

# CHAPTER AN: DOES RASHI ALWAYS MEAN WHAT HE SAYS

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## *Korax- ChuQaTh*

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**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.*

**AN.1 – Overview:** A fundamental component of our position on Rashi comments, is that a critical tool in analyzing Rashis is the distinction between Rashi *form* and Rashi *content*. We continuously argue that Rashi in explaining a comment may not give the true reason; rather, he might give a clever mnemonic to facilitate remembering the Rashi comment. This has led to confusion since students of Rashi incorrectly assume that the mnemonic (which might be a play on words) *is* the real reason.

In this chapter we discuss the justification for this approach. How do we know if Rashi really meant this reason or some other reason? Are we justified in changing what Rashi actually said. In doing so, we point out that this aspect of our approach to Rashi, that Rashi did not necessarily mean what he says when describing the reason for a comment, seems to be the most controversial component of our position. Some typical criticisms are: 1) A clever explanation of the biblical text is being given, but this clever explanation is not Rashis. 2) Do you have any support – from manuscripts or from internal Rashi comments - pointing to the fact that he did not intend all statements to be taken literally? 3) Even if what you are saying is true, how does one ascertain the real Rashi reason? 4) Why didn't Rashi simply state the real reason?

These are of course all good questions. The Rashi comments we present today will afford us a good opportunity to clarify the justifications for our approach and also show the confusion that has arisen when scholars have not used it. We present two examples. In both cases, we present a critical comment on Rashi from the Ramban.

**AN.2 – Biblical Text, Nu16-01.** If we translate **Lamed-Quaph-Cheth** (*LaQaX*) as *take* then the verse reads as follows

Korax took (along with Dathan and Aviram)

Notice how this sentence *as translated* does not make sense. To crystalize the problem, note that *take* in both English and Hebrew is a transitive verb; one takes something else, or to use grammatical categories, the transitive verb requires a grammatical object. There is no object.

**AN.3 – Biblical Text According to Rashi:** To capture the Rashi translation we use a parallel English idiom. The use of skillful translations in other languages is a major technique of ours in understanding Rashi since it does more than translate: It facilitates an appreciation of the spontaneity of the translation.

Korax took hold of himself (along with Dathan and Aviram)

Of course, Rashi did not use English in explaining the biblical verse. We are therefore translating his translation using English (and in so doing changing it somewhat). We have to justify all this and we do so in the next few sections. We are not presenting the actual Rashi comments till the end since such a presentation might initially bias the reader. We however will fully address the issue of whether this explanation is Rashi's or some clever skillful use of my own.

**AN.4 – The verb to take (Lakax):** How does one ascertain the true reason for a Rashi comment on meaning? Prior to reading Rashi we should review all known biblical meanings of the given word; that is, examine the Rashi in the context of the general word meaning. If the Rashi translation corresponds with some known meaning we will feel more comfortable. On the other hand, if the Rashi translation does not correspond with any known meaning then our position will not appear strong.

In reviewing meanings I frequently use the Radaqs book of roots (*Shoroshim*). I could also use a modern counterpart of the Radaq such as the BDB dictionary used by modern scholars.

However, this approach seems problematic. How can a review of the meanings of *lakax* according to the Radaq or according to BDB help us understand Rashi's approach?

This is a proper question. We therefore clarify that the *Shoroshim* of the Radaq serves two purposes:

- A) It presents an encyclopedic review of all uses of each biblical root
- B) It presents the Radaq's opinion of the various meanings.

We are using *Shoroshim* because of item A. We could also use a search engine or a modern dictionary like BDB. I find that *Shoroshim* is usually pretty thorough with A). But we must clarify that the goal in using it is simply to find relevant verses with *lakax*; not to ascertain any meaning. It turns out in this particular case, the *Shoroshim* lacks crucial examples which in fact are provided by Rashi. So Nu16-01 provides a beautiful illustration of proper technique when studying a Rashi on meaning; we use the *Shoroshim* but then have to go back to Rashi!

Here are some verses with *lakax* as given in *Shoroshim*.

