

בס"ד

THE RASHI OF THE WEEK

Week of

Parshas Vayechi

Teves 12, 5778 – December 30, 2017

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THE RASHI OF THE WEEK

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

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Rashi in His Own Words

בראשית נ', כ"ג: וַיֵּרָא יוֹסֵף לְאֶפְרַיִם בְּנֵי שְׁלֹשִׁים גַּם בְּנֵי מְכִיר בֶּן מְנַשֶּׁה יָלְדוּ עַל בְּרֵכְי יוֹסֵף:
רש"י ד"ה על ברכי יוסף: כתרגומו, גדלן בין ברכיו:

Bereishis 50:23: Yosef saw children of a third generation (born) to Ephraim; also the sons of Mochir the son of Menasheh were born on Yosef's knees.

Rashi Heading - on Yosef's knees: As the Targum translates: (Meaning that) he raised them between his knees.

A Brief Synopsis

In this week's Torah portion, Vayechi, we are told that "the sons of Mochir the son of Ephraim (Yosef's great-grandchildren) were born on Yosef's knees." Rashi teaches us, that this means, as Targum renders it, that Yosef brought them up. According to Rashi's explanation, the words of the verse "were born," retain their simple meaning. The words "on Yosef's knees" teach us that Yosef brought them up.

There are other ways of explaining this. This is especially true in light of the fact that Rashi is explaining Peshat. The way that Rashi is explaining it, makes what appears to be one clause in the verse, into two. This is an acceptable way of explaining it according to Peshat; but it is highly unusual. Additionally, according to the simple explanation of the verse, what does the fact that Mochir's children were born on Yosef's knees have to do with Yosef raising them? Rashi could have followed a different explanation, which seems to be much smoother. Targum Yonoson states that the verse means that Yosef served as their Sandek. The Sandek is the one who holds the baby on his lap when the circumcision is being performed on the eighth day from the child's birth. It is easy to understand why the words "that they were born between his knees" apply here. However, according to Rashi, it seems to be difficult to understand.

The explanation is that earlier the Torah told us that Yaakov's wife Rochel appeared to be barren. Accordingly, he married her maid-servant Bilhah. Rochel told him that he should do this in order that "she will bear children on my knees ..." Rashi cites the words "on my knees" there. He comments, "As Targum renders it, 'and I will raise them.'" In other words, Rashi already established that the definition of bearing children "on my knees" means bringing them up. Therefore, it is only natural for that to remain the translation of the words.

Rashi's Explanation

This week we read the Torah Portion of Vayechi, which concludes the first book of the Torah, Bereishis. The

THE RASHI OF THE WEEK

Torah tells us¹ that “Yosef saw a third generation born to (his son) Ephraim; also the sons of Mochir (who was) the son of Menasheh were born ‘on Yosef’s knees.’”

Rashi cites the words from the verse “on Yosef’s knees,” and explains that their meaning is “as Targum Onkelus renders the words – (meaning that) he raised them between his knees.”

The simple meaning of Rashi is that he is answering an obvious question. How it is possible to say that that Mochir’s children *were born* on Yosef’s knees? Therefore Rashi tells us that the Torah is saying that Yosef raised Mochir's children, i.e. he brought them up.

This seems straightforward enough. However, the commentaries disagree upon exactly what is meant here. The Ibn Ezra² explains that the meaning here of “were born,” is “were raised.” The verse is simply telling us that Yosef brought up his great grandchildren. Targum Onkelus, who Rashi specifically cites here, translates “they were born on Yosef’s knees” as “they were born, and (then) Yosef raised them.” In other words, according to Onkelus, the words “they were born” is one clause which is to be understood literally. However, the words “on Yosef’s knees” are a totally separate clause. According to Targum, who as mentioned above, Rashi cites, "on Yosef's knees" means that Yosef raised them.

The fact that Rashi accepts Onkelus’ version (as he explicitly states at the beginning of his commentary) explains two things. First of all, Rashi only cites the words from the verse “on Yosef’s knees,” and not the words “they were born.” We know that Rashi is precise about every word in his commentary – including those words which he cites as the heading of his comments. This makes it clear, that when Rashi explains that Yosef raised them, it is solely derived from the words "on Yosef's knees." This is because Rashi’s explanation is in accordance with the commentary/translation of Onkelus.

