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Spinning With Sensitivity

Translated by Rabbi Mendel Blesofsky

General Editor: Rabbi Eliezer Robbins | Editor: Rabbi Y. Eliezer Danzinger

Content Editor: Rabbi Zalmy Avtzon

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1.

SPINNING ON THE GOATS

As discussed many times, in his commentary on the Torah, Rashi comments on every point within a verse that requires additional clarification, and explains it according to *pshat*.¹ When there is a clear difficulty in the straightforward understanding which Rashi does not address, we must say that from the outset, it is not really a difficulty — because either the meaning is self-understood, or it can be explained based on a previous comment of Rashi.

In *parshiyos Vayakhel-Pekudei*, there are numerous points that are unclear according to *pshat*. Moreover, several of these difficulties arise primarily from Rashi's explanation. In any event, we will discuss one difficulty from each *parshah*:

On the verse in *parshas Vayakhel*,² “All the women whose hearts inspired them with wisdom spun the goats,” Rashi explains: “For they would spin it on the backs of the goats” — they spun the wool (the hair)³ while it was still attached to the goats. We need to clarify: What was the advantage and purpose of the women spinning it “on the backs of the goats”?

Seemingly, the opposite is true: When the hair is sheared off the goats, it can be spun much more quickly and efficiently than while it is still “on the goats.” What is gained from the hair being spun “on the backs of the goats”?

Additionally, the Torah relates how very precious the work of the *Mishkan* was for the women (as intimated in an earlier verse,⁴ “the men came *along with* the women”)⁵ to the extent that they displayed extraordinary wisdom and diligence in spinning {the hair} while it was still attached to the goats. Accordingly, why did they not do the same when spinning of the wool used for the {the *Mishkan*'s} bottom covering of the turquoise and purple, etc.,

¹ {The plain meaning of Scripture. Though there are different depths of interpretation on the Torah, Rashi adopts a straightforward approach.}

² *Shemos* 35:26.

³ Rashi on *Shemos* 25:4, s.v. “*ve'izim*”; see Alter Rebbe's *Shulchan Aruch*, “*Orach Chaim*,” sec. 9, par. 8.

⁴ *Shemos* 35:22, and Rashi's commentary, loc. cit.

⁵ {I.e., the women were the primary contributors toward the building of the *Mishkan*.}

mentioned in the previous verse⁶ (and about which the Torah also emphasizes that it was spun with wisdom)? For although “every **wise**-hearted woman spun with her hands, and they brought the spun yarn of the turquoise wool, and the purple wool...,” they did not spin the wool while it was attached to the sheep!

2.

CONVENTION

We need to clarify the following in Rashi’s commentary in *parshas Pekudei*:⁷

Moshe commanded Betzalel to make the furnishings first and the *Mishkan* afterwards. Betzalel responded: “According to convention, first you make a house, and then you furnish it.” Moshe said to him, “That is what I heard {from Hashem}...” And so he did: {Betzalel made} the *Mishkan* first; and afterwards, the furnishings.

We need to clarify: According to Rashi, the manner and order of constructing the *Mishkan* was according to “convention.” When building a house, the “convention” was that the walls were built first and the roof afterwards — and that was done when **erecting** the *Mishkan*.⁸ Yet, in *parshas Vayakhel*,⁹ it says that the wise-hearted first made the coverings (as a roof) and only then made the beams {that were used for the *Mishkan*’s walls}. [And that also followed the sequence commanded by Hashem in *parshas Terumah*¹⁰!]

The *Baalei HaTosafos*¹¹ answer the coverings were made “first, before all other parts of the *Mishkan*, so that they would be available to cover the *Mishkan* as soon as the beams were completed. That way, they would not be left coverless for even a moment.”

However (in addition to the fact that this itself requires explanation — why couldn’t the beams be left “coverless for even a moment”? —) this explanation is untenable according to *psbat*. For, according to the **straightforward**

⁶ *Shemos* 35:25.

⁷ *Shemos* 38:22.

⁸ *Shemos* 40:18-19.

⁹ *Shemos* 36:8 ff.

¹⁰ *Shemos* 26:1 ff.

