YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Rashi as a Teacher of Values**

**By Dr. Avigail Rock**

[This shiur is part of Dr. Rock’s VBM series ***Great Biblical Commentators*.** The entire series can be found here: <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/topics/great-biblical-commentators>.]

1. **RASHI AS AN EDUCATOR**

What motivates Rashi to expound a verse? Does Rashi explicate the verses only when he finds some difficulty in them, with the sole motive of clarifying the text? This is what Professor Nechama Leibowitz argues, in the footsteps of a number of Rashi’s supercommentaries. Or does Rashi see himself as obligated not only to explain the verses, but also to educate the community and transmit messages by way of *parshanut* when these opportunities happen to fall into his lap? Indeed, a not insignificant number of modern scholars of Rashi maintain that the latter is true.

The first approach compels the student to find the difficulty that Rashi tries to resolve for each and every verse he expounds. Nevertheless, there are times that there is no escape from saying that Rashi does not always find a difficulty in the verse; at least in some circumstances, his desire is to educate and to shape the viewpoint and life practices of his readers, and this is what motivates him to expound the verse.

Regardless of the position we maintain regarding Rashi’s motivations, there is no doubt that Rashi — whether intentionally or unintentionally — has becomes one of the great expositors of Jewish values throughout all generations.

We may say that Rashi is directly responsible for shaping a significant part of the ethical and educational tradition of the Jewish nation. We might even go as far as to say that in this sphere his success is even greater than in the exegetical sphere. Parents and other educators construct the values and the outlook of the Jewish child upon the rock-solid foundations of Rashi’s commentaries on *Tanakh*; these words serve as their guiding light.

Every Jewish child who is about to hit his classmate or playmate immediately hears the resounding voice of the kindergarten teacher quoting: “Whoever raises a hand against his fellow is called a *rasha* (evil one)” (Rashi, *Shemot* 2:13, based on *Sanhedrin* 58b).[[1]](#footnote-1)

We all remember that it is better to say a little and do a lot; this is, after all, Avraham’s behavior, while Efron (who is, of course, a non-Jew) acts in the opposite way (Rashi, *Bereishit* 23:16, based on *Bava Metzia* 87a).

The seriousness of publicly shaming another was emphasized in our youth when we learnt of Tamar: “Better that one leap into a fiery furnace than shame one’s fellow in public” (Rashi, *Bereishit* 38:25, based on *Berakhot* 43b).

The importance of prayer is derived from Rashi’s commentary as well. On the verse, “And God took account of Sara” (*Bereishit* 21:1), Rashi explains, “This section[[2]](#footnote-2) was juxtaposed to the other to teach you that whoever asks for God’s compassion for another, when he needs the same thing, he is answered first” (based on *Bava Kamma* 92a).

The authority of the official leadership, which we must respect even if we do not like it, is recalled with Rashi’s phrase: “Yiftach in his generation is like Shemuel in his generation” (Rashi, *Devarim* 19:17, as cited from *Rosh Hashana* 25b). And who does not remember Rashi’s famous example of the difference between taking revenge and bearing a grudge (based on the *Sifra* *ad loc.* and *Yoma* 23a)?

X says to Y, “Lend me your sickle,” and Y replies, “No!” The next day, Y says to X “Lend me your ax.” If X says to Y, “I will not lend it to you, just as you did not lend to me!” — this constitutes revenge.

Now what constitutes bearing a grudge? X says to Y, “Lend me your ax,” and Y replies, “No!” The next day, Y says to X, “Lend me your sickle.” If X says to Y, “Here it is for you; I am not like you, who did not lend me!” — this constitutes bearing a grudge, for X keeps the hatred in his heart, even though he does not take revenge. (Vayikra 19:18)

Of course, the source of all of these statements is the Talmud and Midrash, but most of us first encountered and came to know them from Rashi’s words.

In this *shiur*, I have gathered a number of examples of educational topics that are very close to Rashi’s heart, so much so that at every opportunity he interweaves them into his commentary. By way of these examples, we may build a model of the ethical and educational philosophy of the greatest of all teachers, Rashi.[[3]](#footnote-3)

1. ***LASHON HA-RA***

To Rashi, speaking ill of others — *lashon ha-ra*, here used as a term including slander, gossip, defamation and the like — is anathema. He notes how serious this sin is in a number of places; according to him (as we shall see presently), the sin is so serious that it is the cause of exile.

