



Of Singers, Sentries, and Schleppers

Some weeks I start preparing this dvar Torah on Sunday, with every intention of sending it out by Tuesday or Wednesday. I might even know my basic topic or text by Sunday night. The problem is that Torah often expands to fill the time available, and so what seems to be a containable question ends up requiring encyclopedic research, and organizing the material so as to make the result comprehensible becomes a major challenge.

So here it is Wednesday night, and I've just realized that the minor textual issue I set out to understand could support several weeks at least of a high-level shiur. But it occurred to me that a description of how that happened might itself be of interest, and incidentally offer some chance of sending this out on Thursday, with its unfinishedness actually helping make the point.

I was first attracted by Rashi's commentary to Bamidbar 8:23-26.

		במדבר פרק ח:כג-כו
		וידבר ה' אל משה לאמר:
		זאת אשר ללויים
		מבן חמש ועשרים שנה ומעלה
		ומבן חמשים שנה
		ושרת את אחיו באהל מועד
		ככה תעשה ללויים
בעבדת אהל מועד:	יבוא לצבא צבא	
ולא יעבד עוד:	ישוב מצבא העבדה	
ועבדה לא יעבד	לשמר משמרת	
	במשמרתם: פ	

Hashem spoke to Mosheh, saying:

This is for the Levites

From age twenty five years and above	he will come to enroll in the roll	in the work of Ohel Moed
From age fifty years	he will return from the work roll	and he will not work further.
He will serve <i>et</i> his brothers in Ohel Moed	to be <i>shomer</i> the <i>mishmeret</i>	but work, he will not work
Thus you must do for the Levites	in their <i>mishmarot</i> .	

רש"י

"מבן חמש ועשרים" –

ובמקום אחר אומר (במדבר ד, ג) "מבן שלשים שנה!"?

הא כיצד?

מבן כ"ה - בא ללמוד הלכות עבודה, ולומד חמש שנים, ובן שלשים עובד.

מכאן לתלמיד שלא ראה סימן יפה במשנתו בחמש שנים, ששוב אינו רואה:

"ולא יעבוד עוד" –

עבודת משא בכתף, אבל חוזר הוא לנעילת שערים ולשיר ולטעון עגלות,

וזהו **"ושרת את אחיו" –**

עם אחוהו, כתרגומו:

"לשמר משמרת" - לחנות סביב לאהל, ולהקים ולהוריד בשעת המסעות:

“from age twenty five years” – but elsewhere (Bamidbar 4) it says “from age thirty years”?!

How can this contradiction be resolved?

From age 25 – he comes to learn the *halakhot* of the work, and he learns for five years, and at age 30 he works.

Learn from here that any student

“and he will not work further” – the work of carrying on the shoulder, but he does return to locking the gates and to music and to load the wagons,

and this is the meaning of “and he will serve *et* his brothers” – *with* his brothers, as translated by Onkelos.

From here (we learn) that a student who has not seen signs of success in his study for five years, will never do so.

“to be *shomer* the *mishmeret*” – to encamp around the Tent, and to construct and take down in the time of the travels”.

Why, I wondered, were Onkelos and Rashi driven to translate *et* here as “with”, rather than adopting the more common usage of *et* the direct object marker? In other words, why were they unwilling to say that superannuated Levites became assistants? This is in fact the position taken by among others Machzor Vitri and Bartenurah. They also anticipate the objection that “assistsanceship” is demeaning and set us an unfortunate generational dynamic by making the elderly Levites consultants, purveyors of good advice, rather than coffee-fetchers.

I also wondered why Rashi felt compelled to offer three examples of the work the Levite could do “with his brothers”, especially as it quickly became clear to me that his inclusion of “music” among the permitted activities was highly controversial.

(Two achronological notes:

1. On Wednesday, I read Dr. Martin Lockshin’s LookJed review of the English translation of Avraham Grossman’s Rashi. Dr. Lockshin writes that

“Leibowitz taught generations of students that Rashi was an exegete and not an educator and that the proper focus when studying Rashi’s commentary is not on the man, Rashi, but on the biblical text. Grossman gently, respectfully, and effectively refutes Leibowitz’s approach, proving that Rashi was also a pedagogue who pursued various educational agendas beyond solving difficulties in the biblical text. For example, four times in his commentary to Deuteronomy (6:6, 11:13, 26:16, and 27:9), Rashi made the same point--that the words of the Torah should be new in your eyes every day, as if you were only receiving the Torah today. In none of these four passages does the text demand such an explanation and in none does any insurmountable textual difficulty “require” Rashi to resort to midrash. Grossman concludes, “Because of his powerful desire to teach people and to instill a particular idea into their hearts, Rashi repeated the same idea four times in one book. This is not exegesis so much as preaching” (p. 213)”

I confess that I fail to follow the argument – in each of the four verses, Rashi is explaining the apparently unnecessary assertion that the verse is being said היום=today – when else? Note that in 27:9 Rashi speaks of the “covenant” rather than “mitzvot” being new, so his comment is

context-sensitive. It is interesting that Rashi is willing to understand the Torah as writing היום repeatedly in order to make the same point, but perhaps Rashi understands Devarim to be a sermon that Moshe Rabbeinu is preaching. Preaching is often eisegesis, but the interpretation of preaching is exegesis.