¹¹ *Shemos* 36:14.

understanding of the verses, the *Mishkan* was only delivered to Moshe after **all** its components were completed — the coverings, beams, and all its utensils¹² — and obviously, it was erected only at that point. Therefore, it makes no difference which piece was **made** first: Even if the beams had been made first, in accordance with “convention,” they would not have been “coverless for even a moment” in any event, for they were only erected after the **entire *Mishkan*** was completed.

It is astonishing that in both instances (in *Vayakhel* and *Pekudei*), we do not find that Rashi addresses these issues.

3.

TWO DIFFICULTIES IN RASHI

This matter can be clarified by prefacing with an analysis of two instances of nuanced wording in Rashi’s commentary in *parshas Vayakhel*:

- a) Rashi’s intention is to explain that {the clause} “they spun the goats” means that “they would spin it {the goats’ hair} on the backs of the goats.” {Accordingly} Rashi should have **begun** his explanation with this point, and only then should he have provided additional details, explaining that **this** method of spinning involved “extraordinary craftsmanship”¹³ (and the like). In general — how can Rashi begin with the words “**this** took extraordinary craftsmanship” before we know what is being discussed here, and only subsequently **explain** the verse — “for they would spin it on the backs of the goats”?
- b) Why does Rashi use the words “extraordinary **craftsmanship**” — and not “(this was) extraordinary **wisdom**,” which is the diction used in the verse: “all the women whose hearts inspired them with **wisdom**” — especially since

¹² As explicitly stated in the verse (*Shemos* 39:33 and onwards) “and they brought the *Mishkan* to Moshe, the tent...”

¹³ {Rashi on *Shemos* 35:26 — “This took extraordinary craftsmanship, for they would spin them on the backs of the goats.”}

the Talmud,¹⁴ which is (apparently) the source for Rashi's interpretation,¹⁵ indeed uses the words "extraordinary wisdom"?

4.

ANIMALS VS. PLANTS

The explanation:

The phrase "spun the goats" is not included in the previous verse together with the clause, "and every wise-hearted woman spun with her hands, and they brought the spun yarn of the turquoise wool, and the purple wool...." Rather, this phrase is recorded separately (in its own verse). (However, both {goats' hair and wool} are indeed mentioned together when they were brought to Moshe,¹⁶ and when the command for donations was given.)¹⁷ Additionally, the Torah repeats that "all the women whose hearts inspired them with wisdom spun."¹⁸ From **this** phrase, it is understood that what is described by the phrase, "they spun (the goats)" is different from the **spinning** in the previous verse. (And since "spinning" obviously does not apply to goats,) it means that they spun the hair ({אֵת הָעִיזִים, which means} with {i.e. something subordinate — the goats' hair}) while it was attached to the goats.

— And the reason for this can even be understood by a novice student of Torah:¹⁹ The Jewish people donated and brought {materials} for the *Mishkan* as a contribution and offering to Hashem. Therefore, just as there are various categories of offerings: animal offerings and plant offerings (as we find in *parshas Bereishis*²⁰ regarding the offerings of Kayin and Hevel), and animal offerings are superior to plant offerings —

¹⁴ *Shabbos* 74b.

¹⁵ As mentioned in *Sefer HaZikaron*; et al.

¹⁶ *Shemos* 35:23.

¹⁷ *Shemos* 35:6. Similarly, by Hashem's command (*Shemos* 25:4).

¹⁸ {*Shemos* 35:26 — immediately after saying "every wise-hearted woman spun with her hands..." in the previous verse.}

¹⁹ {"*Ben chamesh lemikra*," in the Hebrew original, meaning, "a five-year-old beginning to learn Scripture." This is a term borrowed from *Pirkei Avos*, which teaches that the age for a child to begin studying Chumash is at five. Rashi wrote his commentary on Chumash to solve problems that a five year-old student would encounter in understanding the simple meaning of a verse.}

²⁰ *Bereishis* 4:3, et passim.

So, too, in our case: If the hair can be spun while still attached to the goat (animal life), the product is a superior offering than spinning hair that has been shorn. Hair that is still attached to an animal (goats) grows; it is connected to the animal's vitality and draws nurture from the animal's body, in contrast to hair that has been shorn.