When Moshe encounters two quarreling Hebrew men and rebukes the assailant, he is shocked to learn that his killing of the Egyptian slave-driver the previous day has become public knowledge: “And Moshe was afraid” (*Shemot* 2:14). After explaining this reaction literally, Rashi (*ad loc.*) continues:

Midrashically, it is interpreted to mean that he was worried because he saw that were delators[[4]](#footnote-4) among Israel. He said: If this is the case, perhaps they do not deserve to be redeemed![[5]](#footnote-5)

Explaining the next phrase, “And he said, ‘Indeed, the matter is known,’” Rashi continues to develop this approach:

Its Midrashic interpretation, however, is this: The matter I was wondering about, why the Israelites are considered more sinful than all the seventy nations that they deserve to be subjugated in cruel servitude, has become known to me. I see that they do indeed deserve it.

It is not only the Jewish nation that is punished by the privations of exile due to the sin of *lashon ha-ra*; this is true of the individual as well. For example, Yosef informs on his brothers, as the verse notes (*Bereishit* 37:2): “Yosef brought their evil report to their father.” Rashi (*ad loc*.) describes at length both the slander and the punishment of Yosef for bringing *lashon ha-ra* to his father. In fact, he writes, all of the troubles which befall Yosef are a punishment for his *lashon ha-ra* concerning his brothers:

“Their evil report” — any evil he saw in his brothers, the sons of Leah, he would tell his father: 1) That they ate limbs from living animals, 2) that they demeaned the sons of the maidservants by calling them slaves, and 3) that they were suspected of illicit sexual relationships.

For these three, he was punished:

For the tale of limbs from living animals, “they slaughtered a kid goat” (*Bereishit* 37:31) when they sold him, but they did not eat it alive.

For the report that he told about them that they called their brothers slaves, “Joseph was sold as a slave” (*Tehillim* 105:17).

For the tale of illicit sexual relationships that he told about them, “his master’s wife lifted her eyes…” (*Bereishit* 39:7).

According to Rashi, Moshe Rabbeinu’s experiences described in chapter 4 of *Shemot* demonstrate that even leaders and great men such as he must be careful to avoid *lashon ha-ra*; indeed, they are forced to pay for this sin if they stumble in this severe crime.[[6]](#footnote-6) When Moshe Rabbeinu is sent to redeem the Israelites from Egypt, he doubts whether they will trust in his account that God has indeed revealed Himself to him: “But they will not believe me” (v. 1). God’s response to Moshe is to give him two signs (vv. 2-8); at first glance, their aim appears to be to convince the Jewish People of the trustworthiness of Moshe Rabbeinu. However, according to Rashi, the two signs that Moshe performs allude to his own sin – slandering the Jewish people with the statement “But they will not believe me.”

The first sign is changing the staff into a serpent, and Rashi finds in this two allusions to Moshe’s sin. The first allusion precedes the sign itself, when God asks Moshe (v. 2), “*Ma-zeh be-yadekha*?”, “What is this in your hand?” On the basis of the Midrash,[[7]](#footnote-7) Rashi directs our attention to the strange compound word “*ma-zeh,*” composed of “*ma*” (what) and “*zeh*” (this).

This is why it is written as one word: so that it may be expounded: “*Mi-zeh,*” “from this” in your hand you deserve to be stricken, for you have suspected the innocent.

In addition, the sign itself, turning the staff into a serpent, is seen by Rashi (v. 3) as an allusion to Moshe’s sin:

He alluded to him that he told *lashon ha-ra* about Israel, seizing the occupation of the Serpent.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The second sign is Moshe’s hand becoming covered with leprosy[[9]](#footnote-9) (v. 6), and Rashi brings the *midrash* which connects this sign to the sin of *lashon ha-ra*:

This is an allusion to the *lashon ha-ra* that he had told by saying, “They will not believe me;” therefore, he was stricken with *tzaraat*, just as Miriam was stricken because of *lashon ha-ra*.

