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Of Snakes and Scorpions

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Considerable effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the translation, while maintaining readability. As in all translations, however, the possibility of inadvertent errors exists.

Feedback is appreciated — please send comments to: info@projectlikkuteisichos.org

1.

GACHON

“All that moves on its *gachon* and all that walks on four legs, including all those with numerous legs...”¹ Rashi (in his first gloss) quotes the phrase, “moves on its *gachon*,” and explains: “This is a snake. Semantically, *gachon* means bending low, for it moves bent over and falls on its stomach.”

The reason Rashi explains “moves on its *gachon*” by saying, “this is a snake,” is obvious: The **only** other place in Torah where we find a similar term (**in the context of creeping animals**) is regarding the snake (in *parshas Bereishis*).² The verse there says, “Upon your *gachon* you shall move.” Thus, the phrase, “moves on its *gachon*” refers to a snake.

But we need to clarify Rashi’s concluding remarks: “Semantically, *gachon* means bending low, for it moves bent over and falls on its stomach.” As mentioned, the Torah, in *parshas Bereishis*, already says, “Upon your *gachon* you shall move,” but there, Rashi does **not** explain the **semantic** meaning of *gachon*. (Rashi merely says, “the snake had legs, but they were cut off.”) This is unclear: Rashi should have clarified the definition of the word “*gachon*” the **first** time it appears in Torah. Why did he just rely on his explanation in *parshas Shemini*?

2.

BENDING, STOMACH, ROARING

Ostensibly, we could offer the following answer: Rashi does not explain the meaning of the phrase, “Upon your *gachon* you shall move” (in *parshas Bereishis*) for the definition of *gachon* is self-evident — in one of two ways:

¹ *Vayikra* 11:42.

² *Bereishis* 3:14.

a) The verse (**prior** to the verse, “Upon your *gachon* you shall move”) says, “The name of the second river is *Gichon*.”³ Rashi explains: “*Gichon* — because it would keep roaring, and its roar was very great, as in the verse, ‘If an ox will *yigach* {gore},’⁴ because it gores’ and keeps roaring.” We can translate the verse, “Upon your *gachon* you shall move,” along similar lines: Since the snake slithers on the ground (as **Rashi** says, “the snake had legs, but they were cut off”), its movement is called, “upon your *gachon*” — (as *Ibn Ezra* words it):⁵ “It is so called because of the air that rushes forth {roars}, *yagiach*, from it.” Meaning, Rashi relies on the student recalling his explanation of an **earlier** verse — “*Gichon*.”

b) *Gachon* means “stomach,” as the *Targum* translates it: “Upon your *mei’eich* {stomach} you shall move.” [Alternatively, it means “*chazeh* {chest}” — as *Ibn Ezra* explains.]⁶ Rashi does not need to explain the meaning of this word, for this is a Hebrew word, the meaning of which the student knows [just like the student knows the meaning of the word “*mei’ayim*” (or the word “*chazeh*”)].

But on this basis, the converse question emerges: How does Rashi know that **here**, the verse, “all that moves on its *gachon*,” means something different from the verse, “upon your *gachon* you shall move” — as *Ibn Ezra* explains the meaning here⁷ — [**not**, “it would keep roaring...,” or (like the *Targum* translates it) (here, too) “*ma’ohi* {its stomach}”] but rather, “semantically, *gachon* means **bending** low...”?

³ *Bereishis* 2:13.

⁴ *Shemos* 21:28.

⁵ *Bereishis* 3:14.

⁶ *Bereishis* 3:14.

⁷ {I.e. *Ibn Ezra* says here that the meaning of *gachon* is the same as in the verse “upon...”}

3.

MORE QUESTIONS

Subsequently, Rashi quotes, “All that goes,” and explains: “To include worms and that which is similar to that which is similar.”

This is unclear:

a) The word “all” certainly serves as an amplification.⁸ However, how does Rashi determine, based on the *pshat* of this verse, that the word “all” serves to include **two** things: (i) worms, and (ii) “that which is similar to that which is similar”?

b) The question is even stronger: This exposition appears in the Gemara⁹ and in *Toras Kohanim*.¹⁰ The wording Rashi uses, “that which is similar to that which is **similar**,” appears in *Toras Kohanim*. However, the *Gemara* says, “that which is similar to a **worm**.”

According to the Gemara’s version, we can offer (albeit a strained answer) that “all” only serves to include **one** additional thing: “A worm, and that which is similar to a worm.” Meaning, “a worm” is an **example** of a species that is derived from the amplification. This example thus includes **all** creeping insects that resemble worms (and certainly worms themselves).

