

# Rashi's Choice of Words

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**R**ashi selects the words in his Torah commentary with stunning precision, not only paying keen attention to the nuance of language in the verses, but also carefully choosing his own words to express multifaceted meaning. Awareness of this allows us to appreciate the broad counterpoint within Rashi's brief comments. Three examples suffice.

## *Im Lavan Garti*

The first comes from Yaakov's message to Esav after 36 years. *Parashas VaYishlach* starts with Yaakov's communication to Esav (*Bereishis* 32:5): "*im Lavan garti va-eichar ad a'ta*," "I have resided with Lavan and have tarried until now." Rashi explains the word "*garti*" as follows:

גרתִי. לא נעשיתי שר וחשוב אלא גר. אינך כדאי לשנוא אותי על ברכת אביך שברכני הוה גביר לאחריך (לעיל כז:כט), שהרי לא נתקיימה בי (תנחומא ישן ה).  
 "I have resided." I did not become a dignitary or a notable, but a sojourner.  
 It does not befit you to hate me over the blessing of your father who blessed me: "Be a lord to your brothers" (27:29, *supra*), for it has not been fulfilled in me.

Yaakov's use of the phrase "*garti va-eichar ad a'ta*" (I have resided with Lavan and have tarried until now) – instead of the single verb "*eicharti*" (I have tarried with Lavan until now), as the Mizrachi and Levush HaOra suggest, or, even more simply, the verb "*hayisi*" (I was with Lavan until now), as the Gur Aryeh suggests – implies significance to the redundant, apparently inconsequential verb "*garti*," and prompts Rashi's interpretation of the phrase. Moreover, Rashi considers the verse's context in which Yaakov refers to Esav as "*adoni*" (my master) and to himself as "*avdecha*" (your servant). Accordingly, based on the *Midrash Tanchuma Yashan*, Rashi concludes that

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Yaakov, by introducing his message with the word “*garti*,” is conveying contrition to Esav and emphasizing that Esav should forgo his prior anger because, 36 years after their father gave Yaakov the disputed blessing, Yaakov’s supremacy over Esav still remained unfulfilled. To the contrary, during this extended time Yaakov had not advanced in his societal standing to anything beyond a “sojourner.”

Rashi’s own language underscores his point through poetic double meaning. Rashi quotes the phrase from Yitzchak’s blessing to Yaakov that he would dominate over his brother (*Bereishis* 27:29): הוּוה גביר לאחיו. Rashi then states in the voice of Yaakov: לא נתקיימה בי, which translates to mean that this blessing had not come to fruition, but also can be read to mean that the letters “*beis*” and “*yud*” were not fulfilled – and when בי is removed from the word גביר (which is the term from Yitzchak’s blessing that Rashi quotes), the word גר remains.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, Rashi uses a play on words through his phrase “לא נתקיימה בי” to convey multilayered meaning. The translation of this phrase is that the blessing’s promise still remained unfulfilled. A closer reading of Rashi’s comment, however, conveys that the specific letters *beis* and *yud* (בי) in the word גביר were not fulfilled, leaving Yaakov, rather than dominating over his brother, simply a גר, a sojourner. גרתי means “I have lived somewhere temporarily” (see, e.g., *Haggada Shel Pesach* on the phrase “*va-yagar sham*”). But Rashi simultaneously sees a deeper allusion in the verse’s use of the term גרתי, in light of the word גביר in Yitzchak’s blessing to Yaakov. Removing the letters *beis* and *yud* (בי) poignantly conveys Yaakov’s status as a גר, rather than the promised גביר, which uncovers a second layer of meaning in Rashi’s phrase “לא נתקיימה בי.”

This highlights Rashi’s attention to the nuance contained within the Torah’s language and also demonstrates how Rashi’s choice of words in his own commentary conveys multifaceted meaning that draws out layered subtext from within the words of the verses that he explains.

### ***Al SheHiksha LeDaber***

The second example of Rashi’s multilayered use of language comes from Hashem’s reassurance in *Parashas Va’eira*, after Moshe goes to Paroh and at first fails to secure the liberty of the people.

The *Parasha* starts with the statement (*Shemos* 6:2): “*Va-yedaber Elokim el Moshe va-yomer eilav Ani Hashem*,” “God spoke to Moshe and said to him ‘I am Hashem.’”

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<sup>1</sup> I heard this insight from Rabbi Aryeh Leib Lopiansky the week of *Parshas Vayishlach* 5752 but do not remember who he quoted as its original source.

This verse has certain anomalies. First, it repeats the fact that Hashem spoke to Moshe: “God spoke to Moshe and said to him...” Second, it changes the verb it uses for speaking from the word “*va-yedaber*” in the first instance to “*va-yomer*” in the second. Third, it changes the name it uses for Hashem from “*Elokim*,” at the start of the verse, to “*Hashem*,” in the second half of the verse. Rashi concisely explains the redundancy in this verse, as well as the mid-sentence change in terminology from “*Elokim*” to “*Hashem*” and from “*va-yedaber*” to “*va-yomer*,” as follows:

וידבר אלקים אל משה. דבר אתו משפט על שהקשה לדבר ולומר למה הרעותה לעם  
הזה (לעיל ה:כב).