— This is particularly so if we interpret the passage straightforwardly that the spun threads were delivered {to Moshe} while still attached to the goats. The advantage of this is obvious — that when it was delivered, the threads were still categorized as living {since they were still attached to and growing from living animals}.

5.

DYEING THE COVERINGS

It is understood why only the coverings of goat hair were “spun {while still attached to} the goats,” in contrast to the turquoise and purple coverings, etc.:

The woolen thread from the sheep needed to be brought {to Moshe} (after they had been dyed) turquoise²¹ (using the blood of the *chilazon* snail, which was turquoise) and purple, etc. — and this dyeing was not possible while the woolen threads were still attached to the sheep. It turns out that the turquoise and purple, etc., could not have been **brought** immediately after they had been spun on the sheep²² {after being sheared} and obviously, not before the thread was sheared.²³

Therefore, the threads were not spun while on the sheep because, in any event, this offering could not be brought to Hashem in the (remarkable) manner of being attached to a living animal (or even right after being shorn).

²¹ See *Shemos* 25:3-4.

²² See *Maskil LeDavid*, ad. loc.

²³ Even if they were to dye the wool highly unusually, one strand at a time, by the time the wool would have been sheared, it would have grown further and the additional growth would have been undyed.

6.

EXTRAORDINARY CRAFTSMANSHIP

Regarding this point, which is **self-understood** from the verse, as explained above, Rashi explains: “this took extraordinary craftsmanship...”: The women “spun the goats” not only because their “hearts inspired them with **wisdom**” (including the wisdom) to understand that such a method of spinning would be a more prestigious offering for the *Mishkan*, but also because it involved superior workmanship — “extraordinary **craftsmanship**”: Spinning hair while it is attached to the goats produces a higher quality product²⁴ than that produced when thread is spun after the goat hair has been sheared. This is because when the hair is still attached and receives nurture from the animal, it keeps moisture, resulting in a softer material, which is helpful for the craft of spinning.

7.

MAKING THE COVERINGS BEFORE THE BEAMS

In light of the above, we can also explain why the coverings were made before the beams, although conventionally, walls are made first — based on both points mentioned above: Because of the dearness {of the work of the *Mishkan*} for the women, and the alacrity of the women, they immediately **spun** the hair and delivered it to the craftsmen (who fashioned the coverings) while the hair was still attached to the goats. Therefore, they could not postpone the shearing (and making the coverings) until after making the beams and their bases — for in the meantime, each strand of hair would {continue to} grow **individually**, without remaining spun **together**.

Additionally, from a halachic perspective, postponing the shearing would violate the prohibition against inflicting pain on animals²⁵ (for the movement of the animals would be restricted — because of the spun hair). Therefore, they sheared the goat hair immediately .

²⁴ See *Seforno* on the verse.

²⁵ {In the original Hebrew, בעלי חיים.}

And since spinning on the backs of the goats took “extraordinary **craftsmanship**” — such a method of spinning produces a better quality product, as explained above — it is understood that the same idea applies to the weaving of the coverings of goats’ hair: When weaving is done in proximity to when they were attached to the goats, the weaving itself is of superior quality, employing superior craftsmanship. Therefore, immediately after shearing the goat hair, they wove the coverings.

8.

TWO ASPECTS IN BUILDING THE *MISHKAN*

From among the wondrous halachic insights that can be gleaned from this commentary of Rashi:

There is a known question:²⁶ The *Mikdash* may not be built at night²⁷ (and the same is true of the “*Mishkan*, which is called a *Mikdash*”).²⁸ This means that the construction of the *Mikdash* is a positive time-bound commandment from which women are exempt. Accordingly, how were the women permitted to spin the wool for the (construction of the) *Mishkan* [according to the opinion of Rabbeinu Tam²⁹ that a woman may not perform preparatory steps for any mitzvah in which she is not obligated, which is why “a woman may not bind a *lulav* or make *tzitzis*, since she is not obligated in them”]?

The Rogatchover Gaon³⁰ explains there are two aspects to the mitzvah of building the *Mikdash*:

- (a) the very act of **building** a *Mikdash* is a positive mitzvah; and,
- (b) a *Mikdash* must be built in order to {have a place to} offer sacrifices.