(Prv 7:21) She (The evil woman) makes him deviate through her multiple *persuasions* (*lakax*)

(Prv 1:1-5) The proverbs of Solomon...to know wisdom...to be *advised* by ethics...the wise will listen and be more *advised* (*lakax*); the analytic person will acquire strategies

(Job 15:12) Why does your heart *advise you* (*lakax*) [to say what you have]

(2Sam 18:18) Absalom *advised* himself (*lakax*) to set up a monument during his lifetime since he had no children

(Jud 14:12) Three friends *advised* themselves (*lakax*) and came to celebrate (his marriage) with him

(Nu16-01) Korax *advised* himself (along with Dathan and Aviram)

We just argued that we are using *Shoroshim* to provide a list of verses. The last four verses use *lakax* intransitively and therefore are helpful to us. It seems only natural to see what the commenters say on these verses.

Rashi: He says nothing on Jud 14:12 and 2 Sam 18:18; he translates Job 15:12 as *teach* (not advise)

Radaq: He also is mostly silent. On 2Sam 18:18 he repeats his suggested translation of *advise* used above.

The *Shoroshim* was only a starting point. We now cite some additional verses which curiously the Radaq doesn't bring. In this case, there are 3 comments by Rashi (So they are certainly relevant to our study)

Nu08--06a *Take* (Rashi: *Persuade* them verbally through a praise of the position) the Levites

Nu11-16c *Take* (the 70 elders) (Rashi: *Persuade* them verbally through a praise of the position)

Nu27-18a *Take* (Joshua) (Rashi: *Persuade* him verbally through a praise of the position)

So in these three verses, Rashi translates *lakax, take*, as *verbal persuasion*. He literally translates it as *pull them with words*: "*How fortunate you are to be selected for this position.*" We also point out the obvious fact that there is a difference between *taking a suitcase* or *taking a person*. In one case you are physically taking while in the other you are verbally taking (*persuasion*).

We also bring a verse cited by the Ramban on Nu16-01

Prv 08:10 Be *persuaded* by my ethics, not by money

Our review has been fruitful. We have supplemented the Radaq's list with examples from Rashi himself and from the Ramban. These examples afford us our first opportunity to emendation of a Rashi statement. Compare the following two Rashi comments

Nu27-18 Verbally *persuade* (*Lakax*) Joshua (to become leader) through praise of the position

Job15-12 [A colleague of Job criticizing Job for his remarks on suffering] Why has your heart *taught* (*Lakax*) you (what you have been saying)

So we have a contradiction in Rashi in the translation of *lakax*. Rashi translates the word as

- 1) *Teach* (lamed)
- 2) Being *pulled over with words*; praising the position to go to [we have translated this as persuasion]

Which is it: Does *lakax* mean *teach* or *persuade*? (Or perhaps the Radaq's translation as *self-advice*) is better? By reviewing the tone and context of Job15-12 we see that *persuade* really fits in better than *teach*. Why then did Rashi use *teach* on Job15-12. Probably because it is a single

word; there is no word *persuade* in Hebrew. In the other verses Rashi, who couldn't use the word *persuade* (because it doesn't exist in Hebrew) had to approximate it

*Take Joshua to become the new leader by pulling him with words, "How fortunate you are to be appointed as leader"*

To recap this section:

Our approach has been to critically examine other verses using the word in question. A variety of commenters (including multiple Rashi comments) give several translations including *teach*, *persuade*, *self-advise*.

By examining the verses we find that the best translation for a modern English speaker is *persuade*.

Because of the above we feel justified in saying that this is what Rashi meant. He couldn't say what we are saying because the word for *persuade* did not yet exist in Hebrew. He therefore must either coin phrases such as *pull him with words*, "*How fortunate you are*," or use other words like *teach* which approximate the idea of *persuasion*. Note also, that the Radack, who translated this as *advice* had the same handicap; there is no word for *persuasion* in Hebrew so Radaq had to use a good approximation to *persuade*. However, the English word *persuade* or *self-persuade* seems the *best fit* and is close to the various suggested meanings of *teach*, *advise*, *pull with words*.

Additionally, this analysis justifies seeing no reason to view the diverse suggested translations by several commenters as a controversy between Ramban, Rashi, and Radek. We rather argue that they were all trying to catch the tone of the word that best fit the verse.