“And God spoke to Moshe.” He spoke toward him with justice for speaking harshly and saying “Why have you harmed this people?”

The phrase “*va-yedaber Elokim*” conveys justice or rebuke, which is why the verse uses the name “*Elokim*” as opposed to the name “*Hashem*” and also begins with the word “*va-yedaber*” instead of simply starting with “*va-yomer*.” The plain translation of Rashi’s comment is that Hashem started His statement severely because, after Paroh made the work more difficult for the people in response to Moshe’s demand for them to leave Egypt, Moshe had spoken harshly to Hashem when he asked in *Shemos* 5:22: “Why have you harmed this people?”

However, there is a second way to read Rashi’s comment. Rebbe Shaul Yedidya Elazar Taub of Modzitz explains in *Yisa Bracha* that Rashi’s comment can be read as follows: Hashem spoke toward Moshe with justice because Moshe had claimed, in *Shemos* 4:10, that it was difficult for him to speak but then, in *Shemos* 5:22, found his voice sufficiently to challenge Hashem by asking “Why have you harmed this people?”

In this sense, Rashi’s phrase “*al she-hiksha le-daber*” can simultaneously be understood to mean both: (1) Hashem spoke toward Moshe with rebuke because he had spoken harshly toward Hashem and said “Why have you harmed this people,” and (2) Hashem spoke toward Moshe with justice because he had claimed, in *Shemos* 4:10, that it was difficult for him to speak and, as a result, he should not be sent to challenge Paroh, and, nevertheless, in *Shemos* 5:22, he was able to find his voice to challenge Hashem and say “Why have you harmed this people.” The second way to read Rashi’s comment broadens the context of his explanation of the verse in *Shemos* 6:2 (“God spoke to Moshe and said to him ‘I am Hashem’”) to include, not only consideration of Moshe’s statement in *Shemos* 5:22 (“Why have you harmed this people”), but also an ironic contrast to *Shemos* 4:10 when Moshe demurred from his

mission to Egypt by asserting his inability to speak.

This again underscores how Rashi selects language in his commentary capable of simultaneous double meaning, emphasizing that Rashi not only sought multilayered understanding of the words in the verses but also wrote his own commentary to be read with a sense of poetry.

### ***VaAsu Lishmi Beis Kedusha***

The third example appears in *Parashas Teruma* regarding construction of the *Mishkan*. Based on statements by *Chazal*, some *acharonim* emphasize that the spiritual aspiration of building the *Mishkan* is, ultimately, to create an analogue of the *Mishkan* in our inner lives. For example, HaRav Yitzhak Twersky *zt"l* quotes the *Nefesh HaChayim* (1:4), interpreting the phrase “*ve-chein ta’asu*” in *Shemos* 25:9 as follows:

עיקר ענין הקודש והמקדש ושריית שכינתו יתברך הוא האדם. שאם יתקדש עצמו כראוי בקיום המצוות כולן ... אז הוא עצמו המקדש ממש ובתוכו ה' יתברך שמו; כמו שכתוב (ירמיה ז:ד) “היכל ה' היכל ה' המה.” וכמאמרם ז”ל: “ושכנתי בתוכם; בתוכו לא נאמר אלא בתוכם” ... שהצדיקים על ידי מעשיהם הרצויים לפניו יתברך הן הם מקדש ה' ממש. ויש לומר על דרך זה הכתוב “ועשו לי מקדש ... ככל אשר אני מראה אותך ... וכן תעשו” ... ולדרכינו יש לומר גם כן שרוצה לומר: אל תחשבו שתכלית כוונתי הוא עשיית המקדש החיצוני; אלא תדעו שכל תכלית רצוני בתבנית המשכן וכל כליו רק לרמז לכם שממנו תראו וכן תעשו אתם את עצמיכם – שתהיו אתם במעשיכם הרצויים כתבנית המשכן וכליו, כולם קדושים ראויים ומוכנים להשרות שכינתי בתוכם ...

*The essential element of sanctity, the Mikdash, and the dwelling of God's Shechina, is man. If he sanctifies himself properly through the performance of all mitzvos... then he, himself, becomes the actual Mikdash, and within him [dwells] God, may His name be blessed; as it is written (Yirmiyahu 7:4): “the Sanctuary of God, the Sanctuary of God are they.” And as Chazal said: “it does not say ‘so that I may dwell in it [in the Mikdash]’; rather, it says ‘so that I may dwell within them.’” ... Tzadikim, by their deeds which are favorable to Him – may He be blessed – actually constitute the sanctuary of God. Along these lines, one can interpret the pasuk “They shall make for Me a Sanctuary... Like everything that I show you ... so shall you do.” According to our approach, one can also suggest that [the pasuk] means to say: Don't think that My ultimate purpose is the construction of the external sanctuary; rather, you should know that My entire purpose in*

*designing the format of the Mishkan and all its vessels is to hint to you that you should see it as a model and make yourselves into the same. That you, by your favorable deeds, be like the format of the Mishkan and its vessels, all holy – fit and prepared for Me to settle My Shechina within you ...<sup>2</sup>*

This comment of the *Nefesh HaChayim* emphasizes, even more than the physical construction of the *Mishkan*, the inner relationship with Hashem that is part of, and results from, the acts of devotion involved in building the *Mishkan*.