On this basis, we can clarify the above distinction whether women are obligated in, or exempt from, the building of the *Mikdash*: The mitzvah of

²⁶ *Tzafnas Paneach* quoted later in the text.

²⁷ *Shavuos* 15b; *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Beis HaBechirah*,” ch. 1, par. 12.

²⁸ *Beg. of Eruvin*.

²⁹ *Tosfos* on *Gittin* 45b, s.v., “*kol*.”

³⁰ *Tzafnas Paneach*, “*Haflaah*,” appendices, 54a.

building the *Mishkan* and *Mikdash* is a time-bound mitzvah, and therefore, women are exempt; however, regarding the second aspect and obligation — the obligation to build a sanctuary in order to offer sacrifices there — women are also obligated, for they, too, must offer sacrifices.

Therefore, women also are obligated in the building and manufacture of the components of the *Mikdash* necessary for the offering of sacrifices. However, concerning making the parts and utensils of the *Mikdash* that are unnecessary for offering sacrifices, and the manufacture of which fulfills only the positive mitzvah of building the *Mikdash* — women are exempt. Therefore, {according to Rabbeinu Tam} they are also prohibited from taking part in it.

9.

THE LOWER COVERINGS

In the context of our discussion, the Talmud³¹ says regarding the coverings, that the verse, “he spread the **Tent** over the *Mishkan*”³² is referring to the lower coverings (which were made of fine linen, and turquoise, purple, and crimson wool). Meaning, the lower coverings already gave the *Mishkan* the status of a Tent, and it became possible to offer sacrifices there. Consequently, the coverings above it — the coverings made of goat’s hair — were not indispensable to the offering of sacrifices in the *Mishkan*. (And the *Mishkan* was functional even when “the wind folded up” the coverings of goat hair).³³

Accordingly, the change in the wording of the verses is understood: Regarding the lower coverings, the verse says, “every wise-hearted woman spun with her hands, and they brought the spun yarn of the turquoise wool, and the purple wool...,” for the coverings were necessary in order for the *Mishkan* to be valid (for offering sacrifices). Therefore, women could also perform the work of spinning **these** coverings (taking part in the construction of the *Mishkan*). However, regarding the coverings of goat’s hair, which were unnecessary for the sacrifices, as explained above, and consequently, the women were exempt (and

³¹ *Shabbos* 28a.

³² *Shemos* 40:19.

³³ {I.e., even when the upper coverings of the *Mishkan* were folded up by the wind, and they no longer fully covered the *Mishkan*, it remained a valid “Tent” due to the lower covering.}

prohibited) from making them — the verse says “they spun the {hair on the backs of the} goats”: the women had to spin them in a manner which, as the Talmud says in tractate *Shabbos*,³⁴ “was {produced by} extraordinary **wisdom** and not {ordinary} labor.”

10.

NOT JUST WISDOM

According to the above nuanced wording in Rashi’s interpretation — “extraordinary craftsmanship” — we can suggest that Rashi, in his commentary here, is consistent with his interpretive approach of Torah — *pshat*:

Commenting on the verse,³⁵ “he spread the Tent over the {first covering of the} *Mishkan*,” Rashi explains: “These are the coverings made of goat hair” (in accordance with the straightforward meaning of the verse in *parshas Terumah*,³⁶ “you must make coverings of goat hair as a **Tent** to spread over the *Mishkan*”). Accordingly, it turns out that according to Rashi (and *pshat*), the goat hair coverings were (also) within the halachic parameters of the “Tent,” which was germane to and a prerequisite for the offering of sacrifices in the *Mishkan*.

Accordingly, it is clear that even the goat hair coverings could be made by the women. Therefore, Rashi specifically (deviates {from the wording of the Talmud} as mentioned above, and) says, “this took extraordinary craftsmanship.” Their spinning of the wool “on the backs of the goats” was not just wisdom, but also a labor. This is the novelty that the word “craftsmanship” connotes; it is a labor performed with the object itself.

