

GREAT BIBLICAL COMMENTATORS

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Lecture #20: The Chizkuni — R. Chizkiya ben Manoach

A. Introduction

Unfortunately, we do not know the details of the Chizkuni's life. Where and when he lived is a matter of much debate. The contemporary critical consensus is that the Chizkuni wrote his work around the middle of the thirteenth century, and apparently he came from Northern France.

The Chizkuni wrote a comprehensive commentary on the Torah, and his style is very clear and accessible. He himself invented the name "Chizkuni," an allusion to his name, Chizkiya. This is what he writes in the introductory poem to the commentary:

I have chosen the name "Chizkuni" amidst Israel
So that its readers will remember me well.

It appears that the Chizkuni had three aims in composing his commentary on the Torah:¹

- 1) To collect all the explanations in keeping with the *peshat* from the works of the commentators who preceded him.
- 2) To explain Rashi's commentary.
- 3) To write an independent commentary on the Torah.

We will now explicate and demonstrate these aims.

B. The Chizkuni as a Collector

In his introductory poem, the Chizkuni describes the eclectic character of his composition. At first, he specifies his Midrashic sources, which he calls "the commentaries on the Torah":

And I came to *Bereishit Rabba*, *Mekhilta*, and *Sifra*
Sifri, *Tanchuma*, and *Pesikta*, the commentaries on the Torah.

1 As for the other aims of the composition, see Yosef Priel, "*Darko Ha-Parshanit shel R. Chizkiya ben Manoach (Chizkuni) Be-Feirusho La-Torah*" (doctoral dissertation, Bar-Ilan University, 5770), pp. 12-14.

In the next section, R. Chizkiya explains the work of collecting from the various biblical commentators:

To find commentaries of the Five Books, I swam to every port,
And I have found commentaries, twenty of every sort.
I have taken the choicest parts from them,² according to my ability,
Their very clear writing and their felicitous utility.
Thus, I have found words of delight and peace to relate;
They are set like emerald, sapphire, and diamond on the breastplate...

This tells us that the Chizkuni journeyed to many countries with the aim of finding different commentaries on the Torah, and he found twenty of them. These commentaries represent a wide array of biblical exegesis: Spanish, Italian, and French scholars, in addition to the Sages' exegesis. From among all of the commentaries that he gathered, he selected the finest explanations in his view. At times, he quotes them verbatim, while at other times, he adapts the commentary using his own words.

When the Chizkuni cites a Midrashic source or later work, he normally omits the name of the commentator, whether because it is not always clear who originally expressed the idea or because of a concern of bias — the reader may prefer the idea of a certain distinguished commentator over the explanation of a less well-known commentator. This is what he writes in his introductory poem (invoking *Kohelet* 12:11):

Therefore, my kidneys have counseled me and my heart has filled me...
To cover the source of things, to forestall
Mentioning them together, glorifying the great with the small,
Lest the wisdom of the lowly be disdained
And the utterance of the high before the great be maintained.
For my words are the wisdom of the wise, unifying the riven;
Truly, by one Shepherd they have been given...

Frequently, the Chizkuni will cite two or three commentaries that he likes on one verse. Moreover, for the most part, he chooses a comment in which there is some educational message. Thus, for example, the Chizkuni presents three different commentaries for the prohibition of plowing with an ox and donkey together (*Devarim* 22:10). These three commentaries are taken from three different sources, some of them slightly adapted for greater clarity:

For the ox chews its cud, but the donkey does not chew its cud, so this one eats while the other one suffers, and this is animal torture.³

² In other words, he has chosen the commentaries that seem to be the finest in his view. He is paraphrasing the verse (*Bamidbar* 18:30): "And you shall say to them, 'When you lift up the choicest part from it, it will be considered for the Levites like the yield of the threshing-floor and the yield of the wine-press.'" Many other verses use this terminology as well, using the term "*chelev*," which literally means "fat," to indicate the most desirable or prestigious part.

³ The Tosafists (*ad loc.*) write: "For the ox chews its cud, and the donkey is pained when it hears the ox eat."

