

# RASHI'S MIDRASHIC COMMENTS ARE SUPPORTED BY A BROAD RANGE OF BIBLICAL TEXTS

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There is a distinction in Rashi's Torah commentary between two categories: *peshat* – comments that reflect the plain meaning of the text, and *derash* – comments that go beyond the plain meaning. The presence of these two categories is clear and accepted by Rashi himself, as well as by others who have commented on his work. Rashi, in his commentary to Genesis 3:8, states that he intends to explain "the simple meaning of Scripture and of that *Aggadah* which clarifies the words of the verses, each word in its proper way." Rashi was selective in the midrashic material that he quoted, choosing whatever he felt had a basis in the text, in the words used in the verse, or in the narrative context.<sup>1</sup>

This paper will attempt to show that some midrashic comments brought by Rashi that may appear not to adhere to this self-imposed rule do in fact have a textual basis.<sup>2</sup> To reveal the textual basis for these midrashic commentaries, I will introduce a factor that has not been given due attention in the interpretation of Rashi's commentary on the Torah. I will show that certain comments of his can find support in biblical texts, beyond the specific places where he makes them. Three instances will be discussed: Sarah's death and the *Akedah* (binding of Isaac), the comparison of the Promised Land with Egypt, and the obliteration of Amalek.

## SARAH'S DEATH AND THE AKEDAH

Rashi (on Gen. 23:2) comments that Sarah's death is reported following the story of the *Akedah* (Gen. 22:1-19), because her death was precipitated by the distress to which that event gave rise. The news that her only son had been taken to be sacrificed caused her to die prematurely. In the analysis that follows, I will highlight the broader textual basis of this interpretation.

Rashi's comment is based on *Genesis Rabbah* 58:5, which discusses the words *and Abraham came to eulogize [mourn and bewail] Sarah* (Gen. 23:2). Two opinions are brought to explain where Abraham came from: R. Levi

states that Abraham came from burying his father, Terah, but R. Yose rejects this idea. Terah died years before Sarah, he explains, Abraham had just returned from the *Akedah*, and Sarah died from the pain of that episode. This aspect is fleshed out in *Ecclesiastes Rabbah*, chapter 9, where it is related that Sarah died upon hearing from Isaac that he was nearly slaughtered by Abraham.

Rashi chose to quote only the opinion of R. Yose, which is reasonable since the view of R. Levi is challenged without a rebuttal. In addition, R. Yose's view is supported by multiple textual clues. The most obvious one is that the *Akedah* narrative is set in close proximity to the announcement of Sarah's death, thus implying some connection. Furthermore, the text states that Abraham *came* to mourn her, indicating that he was not with her at the time of her death. Sarah died in Hebron and Abraham was then in Beer-sheba, where he went after the *Akedah* (Gen. 22:19). This is the most common textual clue cited as a basis for the Midrash.<sup>3</sup>

Apart from that, however, two other textual hints may be found. Personal mourning and weeping, which we associate with the death of a close family member, is not typically mentioned in regard to the death of other people in the Torah. Thus, for instance, with respect to Abraham, the text gives his age at death and indicates that his sons buried him (Gen. 25:8-9), with no report of mourning. While we can be certain that mourning took place, it is not explicitly mentioned. The fact that Abraham's mourning for Sarah was considered worthy of particular mention is exceptional. Note that the Midrash and (later) Rashi attach their comment linking Sarah's death with the *Akedah* to the statement about Abraham's mourning, which suggests that Abraham felt guilty of having caused her death by taking her son Isaac to be sacrificed.

The only other instance in Genesis of mourning for a departed relative is the description of Joseph falling on the face of his dead father, weeping and kissing him (Gen. 50:1).<sup>4</sup> This case supports my interpretation of the midrashic comment about Sarah's death. Joseph rightly felt pangs of conscience in regard to his father, since he had caused Jacob anguish by not informing him that he was alive and prospering in Egypt. That would explain why the other sons are not mentioned as participants in his mourning.

The second detail supporting R. Yose's view is the fact that Sarah is the only woman whose age at death (127) is given in the Torah. What is the sig-

nificance of recording her age there (Gen. 23:1)? My understanding is that it highlights the fact that she died at a younger age than the Patriarchs (Abraham was 175, Gen. 25:7-8; Isaac was 180, Gen. 35:28-29; and Jacob was 147, Gen. 47:28), which suggests that her death was premature. Although Rachel also died young, giving birth to Benjamin, there the cause of her premature death is clearly indicated. By giving Sarah's age at death right after the *Akedah*, the text evidently provides a clue as to the cause of her relatively early decease.

