



# Likkutei Sichos

Volume 16 | Beshalach | Sichah 1

## The Best of Them

---

Translated by Rabbi Moshe Goldman  
Edited by Rabbi Eliezer Robbins and Rabbi Y. Eliezer Danzinger

A note on the translation: Rounded parentheses and square brackets reflect their use in the original *sichah*; squiggly brackets are interpolations of the translator or editor. The footnotes in squiggly brackets in this translation are those of the translators or editors, and do not correspond to the footnotes in the original. Great effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the translation, while at the same time striving for readability. However, the translation carries no official authority. As in all translations, the possibility of inadvertent errors exists. **Your feedback is needed — please send all comments to: [info@projectlikkuteisichos.org](mailto:info@projectlikkuteisichos.org).**

## 1.

### WHERE IS THE JUSTICE?

On the verse, “He {Pharaoh} took six hundred select chariots...,”<sup>1</sup> our Sages explain in the *Mechilta*<sup>2</sup> that the “animals” that Pharaoh used to drive these “six hundred chariots” were taken from among “the livestock that those {Egyptians} who feared the word of Hashem had driven” {indoors during the plague of hail}.<sup>3</sup> “Based on this, Rabbi Shimon would say: ‘{Even} the best of the gentiles — {you must} kill; {even} the best of the serpents — {you must} crush<sup>4</sup> their brains.’”

A well-known difficulty has been raised regarding this teaching: Does it make sense for the Torah to rule that one should kill even “**the best** of the gentiles?” This controverts {the ideals of} justice and fairness!<sup>5</sup>

Numerous solutions<sup>6</sup> to this difficulty have been offered (some of which will be explored later), particularly, in the course of debates between our Sages and the enemies of Israel throughout the generations (beginning with the debates of Rabbi Yechiel of Paris<sup>7</sup> — one of the greatest *Tosafists* — until recent generations).

## 2.

### QUESTIONS ON RASHI

In his Torah commentary,<sup>8</sup> Rashi also comments on this verse. Rashi quotes the words, “and all the chariots of Egypt,” and explains (similar to the

---

<sup>1</sup> *Shemos* 14:7.

<sup>2</sup> *Mechilta* on *Shemos* 14:7 {sec. 7}. Similarly, see *Tanchuma*, loc. cit. (sec. 8); *Tanchuma* (ed. Buber), “*Vaera*,” sec. 20; *Yalkut Shimoni*, loc. cit., *remez* 186.

<sup>3</sup> {See *Shemos* 9:17-21.}

<sup>4</sup> {*Imrei Emes*, “*Yamim Achronim shel Pesach*,” explains that the word “crush” is used advisedly. It alludes to the extraction of the good associated with *klipah*.” See *infra*, however, section 13, for a more thorough analysis.}

<sup>5</sup> This is so even in the realm of *halachah*. See commentaries of *Bartenura*, *Levush HaOrah*, and *Tzeidah LaDerech* on Rashi’s commentary, loc. cit.

<sup>6</sup> Several of these are quoted in *Torah Sheleima*, “*Miluim*” on *parshas Vaera* (sec. 19), *Otzar Havikuchim* (ed. Eisenstein).

<sup>7</sup> {Unknown year of birth, died in 1286. In 1240, under orders from King Ludwig IX he debated the apostate Nicholas Donin and successfully defended Judaism.}

<sup>8</sup> {Rashi’s commentary on *Shemos* 14:7.}

*Mechilta*): “Where did these animals come from? If you say that they belonged to the Egyptians, the Torah says earlier, “all the livestock of the Egyptians died.”<sup>9</sup> And if you say that the animals belonged to the Jewish people, does the Torah not say,<sup>10</sup> “our livestock will also go with us”? Whose were they? They belonged to those {Egyptians} who feared the word of Hashem.<sup>11</sup> Based on this, Rabbi Shimon would say, “{Even} the best of the Egyptians<sup>12</sup> — {you must} kill; {even} the best of the serpents — {you must} crush their brains.”

Seemingly, this is completely unclear: True, Rashi’s commentary is geared, and necessary, for even a great scholar — which is why, regarding “*shnayim mikra v’echad targum*,”<sup>13</sup> **halachah rules** that “a G-d fearing person should read the *Targum* as well as Rashi’s commentary.”<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, as we have explained many times, Rashi’s commentary on *Chumash* is appropriate for, and can be understood by, **even a five-year-old (studying Scripture)**<sup>15</sup>. {Rashi writes his commentary} in a way that enables a novice Torah student to understand the plain meaning of Scripture in its true sense without recourse to other commentaries, etc. A **straightforward** reading of Rashi’s commentary provides the novice student with an exhaustive explanation {of *pshat*},<sup>16</sup> with nothing left out (or {unnecessarily} added) in Rashi’s commentary on the verse the student is currently studying, or in Rashi’s explanations that the student has studied **previously**.

