

Parashat Toldot 5771, 2010:

Understanding the Ultimate Role of the Jewish People

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Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Sarah bat Rachel, Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

Rabbeinu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (known as Rashi, 1040-1105) is indisputably the greatest Torah commentator in history. His words and ideas are deemed to be so significant that they are viewed as primary texts, rather than as secondary texts of Torah analysis. As such, every nuance of his language and every turn of a phrase found in his commentaries on both the Tanach (Hebrew Canon of Scripture) and the Talmud have been subjected to painstaking scrutiny and exploration. In a word, Torah understanding begins with Rashi.

It is fascinating to note that Rashi uses the phrase “*ein hamikra hazeh omare elah darshan*” (“Beyond a doubt this text declares ‘interpret me!’”), and its close variant, a mere two times in his entire *Commentary on the Torah*. In my estimation, this signals to us that there is something particularly important regarding the two verses about which this phrase is said and that, somehow and in some way, these verses are closely connected. The first instance appears in the very beginning of *Sefer Bereishit* (1:1) and the second in our *parasha* (Ibid. , 25:22). Let us now examine what Rashi says in both of these cases.

In reference to the creation of the world, Rashi teaches us:

Bereishit: Beyond a doubt this text says “interpret me,” just as our Sages of blessed memory did when they [interpreted and] declared that the world was created for the

Torah that is called “the beginning of His path” [*Sefer Mishle* 8:22] and on behalf of the Jewish people who are called “the first of His grain.” [*Sefer Yirmiyahu* 2:3]

In our *parasha*, we encounter a barren *Rivka Imeinu* (our mother Rivka). Following Yitzchak and Rivka’s heartfelt prayers, however, she miraculously became pregnant with twins. At this point the Torah tells us: “And the children struggled within her, and she said, ‘If [it be] so, why am I [like] this?’ And she went to inquire of the L-rd.” (This and the following Rashi translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) The phrase, “and the children struggled within her,” offers a particular exegetical challenge. This led Rashi to state:

struggled: Perforce, this verse calls for interpretation, for it does not explain what this struggling was all about, and [Scripture] wrote, “If it be so, why am I [like] this?” Our Rabbis (*Bereishit Rabbah* 63:6) interpreted it [the word *וַיִּתְרוּצְצוּ*] as an expression of running (*רוּצָה*). When she passed by the entrances of [the] Torah [academies] of Shem and Eber, Jacob would run and struggle to come out; when she passed the entrance of [a temple of] idolatry, Esau would run and struggle to come out. Another explanation: They were struggling with each other and quarreling about the inheritance of the two worlds (*Midrash Avkir*).

Allow me to explicate these two comments of Rashi in which he notes the underlying verses declared “interpret me.” In the first case, he suggests that “*Bereishit*” means “for the sake of” and “on behalf of.” That is, for the sake of the Torah and on behalf of the Jewish people. In the above-cited comment, he summarizes two possible explanations as to why Rivka’s unborn children were running within her. Yaakov and Eisav were running respectively, toward Torah or idol worship, or they were battling over “the inheritance of the two worlds.” The expression “two worlds” is classic rabbinic parlance referring to *olam hazeh* (this world) and *olam haba* (the world to come).

In light of the above, I believe we can see some clear connections between the first *pasuk* (verse) in the Torah and the verse that appears in this week’s *parasha*. The world, as

Rashi first notes, was created for the Torah. Even as an unborn baby, Yaakov somehow knew this and therefore “when she [Rivka] passed by the entrances of [the] Torah [academies] of Shem and Eber ... would run and struggle to come out.” In stark contrast, embryonic Eisav denied Hashem’s presence and hegemony – just as he would as an adult. Thus, “when she [Rivka] passed the entrance of [a temple of] idolatry, Esau would run and struggle to come out.” Torah, quite simply, was anathema to him and represented the polar opposite of his essence and being.

In the Torah’s first verse, Rashi’s second explanation for the term “*Bereishit*” is “on behalf of the Jewish people.” In other words, the world was created for the Jewish people. In my estimation, this was precisely the in-utero point of contention between Yaakov and Eisav. Even at this stage, Yaakov somehow knew and understood that the future of *klal Yisrael* (the Jewish people) would be realized through him and that Hashem’s master plan, begun at the moment of Creation, would ultimately be completed by the Jewish people. Thus, he fought for control of both *olam hazeh* and *olam haba* – in order to guarantee the ultimate fulfillment of Judaism’s eschatological vision and purpose. Beyond a doubt, Eisav hated Yaakov and everything for which he stood and fought. As Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai taught us: “It is a well-known and never to be changed rule that Eisav hates Yaakov.” (See Rashi’s comment to *Sefer Bereishit* 33:4) Therefore, even in the womb, Eisav fought with Yaakov regarding the future of mankind and the world.

Many Jews today are uncomfortable with the notion that the world was created for us. It seems to them that the entire concept is rife with arrogance and superiority. In truth, our chosen stature (*Am Hanivchar*) has nothing to do with either arrogance or superiority –

two characteristics that contravene the most fundamental ethical and moral values of the Torah. In point of fact, our chosen status means that we have been given a unique role to play in Hashem's master plan. This does not mean, however, that the other nations of the world are our inferiors. This thought was given powerful expression by the current Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, Rabbi Sir Jonathan Henry Sacks. He defined *Am Hanivchar* in the following manner: "Do not think that G-d choosing one people means He rejects every other people. Absolutely not! That was never our way. And that is why, again and again and again, G-d, the prophets say, is not our G-d only." (Public lecture: "Jewish Identity - The Concept of a Chosen People," May 8, 2001) Rather than an elitist rejection of the other nations of the world, Rav Sacks presents an entirely different approach to understanding our unique role in Hashem's grand plan for mankind. He maintains that our chosenness enables us to bring Hashem's message to the world: "... the Jewish story, in its unique particularity, is the human story in its universality. If we would have been everyone in general, we would never have been somebody in particular. And if we hadn't been somebody in particular, we would never have a message for humanity in general." (Ibid.) In other words, our chosenness allows us to spread G-d's message of hope and everlasting peace to the nations of the world. It does not, however, make us "better than" anyone else.

With G-d's help, may each of us be *zocheh* (merit) to recognize our role on the world historical stage and live up to the responsibilities and obligations that this entails. Then, hopefully, we will finally help to bring *Mashiach Tzidkeinu* (the one and only true Messiah) *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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http://home.mindspring.com/~rdbe/parashat_hashavuah/index.html .

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