

CHAPTER AO: CAN SYMBOLISM BE PESHAT?

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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.*

AO.1 – Overview: A major problem with the definition of *peshat* is the status of *symbolism*. Can *symbolism* be *peshat*? Is all *symbolism* *derash*? There is even one medieval author whose position was that *peshat* and *derash* in symbolic passages are identical. Such confusions arise when terms have not been properly clarified beforehand.

The goal of today's digest is to clearly answer these questions. Using the precise definitions, we have provided we will find this task easy. Here are some highlights:

- *Peshat* has been defined by us as the spontaneous instant reaction of a native speaker, expert in the subject area of the text. It is that simple. For example, if a husband gives his wife a bouquet of eight roses on their eighth anniversary, then the instant reaction of those seeing this is that the eight roses are symbolic of their 8 years of marriage. Of course, it is *peshat*.
- Sometimes however, we may need to use a *derash process* to discover the *peshat*. For example, if we are not friends of the couple we may have to dig around say in former newspapers to find the announcement of this couples marriage on this date 8 years ago. However, that does not make the symbolism *derash*; the research is a *derash process*; it convinces the researcher that the spontaneous instant reaction to anyone expert in this couple's past is that the gift is symbolic of their 8 years of marriage. Notice, that we have phrased the *derash process* in terms of digging through old newspapers. This could correspond to someone digging through other texts. It is a process, which illuminates the spontaneity.
- We have seen numerous times that Rashi will phrase a *peshat* using fanciful coincidences; perhaps using numerical associations or gematriahs. The position of Rashiyomi is that these statements are neither *peshat* nor *derash* outcome; they are silly but blatant observations which help readers of Rashi retain the Rashi comment. It is no different from the English Mnemonic that "The *principal* is you *pal*; contrastively, *principle* refers to an abstract idea." Does anyone really believe that *principals* are pals. Sometimes they must discipline. We, who are native English speakers all perceive this as a mnemonic form to help remind us of *usage*. It is usage which determines *Peshat*. These ideas as well as the *principal-pal* example were first stated by me in my *Peshat and Derash Tradition* article; it is a pity that this article was ignored since its concepts can help us avoid many problems.

AO.2 – Biblical and Rashi Text: Nu24-05 is familiar since it is recited in the Daily Prayers. The context of this verse is the blessings of Balaq.

How good are your houses, Jacob; your neighborhoods, Israel

Note, in the above translation, I have reinterpreted *tents* as *houses* since a tent in biblical times was like a house today. The Hebrew terms *miskenotheychah* could be interpreted as dwellings; I think neighborhoods is a closer more precise English translation.

Here is what Rashi says on the above.

How good are your houses: (He said this) Because the doors were not completely opposite each other (The point being that one could not accidentally peak into one's neighbor's house to see what is going on, a sign of modesty.)

Your neighborhoods: Your camp positions (That is the relative positions of the various tribes)

Another matter: How good is the Temple (House of God) in Shiloh and later in Jerusalem where offerings are offered to achieve atonement for the Jews.

Your neighborhoods: [Here Rashi exploits a pun: The biblical root **Shin-Caph-Nun** can simultaneously mean i) dwelling ii) neighborhood, iii) camping, iv) collateral for a loan] Even when the Temples are destroyed (they are good) because they are collateral for the Jews and their destruction atones souls. [Rashi gives some further comments and citations showing that the destruction of the Temple atones but we need not go into this today]

AO.3 – Derash Process - Background: Our basic question is, “Are any of Rashi’s comment spontaneous instant reactions” by a native speaker who is expert in the subject area.

To answer this we must provide some background. In ancient times, many near-eastern religions used female priestesses in their Temples and their religious rites. The functions of these female priestesses were twofold: To teach men proper restraints and to acquire information on all people in their neighborhoods. For this reason, many Temple rites had intimacy components. Furthermore, as just indicated, the priestesses were knowledgeable of all their “congregants” and their behavior patterns. They could be used when communal fights erupted to contribute information to help put down the problem.

Although the major religions today do not use this approach, it is still one method used politically. The intelligence community calls this approach the *Romeo* approach. With the emergence of technology, the *Romeo* approach is used less but is still there.

As an aside (nothing to do with Rashi) we note two things. First, it was one of the great contributions of our Patriarch, Abraham, to totally separate prophecy and intimacy. Even secular scholars acknowledge this very important contribution of him. Second, this in fact is the reason why females cannot function in the Temple as priests; the Torah wanted to negate all associations of the *Romeo* approach with religion. Finally, I note that the famous dialogue in 1 Samuel about whether it was good or bad that the people wanted a King is clarified by the above. It is well known that there was much interaction with the non-Jewish neighbors and in fact, as is clear from later books such as Ezra and Nehemiah, there was much intermarriage. The people were satisfied with their way of life and saw nothing wrong with a non-Divine, human government, and the consequent use of the *Romeo* approach to run their nation. Samuel the prophet criticized them for

this request. It is also contrary to the Deuteronomic passage allowing a King; yes, you can have one but there is a limit on the wives he can take (something violated by King Solomon). A blatant example of the *Romeo* approach as a political means is found in the story of Samson: It is clear and explicit in the text that he married a Philistine to get an *in*, and to have an excuse to make raids. His tragic death shows the biblical disapproval of this approach.

