

Dimensions in Chumash

Parshas Vayetzei

The Worlds of Pshat and Drash

Background: Stones that Became a Stone

The beginning of our parsha relates how Yaakov, before embarking on his journey toward Charan, alighted at the site of the future Beis Hamikdash. Before going to sleep, he took a number of stones and placed them around his head. Rashi explains that he did so as protection from wild animals. Rashi then cites a well-known tradition from the Sages that the stones began to quarrel among themselves, with each one wanting to be the one upon which the tzaddik would rest his head. A miracle then occurred whereby all the stones merged into one stone.

Understandably, there are a number of questions that can be raised on this occurrence from a purely content point of view, among them:

- If Yaakov placed the stones “*around* his head” for protection, what is the meaning of each stone then wanting to be the “*one upon which* he placed his head”?
- How are we meant to understand the idea of inanimate objects such as stones expressing their desire that a tzaddik rest his head on them?
- What is the significance of all the stones becoming one?

In the present discussion, however, we would like to focus on the basis in the words of the Torah for these events. The source for this is the Gemara in Maseches Chullin¹ which points to a contradiction between two verses:

¹ 91b.

כתיב "ויקח מאבני המקום" וכתיב "ויקח את האבן!" אמר ר' יצחק מלמד שנתקבצו כל אותן אבנים למקום אחד וכל אחת אורמת עלי יניח צדיק זה ראשו. תנא וכולן נבלעו באחד

*It [first] states "He took from **the stones** of the place,"² and [subsequently] states "he took **the stone**"!³ Said R' Yitzchak, this teaches that all the stones gathered together to one place, with each one saying "Let the tzaddik rest his head on me." It was taught in a braisa, they were all became absorbed as one stone.*

To summarize: The basis of the Gemara's discussion lies in noting a simple contradiction between two verses, with the Sages' tradition of "the quarrel among the stones" coming as the resolution to that contradiction.

Tosafos Confound Us

Tosafos, in their commentary to the above-mentioned Gemara,⁴ make a most interesting – and somewhat alarming – comment. Here are their words:

לפי פשוטו יש לפרש שלקח אבן אחת מאבני המקום

On a straightforward level, one can explain [the verse as saying] that he took one stone from among the stones of the place.

Tosafos are alerting us to the fact that the first verse does not state that Yaakov took "אֲבָנֵי הַמָּקוֹם – stones of the place," but rather, "מֵאֲבָנֵי הַמָּקוֹם – from the stones of the place"! How many stones of the place did Yaakov take? The verse doesn't say – it could be one, it could be more. As such, when the second verse states that he took "the stone," now we know that initially he only took one of the stones that were there. In this sense, the second verse does not *contradict* the verse one, it *clarifies* it!

Needless to say, this is a most unusual situation. On the one hand, Tosafos' point about the two verses not having to contradict each other is quite clear. On the other hand, what exactly do they mean to say by this, given that the Gemara *does* pose them as a contradiction? Tosafos are a commentary on the Gemara. How do

² Verse 11, implying many stones (Rashi, Chullin ibid.)

³ Verse 18.

⁴ S.v. *kesiv*.

their words here add to our understanding of the Gemara when all they seem to be doing is undermining it?

Pshat and Drash Questions

The answer to the above question lies in Tosafos' opening words: "לפי פשוטו". To understand the significance of these words, let us consider two concepts which run throughout the entire Torah, known as *pshat* and *drash*. We normally encounter these two terms when considering differing ways of interpreting a verse:

- **Pshat:** Explains the verse in terms of what can be derived from the words using the disciplines of language, syntax and grammar.
- **Drash:** Explains – and expounds – the verse using a broader spectrum of meaning, including allusions to further ideas, as well as further information relating to that situation known to the Sages through tradition.

However, it is important to note that *pshat* and *drash* differ, not only in terms of the *interpretations they provide*, but also in terms of the *issues they raise* that require interpretation:

- The word *pshat* derives from the word *pashut*, which means simple or straightforward. The goal of *pshat* is to read the verse in a way whereby the straightforward meaning of the words emerges.
- The word *drash* derives from the word *lidrosh*, which means to seek. *Drash* seeks a resolution of aspects of the verse beyond that which the *pshat* requires. It pays attention to details which do not present an impediment to a straightforward understanding, but which, upon closer inspection, require resolution nonetheless.

Or, to put it slightly differently: the difference between *pshat* and *drash* is that *pshat analyzes* the verse, while *drash scrutinizes* it.

