

Texts and Contexts

The fascinating world of the Rebbe's approach to Rashi's commentary

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One of the great challenges we've faced when we arrived in Uruguay is how do you sell religion to a secular-minded person?

It would seem more difficult than lighting a match under water...

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Today I understand that you can't "sell" anything to anyone in this regard. What you can and should do is try to present things properly and trust that they are attractive enough to sell themselves.

In practice it is not so easy, since the cultural barrier between the secular and the religious—at least in the Uruguayan version that I have come to know—is so strong. People are so "religiously" secular; secularist, I would say. If a religious person says that $2+2=4$, it becomes suspect to them.

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How can this barrier be overcome?

In this weekly space I plan to examine a text from the Bible reading of that week with emphasis on Rashi's commentary and the Rebbe's—may his merit shield us—analysis of it.

How will this help break through the barrier of secularism?

The greatest barrier that the Jew who "believes that he does not believe" has with regard to the study of biblical sources is that he feels that it is necessary to be religious or a believer in order to find it interesting or relevant. "If I'm not a believer, why would I want to study religious texts that talk about subjects that don't interest me," he reasons.

It's a logical argument.

—OK, then, Mr. Secular, so you're not interested in religion and irrational beliefs. Are you interested in brain teasers? Logical problems and challenges?

—Yes, of course!

Great! Now, we're talking!

Biblical texts contain multidimensional structures. For starters, we have the five dimensions of *Peshat*, *Remez*, *Derush*, *Sod* and *Chasidut*. One can find an infinite number of expressions in each of these dimensions; in fact, the study of Torah consists not only of learning what has already been discovered but also of contributing perspectives that until now have perhaps gone unnoticed. It is a never-ending task, to be sure. But, before entering into the analysis of advanced and more sophisticated levels of understanding as to what the text wants to say and might be saying, it is necessary to understand what it is saying in the most basic sense. This level is known as *Peshat* or *Peshuto shel mikra*.

It is not always an easy task to discern the *Peshat* of a biblical text. Oftentimes there is information that to the untrained eye seems to be lacking, although to the experienced eye it is more than evident.

Think of the game of Sudoku. You have to fill the empty squares with the missing numbers. If only one number on the grid is missing, it would be quite easy to realize which one it is. The greater challenge is when many numbers are missing and the solution is not so evident. The degree of difficulty depends on the capacity and the experience of the one that looks at it. The Master will see the solution right away and will be able to give you some hints that will help you solve the rest. Perhaps the clues that are so obvious to him will still be insufficient for others of lesser training and it will be necessary that another Master come show you how to identify the missing links, based on the information that the first Master provided.

Similarly, regarding biblical texts, the first Master was Rashi, who in his commentary always addresses the *Peshat* level of the texts. Everything Rashi brings in his commentary is in order to help us understand what the text is saying, why it says what it says and why it does not say what it does not say. His goal is not to interpret the texts but to help us understand them.

For most of us, however, the subtleties of Rashi's commentaries on the biblical texts remain elusive. We are very fortunate that the "second Master" in 1964, the year of mourning for his mother, Rebetzin Chana Schneerson, A"H, began to shed light on this

fascinating world of Rashi's commentary in a very systematic way. The Rebbe —may his merit shield us— introduced us to that fascinating world by sharing each Shabbat with the audience that participated in the weekly Farbrengen, a comprehensive analysis of Rashi's commentary on the first and last verses of that week's Bible reading. After the conclusion of the year of mourning, whenever a farbrengen would take place on Shabbat the Rebbe would select a verse from the weekly reading with Rashi's commentary to be discussed. Over the years the Rebbe identified and articulated a whole sophisticated system with hundreds of rules as to what can and cannot fall within the criteria of "*Peshat*". One thing became clear: simplicity is not to be confused with simplistic.

You don't have to be a believer in order to enjoy the intellectual and logical challenge inherent in the Rebbe's approach to Rashi's commentary; you have to be —or believe that you are— intelligent and be willing to have your intelligence challenged.

(The secular Akshn who resists even a proposal of this nature because he is not religious reminds me of the applicant for an accounting position who, upon learning that it was for a dairy exporter, says: sorry, I can't take the job; I'm lactose intolerant...)