---

<sup>9</sup> *Shemos* 9:6.

<sup>10</sup> *Shemos* 10:26.

<sup>11</sup> This is the wording of Scripture, *Shemos* 9:20. See **Rashi’s** commentary on *Shemos* 9:10, and *Re’em, Sefer HaZikaron* on Rashi’s commentary, loc. cit.

<sup>12</sup> The common version of the *Mechilta* (and other texts) uses the term “גויים.” But *Midrash Tanchuma* and others use “Egyptians.” This is seemingly the correct version (at least in Rashi’s wording), for this is derived from “from here,” i.e., regarding Egyptians. Yet some commentaries on Rashi write “גויים.” It is unlikely that the printer would have emended “Egyptians” to read “גויים,” for what {potential error} would this have rectified? (In contrast, {the rationale for} emending “גויים” to read “Egyptians” is clear.

<sup>13</sup> {Lit., “the verse, twice; and the translation, once.” The *Talmud* and *halachic* codes direct every Jew to review the weekly Torah portion on Friday, by reading each verse twice in the original, along with one reading of the Aramaic translation of the Torah by *Onkelos*.}

<sup>14</sup> *Shulchan Aruch* (both the original and the Alter Rebbe’s), “*Orach Chaim*,” 285:2.

<sup>15</sup> {I.e., a novice Torah student. The terminology in the *sichah* is that of the *Mishnah* in *Avos* 5:22: “Five years is the age for the study of Scripture.”}

<sup>16</sup> {The plain meaning of Scripture. Rashi states in his commentary to *Bereishis* 3:8: “I have come only to explain the plain meaning of the Torah.” Though there are many levels and depths of Torah interpretation, Rashi adopts a straightforward approach.}

On this basis, since the above-mentioned conundrum would confuse a five-year-old even in his cursory study of Rashi, how can Rashi quote Rabbi Shimon's teaching, "the best of the Egyptians — kill," without adding any explanation or without offering a resolution to this difficulty?

An even greater difficulty: The novice student learned **previously**<sup>17</sup> that Pharaoh acted benevolently to Avraham while Avraham was in Egypt. Pharaoh sent Avraham out of Egypt with the intent of protecting him and Sarah from harm.

In addition, the novice student has learned that when Yaakov and his sons came to settle in Egypt, Pharaoh himself — of his own volition — proposed that they should settle in "the best of the land."<sup>18</sup> They settled {so well} to the extent that "they acquired property there, and were fruitful, and multiplied greatly" (as the verse describes).

So how is it possible to say that "{Even} the best of the Egyptians — {you must} kill," when we find that there were Egyptians who related appropriately toward the Jewish people, lived together with them in peace and serenity, and even acted benevolently toward them, etc.?

The novice student will sense this inconsistency even more sharply when he studies *parshas Ki Seitzei*, which commands explicitly:<sup>19</sup> "**Do not despise an Egyptian....**" That is, despising an Egyptian is forbidden, so certainly killing him is forbidden!

Additionally, if "{Even} the best of the Egyptians — {you must} kill," how can we fulfill (the subsequent verse), "Children who are born to them in the third generation may enter the assembly of Hashem {i.e., they may convert to Judaism}?"<sup>20</sup> While it is true that by coming to convert, they demonstrate that they are "**the best of the Egyptians**" — Rabbi Shimon says that "**Even the best of the Egyptians — {you must} kill!**"

---

<sup>17</sup> Bereishis 12:16, 20; Rashi's commentary on verses 19-20.

<sup>18</sup> Bereishis 47:6.

<sup>19</sup> Devarim 23:8.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 23:9.

As such, Rashi ought to have addressed this question in *parshas Ki Seitzei*, at the very least.

### 3.

#### MARTIAL LAW

One of the solutions found in a number of sources<sup>21</sup> is based on the version {of the above teaching} in tractate *Sofrim*:<sup>22</sup> “the best of the idolaters, **at a time of war** — kill.” That is, the permission granted (or obligation) to kill even from the best of the idolaters only applies during a war against the Jewish people, but in no other situation — if not at war, and certainly in a time of peace.

Seemingly, we could interpret Rashi’s comment similarly. Namely, Rashi refers only to a time when Egyptians are waging war against the Jewish people. For the “G-d fearing Egyptians” were punished while the Egyptians pursued the Jewish people in order to do battle with them at the Sea of Reeds.

However, we are unable to read this interpretation into Rashi’s commentary (following the approach of *psbat*), for Rashi says, “**Based on this** {lit., ‘from here’}, Rabbi Shimon would say: ‘the best of the Egyptians — kill,’ which means:

- a) *from here* implies that we apply the lesson to different scenarios, as well .
- b) *from here* — from the verse, “**He {Pharaoh} took...** the chariots of Egypt,” i.e., from the act of **taking** the animals. **Because** the “G-d fearing” Egyptians had given their horses<sup>23</sup> to Pharaoh, the “G-d fearing” Egyptians deserved to be punished by Hashem at the Splitting of the Sea — with death. That is, they deserved death only because they had given their horses to Pharaoh with nefarious intentions, **not** because they had actively waged war against the Jewish people. They gave their horses to Pharaoh

---

<sup>21</sup> Sources cited in fn. 5; *Tosfos, Avoda Zara* 26b, s.v. “V’Lo.”

