Hebrew words the same way we hear the English words. The competing words for a concept may be heard *by us* as synonymous rather than nuanced paintings of different aspects of the whole. Rashi may not appear to be describing something spontaneous in a native speaker; but he is. Proper reading of Rashi requires empathy with the native speaker.

- **Two Rashi problems:** Very often readers of Rashi mistakenly interpret a Rashi comment as coming from say word W when in fact the comment was driven by word V. This has led to many improper criticisms of Rashi: e.g. A reader may critique that *Rashi derived this comment from W; but this violates meaning and grammatical usage*. The response to such a comment is that Rashi really derived the comment from word V; word W teaches something else. In other words, many criticisms of Rashi depend on an incorrect reading

of Rashi in the first place. In summary, there might be two Rashi problems and we only see one.

- **Metaphoric use of words:** We are not native biblical speakers. We consider ourselves lucky if we know the *basic* meaning of a word. Any attempt to create a metaphor from the word is looked at with suspicion. Yet Rashi's greatest contribution in his commentary is precisely his ability to separate a blossoming metaphor from a kernel bud. It is this which gives his commentary such richness, color, and fragrance. While no one disputes this, too often, his comments, perhaps precisely because of their alluring beauty appear non-*peshat*; our goal today is to identify the criteria by which to judge if such a Rashi comment is *peshat*, and to explain this process using the traditional terms of *peshat* and *derash*. This will give us an opportunity to clarify our approach to *peshat* and *derash*.

AL.2 – Hyponymy – The Rashi: We site the Biblical text and Rashi:

Biblical text: Nu13-01:03 God spoke to Moses to say over. Send for yourself people (*anashim*); they will spy the land of Canaan which I am giving to the Jewish people; one person, one person per tribe send them; all of them governors. So Moses sent them from the Paran desert, *all of them gentlemen* (*anashim*), the heads of the Jewish people

Rashi text: All uses of *anashim* in the Bible have a nuance of importance. [Even though upon return these spies caused the downfall of the Jewish people] at the time of sending they were proper.]

Note, I have captured the Rashi comment by using a *skillful English translation*; they were all gentlemen. In English, gentlemen, has a connotation of proper and higher level. It is not a perfect translation (there never can be a perfect translation) but it captures the essence of the Rashi nicely.

Note also that I have included the entire biblical passage from verse 1 to verse 3. In fact, the word *anashim* occurs earlier (it is underlined) and there it simply means people. There are many occurrences of *anashim* in the Bible where it simply means people. Why then does Rashi states *all uses of anashim in the Bible have a nuance of importance* when this is not always true? We will have to also examine this issue and thereby shed light on Rashi's phraseology.

AL.3 – Hyponymy – The Source: Without getting into a discussion of when the Zohar the central book of Jewish mysticism was written, the *idea* that there are many words indicating *people* in Hebrew is explicitly discussed in the commentary on the Parshah of Tazriah. We have cited the entire passage verbatim in another Rashiyomi issue. Here we summarize. We are not claiming that the Zohar was written prior to Rashi and he learned of this *idea* from it; rather, we are claiming that this collection of synonyms for people, the *idea*, seems to have been known.

The Zohar explains that there are four synonyms for people. We list them here with rough English equivalents:

Adam – Humans

Anashim – Gentlemen, Ladies

Gever – men, women

Enosh – The masses, the populace

AL.4 – Hyponymy versus Synonym – Nuances: The classical approach to explaining Rashi uses the concepts of *synonyms* and their nuances. Thus we would describe *human, gentlemen-ladies, men-women, the masses-populace* as four *synonyms* with different nuances.

The modern approach uses the *hypernym-hyponym* distinction. *Hypernyms* refer to general categories, for example, fruit, while the *hyponyms* refer to particular examples of that general category for example, apple, orange, etc.