But *Toras Kohanim*’s version — “that which is similar to that which is similar” — emphasizes that there are two amplifications (two “levels”): (i) “a worm,” which is similar to a snake; and (ii) “that which is similar to that which is similar” — creeping insects that are (**not** similar to snakes, but rather are) similar to worms. And worms themselves are merely **similar** to snakes.

Rashi chooses the *Toras Kohanim*’s version, and not the Gemara’s!

⁸ {For the purpose of including other entities.}

⁹ *Chullin* 67b.

¹⁰ Commenting on this verse.

c) Why does Rashi also quote the word “(all that) **goes**” from the verse — seemingly, the amplification is derived solely from the word “all”?

Moreover, immediately after saying this, **in a similar inference**, Rashi quotes only the word “all” (from the part of the verse which says, “and all that walks on four legs”) and explains: “To include beetles, etc.” — But in our context, Rashi adds and also quotes the word, “**goes**”!

4.

SCORPION AND BEETLE

Subsequently, Rashi quotes the words, “that walks on four legs,” and explains: “This is a scorpion.” (The scorpion is the **only** creeping animal that walks on four legs.) Following this, Rashi quotes the word, “everything,” and explains: “To include beetles, *escharbot* in Old French, and that which is similar to that which is similar.”

Here, we also need to clarify (similar to the questions in Section 3):

a) How does Rashi determine, based on the *pshat* of the verse, that “everything” includes **two** things: (i) beetles; and (ii) that which is similar to that which is similar?

b) Why does Rashi choose the version of the *Toras Kohanim*, as opposed to the *Gemara*’s version, “and that which is similar to the beetle”?

5.

CENTIPEDE

Subsequently, Rashi quotes the words, “those with numerous legs,” and comments, “This is a centipede, a creeping thing that has legs, from its head to its tail, on both sides of its body. They call it *centipedsh*.” (With this gloss, Rashi concludes his commentary on the verse.)

Rashi goes to great lengths in his comments here to explain that a centipede is “a creeping thing that has legs, from its head to its tail, on both sides of its body. They call it *centipedsh*, in Old French.” Why didn’t he say more concisely, “This is a centipede, *centipedsh*, in Old French”? Rashi forestalls the question: Since many creeping things have many legs, why then do we say that the phrase, “those with numerous legs,” means a centipede? Therefore, Rashi explains that this creeping species’ entire body has legs, “from its head to its tail (and) on both sides of its body.” For this reason, “**They call it**” — they **call** this species by a name that connotes many legs, “*centipedsh*” (“a hundred legs”). This is the creeping species that the Torah refers to when it says, “those with numerous legs.”

But why does Rashi not explain the word in the verse, “**all** (those with numerous legs)” as including all other creeping animals that have many legs, and are thus similar to the centipede, “that which is similar, and that which is similar to that which is similar”?

This question is even more baffling:

Both the *Toras Kohanim* and the Gemara do in fact say that the phrase, “up to all of those (with numerous)” includes “that which is similar, and that which is similar to that which is similar.” Rashi thus quotes the expositions of our Rabbis the first two times when the verse says, “all,” but not the third time!

6.

CATEGORIES, NOT SPECIES

The explanation for all the above:

As mentioned above, the fact that the verse uses the phrase, “that moves on its ***gachon***” — a phrase that appears **only** regarding a snake — indicates that the verse means a snake (“**this is a snake**”). Similarly with regard to the phrase, “that walks on four legs.” The only creeping animal that walks on four legs is a scorpion. This indicates that Torah here refers to the scorpion (“**this is a scorpion**”).

But why does the verse write, “that moves on its ***gachon***,” and, “that walks on four legs” (which **mean** “a snake” and “a scorpion”) and not just write in short and explicitly, “a snake and a scorpion”?

[We can understand why Scripture says, “those with numerous legs” (and not “*nadal* {centipede}”), for the word “*nadal*” is not a biblical word. This word is not found anywhere else in Scripture. (We find it only in *Toras Kohanim* here, in the Mishnah,¹¹ and in Rashi’s commentary on the book of *Vayikra*, which quotes *Toras Kohanim* quite a few times.) However, the words *nachash* {snake} and *akrav* {scorpion} appear many times in the *Chumash*.

