

## ParShaT *SheLaCh* - One Pager Series

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**Rashi #1: Biblical Text: Nu14-04a** [Background: The spies have just told the Jewish people that Israel can't be conquered. The people express unhappiness. The text continues] *And people said to each other, "Let us give a head and return to Egypt."*

**Rashi Text:** *Give a head:* (I) [The meaning is ] like the Aramaic translation: "Let us appoint a leader." (II) And our sages say it is a language of idolatry.

**Rashiyomi explanation:** There are two Rashi comments as shown. In the first comment (I), Rashi employs the *Figure of Speech* exegetical pillar; the word *head* in Hebrew like the word *head* in English, is a *Figure of speech* indicating a leader. Although the meaning of *head* as *leader* is well known, this verse has the verb *give*, it says *give a head*. Rashi simply explains that if *head=leader*, *give a head = appoint a leader*.

**Figure of Speech is the key:** It is important to emphasize that the true reason for the Rashi comment is the *figure of speech*: *head=leader*, *give a head = appoint a leader*. Both Rashi and this newsletter often try to explain how these idioms arose; but how they arose is not the core of the Rashi comment; the core of the Rashi comment, the *instantness of response*, the *peshat*, is the fact of the Figure of Speech.

**A possible derivation:** Rashi employs the synecdoche and metonymy Figures of Speech which allow things to be named by good examples related to them, for example, *honey* refers to anything sweet. When dealing with gangs or military raids, very often the leader is on top (at the *head*) of the configuration, leading the way, and therefore looks like the *head*. Additionally, the choice of the verb *give a head* would correspond to the typical *speech* upon election, *you are privileged to receive the honor of leading us* (that is it is a *gift*). As already commented, in English also, *appoint a head* instantly and spontaneously evokes a response: *appoint a leader*. That is the *peshat*. *Why head* should mean leader is however speculative.

**Rashi II, head = idolatry:** In the second Rashi comment (II), Rashi *appears* to be making a homily, a derash, for Rashi says that *head* is a Figure of Speech, an idiom, meaning *idolatry*. But of the three hundred occurrences of *rosh* in the Bible, none of them refers to *idolatry*. It therefore seems clear that Rashi is involved in homily! A further argument can be formulated using the concepts of many academic scholars who explain that the *peshat* is the meaning consistent with the context while the homily is a stand alone meaning having nothing to do with context. The context here is rebellion and new leadership!!

**Context, a 2-way street:** We have brought this Rashi to show how the *context* argument is very tricky. It frequently leads to classifying the true *peshat* as homily and the true homily as *peshat*. The context here, is the context of the Jews being dissatisfied with their current leadership and rebelling. Unfortunately, this is not the only time this happens in the Bible. In fact, in Ex32 when the people saw that Moses was not returning from his ascent to the mountain to receive prophecies to lead the people, it says, *the nation gathered around Aaron and said to him: make us a god that will go before us because regarding this man Moses who took us out of Egypt, we don't know what happened to him*. In other words, Ex32 identifies rebellion, not with election of a new leader, but with creation of a new god. And therefore, context, the context of rebellions, requires that we interpret this passage similarly; *head* would refer to a *god leader*. While it is true that we never find that *head* means *idolatry*, Rashi argues that context takes precedence over other usages and it is preferable to coin a new term *head means idolatry*, rather than say they wanted human leadership, which is inconsistent with the context.

**Context justifies coining terms!** Rashi here follows a consistent approach of letting context suggest new meanings to words. We find an important other example at Ex13-18 where it says that when the Jews left Egypt, *they left fifthed*. The Hebrew word used, *chamushim*, always means armed. Nevertheless, and surprisingly, Rashi interprets *fifthed* as meaning *one fifth*, or 20%, and says *only 20% of the Jews left Egypt; the other 80% died in the plague of darkness because they didn't fully believe in God*. Here too, Rashi overrides a known meaning of a word form based on the context and coins a new term justifying inferring midrash which otherwise would look quite homiletic. The context here is supplied by the previous verse which states *when Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them through Philistine territory even though it was nearer lest the people regret leaving when they say war (warrish nations) and (want to ) return to Egypt*. We have here an explicit context that the Jews, at the time slaves, had a fear of war, a fear great enough to want to make them return to Egypt. Rightfully Rashi says, how then can the very next verse say they left *armed* when the sight of weapons scared them? Therefore, both for the word *fifthed* and the phrase *give a head* Rashi coins a new meaning to justify consistency with context.