God then declares: “If they will not believe you, and they will not hearken to the call of the first sign, then they will believe the call of the latter sign” (v. 8). Rashi explains that the second sign (the leprous hand) is more convincing than the first sign (the ophidian staff), because with the second sign Moshe is punished:

“Once you tell them, ‘I was stricken because of you, because I told *lashon ha-ra* about you,’ they will believe you.” [[10]](#footnote-10)

According to the *gemara*, *lashon ha-ra* is one of the seven sins punished by *tzara’at*:

R. Shmuel bar Nachmani said in the name of R. Yochanan: Plagues are caused by seven things: by *lashon ha-ra*, by bloodshed, by vain oath-taking, by sexual immorality, by arrogance, by robbery and by greed. (*Arakhin* 16a)

 From among these seven possibilities, Rashi chooses the sin of *lashon ha-ra* as the exclusive offense that causes the punishment of *tzaraat*; ever since the publication of Rashi’s commentary on the Torah, the punishment of *tzara’at* is known throughout Jewish communities as the fitting punishment for the sin of *lashon ha-ra*! Rashi even justifies the idea of tit-for-tat inherent in the punishment of *tzara’at* when he explains the verse, “He shall reside alone; outside the camp must his residence be” (*Vayikra* 13:46), the rule governing the *metzora*:

“He shall reside alone” — even other impure people must avoid him.

Our Sages said (*Arakhin* 16b): Why is he different from other impure people, that he must remain isolated? Since, with his slander, he caused a separation between a man and his wife or between a man and his fellow, he too, shall be separated!

 I do not know why this topic of *lashon ha-ra* is so imperative for Rashi. It may be that Rashi, as a communal leader and rabbinic judge, saw up close the extremely harmful results that the sin of *lashon ha-ra* can cause. In any case, it is clear to me that it is Rashi who succeeded in inculcating the severity of the sin of *lashon ha-ra* in the consciousness of the Jewish People, long before R. Yisrael Meir Kagan wrote his magnum opus on the topic, *Chafetz Chayim*.[[11]](#footnote-11)

1. **SENSITIVITY TO THE DISADVANTAGED**

In his commentaries, Rashi displays great sensitivity towards the people in society who are indigent or powerless, who have no defenders.[[12]](#footnote-12) This compassion for the disadvantaged is expressed in numerous ways. We will focus on his commentary on *Vayikra*.

At the end of the first chapter, Rashi declares that the economic situation of the pauper does not decrease his or her value in God’s eyes. In explaining the phrase “a fire-offering of a pleasing fragrance,” he writes:

Now, regarding birds, it says here, “A pleasing fragrance,” and regarding animals (v. 9), it says, “A pleasing fragrance” as well. Thus, we may see that whether the offering is a large animal or a small bird, the fragrance is pleasing to God. This teaches us that it makes no difference whether one offers much or little, provided that one directs the heart heavenward. (Rashi, *Vayikra* 1:17)

 A similar idea is cited by Rashi in the next verse, “And if a person [literally, soul] offers” (ibid. 2:1):

Regarding all the sacrifices which are donated voluntarily, the only instance where Scripture uses the word “soul” is in the case of the meal-offering. Now, who usually donates a meal-offering? Only the poorest of people do so. Nevertheless, the Holy One, blessed be He, says: In my eyes, it is as he has offered his very soul!

Returning to the bird-offering (1:17), Rashi uses a technical detail to stress that the Torah worries about the rights and dignity of the weak. The Torah commands that when offering a bird, the priest “shall cleave it by its wings, but not sever it; then he shall burn it on the altar… a pleasing fragrance to God.” Rashi (ad loc.) explains:

“By its wings” — with its wings. There is no need to pluck the feathers of its wings.

“By its wings” — the actual feathers. But surely even the most unsophisticated person finds the smell of burnt feathers repulsive! Why then does Scripture command, “Then he shall burn it”? So that the altar should appear content and enhanced by the offering of a pauper.

In other words, offering the wing feathers on the altar is designed to create the image of a satisfied altar; a featherless or wingless bird appears to be a very small offering, while the wings add a bit of volume and beauty. Thus, the pauper, who is bringing something of the small amount that he or she owns, feels good about the offering.

Later in *Sefer Vayikra*, this concept is extended to interpersonal laws. The Torah states (ibid. 25:35), “If your brother becomes destitute and his hand falters beside you, you shall support him, alien or resident, so that he may live with you.” Rashi directs our attention to the fact that in charity, timing is everything:

“You shall support him” — do not allow him to fall down and collapse altogether, making it difficult to pick him up again. Rather, “support him” when his hand falters. To what can this be compared? To a load on a donkey — as long as it is still on the donkey, one person can grab hold of it and keep it in place. Once it falls to the ground, however, even five people cannot pick it up.

Throughout the Torah, Rashi is wont to cite the halakhic *midrashim* which emphasize the severity of the prohibitions of taking advantage of the weak, whether in terms of the sin or in terms of the punishment.