Therefore, we must conclude that when the Torah says, “that moves on its *gachon*,” it does not refer to a snake in **general**, with all its many characteristics. Rather, the Torah refers specifically to a snake, as it has the characteristic that it “moves on its *gachon*.” Thus, we can appreciate how, “**all** that moves on its *gachon*” comes to include creeping animals that are similar to the snake, specifically that they go “on its *gachon*” (such as worms, etc.). And the same would apply concerning the phrase, “and all that walks on four legs.”

For this reason, Scripture could not say “snake or scorpion.” As such, the word “all” would include only creeping animals that fit within the general species

¹¹ *Mikvaos*, ch. 5, mishnah 3.

of snake or scorpion. Alternatively — even if the verse would include creeping animals **similar** to them, we would not know in which way these additional animals need to be similar to the snake and scorpion — maybe their similarity would need to be with respect to “that moves on its *gachon*,” or “that walks on four legs,” or maybe some other detail.

On this basis, we can also appreciate, quite simply, why Rashi cannot explain the word “*gachon*” as in the context of, “because of the air that rushes forth from it” (similar to his explanation of the word, “*gichon*”). This is because “**all** that moves on its *gachon*” includes other creeping animals that walk on their *gachon*, but we find no other creeping animal that causes air to rush forth while it walks.

7.

FALL AND THEN SLITHER

On this basis, we can also appreciate why Rashi cannot translate {“on its *gachon*”} (as the *Targum* does), “on its *ma’ohi* {stomach}.” If this was the meaning of that phrase, the following would be unclear: Why would the verse then use the word, “*gachon*,” which must mean, “**this is a snake**” (for this term only appears in the context of a snake, as mentioned above), and write, “**all** that walks...,” to **include** other creeping animals? **From the outset**, the verse could have used a word that includes **all** creeping animals (in this category), as for example, “that moves on its *ma’ohi* {its stomach},” or the like.

Thus, we must conclude that “moves on its *gachon*” is a characteristic **unique** to the snake. Therefore, Rashi explains: “Semantically, *gachon* means bending low, for it moves bent over **and falls** on its stomach.” Meaning, the snake starts out (**not** on its stomach) but rather bent low, and only later does it **fall** on its stomach. In contrast, worms and the like, which are included by the word “all,” start out, **at the outset**, on their stomach.

[And the same applies to “all that walks on four legs.” Only a scorpion actually walks on four legs. By contrast, a beetle, and the other similar animals which are included by the word “all” have “**more** than four legs, but the additional legs are not so functional.”]¹²

Therefore, Rashi quotes the words, “all that **goes**”: In doing so, Rashi emphasizes that the similarity between them and the snake is only in the way they **walk**, which develops **later** in the snake, after it falls on its stomach. But this element of *gachon* — that semantically, it means “bending low, for it moves bent over” — is **absent** in the other animals.

8.

SIMILAR TO THE SIMILAR

On this basis, we can also understand why Rashi chooses the version of the *Toras Kohanim*, “and that which is similar to that which is similar.” In doing so, Rashi teaches us the following:

a) The word “all” does not include animals included in the **species** of snake and scorpion (for then it would also include animals that are “**not** similar to each other”).¹³ Rather, this word in the verse includes only animals that are similar to the snake and scorpion in that they go on their *gachon* or walk on four legs.

b) On the other hand: Worms are not similar to snakes in all aspects; worms don’t even walk on their *gachon*. There is only a slight similarity between the two species (since, ultimately, the snake does fall on its stomach). The same applies to the beetle. There is only a slight similarity between the beetle and the scorpion, in that they both walk on four legs (because “the additional legs are not so functional”).

¹² *Re'em*, commenting on the verse here.

¹³ See Rashi earlier, on *Vayikra* 11:13 — “Any bird about which it says ‘to its kind’... has within that species subspecies that are not like each other.”

Thus, the word “all” can include even “that which is similar to **that which is similar**,” as long as the two species at least share, to some extent, the characteristic of walking on their stomach or walking on four legs.

9.

ALL, ALL, NOT ALL

On this basis, we can also understand the difference between, “all that moves on its *gachon* and all that walks on four legs,” and, “including all those with numerous legs” (where in the latter instance, Rashi does not comment on the word “all”).

“That {which} moves on its *gachon* and all that walks on four legs” (within the general category of creeping animals) only includes snakes and scorpions. Therefore, when the verse adds, “**all** that moves on its *gachon* and **all** that walks on four legs,” we cannot explain the verse literally — **all** creeping animals that go on their stomach and on four legs. This is because aside from snakes and scorpions, no other creeping animals walk on their stomach or on four legs. Thus, we must conclude that the word “all” here is not literal, but serves to include other things.