An example of these two approaches is in our verse. As Tosafos point out, on a *pshat* level, the verse does not necessarily indicate that Yaakov took more than one stone. With this observation, Tosafos do not mean to negate the Gemara's contradiction; they purely mean to establish that it is a product not of *pshat*, but of *drash*. What does this mean? Rabbeinu Eliyahu Mizrachi explains that the

Gemara is bothered by the Torah mentioning that what Yaakov took was “from the stones of the place.” If indeed, Yaakov only took one of those stones, why is this detail mentioned? Would we have thought that he took it from somewhere else? The verse should have stated simply, “וַיִּקַּח אֶבֶן – he took a stone”! This would be similar to that which we find in the verse at the end of Parshas Beshalach⁵ describing the war with Amalek, which states that, when Moshe’s arms began to tire, “וַיִּקְחוּ אֶבֶן” they took a stone from nearby for him to sit on. If our verse does add that there were stones there, it is to indicate that he took a number of them; but if so, then this leads to a contradiction with the later verse which refers only to one stone. This is a classic *drash* approach to the words of the Torah, and indeed, it is the approach taken throughout the Talmud, not only in the halachic sections of the Torah, but also in its narrative sections.

And so, Tosafos’ comment has led us to a deeper appreciation of the Gemara’s discussion. However, it now leads us to a new question: How did a discussion of this nature gain entry into Rashi’s commentary on the Torah?

The Goal of Rashi’s Commentary on the Torah

The background to this question is best presented by referring to the words of Rashi himself⁶ describing the purpose of his commentary:

ואני לא באתי אלא לפשוטו של מקראת ולאגדה המיישבת את הפשט

I have come only to address the pshat of the verse, and to Aggados which resolve the pshat.

In other words, Rashi’s relationship with *pshat* and *drash* in his commentary depends on whether we are dealing with questions or answers:

- In terms of the **answers** he gives, Rashi is prepared to use both *pshat* (ideally) and *drash* (if need be).
- However, in terms of the **questions** that he addresses, Rashi will only deal with issues that arise in *pshat*.

⁵ Shemos 17:12.

⁶ Bereishis 3:8, s.v. *vayishmeu*.

In light of this, we ask: Given that the Gemara's discussion is generated by a *drash* question, not a *pshat* one, why does Rashi give it entry in his commentary?

A Meeting of Methods

To understand Rashi's position, we need to read his words from the beginning. By "the beginning" we refer, not to Rashi's own opening words, but to the part of the verse which he quotes as the headline for his comment. As we noted, the Gemara perceives a contradiction based on the tension between the plural "מֵאֲבָנֵי" and the singular "אֶבֶן". Let us consider: Which of these two terms does Rashi quote as the headline for his comment?

The answer is: Neither of them.

Rashi's headline for his comment is the phrase in our verse "וַיִּשֶׂם מֵרֹאשְׁתּוֹ" – and he placed (them) about his head." In so doing, Rashi indicates that the notion that Yaakov initially took numerous stones emerges from reading this phrase *on a pshat level!* How so?

Firstly, the word "מֵרֹאשְׁתּוֹ" is written in the plural. Certain commentators of Rashi⁷ put the question somewhat bluntly: How many heads does Yaakov have? Given that he has only one, why is the plural used? It is clearly to indicate that he placed whatever he took at *different sides* of his head. If this is so, then it means he took more than one stone.

Even if we take a milder approach and say that the plural form doesn't necessarily denote different sides of his head, but simply means "by his head,"⁸ this alone will lead us to the conclusion that he took numerous stones. Presumably, whatever he put by his head was for protection, which would not be afforded to him by one stone, but rather, by numerous stones surrounding his head.⁹

This is a rare situation, indeed! While we generally do not expect that an issue raised by *drash* will be the same as one raised by *pshat*, in our case it is; with the difference being that whereas for the Gemara a *drash* flag was raised as soon as we encounter the phrase "מֵאֲבָנֵי הַמָּקוֹם," Rashi notes that a *pshat* flag will in any

⁷ See Levush Ha'Orah and Toafos Re'em.

⁸ See Shmuel I, 26:7 where it describes Shaul's sword as being embedded in the ground "מֵרֹאשְׁתּוֹ".

⁹ Nachalas Yaakov on Rashi.

case be raised very soon after when we meet the phrase “וַיִּשָׂם מִרְאֵשֶׁתֵּינוּ.” And so, our verse emerges as a setting for the coming together, not only of the different stones into one stone, but also of the two worlds of *pshat* and *drash* into one discussion.