

בראשית פרק לה

(יג) וַיַּעַל מֵעַל יְאֹקֵב לֵה יִבְנֶה מִקוֹמָהּ שֶׁ הָיָה בְּרָא תוֹ:
(יד) וַיִּצְבֵּיעַ קֵבַע צִבְעֵהּ מִקוֹמָהּ שֶׁ הָיָה בְּרָא תוֹ אֲבֹתָא בְּוִיסָהּ וְלֵיהּ נִסְרָה וַיִּצְעֵק לִיתָשׁ מִן:
(טו) קָרָה אֵיעָ קְבֵא תִשְׁ הָיָה מִן קוֹמָהּ שֶׁ הָיָה בְּרָא תוֹשׁ מֵהָיָה יִם בֵּיתָא לֵה:

רש"י בראשית פרק לה:יג

"במקום אשר דבר אתו" - איני יודע מה מלמדנו:

Genesis 35:13-15

G-d arose from upon him in the place where He had spoken with him.

Yaakov set upright an upright in the place where He had spoken with him; he libated a libation on it, and he poured oil on it.

Yaakov called the name of the place where He had spoken with him there – He being G-d – Beit El.

Rashi to Genesis 35:13

"In the place where He had spoken with him" – I do not know what this teaches us.

An old yeshivish joke tells of a student who was completely paralyzed by a Talmudic passage that seemed to him to face unresolvable difficulties. His teacher tells him to study a series of apparently unrelated Tosafot. On further investigation, it turns out that each of those Tosafot immediately follows a Tosafot that ends with an unresolved question. The moral is drawn: If Tosafot could go on despite having unresolved questions, so can you.

Rashi's comment here seems intended to make the same point. "I don't know what this teaches us" – why not simply be silent? No – Rash conveys to us that he does not understand everything either, but incomplete understanding of one verse does not preclude someone from making valuable contributions to the understanding of other verses.

All very well and good. But what I find fascinating is that almost every subsequent traditional commentator, from medieval through modern, feels compelled to resolve Rashi's difficulty.

Most of the commentators the assertion of Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish, cited in many midrashic collections, that "G-d arose from upon him" implies that "The Patriarchs served as the Chariot", meaning that the phrase "arose from upon him" should be understood literally/metaphorically rather than idiomatically. They then explain why this "chariotness" has a particular connection to place. Mention should also be made of the Gaon RYZ Soloveitchik's creative suggestion that G-d must have been doing a mitzvah that required His coming kebeyakhol to a place, such as comforting a mourner (Yaakov's mother Rivkah is midrashically presumed to have died at this point), or visiting the ill (as He did after Avraham's circumcision).

I suggest that many if not all of these solutions miss the heart of Rashi's question, which is that the phrase "the place where He has spoken with him" shows up here in *three consecutive verses*, and appears essential in none of them.

But my larger question is methodological – why is it obvious that we should blithely continue to offer interpretations of one verse when we are fully aware that we have incompletely understood a

different verse? Why don't we conclude instead that the premises of our interpretational method are possibly false?

The Talmud in various places records the following narrative beraita:

תלמוד בבלי מסכת פסחים דף כב עמוד ב
שמעון העמסוני - ואמרי לה: נחמיה העמסוני - היה דורש כל "את"ים שבתורה.
כיון שהגיע ל'את ה' אלהיך תירא' –
פירש: אמרו לו תלמידיו: רבי, כל אתים שדרשת מה תהא עליהן?
אמר להם: כשם שקבלתי שכר על הדרישה, כך אני מקבל שכר על הפרישה.
עד שבא רבי עקיבא ודרש: את ה' אלהיך תירא - לרבות תלמידי חכמים.

Bavli Pesachim 22b

Shim'on the Amsuni – Some say: Nechemya the Amsuni – would derive meaning from each incidence of “et” in the Torah. When he reached the verse “*et* Hashem your G-d you must revere”, his students asked: “Rebbe, all the *ets* that you previously derived meaning from, what will occur to them?” He said to them: “Just as I received reward for interpreting, so too I will receive reward for separating myself”.

Until Rabbi Akiva came along and interpreted: “*Et* Hashem Your G-d you must revere” – this comes to include Torah scholars.

The yeshivish joke reading of this beraita is that Rabbi Akiva thought the Torah included an extra word to emphasize that even Torah scholars must fear G-d. In context, however, Rabbi Akiva clearly means that everyone must revere Torah scholars as part of their reverence of G-d. (In the Yerushalmi (Berakhot 9:5 and elsewhere) he states that one must revere “Him and His Torah”).

My interest this week, however, is the position of Shim'on (or Nechemyah) Amsuni until Rabbi Akiva came along. At some point he realized that his general reading methodology yielded the result that one must revere something else in the same way as one reveres G-d, and he finds this theologically impossible. Perhaps he even finds it halakhically impossible, as per Talmud (Sukkah 45b and elsewhere), which prohibits any liturgical statement that refers to both G-d and something else – even His altar – under the rubric of Shemot 22:19 “בלתי לה לבדו”. So he is silent. The question is whether his statement “I will receive reward for separating myself (from interpreting)” means only that he avoided saying anything about this verse, or rather broadly that he refused to repeat any of his previous interpretations of את, גם, and אך until Rabbi Akiva had resolved this last one.

One more not-quite-joke, this time from graduate school. A great Biblical scholar developed the theory that Biblical poetry was written syllabically, and set out to prove it. Having spent much of his life demonstrating that the text ‘scanned’ properly, he finally found one verse that simply would not fit, and committed suicide after realizing that his theory was wrong, and thus all his work wasted.

Shim'on Ha'amsuni, I suggest, would have seen the suicide as arrogant rather than humble. Human interpretation of G-d's work is always reaching a little beyond ourselves, and we should be suspicious of any theory that successfully explains everything – more likely we are imposing our own vision on the text.

But what do we do when our theory's inevitable failure is starkly exposed? Most commentators assume that we withdraw our theory, that we cannot continue teaching until we can plausibly pretend that we can explain everything. They assume that Shim'on Ha'amsuni simply refused to teach until

Rabbi Akiva came up with the answer. Thus they rarely if ever include comments pointing out the weaknesses of their approach.

Rashi thought otherwise. Thus Rashi writes “I do not know what this teaches us”, and goes on writing. The humility of this comment lies not only, or even primarily, in his confession that he does not understand this verse, but rather in the implicit acknowledgement that this set of verses casts a shadow on his entire project. If we can’t explain why this apparently extraneous phrase occurs in three consecutive verses, how can we have confidence in a methodology that requires the assumption that there are no extra words in the text?

Rashi nonetheless goes on teaching what he thinks is true. But he does so having giftwrapped for his readers the evidence for overruling or even disregarding him. It is not surprising that very few of his successors were willing to do the same.

Epigrammatically – in order for one to receive the ultimate reward for one’s teaching – one’s *derishah* – one must also be willing to receive reward for acknowledging the inevitable limits and weaknesses of one’s understanding – one’s *perishah*.

Shabbat shalom!
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