This can be a very effective tool to help break the barrier that prevents the Jew who "believes that he doesn't believe" from having and enjoying a contact with the biblical texts.

The Five-year-old

In the course of the Rebbe's teachings of Rashi, we were introduced to a very interesting character: the Five-year-old student, or *Ben Chomesh Lemikro*. Based on the talmudic instruction that at five years old a child is to begin studying the biblical texts, (Lit. "Ben Chomesh Lemikrah")¹ [1] the Rebbe often described a conversation between this five-year-old student and his "teacher", Rashi. Everything must be clear to the "Ben Chomesh" after Rashi explains a text. Moreover, Rashi does not say anything that would be irrelevant to the Ben Chomesh's understanding of the text. "Why does Rashi say this or that? Because the Ben Chomesh asks...." Why doesn't Rashi explain this or that difficulty in the text? Because the "Ben Chomesh" knows the answer based on previous verses and/or Rashi's previous commentary.

¹ Pirkei Avot, 5:21

I often wondered: where does one find such an extraordinary five-year-old that would ask all the questions that the Rebbe raises and would understand all the self-evident answers that the Rebbe says he would?

It dawned on me that the “Ben Chomesh” is a construct. We know what the five-year-old knows and we don’t know the extent of his deductive abilities. In other words: any question or answer about the text that takes into consideration previous verses and Rashi’s commentary up until the verse being studied is fair game. Any question or answer that is based on any other text, is irrelevant. The reason is because the five year old that begins his biblical study has no need to have previous knowledge of any texts. We can therefore not take into account any other texts in our “dialogue” with him. Now, how smart is this child? Given the information that we know he has and presume that he retains, what could be his questions and what would *not* be his questions? We have no way of knowing for sure. It depends on his analytic abilities. Therefore, why not presume that the child is a genius and therefore any question or answer based on logic is fair game, as long as it is based exclusively on the information that we *know* the child has.

This is why I feel that this type of study that the Rebbe introduced us to can serve as a gateway to Torah study for the uninitiated. The “*Ben Chomesh*”, ignorant genius, can be an eighty-year old man who is beginning his journey in Torah study.

Another point:

According to the great Chassidic masters, there is also a “wine” dimension —*sod* or secret— of the text embedded within the sophisticated simplicity of Rashi’s commentary. Through a thorough understanding of Rashi’s commentary one can succeed in shedding light not only on the *Peshat* of the texts, but also on other dimensions of the text being studied, as well as on many aspects of our lives and the daily challenges we face. Usually, after explaining what the text is saying the Rebbe goes on to share some of the broader themes that can be gleaned from the text, thus introducing the beginner to more advanced dimensions of Torah study. Hence, the idea of “gateway”.

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So let's begin with a verse from this week's reading, *Bereshit*² [2].

One of the first documented episodes in human history is that of Cain's envy following G-d's favorable reaction to the offering of fat sheep brought by his brother Abel and His

² Genesis 1:1-6:5

ignoring the offering Cain had brought from his harvest. As a consequence, he killed his brother Abel³ [3].

In verse 4:3 it says, "And Cain brought an offering from the fruit of the land". Rashi quotes the words "from the fruit of the land" and comments: "from the worst. And there is an Aggadah (Midrash) that says it was flax seed."

How does Rashi know that "from the fruit" means that it was from the worst? And why is it so relevant to the understanding of the text—to the point of quoting a Midrash—to know that it was flax seed that he offered up?

Answer:

Why is it that G-d was pleased with Abel's offering and not with Cain's? Are there any clues in the text in this regard?

Rashi, in his commentary, points out that the explanation is hinted at in the way the Torah describes what each one of them brought: when referring to Abel's offering, the verse says⁴ [4]: "And Abel also brought from the best of his flocks and of their fat..." unlike the description of the offering of his older brother, Cain: "And Cain brought an offering from the fruit of the land. The implication of the omission of a qualifier is that he brought not the best of his fruit, but the worst.

The question then arises: Why would it occur to Cain to choose for his offering, meant to thank and please G-d, from the worst of his harvest? Would it not be an offense?

