

CHAPTER AX: BIBLICAL PUNS: MY FATHER, A LOST ARAMAEAN

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AX.1 – Overview: We study the Rashi on the famous verse, cited in the Passover Haggadah, *A lost Aramaean was my father*. The example has significant interest from the point of view of *peshat* and *derash*. Overwhelmingly, all commenters (religious and secular) interpret the verse the same; some commenters note the standard Midrash on this verse, also cited in the Passover Haggadah, and explicitly declare it as non-peshat. Yet Rashi does not even mention the *Peshat* and only presents the *Midrash*. Thus this example affords an excellent illustration of applying the Rashiyomi techniques to uncover the *peshat*. .

AX.2 Review – Puns: To properly understand the verse we will need some prerequisites; perhaps readers are already familiar with them. First we review the idea of *puns* as *peshat*, the *instant spontaneous and natural flow and response to a verse*. We use the *roisen example* repeated in Figure X.1.

Background: Abe and Rose have been dating. They are on a dinner date.

Text: Abe says to Rose: “Pass me the Roisens”

Analysis: The deliberate misspelling (or mispronunciations of *raisins* as *roisens*) points to an author intent of a pun. Abe not only wants Rose to pass the *raisins*; Abe wants Rose to pass herself to him. We note that this is the instant natural way most native speakers would hear such a mispronunciation. Since it is an instant natural response it fulfills our definition of *peshat*. Furthermore, the example shows that a sentence can easily simultaneously have two *peshats*. The defense of this is that this is the way people speak. We have previously documented secular scholarship that many scholars consider puns a grammatical category with its own rules. The technical name for a pun based on misspelling is *metaplasmus*.

Figure X.2: Review of the *peshat* in puns.

AX.3 Review of transitive versus intransitive verbs. We recall that in all languages some verbs are *transitive* meaning the activity is *done to something*. Examples in English are *I ate the apple*; *I bought the pen*; *I tied my shoes*; *I drove an elderly person to synagogue*. Contrastively, some verbs are *intransitive*: The activity is *not done to anything*; we can think of the activity as *attribution*. Some examples are *I am happy*; *I am full*; *I am dressed for the occasion*.

AX.4 The Hebrew Verb Aleph-Beth-Daleth: Like many Hebrew verbs, meaning depends on the conjugation tense. This list illustrates major cases which is all we will need for today.

- *Active tense (Qal):* Oveyd means *lost, wandering, poor* (Ibn Ezra brings the following illustrative verses P119:176, Jr50-06; Pr31-06)

- *Intensive tense/Causative tense (hifil, piel)*: To destroy

AX.5 Dt26-05: The background is first-fruit offering. When the first fruit are harvested annually, a basket of them is taken to Jerusalem and a responsive recital is performed between the officiating Priest and the offeror. It begins as follows

Biblical text: *An Aramaean, that was lost was my father* [Jacob]; *he went down to Egypt and lived there with only a few people, but became there a big and influential nation*

Rashi text: [First we cite **Ibn Ezra** with concurrences from David Tzvi Hoffman, Chizkuni, Rabbaynu Bechayay, Ibn Caspi, Rav Hirsch] After citing that the Hebrew verb is intransitive, Ibn Ezra shows that the preferred grammatical translation is that our father Jacob, who lived in Aram, was a lost (poor) Aramaean. Ibn Ezra besides bringing verses to prove the intransitive nature of *ovayd* as well as its meaning, cites verses to show that a Jew living in Aram can rightfully be called an Aramaean.

Rashi: [Note the comma after Aramaean in the above verse (In Biblical Hebrew the cantillations form a grammatical commentary that is useful for grammatical insight). The comma doesn't belong there since the proper breaking up of the phrase is *An Aramaean that was lost, was my father* (In English you don't even need a comma but Rashi's point is that the cantillations mis-represent the verses natural meaning. Hence, Rashi is justified in treating this like any other metaplasmus; and interprets it as a pun. David Tzvi Hoffman, Rav Hirsch, and the Ktav VeKabbalah in their commentaries also cite the grammatical cantillations]

An Aramaean [Laban] (intended) destroyed my father [So the pun would point to a different rendition of the verb consistent with the pause after Aramaean]

[Rashi continues since Laban did not actually (succeed) in destroying Jacob.] Since he **intended** to destroy, God [in this text] acts as if he actually accomplished the task. Because God accounts to the non-Jewish nations thought as deed.

