

An Outline of the Rebbe's Explanation of Rashi
Parshas Acharei-Kedoshim¹
Likkutei Sichos Volume 27, Pages 141 – 148

Rashi in his Own Words

ויקרא י"ט, י"ד: לא תקלל חרש ולפני עור לא תתן מכשל ונראת מאלקיך אני יהוה:
רש"י ד"ה ולפני עור לא תתן מכשל: לפני הסומא בדבר לא תתן עצה שאינה הוגנת לו, אל תאמר מכור שדך וקח לך
חמור, ואתה עוקף עליו ונוטלה הימנו:

Vayikroh 19:14: You shall not curse a deaf person. You shall not place a stumbling block before a blind person, and you shall fear your God. I am the Lord.

Rashi Heading: You shall not place a stumbling block before a blind person: Before a person who is “blind” regarding a matter, you shall not give advice that is improper for him. (For instance), do not say to someone, “Sell your field and buy a donkey (with the proceeds)” while you plan to cheat him since you yourself will take it from him (by lending him money and taking the donkey as collateral. He will not be able to take the field because a previous creditor has a lien on it.)

Summary

This week's Torah portion, Acharei-Kedoshim, tells us that one may “not place a stumbling block before a blind person².” Rashi explains that here a blind person refers to one who is “blind,” meaning ignorant regarding a particular matter; “placing a stumbling block before him” means giving him bad advice. Rashi, as always, is explaining the simple meaning of the verse. Why does he not do so here? Why can he not simply say that the verse means that one may not place a stumbling block before one who is actually blind (G-d forbid), thereby causing him to suffer injury?

Rashi goes on to give an example of bad advice. He says that “one may not say to someone, ‘Sell your field and buy a donkey (with the proceeds),’ while you plan to cheat him since you yourself will take it from him.” Why does Rashi need to give us an example of bad advice; it is a very simple concept. Once he does bring an example, why does he not bring a simpler example!

1. There are certain Torah portions which are read separately certain years, and other years are combined. There are a number of reasons for this. Among them are the fact that the portion of Bamidbar must be read before the holiday of Shavuos; this would not be the case if Tazriah and Metzorah were read separately. Another is in order to enable us to complete the entire Torah in one year.

2. Vayikroh 19:14

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Additionally, the example of bad advice which he does cite is telling someone to sell his field and buy a donkey. Why does he add that “you plan to cheat him?” That does not make the advice better or worse. Aside from that, selling one’s donkey may be good advice. There are advantages to having a donkey; the payment for work performed with a donkey is immediate, and the donkey is the one that does the work.

The explanation is as follows. When the Torah repeats the same concept twice, we must try to find something new which it is teaching us. The Torah already discussed causing bodily harm to another, causing one to “stumble.” The beginning student already learned that³ “If a person opens a pit, or if a person digs a pit and does not cover it, and a bull or a donkey falls into it ... the owner of the pit shall pay, he shall return money to its owner ...” In other words, we were already taught not to cause damage to another. Despite the fact that what we learned previously discusses the obligation for monetary compensation and not the prohibition of digging a pit, if one is punished for committing an act, it is certainly prohibited! Here, according to Peshat, Rashi is telling us that we are being taught a novel concept; we already know that we may not cause harm to another. Therefore, Rashi explains that the Torah is referring to giving bad advice.

However, there are times that I will be giving my fellow good advice, but I will also be thinking about what I can benefit from it. This too is not acceptable. The Torah says that we must love our fellow as ourselves, the advice I give my friend must purely be for his benefit. That is why after stating the advice of buying a donkey, Rashi adds the words “while you plan to cheat him.” It is possible that buying a donkey may be good advice; nevertheless, I must have his benefit in mind, and no one else’s.

Rashi’s Explanation

This week’s Torah portion, Acharei–Kedoshim, tells us that one may “not place a stumbling block before a blind person.” Rashi explains that here a blind person refers to one who is “blind,” meaning ignorant, regarding a particular matter. Rashi further explains that “placing a stumbling block before him” means giving him bad advice.

³ Shemos 21:33–4

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Rashi continues with an example of “advice that is improper for him,” saying that it means telling one’s friend to “sell your field and buy a donkey (with the proceeds), while you plan to cheat him since you yourself will take it from him.”

Difficulties in Understanding Rashi

As we have stated many times, Rashi is explaining Peshat, the simple meaning of the verse. Why doesn’t Rashi explain simply that the Torah is referring to placing a stumbling block in front of an actual blind (G-d forbid) person? In fact, why does Rashi need to state anything; it seems obvious.