#### THE PROMISED LAND VS. EGYPT

The Torah compares the Promised Land with Egypt in terms of the sources of water for irrigation, saying: *For the land that you are about to enter and possess is not like the land of Egypt from which you have come. There the grain you sowed had to be watered by your foot, like a vegetable garden [which requires extra irrigation]; but the land you are about to cross into and possess, a land of hills and valleys, soaks up its water from the rains of heaven* (Deut. 11:10-11). Here, Rashi (Deut. 11:10) quotes the Midrash (*Sifrei* 37) stating that these verses show that the Promised Land is inherently better than Egypt. *Sifrei* 38, also quoted by Rashi, explains that they point to rain as a superior method of irrigation, because it does not require human labor and provides water for both hilly and low-lying districts.

The midrashic commentary on these verses is quoted in its entirety by Rashi, including an elaborate discussion of an editorial phrase in the Book of Numbers, after the statement that the scouts visited Hebron: *Now Hebron was founded seven years before Zoan of Egypt* (Num. 13:22). Rashi presents two different readings of the phrase, one from *Sifrei* and one from TB *Ketubbot* 112a; the gist of both is that this verse indicates that Israel is a better land than Egypt by stating that Canaanite Hebron is superior to Egyptian Zoan.<sup>5</sup> Both rabbinic sources point out that Hebron was the worst city in Canaan, which is why it was used as a burial place, and that Zoan (Tanis) was the finest city in Egypt, which is why it was the seat of government (Isa. 30:4). If an inferior place in Canaan is better than a superior place in Egypt, it follows that Canaan is much better than Egypt, which in turn is the best of all other lands (Gen. 13:10).

Ramban does not consider Rashi's interpretation a *peshat*. He and Rashbam interpret these verses to mean that the Promised Land is better than Egypt when its inhabitants observe God's commandments and worse when they do not. That is so because unlike Egypt, which has the Nile as a source of water, the Promised Land is totally dependent on God's provision of rain water. This follows the plain meaning of the text, since immediately afterwards the biblical text reads: *a land that the LORD your God seeks out, on which the LORD your God always keeps his eye* (Deut. 11:12). Hence, what is special about the land is that God pays close attention to it, rather than any intrinsic quality of the land itself.

Rashi's acceptance of the midrashic interpretations seems based on the phrase in Numbers comparing Hebron with Zoan. What is the point of this seemingly needless editorial comment? The Midrash explains that it must be understood in the context of the overall message of the scouts. Since the general tenor of their observations was that the Promised Land looked fine, but might not be conquerable, it makes sense for the editorial comment to highlight this point.

Beyond lending significance to the verse comparing Zoan to Hebron, the assertion of the Midrash, that the Promised Land is inherently superior to Egypt, fits the larger context of the way the Bible consistently relates to this land. The Torah repeatedly describes the Promised Land in superlative terms, referring to it as essentially an *eretz tovah*, "a good land." Thus Moses tells the people: *For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with streams and springs and fountains issuing from plain and hill; a land of wheat and barley, of vines, figs, and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey; a land where you may eat food without stint, where you will lack nothing; a land whose rocks are iron and from whose hills you can mine copper* (Deut. 8:7-9). Already, in the burning bush revelation, God had told Moses: *'I have come down to rescue them from the Egyptians and to bring them out of that land to a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey'* (Ex. 3:8).

While interpreting the two verses in Deuteronomy (11:10-11) as an indication that the Promised Land is inherently superior to Egypt, Rashi does not, of course, disagree with the view of Ramban and Rashbam – that the Israelites' enjoyment of propitious rain is conditional on their obeying God's com-

mandments. The Torah says so explicitly in the verses that follow (Deut. 11:13-17) and elsewhere. Since this is not actually stated in the particular verses discussed (Deut. 11:10-11), however, Rashi derives his interpretation from the Midrash, which is itself based on the superlative, unqualified descriptions of the Promised Land throughout the Torah and on the comparison in Numbers of a Canaanite with an Egyptian city.