The prohibition of defrauding is mentioned twice in Scripture. In *Vayikra* (19:13), we read, “Do not defraud your fellow;” in *Devarim* (24:14), we read, “Do not defraud your poor or destitute hiree, from among your brethren or from among your aliens.” According to Rashi, the Torah views the offense as more serious when it is committed against a pauper; indeed, one who transgresses and takes advantage of the indigent violates two prohibitions simultaneously:

“Do not defraud your [poor or destitute] hiree” — But has this not already been written? Indeed it has, but this makes the transgressor liable for two negative commandments for a poor person: 1) “Do not defraud your poor or destitute hiree” of his wages; 2) “Do not defraud your fellow,” which proscribes doing so [even] to a rich person. (Rashi, *Devarim* 24:14)

A few verses later (24:17), Rashi applies the same logic to the justice system that he does to labor relations:

“Do not pervert the judgment of an alien or an orphan” — The Torah has already proscribed doing so even to a rich person: “Do not pervert justice” (ibid. 16:19). However, the Torah repeats it here in reference to the poor person in order to make the transgressor liable for two negative commandments. Since it is easier to pervert the judgment of a poor person[[13]](#footnote-13) than that of a rich person, the Torah proscribes once and then repeats.

In other places in Rashi’s commentary, we see that God Himself serves as a guardian of the weak. For example, in *Shemot* 22:25, the Torah states: “If you take your fellow’s garment as security, return it to him until sunset.” Rashi comments:

“If you take… as security” [literally, “If you take a security, you shall take a security”] — The Torah employs duplicative language, indicating that one may end up taking the security many times.

The Holy One, blessed be He, says: How greatly are you in My debt! For your soul ascends to Me every night, gives an account and tally, and is found wanting before Me, but I return it to you nevertheless. You as well must take and return, take and return. [[14]](#footnote-14)

This *midrash* implies that the creditor must return to the pauper his collateral daily, since this is how God acts with every person when He returns his soul to Him; in other words, God, as it were, represents the poor, and the bounty which God bestows upon us must therefore be shared with the pauper.

A similar idea is expressed in the previous verse (22:24): “If you lend money to My people, the pauper among you…” Rashi comments:

“To My people” — do not act towards [the borrower] in a demeaning manner when you lend to him, for he is with Me.

Rashi is suggesting a homiletic reading: instead of vowelizing the word “*ammi*” (My people), it may be understood as “*immi*” (with Me). Thus, the pauper deserves respect, since God is in his corner, and disrespect for the pauper is thus disrespect for God.

Rashi reiterates this idea in his comment to *Devarim* 16:11. The verse describes the joy of the festival of Shavuot:

And you shall rejoice before Lord your God, you, and your son, and your daughter, and your servant, and your maidservant, and the Levite in your gates, and the alien, and the orphan, and the widow in your midst…

Rashi explains:

“The Levite… and the alien, and the orphan, and the widow” — [God says:] These are My four, corresponding to your four – “Your son and your daughter and your servant and your maidservant.” If you will gladden Mine, I will gladden yours.

Rashi even teaches us that identification with the pauper can lead us to sympathy. Returning to the verse in *Shemot* 22:24, Rashi examines the phrase “the pauper among you:”

“The pauper among you” — Look at yourself as if you were the pauper.

Rashi writes similar things about the welfare of the aliens, the strangers or converts. In the next chapter, the Torah states: “You know the soul of the alien” (23:9), and Rashi explains:

“The soul of the alien” — [You know] how hard it is for him when people oppress him.

The Jewish people know how difficult it is for the aliens when they are oppressed, because the Israelites were aliens in Egypt, and they were also oppressed, “And we cried out to God… and He saw our suffering… and our oppression” (*Devarim* 26:7).