<sup>22</sup> End of ch. 15 {Tractate *Sofrim* is one of the minor tractates of the Talmud}.

<sup>23</sup> {Lit. “animals.”}

prior to the “time of war,” before Pharaoh and the Egyptians engaged in warfare against the Jewish people.

#### 4.

##### REJECTED SOLUTIONS

Even if we were to say that this occurrence (of taking {the horses} — in order to later wage war) also qualifies as “a time of war,” we cannot maintain that {with his remarks,} Rashi intends to say, “{you must} kill **at a time of war**,” for the following **fundamental reason**: As mentioned above, Rashi wrote his commentary for a novice student, as well. Therefore, {in his commentary} Rashi plainly and clearly explains all that is needed to clarify the plain meaning of Scripture. Consequently, if Rashi had meant to say “{you must} kill at a time of war,” he would have written these words explicitly in his commentary. (He would not have relied on a novice student to search {for an explanation} until he {ultimately} discovers the meaning of Rashi’s remarks... in tractate *Sofrim*.) Especially since — according to this explanation — “a time of war” is a critical condition {for *killing the best of the Egyptians*}!

For the same reason, it is difficult to read into Rashi’s words the other solutions found in various commentaries —

[For example:

- a. Rabbi Shimon’s principle means (not that “the best of the Egyptians” deserves to be punished — “kill”; rather) that even “the best of the Egyptians” [is the sort that **says**], “kill.” Meaning, when a suspected murderer is on trial, even “the best of the Egyptians” is prepared to rule in favor of execution (“kill”) based on conjecture alone, without conducting an appropriate investigation and without considering a defendant’s merits.<sup>24</sup> In contrast, Jewish law dictates that “the court shall judge... and the

---

<sup>24</sup> This explanation is found in the dispute between Don Shmuel Abarbanel and Don Shelomo HaLevi, printed in *Sefer Shevet Yehudah*.

court shall protect”;<sup>25</sup> meaning, {to convict an accused} we require witnesses {to the crime}, warnings,<sup>26</sup> etc., and we **are obligated** to consider the defendant’s merits.

- b. Rabbi Shimon’s principle is only hyperbole, to be understood in the same manner as Rabbi Shimon’s subsequent remarks (as recorded in tractate *Sofrim*):<sup>27</sup> “{Even} the best of women practice witchcraft.” G-d forbid that a person should say that a daughter of Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel and Leah, especially “the best of them,” should be considered to be a practitioner of witchcraft! Rather, this was hyperbole, said in order to strongly emphasize how careful even “the best of women” must be to avoid witchcraft.<sup>28</sup> “{Even} the best of the Egyptians — {you must} kill” should be understood similarly. This statement is not to be taken literally, but rather as hyperbole, in order to emphasize the unreliability of Egyptians.
- c. During Rabbi Shimon’s era, the Jewish people suffered from severe persecution by anti-Semites. It was **they** who Rabbi Shimon had in mind with his teaching, “{Even} the best of the Egyptians — {you must} kill,” for they demonstrated open hatred for the Jewish people (similar to the “snake” — mentioned next in the teaching — which is full of venom). But he was not referring to gentiles generally, not even to the Egyptians. As proof, we find several teachings of our Sages that **emphasize** to what extent Hashem showed mercy toward the Egyptians. This is strikingly evident in (the reasoning behind) the commandment, “Do not despise an Egyptian, for you were a stranger in his land.”]<sup>29</sup>

It is difficult to read these explanations, and others like them, into Rashi’s words, for they do not flow from the simple meaning of Rashi’s wording, “the

---

<sup>25</sup> *Bamidbar* 35:24-25. See *Rosh Hashanah* 26a.

<sup>26</sup> {In the procedure known as “*hasra’ah*,” two qualified witnesses must warn the would-be perpetrator that the crime he is about to commit is forbidden by the Torah, and inform him of this crime’s punishment. The perpetrator must acknowledge the warning in order for the punishment to be administered. Absent the *hasra’ah*, this punishment may not normally be administered by the courts.}

<sup>27</sup> *Sofrim*, ch. 15, par. 10; *Jerusalem Talmud*, “*Kiddushin*,” ch. 4, par. 11.

<sup>28</sup> See *Pnei Moshe*’s commentary on the Jerusalem Talmud, “*Kiddushin*,” ch. 4, par. 11.

<sup>29</sup> See *Gur Aryeh*’s commentary on *Devarim* 23:8.

best of the Egyptians — kill.” Rashi would have had to add explanatory remarks if his intention was in accord with those explanations.