#### OBLITERATION OF AMALEK

In both Exodus and Deuteronomy, the Israelites are commanded to obliterate the Amalekites. Exodus 17:8-13 relates that the Amalekites attacked the Israelites at Rephidim and Joshua overwhelmed them. Afterwards, the Lord orders Moses: *'Inscribe this reminder [zikkaron] in the book, and recite it to Joshua: I will utterly blot out the name [zekher] of Amalek from under heaven'* (Ex. 17:14).<sup>6</sup> Rashi and Rashbam interpret this verse as an instruction for Joshua to blot out the name of Amalek. In Deuteronomy 25:17-19 the Israelites are commanded to remember what Amalek did and to obliterate them. The passage begins, *'Remember [zakhor] what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt'* (Deut. 25: 17), and ends by telling the Israelites, *'When the LORD your God grants you safety from all your enemies around you, in the land that the LORD your God is giving you as hereditary portion, you shall blot out the name [zekher] of Amalek from under heaven . . .'* (Deut. 25:19).

The obvious question is: What was it that the Amalekites did to single them out for this treatment? The Israelites encountered many hostile nations that fought against them, but only Amalek was set apart for complete obliteration. Furthermore, the original account of the battle in Exodus nowhere states that the Amalekites managed to cause the Israelites any harm. All it says is that they attacked the Israelites and were defeated by Joshua. One verse in Deuteronomy (25:18) describes in vague terms what Amalek did to Israel. It reads: *He surprised you on the march, and cut down all the stragglers in your rear when you were famished and weary; and feared not God [asher karekha ba-derekh, va-yezannev bekha kol ha-neheshalim aharekha, ve-attah ayef ve-yage'a, ve-lo yarei Elohim].*

The phrase, *ve-attah ayef ve-yage'a* – *when you were famished and weary*, can be understood as a reference to what happened when the Israelites were

encamped at Rephidim before the Amalekite attack (Ex. 17:1-7). The people were miserable because there was no water to drink, so they confronted Moses and blamed him for taking them out of Egypt to perish in the wilderness. Moses, at God's command, struck the rock and produced water for the people and their livestock. While the phrase *ve-attah ayef ve-yage'a* describes the sorry state of the Israelites at the time of the enemy attack, there is nothing to indicate the harm caused by the Amalekites which justified their annihilation.

I will now look closely at Rashi's explanation of what the Amalekites may have done, and will try to find a basis for it in the text. Rashi (on Deut. 25:18) first explains that the word *karekha* literally means "a happening" or "occurrence." He then brings two interpretations of *karekha*, based on the phrase *asher karekha ba-derekh* in *Midrash Tanhuma*. There, R. Yehudah maintains that *karekha* implies defilement, based on the term *mikreh layelah*, a nocturnal seminal emission. Rashi expands on this, stating that it means that the Amalekites were defiling the Israelites with homosexual rape. He then cites the opinion of the rabbis that *karekha* is related to the word *kor* ("cold"), signifying that Amalek "cooled them down" by being the first to attack. Other nations thought twice about waging war on the seemingly all-powerful Israelites. By being the first to attack them, Amalek changed that perception of the Israelites and enticed other nations to do likewise. It is interesting that Rashi fails to quote the opinion of R. Nehemiah, that the Amalekites tricked the Israelites into emerging from their protective clouds by calling them by their names, using information that they had found in Egypt. This rather fanciful idea is based on the notion that *karekha* is related to the verb *li-kro*, "to call."

In my opinion, what Rashi suggests is that the plain meaning of *karekha* ("happening") does not really establish what it was that the Amalekites did to the Israelites. The Midrash offers three interpretations, one of which is not recorded by Rashi because it is too fantastic. The idea of "cooling down" may seem reasonable, considering all we know is that the Amalekites went to war against the Israelites. Why, then, did Rashi include the opinion of R. Yehudah, which also seems over-imaginative, with no basis in the text?<sup>7</sup>

One may reasonably suppose that the outrage described by R. Yehudah was too painful an event to be explicitly recorded in the Bible, and that it was therefore alluded to in a code word, *karekha*. Moreover, there are other ver-

bal indications of homosexuality in the Amalekite passages which provide a textual basis for this interpretation.

The idea is suggested by the repeated use of words stemming from the root letters *zayin-khaf-resh* in *mishkav zakhar*, the biblical term for homosexual relations (Lev. 18:22, 20:13). The passage in Deuteronomy 25:17 begins with the word *zakhor*, "remember," and ends with *zekher*, "name," in the directive to *blot out the name* [*zekher*] of Amalek (Deut. 25:19). In Exodus, too, *zekher* is used to refer to the name of Amalek: Moses is instructed to convey to Joshua God's message, 'I will utterly blot out the name [*zekher*] of Amalek' (Ex. 17:14).