That is why Rashi quotes the Midrash that says it was flax seeds. In other words, Cain's offering consisted of a product that was highly valued at that time, to the extent that the first of the four rivers that came out of the Garden of Eden was called *Pishon*⁵ [5] precisely because of the flax "*Pishtan*" that grew on its banks.

We can now understand that Cain considered it enough to bring the best product that he had, albeit not the best quality within that product. Abel, on the other hand, chose for his offering the best that he had within his flock.

³ Genesis 4:1-8

⁴ Ibid 4:4

⁵ Genesis 2:1. See Rashi's commentary on this verse.

Once the analysis of Rashi's commentary on the text of the verse is concluded, the Rebbe show us how we can learn three lessons beyond and based on the understanding of the text: one lesson is regarding a halacha (law) regarding the sacrifices brought in the Temple, another one is in the realm of mystical/philosophical ideas and yet a third lesson is regarding behavior in general.

Halacha:

Maimonides states in his code⁶ [6]: "if one wants to generate a merit for himself... when he offers a sacrifice he should bring it from the best within that type". The Rambam quotes two verses: 1) Leviticus 3:16 that says that one must destine "all the choicest for G-d" and 2) our verse that describes the sacrifice that Abel brought and G-d's reaction to it. Why are two verses quoted?

The answer:

How do we know that "all the choicest" means the best within the class from which one brings the sacrifice and not that one must always bring his sacrifices from the best type that he has? It is for this reason that Maimonides quotes the verse that speaks of Abel's sacrifice: we see that even though he didn't bring an animal from the very best that he had—he brought his sacrifice from the flocks of sheep and not from the herds of cattle—the fact that he brought it from the best that he had within that category is what caused G-d's pleasure. Cain's offering, by contrast, even though it was brought from the best type within his crop, it was taken from the worst quality, and G-d didn't accept it.

Mysticism/philosophy:

Why is it that when offering a sacrifice it is more important to choose the best specimen within a type and not necessarily the best species? It is in order to demonstrate that everything, every *type* of existence, belongs to G-d. This explains why Cain brought his offering from the best species—flax—but not of the best quality that he had. The reason for bringing sacrifices from the best is to express the absolute authority of G-d and his ownership of all of Creation; that G-d is the only true existence. This condition of unity and uniqueness is manifested in two ways: 1) as the ultimate truth that transcends diversity and 2) as an absolute truth that is expressed through all kinds of differences, thus uniting them. Each flax seed produces a single stem. It represents G-d's unity that transcends differences. Cain wanted to activate and connect with that dimension of G-d's transcendent truth. He therefore didn't focus on quality, since different categories

⁶ End of *Hilchot Isurei Mizbeach*

of quality imply diversity and he was aiming for unity that transcends diversity. The reason G-d did not accept his noble intentions is because the ultimate goal is not to escape from diversity but to find unity within it. He should have offered the best within the species itself, thus expressing that each expression of diversity is nothing more than a manifestation of one and the same truth. In terms of Jewish mysticism: the ultimate goal is to manifest the unity of Echad (“Oneness”) rather than Yachid (“Uniqueness”).

Practical life:

From Cain's way of thinking and acting we learn that it is not enough to have lofty ideals; it must be reflected in one's behavior as well. The fact that Cain was satisfied with having very high spiritual aspirations, far from his practical down-to-earth reality, led to his eventual downfall and fratricide. You cannot serve G-d by ignoring your physical reality; you need to conquer and sublimate it, using it to serve G-d. The aim in life is not only to aspire to the highest levels of understanding; it is to do your best within each reality in which you find yourself. The reality in which you find yourself does not depend on you; what does depend on you is what you choose to do with it.

Dear reader: I hope I have been successful in giving you a taste of the beauty, sophistication and clarity in Rashi's approach to the Bible text that the Rebbe introduced us to. The development of the theme in its original form is much broader, more complex and richer. What you see here is only a very brief summary to whet your appetite, or to jog your memory.

Enjoy!

Source: Likutei Sichot Vol. 15, pp. 20-26.

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1. Pirkei Avot, 5:21
 2. Genesis 1:1-6:5
 3. Genesis 4:1-8
 4. Ibid 4:4
 5. Genesis 2:1. See Rashi's commentary on this verse.
 6. End of *Hilchot Isurei Mizbeach*