Since Rashi does **not** do so, but merely quotes the few words of Rabbi Shimon as they appear in the *Mechilta*, we must say that this teaching is to be understood based on Rabbi Shimon’s words alone, and Rashi thinks that nothing needs to be added to his commentary — not even for the novice student — in order to resolve the above-mentioned difficulty.

## 5.

### A GREATER PUZZLE

This leads us to the most perplexing point in this matter: Assuming we could resolve all of the issues stemming from Rashi’s remarks and could explain how the dictum, “{Even} the best of the Egyptians — {you must} kill” in a way that will be completely clear, at the outset, to the novice student — an opposite difficulty would arise: How is it possible that, over the course of generations, several of our greatest Sages have toiled to resolve this difficulty, and were not satisfied with Rashi’s explanation, geared for the novice student?

Obviously, we don’t refer to a resolution of the novice student’s question, that, while corresponding to his level of understanding, is not truthful in its reasoning and explanation (which he will only discover when studying the aforementioned commentaries when he matures). G-d forbid that a person should say that Rashi teaches untruths to a novice student! Rather, certainly Rashi’s intention is to offer a true reason and explanation. His {implicit} explanation is so clear — even for the novice student — that Rashi has no need to add anything to the wording in the *Mechilta*. Nonetheless, this {implicit} explanation is never mentioned in all of the Sages’ debates {on this topic}!

## 6.

### ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS

We must also clarify:

- a. Rashi's commentary is not a catalogue of *halachic* rulings; rather, it is meant to explain the plain meaning of Scripture. As such, why is it necessary — in explaining the plain meaning of Scripture — to quote, “Based on this, Rabbi Shimon would say...”? To answer Rashi's question, “Where did these animals come from?”<sup>30</sup> saying that they came from “those {Egyptians} who feared the word of Hashem,” and nothing more, would have sufficed.
- b. Even if we say that Rashi had to explain that even “those who feared the word of Hashem” did not behave appropriately — in order to forestall the question as to how someone who “fears the word of Hashem” could pledge his animals to the war effort against the Jewish people — a difficulty remains: Why is it necessary to say that he deserves to be killed?
- c. Seemingly, the subsequent and concluding part of this dictum, “the best of the serpents — crush their brains,” is irrelevant to explaining our verse.
- d. Why must we learn that “the best of the serpents — crush their brains” from the words “based on this?” Scripture teaches this explicitly:<sup>31</sup> “I will plant enmity between you... **he will pound your head!**”

---

<sup>30</sup> {This is the question that precedes the comment of the *Mechilta* quoted in sec. 1 above.}

<sup>31</sup> *Bereishis* 3:15.

## 7.

### FINER POINTS

There are additional nuances in Rashi's explanation that require explanation:

- a. Why, in this instance, does Rashi quote the author of this teaching by name — *Rabbi Shimon*? (As explained many times,) Rashi only mentions the name of an author if doing so adds clarity to Rashi's remarks.
- b. Regarding “the best of the Egyptians,” Rashi says, “kill,” but regarding “the best of the serpents,” Rashi says, “**crush their brains.**” {Why does he not use the same wording for both?}
- c. Seemingly, when writing, “crush,” Rashi should have said, “crush their **heads,**” corresponding to the wording in the verses, “he will pound your **head,**” and “you have crushed the heads of the Leviathan.”<sup>32</sup>
- d. What is the meaning behind the nuanced wording, “**based on this** {lit., ‘**from here**’} Rabbi Shimon would say, etc.” By inference, this phrase precludes deriving this teaching from another source. Why must we derive this teaching specifically “from here?”

## 8.

### WHY WERE THE EGYPTIANS ELIMINATED?

In order to clarify this issue, we must preface with a broad question regarding Rashi's explanation:

Seemingly, the version in tractate *Sofrim*, “the best of the idolaters, **at a time of war** — kill,” is more **appropriate**, even according to the plain meaning of Scripture: Since the Egyptians came to wage **war** against the Jewish people [and Hashem's punishment of the Egyptians was also through war, as the Torah

---

<sup>32</sup> *Tehillim* 74:14.

says, “Hashem will **wage war** for you,” and “Hashem **waged war** for them”<sup>33</sup>], even a novice student understands that at a time of war, it is impossible to identify who is “the best” of the enemy (in the course of battle).

As such, this version is smoother than the version that Rashi quotes from *Mechilta*, which says without qualification “the best of the Egyptians — kill” which:

- a. Refers to all times and circumstances — which utterly controverts {the ideals of} justice and fairness; and
- b. Emphasizes that an Egyptian “who feared Hashem” deserved to die merely because he gave his animals to Pharaoh (as mentioned above in sec. 3)!