There is a broader point to be made. Grossman refers to these comments of Rashi as "resorting to Midrash", presumably as opposed to "interpreting the plain sense" or some equivalent formulation identified with "pshat". But even granting the distinction as-is, what makes these comments midrashic? I suspect the issue is this - according to Rashi, the literary purpose of "hayom" is to encourage *future readers of Torah* to experience its words as "live", rather than as history. But why is a claim that the Torah is written as a *document intended to be read for many years* against the plain sense? Such a claim does not require any metaphysical or theological claims - it would be a valid *reading* of any text which used "today" repeatedly, even if its author's expectation for its longterm survival turn out to be fundamentally mistaken. Perhaps the issue is more sharply that Rashi seems to understand "hayom" as *primarily* directed to future readers. But I do not find this compelling - the obligation to see the words of Torah as new begins the day after the words are said, and thus apply with equal force to the first readers. I think a stronger argument for Rashi-as-preacher might be made from Rashi's comment here that

"מכאן=From here (we learn) that a student who has not seen signs of success in his study for five years, will never do so."

The מכאן introduction suggests a moral derived from the story, in other words a point subsequent to interpretation rather than a point necessary for interpretation, and Rashi uses this form around 200 times in his commentary on the Torah. This would not necessarily challenge Nechamah z"l's fundamental assertion, as we could claim that comments introduced by מכאן are explicitly marked as digressions from exegesis into preaching.

However, I'm not convinced even that concession is necessary. The מכאן here explains why the Torah institutes a five-year apprenticeship for the Levites – it seeks to give even the slowest learner a chance to pass. I suspect the same type of explanation will cover the other מכאן as well.

Here I am tempted to leave technical exegesis behind myself, and ask: Why is it important for us to treat the Torah and covenant as if they were first given today? Perhaps it is simply an issue of enthusiasm, which seems to be the import of Rashi to Devarim 6:6. But perhaps there is also a substantive issue – that one should interpret the Torah as if it were given today, and not necessarily on the basis of what it would have meant to the original readers. This would need to be qualified so as to allow for masoret, precedent, etc., but deserves consideration.

2. On Wednesday night, I realized that Rashi translates **"to be shomer the mishmeret"** – to encamp around the Tent, and to construct and take down in the time of the travels". Why does he need two examples here as well? Why was at least the second example not included in the previous verse's statement that returns to serve *with* his brothers?)

Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik often reported a family tradition that “we were from the gatekeeping Levites, not the musical Levites”. The Rav’s comment was a humorous deprecation of his singing voice, but the joke had a halakhic core – these Levite roles are apportioned by family, and according to Abbayay on Arakhin 13b “We rule that a musician who gatekeeps, or a gatekeeper who musics – deserves death”.

Abbayay’s position may be rejected by the Talmud¹ on the basis of a Tannaitic story in which one Levite rabbi refuses the help of another in closing the Temple doors on the grounds that the would-be assistant is from a family assigned to music, but even if so, the argument is only about the penalty – the assignment of roles gains universal assent. However, Rashi admits ignorance as to the Biblical source of a non-capital prohibition², and everyone agrees that assisting, as opposed to doing the nonassigned work solo, is only a rabbinic prohibition.

All this seems to be perfectly conventional halakhic argumentation and content. The problem is that Bamidbar 4 assigns tasks to the Levite families in precise and respective detail, and yet makes no mention of either gatekeeping or musicing! Rather, we are informed that the Kehati Family carries the utensils of the Mishkan, the Merari Family carries the wood and metal structural elements, and the Gershuni family carries the fabric structural elements.

The gatekeeping and musicing roles first appear explicitly in 1Devrei haYamim 23, where David haMelekh assigns them while explicitly noting that the Levites original Mishkan-related tasks were obsolete. The clear implication is that these are replacement roles which previously had either been done in the course of other assigned roles, or not done at all.

I suggest that the Talmud – and perhaps especially Abbayay, who explicitly derives his capital ruling from a verse that he understands as generically forbidding one Levite to fill the role assigned to another – understood that all Levites were originally eligible to sing or play music, and chosen by merit for that role without regard to family origin. Once the Temple was built, however, *and the tasks of musicing and gatekeeping were assigned by family*, it became a Biblical violation to work in another family’s field.

R. Chaim Paltiel asks: How can Rashi declare that the Levites return to *both* musicmaking and gateclosing? R. Paltiel answers that Rashi may mean that they return to whichever had been their role previously. However, on my reading we can answer that Rashi means that they returned to musicmaking before King David assigned that role by family.

Now it is 3:30 am Thursday, and I haven’t mentioned that the *Maaseh Nisim*, as understood by R. Yerucham Fishel Perla (I haven’t yet seen it inside”, apparently holds that superannuation applied only during the era was being carried; that the Sifrei and Sifrei Zuta apparently differ with each other and with Rashi as to which labors the Levites could return to after 50, but that Sifrei Zuta agrees with Rashi that they could make music; and my tentative theory that this issue depends on the translation of *et*;

¹ Maimonides may see the rejection as spurious.

² Rabbeinu Menachem in Tosafot proposes a derivation

how the halakhic positions of Ramban in his comments to Maimonides' Sefer HaMitzvot may or may not relate to his exegetical dispute with Rashi here; the fascinating kabbalistic/psychological explanation given by Sefat Emet for the age limit, and the difficulty understanding the Tanchuma at the heart of Sefat Emet; or the Zohar's take on this whole passage. Perhaps next year.

Shabbat shalom

Aryeh Klapper