

This Verse Says Nothing But “Dorsheini”

RABBI PINCHAS GELB



Even among works of genius, Rashi’s commentary on the Torah stands out. The elevated spirit of Rashi’s commentary reflects his careful attention to the details in the Torah’s words. Through his paraphrase of *midrash*, Rashi draws out subtleties from the text, context and subtext of the verses that, without his brief comments, would have remained completely unperceived, hiding in plain sight.

Indeed, Rashi has a dual goal in his Torah commentary, as he states in his explanation of *Bereishis* 3:8: “[In writing this commentary,] I have come only for the simple meaning of Scripture and for *aggada* that resolves the words of Scripture with each word stated in its proper place and with its correct meaning.” Thus, Rashi’s first purpose is to explain the meaning (*peshat*) of difficult words and phrases, and his second goal is to draw upon the totality of *aggada* in order to resolve lacuna in the verses.¹ In this way, he integrates his keen insights regarding the text and context of the verses with his mastery over the entire corpus of *midrash* and *gemara* – which appears to have been exceptionally well-ordered in his mind – to reach conclusions based on pronounced nuances in the Torah’s language.

Rashi generally does not explain his methodology. But, through his comment on the first words in the Torah, “*Bereishis bara*” (Gen. 1:1), he gives a glimpse into his reasoning and also provides an important statement of purpose for his Torah commentary as a whole. In this sense, Rashi’s comment on the Torah’s introductory phrase serves as an illustrative example of the text-focused approach of his commentary.

¹ In his comment to *Shemos* 23:2, Rashi amends this to include *midrashei halacha*.

Rabbi Pinchas Gelb is a lawyer in Los Angeles.
He has been a member of Adas Torah since 2005.

Rashi's Explanation to the Torah's First Two Words

Rashi states that the Torah's first phrase cries out for interpretation: "*Ein ha-mikra hazeh omer ela dorsheini*," "This verse says nothing but 'Expound me!'" Yet, it is unclear what about the Torah's first two words is so startling.

Rashi explains. Had the verse meant to convey just the sequence of Creation, it would have started with the word "*barishona*," instead of "*bereishis*."² The term "*barishona*" implies numerical ordering, while the term "*bereishis*" is always used as the beginning of something else in connection with some bigger goal or broader purpose, and should be translated as "in the beginning of ..."

Rashi cites three examples. The verse in Yermiyahu 26:1 states: "*bereishis mamlechet Yehoyakim*," "during the beginning of the reign of Yehoyakim." The verse in Bereishis 10:10 states: "*va-tehi reishis mamlachto ... be-eretz Shin'ar*," "the beginning of [Nimrod's] kingdom was ... in the land of *Shin'ar*." The verse in Devarim 18:4 states: "*reishis degancha ... titen lo*," "the beginning of your grain ... you shall give to [the *kohen*]."

Rashi similarly explains the Torah's first verse to mean "In the beginning of, Hashem created the heavens and the earth" and then asks the self-evident question: the beginning of what?

Indeed, the word "*bereishis*" suggests that there is some underlying purpose in the act of Creation, but the verse does not seem to identify Creation's broader significance. The context of the verse, likewise, provides no clue as to the implicit meaning that the phrase "*bereishis bara*" conveys. This is the Torah's first verse. There is nothing prior. Of particular significance considering the Torah's use of the word "*bereishis*" instead of "*barishona*," there is no introductory statement of purpose. The first two words function as if the reader knows the purpose of Creation. But these words appear in a contextual vacuum. There is nothing leading up to them.

Rashi therefore explains that, while "*bereishis bara*" can be understood to mean "in the beginning of creating," which is the *peshat* explanation, the *midrash* concomitantly seizes upon the verse's use of the word "*bereishis*," instead of "*barishona*," to conclude that the verse also can mean that the world was created "for the sake of reishis." The prefix "*be-*" shows relationship. It means not only "in" or "with," but also "for the sake

² Rashi does not base his question on the fact that the word "*bereishis*" is unnecessary and the verse could have started simply with "*bara Elokim ...*," "Hashem created ...," omitting the word "*bereishis*" entirely. Rashi assumes that there is a textual need for the verse's first word. But he seizes upon the connotation of the term "*bereishis*," as opposed to "*barishona*," to provide the basis for his question, as well as for his conclusion.

of.” Elsewhere in Tanach, the term “*reishis*” refers to Torah (which *Mishlei* 8:22 calls “*reishis darko*,” “the beginning of His way”) and to the Jewish people who received the Torah (which *Yirmiyahu* 2:3 calls “*reishis tevuaso*,” “the beginning of His crop”).

Hence, through the words “*bereishis bara*,” Rashi finds expression of an overarching purpose in Creation: namely, the Torah and the Jewish people who accepted the Torah. Indeed, the implication of Rashi starting his commentary with this specific insight³ is that his Torah commentary – itself – possesses a motive force that extends back to the primordial purpose inherent in Hashem’s first act of Creation.

