

GREAT BIBLICAL COMMENTATORS
By Dr. Avigail Rock

Dedicated in memory of Mrs Irene Schenker z”l
by Zachary Schenker

Lecture #6C:
Rashi (Part III) —
The Moral and Educational Philosophy of Rashi (Conclusion)

E. PRAISE AND AFFECTION FOR THE JEWISH PEOPLE

Rashi has a great affection not only for the ancestors of the Jewish people, but for Israel as a nation as well, and he succeeds in finding points in their favor even when their sins are spelled out in the verse.

One example is in the passage of the blasphemer (*Vayikra* 23:10-12). Rashi praises the nation of Israel, deducing that if the verse finds it worthwhile to mention the name of his mother — “And his mother’s name was Shelomit, daughter of Divri, of the tribe of Dan” (*ibid.* v. 11) — it must be that she was unusual:

“His mother’s name was Shelomit the daughter of Divri” — this is to praise Israel. The verse publicizes this one to let us know that she alone was involved in sexual immorality.

An additional example may be found in *Devarim* 32:43, where the Torah states, “Nations, sing out praise for His people.” Rashi explains:

At that time, the nations will praise Israel, saying: You see, now, what the praise of this nation is. For they clung to the Holy One, Blessed be He, through all the sufferings that befell them, and they did not forsake Him! They knew His goodness and His praise.¹

¹ It is worth adding the innovation of Rav Mordechai Breuer ([Megadim 28 \(5758\), pp. 45-72](#)) concerning Rashi’s method in his introductory comments to each volume of the Pentateuch:

It appears that Rashi has a clear methodology here. Rashi introduces his commentary to each volume of the Pentateuch by singing the praises of Israel: proving their righteousness (*Bereishit*), revealing how beloved they are (*Shemot, Vayikra, Bamidbar*) or defending their honor (*Devarim*). There is a great significance to this method of Rashi

It is difficult not to see in this approbation of the nation of Israel, who “clung to the Holy One, Blessed be He, through all the sufferings that befell them,” a reassuring comment which comes to bolster his contemporaries. Rashi lived in a period in which the Church pointed to the success and power of Christendom, on the one hand, and the low situation of the Jews, on the other hand, as a divine sign of the rightness of the Christian viewpoint. Through his commentary, Rashi strengthens his coreligionists, who are overwhelmed and beleaguered by their current situation, reassuring them that, in the future, the nations of the world will praise the nation of Israel because they have not been seduced into apostasy.

F. LOVE OF THE LAND OF ISRAEL

This lesson would be incomplete without noting Rashi’s great affection for the Land of Israel. Rashi attributes many great qualities to the Land of Israel, whether physical or spiritual, and sometimes they even dovetail with each other.

The terms *aliya* (ascent) and *yerida* (descent) have become the common terms for, respectively, immigration to and emigration from the land of Israel. It is logical to assume that this use of the term *aliya*, instead of defining mere upward motion, became rooted in the Hebrew language because of Rashi’s many comments describing Israel as “above” all other lands, which should be seen as a physical and spiritual description combined. Below are a number of examples.

After Yosef identifies himself to his brothers, he says (*Bereishit* 45:9), “Hurry and **go up** to my father.” Rashi explains: “The Land of Israel is higher than all other lands.” In *Shemot* 33:1, God says to Moshe, “Go, **go up** from this, you and the people which you brought up from the land of Egypt, to the land which I swore...” Rashi explains: “The Land of Israel is higher than all other lands; this is why He said, ‘Go up.’”

The same applies in the reverse; leaving the land of Israel is described to this very day with the term *yerida*. This also follows in Rashi’s footsteps. On the verse, “And they will bring down to us” (*Devarim* 1:25), Rashi explains: “This tells us that the Land of Israel is higher than all other lands.”

Rashi believes that the Land of Israel has higher spiritual standards than other lands. In *Vayikra* 18:28, the verse says that the Land will vomit out those who defile it, and Rashi explains: “The Land of Israel does not suffer sinners.” The Land itself, as it were, is not capable of containing evildoers, and

throughout his commentary. After all, the Holy One, Blessed be He, Israel, and His Torah are one. Thus, one who seeks to interpret the Torah must always have Israel uppermost in his mind. Only Israel received and fulfilled the Torah, and they still fulfill it until to this very day. Israel is the sole subject of the Torah, and they alone are what it deals with, from the beginning to the end.

consequently, it vomits them out. Similarly, because of the high spiritual level of the Land of Israel, Rashi determines that one who lives outside of Israel is likened to an idol worshipper, while one who lives in the Land of Israel makes the God of Israel his. In *Vayikra* 25:38, the verse states: “I am the Lord, your God, Who took you out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan, to be a God to you.” Rashi explains: “For I am a God to anyone who lives in the Land of Israel, but anyone who leaves it is like one who worships idols.”

Rashi emphasizes the physical advantages of the Land of Israel as well. In his commentary to *Bamidbar* 13:22, “Now Chevron had been built seven years before Tzoan of Egypt,” Rashi argues that the simple meaning of the verse is untenable, since the Egyptians are an older people than the Canaanites. Instead, he explains that even the most inferior part of the Land of Israel, Chevron, is seven times as good as the finest part of Egypt:

This is meant to teach you the excellence of the Land of Israel, for there is no place in the Land of Israel rockier than Chevron, which is why it was designated for a burial ground. On the other hand, there is no country in the world as superb as Egypt, as it says, “It was like God’s garden, like the land of Egypt” (*Bereishit* 13: 10). Furthermore, Tzoan is the best part of Egypt, for the residence of the kings is situated there, as it says, “For his princes were in Tzoan” (*Yeshayahu* 30:4). Yet Chevron was superior to it seven times over.