However, having numerous legs, over four, is seen in many creeping animals (even though — aside from the centipede — their bodies have “room” for more legs). Thus, we can understand the words, “**all** those with numerous legs,” literally (and Rashi does not need to clarify their meaning) — **all** creeping animals in the category of “numerous legs.”

10.

CENTIPEDE SPECIES

But we still need to clarify:

On this basis, how can Rashi explain the words, “with numerous legs — **this is** a centipede...,” without even writing something to the effect of, “**such as** a centipede”?

The explanation: In the first two instances — “that {which} moves on its *gachon*... that {which} walks on four legs” — each clause in this verse refers specifically to a single creeping animal, a snake and a scorpion (as discussed above at length). Thus, we can reasonably say that the same holds true in the third instance: “numerous legs” refers to a single creeping animal — a **centipede**. And, “**all** those with numerous legs” refers to many animals included by this **characteristic** — (**species** possessing) “numerous legs.” (Rashi does not need to explain this idea because it is self-understood, since it is similar to the Torah’s wording used earlier in many instances — “of its species,”¹⁴ or the like.)

11.

THE HALFWAY POINT

A lesson in *avodas Hashem*¹⁵ — to preface:

Seemingly, not everything {that has been explained} is smooth (at least when the matter is considered more deeply): In the end, a snake crawls on its stomach (“it moves bent over” only when beginning to walk). Why, then, doesn’t the Torah write, “moves on its stomach,” which would include **all** creeping animals that fit into this category (including the snake)?

¹⁴ {*Vayikra* 11:15-17.}

¹⁵ {Divine service; often referred to just as “*avodah*.”}

This, then, is the lesson for us in *avodas Hashem*: About the snake, our Sages remark¹⁶ — “this is the *yetzer hara*.”¹⁷ The Torah therefore teaches us that the *yetzer hara* does not start its work by enticing a Jewish person to “move on its **stomach**” — to walk, to crawl, and to submerge himself in earthly matters, such as gluttony, etc. Rather, the snake begins by telling a person to move “bent low”: meaning, his **head** sags, bent. He behaves contrary to {the advice of the prophet:} “**Lift your eyes On High** and see Who created these.”¹⁸ Eventually, this leads the person to **falling** on his stomach. As our Sages say,¹⁹ “This is the *yetzer hara*’s craft: Today it tells a person, ‘Do thus... (until eventually it tells him), ‘Go worship idols.’”

Therefore, the strategy to overcome the “snake” is for a person to submerge himself in lofty matters — Torah, in general; and specifically, in the esoteric and inner dimensions of Torah. This prevents a person from going “bent low.”

This idea is also alluded to in our verse. Our Rabbis taught:²⁰ “Therefore, the earlier Sages were called ‘*soferim*, those who count,’ because they would count all the letters in the Torah. They would say that the middle letter of a Torah scroll is the letter *vav* found in the word ‘*gachon*’....” *Maharsha*²¹ explains:

The letters allude only to the names of Hashem, for He is the **complete secret**²² of the Torah. Since the “left side”²³ and the power of impurity are the primordial snake..., therefore, the break²⁴ of letters in the Torah is made by the *vav* of the word “*gachon*, גַּחֲוֹן.” This alludes to the following: Since the letters of the Torah are all Names of Hashem, there is no room for the force of impurity, since the *vav* of *gachon* breaks it.

¹⁶ *Zohar*, vol. 1, p. 35b.

¹⁷ {The evil inclination.}

¹⁸ *Yeshayahu* 40:26.

¹⁹ *Shabbos* 105b.

²⁰ *Kiddushin* 30a.

²¹ *Maharsha*’s “*Chiddushei Aggados*” on *Kiddushin* 30a.

²² {In the original, “*hanistar gamur*”; lit., “totally concealed.”}

²³ {A euphemism for the forces of evil.}

²⁴ {Lit., it “pauses” (פסיק = comma) or “breaks up” the letters of the Torah. Note that in a Torah scroll, this particular *vav* is written large, so it resembles the cantillation mark “*psik*,” which is vocalized by a pause.}

12.

GOOD SNAKE

The break in the snake's power needs to be accomplished not only by nullifying and **destroying** the power of the snake but also by **refining** the snake, until the snake becomes holy. As our Sages comment²⁵ on the verse,²⁶ “*Also his foes will make peace with him* — this refers to the snake.” Meaning, the snake is indeed his **foe**, as the verse says,²⁷ “I will put enmity between you...” Nonetheless, the snake will make **peace** with him.