**AN.5 – More on Rashi' style:** Having seen that *persuade* is a good translation let us review some of the other comments of Rashi in light of this.

First:

And Korax took: He took himself

This is a citation of Rashi from the Midrash. The Midrash is dealing with the intransitive nature of *take* in this verse (Korax took). The midrash responds with a witticism: *He took himself*. However, clever this is, we refer to the Radaq's list above where four instances of a non-transitive use of *Lakax* occurs. In all of them, *self-persuade*, or *talking oneself into it* seem like the best translation. In other words, we do not view the issues in Nu16-01 as grammatical but rather we view them as semantic.

Second: Rashi further says in translating *lakax*

Korax *split* from Moses and took himself *to one side*.

Rashi in fact says

"The Midrash explains *lakax* to mean he took himself to one side"

Here again, Rashi is coining metaphors to capture the nuances of *persuade* which did not yet exist as a word in Hebrew. English also frequently uses spatial metaphors to describe disagreement. In English we say *he took a position*, *he separated himself*, *he joined the other side*. Clearly, the words, *position*, *separate*, and *side* are spatial concepts which metaphorically describe an intellectual debate

**AN.6 – The Rashi Ramban Controversy:** Let us now see what the Ramban says on Rashi's comments cited above that *lakax* means *split*, *separate*, *taking oneself to one side*.

The Ramban demurs to Rashi's assertion that Korax took himself to one side or that Job took himself to one side (Ramban disagrees in his usual respectful tone to Rashi)

My opinion is that the Midrash is not saying this. It is not saying that Korax took himself to one side. Similarly for Job 15:12 *Why has your heart taken you*. The Midrash is not saying that Job took himself to one side. But rather that his heart gave him *advice* to separate from the opinions of most people. Here too, the verse simply means that Korax *advised himself* to separate from Moses.

We are now in a position to fully comment on this Ramban

1<sup>st</sup>) Indeed, as we showed above, Rashi would agree that *lakax* means advice, or persuasion. It does not literally mean going to a side. Thus there is no controversy between Rashi and Ramban.

2<sup>nd</sup>) Recall that Rashi was trying to capture the nuances of a word that didn't yet exist in Hebrew, *to persuade*. Rashi simply used multiple metaphors to capture this. In other verses he coined the metaphor *pulled by words*. He also coined spatial metaphors similar to those in English, *separate*, *went to the other side*, *split*.

3<sup>rd</sup>) We at last can state our criticism of the Ramban. The Ramban made the fatal mistake of assuming that Rashi meant what he said literally. He assumed that Rashi literally thought that Korax took himself to one side and separated from Moses. The position of this Newsletter is that Rashi should not be interpreted literally. He should be interpreted as attempting to capture nuances. The textual citations from the Ramban of the very Midrash that Rashi is claiming to quote and to which Rashi added *took himself to one side*, claiming it be text in the Midrash, further proves that Rashi was simply trying to capture nuances of a concept that did not yet have a word in Hebrew.

**AN.7 – Our position on Rashi comments summarized:** This then is the essence of our thesis. There is no value in saying Rashi really believed that Korax or Job *took themselves to one side* and that there is a *controversy* between Rashi and Ramban. There are several reasons to support not literally taking Rashi.

First, the translation *persuade* comes from Rashi on other verses with this word.

Second, as Ramban rightfully points out, Rashi's citation of the Midrash is incorrect; the Midrash does not speak about *going to another side*. So we must assume that Rashi was

clarifying further the concept of persuade, not creating a new meaning of going to one side.

Third: If we look at this Rashi comment on *lakax* in light of all verses containing *lakax* we see a very simple approach, consistent with Rashi's comments elsewhere. There is no need to interpret Rashi literally.

**AN.8 - Further comments in Rashi:** At the very end of his comment on Nu16-01, Rashi states

Another matter: Korax *pulled the heads of the Sanhedrin with words*; this translation of *lakax* of *pulled with words* is similar to the usage in Nu20-25 *Take (persuade) Aaron*

Before proceeding, we note that the Ramban does not mention this extra Rashi comment. But it certainly supports our explanation that Rashi was simply translated *lakax* as *persuade* exactly as the Ramban suggests.

It appears that Rashi is giving a second explanation to *Korax took*. Here are the verses using this double application of *lakax*.

