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No Favor, No Bribe

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RASHI'S EXPLANATION

Regarding the verse,¹ “For Hashem, your L-rd — He is the L-rd of the divine beings... Who does not show favor and does not take a bribe,” Rashi explains: “*Who does not show favor* — if you cast off His yoke”; “*And does not take a bribe* — to appease Him with money.”

This needs to be clarified: What is Rashi adding by explaining that “Who does not show favor” applies “if you cast off His yoke” — when else would Hashem not show favor? When do we observe the Torah and mitzvos? What is Rashi telling us?

Commentators² explain that Rashi is addressing an apparent contradiction between this verse, “Who **does not show** favor,” and a previous verse (in *Birkas Kohanim*)³ — “May Hashem **show** favor to you.”⁴ Concerning this paradox, Rashi explains that we are dealing here with a situation when “you cast off His yoke.”

However, this still needs to be clarified: What is Rashi adding by telling us that Hashem “does not show favor” if “you cast off His yoke,” when this seems self-evident, particularly in light of the **lengthy** illustration recorded **earlier**, in *parshas Bechukosai*?⁵

Furthermore, in *parshas Naso*, **Rashi** explains the verse, “May Hashem show you favor,” to mean “May He suppress His anger.” In other words, this verse also speaks of a situation where “His anger” exists, so certainly, there is a cause for His anger, namely, behavior contrary to His will. Nevertheless, the verse says, “May Hashem show you favor”! If so, the contradiction between these two verses returns.

¹ *Devarim* 10:17.

² *Devek Tov, Maskil LeDavid, Melech HaKodesh*.

³ *Bamidbar* 6:26.

⁴ See *Berachos* 20b; *Rosh Hashanah* 17b; *Niddah* 70b; *Sifri* on the verse; Rambam’s *Commentary on Mishnah*, “*Megillah*,” ch. 4, par. 8; et al.

⁵ {Where Hashem pledges prosperity for keeping His mitzvos, but warns of retribution if they are forsaken.}

2.

TO APPEASE HIM WITH MONEY

We must also better understand Rashi's second remark: "*And does not take a bribe* — to appease Him with money."

We can understand why Rashi added the words "to appease Him" in his second remark: "*And does not take a bribe*," even though the verse uses the {more general} term, "a bribe." As *Re'em*⁶ explains and as is self-evident, bribery, generally (when speaking of a human judge), can refer either to "acquitting the guilty" (**perverting** justice) or to "**waiving** his punishment," "but Hashem would never consider acquitting the guilty, only to waive his punishment." Therefore, Rashi emphasizes that this verse refers to a bribe that a person gives to Hashem to "appease Him" — to **waive** his punishment (but not to acquit him when he is guilty, as this doesn't need to be ruled out).

Still, why does Rashi add the words "with money"? As *Re'em* asks: "I don't understand how money could influence Hashem. Why doesn't Rashi explain, "*And does not take a bribe* — in the form of a mitzvah the person performs {to atone} for his transgression"?"

In addition, why does Rashi cite the words "And does not take" from the verse? His explanation only addresses the word "bribe," clarifying that (a) it refers to appeasement and that (b) the appeasement is "with money."

⁶ {An acronym for Rabbi Eliyahu Mizrachi, a major super-commentary on Rashi's commentary.}

3.

“MONEY”

The commentators⁷ offer various answers to address the *Re'em*’s question:

- a) “Money” in this context refers to bringing a sacrifice to Hashem, with the verse informing us that {although sacrifices generally engender goodwill} “The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination”⁸ — until he performs *teshuvah*,⁹ his sacrifice will not be accepted.
- b) “To appease Him with money” refers to all money given for the sake of Hashem — for the *Mishkan*¹⁰ fund, or Temple fund, or other similar causes, as the verse states above, “They shall take **Me** a portion.”¹¹ Our verse informs us that donating money toward holy causes does not remove the punishment of sin (unless *teshuvah* was performed).
- c) “Money” refers to any mitzvah connected with giving money, such as the mitzvah of tzedakah or the like (and these donations do not suffice, as discussed above).

However, these explanations only address the **lesser** of *Re'em*’s questions: How **can** giving money to Hashem even be feasible? However, the main question remains:

The basis for (there even to be a consideration of) this money having the effect of “bribery,” so to speak, on Hashem, is **not** the same as it would be for a person (where the judge benefits from the money personally). Instead, it’s because the person performs a **mitzvah** with the money, offering a **sacrifice** or something similar. As such, why does Rashi use the specific wording of (a

⁷ See *Gur Aryeh*; *Divrei David* by the Taz; *Sifsei Chachamim*. See, also, *Maskil LeDavid*.

