

בס"ד

THE RASHI OF THE WEEK

Week of

Parshas Vo'eschanan

11 Menachem Av, 5786 – July 25, 2026

Compiled from the works of

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An Outline of the Rebbe's Explanation of Rashi Parshas Vo'eschanan

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Rashi in His Own Words

דברים ד', מ"א: אַז יבדיל מֹשֶׁה שְׁלֹשׁ עָרִים בְּעֵבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן מִזְרְחָה שֶׁמֶשׁ:

רש"י ד"ה אַז יבדיל: נתן לב להיות חרד לדבר שיבדילם. ואף על פי שאינן קולטות עד שיבדלו אותן שבארץ כנען, אמר

משה מצוה שאפשר לקיימה אקיימנה:

Devorim 4:41: Then Moshe decided to separate three cities on the side of the Jordan River towards the sunrise.

Rashi Heading - Then (Moshe) decided to separate: Moshe took this to heart and became anxious to implement the matter, to separate the cities. Even though they would not serve to protect until those of the land of Canaan were separated, Moshe said, "Any commandment that is possible to fulfill, I will fulfill."

Synopsis

In this week's Torah portion, Vo'eschanan, we are told that Moshe Rabbeinu separated three cities of refuge on the eastern side of the Jordan. The Torah says,¹"Then Moshe decided to separate" The literal meaning of this is that "Then (past tense), Moshe will separate (future tense)." Rashi explains, "Moshe took to heart and became anxious to implement the matter, to separate the cities. Even though they would not serve to protect until those of the land of Canaan would be separated, Moshe said, 'Any commandment that is possible to fulfill, I will fulfill.'"

According to many of Rashi's commentators, he explains the reason for the Torah's use of mismatched tenses. He explains that the Torah does not say that Moshe separated the cities, but rather that he considered, or "took heart," to do so. However, why does Rashi write that Moshe was "anxious" to implement the matter if that is the case? Moshe's anxiety seemingly has nothing to do with past-to-future tense changes. Additionally, why does Rashi explain two different ideas under the same heading? He first tells us that Moshe considered separating the cities. Then he said that Moshe decided this even though the cities would not provide refuge until Yehoshua separated the other three cities on the western side of the Jordan.

The explanation is that Rashi is explaining a different matter in addition to the question of the verse changing tenses. When the Torah first discussed cities of refuge, it implied that this Mitzvah

1. Our Parshah, Devorim 4:41.

depended on the Jews entering the land of Israel ². Now, at the beginning of our Torah portion, it was established that there was no chance that Moshe would enter Israel. Therefore, he worried that G-d might not want him to be involved in this Mitzvah. Because of Moshe's lofty stature, the Jews did not yet *need* the cities of refuge.

Rashi's Explanation

This week's Torah portion, Vo'eschanan, teaches us the laws of the cities of refuge. If one murdered someone unintentionally, these cities would give him a place of refuge. He could escape the wrath of a close relative of the victim seeking to take revenge. There were to be three cities on the east side of the Jordan River and three on the west side in Israel proper. However, the three towns in Transjordan would not serve as a refuge until Yehoshua established the cities in Israel. The Torah says,¹ "Then Moshe decided to separate three cities on the east side of the Jordan River toward the sunrise." Rashi cites the words "Then (Moshe) decided to separate" and explains that "Moshe took to heart, and became anxious to implement the matter, to separate the cities."

Many of Rashi's supercommentaries³ explain that Rashi reveals that the verse is speaking about Moshe's intentions rather than his actions. "Moshe took heart ..." The reason is that if you look at the Hebrew words, first, it says "then" in the past tense. The Torah then says, "he will separate," in the future tense. This syntax indicates a thought to do something rather than an actual deed. They cite additional instances of this, including⁴ "Then Moshe and the children sang" The literal meaning of the words is "Then Moshe and the children of Israel will sing ...," identical to the syntax in our verse. There, Rashi also explains the verse in the same manner. "Then, when he saw the miracle, it occurred to him to recite a song."

Rashi continues his explanation by saying that "Even though they (the cities) would not serve to protect until those in Canaan - Israel would be separated, Moshe said, 'Any commandment that is possible to fulfill, I will fulfill.'"

Difficulties in Understanding Rashi

If Rashi believes that the Torah only tells us what Moshe planned on doing, why does he not write that "Moshe took heart to separate the cities? Why does he add that "Moshe took to heart and

2. Parshas Massei, beginning with Bamidbar 35:9.

3. Supercommentaries are commentaries which are dedicated to explaining Rashi's comments on the Torah. There are more commentaries on Rashi than there are on any other biblical commentary.

4. Parshas Beshalach, Shemos 15:1.

became anxious to implement the matter, to separate the cities?" How does Rashi know that Moshe's anxiety is a relevant element?

Why does Rashi include the word "*then*" in the words he cites from the verse? This would seem to imply that something happened that caused Moshe to consider separating the cities. This would appear similar to Rashi's above-quoted comments on the words "Then Moshe and the children of Israel sang ...," where he explains, "Then when he saw the miracle." The term "then" implies that something caused him to consider acting.

It would seem as if Rashi's continuation that "even though they would not serve to protect ..." does not belong together with the beginning of Rashi's comments under the same heading. Each part of Rashi explains something different. First, he explains the *words* "then he will separate," then he explains that Moshe separated the cities, although it would be some time before they would serve a purpose. Generally, when Rashi teaches us two different things, he places them under separate headings. Why does he combine them here?

