

ParShaT *VaEthChaNaN* One Pager Series

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[Background: We continue to bring controversies between Rashi and either academic scholars or other Jewish commentaries. Today we bring a Rashi Ramban controversy and show they were each speaking about different aspects of the text.]

Rashi #1 Biblical Text: Dt04-06:40

Verse	Beginning word	Rest of paragraph	Commentator	Footnote
Dt04-06	Watch commandments	You will be known as a wise nation	Rashi	A
Dt04-09	Watch commandments	Don't forget the Sinaitic revelation; you personally heard from God; teach it to your children	Ramban	B
Dt04-15	Watch commandments	No idolatry: animal, bird, insect, fish, sun, moon, stars	Rashiyomi	C
Dt04-23	Watch commandments	Don't forget lest you wax old in land & deviate to idols; but you can repent	Rashiyomi	D
Dt04-40	Watch commandments			

Background: Five times in Dt04 we find a verse admonishing the Jews to be very careful and watch the commandments and themselves. The use of a repeating keyword is one way to mark off the beginning and end of biblical paragraphs. In English we use either indentation or surrounding white space. Amos Chacham has particularly emphasized this. Modern scholarship also acknowledges this; the call repeating keywords *semantic markers*., since they mark off paragraphs. In the rest of this one pager we discuss the unique contributions of each paragraph and the commentator associated with it. It is most interesting that this particular type of exegesis is uncommon in the Yeshiva world where they focus more on a contract-law type of analysis of Rashi comments.

(A) Rashi Text: When you watch the commandments, you will be known as a wise nation. But if you desert the commandments you will be known as a foolish nation.

(B) Ramban Text: After citing Rashi, Ramban says: This (what Rashi said) is not correct. Rather, the biblical text is warning us to remember that we personally witnessed the revelation and it is important to preserve this moment by transmitting to our descendants. Ramban further explains, "If we received the Torah from Moses then another prophet might create doubts in our mind; but since we received the Torah directly from God, we will not have doubts.

The Ramban correctly described paragraph (B). However, he overlooked that there are four paragraphs and Rashi explained paragraph (A).

(C) Rashiyomi: The 3rd paragraph deals with idolatry. This is the only place in the entire Bible where the 7 types of items that could be worshipped are mentioned. We should clarify that each idolatry has an appeal to people who have deficiencies in that area. For example, the Ba'al deity, with ba'al meaning ownership, might have appeal to someone in poverty. The Pe'or deity, pe'or meaning to uncover, might have appeal to someone for whom the religious restrictions of religion are causing him or her problems. The Bible therefore asks us to watch ourselves as we experience various weaknesses in life and be aware that the solution lies in our own religion, not the religion of others.

(D) Rashiyomi: Most people scoff at the idea of idolatry: "I would never worship idols; that is ridiculous." Paragraph (D) describes "how it happens." It doesn't happen when the nation is just forming and one is full of energy and enthusiasm. It rather could happen when as the verse says, "when you have descendants and wax old in the land." At that point, you have security in possession of your land. Maybe (as other biblical passages describe) you create treaties with other nations and in so doing tolerate their idolatrous beliefs at joint ceremonies. Or, maybe you now socialize with other nations and get involved and thereby tolerate beliefs of the people you get involved with.

Paragraph D also emphasizes that if you sin you have the right to repent and return to God.