Korax *took* (Persuaded himself and persuaded the Heads mentioned in verse 2) along with Dathan and Aviram. The arose before Moses, them and 250 distinguished people

Rashi seems to be suggesting that *took* functions twice

It refers to Korax *taking ahold of himself* (self-persuasion)  
It also refers to Korax persuading the Jewish leaders

How can one word have two distinct meanings (*self-persuade* and *persuaded* the leaders). True, we sometimes in Rashiomi allow two meanings to a word when it functions as a pun. But puns are governed by grammatical rules. The text has to *indicate* that the word is intended as a pun which it does not do here. The non-transitive nature of *take* does not justify a pun; in fact the Radaq brings four verses where *take* is non-transitive and means self-persuade. So it is not a pun.

But this dilemma can be solved by reinterpreting the Rashi

Another matter could mean another meaning to *Korax Took*

Another matter could also mean *a separate and distinct other problem*

In fact there is a second problem here. Look at verses 1,2,3

Korax self-persuaded himself along with Datan and Aviram

They stood up to Moses along with 250 Jewish leaders

They congregated on him and said: Enough: Everyone is holy and a prophet (God is in them) Why do you have to be leader

The problem is quite simple. Korax self-persuaded himself. Datan and Aviram self-persuaded themselves. But what about the 250 people?

This is exactly the *another problem* that Rashi is dealing with. From *context*, not from the *meaning of lakax*, we infer that Korax spoke to them and they joined him. True, Rashi phrases this in a catchy manner using the translation of *take* as *pulled verbally*. Rashi frequently uses a catchy form. But there is no reason to assume he is making a comment on *lakax*. Rather this derivation is motivated by the Grammar rule which states that sentences in a paragraph are related to each other. In this case, from *context*, or more specifically, from *grammatical context*, we infer that there were conversations between Korax, Datan and Aviram and the leaders. This is a grammatical inference and has nothing to do with the meaning of *Lakax*.

Why am I so sure that Rashi is not giving a second explanation? Why am I reinterpreting *another matter* to mean *a separate issue*? Because there is no justification for the 2<sup>nd</sup> explanation of the *lakax*. Furthermore, the grammatical explanation based on paragraph design fully explains it.

So in this comment also I interpret the Rashi as using a clever mnemonical form to get across an idea whose true basis lies not in meaning but in grammar.

**AN.9 – Another Rashi-Ramban Controversy:** Ramban appears to disagree with Rashi on Nu19-14:17

Biblical text:

This is the Torah (law)

A)If a person dies *in a tent*

Anyone coming to the tent

Anything in the tent

Is ritually impure 7 days

B)Anything that *touches* on an open field

Someone smitten by the sword

A dead person

A human bone, or

A coffin

Is ritually impure 7 days

C)And one takes from the ashes of the sin offering (the red cow)....

Rashi comments:

The *peshat* simple meaning of the text, is that Verse A explains creation of ritual impurity by *being inside a tent* Verse B explains creation of ritual impurity by *touch*

And our sages *derash-ed* (from this verse) to teach that touching the roll and knock create ritual impurity.

Ramban demurs:

This is not a derash! It is the law.

Before proceeding, we note an identical controversy in the Jewish legal books between Rambam and Raavad

Rambam, Laws of Ritual Impurity for the dead Chapter 2:26-29 states

When a person is found dead in a field and one surrounds the corpse with utensils and rolls a covering over the utensils, the utensils are called the *knock* and the rolled over covering is called the *roll*. A person who touches the roll and knock becomes ritually impure. And this impurity is classified as an ordinance of the Soferim.

Raavad, demurs

It is not an ordinance of the Soferim (rabbinical) it is the law

Thus we see here two issues that we have been discussing

What is *peshat* and *what is derash*

Is there a controversy ?

**AN.10 – What is the Peshat:** If one glances at the layout of the verses in Section **AN.9** one sees the contrasting paragraphs, A and B. The spontaneous reaction to this (say to someone who sees this in writing particularly if modern formatting is used) is that there are two cases

Death in a tent

Death in an open field

The two situations are governed by different laws of ritual impurity

Ritual impurity is created

In a field, only by *touching*

In a house or *tent*, merely by being in the same room

In this case we are using the Grammar Pillar of exegesis. In fact, we are dealing with the grammar of paragraph contrast and parallelism. Most people with the proper cues would spontaneously see these paragraphs as presenting contrasting situations governed by different rules.