1. **AFFECTION FOR FOREBEARS OF ISRAEL**

Rashi expresses great affection for the forebears of Israel, the Patriarchs, the Matriarchs, and the Twelve Tribes. This regard is expressed in two areas. The first is an attempt to minimize — to the level of obscuring the very progression of the biblical text — the negative traits or acts which are attributed in Scripture to Israel’s forebears and its role models. The second is the glorification of acts that seem to be insignificant. There are a number of examples of Rashi’s forgiving attitude towards the ancestors of the Jewish People, and we will cite a number of them from the Book of *Bereishit*:

1. Avraham asks God about the future provision of the Holy Land (15:8): “By what shall I know that I will inherit it?” Rashi stresses that Avraham does not actually doubt God’s ability to fulfill the blessing, but he needs to know how his descendants will merit to receive the land and hold on to it: “He said to Him: ‘Let me know — by what right will they endure in it?’”
2. In Yitzchak’s words to Esav, he describes Yaakov’s trickery in the following way: “Your brother came with guile (*be-mirma*), and he took your blessing” (27:35). Rashi follows in the footsteps of Onkelos, rendering “*be-mirma*” as “with cleverness (*be*-*chokhma*).” When Yaakov’s sons hatch a scheme to kill the men of Shekhem, the Torah notes, “And Yaakov’s sons answered Shekhem and Chamor with *mirma*” (34:13); Rashi likewise translates the word *mirma* as *chokhma*.[[15]](#footnote-15)
3. When the Torah states (30:1), “And Rachel saw that she had not borne a child to Yaakov, and Rachel was envious of her sister,” Rashi explains that Rachel is not jealous, but rather “envious of her good deeds,” by which she had merited giving birth to so many sons.
4. The verse reports (35:22), “And Reuven went, and he slept with Bilha, his father’s concubine;” Rashi explains that “he disarranged his bed.”
5. When the brothers’ hatred of Yosef becomes overpowering, so that “they could not speak peaceably with him” (37:4), Rashi points out that this redounds to the brothers’ credit; they did not act in a duplicitous manner, pretending to like him.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Conversely, as we have said, when it comes to the forebears of Israel, Rashi also glorifies actions which seem meaningless. Interpreting the words of the verse (30:14), “And Reuven went in the days of the wheat harvest,” Rashi explains:

This tells you how the tribes [i.e. Yaakov’s sons] were praiseworthy, that it was the time of harvest, but [Reuven] did not stretch out his hand in thievery to steal wheat or barley, but rather took an ownerless thing, which no one cares about.

Another example is Rashi’s interpretation of the verse (22:1), “And Avraham said, ‘Here I am,’” when God tests him:

“Here I am” — This is the reply of the pious. It is an expression of humility and an expression of readiness.[[17]](#footnote-17)

1. **PRAISE AND AFFECTION FOR THE JEWISH PEOPLE**

Rashi has great affection not only for the ancestors of the Jewish people, but for Israel as a nation as well, and he succeeds in finding points in their favor even when their sins are spelled out in the verse.

One example is in the passage of the blasphemer (*Vayikra* 23:10-12). Rashi praises the nation of Israel, deducing that if the verse finds it worthwhile to mention the name of his mother — “And his mother’s name was Shelomit, daughter of Divri, of the tribe of Dan” (ibid. v. 11) — it must be that she was unusual:

“His mother’s name was Shelomit the daughter of Divri” — this is to praise Israel. The verse publicizes this one to let us know that she alone was involved in sexual immorality.

An additional example may be found in *Devarim* 32:43, where the Torah states, “Nations, sing out praise for His people.” Rashi explains:

At that time, the nations will praise Israel, saying: You see, now, what the praise of this nation is. For they clung to the Holy One, Blessed be He, through all the sufferings that befell them, and they did not forsake Him! They knew His goodness and His praise. [[18]](#footnote-18)

It is difficult not to see in this approbation of the nation of Israel, who “clung to the Holy One, Blessed be He, through all the sufferings that befell them,” a reassuring comment which comes to bolster his contemporaries. Rashi lived in a period in which the Church pointed to the success and power of Christendom, on the one hand, and the low situation of the Jews, on the other hand, as a divine sign of the rightness of the Christian viewpoint. Through his commentary, Rashi strengthens his coreligionists, who are overwhelmed and beleaguered by their current situation, reassuring them that, in the future, the nations of the world will praise the nation of Israel because they have not been seduced into apostasy.

1. **LOVE OF THE LAND OF ISRAEL**

This lesson would be incomplete without noting Rashi’s great affection for the Land of Israel. Rashi attributes many great qualities to the Land of Israel, whether physical or spiritual, and sometimes they even dovetail with each other.

The terms *aliya* (ascent) and *yerida* (descent) have become the common terms for, respectively, immigration to and emigration from the land of Israel. It is logical to assume that this use of the term *aliya*, instead of defining mere upward motion, became rooted in the Hebrew language because of Rashi’s many comments describing Israel as “above” all other lands, which should be seen as a physical and spiritual description combined. Below are a number of examples.