Secondly, it explains why Rashi states that "he brought them up," using the active voice. Since the verse says that "they were born," using the passive voice, it would seemingly have been more logical for Rashi to have written that "they were brought up (by Yosef)." However, this is only difficult according to the Ibn Ezra, who derives that Yosef brought up his great-grandchildren from the words "they were born" (passive voice). However, according to Targum it is not difficult at all. His derivation that Yosef brought them up is from the words "on Yosef's knees."

Difficulties in Understanding Rashi

Why does Rashi explain this verse according to Onkelus? This necessitates for Rashi to explain that what is seemingly one clause in the verse, is actually two. That explanation is acceptable according to Peshat, the simple explanation of the verse. However, it is not all that smooth. Explaining the words “they were born” to mean “they were raised,” would seemingly have been much simpler. That would have left the entire phrase as one clause.

1. Bereishis 50:23.

2. Rabbi Avrohom Ibn Ezra (1089 – 1164) was a great scholar and Biblical commentator. He was born in Tudela, Navarre (which is now Spain).

THE RASHI OF THE WEEK

Rashi himself says that according to Peshat, the term “giving birth” includes the broader explanation of spiritual birth, i.e. bringing up a child. The Torah tells us that³ “These are the descendants of Moshe and Aharon.” Rashi comments on these words that “... they are called the descendants of Moshe because he taught them Torah ... whoever teaches Torah to the son of his fellow man is considered by the Torah as if he had borne him.” Hence we see that according to Peshat physical birth is the equivalent of spiritual birth, i.e. teaching one Torah. How much more so is this true in our verse, where Yosef did not merely teach Mochir’s children Torah, but he brought them up in every sense of the word.

The Explanation

Earlier the Torah wrote⁴ “and she (Rochel) said, ‘here is my maidservant Bilhah; come to her and she will bear children on my knees ...’” Rashi cites the words “on my knees” and comments “as Targum renders it, ‘and I will rear them.’” He writes the words “and I will rear them” in the original Aramaic, quoting Onkelos verbatim.

There we cannot say that the words “and she will bear children” imply that “she will rear them,” because there the words obviously refer to Bilhah and not to Rochel⁵! Bilhah was to give birth to the children. In other words, the words “on my knees” on their own teach us that “I will bring them up,” and the words “she will bear children” have the simple meaning of giving birth. This is exactly how Onkelus translates it. Bilhah will give birth to the children and Rochel will raise them.

In our verse where the Torah uses a similar expression, “(the sons of Mochir, the son of Menasheh were born) on Yosef’s knees” it would not make sense to change the meaning which Rashi originally attributed to these words. Therefore the words “were born” mean just that. However, the words “on Yosef’s knees” are to be translated according to Targum. Yosef brought them up; he raised them.

However, Rashi’s lengthy explanation gives us pause to wonder. In the vast majority of instances where Rashi explains a verse “as Targum renders it,” he relies that the student will look in Targum himself and does not quote Onkelus’ words. Even in those rare instances where Rashi does quote his words (which are in Aramaic) he hardly ever translates them into Hebrew. In our verse Rashi feels the need to translate the Targum’s words into Hebrew, whereas previously, regarding Rochel and Bilhah, Rashi did not translate the words of Onkelus into Hebrew. If he did not need to translate it earlier for the beginning student, why did he do so now? There may be a reason that Rashi does feel the need to translate the words “he raised them” in our verse. However, why does Rashi need to mention the words “on his knees” which Targum does not even say?

The question is even more problematic. Targum Onkelus, unlike the other Aramaic translations of the Torah, is

3. Bamidbar 3:1.

4. Bereishis 30:3.

5. Rochel was married to our forefather Yaakov, but was childless for quite some time. Yaakov married Rochel's handmaiden, Bilhah, who would have children "in her place." Please bear in mind that throughout Biblical times it was permissible to be married to more than one woman.

