



Likkutei Sichos

Volume 18 | Matos | Sichah 3

A Weak Letter

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1.

QUESTIONS ON RASHI

Commenting on the last verse of the *sedrah*,¹ “Novach went and captured Kenas... and called it Novach, after his name,” Rashi quotes the words “and called it {וִיקְרָא לָהּ} Novach” and explains:

The {letter “ה” of the} word “לה” {“he called it”²} does not have a *mappik* ה.³ In the commentary of Rabbi Moshe HaDarshan, I have seen {that this is so} because this name {Novach} did not endure.⁴ Therefore, it is weak {i.e., the letter ה is silent}, for the implication of the way it can be expounded is that it is like {the Aramaic word} “לָּ,” “no.” But I wonder how he would expound two similar occurrences {namely}, “Boaz said to her (לָּ)”;⁵ and, “to build her (לָּ) a house.”⁶

We need to clarify:

- a) If Rashi maintains that the exposition of Rabbi Moshe HaDarshan is **not** plausible according to the **straightforward** reading of the verse — for “I wonder how he would expound” the two other instances of the word “לה” without a *mappik* ה — why does Rashi cite Rabbi Moshe HaDarshan’s interpretation to begin with?

Rashi should have said, as he says **frequently**⁷ in his commentary, that “I don’t know.” That is, he doesn’t know the **straightforward** meaning of a word. For although the word may have interpretations and explanations in the teachings of our Sages, they are totally not in line with the straightforward meaning of the verse. Therefore, Rashi doesn’t quote them in his commentary, since his commentary expounds the **straightforward** meaning.

¹ {*Bamidbar* 32:42.}

² {Lit., “her.” The antecedent of the pronoun לה, is the city, עֵיר, of Kenas. In Hebrew, עֵיר is a feminine noun; hence, the feminine pronoun, לה.}

³ {*Mappik* is Aramaic for “brings forth.” A “*mappik* ה” is a ה marked with a dot inside, referred to also as a *dagesh*, indicating that it is “brought forth,” i.e., emphasized and pronounced as a full consonant, even though it is at the end of a word. When the suffix ה is used for “her” or “it” (“לה”), it is usually a *mappik* ה .}

⁴ See *Divrei Hayamim* 1, 2:23.

⁵ *Rus* 2:14.

⁶ *Zechariah* 5:11.

⁷ See the sources cited in *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 5, p. 1, fn. 2 and the note there.

- b) Why does Rashi first cite the verse, “Boaz said to *her*” in the book of *Rus* (in the Writings), and {only} afterward, from the verse, “to build *her* a house,” from *Zechariah* (in the Prophets), although in Scripture, the Prophets comes **before** the Writings?
- c) The difficulty raised by Ramban:⁸ There are expositions in *Midrash Rus*⁹ both on the verse “Boaz said to *her*,” and on “to build *her* a house” (together with the exposition on our verse, “and called it {*her*} Novach” — “because this name did not endure” {which Rashi quotes}), which explain “the absence of a *mappik*”¹⁰ in those cases. Why, then, does Rashi say, “I wonder what he would expound”?

[And one would be hard-pressed to suggest that Rashi hadn’t seen this *Midrash Rus*, as Ramban wonders: “**Behold**, the master {Rashi} is a treasure-house of Torah, *halachah*, and *aggadah*; **yet, he overlooked it!**”]

Ramban further raises a stronger difficulty: There is also an exposition in the **Talmud** (in tractate *Sanhedrin*¹¹) regarding the fact that the word “לָהּ” of the verse “to build her {לָהּ} a house” does “not have a *mappik* ה.” The Talmud says that the verse speaks regarding {the traits of} “sanctimony and arrogance {that} moved¹² into Babylonia,” and the fact the letter ה is missing a *dagesh* teaches us that the move (of arrogance) into Babylonia was not permanent — “{arrogance originally} rested in Babylonia” — but subsequently, it “wandered off there” (to Eilat).

And although in his commentary on the Talmud, **Rashi** explains¹³ that the proof from {the words of the verse} “to build her a house” — that “it wandered off there” — is (**not** from the fact that {the letter ה of the word}

⁸ And similarly of Rabbi Ovadiah Bartenura, and others, on Rashi here.

⁹ *Rus Rabbah* 5:5.

¹⁰ Ramban’s words there.

¹¹ *Sanhedrin* 24a; similarly in *Kiddushin* 49b.