After Yosef identifies himself to his brothers, he says (*Bereishit* 45:9), “Hurry and **go up** to my father.” Rashi explains: “The Land of Israel is higher than all other lands.” In *Shemot* 33:1, God says to Moshe, “Go, **go up** from this, you and the people which you brought up from the land of Egypt, to the land which I swore…” Rashi explains: “The Land of Israel is higher than all other lands; this is why He said, ‘Go up.’”

The same applies in the reverse; leaving the land of Israel is described to this very day with the term *yerida*. This also follows in Rashi’s footsteps. On the verse, “And they will bring down to us” (*Devarim* 1:25), Rashi explains: “This tells us that the Land of Israel is higher than all other lands.”

Rashi believes that the Land of Israel has higher spiritual standards than other lands. In *Vayikra* 18:28, the verse says that the Land will vomit out those who defile it, and Rashi explains: “The Land of Israel does not suffer sinners.” The Land itself, as it were, is not capable of containing evildoers, and consequently, it vomits them out. Similarly, because of the high spiritual level of the Land of Israel, Rashi determines that one who lives outside of Israel is likened to an idol worshipper, while one who lives in the Land of Israel makes the God of Israel his. In *Vayikra* 25:38, the verse states: “I am the Lord, your God, Who took you out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan, to be a God to you.” Rashi explains: “For I am a God to anyone who lives in the Land of Israel, but anyone who leaves it is like one who worships idols.”

Rashi emphasizes the physical advantages of the Land of Israel as well. In his commentary to *Bamidbar* 13:22, “Now Chevron had been built seven years before Tzoan of Egypt,” Rashi argues that the simple meaning of the verse is untenable, since the Egyptians are an older people than the Canaanites. Instead, he explains that even the most inferior part of the Land of Israel, Chevron, is seven times as good as the finest part of Egypt:

This is meant to teach you the excellence of the Land of Israel, for there is no place in the Land of Israel rockier than Chevron, which is why it was designated for a burial ground. On the other hand, there is no country in the world as superb as Egypt, as it says, “It was like God’s garden, like the land of Egypt” (*Bereishit* 13:10). Furthermore, Tzoan is the best part of Egypt, for the residence of the kings is situated there, as it says, “For his princes were in Tzoan” (*Yeshayahu* 30:4). Yet Chevron was superior to it seven times over.

Similarly, Rashi comments on the words of the verse in *Devarim* (11:10) stating that the land of Israel “is not like the land of Egypt,” noting: “Rather, it is better than it.”

Rashi emphasizes that these superior qualities of the Land of Israel are known not only to the Jewish People, but even to the nations of the world. This is what he writes earlier in *Devarim* (3:9), where the Torah notes that other nations have their own name for Mount Hermon: “The Sidonians call Hermon Sirion, while the Amorites call it Senir.”

“The Sidonians call Hermon…” — but in another passage, it states, “Until Mount Sion, which is Hermon” (*Devarim* 4:48). So we see that it had four names [Hermon, Sirion, Senir, and Sion]. Why was it necessary for all of them to be written? To express the praise of the Land of Israel, that there were four kingdoms taking pride in it — one saying, “It shall be called by my name,” and another saying, “It shall be called by my name.”

A similar concept arises one more time in *Devarim*, towards the end (33:17). There, Moshe is blessing the tribe of Yosef: “The firstborn of his ox is his glory, and the horns of the aurochs are his horns; with them he will gore together the ends of the earth.” According to Rashi, the verse constitutes a prophecy describing the impending conquest of the land of Israel by Yehoshua. Once again, Rashi finds the opportunity here to weave the message of the superiority of the Land of Israel into his commentary, despite the fact that there is no difficulty in the verse that requires the introduction of aggadic material:

“The ends of the earth” — that is, the thirty-one kings. [[19]](#footnote-19) Is it possible that these kings were all from the Land of Israel? Rather, there was not one king or ruler who did not acquire for himself a palace and a holding in the land of Israel. This is because the Land of Israel was considered distinguished by all of them, as it is said, “The finest inheritance of the hosts of nations” (*Yirmeyahu* 3:19).

In other words, every king throughout the world (“the ends of the earth”) wanted to own real estate in the Land of Israel because of its universal importance.

