

בס"ד

THE RASHI OF THE WEEK

Week of

Parshas Vayechi

18 Teves, 5784 – December 30, 2023

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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.

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. The fact that we can interpret the verse differently is especially true because Rashi is explaining Peshat. Rashi is telling us that this one verse contains two clauses. A verse with two clauses is acceptable, according to Peshat; however, it is highly unusual. Additionally, according to the simple explanation of the verse, there seems to be no connection between Mochir's children being born on Yosef's knees and Yosef raising them. Rashi could have followed a different explanation, which appears 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 on his knees" apply here. However, according to Rashi, it seems to be challenging to understand.

The explanation is that earlier, the Torah told us that Yaakov's wife, Rochel, appeared to be barren. Accordingly, he married her maidservant Bilhah. Rochel said to do so so that "she will bear children on my knees..." Rashi cites the words "on my knees" and 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" implies raising them. 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 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.'" In other words, after the Jews descended to Egypt, Yosef

1. Our Parshah, Bereishis 50:23.

eventually had great-grandchildren.

Rashi cites the words from the verse "on Yosef's knees" and explains, "as Targum Onkelus renders the words, that they mean that he brought them up between his knees."

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

Rashi's interpretation appears straightforward enough. However, other commentaries disagree as to what the Torah means here. The Ibn Ezra² explains that the meaning here of "was born" is "were raised." The verse is merely 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, afterward) Yosef raised them." In other words, according to Onkelus, "they were born" is one clause that is to be understood literally. However, "on Yosef's knees" is a separate clause. According to Targum, who, as mentioned above, Rashi cites, "on Yosef's knees" means that Yosef raised them.

Rashi's acceptance of Onkelus's version (as he explicitly states at the beginning of his commentary) explains two things. First, Rashi only cites the words from the verse "on Yosef's knees," not the words "they were born." We know that Rashi is precise about every word in his commentary – including those words he cites as his comments' heading. Using Onkelus' explanation, Rashi clarifies that he derived the fact that Yosef raised them from the words "on Yosef's knees."

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, only according to the Ibn Ezra is this difficult. He 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 explanation necessitates Rashi to explain that what seems to be one clause is two. That explanation is acceptable, according to Peshat. However, it is not all that smooth. Interpreting the words "they were born" to mean that Yosef raised them would have seemed much more straightforward. That would have left the entire phrase as one clause.

Rashi himself says that, according to Peshat, the term "giving birth" includes the broader explanation of

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

spiritual birth, i.e., bringing up a child. The Torah tells us,³ "These are the descendants of Moshe and Aharon." Rashi comments on these words that "... Aharon's children are called the descendants of Moshe because he taught them Torah... and whoever teaches Torah to the son of his fellow man is considered by the Torah as if he had borne him." Hence, 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 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.

We cannot say that the words "and she will bear children" imply that "she will rear them" because they refer to Bilhah and not 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 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 Rashi attributed initially to these words. Therefore, the words "were born" mean just that. However, the words "on Yosef's knees" will be translated according to Targum. Yosef brought them up; he raised them.

However, Rashi's lengthy explanation gives us pause to wonder. In most instances where Rashi explains a verse as Targum does, he depends on the student looking at Targum himself. Therefore, he 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. Why did he do so now if he did not need to translate it earlier for the beginning student? There may be a reason that Rashi needs 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,

3. Parshas Bamidbar, Bamidbar 3:1.

4. Parshas Vayeitzei, 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

is written according to Peshat. Since Onkelos does not translate the words "on his knees," Onkelos understands that those words are allegorical. By adding those words, Rashi implies that they are to be taken literally, which differs from how Targum renders it.

The explanation is as follows. Onkelos writes the words "he raised them between his knees" 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 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 that is done shortly following the baby's birth. Finally, it is much easier to understand that Yosef, who was governing a superpower, took time from his schedule to serve as the Sandek for his great-grandchildren than it is to think that he was occupied with the daily chores involved in raising them. That is why Rashi repeats that "bearing children on his knees" means raising them, although 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." We see that Yosef saw the grandchildren of both of his children, Ephraim and Menasheh. This being the case, why does the Torah tell us about his descendants from each of his sons in a different manner?

Rashi teaches us that Yosef lived to see Ephraim's young grandchildren. Hence, we cannot 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 most total sense of the word.

Lessons from Rashi in Jewish Law

The Alter Rebbe's Shulchan Aruch⁸ 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 the earliest reference was from the classic work Seder Hayom⁹. Sources that were believed to be earlier were Menoras

6. There are a number of Targumim (literally translations) of the Torah besides that of Onkelos. Onkelos is (for the most part) a straightforward translation of the Torah into Aramaic. Targum Yonasan includes Midrashic explanations.

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 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.

9. This work was written approximately 400 years ago by Rabbi Moshe Machir in Tzefas.

THE RASHI OF THE WEEK

Hamaor¹⁰ and Raishis Chochmah¹¹. From here, we see that these are not the earliest sources. There is a source from Mishnaic times. Targum Yonoson explains that "they were born on Yosef's knees," means that after they were born, they were circumcised on Yosef's knees. The fact that the Bris was on Yosef's lap implies that it was their spiritual birth, i.e., the entrance of their G-dly soul.

Another Halacha that can be derived from here is 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 proves that 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 High Priest, the Kohen Gadol, could offer Ketores – Incense whenever he wanted. In the same manner, Yosef, as the leader of Egypt, was considered the community leader.

Yet another Jewish law involving the study of the Torah can be derived from here. One is obligated to teach the 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 even though Yosef had no obligation to teach them. Yehudah had founded and headed a Yeshiva full-time before the arrival of all Jews in Egypt. This being the case, He may have been a greater scholar than Yosef. Because Yosef governed all of Egypt (including his family), he had the law of one who was "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 one's great-grandchildren.

From this, we can learn a great lesson. If one merits having great-grandchildren, he must teach them the Torah. If he is incapable, he must support the Torah institution where they study.

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

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

To dedicate a week, a month, or a year of

For the Rashi of the Week, [click here](#).

You can find us on the web at www.RebbeTeachesRashi.org.

You can find our blog [here](#).

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

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

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