

ParShaT *Lech Lechah*- One Pager Series

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[Background: We devote this year's issues to defenses of Rashi from other commentators and bible scholars. Today we explain a frequent misunderstanding of Rashi]

Rashi #1,2,3 Biblical Text: Gn13-13a,b,c *The citizens of Sodom were very 1) evil [Rashi: Sins of the body] 2) and sinful [Rashi: Monetary crimes]) 3) To God [Rashi: The deliberately did sins contrary to religious law to express contempt of God]*

Rashi: (1,2) Rashi's translations are embedded in the text in courier font.

Modern Scholarship: Modern Rashi scholars include people like Grossman (2012), Cohen(2003, 2021), Kugel (1981), Halivni (1991) all of whom have written books on Rashi or the Bible, many other modern scholars, and even (in the matter we are discussing) several Jewish scholars like Ibn Ezra and Rashbam, members of the *peshat* school. Kugel coined the term *omnisignificance* to explain their criticism which we apply to the above Rashi: "*There is no basis to say that evil = bodily sin and sin=monetary sin as Rashi says. In other words, the verse is simply saying that the Sodomites were sinful. However the Rabbis who believed in the Divine origin of the Torah, consequently, believed that every word in the Torah must have some significance (hence the name-omni-significant, everything is significant) and read into the text* (a phrase coined by Halivni) *interpretations which weren't there.*"

Rashiyomi comment: This position is totally incorrect: #1) The Rashi can be defended without recourse to the Divine authorship of the Torah; #2) The argument that since the Torah is divine, therefore, every word must have some meaning is rejected by both the Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Akivah schools who believed the Torah spoke in human terms. Many modern legal scholars regard the Torah as casuistic, a legal code based on illustrative cases, showing that every word need not have significance. #3) Principles of parallel constructions (in fact explained by Kugel himself) show how to see the Rashi comment as the natural meaning of the text, the meaning heard by listeners in the Bible and Rashi's time.

Parallelism: Parallelism is a grammatical style. It can be recognized by consecutive (or distant) biblical phrases which mean more or less the same thing but use slightly different words. The Figure illustrates the parallelism

The Sodomites were very

Evil

Sinful to God

Gn13-13 written in parallel form showing two phrases *evil* and *sinful to God* with similar meaning but different words.

How not to interpret parallelism: *Parallelism* is an interpretive method distinct from *dictionary meaning*. It appears that the Rashi comments, *evil=bodily sin*, and *sinful to God = monetary sin*, and *the phrase to God present in one of the two parallel clauses but not the other = willfully rebellious*, are statements of *meaning*. If this interpretive approach is taken, then the critique of academic scholars is correct. It is simply not true that *evil* means *bodily sin* and *sinful* means *monetary sin*.

How to read parallelism #1: First, the climactic style by itself *endows and creates* meaning. It is the bundled parallel phrase *evil and sinful* which as a whole means *sinful in all respects*, for which *bodily and monetarily* is but one illustrative example. The Rashi should be read as saying: *evil and sinful Totally sinful in all respects including bodily and monetarily*. Rashi was explaining the *entire phrase* not *it's individual words*. As to the assertion that climax *endows and creates* meaning consider the Rashi statement on the verse *please don't go: Let her stay with us 1) days or 2) a tenful*. Rashi, because of the principle of climax interprets *days as a year* and *tenful* as ten months. In other words, they asked that she be allowed to stay an entire year *but if not* at least 10 months (Gn24-52). Rashi actually justifies his derivation by an explicit appeal to parallelism.

How to read parallelism #2: In the figure above, *to God* occurs in the 2nd clause but not the 1st. This type of *present in one but not the other* creates *emphasis*. It is as if the phrase was underlined or bolded. Hence the Rashi comment *to God* means *intentionally rebellious*. This is not *omnisignificant* but simply the meaning of the text.