



# Likkutei Sichos

Volume 20 | Vayera | Sichah 2

## Master Who?

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## 1.

### TALKING TO ONE OR ALL?

The verse,<sup>1</sup> “He said, ‘*Adonai* {My lords} if it pleases you that I find favor in your eyes, please do not depart {singular} from before your servant.” In his caption, Rashi quotes the words, “He said, ‘*Adonai* {My lords,} if it pleases you, etc.,” and explains:

Avraham addressed the greatest one among them and called them all ‘lords.’ To the greatest one {alone}, he said, ‘Please do not depart,’ and his companions would remain with him once he did not depart. According to this interpretation, the term {*adonai*} is *not* sacred.<sup>2</sup>

[Subsequently, Rashi offers a second interpretation, as will be discussed.]

We need to clarify:

At the beginning of his remarks, Rashi says, “To the **greatest one** among them, he said.” In other words, Avraham said, “My lords, if it pleases you...” (**not** to all three men but only) to the greatest one among them. Why does Rashi immediately follow this by saying, “and called them **all** ‘lords’”?

## 2.

### MY LORDS OR HASHEM?

Subsequently, Rashi continues:

Alternatively, the term {*Adonai*} is sacred, and he asked the Holy One to wait for him while he would run to welcome the guests. Even though our verse is written after the verse,<sup>3</sup> “He ran toward them,” the statement {of Avraham to Hashem} occurred earlier. It is not unusual for Scripture to speak this way {in non-chronological order}, as I have explained in my comments on the verse,<sup>4</sup> “My spirit shall not contend concerning man,” which was written following, “Noach begot.”<sup>5</sup> Yet, it is impossible to say so {i.e., that the statement, ‘My spirit...,’ followed the birth of Noach’s children}. Instead, the decree of 120 years preceded {the birth of Noach’s oldest son by twenty years}.

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<sup>1</sup> *Bereishis* 18:3.

<sup>2</sup> {It does not refer to Hashem.}

<sup>3</sup> *Bereishis* 18:2.

<sup>4</sup> *Bereishis* 6:3.

<sup>5</sup> *Bereishis* 5:32.

We need to clarify:

- a) Why does Rashi offer two interpretations? Why is he dissatisfied with one?
- b) Why does he place “the term is *not* sacred” as the first (and primary) interpretation and “the term *is* sacred” as the second?

Moreover, in most places in the Torah, the term *Adonai* is **sacred**. Thus, the interpretation, “the term is not sacred” (that is, the meaning of the term *Adonai* here is **different** than in most other places), is **further** from *pshat*<sup>6</sup> than the interpretation that it is sacred. Why, then, is this interpretation considered first (and primary)?

- c) Rashi says, “the term is not sacred,” only at the **end** of his remarks (in his first interpretation), whereas he mentions, “the term is sacred” in his second interpretation right at the beginning. What is the reason for this different syntax?

### 3.

THE SOURCE IS MIDRASH

After concluding both interpretations, Rashi adds, “And both of these interpretations appear in *Bereishis Rabbah*.”

We need to clarify:

- a) In the vast majority of cases, Rashi does not provide the source of his interpretations. Why does he do so here?

b) When Rashi offers two interpretations, and he wants to emphasize that both have a source in the teachings of our Sages, he (usually) mentions this at the **beginning** of his remarks.<sup>7</sup> Here, too, Rashi should have **prefaced** his remarks with this (by saying, “It says in *Bereishis Rabbah*,” or something to that effect) rather than mentioning the source **later**.

- c) In (the extant version of) *Bereishis Rabbah*,<sup>8</sup> there is only **one** interpretation — that *adonai*, in this verse, is not sacred.<sup>9</sup> Thus, we must assume that Rashi’s version of *Bereishis*

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<sup>6</sup> {The plain meaning of Scripture. Rashi says in his commentary to *Bereishis* 3:8: “I have come only to explain the plain meaning of Scripture.” Although there are many levels of Torah interpretation, Rashi adopts a straightforward approach.}

<sup>7</sup> See Rashi on *Bereishis* 6:9 (“Some of our Sages...”); *Bereishis* 21:33 (Rav and Shmuel...); **et al.**

<sup>8</sup> *Bereishis Rabbah*, ch. 48, sec. 10.

<sup>9</sup> See the commentary (attributed to) Rashi on *Bereishis Rabbah*, *ibid*; **et al.**

*Rabbah* had two interpretations (as Rashi says, “And **both** of these interpretations appear in *Bereishis Rabbah*”). But we need to clarify: Tractate *Shevuos*<sup>10</sup> mentions both interpretations (and there are no other variant versions of the Talmud’s wording). Why, then, does Rashi attribute the source of both interpretations to *Bereishis Rabbah* when this is only true according to one version of the *Bereishis Rabbah* (and not the **extant** version)? Why does he not cite the Talmudic source in tractate *Shavuos*?