But in truth, this does not pose any difficulty: On the level of *psbat*, it is clear that the miracle of the Splitting of the Sea and the elimination of the Jewish people’s Egyptian pursuers was not strictly a result of their pursuit of the Jewish people and the war the Egyptians waged against them, for the Torah says previously that Hashem told Moshe, “**I will** harden Pharaoh’s heart and he will pursue....”<sup>34</sup> Additionally, the Torah says subsequently, “**Hashem** hardened Pharaoh’s heart... and he pursued....”<sup>35</sup> Since this pursuit took place because **Hashem** hardened Pharaoh’s heart, the Egyptians did not deserve to be punished for this {i.e., for pursuing the Jews and waging war}! Rather, this punishment was a continuation of Hashem’s earlier plagues upon the Egyptians as a consequence for having oppressed and enslaved the Jewish people over the course of many years. As the conclusion<sup>36</sup> of all the plagues, Hashem delivered the greatest punishment of all — the miracle of the Splitting of the Sea, in consequence of which, “**not even one** of them remained.”<sup>37</sup>

Therefore, Rashi could not have quoted the version in tractate *Sofrim*, that (only) “at a time of war— kill,” because the intent of Scripture is not that the

---

<sup>33</sup> *Shemos* 14:14, 30.

<sup>34</sup> *Shemos* 14:4.

<sup>35</sup> *Shemos* 14:8.

<sup>36</sup> See *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 3 (pg. 878 ff., explained in detail there), which explains that the Splitting of the Sea was the conclusion of the Exodus from Egypt.

<sup>37</sup> {*Shemos* 14:28.}

pursuit {of the Jews} and war waged by the Egyptians was the reason for their demise at the Sea of Reeds.

## 9.

THIS IS WHY

On this basis, we can understand<sup>38</sup> why Rashi needed to write, “based on this, Rabbi Shimon would say...” (despite the fact that Rashi’s commentary is not a *halachic* work): By Rashi saying that “those who feared the word of Hashem” had given their animals to Pharaoh, we understand that they were present at the Splitting of the Sea as well.<sup>39</sup> Consequently, they also were punished together with the other Egyptians. This demands an explanation: How is it possible that even “those who feared the word of Hashem” perished at the Splitting of the Sea just as<sup>40</sup> those who did not “fear...” (as the Torah says,<sup>41</sup> “not even one of them remained”) for merely giving their animals {to Pharaoh}?

(If we were to posit that the Egyptians’ met their demise because they pursued the Jewish people in order to wage war against them, their punishment would have been justified (and Rashi would not have needed to address this point). However, since this pursuit was not the cause {of their demise}, it is perplexing why “those who feared the word of Hashem” were punished.)

This is particularly perplexing, since the novice student already studied the saga of Sodom and Amarah, and {he knows that} had there only been (nine or) ten righteous citizens, not only would they have been saved themselves, but their merit would have served to protect all the citizens of their city. But here, the exact opposite happened: not only did {the presence of} “those who feared the word of Hashem” not protect the other Egyptians from being decimated, but even they “who feared the word of Hashem” were themselves not spared.

---

<sup>38</sup> {This resolves the question from sec. 7, subsection a.}

<sup>39</sup> As the *Levush* explains, ad loc: ‘Since Pharaoh had successfully persuaded them to give him their horses for the pursuit, he naturally would have also persuaded them to join him in his pursuit. This way, they could recoup the riches they had lent to the Jews.’

<sup>40</sup> In the manner of **death** — see Rashi on *Shemos* 15:5, s.v. “*k’mo aven*.”

<sup>41</sup> *Shemos* 14:28.

Therefore, Rashi quotes the dictum of Rabbi Shimon, “Based on this... the best of the gentiles — kill; the best of the serpents...,” in order to explain that “those who feared” were punished not only because they had given their animals to Pharaoh. Rather, the harsh punishment of “those who feared” proves that they had given their animals to Pharaoh because of their hatred for the Jewish people, which they shared equally with the other Egyptians. This “venomous” hatred (symbolic of a serpent’s venom) drove **all** the Egyptians to harshly afflict the Jewish people over so many years. For this reason, as punishment Hashem decreed that **all** of them (even for “those who feared”) be ‘killed’ — “not even one of them remained.”

## 10.

### THE ULTIMATE HATRED

Now we can also understand the emphasis placed on the words, “**Based on this**<sup>42</sup>...{even} the best of the Egyptians — kill” — for prior to the punishment {meted out} at the Splitting of the Sea, we had no clear indication that even “those who feared the word of Hashem” felt such hatred and were filled with such wickedness toward the Jewish people that as punishment, they equally deserved the punishment of being killed along with the other Egyptians.

The fact that “those who feared” were not distinguished from the other Egyptians throughout the other plagues (except pestilence and hail) does not prove that they were identical to the other Egyptians in their degree of hatred for, and wickedness toward, the Jewish people. Since the other plagues did not bear the greatest punishment — **death** — the Egyptians did not need to be as wicked {as the others to deserve those plagues}. Such punishments can be deserved because of lesser degrees of hatred and wickedness, which even “those who feared the word of Hashem” possessed. Therefore, even they deserved to be punished by those plagues.