¹² {In the Hebrew original, “*yardu*”; lit., “descended.”}

¹³ *Kiddushin* (in his first explanation) and *Sanhedrin*, *ibid*; *Rabbeinu Channanel* explains similarly in *Sanhedrin*, *ibid*.

הָל does not have a *mappik* ה, but) from the fact that the verse says “her” in singular tense.

For, since previously, it says,¹⁴ “and behold — **two** women... and they had...” (in plural), who symbolize (the **two** things that moved into Babylonia) “sanctimony and arrogance,” and afterwards the verse says, “to build **her** a house,” in singular, we infer that “when they came to build a house **permanently** in Babylonia,”¹⁵ “sanctimony alone remained”¹⁶ (and arrogance “wandered off there”) —

Nevertheless, it is inappropriate to pose this question incredulously: “And **I wonder how** he would expound....” Although Rashi (for whatever reason) does not wish to give this explanation in the Talmud, possibly, Rabbi Moshe HaDarshan understood this to be the meaning of the Talmud.

2.

THE STRAIGHTFORWARD MEANING

The explanation: We have already discussed several times that even the **expositions** of our Sages that Rashi quotes in his Torah commentary are “close” to *pshat*.¹⁷ In the words of **Rashi**:¹⁸ “Aggadah that clarifies the words of the verses, each word in its proper way.” However, Rashi does not quote an exegesis that is completely contrary to the straightforward meaning of a verse (as mentioned in Section 1).

¹⁴ *Zechariah* 5:9. {The entire passage reads as follows: “And I raised my eyes and saw. Behold, there came two women, and wind was in their wings; for their wings were like the wings of a stork — and they lifted up the *eifah*-measure, carrying it between the earth and the sky. Then I said to the angel that was speaking with me: ‘Where are they taking the *eifah*?’ He replied: ‘To build a house for her in the land of Shinar.’” The Talmud interprets the two women as referring to the traits of sanctimony and arrogance that moved into Babylonia (Shinar). Rashi explains that the verse changes from plural (“two women”) to singular (“for her”) tells us that only one of the two, sanctimony, remained permanently in Babylonia.}

¹⁵ Rashi in *Kiddushin*, *ibid*.

¹⁶ Rashi in *Kiddushin*, *ibid*.

¹⁷ {The straightforward meaning of Scripture.}

¹⁸ *Bereishis* 3:8; et al.

It is, therefore, understood, in our case, that since Rashi quotes the exposition of Rabbi Moshe HaDarshan on the verse, “and he called it Novach,” this exposition can fit in with the straightforward meaning of the verse. And Rashi’s statement, “I wonder how he would expound two words...,” does not mean that it is **out of the question** to find an exposition on these two words, but that we cannot (according to Rashi) expound the word “לה” (that is without a *mappik* ה) in the **same** manner that he expounds here — an exposition close to the straightforward meaning of the verse. For the expositions on those words that are in Midrash (and the Talmud) are completely incompatible with *pshat* (as explained in Section 4 and onward).

According to this, Rashi’s words, “**I wonder** how he would expound...” — not “it is difficult” or the like — are precise. This is not a **difficulty** or a contradiction to the teaching of Rabbi Moshe HaDarshan here. Rather, it is only puzzlement — what sort of exegesis will be expounded on the two other verses (words)?

[And possibly, the expositions on those two words are of a different sort, **not** in keeping with *pshat*. As explained in the past, in the Prophets and the Writings, many verses and words must be interpreted not in line with *pshat* — unlike in Chumash, where we must explain a verse according to *pshat*, specifically.]¹⁹

Rashi **wonders** — “and I wonder” — “how he would expound...”: How would Rabbi Moshe HaDarshan expound the other two instances of the word “לה” {without a *mappik* ה}? Would they be expositions that are close to *pshat*, and, therefore, “I found a comparable case to it” {a support} to his exposition on our verse? Or would they be like the expositions of the Midrash (and the Talmud), etc., which are **not** in harmony with *pshat* (and therefore — “I did not find a comparable case to it”)?

¹⁹ And, therefore, Rashi’s commentary on the Prophets and the Writings is not in line with *pshat* to the same degree as his Chumash commentary, as discussed several times.

3.

A WEAK EXISTENCE

In order to elucidate, we must first explain Rashi's statement, "The {letter ה of the} word 'לה' does not have a *mappik* ה... for the implication of the way it can be expounded is that it is like 'לָ,' *no*": At first glance, Rashi means to say that it is as if the verse had written "not (Novach)"²⁰ — the name of the city is **not** Novach (since "this name did not last").

