

בס"ד

# THE RASHI OF THE WEEK

Week of

## Parshas Bo

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Compiled from the works of

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## An Outline of the Rebbe's Explanation of Rashi Parshas Bo

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Rashi in His Own Words

**שמות י"א, ד':** ויאמר משה לה' פקדון הלילה אני יוצא בתוך מצרים:

**רש"י ד"ה כחצת הלילה:** כהחלק הלילה, כחצות, כמו (מלכים א' י"ט, כ"ה) כעלות, (תהלים קכ"ד, ג') בחרות אפם בנו, זהו פשוטו לישבו על אופניו, שאין חצות שם דבר של חצי. ורבותינו דרשוהו כמו בחצי הלילה (שמות י"ב, כ"ט) ואמרו, שאמר משה כחצות, דמשמע סמוך לו או לפניו או לאחריו, ולא אמר בחצות, שמא יטעו אצטגניני פרעה, ויאמרו משה בדאי הוא, אבל הקב"ה יודע עתיו ורגעיו אמר בחצות:

**Shemos 11:4:** Moshe said, "So said the Lord, At the dividing point of the night, I will go out into the midst of Egypt.

**Rashi Heading - At the dividing point of the night:** When the night is divided. פקדון is like (II Kings 3:20) "when the meal offering was offered up (כעלות)"; (it is also like) (Tehillim 124:3) "when their anger was kindled (בחרות) against us." This is its simple meaning, which fits its context that פקדון is not a noun denoting a half. Our Rabbis, however, interpreted it like פקדון at about midnight [lit., half the night], and they said that Moshe said פקדון about midnight, meaning near midnight, either before it or after it, but he did not say פקדון meaning at midnight, lest Pharaoh's astrologers err and say, "Moshe is a liar," but the Holy One, blessed be He, Who knows His times and His seconds, said פקדון at midnight.

### Synopsis

This week's Torah portion, Bo, tells us of the last of the ten plagues. Moshe warned Pharaoh of the tenth plague, the smiting of the firstborn, with the words<sup>1</sup>, "Moshe said, 'So said the Lord, At the dividing point of the night, I will go out into the midst of Egypt.'"

The words "at the dividing point of the night" seem somewhat ambiguous. The words can be translated as written. However, they can also be translated as "at about midnight." Rashi uses both translations. As usual, we ask why Rashi needs two translations. This is especially true because Moshe said it was at approximately midnight. As the Talmud asks, is it possible that Hashem wasn't sure of the time? Instead, as Rashi explains, Hashem told Moshe that He would come at exactly midnight. Fearing that the Egyptian astronomers would miscalculate, Moshe changed G-d's words from "at midnight" to "at about midnight."

Among the other questions is why Hashem needed to give a time for the plague to occur altogether. This was not the case with most of the plagues. Additionally, telling Pharaoh that it would happen at or about midnight was useless to him. Moshe did not tell him what day it would take place.

Rashi is answering all of these questions with his definition. Moshe was telling Pharaoh that G-d Almighty would carry out this plague. He and he alone can distinguish between one moment and the next.

1. Shemos 11:4.

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### Rashi's Explanation

In this week's Torah portion, Bo, we are told that<sup>2</sup> "So said Hashem, 'כַּחֲצוֹת הַלַּיְלָה – *Kachatzos Halayloh* - when the night is divided / at about midnight<sup>3</sup>, 'I will go out in the middle of Mitzraim.'" This was the prelude to the tenth and most severe plague, when G-d Almighty smote Egypt's firstborn.

As you can see, Rashi translated the Hebrew words "Kachatzos Halayloh" with both possible translations. The first is as follows. The Hebrew prefix "- כַּ Ka" has various translations. It can mean "when." The word "חֲצוֹת -Chatzos" can mean "it is divided in half." The word "הַלַּיְלָה - HaLayloh" means "the night." Hence, "כַּחֲצוֹת הַלַּיְלָה - Kachatzos HaLayloh" means "when the night is divided in half." The Hebrew prefix "כַּ - Ka" can also be translated as "approximately." The word "חֲצוֹת - Chatzos" can also mean the noun "midnight," i.e., half of the night. Based on this translation, "כַּחֲצוֹת הַלַּיְלָה - Kachatzos HaLayloh" would mean "at approximately midnight."