Accordingly, it is unnecessary to say (as many commentators³⁷ do) that Rashi here follows the opinion in the Talmud³⁸ that “one who spins wool {that has not been shorn, while it is} on the back of an animal {on Shabbos}” is not liable, since “this is not a typical way of spinning,” and the fact that this method of “spinning on the goats” was used in the {construction of the} *Mishkan* does

³⁴ *Shabbos* 74b.

³⁵ {*Shemos* 40:19.}

³⁶ *Shemos* 26:7.

³⁷ *Sefer Zikaron*, *Shemos* 35:26, et. al.

³⁸ *Shabbos* 74b.

not make one liable because “extraordinary wisdom is different.” Rather, Rashi’s explanation can fit with the first opinion {in the Talmud} — that he is liable — because such a method of spinning is considered a bona fide labor.

On the contrary, since all forbidden labors {of Shabbos} are derived from the {labors that were performed in the construction of the} *Mishkan*,³⁹ we can suggest that according to Rashi (this was “craftsmanship” —) this verse is the source for the first opinion {in the Talmud}:

Since spinning {the hair} while it was attached to the animal was among the labors that was done in the *Mishkan*, it is clear that this is “craftsmanship” and labor; thus, one is liable to bring a *chatas*⁴⁰ {for doing it on Shabbos}.

11.

ALL FOR HASHEM

From the “wine of Torah”⁴¹ alluded to in Rashi’s commentary, and its practical lesson in *avodah*.⁴²

It is difficult to understand why the Torah relates that “all the women whose hearts inspired them with wisdom spun the goats.” This seems to be a story of the past. How is this relevant today?⁴³ The goat hair coverings were only used in the *Mishkan* and not in the *Mikdash* (including the future *Mikdash*, especially since it is⁴⁴ “built and perfected,” and “it will be revealed and descend from Heaven”).⁴⁵

The second point — the making of the coverings before the beams, against “convention” — is likewise difficult to understand: Why is this relevant for all generations?

³⁹ *Shabbos* 49b; et. al.

⁴⁰ {Often translated as “a sin offering,” it was brought for the violation of specific sins.}

⁴¹ {The deeper ideas in Torah.}

⁴² {Divine service.}

⁴³ {It is axiomatic that everything in the Torah is relevant for all time.}

⁴⁴ Rashi (and *Tosafos*), *Sukkah* 41a; *Rosh Hashanah* 30a; et. al.

⁴⁵ {So there will certainly be no need for goat hair to be spun, much less while it is attached to the goats!}

Rather, we can learn two general, practical lessons in the *avodah* of making a *Mishkan* and *Mikdash* in this world, which is the responsibility of every Jew in all places and at all times. (As our Sages expound⁴⁶ {the verse,⁴⁷ “they shall make Me a *Mikdash*, and I shall dwell in *them*”}: “It does not say ‘in it,’ but ‘in them’” — a *Mikdash* must be made within each and every Jew).

The first lesson is derived from the women “whose hearts inspired them with wisdom”: When Hashem gives a Jew a unique talent and ability, he must know that it is not only for him personally. Instead, he must use it in his *avodah* of making the world a *Mishkan*, a dwelling place for Hashem, just as the women, when the *Mishkan* was constructed, understood that their special, unique, G-d given talent had to be used to build a *Mishkan*, a place where the *Shechinah* would rest — “I will dwell in them.”

Therefore, although they were not commanded to spin the goat hair with “extraordinary craftsmanship,” the Torah relates that they felt the initiative to spin it with “extraordinary craftsmanship” for the sanctuary of Hashem — and the Torah conveys to us an eternal lesson.

And just as a Jew must use his unique abilities for the *avodah* of making the world into a dwelling place for Hashem, the same applies to other benefits that Hashem gives a Jew — for example, when Hashem affords him to earn an extraordinary profit, he must know that he must increase in giving charity, a donation to Hashem. (As known,⁴⁸ “when a certain chassid of the Alter Rebbe had enjoyed a financially successful week, he was sure that when he would return home, he would come across a letter of the Rebbe encouraging *tzedakah*, or meet a fundraiser of the Rebbe who was collecting for the needs of the residents of the land of Israel”).