Alternatively, because the ox is the king of the domesticated animals and its image is upon⁴ the Throne of Glory, while the donkey is a despised animal; thus, they are not complementary.⁵

Alternatively, God's mercies are upon all of His creations, and the donkey does not have the strength of the ox.⁶

C. The Chizkuni as a Supercommentary on Rashi

As we saw above, the Chizkuni has an additional exegetical aim aside from collecting various commentaries; he seeks to explicate Rashi's commentary, and he thus may be seen as a super-commentary. This is what he writes in his introductory poem about his relationship to Rashi's explanation:

I come only to add to the words known as Rabbeinu Shelomo's,
Not to undermine them. May God grant him peace in his repose!

This makes the Chizkuni one of the first of Rashi's super-commentaries. Despite the general rule that the Chizkuni does not quote commentators by name, Rashi is an exception; Rashi's commentaries are quoted by name in hundreds of places throughout the Chizkuni's commentary.

The stated aim of the Chizkuni is that he merely comes "to add" Rashi's commentary, or to answer some difficulty that may arise therein. This is similar to the approach of the Tosafists in their Talmudic commentary; indeed, "*tosafot*" literally means "addenda." Therefore, Rashi's words are always their point of departure.

Sarah Yefet notes this linguistic phenomenon, which developed toward the end of the 12th century:

In parallel to the appearance of the Tosafot, addressing Rashi's Talmudic commentary, and perhaps influenced by this phenomenon, Rashi's commentary itself become a subject of study. The biblical text and Rashi's commentary became one system, studied as one entity, and the commentator's attention was directed not only to the text and the questions it raises, but Rashi's commentary as well. Do Rashi's words stand up to criticism? Is he consistent? ...These and similar questions were raised.⁷

4 According to *Yechezkel* 1:10; the original text is "And upon its image is the Throne of Glory," and apparently this is a printer's error.

5 I have not found a source for this commentary. The idea that the ox is the king of the domesticated animals appears on *Chagiga* 13b.

6 He is quoting ibn Ezra's explanation.

7 "*Chizkuni La-Torah*" in *Sefer Ha-Yovel La-Rav Mordechai Breuer* (Jerusalem, 5752), p. 108.

As we shall see in the following examples, the Chizkuni's "addition" to Rashi's commentary is expressed in a number of ways.

1. Explaining by changing or adding.

On the verse, "When a stranger sojourns with you in your land... you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (*Vayikra* 19:33-34), the Chizkuni cites Rashi: "Do not accuse your fellow with your own defect." However, the words of Rashi are unclear, and therefore the Chizkuni adds and explains:

And in Egypt, the Israelites worshipped idols, as it says in the book of *Yehoshua* (24:14): "Remove the gods which your fathers worshipped on the other side of the river and in Egypt."

In other words, the blemish is not that we were also strangers in a foreign land (Egypt), as one might have understood Rashi, but that we too, as strangers, were idol worshippers.

The Chizkuni sometimes add the psychology behind a certain explanation that Rashi brings. For example, on the words of the chief butler to Pharaoh describing Yosef, "And there was with us a Hebrew youth, a slave" (*Bereishit* 41:12), Rashi explains:

Cursed are the evil, for their good is incomplete; he mentions him with contemptuous terminology.

The Chizkuni adds the motivations of the chief butler in deriding Yosef:

"A youth, a Hebrew slave" — He was afraid that he might be angry at him, that he might hate him for not mentioning as he asked him; therefore, he spoke ill of him.⁸

Alternatively, so that the king would not be angry at him that he did not tell him until this point about such a great sage such as this in his land; therefore, he derided him.

Rashi explains that the butler's words are derogatory, and the Chizkuni enhances this approach by explaining the possible motivations of the chief butler in deriding Yosef.

Another example of explaining Rashi's words and using psychology in order to understand the verses may be found in the Chizkuni's comments on the sale of Yosef. When Yehuda suggests selling Yosef, he says, "What profit is there in killing our brother and concealing his blood?" (*Bereishit* 37:26) This verse is explained by Rashi in the following way:

⁸ In other words, the butler tries to doom Yosef's chances for advancement, for if Yosef were to ascend to greatness, Yosef might punish the butler for failing to mention him and help him before this. Despite Yosef's specific request (*ibid.* 40:14), the butler had forgotten him for two years (*ibid.* v. 23).

“What profit” — what money?

“And concealing his blood?” — hiding his death.