1. **APPENDIX — RASHI’S DICTA**

Having reached this point, I wish to list a number of expressions and maxims which have become a treasured part of the Hebrew language because of Rashi’s commentary. Here as well, I will stress that Rashi did not compose these expressions, but the fact that Rashi uses these aphorisms has made them extremely popular. I bring here only a small sample of these dicta:

* Say part of one’s praise in his presence, all of it outside of his presence (*Bereishit* 7:1).
* Woe to a villain, woe to his neighbor (*Bamidbar* 3:29).
* A cloak all of blue wool (*Bamidbar* 16:1). [[20]](#footnote-20)
* What does the sabbatical year have to do with Mt. Sinai? (*Vayikra* 25:1).[[21]](#footnote-21)
* For Rachel, your younger daughter (following Rashi, *Bereishit* 29:18).[[22]](#footnote-22)
* Two kings cannot share the same crown (*Bereishit* 1:16).
* One in the mouth and one in the heart (*Bereishit* 37:4).[[23]](#footnote-23)
* Each word according to its properties (Rashi, *Bereishit* 3:8, based on *Mishlei* 25:11).[[24]](#footnote-24)
* Do not criticize your fellow for a blemish that you have (*Shemot* 22:20).
* When you see something like this, sanctify it (*Shemot* 12:2). [[25]](#footnote-25)
* The grandfather of all impurity (*Bamidbar* 19:22).

(Translated by Rav Yoseif Bloch)

1. Usually, this threat is voiced without mentioning the term *rasha*, following another of Rashi’s dicta: “It threatens, but it does not delineate the punishment” (*Shemot* 22:22; a similar expression appears in *Bereishit* 4:15). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In 20:17, Avraham prays for Avimelekh and his household. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. As we have noted above, the source of all of these points is ultimately the words of the Sages. Nevertheless, we will attribute the resultant educational philosophy to Rashi, because he selects certain *midrashim* and cites them, while ignoring others. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This is a term for informers from the Latin that has found its way into both Hebrew and English. How does Moshe know that it is Hebrews, not Egyptians, who have informed on him? Before he kills the Egyptian, “he turned this way and that, and he saw that no man was there” (*Shemot* 2:12); therefore, the only person who could have told the tale was the Hebrew whom Moshe had saved from his Egyptian attacker. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. It may be that the impetus for adding this *midrash* is the question of how a person at Moshe’s spiritual level would be in fear of mere humans. According to this *midrash*, this is not the fear of personal peril, but rather a concern for the fate of the Jewish people; perhaps, God forbid, they do not deserve redemption due to their perfidy. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. It is noteworthy that while Rashi generally tries to justify the acts of the Patriarchs and other role models, he does not mince words with regard to the sin of *lashon ha-ra*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Midrash Tanchuma, Shemot* 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The association of snakes with the sin of *lashon ha-ra* also appears in Rashi’s comments to the following verse: “God sent against the people the venomous snakes, and they bit the people, and many people of Israel died” (*Bamidbar* 21:6). Rashi writes: “‘And they bit the people’ — let the snake, which was stricken for speaking evil, come and punish those who spread slander.” [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. **Translator’s note**: For convenience’s sake, we use the terms “leprosy” and “leper” for *tzara’at* and *metzora* respectively, despite the fact that in *Tanakh*, *tzara’at* is a physical manifestation of spiritual infirmity, not Hansen’s disease, which is bacterial in nature. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. It appears that what motivates Rashi’s interpretation of these signs is the fact that Moshe is required to perform the signs while he is still standing by the Burning Bush, before he arrives in Egypt at all, without even one person around to witness these phenomena. The aim of performing these signs afterwards, before the Israelites, is quite clear – Moshe needs to convince them that God did indeed speak to him – but what is the point of performing them at the Burning Bush? According to the comments of Rashi, the answer is profound; they serve as a rebuke and punishment for Moshe. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The sin of *lashon ha-ra* appears in Rashi’s commentaries in the following places as well: *Vayikra* 14:4, 19:16; *Bamidbar* 33:18; *Devarim* 22:14, 27:24, etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The Torah declares, “Do not oppress any widow or orphan” (*Shemot* 22:21), and Rashi explains this: “The same applies to all people, but the Scripture speaks of the usual situation, since [the widows and orphans] are weak and they are often mistreated.” [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Note that Rashi uses the term “poor person” to describe an oppressed person (in this case, an alien or orphan), not specifically one who is financially disadvantaged. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. This is a payment which is taken from a borrower who does not have the cash to pay a debt. When the creditor takes the collateral garment of the pauper in this case, he must return it to that individual every morning, so that the pauper will have something to wear throughout the day, and at sunset the lender takes the garment once again, until the next morning, and so on and so forth (until the pauper pays his debt). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. In the case of Shekhem, the alteration from the *peshat* of the verse is more significant, since the guile is also mentioned by the objective biblical narrator, who calls it *mirma*, while Rashi explains that the reference is to *chokhma*. On the other hand, in the case of Yitzchak, *mirma* is mentioned only by Yitzchak himself; one may understand that even though Yitzchak himself evaluates it as *mirma*, in fact, Yaakov’s actions are not so deplorable, and they are in the category of *chokhma*, not *mirma*. As we shall see below, Rashi is not overly concerned with setting aside the literal meaning of the words employed by the objective biblical narrator in order to convey a moral message.