⁴⁶ *Reishis Chochmah* (near the beginning of *Shaar Ha'Ahavah* ch. 6); *Shnei Luchos Habris* (*Shaar Ha'osiyos*, “*os lamed*,” et al.) and numerous other sources.

⁴⁷ {*Shemos* 25:8.}

⁴⁸ *Sefer Hasichos* 5703, p. 9.

12.

YOU MUST CLOTHE HIM

The second lesson — to what extent one must be careful not to cause pain to someone else: If, in order to prevent causing pain to animals (and not actual pain, only discomfort, and so forth), we forsake “convention” and {thus} Hashem instructed us to make the coverings of the *Mishkan* before making the beams, certainly this is so regarding human suffering, and especially that of a Jew, for “you are called ‘man.’”⁴⁹ And this concern applies especially when we see a Jew is “naked”⁵⁰ of mitzvos, as *Tanna Dvei Eliyahu Rabbah* says:⁵¹ “There is no nakedness among Jews except one who is bare of Torah and mitzvos.” A person might rationalize: True, I must fulfill the command “you must clothe him,”⁵² “to dress him with *tzitzis* and *tefillin*.”⁵³ However, this must be done in an orderly fashion: First I must pray, and “from the synagogue to the house of study”⁵⁴ — I must study Torah, eat breakfast, and then go out and make a living.⁵⁵ After all of that, I can fulfill the command — “you must clothe him.”

The Torah tells this fellow that when it comes to the pain of another Jew — and there is no greater pain than the fact that a Jew is “naked” of mitzvos — especially when we see this person does not know that he is “naked,” we turn “convention” upside down. Even when this is not only the convention of the world {עולם}, which connotes concealment {העלם},⁵⁶ but a practice that Hashem instructed us to follow in His home⁵⁷ — nevertheless, when a Jew is in distress, we do not conform with “convention.” We must immediately address the imperative “you must clothe him” — clothe him with mitzvos. Only then, as the passage continues **subsequently**,⁵⁸ we take care of our personal needs (“and from your {own} flesh you shall not hide”).

⁴⁹ *Yevamos* 61a.

⁵⁰ *Yeshayahu* 58:7.

⁵¹ *Tanna Dvei Eliyahu Rabbah*, ch. 27.

⁵² {*Yeshayahu* 58:7.}

⁵³ Talk {delivered by the Rebbe Rayatz}, Purim 5691 (*Likkutei Dibburim*, vol. 4, 729a). See also *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 16, p. 121.

⁵⁴ *Brachos* 64a; Alter Rebbe’s *Shulchan Aruch*, “*Orach Chaim*,” ch. 155.

⁵⁵ {Lit., “act in [...] the way of the world.”} *Brachos* 35b. And see Alter Rebbe’s *Shulchan Aruch*, *ibid.*, and ch. 156.

⁵⁶ *Likkutei Torah*, “*Shlach*,” 37d; et al.

⁵⁷ {I.e., in constructing the *Mishkan*.}

⁵⁸ {The conclusion of the same verse} *Yeshayahu* 58:7.

Similarly, when it comes to studying Torah, the same principle applies (and takes precedence over the above). As the beginning of the verse says,⁵⁹ “Surely you should break your bread for the hungry,” and “there is no hunger but one who hungers for Torah; and there is no bread but Torah.”⁶⁰ Others must be taught Torah first, before studying Torah for ourselves, before fulling, “from your {own} flesh, you shall not hide.”

Then, we will merit to experience “not a hunger for bread nor a thirst for water — but {a yearning} to hear the word of Hashem,”⁶¹ from our righteous Moshiach, in the eternal *Beis HaMikdash*, which is built during the time of exile by every person using their talents and skills that Hashem gave them — to make this world a *Mishkan* and *Mikdash* for Hashem.

— From talks delivered on Shabbos *parshas Vayakhel*, 5736 (1976) and *Motzei Shabbos parshas Vayakhel-Pekudei*, 5739 (1979)

⁵⁹ {*Yeshayahu* 58:7.}

⁶⁰ *Tanna Dvei Eliyahu Rabbah*, ch. 27.

⁶¹ *Amos* 8:11, quoted in *Tanna Dvei Eliyahu Rabbah*, ch. 27.