#### 4.

COME ONE, COME ALL

The explanation for all the above is as follows:

After saying, “He said, ‘My lords, if it pleases you that I find favor in your eyes... from before your servant,’” the subsequent **verses**<sup>11</sup> immediately say (as a continuation of Avraham’s entreaty), “Let some water be brought, please, and wash your feet... I will fetch a morsel of bread that you may nourish your heart.” Before the words, “Let some water be brought, please,” the verse does not repeat, “He said.” This suggests Avraham delivered the entire entreaty in a single, uninterrupted monologue. [“If it please you that I find favor...” was said as an introduction to “Let some water be brought, please.”]

Since Avraham told the three men, “Let some water be brought, please, and wash your feet...,” a novice student of Scripture<sup>12</sup> (readily) understands that the beginning of the statement — “*Adonai* if it please you” — was said (not to Hashem, but) to the three men. [For this reason, Rashi does not need to immediately mention at the beginning of his comments, “this term is not sacred,” because, for the novice student, this is self-evident.]<sup>13</sup>

But the following question emerges: Why did Avraham begin speaking in the singular to the **three** men (and not in the plural) — “if it please you that I find favor in your eyes **בְּעֵינַיִךְ** {singular}, please do not depart **תֵּעָבֶר** {singular} from before your servant **עַבְדְּךָ** {singular}”?<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Shevuos* 35b.

<sup>11</sup> *Bereishis* 18:4-5.

<sup>12</sup> {In the Hebrew original, “*ben chamesh lemikra*,” lit., “a five-year-old {beginning to study} Scripture.” This term borrowed from *Pirkei Avos* teaches that the appropriate age for a child to begin studying *Chumash* is at the age of five. Rashi wrote his commentary on *Chumash* to solve problems that a 5-year-old pupil would encounter in understanding the simple meaning of a verse.}

<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, Rashi mentions this at the end of this interpretation, as explained in Sec. 7 below.

<sup>14</sup> {These differences between the singular and plural forms are not apparent in the English language.}

Rashi forestalls this question: “He addressed the greatest one among them.” Avraham spoke only to one person — he spoke to the greatest one among them. For this reason, he spoke using the singular.

But this begs the question: When in the presence of three people, it would be impolite for a potential host to direct his attention to only one of the three (even to the greatest one among them). How was it, then, that Avraham spoke only to the greatest?

To address this question, Rashi continues, explaining: “and called them **all** ‘lords.’” He only “addressed” (his {subsequent} statement, “if it please you...”) to the greatest one among them. Beforehand, however, he had turned towards all three men (“and called them”) with the title, “*adonai*, my lords” (**before** saying, “if it please you...”) — he “called them **all** ‘lords.’”

But we still need to clarify: Avraham wanted all three men to stay as guests. Why, then, did he say, “Please do not תַּעֲבֹר {depart},” in singular, only to one of them?<sup>15</sup>

To address this, Rashi continues: “But to the greatest one {alone} he said, ‘Please do not depart,’ and once he did not depart, his companions would remain with him.” Avraham ensured that the others would also accept his invitation by saying, “Please do not depart” to the greatest one among them.

## 5.

BUT STILL...

But even after this entire explanation, the following remains irksome: Why did Avraham have to persuade the other two by asking the “greatest one among them” not to depart? He could have asked **them** all directly: “Please do not depart תַּעֲבֹרוּ {plural}”!

True, asking the other two directly would not accomplish anything since, in any event, their decision would depend on the decision of the “greatest one among them.” Nevertheless, petitioning only the greatest one among them by saying “Please do not depart תַּעֲבֹר {in singular}” might be misinterpreted as **excluding** the others. Avraham should have included them by saying, “Please do not depart תַּעֲבֹרוּ” {using the plural form of the verb}.

Rashi offers a second interpretation to address this difficulty: “Alternatively, the term is sacred, and he asked the Holy One....” This means that Avraham said, “*Adonai* if it pleases

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<sup>15</sup> This is particularly difficult considering that immediately afterwards he spoke to all of them (in plural), “וַיְרַחֲצוּ וַיְרַחֲצוּ {and wash your feet (plural)}... וַיְרַחֲצוּ וַיְרַחֲצוּ {that you may nourish (plural)}...”

you” (not to the three men, as an introduction to, “Let some water be brought, please, and wash your feet...,” but rather) to Hashem, “to wait for him while he would run and welcome the guests.”

## 6.

### AVRAHAM WOULDN'T HAVE LEFT HASHEM BEHIND

However, Rashi brings this as the **second** interpretation (meaning, this interpretation is further from *pshat* than the first).<sup>16</sup> This is because:

a) The verse does not mention (again) “He said” before saying, “Let some water be brought, please.” This indicates (as discussed above in Section 4) that “He said, ‘*adonai...* please do not depart,’” was said to all three men.

b) It seems illogical to suggest that during Hashem’s visit to Avraham, Avraham would leave Hashem and run to the guests, and (Avraham certainly would not) then ask Hashem to **wait** for him.<sup>17</sup>

[Moreover, as soon as the angels arrived (“three men were standing”)<sup>18</sup> – considering that one of them came to heal Avraham<sup>19</sup> – we can assume that Avraham was immediately healed before he even brought them into his home, etc.<sup>20</sup> (This is because when an angel heals, the healing does not take time.) Since Hashem appeared to Avraham in order “to visit the sick,”<sup>21</sup> as soon as the angels came and Avraham was healed, Hashem no longer had a reason to remain. Why, then, did Avraham ask Hashem, “Please do not depart...” – why did he ask Hashem “to wait for him...”?]