However, this interpretation **directly contradicts** the straightforward meaning of the verse (and is thus antithetical to Rashi's general principle in his commentary on the Torah: "I have only come to explain the straightforward meaning").²¹ With the words, "He called it Novach, after his name," the verse means, simply, to relate that Novach called the city after his own name — "Novach."

Rather, Rashi's wording is precise: "for the implication of the way it can be **expounded** is that it is **like** {the Aramaic word} "לָ," *no*" (and not "for the implication is (literally) *no*"). Meaning, since the word does not have a *mappik* ה, this hints that the subject about which the verse is speaking is "weak." Novach indeed gave the name "Novach" (and, therefore, it does not say "no"), but its naming proved to be feeble — the name did not last.

4.

NOT IN ACCORDANCE WITH *PSHAT*

Accordingly, we can easily answer why we cannot similarly expound (according to *pschat*) the verse, "and Boaz said to her":

²⁰ See *Be'er Mayim Chaim* (authored by the brother of the *Maharal*); *Devek tov*; and *Sifsei Chachamim* here; *Matnas Kehunah* on *Rus Rabbah* 5:5. And see the commentary of the *Rosh* here; et al.

²¹ *Bereishis* 3:8, et al.

In *Megillas Rus* (there),²² it says that Rus said to Boaz, “but I am not like one of your handmaids.” (“I am not as worthy as one of your handmaids.”)²³ In response, Scripture continues:) “And Boaz said to her (‘לה’) at mealtime, ‘Come here and eat...’” On the words, “and Boaz said **to her** {‘לה’}” (where the word “לה” does not have a *mappik* ה), the Midrash expounds that Boaz responded to her: “Heaven forbid! You are **not** one of the maidservants (אמהות) but one of the matriarchs (אימהות — Sarah, Rivkah, etc...).” Meaning, in response to her assertion, “I am not {as worthy} as one of your maidservants,” Boaz said “to her” {‘לה’} — “**no**” {“לא”} “what you said is not true.”²⁴

Clearly, this exposition is totally not in harmony with the *pshat*. Here we cannot say that “**it can be expounded... like no**,” for the words, “you **are not** one of the maidservants” were not said tentatively, but were a total rejection {of Rus’s self-deprecating remarks}.

The same is true regarding the phrase in the verse, “to build her a house”:

True, “arrogance” in Babylonia was “weak”; it was not permanent (“it wandered off there”). However, according to *pshat*, the verse, “to build her a house” is not talking about “arrogance,” just about “**sanctimony**.” And as quoted earlier (in Section 1) from **Rashi’s** commentary on the Talmud, since the verse says “her” {‘לה’} in singular — and not “them” in plural (as it says earlier) — this clarifies that the verse is only speaking of one thing, “sanctimony alone,” because “sanctimony” did **not** “wander off there” — it remained in Babylonia **permanently**. We cannot say, therefore, that the word “לה” (without a *mappik* ה) in **singular** form alludes to something else that was there only in a “weak” state.

²² *Rus* 2:13.

²³ Rashi on *Rus* 2:13.

²⁴ *Matnas Kehunah*, loc.cit.

However, we need to clarify:

According to the exposition in *Midrash Rus*, the verse “to build her a house” alludes to the falsehood of Shinar (Babylonia), and the word “לה,” without a *mappik* ה, “teaches that falsehood has no salvation.” Rashi could have used **this** exposition, which is like his explanation of “and he called it {“לה”} Novach.” Falsehood **does** exist, but only feebly,²⁵ for “falsehood has no **salvation**” (it does not endure).

This would also be in accord with Rashi's commentary on the Talmud that “to build her a house” alludes to “sanctimony.” “Sanctimony” is also falsehood. As **Rashi** explains, “sanctimony” means “they {falsely} present themselves as pious.”²⁶

The explanation: If we will say that by writing the word “לה” without a *mappik* ה, the verse alludes to a “weak” existence — sanctimony and falsehood, which have no salvation — this leads to a difficulty: Why is this emphasized only regarding sanctimony, and **not** also regarding arrogance? (And on the contrary, it is more logical for it to be referring to arrogance) which moved to Babylonia (specifically) only weakly (“it wandered off there”), as explained above.

From the fact that the verse says “לה” in **singular** — that we are **only** speaking here about one thing, sanctimony — it is clear: a) that the verse is not discussing the fact that (sanctimony) has no salvation; and b) the verse is referring to the move of sanctimony to Babylonia **permanently** (unlike arrogance, which “wandered off there”).

²⁵ {Referring to the exposition in *Rus*.}

²⁶ *Sanhedrin* 24a, s.v., “*ke'kanfei ha'chasadah*.”