Additionally, Rashi says that the meaning of a stumbling block here is “advice that is improper for him.” He gives an example of telling one’s friend to “sell his field and buy a donkey (with the proceeds), while you plan to cheat him since you yourself will take it from him.” There seems to be no need for an example. We all understand what improper advice is. Moreover, obviously Rashi finds a need to give an example of improper advice. Why can he not use a simpler example? There are many types of bad advice.

The source of this Rashi is a Midrash⁴. The Midrash gives other examples of bad advice, which are seemingly simpler than the one which Rashi quotes. The first example is suggesting to someone that he leave on a journey at the break of dawn in order that he be attacked by highwaymen. The second is that he leaves in the middle of the afternoon, so that he succumbs to a heatwave. The third is that he tells someone that a certain woman is fit according to Jewish law to marry a Kohen, but she is not. Finally, the Midrash uses the example which Rashi cites. Why does Rashi cite the last example used by the Midrash, rather than one of the first which are all simpler? For whatever reason Rashi does choose the last reason. However, why does he conclude by saying that “you plan to cheat him since you yourself will take it from him?” That does not serve to make it less fitting advice!

The Explanation

Let us begin by dealing with the last two questions. Even the beginning Torah student understands that in terms of earning a livelihood, a donkey could be more beneficial than a field. A donkey can work both day and night. The donkey carries the heavy loads, meaning that there is less work for the owner to do. A field can (usually) only be taken care of during the day. It also

4. Toras Kohanim 19, 34.

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involves a tremendous amount of exertion on the part of the one who owns it. He must perform all of the labors associated with farming; he must plow, sow, reap, harvest, etc. Until the end of this procedure, he does not make any profit whatsoever. However, while working with a donkey one can see a profit (almost) immediately. It would seem from this that the advice to sell his field and buy a donkey is quite good, at least short term.

That is why Rashi adds the words “you plan to cheat him since you yourself will take it from him.” Although the advice is sound, the one who is giving the advice does not have his friend's best interest in mind. It is, in Rashi's words, “advice that is improper *for him*.”

The fact is, however, that in the long term the advice is actually not good *for him*. A field does not die, unlike a donkey. Working with a donkey involves travelling, often far from home, whereas a field is usually nearby. There are numerous reasons why selling his field and buying a donkey may not be good advice *for him*. This is similar to the other examples quoted by the Midrash. Leaving on a journey early in the morning is generally good advice, but in this case, it presents a stumbling block. It was not good advice *for him*. Aside from that, if in reality it is better for the one who is being advised to have a donkey, than what difference does it make that the advisor will claim his field?

The answer to all of the above questions, which is understandable to all, beginner and advanced student alike, is that when the Torah states something which we know from before, we must try to look for an additional teaching which is added by its repetition.

We already know from what was previously said⁵ “If a person opens a pit, or if a person digs a pit and does not cover it, and a bull or a donkey falls into it ... the owner of the pit shall pay, he shall return money to its owner ...” In other words, we were already taught not to cause damage to another by placing a stumbling block, i.e. *doing damage*. We learned that such acts are *prohibited*. Despite the fact that what we learned previously discusses the obligation for monetary compensation and not the prohibition of damaging another, if one is punished for committing an act, it is certainly prohibited! Here, according to Peshat, Rashi is telling us that we already know that it is prohibited to cause another damage. Therefore, he explains that we are being taught a novel concept. Therefore, Rashi explains that the Torah is referring to giving bad advice, advice which is bad for the one whom we are advising.

5. Shemos 21:33-34.

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This is why Rashi does not quote the first three reasons of the Midrash. Suggesting to someone that he leave on a journey at the break of dawn in order that he be attacked by highwaymen or suggesting that he leave on a trip in the middle of the afternoon so that he succumbs to a heatwave, are the equivalent of digging a pit in a public place. Telling someone that a certain woman is fit according to Jewish law to marry a Kohen, while she is not, is causing spiritual damage.

However, there are times that I will be giving my fellow good advice, but I will also be thinking about what I can benefit from it. This too is not acceptable. The Torah says that we must love our fellow as ourselves, the advice I give my friend must purely be for him. That is why after stating the advice of buying a donkey, Rashi adds the words “while you plan to cheat him.” It is possible that buying a donkey may be good advice; nevertheless, I must have his benefit in mind, and no one else’s. The Torah tells us to love our fellow as ourselves; while giving him advice I must place myself in his shoes.

A Practical Lesson from Rashi

As we said above, it is not enough to give a friend good advice. I must consider only my friends benefit, and not even consider any benefit which may accrue to me whatsoever. At the time that I advise him, I must entirely divest myself from the situation. That is the true fulfillment of “loving your fellow as yourself,” and this brings the true unity of all Jewish people.

(Compiled from a talk given on Shabbos Parshas Kedoshim 5741)

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