Even though the Plague of the Firstborn bore the punishment of death (“kill”), Rashi explained **previously**, “Why were the sons of the female servants

---

<sup>42</sup>{This resolves the question from sec. 7, subsection d.}

killed? Because they too would enslave the Jewish people and rejoice in their misfortune.”<sup>43</sup> That is, even this punishment involving death, because it was not imposed on an entire family, but only on a small portion of a family — the firstborn — was not specifically in response to the full measure of Egyptian wickedness. Thus, the “sons of the female servants” were also stricken by this plague.

It is specifically, “based on this” — based on the decimation of the Egyptians (at the Splitting of the Sea) whereby “not even one of them remained,” that we have proof that even “those who feared the word of Hashem” (“the best of the Egyptians”) of that generation were completely identical to the other Egyptians in their intense degree of hatred and wickedness toward the Jewish people. Thus, they also deserved the punishment of “kill.”

## 11.

WHY KILL “THE BEST?”

Now we can also understand<sup>44</sup> why, “{even} the best of the Egyptians — kill”: Since Rashi quotes this teaching in order to resolve a difficulty in **this verse**, we understand that “{even} the best of the Egyptians...” refers to the Egyptians (of that generation) spoken about in this verse — **those** Egyptians (even “the best” of them) deserve to be ‘killed’ as punishment, for the reason mentioned above. Rashi’s remarks do not apply at all to the Egyptians of other generations, whether decent or wicked.

However, the novice student may still ask: The wording, “**based on this**” {lit., ‘from here’}, Rabbi Shimon **would say**...” implies that this is relevant in another context, for later generations. What difference does it make to later generations that “{even} the best of the Egyptians (of **that** generation) — kill”?

To forestall this question, Rashi quotes Rabbi Shimon’s subsequent remarks: “{Even} the best of the serpents — crush their brains.” This emphasizes

---

<sup>43</sup> Rashi on *Shemos* 5:11.

<sup>44</sup> {This resolves the question in sec. 2.}

that the dictum, “{even} the best of **the Egyptians** — kill,” *per se*, is not relevant for future generations, but it informs our future conduct regarding the dictum, “{even} the best of the serpents — crush their brains.”

Moreover, this (the phrase, “on this basis”) informs us that if an individual arises whose **evil** intent toward the Jewish people is such that we may {justifiably} refer to him as a “serpent” — just as Shimshon was called a serpent in the **positive sense**<sup>45</sup> — then the rule, “{even} the best of the serpents...” would apply.

It’s noteworthy that in the days of Rashi and his disciples, there were many who behaved as “serpents” toward the Jewish people — as we can see from the elegies composed by Rashi and his disciples.

## 12.

### THE APPROACH TO HATE

With this in mind, we can also understand<sup>46</sup> the novelty of the teaching, “{even} the best of the serpents — crush their brains” (even the Torah says explicitly, “he will pound your head”): The verse, “he will pound your head, and you will bite his heel” teaches us only of the correspondence between, “he will pound your head” and “you will bite his heel” (as a warning) — you should *smash a serpent’s “head” precisely* when it is about to *bite your heel*.

The novelty of Rabbi Shimon’s teaching: Just as we find that the best of the Egyptians deserved to be killed on account of their “venomous” hatred of the Jewish people [and not because they waged war against the Jewish people, as explained above], the same applies to a serpent — since Hashem **decreed** that, “I will plant enmity between you and {the woman}...,”<sup>47</sup> a person need not wait for a serpent to attack (and only then *pound its head*). Rather, as soon as he sees a serpent, he should “crush its brain.” Even the “**best** of the serpents” is similar

---

<sup>45</sup> **Rashi’s commentary** on *Bereishis* 49:11. {Rashi mentions the story of the conclusion of Shimshon’s life; see *Shoftim*, ch. 16.}

<sup>46</sup> {Resolving the question in sec. 6, subsection d.}

<sup>47</sup> {*Bereishis* 3:15.}

to the best of the Egyptians described in our *parshah* (i.e., Egyptians of that generation) — he is your dangerous enemy (for “I will **plant enmity...**”).

{The maxim} “a rule that clarifies {another topic} is also itself clarified” {can be applied to our discussion here}: Rabbi Shimon’s concluding teaching, “{even} the best of the serpents — crush their brains,” quoted by Rashi, clarifies that Rabbi Shimon’s initial teaching: “{Even} the best of the Egyptians — kill” refers only to that generation of Egyptians whose hatred of the Jewish people was comparable to the enmity of serpents for humans (“I will plant enmity...”).