6.

WHY *RUS* IS BEFORE *ZECHARIAH*

According to the above, we can also understand why Rashi quotes the verse from *Rus* before the verse from *Zechariah*:

In the verse (from *Rus*), “and Boaz said to her,” the exposition itself is antithetical to *pshat*: According to the exposition, the phrase, “{Boaz} said to her,” means that “{Boaz} said **no** {‘ל’},” as explained above. Rashi negates this exposition first, for it is further from *pshat* than the exposition on the verse, “to build her a house.” This latter exposition is in line with *pshat* (since “לה” {without a *mappik* ה} alludes to a weak existence – “it wandered off there” or “has no salvation”), just that it is difficult to understand the verse this way because of the scriptural transition from plural to singular, as explained above.

7.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF UNHOLINESS

From the “wine of Torah”²⁷ alluded to in Rashi’s commentary: All three verses, where the word “לה” is written without a *mappik* ה, are talking in connection to an existence of unholiness: Our *parshah* discusses a city conquered from the Amorites; “and Boaz said to her” discusses *Rus* the **Moabite**; and “to build her a house” discusses the (arrogance and) sanctimony (falsehood) of *Babylonia*.

For this reason, “לה” is written without a *mappik* ה, to allude to the fact that the existence of unholiness is “weak”: Only holiness is a true and eternal existence. Unholiness, however, is not a true existence. Consequently, it cannot endure.²⁸

Regarding this, Rashi says, “I wonder how he would expound” the verses: “And Boaz said to her”; and, “to build her a house.”

²⁷ {The deeper ideas of Torah.}

²⁸ See, at length, the *Maamar* entitled, “*Reishis Goyim Amalek, 5680*,” (printed in *Sefer Hamaamorim 5680*).

In our verse — which discusses the subdual of unholiness, “and he captured...” (and not its transformation into holiness) — the hint in writing “לֶה” without a *mappik* ה fits in, alluding to how the existence of unholiness was not transformed {only subdued}.

However, the two other verses discuss the existence of unholiness as it is transformed to holiness: Rus the Moabite converted to Judaism, and ascended to the loftiest levels of holiness. So much so, she is like one “of the Matriarchs.” Similarly, “to build her a house” — the “falsehood” of Babylonia — refers, according to its deeper meaning, to the deliberations and discussions of the Babylonian Talmud, which “descended into darkness... even into falsehood.”²⁹ Only by this process — “He has made me dwell in darkness... this refers to the Talmud of Babylonia”³⁰ — we reach the level of “to build her a **house**,” which is the loftiest level of Torah, the level of “house” within Torah,³¹ “a faithful home.”³²

Since these two verses discuss unholiness, as it is transformed into holiness, it is appropriate to write “לֶה” with a *mappik* ה. For whichever way it is looked at {it is not appropriate to insinuate that the unholiness is weak}: The *kelipah*³³ itself is totally nullified; it is completely nothing — {as intimated by the word} “no” { (“לֹא”). It is not just a “weak” existence}. And from the perspective of holiness, the point should specifically be emphasized {by writing it with a *mappik* ה} — {connoting} the greatest strength. Because, specifically by converting darkness into light, the true strength of holiness is brought to light.³⁴

— From a talk delivered on Shabbos *parshas Matos-Masei* 5725 (1965)

²⁹ *Torah Or* 17b. {By discussing subjects of falsehood and deceit, etc., from the perspective of Divine wisdom, the Talmud actually effects a purification of these matters.}

³⁰ *Sanhedrin* 24a.

³¹ See, at length, *Hemshech Mayim Rabbim* 5637, at the end. There it is explained that the level of “house” of Torah refers to the Oral Law. And see *Shaarei Orah* (s.v. “*bechof hei beKislev*,” ch. 54ff); *Hemshech* 5666 (p. 90 ff.); *Sefer Hamaamorim* 5708 (p. 121 ff); et al. — regarding the greatness of the Babylonian Talmud, that specifically through it, we reach the ‘*helam ha’atzmi*’ {‘essential concealment’ — Hashem’s Essence which is totally above any revelation} etc.

³² See *Hemshech Mayim Rabim*, *ibid.* (and fn. 414, there).

³³ {*Kelipah*, lit., “a shell” or “a peel.” The term refers to anything that conceals, and thus opposes G-dliness, just as a shell or a peel conceals the fruit within. *Kelipah* is often used to refer to evil or impurity.}

³⁴ See, at length, *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 15, p. 434, and other sources.