This *hypernym-hyponym* approach becomes very useful when dealing with hypernyms whose hyponyms are synonyms. For example, the hypernym of *positive emotion*, has the hypernyms of *joy, ecstasy, happiness, satisfaction*, etc. A most important point is that words do *not* have one meaning. In fact, each of these hyponyms when used in an English sentence can *either* refer to

The general category of positive emotion, or
The particular nuances involved

This is an important point which is often overlooked. A good illustration is provided by the word *honey*:

Honey can refer to the particular hyponym, of honey, or
Honey can refer to the general hypernym category of sweet things.

This basic idea, that words can switch between particular and general meanings is important in reading any piece of literature. Interestingly, this ambiguity in meaning – particular-general or hypernym-hyponym – is not a deficiency but rather a strength of language. The modern computer languages, for example Java, allow objects with attributes to metaphorize from a hyponym to hypernym. Such an allowance is consistent with human usage and saves time: For example, if you created a particular object not knowing that there were other instances, you can easily (in Java) transfer the particular object (hyponym) to mean the general category (hypernym) without having to create it.

Thus using the hypernym-hyponym distinction is a more powerful and precise tool than using the synonym-nuance approach.

AL.5 – When is the interpretation particular (hyponym) and when is it general (hypernym):

OK! We have established that words like honey can fluctuate in meaning in sentences and refer to the general hypernym or a particular nuanced hyponym. With this awareness, we can now return to our Rashi. The rules governing interpretation (particular general) are the same in Hebrew as in English. If I am just speaking about people I might use the word *anashim*. This has no significance; that is, the word retains the general category meaning, they hypernym. However, if the focal point of a sentence is attribution, then the word is particular (hyponym meaning). Compare the following two illustrative sentences

We sent wedding invitations to all gentlemen and ladies we know
He is a gentleman; She is a lady

In the first sentence, gentlemen and ladies have general meaning, people. But the whole point of the second sentence is to declare an attribute; hence *he is a gentleman (lady)* refers to the particular

hyponymic meaning. This explains the Rashi comment on the 2nd use of Anashim in the biblical passage but not the first.

Send people (anashim); they will spy on the land of Canaan (*General meaning; people*)
Moses sent them. They are all gentlemen (anashim) (*Particular meaning, mature, proper*)

AL.6 – Rashi’s language: We lastly deal with Rashi’s exact wording:

All uses of anashim in the Bible denote importance

As we saw above, this is not factually true. Therefore we interpret this Rashi phrase to mean

All hyponymic uses of anashim indicate importance.

In other words, Rashi’s point is, that although *anashim* can and does mean *people*, when the style requires a particular hyponymic interpretation then *anashim* must indicate importance.

AL.7 – Another Example: The Rashi at Nu12-01c,d,f,g (4 Rashi comments) discusses the following biblical text:

Biblical text: Miryam spoke (Aaron too) against Moses concerning the *Ethiopian Lady* he had married because he had married an *Ethiopian lady*.

Rashi makes four comments:

Gematria: The sum of the numerical value of the positions of the word Ethiopian equals the sum of the numerical value of the positions of the phrase *good looking*.

Metaphor: This teaches that all acknowledged her beauty the same way all acknowledge the blackness of skin of an Ethiopian

Lady: Some women are good looking but of poor character; some are of good character but not good looking. But Moses’ wife was both good-looking and of good character

Figure of Speech: Even though she was beautiful they called her black not to make a fuss about it and draw attention

Four comments! This will definitely give us an opportunity to distinguish between Rashi *form* and *content*.

AL.8 – The Actual Explanation – Two problems: Prior to dealing with form we deal with content. Notice how the majority of Rashi comments deal with the word *Ethiopian*. Indeed, all the Rashi commenters approach this Rashi as if the only concern of Rashi is the word *Ethiopian*.

An important principle in studying Rashi is to realize that sometimes he addresses two problems and readers of Rashi only notice one.

Indeed, in this verse Rashi deals with two problems, corresponding to the two words, *Ethiopian lady*.