Yehuda claims that the brothers would not gain anything from Yosef's death (“What profit is there in killing our brother?”) but what is the meaning of the continuation, “and concealing his blood?” Furthermore, what is the connection between this claim and the claim of “What profit is there”? The Chizkuni explains the intention of Rashi's words so as to present Yehuda's claims as consistent and consecutive:

For we would need to conceal and hide his death, and we cannot glory in it because of Father's distress.⁹ The custom of the world is that when a man takes revenge upon his enemy, the vengeance does not count if one does not glory in it.

If so, Yehuda's claim is that not only will they not make money from Yosef's sale (“What profit is there in killing our brother?”), but they will not even be able to savor their vengeance and to glory in this murder, for they must conceal it: “And concealing his blood?”

2. Resolving difficulties in Rashi.

The Chizkuni defends Rashi from many attacks. Generally, he introduces the question with the words, “And if you will say”¹⁰ (a common Tosafist term), and immediately after presenting the question, we find the Chizkuni's answer. For example, on the words, “And Yitzchak entreated God for his wife, because she was barren, and God was entreated of him, and Rivka his wife conceived” (*Bereishit* 25:21), Rashi explains:

“And God was entreated of him” — He allowed Himself to be entreated, placated and swayed by him. I say that every expression of entreaty is excessive supplication, and similarly we find (*Yechezkel* 8:11): “And a thick cloud of incense arose,” indicating the immensity of the ascent of smoke; “And you have multiplied your words against Me” (*ibid.* 35:13); “Whereas the kisses of an enemy are excessive” (*Mishlei* 27:6) — they seem to be too many...

The Chizkuni explains:

And if you will say, what does Rashi teach us by saying that “I say that every expression of entreaty is excessive supplication,”¹¹ but you may say that at first Rashi explains what he received from his rabbis — i.e.,

⁹ In other words, in order not to cause their father pain, they cannot publicize Yosef's killing.

¹⁰ The expression, “And if you will say” appears dozens of times, not only when the Chizkuni wants to resolve a difficulty in Rashi's commentary, but even when the Chizkuni has a problem with the verses themselves.

¹¹ In other words, Rashi explains already at the beginning of his comment that “entreaty” refers to excessive supplication, so what does he add by saying, “I say that every expression of entreaty is excessive supplication”?

“And He was entreated” indicates excessive supplication. Afterwards, he explains his own view: that every use of the root refers to supplication and excessiveness.¹²

3. Pointing out inconsistencies in Rashi’s commentary.

God asks Moshe (*Shemot* 4:11), “Who has made man’s mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, God?” Rashi cites the *Midrash Tanchuma* (*Shemot* 10), which explains this verse as relating to Moshe’s flight from Egypt:

Who made Pharaoh dumb, that he was incapable of issuing the order to kill you? And [who made] his servants deaf, so that they did not hear his commandment concerning you? And who made the executioners blind, that they did not see when you fled from the platform and escaped?

However, we find elsewhere (*ibid.* 2:15), “And Pharaoh heard of this matter, and he sought to slay Moses”:

He delivered him to the executioner to execute him, but the sword had no power over him. This what Moshe refers to when he says, “And He saved me from Pharaoh’s sword” (*ibid.* 18:4).

The Chizkuni (ch. 4) points out the contradiction in Rashi’s words:

“Or blind” — Rashi explains “And who made the executioners blind, that they did not see when you fled?” *Chazak!* For when it said above, “And Pharaoh heard,” Rashi explained this: “He delivered him to the executioner to execute him, but the sword had no power over him.”

In this context, we should explain the term “*chazak*” as it appears many times (more than seventy) in the Chizkuni’s commentary on the Torah. Literally, it means “strong,” but it is clearly meant to be some sort of acronym or abbreviation. The Chizkuni himself does not explain what this term means, but it appears that it alludes to his name, Chizkiya, and he uses this term when he has the desire to express some difficulty which he cannot explain, something along the lines of, “This requires further analysis.”¹³

D. The Chizkuni as an Independent and Original Exegete

Psychological Understanding of the Characters

12 In other words, at first Rashi explains that only the formulation, “And God was entreated” means excessive supplication; afterwards, Rashi explains that this is the meaning of other forms of the root *atar*.

