

בס"ד

THE RASHI OF THE WEEK

Week of

Parshas Noach

6 Cheshvan, 5781 – October 24, 2020

Compiled from the works of
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THE RASHI OF THE WEEK

An Outline of the Rebbe's Explanation of Rashi Parshas Noach

Likkutei Sichos Volume 10, Pages 30 – 36

Rashi in His Own Words

בראשית ה', י"א: וַתָּבֵא אֵלָיו הַיּוֹנָה לַעֵת עֶרֶב וְהָיָה עֹלֵה-עֵזָבִית טָרֵף בְּפִיהָ וַנִּדְעַנּוּם כִּי-קָלוּ הַמַּיִם מֵעַל הָאָרֶץ:

Bereishis 8:11: The dove returned to him in the evening. It had plucked an olive leaf in its mouth. (That is how) Noach knew that the water had abated from the earth.

Synopsis

In our Torah portion, Noach, the Torah tells us of the great flood that destroyed most of humanity. The survivors were Noach and his family. Hashem had commanded him to build a large ship, which we commonly call an ark. This craft would protect him, his wife, his three sons, and their families from the deluge. How did Noach know when it was safe for him and his "crew" to leave the ark? The Torah tells us,¹ "The dove returned to him in the evening. It had plucked an olive leaf in its mouth. (That is how) Noach knew that the water had abated from the earth."

Whenever a verse in the Torah poses a question to a beginning student, Rashi answers it. The only exception is either (a.) something that, upon deeper reflection, is not difficult, or (b.) a question which he already answered. This verse presents just such a problem. How could an olive leaf survive after such a destructive down-pour? This flood destroyed all people and animals that were not protected by the ark!

Furthermore, how did the leaf indicate that the water had subsided? The dove may have taken the leaf from the top of a tree that was on a mountain. The leaf would not provide a sign that the land was dry. Additionally, why does the Torah specify that it was an olive tree? It would not seem to make any difference what sort of tree it was.

The explanation is that Rashi's commentary is geared to a beginning student, even a five-year-old child. If this young child has ever seen an olive tree, he is aware that it is exceedingly strong. Its leaves could not withstand the torrential flood. Even if a leaf remained after the deluge, it would no longer look like a leaf. However, the tree itself could remain standing. That would tell Noach that a new leaf had grown after the rain had stopped. That is how he knew that "the water had abated from the earth."

1. Our Parshah, Bereishis 8:11.

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Rashi's Explanation

Our weekly Torah portion, Noach, tells us of the great flood that destroyed most of mankind. The survivors were Noach and his family. Hashem had commanded him to build a very large ship. This craft would protect him, his wife, his three sons, and their families from the deluge. How did Noach know when it was safe for him and his "crew" to leave the ark? The Torah tells us that¹ "The dove returned to him in the evening. It had plucked an olive leaf in its mouth. (That is how) Noach knew that the water had abated from the earth."

Rashi offers no explanation as to how the olive leaf survived the flood. However, we find that the Midrash offers two possible explanations as to where the dove found the leaf². The first is that dove found the leaf in the Land of Israel. Regarding Israel, the prophet says, "You are a land that is not cleansed; it was not rained upon on the day of fury." Based on this the Midrash says that the rain did not fall in the Holy Land. The Midrash's second explanation is that the dove retrieved the leaf from Gan Eden, where the rain also did not fall. The gates of Gan Eden were opened, and the dove brought the leaf from there.

Difficulties in Understanding Rashi

Our understanding of Rashi's commentary is based on several fundamental principles. One such rule is that Rashi answers every question which even a beginning student might ask. There are exceptions to this rule. One is that if upon further examination, what we considered difficult is in reality no question whatsoever. The other is in an instance that Rashi answered this question in an earlier comment.

Based on this, we need to understand why Rashi does not comment on our verse;³ "The dove returned to him in the evening. There was an olive leaf in its mouth which he had plucked. (That is how) Noach knew that the water had abated from the earth." This is despite the fact that it poses a fundamental question. The Torah already described the effects of the flood⁴. "The *Flood* was upon the earth for *forty* days... the waters became powerful, and they *increased very much* on the earth... the ark moved upon the waters... the waters became exceedingly powerful upon the earth, and all the lofty mountains that were under the heavens were covered. The water prevailed fifteen cubits above the earth, and the mountains were covered. *All flesh that moved on the earth perished*; that included fowl, cattle, beasts... all creeping creatures that creep upon the earth... everything that was alive, everything on the dry land died. The Flood

2. Bereishis Rabbah Chapter 33, 6.

3. See footnote 1.

4. Our Parshah, Bereishis 7:17-23.

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blotted out all beings that were upon the face of the earth... they were all wiped out from the earth..." Under these conditions, an olive leaf could not possibly survive? Yet Rashi says nothing!