The Explanation

When the Torah first discussed the cities of refuge, it said,⁵"When you *cross the Jordan to the land of Canaan*, you shall designate cities for yourselves; they shall be cities of refuge for you ... The cities you provide shall serve as six cities of refuge. You shall provide three cities in Transjordan and three cities in the land of Canaan; they shall be cities of refuge." In other words, it seems clear that designating and setting aside cities of refuge, even those in Transjordan, is not meant to be done until after we cross over the Jordan into the land of Canaan.

This implies that the Mitzvah of building cities of refuge is one of the Mitzvos dependent upon our conquering and dividing the land of Israel. None of these Mitzvos became mandatory until that time. However, Transjordan was also given to the Jewish people, and two and a half tribes settled it and lived there. The Mitzvah also applies there. However, this commandment applies primarily to Israel.

This week's Torah portion teaches us something new. Until our Parshah, Moshe still believed that the decree barring him from entering Israel might be rescinded. However, right at the beginning of our portion, he loses all hope. Moshe tells us, "I prayed to Hashem ... please let me cross over and see the good land ...and G-d said to me, 'It is enough for you, speak to me no more about this matter. Go up to the top of the hill, *for you shall not cross this Jordan.*'" That is when Rashi explains the meaning of "Then Moshe will separate." The Jewish people are standing ready to enter Israel. It is already known

5. See Footnote 2.

that Moshe will not be coming with them. "Then," - he "took heart and became *anxious* to implement the matter."

The Hebrew word we translate as "anxious" is "חרד - Choreid." The simple connotation of this word is fear, which stems from the suspicion that one's actions are not up to par. That is the reason that Moshe was "anxious – חרד." He was concerned that he would not even perform the establishment and designation of cities of refuge in Transjordan; it is a Mitzvah that would not take effect until the entrance of the Jews into Israel.

His anxiety could have come from something more significant. He worried Hashem might not want him to designate the cities at all. After all, He did not want Moshe to enter the land. Maybe Hashem did not want him involved in Mitzvos that depended on the Land of Israel. In other words, he was concerned that perhaps his designation of the cities would not affect anything. Even if they changed, Hashem might not have wanted him involved with them.

We see from this that Rashi is not merely explaining why the Torah changes from past to future tense, saying, "then - he will separate," similar to "then - he will sing." He is explaining something much more profound. "Then, he (Moshe) will separate." *All* of Moshe's *actions* in separating the cities of refuge were performed in a manner of *fear* and *anxiety*. Why was this so? Because they were performed *then*, they were performed when the Jews were on the threshold of entering Israel without Moshe. Did G-d want this done before the Jews entered Israel? Did Hashem want Moshe to be involved in this process or not?

A Deeper Lesson from Rashi

We still need to understand why the three cities of refuge in Transjordan could not protect one who unintentionally murdered until the three cities in Israel were designated as cities of refuge. The fact is that the tribes of Gad, Reuvain, and half of the tribe of Menasheh already inhabited the land east of the Jordan. We are told this at the end of the Torah portions of Matos and in Devorim. Since two and a half tribes already inhabited this land, one would think it should have already had the status of Israel. Hence, the cities should have had the full power to protect an unintentional murderer! The Jews were not to cross the Jordan and enter Israel for several months. During that time, the members of the two-and-a-half tribes lived on their portions of land. All those who did not serve in the army, meaning men younger than twenty and older than sixty, women, and children, remained on their land the entire time. This was land conquered and inhabited by the Children of Israel; why did its cities of refuge not function?

THE RASHI OF THE WEEK

One might answer on a deeper level that during the lifetime of Moshe Rabbeinu, the Jews did not yet need cities of refuge. This is in keeping with Moshe's words ⁶. "But you who cleave to the Lord your G-d are alive, all of you, this day." Moshe instilled in the Jewish people a connection to Hashem that encompassed only life, not its opposite. Even one who sins unintentionally requires atonement. An unintentional transgression demonstrates that something is lacking in one's connection to Hashem. However, after Moshe's passing, they fell from this lofty level and were forced to establish cities of refuge.

Not only did the cities of refuge protect the "redeemer of the blood of his kinsman." It also had a positive effect: "... that he may flee to one of these cities so that he might *live*." In other words, the city of refuge provided him with actual life. Murder, even unintentional murder, demonstrates that one is under the control of the Yetzer Hora – Evil Inclination. Tanya states that such a person receives his vitality from a "place of death and impurity." However, in the city of refuge, his energy stems from the realm of holiness, "that he may flee ... that he might live." Therefore, the separation of the cities of refuge needed the involvement of Moshe Rabbeinu, who instilled the level of ⁷ "... you who cleave to the Lord your G-d are alive, all of you, this day."

This is also the more profound reason that, in Rashi's words, Moshe was "*anxious*" to separate the cities. It required a descent from his holy level. His level did not allow for the opposite of life. However, as a true shepherd of the Jewish Nation, he brought down life force to the level of ⁸ "impurity and death, may G-d protect us."

So, too, should it be for us, through the protection of our holy cities of refuge⁹ throughout our bitter exile. Not only should our present refuge protect us and not allow exile to affect us, but we should also reach "that he may flee (to words of Torah) ... that he might *live* (true life)," with the coming of Moshiach now.

(Adapted from a talk given on Shabbos Parshas Vo'eschanan 5745)

I hope you gained as much by reading this as I did by translating and adapting it.

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6. Our Parshah, Devorim 4:4.

7. Our Parshah, Devorim 4:4.

8. Tanya, *ibid*.

9. See Talmud Makkos 10, a, "Words of Torah protect us."

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כ"ק אדמו"ר נשיא דורנו מליובאוויטש

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חיילי "צבאות השם"

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ר' אליעזר ברוך וזוגתו מרת חי' שיחיו סאלינס

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נדפס ע"י הוריהם

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ומתוך בריאות הנכונה ולשנת ברכה והצלחה בגו"ר

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