Lady – This implies noble character (similar to the gentleman Rashi earlier in this digest)
Ethiopian – Beautiful (We still have to explain this)

To summarize: Scholars and readers of Rashi, both religious and secular, only saw Rashi commenting on *Ethiopian* when in fact he was commenting on *Lady* also. Hence the Rashi comment addressing two inferences:

Lady: Some women are good looking but of poor character; some are of good character but not good looking. But Moses' wife was both good-looking and of good character

To sum up:

From *lady* we infer she was of noble character
From *Ethiopian* we infer she was beautiful

In the Rashi above we pointed out that *lady* can mean both *woman* and *lady* (the general (hypernym) and particular (hyponym) category). In that discussion we pointed out that we need a justification to interpret a word as a particular hyponymic meaning. The following contrast should illuminate

Nu25-14 The name of the Jewish gentlemen who was hit with the *Midianitess* [not *Lady Midianitess*])

Gn21-09 Sarah saw the son of the Egyptian *Hagar* playing with his son [Not *Egyptian Lady Hagar*])

Nu12-01...concerning the *Ethiopian Lady* he married (Not *the Ethiopian he married*)

As can be seen, the attribution, *Lady*, is deliberate and particular (hyponymic) not general (hypernymic)

AL.9 – Ethiopian: I have already explained that Rashi will sometimes state things in punchy forms to help people remember. After all, who could not resist the very charming coincidence that *Ethiopian* and *good-looking* have the same *gematria*. That is the type of thing you retain. Rashi in fact gave several explanations, each designed to help retention.

But what is the real basis of the Rashi comment. Which of his comments are punchy cute form which are true *peshat*? Curiously, the real basis and explanation is absent from Rashi! Rashi simply cites a phrase *just as all acknowledge an Ethiopian's blackness* so all acknowledge *her beauty*. This certainly does not look like a logical argument. And it isn't. Rashi will frequently not be 'stuffy' with technical reasons relying on other scholars to fill in. In this case, the phrase Rashi cited in fact comes from the Sifrah. The Sifrah gives a very cogent argument which we summarize with some embellishments; bracketed expressions are not in the actual Sifrah text but supplied by me as supportive explanatory material.

First some statistical background. The word *Ethiopian* occurs 53 times in the Bible. It usually means *Ethiopian*. But 7.5% of the time it has metaphoric use. Let us examine the cases which are in fact brought by the Sifrah.

Ps7:1 A psalm of David on the Benjaminite Ethiopian: This Psalm was said on David's pursuer King Saul who was not an Ethiopian but rather a Benjaminite. The Sifrah explains the Ethiopian here means good-looking since Saul was tall. The underlying idea is that just as a black is easily picked out in a white crowd, so too a good-looking person is easily picked out. So in this verse Ethiopian has metaphoric meaning; it means good-looking. This uses the figure of speech method called synecdoche (just as honey can mean sweet; Ethiopian can mean easily distinguishable and recognizable)

Amos 9:1 Are not the Jews to me like Ethiopians; they are the people I raised out of Egypt...: The Sifrah explains (perhaps echoing the Exodus and the receipt of the Torah) that the Jews are distinguished by their performance of many commandments.

Jer 38:7-11 [Summary] The Ethiopian Servant of the King interceded with the King to save Jeremiah who had been falsely imprisoned and was granted permission by the King to do so. The Sifrah explains that Ethiopian refers to Baruch, son of Nariah, and indicates that he was distinguished in his good deeds in opposing the political forces that incarcerated Jeremiah.

Nu12-01 Miryam spoke (Aaron too) concerning the Ethiopian Lady Moses had married. The Sifrah explains that they called her Ethiopian because she was distinguished in her appearance (good looking).