Rashi’s Choice of This *Midrash*

Rashi is a textualist. His central point of reference is the Torah’s language. To Rashi, the question of the purpose of Creation is not a philosophical conundrum. Rather, it is a textual problem inherent in the Torah’s choice of words. This is further borne out by noting the *midrashim* that Rashi, in his interpretation of the Torah’s introductory phrase, chooses not to cite.

For instance, as opposed to Rashi, Ramban cites *Midrash Rabba* 1:4 that the term “*reishis*” in this verse also refers to (i) *challa* which *Bamidbar* 15:20 calls “*reishis arisoseichem*,” “the beginning of your dough,” (ii) *ma’asros* which *Devarim* 18:4 calls “*reishis degancha*,” “the beginning of your grain,” (iii) *bikkurim* which *Shemos* 23:19 calls “*reishis bikkurei admascha*,” “the beginning of the first-ripening produce of your land,” and even (iv) Moshe Rabbeinu, because *Devarim* 33:21 praises the tribe of Gad for having requested the area of land where Moshe was buried and uses the phrase to describe Moshe: “*vayar reishis lo, ki sham chelkas mehokek safun*,” “he [the tribe of Gad] chose the beginning portion for himself, for that is where the lawgiver’s plot is hidden.”

Rashi’s interpretation does not cite these alternate ways of explaining the verse’s use of the word “*bereishis*” instead of “*barishona*.” His choice of the *midrashic* meaning of “*reishis*” most closely reflects the text because, of all the possibilities that the *midrash* presents, only the Torah and the Jewish people are referenced as the subject of the respective verses and are specifically called “*reishis*” as a title, and not simply to reference the first item in an ordered sequence.

The verses cited to suggest that the term “*reishis*” refers to *challa*, *ma’asros* and *bikkurim* do not actually use the term “*reishis*” as a subject. In each of these, the

³ Rabbi Mordechai Breuer points out that this second Rashi, interpreting the Torah’s initial phrase, is actually Rashi’s first comment to the language of any verse. Rashi’s prior comment of the Torah does not interpret any specific word or phrase. Rather, it functions as an introduction to the Torah as a whole.

term is used to reference the “beginning of” dough, grain and produce, rather than, itself, being called “*reishis*.” And, concerning the fourth alternative that it might refer to Moshe, the verse’s phrase “*vayar reishis lo*” potentially refers to the land that was conquered first, rather than to Moshe (who, instead, is referenced in the second half of the verse as the “lawgiver”), as Rashi expressly states in his interpretation of that verse.

Consistent with his comment to *Bereishis* 3:8 about his reference to *midrash* in his Torah commentary, Rashi uses the “*aggada* that resolves the words of Scripture with each word stated in its proper place and with its correct meaning.” Here, the other *midrashic* possibilities about the meaning of “*reishis*” actually use the term as part of a prepositional phrase rather than as a subject, which likely is why Rashi does not cite them in his explanation to the verse.

Hence, Rashi chooses the *midrashic* interpretation that, of the choices, most closely fits the text. The structure of the first two words in the Torah implies that there is a higher-level meaning to the text; the choice of the word “*bereishis*” as opposed to “*barishona*” conveys that there is purposiveness to Creation. Rashi then draws upon the *midrash* which explains that the term “*reishis*” elsewhere in *Tanach* is used as a subject, and not just as the ordering of a sequence, to specifically reference the Torah and the Jewish people.⁴

In so doing, Rashi considers the *Tanach* as a whole. He leaves aside the *midrashic* interpretations that do not fit the grammar of the text as well, even when they are based on other verses in the Torah, preferring instead to cite the interpretations grounded in the language found in *Mishlei* 8:22 and *Yirmiyahu* 2:3, which fit more exactly into the verse that he is interpreting.

Rashi’s Phrase

In his comment to this first verse of the Torah, Rashi uses a striking phrase: “*Ein ha-mikra ha-zeh omer ela dorsheini*,” “This verse says nothing but ‘expound me!’” This phrase has become a popular idiom in modern Hebrew to express astonishment about

4 This also, incidentally, provides some measure of comfort to *Knesses Yisrael* because, by linking the verse at the beginning of *Yirmiyahu* (“*Kodesh Yisrael laHashem, reishis tevuaso*”) to this first verse in this Torah (“*Bereishis bara Elokim*”), Rashi’s interpretation conveys that, notwithstanding the embattlement prophesied by *Yirmiyahu*, the significance of *Yisrael* pre-dates Creation and, accordingly, will always persist. Indeed, the earlier verse in *Yirmiyahu* 1:5 speaks about *Yirmiyahu* himself, but, based on Rashi’s interpretation of the first words of *Bereishis*, this earlier verse equally could be speaking about *Yisrael*: “When I had not yet formed you in the belly, I [already] recognized you; and when you had not yet come forth from the womb, I sanctified you; a *navi* to the nations have I made you.”

all aspects of life. However, in the context of Rashi's commentary on the Torah, this phrase seems unnecessary and redundant. What exactly does the word "*dorsheini*" mean? And why is the verse's proclamation, of all things, "*dorsheini*"?