Color code:

Blue – *Peshat*, that is, the instant spontaneous reaction of a listener to this verse

Green – *Derash activity*; the *process* by which the spontaneity of the pun is justified. Note: The actual pun is not *derash* but *peshat*. But to defend this we need some analysis.

Red – Moral exhortational material directed at the Jews of his time who lived in persecution. Rashi hopes to uplift their spirits by the statement which attacks non-Jewish nations who have evil intentions on Jews. NOTE: Rashi here is not *peshat*; since throughout the Bible and in fact in all languages a declarative one can sometimes be used to indicate the subjunctive tone, *intent*.

Figure X.5: Biblical text, *peshat* and *pun*. Further elaboration is found in the text.

AX.6 Other Commenters: The mantra we have advocated throughout the Rashiyomi series is that

other commenters were unaware of some of the more advanced methods of *peshat* such as the method of *puns*. Had they been aware of this they would not have created spurious distinctions and weak defenses.

In this case both religious and secular scholars scratch their heads trying to make sense of the Midrash. We cite here several approaches.

Ibn Ezra using the intransitivity argument shows that the *derash*, *Laban the Aramaean (intended to) destroy Jacob* is not *peshat*. In a moment we shall see attempted responses.

On the secular side we have Jacob Metz, *The Aramean of Deut. 26:5*, jacobmetz.wordpress.com and M. Lockshin, *Did an Aramean Try to Destroy our Father*, TheTorah.com/arami-oved-avi. Steiner brings three opinions to try and salvage the Midrash.

- Maharal finds other Aramaic translations of *oveyd* meaning to destroy. This however does not solve the problem that *oveyd* is intransitive. His examples are not convincing.
- Heidenheim interprets *oveyd* as 3rd person masculine singular perfect *binyan Poel*; similarly Rabbi Meyuchas ben Elijah also interprets *oved* as *Poel*. They then invent a sort of new grammatical conjugation which “solves” the problem. The simplest refutation of this is that throughout Tanakh, *ovayd* is a participle meaning lost. There is also not sufficient evidence that if *oveyd* was *binyan poel* that it would mean to destroy [Although Steiner does not mention this the Ketav Vekaballah commentary also tries to “create” a new grammatical tense..
- Ehrlich and Finklestein, hint at a *kri-ketiv* solution, “The rabbis read the text as *ibad*”. Steiner himself objects to this since we do not find the midrashic formulation *do not read oveyd but read ibad*.

Among classical commenters we have the following:

- Rabbi Yehuda Ibn Bilam says the Chazal Derash is not necessary
- Rabbaynu Bechayay simply states “The *Peshat* (of Ibn Ezra) is inconsistent with the Midrash of Chazal (found in the Haggadah)”
- Ralbag and Malbim try to twist the *peshat* and *derash* together: “*My father was a lost (poor) Aramaean*; clearly this is Laban’s fault and doing.”
- Hoffman cites Heidenheims attempt to create a new grammatical tense and notes that it just doesn’t work out
- We close with the Gur Aryeh. This commentary shows how ignorance of method leads to name calling and midrash wars. Commenting on Ibn Ezra’s refutation of the Midrash, Gur Aryeh states
 - o He [Ibn Ezra] tried to refute the sages! But he burdened them with a needle burden

and burdened himself with a thousand camel-loads of problems. Indeed, this question the Ibn Ezra asks can be answered in numerous ways. For example, we could translate the verse as follows:

- The Aramaean (Laban) was the source of the lostness of the my father.
- Our response to this of course is that the text does not use the word *lostness* but says the Aramaean was lost.

We have brought all these commentaries and discussions to illustrate our main point: Without a thorough understanding of method, including the modern theory of figures of speech and puns, we are forced to see *peshat* and *pun* disagreeing with each other; this leads to some fabricating texts, or fabricating new grammatical categories, or just fabrication an artificial *peshat* – *derash* dichotomy. It also leads to name calling and wonderment at the texts. Finally it leads to the idea that Rashis statement that he is only interested in the *peshat* is a statement of intent not actuality.

All this is not necessary. As we have shown, the *Lost Aramaean* midrash is as sound as the *pass me the Roisens* example. It is the spontaneous instant reaction of native speakers. It points to bounciness and dynamic living informality of the biblical text which can communicate on several layers all in harmony.