Rashi gives us both translations. Rashi first quotes the words from the verse "Kachatzos HaLayloh - כַּחֲצוֹת הַלַּיְלָה" and tells us that they mean "when the night is divided." He then continues, bringing various proofs that a noun can be used as a verb in this grammatical form. He writes that<sup>4</sup> "'when the meal offering was offered up - כַּעֲלוֹת. (He then cites another example from a verse in Tehillim<sup>5</sup>) 'When their anger was kindled - בָּחֲרוּת against us.' (He continues stating that) this is its simple meaning which fits its context, that חֲצוֹת is not a noun connoting a half."

Rashi then offers the second translation. "Our Rabbis, however, interpreted it as כַּחֲצֵי הַלַּיְלָה - about midnight. They said that Moshe said *about* midnight, meaning near midnight, either slightly before or after it. Moshe did not say *at* (*precisely*) midnight. (He was concerned that) Pharaoh's astrologers would themselves miscalculate and say that Moshe is a liar. (According to many versions of Rashi, including ours, he finishes his explanation with the words) but Hashem, Who knows His times and His seconds (actually), said 'at midnight,' "Despite Moshe repeating what Hashem said verbatim, he changed Hashem's words. The idea was that even for a fraction of a second by which the Egyptians may have miscalculated, they would not think Moshe, and consequently Hashem, was not telling the truth.

The supercommentary to Rashi, Sefer HaMizrachi<sup>6</sup>, and others explains that Rashi states both translations to explain an apparent difficulty with the verse. The Talmud asks the same question: "Does G-d have a doubt?" If the verse uses the words "חֲצוֹת הַלַּיְלָה - Chatzos HaLayloh" as a noun, meaning midnight, Moshe is declaring that G-d said that He will slay the first born at about midnight. Yet it's impossible to say Hashem does not know the exact time! Why would G-d approximate the time?

To explain this, Rashi cites two explanations. The first is that "חֲצוֹת הַלַּיְלָה - Chatzos HaLayloh" is not being used as a noun, meaning midnight. It rather expresses the night being divided. The prefix "כַּ - Ka" is being used to mean "when."

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2. See the previous note.

3. In Jewish law, Chatzos, which is usually translated as either midnight or noon, is not necessarily 12:00. Chatzos HaYom – midday, is the time which is the halfway mark between sunrise and sunset. Chatzos HaLayloh is 12 hours later.

4. Melochim Bais 3:20.

5. Tehillim 124:3.

6. Rabbi Eliyahu Mizrachi (1455 – 1525 or 26) was a great Talmudist and Halachic codifier who was born in Constantinople. He is perhaps best known for his supercommentary to Rashi.

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According to this explanation, Moshe is announcing that Hashem said that "at the exact moment when the night is divided in two, i.e., midnight, He will go out to Egypt and smite the firstborn.

According to Rashi's second explanation, the question is also explained. G-d did not say that he would come out at about midnight. He told Moshe that he would come "at midnight." However, to avoid the Egyptians' suspicion that G-d is not aware of the exact time, Moshe changed Hashem's words from "at" to "at about."

### Difficulties in Understanding Rashi

We assume that when one says "about" or "approximately," it shows that they have a doubt. Why should we assume that? Perhaps Hashem would go out in Egypt a few minutes before or after midnight. This is especially true in light of the Levush's<sup>7</sup> question; people often say "approximately" because they are rounding off a number rather than using a precise amount.

The seemingly obvious answer is that it says further on<sup>8</sup> that "it happened at midnight that G-d smote every firstborn in Egypt." This makes it clear that the killing of the firstborn was *precisely* at midnight, not near midnight. However, we cannot say that Rashi is basing his commentary here on something the Torah will say further. One of the principles Rashi consistently follows is that he does not rely on the beginner knowing a verse he has not yet learned.