13 It is interesting to note that among the seventy appearances of the word *chazak*, more than forty of them are challenges to Rashi’s explanations, which unequivocally identify the Chizkuni as a super-commentary on Rashi. For a broad discussion of this, see the essay by Yosef Ofer, “*Peirush Chizkuni La-Torah Ve-Gilgulav*,” *Megadim* 8, pp. 3-4. In my humble opinion, it may be that the meaning of the term is, “And Chizkiya finds it difficult”.

Despite the fact that the Chizkuni utilizes many commentaries for the purposes of writing his work, there are more than a few original commentaries to be found in its lines, characterized mainly by his attempt to understand reality and the motivations of the characters in each narrative. In this, the influence of Ri Bekhor Shor¹⁴ is noticeable, and the Chizkuni draws more than a few of his explanations from that exegete's work.

We may see this in his approach to the verse, "And he loved Yosef from among all of his brothers, for he was a child of his old age" (*Bereishit* 37:3). The Chizkuni explains this using psychology, dealing with an obvious question: why should Yaakov love Yosef more than his other children, including Binyamin? Is Binyamin not, in fact, the youngest of his children?

And if you will say, is Binyamin not a "child of his old age," consider that his love for Binyamin was not as deep in Yaakov's heart as his love for Yosef, because their mother died while giving birth to [Binyamin].

Similarly, the Chizkuni uses psychology to understand Yaakov's reaction to Yosef's death (*ibid.* v. 35): "All his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted and said, 'No, I shall go down to the netherworld for my son, mourning.' Thus his father wept for him." The Chizkuni makes this dependent on Yaakov's guilt over sending Yosef to his spiteful brothers:

"But he refused to be comforted" — He thought he was banished¹⁵ due to his negligence, because he sent him there.

"For my son" — On account of my son, because of the sin which I committed against my son, that I sent him to the place where I knew he was hated to death.

Another example may be found in the Chizkuni's explanation of the fact that the chief baker is impressed by the interpretation that Yosef offers to the chief butler's dream (*Bereishit* 40:16):

Were he truly a liar, he would prevaricate and procrastinate, but he did nothing of the sort; instead, he said (*ibid.* v. 12), "In another three days..."

Original Interpretations

Even when we are not talking about a psychological interpretation of the motivations of the characters in the story, the Chizkuni has some very original interpretations. One example of this is the Chizkuni's explanation of

¹⁴ See our lecture on [Ri Bekhor Shor](#).

¹⁵ The version that we have before us has "*nitrad*" (banished), but this may be a printer's error, and the word should be "*nitraf*" (torn apart). On the other hand, it may be that "*nitrad*" is a reference to a term the Sages use, "banished from the world" (e.g., Sota 4b, *Chagiga* 9b), which is a metaphor for death.

the prohibition of eating the sciatic nerve (*Bereishit* 32:33) as a punishment for Yaakov's sons, who failed to accompany their father:

By law, the sons of Yisrael deserved to be penalized and prohibited from eating the sciatic nerve due to their leaving their father alone, as it is written, "And Yaakov remained alone" (*ibid.* v. 25). Now, they were strong, and they should have waited for their father to assist him, should he need it; however, they did not accompany him, and he was injured because of this. From this point on, this will serve as reminder for them, and they will be alacritous in fulfilling the commandment of accompaniment. For this reason, Yaakov accompanied Yosef.¹⁶

An additional example is his explanation of the verse, "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen, and you shall love your fellow as yourself" (*Vayikra* 19:18). After the Chizkuni explains the nature of the prohibitions of vengeance and bearing a grudge, he explains the conclusion of the verse:

"And you shall love your fellow as yourself" — If you do so, you will love him.

In other words, according to the Chizkuni, the words, "And you shall love your fellow as yourself" do not constitute a positive command (as the *peshat* indicates), but the aim and the natural result of not taking revenge or bearing a grudge.¹⁷

Explaining According to Reality

The Chizkuni attempts to explain many verses using by examining the reality of the biblical era. We shall bring a number of examples:

¹⁶ We will see two more examples below.

¹⁷ The letter *vav* in the Torah is the conjunction, "and". "And you shall love your fellow as yourself" can be understood in one of two ways. If we take it as a separate command, the verse essentially should be translated: "You must not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen; rather, you must love your fellow as yourself." If it is meant to indicate a result, we should translate it, "You must not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people; then, you will love your fellow as yourself."