One meaning of the word "*dorsheini*" is to investigate something closely in order to discern the truth. The *mishna* in *Sanhedrin* 32a uses the term "*derisha v'chakira*" as sharp investigation of a testifying witness. In this sense, the phrase is straightforward. "*Ein ha-mikra ha-zeh omer ela dorsheini*" means that the syntax of the verse invites close analysis.

Yet, "*dorsheini*" can also mean to search for someone and, in particular, to seek Hashem. For example, *Amos* 5:4 states: "*Ki cho amar Hashem le-veis Yisrael, dirshuni vichyu*," "For thus said Hashem to the House of Israel, seek Me and live." *Tehillim* 24:6 renders this more personally: "*Zeh dor doreshav, mevakshei Panecha, Yaakov selah*," "This is a generation of those who seek Him out, [the descendents of] Jacob who seek Your presence, Selah!" Likewise, *Tehillim* 34:5 states: "*Darashti es Hashem ve-anani, u-mikol megurosai hitzilani*," "I sought out Hashem and He answered me, and from all of my fears he delivered me." Similarly, *Yeshayahu* 55:6 states: "*Dirshu Hashem behimatzo kerahu bihyoso karov*," "Seek Hashem when He can be found; call upon Him when He is near."

This sometimes can be an indirect connection through a prophet or a sage. For instance, *Bereishis* 25:22 states: "*Va-yisrotzetzu ha-banim be-kirba va-tomer im kein lama zeh anochi – va-teleich lidrosh es Hashem*," "The children agitated within her and she said, 'If so, why am I thus?' – and she went to inquire of Hashem." Further, *Shemos* 18:15 states: "*Va-yomer Moshe le-chosno ki yavo eilai ha'am lidrosh Elokim*," "Moshe said to his father-in-law, 'Because the people come to me to seek God.'"

Thus, in addition to meaning examination and analysis, the term "*lidrosh*" also means to seek Hashem. When Rashi uses the phrase "*ein ha-mikra ha-zeh omer ela dorsheini*," he also could be conveying the imperative to seek out Hashem through subtleties in the Torah's words. The personification conveyed by the phrase "*dorsheini*," "expound me," expresses that the object of this *derisha* (or *derash*) is not simply to analyze but also to aspire toward an engaged, enduring relationship with the singular voice of the Torah, and ultimately with Hashem.

This is similar to the insight of HaRav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik *zt"l* regarding the "personality" of the *gemara*, which he described on April 1, 1973, when speaking about the custom to say the *hadran* upon completing a Tractate:

The Torah should be seen not just as a book, but as a living personality, a queen like the Shabbat Malketa, with whom one can establish an I-thou

relationship. In many places the Torah is referred to as a personality, as for example: "The Torah said before the Holy One Blessed Be He." The study of Torah should be a dialogue, not a monologue... When you apprehend the Torah as a personality, not just as a book, it infiltrates your emotional as well as your intellectual life. An am ha'aretz cannot have this experience, and one cannot be lamdan without it. ... No matter how much involved one is in other matters, there should always be an awareness of the appreciation of Torah as the highest value. For this reason, when we make a siyum we say hadran alakh—we still return to you. ... "Daatan alakh"—in our latent awareness we are still committed to you. "V'daatak alan"—we hope you won't forget us. We hope that you, the tractate, will also keep us in mind, and if we view the Torah as a friend, the Torah will indeed be able to watch over us.

To seek out the Torah means to understand the tenor conveyed by the context and subtext of the Torah's verses. This is what Rashi means when he says in *Bereishis* 3:8 that he only comes for the "simple meaning of Scripture and for *aggada* that resolves the words of Scripture with each word stated in its proper place," and uses the phrase "*davar davur al ofanav*," which is actually a quote from *Mishlei* 25:11. There, Rashi explains that the word "*al ofanav*" means that an interpretation is correct. He cites an example from *Tehillim* 88:16 where the verse states "*eimecha afuna*" (which is similar to the word "*ofanav*"), which Rashi explains to mean that it is "*meyusheves u-meveses... be-libi*," that it sits well internally.⁵

In this sense, Rashi is saying that the *midrashim* which he quotes are the ones that, not only fit well with the text, but also resonate as correct expressions of its context and subtext. Indeed, Rashi's commentary centralizes fidelity to the Torah's language. He paraphrases *midrash* to explain gaps and incongruities in the verses based on his keen sensitivity to their nuance. His own sensitivity to the flow and undercurrents of the text gives his Torah commentary stature and lift, as well as rooted insight into the depth within the Torah's words, thereby responding vigorously to the inviting charge of the Torah's first verse which declares "*dorsheini*."

⁵ Rashi uses almost the same formulation in his comment to *Mishlei* 25:11, that it is "*meveses u-meyusheves be-kirbi*."

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Adas Torah

9040 West Pico Boulevard
Los Angeles, CA 90035
www.adastorah.org
adastorah@earthlink.net
(310) 228-0963

Rabbi Dovid Revah, *Rav and Mara D'Asra*
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