When Yaakov describes what Lavan has done to him in swapping Leah for Rachel, he uses the identical term: “And why have you beguiled me?” (*Bereishit* 29:25). Rashi does not explain that the meaning of the word *mirma* there is *chokhma*, but rather leaves it without explanation, with the understanding that the reader will interpret it according to the usual meaning – that Lavan has tricked, misled, or defrauded Yaakov. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. This explanation of Rashi teaches us the importance of honesty in his worldview. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. A similar idea is applied to Yosef’s use of the term when his father addresses him; see *Bereishit* 37:13. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. It is worth adding the innovation of Rav Mordechai Breuer ([*Megadim* 28 (5758), pp. 45-72](http://www.vbm-torah.org/vtc/0051193.html#fn0)) concerning Rashi’s method in his introductory comments to each volume of the Pentateuch:

It appears that Rashi has a clear methodology here. Rashi introduces his commentary to each volume of the Pentateuch by singing the praises of Israel: proving their righteousness (*Bereishit*), revealing how beloved they are (*Shemot*, *Vayikra*, *Bamidbar*) or defending their honor (*Devarim*). There is a great significance to this method of Rashi throughout his commentary. After all, the Holy One, Blessed be He, Israel, and His Torah are one. Thus, one who seeks to interpret the Torah must always have Israel uppermost in his mind. Only Israel received and fulfilled the Torah, and they still fulfill it until to this very day. Israel is the sole subject of the Torah, and they alone are what it deals with, from the beginning to the end. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Chapter 12 of the Book of *Yehoshua* lists thirty-one Canaanite kings whom he defeated in order to conquer the Land of Israel. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Korach, whose rebellion is described in *Bamidbar* 16 (immediately following the commandment to the Israelites to make fringes, containing a thread of blue, on the edges of their garments), uses the following tactic:

He dressed them with cloaks made entirely of blue wool. They came and stood before Moses and asked him, “Does a cloak made entirely of blue wool require fringes, or is it exempt?” He replied, “It does require fringes.” They began laughing at him. "Can it be that one string of blue wool fulfills the obligation for a cloak made of any other color, while this one, which is made entirely of blue wool, cannot exempt itself?” [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. This is a phrase which describes a non-sequitur in the biblical text. In this case, it is the introduction to *Vayikra* 25, which deals with the sabbatical and jubilee years. It opens with, “And God spoke to Moshe on Mount Sinai, saying,” instead of the usual, “And God spoke to Moshe, saying.” [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. This is a phrase which describes the apparently redundant, legalistic terminology of contracts and the like. In this verse, Yaakov strikes a deal with Lavan: “I will work for you for seven years for Rachel, your younger daughter.” Ostensibly, he could have merely said “for Rachel.” Rashi explains:

“For Rachel, your younger daughter” — Why were all these signs necessary? Since Yaakov knew that Lavan was a deceiver, he said to him, “I will work for you for Rachel;” lest you substitute some other Rachel from the street, it states explicitly: “Your daughter;” lest you say, “I will change her name to Leah, and I will change Leah’s name to Rachel,” it states explicitly: “Your younger [daughter].” [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. This is an expression of hypocrisy or duplicity. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. In other words, a word must be defined on its own terms, literally rather than homiletically. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. This expression refers to an unequivocal, unquestionable teaching. The first commandment given to Israel in Egypt is: “This new moon shall mark for you the beginning of the months.” Rashi is troubled by the word “this,” and he explains:

Moshe had some difficulty understanding the crescent of the new moon, at what size it must appear before it is fit for sanctification. So He showed him with His finger the moon in the sky and said to him, “When you see something like this, sanctify it.” [↑](#footnote-ref-25)