This approach finds strong roots in Rashi. First, Rashi comments on the phrase in *Shemos* 25:2 “*ve-yikchu li teruma*,” “and take for Me an offering,” as follows: “*li lishmi*,” the word “*li*” means “an act dedicated to My name.” In his comment to this verse, Rashi also emphasizes that the phrase “*yidvenu libo*” is related to the word “*nedava*,” a donation, which means that a person should perform an act of wholehearted dedication when building the *Mishkan*. As Rashi states: “*ve-hu leshon ratzon tov*,” “it is a term of good will.” Likewise, in his comment to the partial list of materials given toward the work of the *Mishkan* (*Shemos* 25:3): “*zahav, va-chesef, u-nechoshes*,” “gold and silver and copper,” Rashi states: “*kulam ba’u binedava ish ish ma she-nidava libo chutz min ha-kesef she-ba be-shaveh machatzis ha-shekel le-chol echad*,” “All of the items mentioned came as voluntary donations [and] each individual gave what his heart wanted to donate, except for the silver which came equally as a half shekel from every individual.”

Hence, according to Rashi’s explanation of the verses, the dedication of materials to build the *Mishkan* had to be “*lishmi*” (dedicated to Hashem’s name), “*ish ish ma she-nidava libo*” (wholehearted) and with “*ratzon tov*” (motivated by good will).

Moreover, Rashi interprets the word “*teruma*” in *Shemos* 25:2 as “*hafrasha*,” the act of separating something out and setting it aside, rather than the act of actually giving a donation. This perhaps is based on the verse’s use of the verb “*v’yikchu*,” “and you shall take,” rather than “*v’yisnu*,” “and you shall give.” HaRav Zvi Dov Kanotopsky *zt”l* emphasizes that the more general mitzva of *teruma* has two distinct stages: *hafrasha* (separating a portion) and *nesina* (giving the portion to the *kohen*). The act of *hafrasha* takes place at home while the act of *nesina* takes place in society away from the home. He writes:

*When one examines this halachic principle closely, one notes that the intention of the Torah here is twofold. It wants the Jew to create something*

<sup>2</sup> Rabbi David Shapiro, *Torah of the Mind, Torah of the Heart: Divrei Torah of the Talner Rebbe* (Jerusalem, 2020), pp. 154-155.

*holy and make this havdala while it is still his and in his own home. Once there is something holy in his own home, he takes it and offers it to the kohen. Kedusha, or holiness, begins in the home before it becomes part of the general religious institutions... In a more general sense, we can now maintain that in essence, two sanctuaries are being fashioned. Each Israelite, [b]y performing the hafrasha in his home, is making his home a repository of kedusha, which means a domain of havdala. At the same time, Moses and his committee are collecting the various materials and are in the process of building a central sanctuary. It should be clear, however, that the building, and the sanctity of the central mikdash are dependent upon and directly proportionate to the sanctity of the individual sanctuaries of the Israelites. That, after all, is where Moses gets his materials.<sup>3</sup>*

This insightful conclusion that there are two sanctuaries being built simultaneously, one in each family's home and the other through the public work on the *Mishkan* – when considered alongside Rashi's interpretation that, in the context of building the *Mishkan*, the word “*teruma*” specifically references the act of *hafrasha*, which takes place at home, rather than *nesina*, which takes place in society – also raises the possibility that there is double meaning in Rashi's comment on “*va-asu li Mikdash*,” “and they will make for Me a sanctuary” (*Shemos* 25:8), as follows:

ועשו לי מקדש. ועשו לשמי בית קדושה.

“They will make for Me a sanctuary.” They will make a house of sanctity dedicated to My name.

On the one hand, the “*beis kedusha*” that Rashi references is, of course, the *Mishkan*. And, simultaneously, Rashi's phrase “*beis kedusha*” can – and likely does – mean for each family to cultivate *kedusha* in its individual household. This double understanding of Rashi's statement, which can alternately be read to mean (1) to construct the *Mishkan* of *kedusha* and (2) to build a home of *kedusha*, also correlates closely with the statement of *Chazal* quoted by the *Nefesh HaChayim* that the second half of this verse, “*ve-shachanti be-socham*,” can mean both that Hashem's Presence will be in the *Mishkan* and, more pointedly, that it will be a vital part of each person's own inner life.

<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Zvi Dov Kanotopsky, *Night of Watching: Essays on the Torah* (Jerusalem, 1977), pp. 127-128.

These three examples show that, through his choice of words, Rashi's brief comments often convey multiple levels of intricacy, precision and meaning simultaneously. There are dozens or even hundreds of comparable examples within Rashi's commentary to be uncovered. Like any great work, the closer and longer we engage the multifaceted strata of Rashi's language, the more nuanced and stunning his commentary becomes.

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