**AN.11 – What is the Derash:** I have already explained many times that Rashi never gives derash-outcome. However, sometimes he gives a peshat of unspecified emphasis which has to be filled in by a derash process. We have presented many such examples in previous chapters.

We have also presented the idea that Rashi may be commenting on two aspects of a verse.

In the verse we are studying there are two aspects. The first aspect is the contrastive paragraphs, *death in a tent* vs. *death in an open field*. The second aspect is the list in the open field verse:

Sword smitten

Dead person



Bone of a human  
Coffin

As any English teacher will tell you, the list is anomalous. The first three items deal with people (sword smitten, dead, part of a dead person, a bone). But the fourth item, the coffin, does not fit in. (The point here, is that proper English or Biblical style requires that only the first three items (sword-smitten, dead person, human bone) be included in this verse. The coffin should have then been assigned another verse. Its inclusion in a list of people-related items is anomalous.

And any such anomaly, creates an unspecified emphasis. To resolve that unspecified emphasis requires a *derash process*.

In this case, the *derash* process sees *coffin* as similar to sword-smitten-dead-bone. Just as a dead human creates ritual impurity when touched whether the human was whole, mutilated (sword-smitten), or partial (bone), so too a coffin creates ritual impurity when touched whether it is a real permanent coffin, or whether it is a temporary knock-and-roll coffin.

**AN.12 – Response to Ramban and Raavad:** As the Kesef Mishneh says on the spot in responding to the Raavad:

The law (of knock-and-roll) is biblical but is not explicit. Therefore Rambam classifies it as an ordinance of the Soferim.

Here the Kesef Mishneh utilizes a principle well-known to students of Rambam. Whereas we tend to classify laws as either,

Biblical (e.g. prohibition of stealing, murder, etc.), or  
Rabbinical (for example, the prohibition of soaking a rag to clean on Sabbath since you might accidentally and habitually ring it out; in this case, the rabbinic prohibition is a prophylactic preventing probable violation of a biblical prohibition),

the Rambam introduced a third category

Laws that are indicated by an unspecified emphasis in the bible and concretized by the sages are called neither biblical nor rabbinic but rather ordinances of the Soferim (scribal ordinances)

It is noteworthy that these three categories of the Rambam correspond exactly to the three categories of biblical interpretation advocated by Rashiyomi:

Explicit biblical verses (Peshat)  
*Derash-outcome* (fanciful made up interpretation of verses)  
Unspecified emphasis with a fill-in through a *derash-process*

**AN.13 Summary:** In this chapter we have shown how Rashi

Can either indicate *peshat* or a *peshat* which is an unspecified emphasis filled in not by a *derash-outcome* but by a *derash-process*

May use metaphors and coined terms to capture nuances without holding them literally.

It is critical for the true understanding of Rashi to examine all related verses and if necessary to use skillful English translations.

We must acknowledge that Ramban in these two examples thought he was really disagreeing with Rashi. He really thought that Rashi meant that *take* means *take to one side*; he really thought that Rashi thought of knock-and-roll as derash. And if the Ramban fell into this trap, then many scholars today can fall into this trap. Similarly, it is clear from the dialogue between the Raavad and Kesef Mishneh that the Raavad really thought that the Rambam was classifying knock and roll as rabbinic. Like the Ramban, Raavad seems to be unaware of a third category of biblical interpretation, unspecified emphasis filled-in by a derash-process.

Therefore we advocate an approach to Rashi that avoids these unpleasant dichotomies. Rashi's real reason for something can only be understood by a global examination of issues. It could be a global examination of word occurrences or a global examination of surrounding paragraphs.

Finally, this chapter sheds light on the very nature of controversy. We have advocated regarding certain controversy as complementarity: The meaning of *lakax* can be approximated as *advice, teaching, persuasion, taking a hold of oneself etc.* These viewpoints do not contradict each other (either this one or that one is correct) but work synergistically together to point to a larger whole.