THE RASHI OF THE WEEK

written according to Peshat. Since Onkelus does not translate the words “on his knees,” we see that Onkelos understands that those words are figurative – allegorical. By adding those words Rashi is stating that they are to be taken literally which is different than the way that Targum renders it.

The explanation is as follows. Onkelus writes the words “he raised them between his knees,” in order to negate the commentary of Targum Yonoson⁶. Targum Yonoson explains that “their circumcision was upon the knees of Yosef.” In other words, he is explaining that Yosef was the Sandek⁷ of his great grandchildren.

Without Rashi we would think that the explanation of Targum Yonoson is closer to Peshat. Firstly, the words “on Yosef’s knees” could be understood literally, not allegorically. The Sandek holds the baby on his lap, i.e. his knees. Secondly, the statement that “they were born (on Yosef’s knees)” is much easier to understand according to Targum Yonoson. If the entire point is just that Yosef brought them up, what does their birth have to do with his holding them on his knees? However, if we are discussing their circumcision, we are speaking of a procedure which is done shortly following the baby's birth. Finally, it is much easier to understand that Yosef, who was governing a super power, took time from his schedule to serve as the Sandek for his great grandchildren; than it is to think that he actually was occupied with the daily chores involved in raising them.

Because of all of the above, Rashi had to reiterate that “bearing children on his knees” means raising them, despite the fact that he already said this regarding Rochel and Bilhah.

Our entire verse reads “Yosef saw children of a third generation (born to his son) Ephraim; also the sons of Mochir the son of Menasheh were born on Yosef’s knees.” According to most of the commentaries, the verse is telling us that from both of his children, Ephraim and Menasheh, Yosef had great grandchildren. This being the case, why does the Torah tell us about his descendants from each of his sons in a different manner?

Rashi is teaching us that Yosef lived to see Ephraim’s grandchildren; but they were very young. Hence it does not fit to say that Yosef brought them up. However, Menasheh’s grandchildren were older. They were old enough for Yosef to be able to bring them up in the fullest sense of the word.

Lessons from Rashi in Jewish Law

In the Alter Rebbe⁸’s Shulchan Aruch⁹, it says that the time of a baby boy’s Bris is the beginning of the entrance of his Divine soul into his body. The Shulchan Aruch itself does not note a source for this. It was once explained that

6. There are a number of Targumim (literally translations) of the Torah besides that of Onkelos. The main difference is that Onkelus is a straightforward translation of the Torah into Aramaic. The others, including Targum Yonoson Ben Uziel includes Midrashim and more commentary. Yonoson Ben Uziel was one of the great students of Hillel the Elder.

7. The Sandek is the one who is honored at a Bris Milah, a Jewish circumcision, to hold the baby on his lap when the procedure is being performed.

8. The Alter Rebbe, Rabbi Shneur Zalman (1745 – 1812), was the founder of Chabad Lubavitch.

9. The Shulchan Aruch is the Code of Jewish Law. Despite the fact that such a work existed, Rabbi Shneur Zalman, at the behest of his teacher, wrote a more up-to-date version. Additionally, he writes the reasons behind each law.

THE RASHI OF THE WEEK

the earliest source was from the work Seder Hayom¹⁰. Sources which were believed to be earlier were Menoras Hamaor¹¹ and Raishis Chochmah¹². From here we see that there is a far earlier source, from Mishnaic times. Targum Yonoson explains that “they were born on Yosef’s knees” means that after they were born, they were circumcised by Yosef. The fact that that the Bris was on Yosef’s knees means that it was their spiritual birth, i.e. the entrance of their G-dly soul.

Another Halacha which can be derived from here regards the custom of having a Sandek at a Bris. It is not customary for the same person not to be Sandek for two brothers. This is because the act of being Sandek is comparable to performing the Ketores - Incense ceremony in the Holy Temple. No Kohen - Priest ever performed that particular ceremony twice. However, here we see that Yosef was the Sandek for the sons (in the plural) of Mochir. How could that be? This serves as proof for what the Chasam Sofer writes, that the leader of a community, the city’s rabbi, can serve as Sandek for multiple children of the same parents. This too is due to the comparison to incense. The Kohen Godol, the High Priest, was able to offer Ketores – Incense whenever he wanted. In the same manner, Yosef, as the leader of Egypt, was considered the leader of the community.