A similar example is v. 23 (*ibid.*), which literally reads, "And when you shall come into the land, and you shall plant any kind of tree for food, and you shall regard its fruit as forbidden." "And you shall plant any kind of tree for food" is clearly the continuation of the first clause, setting up the situation, while "And you shall regard its fruit as forbidden" is the command. Thus, we translate the verse: "And when you will come into the land, planting any kind of tree for food, then you must regard its fruit as forbidden."

A case in which the use of the *vav* is unclear is Yaakov's vow (*Bereishit* 28:20-22), "If God shall be with me... and I shall return to my father's house in peace, and Lord shall be my God... And of all that You give me, I shall give a full tenth to You." Are we to understand "And Lord shall be my God" as the last of the conditions of the vow ("If Lord shall be my God") or as the first of Yaakov's commitments ("Then Lord shall be my God")? See Rashi and Ramban *ad loc.*

- 1) The Chizkuni explains Avraham's name change (*Bereishit* 17:5) by putting it in the context of the ancient custom of acquiring new appellations based on one's exalted position:

The custom is to change the name of a person who ascends to greatness, and this is what we find concerning Sara;¹⁸ Yaakov;¹⁹ Yosef;²⁰ Yehoshua; Chananya, Michael and Azarya.²¹

- 2) When Yaakov comes to prove to Lavan his dedication as a shepherd, he proclaims before Lavan: "These twenty years I have been with you. Your ewes and your female goats have not miscarried, nor have I eaten the rams of your flocks" (*Bereishit* 31:38). The difficulty is that refraining from eating Lavan's flocks is exactly what is expected from Yaakov. Thus, the Chizkuni explains:

"And I have not eaten the rams of your flocks" — The custom of the shepherd was that when he would take the sheep to a distant place to find pastureland, and he could not find food to buy because he was far away from civilization, he would take from the rams of the flocks, which are not fit for reproduction, and eat them. However [Yaakov says], "I have not eaten the rams of your flocks."

In other words, the Chizkuni is detailing the standard deal for shepherds of the era: they would eat some of their flock whenever they found themselves in a place where it would be difficult to acquire food. However, Yaakov, going beyond the letter of the law, did not do so.

- 3) In *Shemot* 11:2, the Israelites are commanded to borrow from the Egyptians silver and gold vessels. The Chizkuni notes:
In place of the houses and fields and possessions which the Israelites left behind because they could not take them along, for the Israelites had estates in Egypt, as it is written (*Bereishit* 47:27), "And they took possession of it."

In other words, the legal justification for taking the Egyptians' possessions and not returning them is as compensation or a settlement for the fields that the Israelites are leaving in Egypt.²²

18 God changes her name for Sarai to Sara (*Bereishit* *ibid.* 15).

19 This refers to changing his name to "Yisrael" (*ibid.* 32:28, 35:10).

20 Pharaoh changes his name to Tzafnat Pane'ach (*ibid.* 41:45).

21 Nevukhadnetzar changes their names to Meishakh, Shadrakh and Aved Nego (*Daniel* 1:7).

22 On this comment of the Chizkuni, Nechama Leibowitz notes:

In this, the Chizkuni touches on a problem which exists in every mass emigration. It even bothers Herzl, in his book *Der Judenstaat*, as he plans the Jews' sudden departure from Europe — what can he do with all of the immovable possessions, so that their worth will not plummet? Otherwise, the Jews immigrating to their land will arrive impoverished! This difficulty of abandoning property has hit us hard in the Expulsion from Spain and all of the departures from the lands of the Diaspora, and we have seen it in our days. Nevertheless, in all of those cases, their neighbors did not lend them silver and gold vessels in exchange for

Indeed, it may be that in the final example, the Chizkuni is responding to the Christian claim that the Jewish nation stole from the Egyptians.

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Let us conclude with the Chizkuni's blessing to his readers:

I adjure you, by words of delight, each man by his name,
Not to treat this book lightly,²³ but honestly regard the same,
Whoever supports and strengthens it is worthy of praise,
And in the eyes of God, upright he stays.
May God take account of him and him bless
And in all his ways, grant him success...

Translated by Rav Yoseif Bloch

their houses and fields — neither as an outright gift nor as a loan. (*Iyunim Be-sefer Shemot*, p. 133)

²³ The Chizkuni asks his readers not to treat his work with disrespect.