In a similar manner to the *Romeo* approach in the government and in ancient temples, very often the man in the street wanted to at least have information on their neighbors to avoid anyone encroaching on their space.

As final background on the *Romeo* approach, as explicitly declared in the Bible, Balak fought the Jews by advising Midianite women to seduce Jewish men. Moses rightly considered this an act of war leading to the Midianite war where the Jews were victorious and the evil advisor Balak was killed.

AO.4 – Rashi is Peshat: Using the above background, we can instantly and spontaneously see that the Rashi comments are *peshat*. Here is a paraphrase of Balaq's blessings as interpreted by Rashi. I also bring in the content of the next verses which contains additional supportive information.

Balaq use to his own culture was probably shocked that the Jewish Temple had no female priests. He must have also been shocked on the modesty of the Jews, one example of which is their emphasis on privacy, reflected by tent doors not being opposite each other. At seeing this he broke out in poetry

How good (modest) are your tents, Jacob
[How good(modest)] are your neighborhoods and Temples, Israel
They resemble well planted gardens, with aromatic trees, fertile tributaries, and planted cedars [all of these are well known male, female and intimacy symbols denoting a passionate relationship: *Aloe trees* known for their passionate aroma; *gardens and tributaries*, fertility symbols, and *lofty cedars*, obvious male symbols.]

AO.5 – Sundry comments on the Rashi: We fill in the above explanation with some subtle points further clarifying our approach.

Notice, how I left out of the defense of *peshat* the Rashi pun on *collateral-Temple*. I certainly have nothing against puns and have even advocated that *puns* can be *peshat* even when they are an additional meaning to a sentence. However, the Rashiyomi approach is rule-based; the text has to *require* the pun; in the above verse, there is nothing justifying or hinting at a pun. True, the verse is repeated (Tents – Neighborhoods) but that is the norm in poetry. Yes, the two names of the Jewish people, Jacob, the Jewish people in exile, and Israel, the Jewish people when they are on their land are mentioned; but Jacob, the name of the Jewish people in exile (or non-full possession of the land) is not associated with the part of the verse where Rashi talks about the destroyed Temples. On the contrary that part of the verse which Rashi puns as talking about the destroyed Temple is in fact using the term Israel, connoting Israel in its ownership state when it fully possesses its land.

There is simply nothing in the verse to justify a pun. Hence, I don't consider this pun part of the interpretation of the verse. It is rather a cute mnemonic to help me remember it. It is part of the form-content distinction in Rashi narrative that I have frequently mentioned.

A second point to notice is that people interested in *peshat* frequently make the mistake of saying that a verse can have only one *peshat*; it is not possible to have two simultaneous meanings to a verse. However, Rashi claims that the verse simultaneously is interpreted to mean that Jewish private homes are good and modest and furthermore the Jewish Temple and religious life are good and modest. How can one verse have two interpretations both of which are *Peshat*.

We can answer this on two levels. First, to take the example we have cited often, if Abe on a dinner date with a woman named Rose, says,

Pass me the Roisens,

then we all spontaneously and instantly here *both* messages: i) Pass me the raisins, and ii) Pass me yourself, Rose. The justification of the pun here comes from the mispronunciation or the misspelling, which is the pun technique of metaplasmus.

In other words, *instantaneity* is the exclusive determinant of *peshat*; single interpretation is not a requirement.

However, on a deeper level, poetry unlike legal narrative, intrinsically evokes multiple interpretations and levels. A good poem instantly captures the listener's ear with multiple meanings at multiple levels. The spontaneous interpretation of the verse *How good are your Houses, Jacob*, in the context of the *Romeo* approach common in the near east and in fact used by the Midianites at Balak's advice, is an exclamation at the modesty of the Jewish people.

If we accept the thesis that the core value being praised by the poetry is modesty, that instantly and spontaneously, anyone familiar with near-eastern practices sees that the verse simultaneously applies to the individual home, to the community neighborhood, and to the national Temple.

For the above reasons, I have classified the two Rashi interpretations as both being *Peshat*. On the other hand, I have classified the pun on collateral as being a mnemonic. We therefore think this verse an excellent example illustrative of the various techniques we have been advocating.

On a final note, there is no need to see symbolism as a special category where *peshat* and *derash-process* meet. *Peshat* and *derash-process* can meet and cooperate in any category including even grammar. Symbolism is simply another literary genre with however its own rules of interpretation.

AO.6 – Multiple Meanings in a Single Verse: This Rashi is a good place to discuss multiple meanings on a single verse.

In addition to the above arguments, we cite the opinions of poetic experts. Not just biblical poetry, but secular poetry also sees multiple meanings (in a poem) as the norm. For example A. Macleish's famous poem, "Ars Poetica" ends with the line, "A poem should not mean but be," referring to the fact that poems paint pictures with multiple evocations rather than point to a single meaning. Many

books on poetry say the same thing, the most famous probably being W. Yeats “The Symbolism of Poetry”

However, the existence of multiple meanings in a single verse raises questions: Are their limits? Can we simply add whatever we want? Isn't it preferable to point to one meaning as primary and classify the others as secondary?