⁸ *Mishlei* 21:27.

⁹ {Repentance.}

¹⁰ {Tabernacle; the temporary Temple used by the Jewish nation before the permanent Temple was constructed.}

¹¹ *Shemos* 25:2.

mitzvah performed) “with money”? What difference does it make whether it is a mitzvah performed by giving money or any other mitzvah?

This question is even more potent, according to the opinion that this verse refers to a sacrifice (which is “*pleasing* — a source of contentment before Me”¹² and the reverse of “His anger”). If this is indeed Rashi’s intent, Rashi should have written explicitly, “to appease Him with a **sacrifice**,” he should not merely have **alluded** to this particular scenario with the word “money.”

Moreover, according to this explanation, “the essential point is missing from the text” (although sacrifices generally bring atonement, they must be accompanied by *teshuvah* to be effective).

Furthermore, in the simple meaning of the verse, how is this concept — that a sacrifice only brings atonement when accompanied by *teshuvah* — (at least) hinted to in the words, “and does not take a bribe”?

In addition, we can’t say that Rashi uses the word “with money” because for people, “bribes” are typically offered with “money,”¹³ because (a) bribery by people can *also* come in various forms, like “words of bribery,”¹⁴ and so forth; and (b) most importantly: The question on the **verse** remains — why does the verse use the word “bribe” (meaning “with money”) and not use words that denote, “with mitzvos” or the like?

¹² *Vayikra* 1:9 and Rashi there.

¹³ See *Maskil LeDavid*.

¹⁴ *Kesubos* 105b; however, Rashi’s commentary on Scripture (*Shemos* 23:8) does not follow this explanation.

4.

BREAKING LOOSE

The explanation:

The intent of Rashi's explanation is alluded to in his nuanced wording — “if you **cast off His yoke**” (and not one of the expressions used in *parshas Bechukosai* or elsewhere):

We aren't discussing ordinary neglect of positive mitzvos or committing sins, G-d forbid.

In such a situation, we implore Hashem for His mercy, and the kohanim bless us. “May Hashem show favor to you,” He should **overcome** His anger and not punish us.

However, this verse discusses **casting off His yoke**—someone who entirely repudiates subservience to Hashem. He relinquishes his status of “a servant of Hashem.” In fact, he feels at liberty to behave however he desires and says, “I will go as my heart sees fit.”¹⁵ To this person, the verse says, “Who **does not** show favor”: Hashem is exacting with him, unwavering and unforgiving.

The general content of this section **proves** that this is indeed the proper interpretation:

This section begins with the verse, “And now, Israel, what does Hashem, your L-rd, ask of you **but to fear....**”¹⁶ Rashi explains that “even though you have done all this — His compassion and His affection are still upon you, and despite all your sins, He does not “ask of you but to fear....”

¹⁵ *Devarim* 29:18.

¹⁶ *Devarim* 10:12.

From the beginning of this section, Scripture emphasizes that Hashem **does** favor the Jewish people despite what they may have done... — all He asks for is {a person to continue} “to fear....”

Therefore, when Scripture continues and says, “Who does *not* show favor,” we must say that here, the verse addresses a situation that is the polar opposite of **this possibility** — an antithetical state in which the person has become impervious to “fear...”

Accordingly, Rashi explains that “Who does not show favor” refers to “if you **cast off His yoke**,” as discussed above.

5.

THE TWO SIDES OF A BRIBE

This also helps us understand why Rashi doesn’t interpret the verse, “And does not take a bribe” to mean “a bribe of **mitzvos**,” as other commentators¹⁷ suggest: According to **Rashi’s** understanding of **this** verse (that it is speaking of a person who **lacks** “fear,” and chooses to “cast off His yoke”), there is no room to explain that it (“and does not take a bribe”) teaches us that Hashem is not bribed by the mitzvos performed by someone who has thrown off the yoke. After all, this lesson has already been taught by the **preceding** words of the verse, “and does not show favor.”

Accordingly, Rashi must find a scenario in which we would have assumed that although a person has cast off the yoke of Heaven, still, through this deed, he might somehow be able to appease Hashem and obtain atonement. For this reason, Rashi explains {that the verse, “and does not take a bribe,” means}, “to appease Him with money.”

¹⁷ *Ramban* and *Sforno* (and the commentaries on Rashi mentioned above {in the text and in fn. 6}) on *Devarim* 10:17. *Rambam’s Commentary on Mishnah*, “*Avos*,” end of ch. 4 (cited below in the text). According to *Meiri’s* version of *Sifri* on *Devarim* 10:17, this is also its interpretation.

