

ParShaT *EyQueV* - One Pager Series

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Rashi #1,#2: Biblical Text: Dt07-12a,b: It will be, that on the heels of intensively listening to these civil laws, you will guard them, and perform them, [Rashi: that] God will guard for you the covenant and kindness that he swore to your forefathers.

Rashi text #1: on the heels of: If you listen to the light commandments that a person tramples on with his heels.

Rashi text #2: Rashi, as already indicated in the translation, inserts the transition word, *that*. A person reading this sentence may be bewildered where the condition ends, and the consequence begins. The many phrases used: i) listen to these laws, ii) guard them, iii) perform them, iv) God will guard the covenant and kindness he promised can confuse the reader. Rashi explains that the proper way to read the sentence is that *if you do i) ii) and iii) then iv) will happen*. Rashi comments will sometimes simply clarify the *organization* of a difficult text.

How Not to Read Rashi #1: The traditional approach to Rashi is to see him as non-scholarly. Rashi *appears* to be making a pun on *heel*. Rashi seems to take the phrase *on the heels of* and connects it with light commandments which a person tramples on so to speak with his *heels*. Such puns are cute and punchy; something entertaining. But they are not scholarly. The people who read Rashi this way point to the text of Rashi which connects *heel* with light commandments trampled on by the *heel*. They say that this proves that the pun motivated Rashi.

A Better Way to Read Rashi: True, Rashi *expressed himself* in a non-scholarly form. He did not want to be known as Dr. Academic. He wanted to reach the masses. This is totally analogous to the English pun, *The word principal refers to a person who is your pal; it does not refer to an abstract concept like principles*. Now that is a silly pun. Not all principals are pals! The real meaning that principal refers to a person is not because of the last 3 letters in its spelling but rather because of dictionary usage. So Rashi is certainly perfectly justified in using a pun to *express* himself and help people remember. But there is no reason to think that he believes that to be the real reason. Those who oppose this view will say “But Rashi explicitly says *these are the commandments that people trample on with their heels*.” So what!? The English teacher explicitly says, “*Principal* is a person because it ends in *pal*.” This A is B because C form can refer to meaning; but is also can refer to a mnemonic. There is no justification in interpreting Rashi as really believing this.

The real reason Rashi made his comment, the reason that has substance and bite, is because the verse said *if you intensively listen*. Now Rashi sounds mature and professional. *If you intensively listen: Rashi: If you listen even to the light commandments which people trample on with their heels and say they are not so important. Notice how much better this sounds.*

Intensively? That does sound reasonable. But where does the word *intensively* come from. It is not in the standard English translations. To understand why I translated the verse with *intensively* and then explained Rashi with *intensively*, we have to review grammar. The root Shin-Mem-Ayin means *to listen*. The conjugation Tauv-Shim-Mem-Ayin-vav, is plural 2nd person future: *if you will listen*. But the Hebrew text has a terminal nun: Tauv-Shim-Mem-Ayin-vav-nun. Not *tishmeu* but *tishmeun!* This terminal *nun* is known as the *nun intensificum* or *paragogic nun*; some grammarians interpret it to mean *intensity*. I argue that Rashi followed this grammatical interpretation. He interpreted the *terminal nun* to mean intensity and then explained *what* the intensity refers to: It refers to listening *even to the light commandments*.

Some grammarians? I said some grammarians believe that the terminal nun means intensity. Other grammarians say it has no meaning. It is just a beautification in pronunciation. Instead of saying *tishmeu* you prolong the last syllable and say *tishmeun*. The reason for this controversy lies in the biblical text. It is not always clear how *intensity* fits in with the verse. For that reasons some grammarians shrug their shoulders and say it has no meaning.

An Illustrative Example: When Abraham prayed to God to spare Sodom and Amorah he at one point says *Perhaps you will intensively find 40 people in the city who are righteous. Will you then destroy it (And God said: If I find 40, I will not destroy it*. How does *intensively* fit in here? I would argue it does fit in. Abraham said: “Maybe you will find 40 righteous who are not openly righteous but righteous in hiding (because they are afraid to be public). If you *intensively* find 40 righteous (where *intensively* means righteous in hiding) will that suffice to save the city?

Grammar and meaning: Notice in this example how the grammar led to a new understanding, new nuances of the biblical text. Without applying this grammatical principle, the text would be drier with less life.