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<sup>16</sup> Note *Rabbeinu Bachya* on *Bereishis* 18:3: According to *pshat* he called them all lords, but he addressed the greatest one among them...

<sup>17</sup> The Gemara (*Shabbos* 127a; *Shevuos* 35b) learns from this conduct that “hospitality towards guests is greater than receiving the Divine Presence.” However, this lesson is not mentioned in Rashi’s commentary on the Torah.

[According to Rashi’s first interpretation, we can simply explain that the angels visited Avraham *after* the Divine Presence departed from him (as stated in *Ramban*’s commentary on *Bereishis* 18:2) {and so no such lesson can be derived}.]

<sup>18</sup> *Bereishis* 18:2.

<sup>19</sup> *Rashi*, ad loc..

<sup>20</sup> However, Avraham simply thought that the Holy One’s visit had cured him (similar to that which is mentioned in *Nedarim* 39b), and that these guests were {ordinary} men. Hence, he told them, “let some water be brought, please...”

This does not contradict **Rashi’s** earlier commentary (on *Bereishis* 18:2) – “When they saw him **loosening and re-binding** his bandages, they departed from him” – for we can presume that his bandaging persisted even after he had recovered from his illness and weakness.

<sup>21</sup> *Rashi* on *Bereishis* 18:1.

For this reason, Rashi offers this interpretation (“and he asked the Holy One”) as the second one because it has more difficulties than the interpretation, “He addressed the greatest one among them” (and these additional difficulties are more significant).

## 7.

### WHAT’S THE NOVEL TEACHING?

Based on all the above, we can appreciate why Rashi says, “According to this interpretation, the term {“*adonai*”} is not sacred” at the **end** of the first interpretation, and says, “the term is sacred” right at the beginning of the second.

This is because the simple reading of the verses **proves** (as discussed above) that “his initial request was directed to all three **men**. Therefore, in the context of the first interpretation, where the novelty is only that “to the greatest one among them,” Rashi does not begin by mentioning, “the term is not sacred” because this is not the primary **novelty** of the first interpretation.

Since, however, it is not altogether smooth to use the term “*adonai*” about a person, Rashi addresses this at the **end** of his comments: “According to this interpretation, the term {“*adonai*”} is not sacred.” That is, the term “*adonai*” here differs from its meaning in most other places.

In contrast, in his second interpretation, Rashi says, “the term is sacred” at the beginning of his interpretation. This is because (a) saying that the term “*Adonai*” **here** is sacred is a **novelty**. (As discussed above, the narrative’s flow suggests that this term refers to the men.) (b) The foundation and proof for the validity of this interpretation, “and he asked the Holy One” (unlike the simple understanding that his statement was addressed to the three men), is, as discussed, that the translation of the word “*Adonai*” is smooth according to this interpretation. The usage aligns precisely with all other places where this term is mentioned. Therefore, Rashi begins with, “This term is sacred,” emphasizing that this is a conclusive proof for the interpretation, “and he asked the Holy One.”

## 8.

### MIDRASH RESOLVES THE WORDS OF THE VERSE

Since neither interpretation is altogether smooth,<sup>22</sup> and both are far from pure *pshat*, Rashi must add, “And both of these interpretations appear in *Bereishis Rabbah*.” Namely, the source of both interpretations is from **Midrash**. (However, it is a Midrash [as Rashi writes]<sup>23</sup> “that resolves the plain meaning of the words of Scripture.”)

Therefore, **after** his comments, Rashi says, “And both of these interpretations appear in *Bereishis Rabbah*.” Only after examining both interpretations do we appreciate that they are far from pure *pshat*. Only then does Rashi need to note their source is in Midrash.

Based on this, we can also appreciate why Rashi says, “And both of these interpretations appear in *Bereishis Rabbah*,” and does not note their source in Talmud. Specifically, by citing *Bereishis Rabbah*, **Midrash**, Rashi emphasizes that both interpretations are homiletic. In contrast, the Talmud records many scriptural expositions that (also) conform with *pshat*.

— From talks delivered on *Shabbos, parshas Vayeira* 5740 (1979)

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<sup>22</sup> As is the case in all instances where Rashi brings **two** interpretations, being that both of them are not completely smooth — yet, he doesn’t cite the Midrash as their source, for they are both fully in line with *pshat*.

<sup>23</sup> *Bereishis* 3:8.