



# Deciphering Rashi

BY AVIGDOR BONCHEK

**A**s a Torah commentator, Rashi is unequalled, unquestioned—and underestimated. All of us have studied Rashi's commentary, but do we truly grasp the extent of his complexity?

Rabbeinu Tam, Rashi's grandson, and the most famous of the Ba'alei Tosafot, wrote:

*As far as my grandfather's commentary to the Talmud is concerned, I could have composed such a commentary as well. But as regards to his commentary to Chumash is concerned, no one else could have written such a commentary!*

Without Rashi's commentary, the Talmud would be a closed, unintelligible book. Rashi's Torah commentary,

on the other hand, appears to be a compilation of folksy midrashim and grammar lessons. Where is the profundity that so impressed his grandson?

To illustrate Rashi's profoundly nuanced reading of the Torah text, in this article I will focus on just one type of Rashi-comment—his explanation of seemingly easy, familiar words. Indeed, why does Rashi bother to translate words that the student is already familiar with?

To get the most out of the following examples, I would advise having a *Chumash* with Rashi on hand.

**Example 1:** In the Ha'azinu song (Devarim 32:31), we read:

“For not as our Rock is their rock. And our enemies sit in judgment.”

Rashi comments:

*Had the enemies of Israel thought a bit, they would have understood that their enormous victory over Israel is not due to their gods being victorious, but rather to the fact that Hashem gave Israel*

*over to them.*

Then Rashi adds: “Every *tzur* in the Torah means rock.”

Rashi's final comment is strange since the word *tzur* appears previously in the Torah. In fact, it is mentioned four times in Ha'azinu prior to this verse. Why does Rashi comment *here* about the meaning of the word?

*Tzur*, as Rashi states, means rock.

However, the word can easily be confused with *Yotzer*, which means Creator, as in *Yotzer ohr*. The confusion is compounded by the fact that every previous mention of *tzur* in Ha'azinu clearly *refers* to Hashem (who is as strong as a rock). However, were one to translate *tzur* in the previous verses as Creator, while technically incorrect, it would not affect the “plain meaning” of the text. Only in the verse under discussion is *tzur* used to refer both to Hashem and to foreign gods. Therefore, were one to translate *tzur* in verse 32:31 both times as Creator, he would be making a grave error since he

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is referring to a foreign god as a creator, which is blasphemous. Thus, Rashi defines the word *tzur* in this verse to prevent one from making a serious mistake.

**Example 2:** At the end of Shelach, which deals with the sin of the spies, Hashem tells Bnei Yisrael about the mitzvah of *tzitzit* (Bamidbar 15:39):

*It shall be for you for tzitzit, and you will see it and remember all the commandments of Hashem, and perform them; and you shall not spy after your heart and after your eyes, which cause you to go astray.*

On the words, “And you shall not spy after your heart,” Rashi states:

*This [word taturu] is similar to “from spying the land” (13:25). The heart and the eyes are the body’s spies, procuring sins for it. The eyes see, the heart desires, and the body commits the sin.*

Rashi is drawing our attention to the use of the word *taturu* in relation to *tzitzit*, the same word used in the story of the spies. He then goes on to explain the connection between the two sections of the *parashah*.

However, the word *latur* (to spy), or variations of it, appears eight different times in the story of the spies. Rashi focuses on only one of these instances: “from spying the land” (13:25). Why?

## *Why does Rashi find the need to translate words that the student is already familiar with?*

Moshe sent spies to Canaan in order to figure out the best way to conquer the land. But the spies became overwhelmed by the giants they saw and feared that Bnei Yisrael would never be able to defeat them. As a result, they returned with a defeatist and depressing report.

It is clear that at some point in their mission, the spies had a change of heart and began doubting God. Instead of trying to determine the best way to defeat the Canaanites, they succumbed to feelings of inadequacy and began feeling frightened. Once this occurred, the spying became counter-productive. The word *tur* is used precisely at the point that their spying turned sour. Right after the word appears, the spies complain (13:27, 28), “But the people are strong,” a statement signaling the beginning of their downfall.

Rashi draws a parallel between this point in the story of the spies and *parashat tzitzit*. He does so to illustrate that “spying” (going after one’s eyes), in and of itself, is not evil.

This idea is apparent when we compare two verses in *Tanach*. We read in Isaiah 40:26, “Lift up your *eyes heavenward* and see Who created these [the vast heavens].” Our eyes can inspire us to have faith in God. Yet in Devarim, the verse states (4:39), “Lest you raise your *eyes to the Heavens* and you see the sun, the moon and the stars ... and you be drawn astray and bow down to them and worship them....” Observing the heavens may lead either to Godly inspiration or to abandoning one’s faith in Hashem. It is not what we see that is crucial, but rather how we interpret that which we see.

Neither our eyes nor our hearts are evil “spies” unless they are diverted from their higher calling and are, instead, enlisted into the service of our transient, bodily desires (as Rashi says, “the *body’s* spies”). It is then that they cease to be helpful and become agents of destruction. Rashi thus chose to define the crucial word “spying” in the story of the spies at the point that the spies abandoned their holy mission, and succumbed to faithless fear.

Many similar examples of Rashi’s careful attention to subtleties of the text can be found throughout his Torah commentary. Unfortunately, we had to limit our choice to two such examples due to space constraints. With these examples, however, I have attempted to show that while Rashi strives to elucidate the simple meaning of the Torah (*peshuto shel mikrah*), deciphering his commentary is by no means a simple endeavor. For while Rashi is profoundly simple, he is also simply profound. **IA**