Similarly, Rashi comments on the words of the verse in *Devarim* (11:10) stating that the land of Israel “is not like the land of Egypt,” noting: “Rather, it is better than it.”

Rashi emphasizes that these superior qualities of the Land of Israel are known not only to the Jewish People, but even to the nations of the world. This is what he writes earlier in *Devarim* (3:9), where the Torah notes that other nations have their own name for Mount Hermon: “The Sidonians call Hermon Sirion, while the Amorites call it Senir.”

“The Sidonians call Hermon...” — but in another passage, it states, “Until Mount Sion, which is Hermon” (*Devarim* 4:48). So we see that it had four names [Hermon, Sirion, Senir, and Sion]. Why was it necessary for all of them to be written? To express the praise of the Land of Israel, that there were four kingdoms taking pride in it — one saying, “It shall be called by my name,” and another saying, “It shall be called by my name.”

A similar concept arises one more time in *Devarim*, towards the end (33:17). There, Moshe is blessing the tribe of Yosef: “The firstborn of his ox is his glory, and the horns of the aurochs are his horns; with them he will gore together the ends of the earth.” According to Rashi, the verse constitutes a prophecy describing the impending conquest of the land of Israel by Yehoshua. Once

again, Rashi finds the opportunity here to weave the message of the superiority of the Land of Israel into his commentary, despite the fact that there is no difficulty in the verse that requires the introduction of aggadic material:

“The ends of the earth” — that is, the thirty-one kings.² Is it possible that these kings were all from the Land of Israel? Rather, there was not one king or ruler who did not acquire for himself a palace and a holding in the land of Israel. This is because the Land of Israel was considered distinguished by all of them, as it is said, “The finest inheritance of the hosts of nations” (*Yirmeyahu* 3:19).

In other words, every king throughout the world (“the ends of the earth”) wanted to own real estate in the Land of Israel because of its universal importance.

G. APPENDIX — RASHI’S DICTA

Having reached the end of this part, I wish to list a number of expressions and maxims which have become a treasured part of the Hebrew language because of Rashi’s commentary. Here as well, I will stress that Rashi did not compose these expressions, but the fact that Rashi uses these aphorisms has made them extremely popular. I bring here only a small sample of these dicta:

- Say part of one’s praise in his presence, all of it outside of his presence (*Bereishit* 7:1).
- Woe to a villain, woe to his neighbor (*Bamidbar* 3:29)
- A cloak all of blue wool (*Bamidbar* 16:1).³
- What does the sabbatical year have to do with Mt. Sinai? (*Vayikra* 25:1).⁴
- For Rachel, your younger daughter (following Rashi, *Bereishit* 29:18).⁵

² Chapter 12 of the Book of *Yehoshua* lists thirty-one Canaanite kings whom he defeated in order to conquer the Land of Israel.

³ Korach, whose rebellion is described in *Bamidbar* 16 (immediately following the commandment to the Israelites to make fringes, containing a thread of blue, on the edges of their garments) uses the following tactic:

He dressed them with cloaks made entirely of blue wool. They came and stood before Moses and asked him, “Does a cloak made entirely of blue wool require fringes, or is it exempt?” He replied, “It does require fringes.” They began laughing at him. “Can it be that one string of blue wool fulfills the obligation for a cloak made of any other color, while this one, which is made entirely of blue wool, cannot exempt itself?”

⁴ This is a phrase which describes a non-sequitur in the biblical text. In this case, it is the introduction to *Vayikra* 25, which deals with the sabbatical and jubilee years. It opens with, “And God spoke to Moshe on Mount Sinai, saying,” instead of the usual, “And God spoke to Moshe, saying.”

⁵ This is a phrase which describes the apparently redundant, legalistic terminology of contracts and the like. In this verse, Yaakov strikes a deal with Lavan: “I will work for you for seven years for Rachel, your younger daughter.” Ostensibly, he could have merely said “for Rachel.” Rashi explains:

- Two kings cannot share the same crown (*Bereishit* 1:16).
- One in the mouth and one in the heart (*Bereishit* 37:4).⁶
- Each word according to its properties (Rashi, *Bereishit* 3:8, based on *Mishlei* 25:11).⁷
- Do not criticize your fellow for a blemish that you have (*Shemot* 22:20)
- When you see something like this, sanctify it (*Shemot* 12:2).⁸
- The grandfather of all impurity (*Bamidbar* 19:22).

Translated by Rav Yoseif Bloch

“For Rachel, your younger daughter” — Why were all these signs necessary? Since Yaakov knew that Lavan was a deceiver, he said to him, “I will work for you for Rachel;” lest you substitute some other Rachel from the street, it states explicitly: “Your daughter;” lest you say, “I will change her name to Leah, and I will change Leah’s name to Rachel,” it states explicitly: “Your younger [daughter].”

⁶ This is an expression of hypocrisy or duplicity.

⁷ In other words, a word must be defined on its own terms, literally rather than homiletically.

⁸ This expression refers to an unequivocal, unquestionable teaching. The first commandment given to Israel in Egypt is: “This new moon shall mark for you the beginning of the months.” Rashi is troubled by the word “this,” and he explains:

Moshe had some difficulty understanding the crescent of the new moon, at what size it must appear before it is fit for sanctification. So He showed him with His finger the moon in the sky and said to him, “When you see something like this, sanctify it.”