The way to elevate the snake of *kelipah*²⁸ is by uncovering its source. Namely, in essence, the Satan acts for the sake of Heaven²⁹ — emblematic of the snake of holiness, as explained³⁰ in the context of the copper snake made by Moshe Rabbeinu. When a person would “gaze at the copper snake”³¹ — when “they would look **Heavenward**,”³² meaning, by realizing that the snake of *kelipah*'s source was the snake of holiness, “they lived.”³³ They elevated the snake of *kelipah*.

Even the aspect of “making peace” between the snake of holiness and the snake of *kelipah* is alluded to in our verse:

Regarding what was discussed above, that “the letter **vav** in the word ‘*gachon*’ is the midpoint of the letters in a Torah scroll,” the Tzemach Tzedek offers the following explanation:³⁴ The large *vav* in the letter *gachon* alludes to the

²⁵ *Jerusalem Talmud*, “*Terumos*,” ch. 8, sec. 3; *Bereishis Rabbah*, ch. 54, sec. 1.

²⁶ *Mishlei* 16:7.

²⁷ *Bereishis* 3:15.

²⁸ {Negative forces.}

²⁹ *Bava Basra* 16a; see also *Sanhedrin* 59b.

³⁰ *Likkutei Torah*, “*Chukas*,” *Maamar* “*Vaya’as Moshe*.”

³¹ *Bamidbar* 21:9.

³² Rashi on *Bamidbar* 21:8.

³³ *Bamidbar* 21:9.

³⁴ *Or HaTorah*, “*Shemini*” (p. 240, 242, ff.); see also *Sefer HaMaamorim* 5626, *Maamar* “*Kol Holech*.”

*sefirah*³⁵ of *tiferes*³⁶ the way it ascends into *keser*.³⁷ For this reason, it has the power to bring together the two halves of the Torah: *chesed*³⁸ and *gevurah*.³⁹ [This is similar to the idea that midnight joins the two halves of the night, wherein the first half of the night draws its energy from *gevurah*; and the second half, from *chesed*.] For this reason, the *vav* of the word *gachon* breaks the snake's power. This is because the snake draws its sustenance produced by the many constrictions of the G-dly energy brought about by the "left side"; however, by bringing together the left and right⁴⁰ sides (through the *sefirah* of *tiferes*) the Heavenly bounty {to the snake} is cut off.

The peace between the snake of *kelipah* and (its source) the snake of holiness is also brought about by the large *vav*. This is because, in fact, the unity of the celestial and the terrestrial⁴¹ through the middle vector, which traverses from one extreme (from the highest) to the other extreme (the lowest). — This unity contradicts the mistake of the heretic who declared:⁴² "From the midpoint of your body and upward is in the domain of Hurmiz, and from the midpoint of your body and downward is in the domain of Ahurmiz."⁴³ — For this reason, it {the middle vector} can make peace between the celestial "entourage" and the terrestrial "entourage" so that even in the earthly snake, its source will be revealed.

This "peace" will be revealed with the coming of our righteous Moshiach; Moshiach is also referred to as a snake.⁴⁴ He will "make peace with him," very soon, literally.

— Based on a talk and a *maamar* delivered on *Shabbos parshas Shemini*, 5730 (1970)

³⁵ {*Sefiros* are Divine emanations. There are ten *sefiros*, which are various phases in the manifestation of Divinity, generally categorized by intellectual and emotional faculties.}

³⁶ {Lit., "beauty." A synthesis of the opposite traits of *gevurah* and *chesed*. See fn. 34, 35.}

³⁷ {*Keser*, lit., "crown," is the highest level of the *sefiros*, similar to a crown, which sits on the top of the head. In a human being, the two components of *keser* — *ratzon* {will} and *taanug* {delight} — control and motivate the other faculties. See Rabbi J.I. Schochet, *Mystical Concepts in Chassidism*, Kehot Publication Society, Brooklyn, 1988, pp. 59-71.}

³⁸ {The Divine attribute of unbridled generosity.}

³⁹ {The Divine attribute of strict justice.}

⁴⁰ {The "right side" refers to the attribute of *chesed*.}

⁴¹ {In the original, "*maalah*" and "*matah*," respectively; lit., "higher" and "lower."}

⁴² *Sanhedrin* 39a.

⁴³ {The heretic subscribed to a form of dualism, believing in two deities that promoted conflicting values.}

⁴⁴ See *Or HaTorah*, "*Shemini*," p. 240, 242; see also Tzemach Tzedek's *Bi'urei HaZohar*, p. 556; *Or HaTorah*, "*Vaeschanan*," p. 306; et al.