It is interesting that the Radaq attempts to disagree with the Sifrah but in so doing affirms it. That will be explained below. Right now we wish to deal with the Rashi. It appears we have the basis of the Rashi comment(s):

Ethiopian Lady – Ethiopian here metaphorically means good-looking, easily distinguished in a crowd like a black in a white crowd
Ethiopian Lady – Lady refers to noble character.

AL.10 – But is this the Peshat? All the above sounds right and is well defended. But is it *Peshat*? Didn't we define *peshat* as *the spontaneous instant reaction of a native speaker to a biblical text*. The argument from the Sifrah seemed quite technical. It doesn't seem spontaneous and instantaneous.

This affords us to further clarify our conception of *Peshat*. The key point is that *Peshat* is the instantaneous spontaneous reaction of a native speaker to a Biblical text. But you and I are not native biblical speakers. So what has to be done is to prove that the native speakers during biblical time did hear this text the way we suggested. When they heard *Ethiopian Lady* they instantly understood it as *distinguished and beautiful*.

But how do we so prove. The answer is we prove how people heard the text by examining usage.

Usage – How people used words; established by examining lists of words and their meaning in context

Peshat – The natural meaning of the text (spontaneous and instantaneous) to a native speaker.

So the technical examination of usage establishes the spontaneous *peshat* nuances of a word by a native speaker. In this case we have a partnership of *usage* and *peshat*. The criteria for *peshat* is that *instant understanding* but to establish that people spoke that way we may have to do laborious research.

This research refers to a process, in fact, the *derash-process*. Thus we see here a partnership of *derash* and *peshat*. Already previous Rashi theses spoke about this partnership. What we contribute is a concretization of *how* this partnership takes place. *Derash-process* establishes the *peshat outcome*.

AL.11 – The Radaq: As mentioned above the Radaq attempted to disagree with the Sifrah. His approach was similar to modern scholarship who try to avoid metaphors as too loud. His attempt however was quite comical since he ended up proving the Sifrah correct!

Radaq takes the four examples cited above but only explains two of them: He says that Moses' wife, Tziporrah was called an Ethiopian because she was a Midanite and Midian is part of Ethiopia. He further explained that the *Ethiopian servant of the King was simply a righteous Ethiopian who served the King*.

But Radaq is forced to use the metaphoric approach on the other two examples. Why do I call this comical? Because Radaq admits that 4% of the time, the word is metaphoric. This is a normal percentage. It means that the metaphor was well known and established. But if that is so, recall that usage establishes metaphoric usage, and metaphoric usage is spontaneous and instantaneous, it is the *Peshat*. So why bother to explain the other two away; you already know that this metaphoric meaning is established and well known!

Furthermore, the Sifrah metaphor uses a well-known figure of speech method, synecdoche according to which a black in a white crowd is a good example of being easily recognizable and distinguished (just as honey is a good example of sweetness). Contrastively, Radak explains the metaphor to mean *unchangeable* based on Jer 13:23 *Can an Ethiopian change his skin?* Radak then explains that King Saul was called Ethiopian because he didn't change in his hatred. Similarly, the Jews are called Ethiopians because their bond with God is unbreakable. However nice this sounds, it doesn't follow any nice pattern of figure-of-speech methods. So here too, we must regard the Radaq's attempts as feeble and useless. Feeble because it doesn't fall into any metaphoric pattern and useless because Radak is forced to acknowledge that Ethiopian is a metaphor anyway.

AL.12 – Summary: We have covered a lot of ground today. So let us summarize key points in the Rashiyomi approach to reading Rashi. These key points will be and should be used frequently and are important to prevent misunderstandings.

- We distinguish between Rashi *form* and Rashi *content*
- The true reason for a Rashi comment may not be given in the Rashi itself

- Hyponymy is important for understanding many double meanings of words
- Rashi comments may deal with multiple problems; it is important to identify each one
- While *Peshat* does refer to instantaneous spontaneous reaction it does so only in the native speaker. We can establish the native speaker's thought patterns by examining usage
- Metaphors should follow known rules of figures of speech