Yet another Jewish law involving Torah study can be derived from here. One is obligated to teach Torah to his children and his grandchildren. However, as far as great grandchildren are concerned, as long as there are more qualified teachers than him, he has no obligation to teach them. Nevertheless, from both Rashi and Onkelus we see that Yosef taught his great-grandchildren. This is despite the fact that Yosef had no obligation to teach them. Yehudah had founded and headed a Yeshiva full time prior to the arrival of all of the Jews in Egypt. This being the case, it is possible that he was a greater scholar than Yosef. Because Yosef governed all of Egypt (including his family), he had the law of one who is “occupied with the needs of the community.” This would exempt him from the obligation of teaching. Nevertheless we see that according to Rashi’s commentary on the Torah there is an obligation to teach ones great grandchildren.

From this we can learn a tremendous lesson. If one merits having great-grandchildren, he must teach them Torah. If he is not capable, he must support the Torah institution in which they study.

(Adapted from a talk given on Shabbos Parshas Vayechi 5725)

**I hope that you gained as much by reading this as I did by translating and adapting it.
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The Rashi of the Week, visit**

<http://rebbeteachersrashi.org/contact-us-dedicate-an-issue>

10. This work was written approximately 400 years ago by Rabbi Moshe Machir in Tzfas.

11. It is an important ethical work, which was written during the 14th century in Spain. The author was Rabbi Yitzchak Avoav.

12. This is an important work of Kabbalah and ethical behavior. It was written by the 16th century scholar Rabbi Eliyahu de Vidas.

**DEDICATED IN HONOR OF
the Lubavitcher Rebbe**

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**IN HONOR OF
Chaim and Aiden Oded שיחיו Morris**

*

DEDICATED BY THEIR PARENTS

Rabbi & Mrs. Menachem M. and Chaya Mushka שיחיו Morris

* * *

IN LOVING MEMORY OF

Mr. Sholom Dovid Hacoheh Mankes

Passed away on 11 Teves, 5776

May His Soul be bound in the Eternal Bond of Life

*

DEDICATED BY HIS CHILDREN

Mr. and Mrs. Yonatan Itsik Hacoheh and Shaindel Miriam שיחיו Mankes

* * *

**IN HONOR OF
THE WEDDING OF**

Mr. Elad and Mrs. Yael שיחיו Haramati

May they merit to build a house in Israel filled with blessings and joy!

*

Dedicated by their loving family

* * *

IN HONOR OF

Reb Sholom Moshe Hacoheh ben Tziviah שי'

and

Mrs. Brochoh bas Soroh שתחי' Cohen

For a complete and speedy recovery

* * *

DEDICATED BY

Hatomim Moshe Shlomoh Zohar שי' Mars

*

May he merit to be a Chossid, a Yerei Shomayim and a Lamdon

מוקדש לזכות

כ"ק אדמו"ר נשיא דורנו מליובאוויטש

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לזכות

חיילי "צבאות השם" חיים ועדן עודד שיחיו מאריס

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נדפס ע"י הוריהם

הרה"ת ר' מנחם מענדל וזוגתו מרת חי' מושקא שיחיו מאריס

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לע"נ

ר' שלום דוד בן ר' יצחק הכהן ע"ה מנקס

נפטר ביום י"א טבת ה'תשע"ו

ת. נ. צ. ב. ה.

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נדפס ע"י בניו

ר' יונתן איציק הכהן וזוגתו מרת שיינדל מרים שיחיו מנקס

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לזכות שמחת נישואין של

החתן ר' אלעד שי' והכלה המהוללה מרת יעל שיחיו

הרמתי

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נדפס ע"י משפחתם שיחיו

לזכות

ר' שלום משה הכהן בן צבי שי'

ומרת ברכה בת שרה שתחי' כהן

לרפואה שלימה וקרובה

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הת' משה שלמה זהר שי' מארס

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יהי רצון שיזכה להיות חסיד, ירא שמים, ולמדן