

בס"ה

THE RASHI OF THE WEEK

Week of

Parshas Vayechi

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Compiled from the works of
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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: וירא יוסף לאפרים בני שלשים גם בני מכיר בון מנשה ילדו על ברכי יוסף:

ריש"י ז"ה על ברכי יוסף: כתרגומו, גדול בין ברכו:

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 "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 in various ways is especially relevant because Rashi is explaining Peshat. Rashi tells us that this verse contains two clauses. A verse with two clauses is acceptable according to Peshat, though 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 holds the baby on his lap during the circumcision. It is easy to see why the words "they were born on his knees" apply here. However, according to Rashi, it seems to be challenging to understand.

The explanation is as follows. Earlier, the Torah told us that Yaakov's wife, Rochel, appeared 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 eventually

1. Our Parshah, Bereishis 50:23.

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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 merely states that Yosef brought up his great-grandchildren. Targum Onkelus, which 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, the term "they were born" is a single clause to be understood literally. However, the words "on Yosef's knees" are a separate clause. According to Targum, as Rashi cites above, "on Yosef's knees" means that Yosef raised them.

Rashi accepts Onkelos' version (as he explicitly states at the beginning of his commentary), which 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 he cites as the heading of his comments. Using Onkelus' explanation, Rashi clarifies that he derived that Yosef raised them from the words "on Yosef's knees."

Secondly, it explains why Rashi states, "he brought them up," in the active voice. Since the verse says "they were born" in the passive voice, it would seem more logical for Rashi to have written that "they were brought up (by Yosef)." However, this is only difficult, according to Ibn Ezra, who derives it from the words "they were born" (in the 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 that Rashi explain that what seems to be one clause is actually 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 seemingly have been much more straightforward, and 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).

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spiritual birth, i.e., teaching him Torah. The Torah tells us that³ "These are the descendants of Moshe and Aharon." Rashi comments on these words that "... the Torah calls Aharon's children 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, we see that, according to Peshat, physical birth is equivalent to 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, "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 the terms obviously refer to Bilhah, not to Rochel⁵! Bilhah was to give birth to the children. In other words, the words "on my knees" on their own suggest "I will bring them up," and the words "she will bear children" have the simple meaning of "giving birth." This is how Onkelos 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 initially attributed to these words. Therefore, the phrase "was born" means just that. However, the words "on Yosef's knees" are 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 the Targum does, he depends on the student looking up the Targum himself. Therefore, he does not quote Onkelos' words. Even in those rare instances when Rashi quotes 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 Onkelos 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 why Rashi feels 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 Onkelos, unlike the other Aramaic translations of the Torah, is written according to Peshat. Since Onkelos does not translate the words "on his knees," we see that Onkelos

3. Parshas Bamidbar, Bamidbar 3:1.

4. Parshas Vayaitzei, 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.

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understands them to be allegorical. By adding those words, Rashi implies that they are to be taken literally, which is different from how Targum renders it.

The explanation is as follows. Onkelus 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 Targum of Yonoson is closer to the Peshat. Firstly, "on Yosef's knees" could be understood literally rather than 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 speak of a procedure that is done shortly after 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 to think that he occupied himself with the daily chores involved in raising them. That is why Rashi repeats that "bearing children on his knees" means raising them, even though he had 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 differently?

Rashi teaches us that Yosef lived to see Ephraim's grandchildren, but they were very young. Hence, we cannot say that Yosef brought them up. However, Menasheh's grandchildren were older and old enough for Yosef to bring them up in the fullest sense of the word.

Lessons from Rashi in Jewish Law

In the Alter Rebbe's Shulchan Aruch⁸, 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 the earliest reference was in the classic work Seder Hayom, and authorities believed to be earlier were Menoras Hamaor and Raishis Chochmah. 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 they were circumcised

6. There are a number of Targumim (literally translations) of the Torah besides that of Onkelos. Onkelus 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.

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on Yosef's knees after they were born. The fact that the Bris was on Yosef's lap implies their spiritual birth, i.e., the entrance of their G-dly soul.

Another Halacha that we can derive from here regards the custom of having a Sandek at a Bris. It is not customary for the same person to serve as 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 community leader, 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 Gadol, the High Priest, offered Ketores – Incense whenever he wanted. In the same manner, as the leader of Egypt, Yosef was considered the leader of the community.

Yet another Jewish law regarding Torah study can be derived from this. One is obligated to teach Torah to his children and his grandchildren. However, as far as his great-grandchildren are concerned, he has no obligation to teach them, as long as there are more qualified teachers than him. Nevertheless, both Rashi and Onkelus state 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 the Jews in Egypt. He may have been a greater scholar than Yosef. Yosef governed all of Egypt (including his family). Accordingly, he had the law of one who is "occupied with the community's needs." This would exempt him from the obligation of teaching. Nevertheless, 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 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 you gained as much by reading this as I did by translating and adapting it.

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in health, happiness, Torah, and mitzvot

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