Biblical Hebrew uses two terms for "name": *shem* and *zekher*. Of these, *shem* is the generic term, while *zekher* is used only to refer to God (e.g., Ex. 3:15), to a righteous person or *tzaddik* (Prov. 10:7), and to the Israelites in general (Deut. 32:26). In regard to Israel's enemies, forms of the generic *shem* are employed: thus, for example, the Israelites are told that the Lord will deliver the kings of Canaan into their hands, and you shall obliterate their name [et shemam] from under the heavens (Deut. 7:24). Similarly, while the *tzaddik* is referred to by *zekher*, evildoers, *resha'im*, are referred to by *shem*: Remembrance [*zekher*] of a righteous one brings blessing, but the name [*shem*] of the wicked will rot (Prov. 10:7). The employment of *zekher* rather than *shem* in regard to the archenemy Amalek is therefore an outstanding exception to normal biblical usage.

More pertinently, in conjunction with the verbal root *m-h-h* ("blot out"), the generic *shem* is used for both benign actors (Deut. 25:6, II Kgs. 14:27) and evil ones (e.g., Deut. 9:14, 29:19), as in Psalm 9:6: *You blast the nations; You destroy the wicked; You blot out their name* [*shemam mahita*] forever. Amalek is the only case in which "blotting out" is paired with the term *zekher*. I propose that Rashi interpreted the exceptional use of *zekher* as triggering an association with *mishkav zakhar* (homosexuality).

This interpretation of Rashi's reading of the text is supported by his comment on God's order to Moses to *write this as a remembrance* [*zikkaron*] (Ex. 17:14). That phrase does not specify what exactly Moses was supposed to record. Rashi fills in the missing information, saying that Moses was to write "that Amalek came to join Israel with evil intent [*le-hizdaveg*] before other nations." The Midrash on which Rashi bases his comment (*Mekhilta*, Ama-

lek, chapter 2) uses the verb *le-hazzik* ("to harm"), not *le-hizdaveg*. I suggest that Rashi's usage is meant to hint at homosexual rape, which he makes explicit in Deuteronomy, as *le-hizdaveg* can imply sexual coupling.

Although, initially, the idea of homosexual rape seems overly imaginative, there are textual hints in the use of *karekha* and derivatives of the root *zayin-khaf-resh* that trigger associations with *keri* and *mishkav zakhar*. This elevates R. Yehudah's interpretation to a text-based *derash*, which Rashi saw fit to include in his commentary.

I have discussed three of Rashi's comments to show that they gain support not only from the phrases where he placed them, but also from the immediate context and other passages in the Torah as well as the Midrash.

#### NOTES

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1. See Benjamin Gelles, *Peshat and Derash in the Exegesis of Rashi* (Leiden: Brill, 1981), and the discussion in chapter 4 of Avraham Grossman, *The Early Sages of France: Their Lives, Leadership and Works* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2001), especially pp. 196-198.
2. These *midrashim* may be seen to represent a deeper level of meaning, what has been referred to as "*omek peshuto*". See Rashbam on Gen. 37:2.
3. Gur Aryeh (in *Otzar Me'afeshei Rashi al Ha-Torah*, Jerusalem: H. Wagshal, n.d.), Genesis 23:2, and Devek Tov (quoted in Charles D. Chavel, *Perushei Rashi al Ha-Torah*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1983), Genesis 23:2, have made this last point the sole basis for Rashi's connecting Sarah's death with the *Akedah*. Although this provides support for the temporal connection of Sarah's death with the *Akedah*, it does not support the interpretation of a causal connection between the two. Moreover, if this were the main basis for Rashi's comment, he would have written it on s.v. *and Abraham came*; but instead he wrote it on s.v. *to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her*.
4. Joseph's personal mourning was separate from the official 70-day wailing period for Jacob observed by the Egyptians.
5. For a discussion of Rashi's two interpretations, see Gur Aryeh, *ibid.*, Numbers 11:10. One of the interpretations is based on the unusual syntax: *sheva shanim* ("seven years") preceding *nivnetah* ("was founded").
6. The translation of *zekher* as "name" is that of J. H. Tigay, *The JPS Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 25:19. Other translations throughout the paper are based on the NJPS. In general, I have replaced interpretive translations by more literal ones. Note that rendering *zekher* as "memory" would not alter the conclusions reached.
7. Rashi also quotes *Midrash Tanhuma's* interpretation of the phrase, *va-yezannev bekha kol ha-neheshalim aharekha*, which follows *asher karekha ba-derekh* as referring to the mutilation of



the sexual organs of Israelite males. Since *va-yezannev* derives from the noun *zanav*, meaning "tail," this means that the Amalekites cut off the penises of Israelite stragglers.