The explanations which we cited above from the Midrash⁵ are totally untenable according to Peshat, which is Rashi's method of explaining the Torah. If Rashi's opinion was that the leaf was brought either from Israel or Gan Eden, he should have said so. According to Peshat, it is logical to say that the rains did not fall in Gan Eden. The reason for the flood was because⁶ "Hashem saw that the evil of man was great in the earth, and every imagination of his heart was only evil all the time." It also says that⁷ "G-d regretted that He had made man upon the earth, and He became grieved in His heart." Based on this, there was no reason for Hashem to bring a flood in Gan Eden. Nevertheless, we cannot explain that the dove retrieved the leaf from Gan Eden according to Peshat. We learned earlier that after Hashem expelled Adam from the Garden, He blocked the entrance. The Torah tells us that⁸ "He drove Adam out (of Gan Eden). He stationed from the east the Keruvim and the blade of the revolving sword, to guard the way to the Tree of Life."

Furthermore, if the dove did take the leaf from Gan Eden, it would not prove anything. The same is true of Israel. The Midrash is based on the idea that the flood neither fell in Gan Eden nor in Israel. If there was no rain there, of course there were olive trees filled with leaves! How could Noach understand on the basis of an olive leaf in the dove's mouth that the rain had abated?

We also need to understand why finding a leaf proves anything. It could very well be that the leaf came from an extremely tall tree, or a tree atop a mountain. Maybe the leaf was floating on the water. Under such circumstances, the leaf would not have been affected to the same extent as other leaves. Additionally, why does the Torah specify that it was a leaf from an olive tree. What difference could it make what sort of tree it was. The point is that the dove found a leaf.

The Explanation

We wrote earlier that Rashi's commentary is based on Peshat, the simple understanding of the Torah. It is accessible even to a five-year old child, who is just beginning to study the Torah. If the child had ever seen an olive tree, he would realize that is it is an exceedingly strong tree. It is strong enough, that it could have withstood the intense storm. However, if it had any leaves remaining, none of them

5. See above, footnote 2.

6. Oure Parshah, Bereishis 6:5.

7. Ibid, ibid, 6.

8. Parshas Bereishis, Bereishis 3:24.

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could have retained their original appearance. With such great rain pouring down upon them for so long, if any of them had survived, they would not be recognizable. Noach understood that he would not find a leaf which had grown before the flood. The only leaf which would inform him what was happening outside of the ark would be a newly grown one. Therefore, it could only come from the mighty olive tree.

This leaves us with one question. If according to Peshat it had to be a newly grown leaf, why did Rashi not tell us so? This is a very novel way of understanding what happened. Rashi should have let us know.

The answer is that Rashi actually did tell us that it was a fresh leaf which had grown from a strong tree. Rashi cites the word “טרף – plucked” from our verse⁹, and explains that it means that the bird grabbed the leaf. Rashi is telling us is that the bird had to grab the leaf, i.e. it took quite a bit of effort on his part to retrieve the leaf from the tree. In other words, it was a very strong tree.

A Deeper Lesson from Rashi

The Prophet calls the flood the “Waters of Noach¹⁰.” This is so despite the fact that Noach represents the salvation from the flood. The Alter Rebbe explains¹¹ that it is because the water came to purify the world. The waters of the flood were like the water of a Mikvah. Just as the minimum measure of water for a Mikvah is forty Se’ah¹², so too the rains of the flood poured down on the earth for forty days and forty nights. Furthermore, Noach’s mission was to reestablish the world in a pure manner, which is alluded to by the flood waters.

We have an established rule that every descent, is for the purpose of being able to rise even higher than before. Based on this, we understand that the flood did more than purify the world from its earlier state. It actually elevated the world to a higher level than it could have reached otherwise. This explains

9. See footnote 1.

10. Yeshayahu 54:9.

11. Torah Ohr, our Parshah; 8, 3.

12. Se’ah is a Biblical measure.

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why Rashi could not explain according to Peshat that the rain did not fall in Israel. Since, the flood also elevated Israel to a level which was even higher than that which it had held before.

Hashem should help us that by learning and reading this Parshah, we should manage to purify ourselves without any need for “floods,” or anything negative. In this manner, we will certainly merit the redemption through our righteous Moshiach now!

(Adapted from talks given on Shabbos Parshas Noach, 5734)

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

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