This is why we would assume that “money” would have the power to atone even “if you cast off His yoke” need not be spelled out — because it has been established **previously**: On the verse, “You shall not take atonement money”¹⁸ (regarding a murderer), Rashi explains: “He shall not be exempt {from the death penalty} through money.” (Similarly, regarding an ox that kills a person — the verse states, “he shall give the redemption of his soul.”)¹⁹ It follows that the “bribe” of “money” has a two-fold nature and characteristic: Aside from causing **the one who receives** the money to become “bribed” (through the benefit and good that he receives), the money also serves to “atone” — an atonement and exchange for the **giver** — instead of surrendering himself (to death or the like) he gives his money away.²⁰ This is so to the extent that Rashi records an opinion regarding the atonement of {the owner of} an ox that killed, that the verse, “redemption of his soul,” means “the value of the owner of the ox **that did the damage**.”

[The rationale: This is a measure for measure, as the verse states: “With that which they schemed against them.”²¹ And as the Alter Rebbe explains in detail in *Tanya*²² regarding tzedakah, since “he could have purchased with this money {that he gave for tzedakah, sustenance for} the life of his vital soul,” thus {when he instead gives it to charity}, “he is giving his soul’s life to Hashem.”

And as Rashi explains a few verses later, “*and all the sustenance which was at their feet* — this is a person’s property, which stands him on his feet.”]²³

This is what the verse is rejecting — it is impossible “to bribe” Hashem “with money”: There is certainly no need to inform us that **Hashem** can not be, G-d forbid, “bought off” with money; instead, the verse is addressing the possible benefit that the money would have for the **giver**: He could think that although he cast off the yoke of Heaven and is **no longer** self-subordinated to Hashem,

¹⁸ *Bamidbar* 35:31.

¹⁹ *Shemos* 21:30.

²⁰ Note *Makkos* 2b.

²¹ *Shemos* 18:11.

²² *Tanya*, “*Likkutei Amarim*,” ch. 37.

²³ *Devarim* 11:6; see **Rashi** on *Shemos* 4:19.

he could give money (in his stead). Hashem would accept it as the “redemption of his soul.”

To address this misconception, the verse states: “and does not take bribes.” Hashem does **not** accept atonement money unless the person subjugates himself to Hashem. Only then does the money he gives make an impact. However, if he casts off the yoke, Hashem “does not take bribes.”

We can now understand why the verse emphasizes (and Rashi cites) “and does not take”: Since giving money is akin to an act of self-surrender (the life of his soul) and *kabbalas ol*,²⁴ and the only detracting factor is that the person “cast off the yoke.” Therefore, the money that he gives can not be in **his** stead — consequently, the emphasis of the verse is not in rejecting the (**giving** of the) money, but instead on the **nonacceptance** of it as an “appeasement” or “bribe.” Hence, there is an emphasis on “and does not **take** a bribe.”

6.

THE PIETY ANGLE

Everything, especially matters of Torah and mitzvos, happens by Divine providence. In our context, this principle (that Hashem “does not show favor and does not take a bribe”) is also recorded at the end of the fourth chapter of *Avos*: “for before Him there is... no favoritism and no bribery.”²⁵

— And when following the routine of “those who have the custom” to learn *Pirkei Avos* “every Shabbos during the summer months,”²⁶ the week of studying the fourth chapter of *Avos* (often) coincides with the Shabbos of *parshas Ekev*.

²⁴ {Lit. – “acceptance of the yoke”; total submission and subordination to the will of Hashem.}

²⁵ {*Avos*, ch. 4, par. 22.}

²⁶ Alter Rebbe’s Siddur; this is also the opinion of *Rama* (*Shulchan Aruch*, “*Orach Chaim*,” end of ch. 292 — not cited by Alter Rebbe in his *Shulchan Aruch* there); *Ramak*’s Siddur; and *Mateh Moshe*, ch. 486. This custom is recorded in *Sefer HaManhig* (“French custom”); *Mahari Tirna’s Sefer HaMinhagim* (“the custom in Hungary, Poland and Brno”); and *Orchos Chaim* (“from Shavuot until Sukkos”); **et al.** Note that some maintain that it should be studied in the summer and winter — *Tur* in the name of Rav Amram Gaon; **et al.** Also see *Machzor Vitri*.

Here, we see how Rashi's explanation of the verse's simple meaning sheds light and answers an obvious question: What does the mishnah add, considering that there is an equivalent **verse** written **explicitly** in Torah?