### 13.

#### THE APPROACH TO HATE

What, truly, is the reason that such an exceptionally hateful generation thrived precisely at that time? To address this, Rashi quotes the exact wording (of the *Mechilta*), “{even} the best of the serpents — crush their **brains**” (which accords with the above-mentioned maxim, *the rule that instructs is also instructed*):

Just as in the case of the serpent, in which the decree “and I will plant enmity...” was an outcome of the fact that “the serpent was **cunning...**” — {a function of} his brain — which resulted in the sin of the Tree of Knowledge, etc. — the Egyptians’ hatred was also predicated on a particular cause (which fueled their hatred). The cause of their hatred was Pharaoh’s directive, “Let us deal **wisely** with them...”<sup>48</sup> — i.e., all Egyptians should act wisely — with “cunning.” This “cunning” led to the harsh subjugation and oppression of the Jewish people.

Rashi alludes to this with his nuanced wording, “their brains” (and not “their heads”):<sup>49</sup> The serpent must be killed because of its “brain” (“the serpent was **cunning**”), which led to Hashem saying, “I will plant enmity...” Similarly, the maxim “{even} the best of the Egyptians — kill,” is based on the Egyptians’

---

<sup>48</sup> *Shemos* 1:10.

<sup>49</sup> {This resolves the question raised in sec. 7, subsection c.}

cunning, which was predicated on Pharaoh's plan, "Let us deal **wisely** with them." This culminated in the harsh subjugation and oppression in Egypt.

## 14.

RABBI SHIMON!

A general question could be posed regarding this solution: How do we know that the best of the Egyptians" were killed as a result of **their** hatred and wickedness? Perhaps they were killed because of a Heavenly **decree**, and not because a known reason?

To forestall this question,<sup>50</sup> Rashi cites the author of the teaching by name — Rabbi Shimon — for Rabbi Shimon is known as the one who "expounds reasons behind Scriptural verses {and narratives}." Here too, he follows his own methodology.

## 15.

INADMISSIBLE IN DEBATES

In light of this, it is clear why, in the various debates (mentioned earlier) regarding Rabbi Shimon's teaching, our Sages were unable to avail themselves of this explanation:<sup>51</sup>

Although this explanation is extremely **simple**, it **only** pertains to Rashi's commentary, because:

- a. Rashi **only** explains the plain meaning of the verse, i.e., the scope of his commentary is limited to the **verse** that is the subject of his remarks. Therefore, "the best of the **Egyptians**" (in **Rashi's commentary**) refers to the Egyptians mentioned in **this verse**.

---

<sup>50</sup> {This resolves the question raised in sec. 7, subsection a.}

<sup>51</sup> {This resolves the question raised in sec. 5.}

- b. In Rashi's commentary, "{Even} the best of the serpents — crush their brains" follows after the statement that "{even} the best of the Egyptians, kill." (Thus, the dictum "{even} the best of the serpents..." is also learned "**from here**" {i.e., from the previous statement}). Accordingly, this proves and validates the conclusion that "{even} the best of the Egyptians — kill" refers only to the Egyptians of that generation, as explained above.<sup>52</sup>

In contrast, in tractate *Sofrim* and similar texts,<sup>53</sup> Rabbi Shimon's dictum is quoted not in a specific context: "Rabbi Shimon taught: "{Even} the best of the gentiles... kill; {even} the best of the serpents — crush their brains; {even} the best of women practice witchcraft." This cannot be explained the same way {we explained similar remarks in Rashi's commentary}, since tractate *Sofrim* does not associate this dictum to a specific generation or particular "gentiles" (or to Egyptians).

Additionally, since a third clause, "the best of women practice witchcraft" is added (in tractate *Sofrim*, etc.) which is completely unrelated to "the best of idolaters..." we are compelled to see each of the three clauses as **independent** statements: "the best of women..." teaches us about the nature of women; and, "the best of the serpents..." teaches us about the nature of serpents.

Neither of these statements were said in reference to a particular generation.

So, too, regarding, "the best of the gentiles..." — this teaches us (for all times) about the **nature** of gentiles.

## 16.

### EXTRAJUDICIAL EXECUTION

As mentioned several times, we can often apply Rashi's Torah commentary to *halachic* issues:

---

<sup>52</sup> {Sec. 12.}

<sup>53</sup> Similarly, the *Jerusalem Talmud*, "Kiddushin," ch. 4, par. 11.