The response to these questions can be developed using the Rashi on this verse. Notice that a *justification* of the multiple meanings was given above which we now repeat:

The verse is not speaking about the goodness of the Jewish homes but rather (based on background knowledge) identifies this goodness with the modesty. And if modesty is the core attribute being praised then modesty is equally present in both Jewish homes, Jewish Temples, or even Jewish camp positions.

In other words, the multiple meanings were justified by finding a core driving force to the statement of goodness. Those familiar with Jewish culture will recognize the endeavor to find a core driving force to a statement as the signature method of the Brisk approach to analytic Talmudic learning. The Brisk approach seeks to identify a core driving force in each law it meets; these driving forces are then useful in analyzing new legal positions. In our verse, if the core attribute of the goodness mentioned in the verse is modesty then the core driving force is a single interpretation; the multiple branchings (good in private houses, good in the Temple) are then seen as a multiplicity rooted in an underlying unity.

This partnership of the cold austere Brisk analytic method of Talmudic analysis with the bouncy fluid method of poetry is a core interpretive principle of Rashiyomi when approaching poetic passages. This approach allows us to understand that the multiplicity of meaning is superficial, since underlying it is a unifying idea.

AO.7 – The Red Heifer: Nu19 presents the mysterious Red Heifer procedure. It is anomalous in that it is an offering not done in the Temple. It is notoriously famous as not having any rational basis which is ridiculous since Rashi on the spot explains the reason for the Red Heifer; we will review these Rashi comments today.

We have already provided the background, the Romeo approach to cultic religious events. We have explained in previous chapters that a good symbolic interpretation should be in the form of a parable rather than a one-time symbol.

To emphasize that *peshat* is the spontaneous instant reaction to a verse, this section modestly gives some background and immediately (without further derash process) presents the Rashi interpretation. We will italicize those phrases coming from the Biblical text. It should be obvious that this interpretation is natural and spontaneous to a person familiar with the one background element needed, and that element is the golden-calf sin.

So imagine you are in the desert; immediately after the revelation, the Jews sinned by creating a golden-calf idol and using it as an excuse for an idolatrous holiday which as we know involves the *Romeo approach*. The emphasis that the golden-calf was for purposes

of the fun of the Romeo approach is explicitly indicated in Ex32-06 which speaks about the nation making an idolatrous holiday in which they got up to have *fun*; the grammatical conjugation for *fun* is the Piel conjugation which indicates *the Romeo approach*. As is well known, the Jews lost many lives from the golden calf sin; there was a partial civil war in which 3000 people died and they lost many other things.

With this background, we cite the symbolic interpretation of the Red Heifer with, as indicated above, italicized phrases indicating the biblical text. Judge for yourself whether this interpretation is something spontaneous and instant. The interpretation is dressed up with paraphrases referring back to the event; these paraphrases are enclosed in brackets.

[Do you remember the golden calf event] You behaved like those at the beginning of *adulthood* (*adult cow*), you, *the adult cow*, were *unblemished* (at that age), with full vigor (*fully red cow*). But you, as *adult cow*, *left the Temple camp and only faced in the Temple direction*. [Do you remember what had to be done because you left the Temple camp?] *It was required to slaughter* (the sinners); [like the calf, we had to do more than destroy it] *we had to burn the cow* [golden calf] (leaving no remnant); [yes there were many types of people involved] (those of you who felt haughty) *like a cedar*, (those of you who felt worthless) *like hyssops*, (those of you who felt) *worm-like* and (those of you who felt-social), *like the sheep*. [Instead of correcting your problems, you drowned them out with the Romeo approach]

To recap: The Bible says to

Take an adult cow, unblemished, fully red, take it out of the camp, slaughter it, and burn it. Throw a cedar, hyssop, and wool died worm-red into the burning.

Rashi interprets this as a reenactment of the sin of leaving religion and succumbing to passion:

You behaved like someone in their 20s, just turned adult; you were unblemished, with full passion. Yet you left the Temple camp. You had to be slaughtered, and moreover, the calf had to be totally burned. This applied to all personality types, the haughty cedar, the low hyssop, the low worm and the social.

I believe this enough to justify Rashi's approach, which uses *peshat symbolism*. In explaining Rashi, I have found support in the commentary and approach of Rabbi Hirsch. More could be said, but I chose the above approach to emphasize the criteria I use:

A biblical narrative is *Peshat* if the response to the biblical narrative by a native speaker with relevant experiences is instantaneous and spontaneous.

AO.8 – Epilogue: We believe the methods presented here fully clarify our approach. To interpret a verse or entire narrative:

- Become familiar through a *derash-process* of relevant background
- Be aware of universal symbols (such as red as a simple of passion)
- Then read the passage and the interpretation and see if it clicks as something spontaneous

- That which is immediate and spontaneous is *Peshat*; the rest might be some mnemonics to assist in retention.

This approach should be used on every symbolic passage interpreted by Rashi whether it is an entire chapter, a poetic verse, or a stand-alone verse.