The difference can be understood based on what has been explained above:

In **Torah**, this concept is stated in the context (and circumstance) of “And now, Israel, what does Hashem, your L-rd, ask of you...,” which forces us (as discussed above) to interpret the verse “and does not take a bribe” as understood in the context of the general discussion of *kabbalas ol*. Therefore, Rashi — who elucidates the plain meaning of Scripture — explains the verse: “*Who does not show favor* — if you cast off His yoke”; “*And does not take a bribe* — to appease Him with money.”

This is as opposed to (the passages of) *Pirkei Avos*, a study that teaches “matters of piety.”²⁷ Accordingly, the teaching, “for before Him there is... no favoritism, and no bribery,” must be interpreted differently, as it applies to a person who {already} performs Torah and mitzvos and is now demanded to act piously.

As Rambam explains in his *Commentary on Mishnah*:

He {Hashem} does not take the good deeds as a bribe, such that if a man did a thousand good deeds and one bad deed, Hashem would not forgive that one sin due to the abundance of his good deeds and subtract one or more good deeds from his thousand good deeds. Instead, He will punish him for that one evil deed and reward him for all of the good deeds.²⁸ This is the meaning of the phrase “{and} does not take a bribe.” It is similar to the verse, “Who does not show favor.” He punishes a virtuous person for a minor misdeed, like our teacher Moshe, who was punished... and the reward of Esav the wicked for honoring his father and mother; and Nevuchadnezzar, for honoring Hashem.... This is the meaning of the phrase “and no favoritism.”

²⁷ See *Bava Kama* 30a.

²⁸ Note *Midrash Mishlei*, beginning of ch. 11; *Sifri* on *Devarim* 33:6 and *Devarim* 32:4.

In other words, mitzvos and sins are not calculated the way calculations are made in business or in an exchange, where the reward for one mitzvah can be deducted, thereby canceling the punishment for sins. Instead, every mitzvah and every sin has its reward or punishment.

We can propose the reason for this: The mitzvos and transgressions are delineated not (only) by their effect and impact on the person who commits them. Instead, the essence of mitzvos is the fulfillment of Hashem's will, and the essence of sin is the violation of His will. Therefore, every mitzvah has significance (the same is true for the opposite {— sins}).

However, this has two parts: “no favoritism, and no taking of bribes.” The **apparent** difference between “no favoritism” and “no taking of bribes” is the following: “No favoritism” refers to forgiveness that is prompted by the **person's** virtue, and “no taking of bribes” refers to the value of the **object being given**.

We can posit that the same is true concerning their effect on a judge: “Favoritism” helps to prevent a person's misdeed from diminishing his virtue; **he** isn't considered a “sinner” (lacking). And “bribery” causes his unfavorable **action** to be “bought off” and erased.

This is where the novel idea introduced by the mishnah comes in: A person's connection²⁹ with Hashem cannot be rebalanced by a mitzvah compensating for sin, and neither can sin be canceled out by performing a mitzvah.

In light of this, we can now understand³⁰ the words of a midrash that *teshuvah* is associated with “bribery.” (“You accept bribery from the wicked in this world, {namely} *teshuvah*, good deeds, and prayer...,” and the Midrash concludes, “engage in prayer and *teshuvah*.”)³¹ The impact of *teshuvah* is

²⁹ The word *mitzvah* is etymologically related to the words “*tzausa vechibur*” {connecting and binding} (*Likkutei Torah*, “*Bechukosai*,” 45c, et al). Conversely, when one transgresses a negative commandment, they become completely disconnected {from Divine Holiness} at that moment (*Tanya*, “*Likkutei Amarim*,” ch. 24).

³⁰ For the following explanation, see *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 34, pp. 59 ff., for further elaboration.

³¹ *Midrash Tehillim* 17:2; *Yalkut Shimon* on *Tehillim* 17:2, par. 670.

incomparably greater than that of mitzvos. In our context, the potency of *teshuvah* is expressed not only by the **person** being forgiven — he becomes a *baal teshuvah* — but by the way that it transforms his undesirable **deed**:

Teshuvah transmutes a person's intentional sins into unwitting ones.³² Moreover, his deliberate transgressions become like merits.³³ Ultimately,³⁴ his intentional sins become like **actual** merits.

— From a talk delivered on *Shabbos parshas Ekev*, 5740 (1980)

³² *Yoma* 86b — regarding *teshuvah* out of fear.

³³ *Yoma*, *ibid.* — regarding *teshuvah* out of love.

³⁴ See *Tanya*, “*Likkutei Amarim*,” end of ch. 7; for an expanded explanation of these levels — *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 17, pp. 183 ff., **and the sources mentioned there**.