Rabbi Eliezer taught in tractate *Sanhedrin*<sup>54</sup> regarding “a wolf... and a serpent,”<sup>55</sup> that “whoever kills them preemptively, merits {the performance of a *mitzvah*}”; {convening} a court of 23 judges is not necessary (in line with the opinion of the *Tanna Kamma*).<sup>56</sup> Rabbi Yochanan and Reish Lakish debate this point:<sup>57</sup> Reish Lakish maintains that this applies only when the serpent had killed a person previously — making the serpent liable to be killed. Only then do we deem a court case unnecessary (unlike in the case of an ox {that killed a person}). However, if the serpent had not killed a person previously, we may not kill the serpent. Conversely, Rabbi Yochanan maintains that Rabbi Eliezer’s teaching applies, “even if it had not killed a person” — “whoever kills them first merits {the performance of a *mitzvah*},” since “these species can never be domesticated.”<sup>58</sup>

According to Rashi’s explanation (based on *pshat*), the dictum that “{even} the best of serpents...” is learned from, “{even} the best of Egyptians — kill.” We can draw the following conclusions (bearing in mind that Rashi’s explanations of the Torah must be interpreted, first and foremost, according to **their plain meaning**):

- a. A court hearing is not required to justify killing a serpent, in the same way that each Egyptian was not tried individually. [If they would have been tried individually, the rule that, “the court shall judge... and the court **shall protect**” would have had to have been applied. Meaning, the judges would have had to look for the merits of the Egyptians {and take them into consideration}. But in this case, even “those who feared the word of Hashem” were killed, “not one {of them remained}.”<sup>59</sup>] Rather, this {divine death} decree applied to **all** the Egyptians, all together (categorically).

---

<sup>54</sup> *Sanhedrin* 2a, in the *Mishnah*.

<sup>55</sup> {This *Mishnah* describes the judicial procedures for animals that caused a person’s death. Rabbi Eliezer maintains that for these wild animals, no judicial procedure is necessary; they may be killed on sight.}

<sup>56</sup> {The *Tanna Kamma* is the first authority listed in a *Mishnah*.}

<sup>57</sup> *Sanhedrin* 15b.

<sup>58</sup> {An animal that cannot ever be tamed must be ownerless; therefore, we can proceed with killing it extrajudicially.}

<sup>59</sup> For how could it be possible that if they **searched**, merits could not be found for at least one of them!?

- b. Even a serpent that “had **not** killed a person” must be killed — for even “the **best** of serpents ...crush their brains” [similar to the rule that “even the **best** of Egyptians... kill” which was stated (**not** on account of their **war** against the Jewish people, but rather) on account of their deep-seated hatred of the Jewish people].
- c. This only applies to a serpent, regarding which Hashem decreed, “I will plant enmity between you and....” In contrast, we might be able to say that other animals “... may be domesticated.”

## 17.

### THE PERSONAL LESSON

The lesson that every individual can apply in their divine service:

Our Sages teach that the serpent “represents the Evil Inclination.”<sup>60</sup> On occasion, the Evil Inclination appears to be “pious” — “**the best** of the serpents.” The Evil Inclination maintains that it wishes to make peace with the Good Inclination predicated on a compromise: It will allow the Jew to study Torah, etc., during the time for Torah study, provided that the Good Inclination allows the person to indulge his desires “a bit” during the time for eating, etc.

In response, Rabbi Shimon teaches, “{Even} the best of serpents — crush their brains:” We may never make peace with the Evil Inclination, for it is a “serpent.” No matter its disguise, it hates you with unimaginable hatred.<sup>61</sup> Its willingness to make concessions is one of the Evil Inclination’s schemes: “Today he tells you to do this; tomorrow he tells you do that... {until finally he tells you to} worship idols....” Therefore, the Torah’s recommended course of action is to “crush its **brains**”; we must obliterate its “**brain**,” the cunning and schemes of the Evil Inclination.

---

<sup>60</sup> *Zohar*, vol. 1, p. 35b.

<sup>61</sup> See *Bereishis Rabbah*, beg. of ch. 54; *Midrash Tehillim* on psalm 34.

Another point: The idea behind nuanced wording in the verse, “when you eat from the toil of **your hands**”<sup>62</sup> is well-known — the toil of a Jew to earn a livelihood must only occupy “your hands,” the faculty of action, while a person’s head (the intelligence of the brain) must **always** be filled with Torah, etc.

This is the meaning of “crush its **brains**.” We must smash the **brain** of the Evil Inclination, so that a person’s mind can be completely devoted to Torah and holiness.

By fulfilling the directive of our Sages that {even} “the best of serpents — crush their brains,” throughout the period of exile, the Jewish people will merit fulfillment of the promise that “even his *enemies* will make peace with him.”<sup>63</sup> As our Sages explain, “This {word, *enemies*} alludes to the serpent.”<sup>64</sup> Meaning, the “serpent” will also be so completely transformed that it will “make **peace**” with the Jewish people.<sup>65</sup>

-From talks delivered on Shabbos *parshas Beshalach*, Purim and Shabbos *parshas Ki Sisa*, 5729 (1969)

---

<sup>62</sup> *Tehillim* 128:2.

<sup>63</sup> *Mishlei* 16:7.

<sup>64</sup> *Bereishis Rabbah* 54:1. {I.e., the Evil Inclination.}

<sup>65</sup> See *Yerushalmi*, “*Terumos*,” ch. 8, *halacha* 3; *Bereishis Rabbah*, ch. 54, par. 1.