Rashi states regarding his first explanation that "this is its simple meaning which fits its context, that 'חצות - Chatzos' is not a noun denoting a half." However, in his second explanation, he says, "Our Rabbis, however, interpreted it as 'כחצי' - at about midnight." Rashi is saying that this is a Midrashic, Aggadic explanation. Why does Rashi consider the first explanation Peshat – the simple meaning of the verse? Why should explaining the Hebrew word "חצות - Chatzos" as meaning when the night is divided be more in keeping with Peshat than defining it as a noun, midnight? This word is used in two other places in the Tanach<sup>9</sup>, which means midnight in both places! We must say that when Rashi concludes his first explanation and writes that "this is its simple meaning ... that 'חצות - Chatzos' is not a noun denoting a half," he is writing that to have the word fit into its present context, we must translate it differently than usual.

Why is Moshe so concerned that *perhaps* Pharaoh's astrologers will *suspect* he is a liar? Ultimately, all of the firstborn of Egypt will die simultaneously within moments of the time that Pharaoh's "scientists" calculated is the midpoint of the night. They will know that he was telling the truth. Why would this be a reason to change G-d's words?

According to our version of Rashi, he concludes his commentary with the words, "but Hashem Who knows His times and His seconds (actually) said 'at midnight' (rather than 'at about midnight' as said by Moshe)." We have stated many times that even when Rashi does quote Midrashic material from the Sages, he only quotes those parts that explain Peshat and can be explained according to Peshat. Why does Rashi say that G-d told Moshe "at midnight", forcing us to say that Moshe changed Hashem's words? Perhaps Hashem, realizing that the Egyptians would not know the exact moment of midnight, told Moshe to say "at about midnight."

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7. The Levush was the name given to ten volume work, primarily dealing with Jewish law, written by Rabbi Mordechai Yaffe (1530 – 1612). He was a great Talmudist, Halachic codifier and Kabbalist who was born in Prague.

8. Shemos 12:29.

9. Tehillim 119:62 and Iyov 34:20.

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Rashi is precise about the words he quotes for his commentary's heading. Why does Rashi cite the words "כַּחצוֹת הַלַּיְלָה – when the night is divided / at about midnight" when he does not explain the word "הַלַּיְלָה – night?" All that he is explaining is the word(s) "כַּחצוֹת - Kachatzos." According to Rashi's first explanation, it means when it is divided; according to the second explanation, it means about halfway. However, in either case, Rashi does not explain the word "night."

### The Explanation

We will understand the answer to these questions by first explaining the unusual expression Rashi uses here. There are instances in which Rashi gives two explanations, one according to Peshat and the second according to a Midrash. Generally, after Rashi explains the answer according to Peshat, he will say something along the lines of "This is the explanation according to Peshat; however, our Sages said in a Midrash ... "Here he says, "this is its simple meaning which fits its context ... Our Rabbis, however, interpreted it as ..." In this manner, Rashi clarified that the difficulty in the verse is neither because of the word חֲצוֹת nor because of the impossibility of saying that Hashem has any doubt. The difficulty that Rashi is explaining is that the explanation, according to Peshat, must fit with the context of the verse.

When the beginning student learns this verse, the obvious question that immediately bothers him is why Hashem had to give a time when the plague will strike, unlike most of the previous nine plagues. Among the other nine plagues, there were only three that Hashem made known when they would take place. Namely, only the plagues of pestilence, hail, and locusts were given a specific time frame. Regarding pestilence and locusts, Hashem only let Pharaoh know they would occur the next day. The only plague, besides the death of the firstborn, where Hashem informed Pharaoh exactly when it would happen, was hail. The verse states<sup>10</sup>, "I am going to rain down at this time tomorrow." Rashi comments that Moshe "made a scratch on the wall (to show that) 'Tomorrow, when the sun reaches here, the hail will come down.' "However, that was for a particular purpose. It was to allow the Egyptians who feared G-d the opportunity to remove their livestock, etc., from the fields. Here, that reason does not apply at all.

By explaining "חֲצוֹת - Chatzos," Hashem's words did not inform Pharaoh when the plague would take place. All that he knew was that it would take place at about midnight. Moshe never told him the day on which it would occur. This knowledge was seemingly useless to Pharaoh.

Therefore, we must say that the purpose of telling Pharaoh that the plague would occur at *about* midnight was not to let him know when to expect it. We must say that Moshe gave a qualitative idea about the plague. Saying that it would be "at approximately midnight" emphasized that "I will go out," this plague will be performed by G-d Almighty Himself in His essence and glory.

We need to understand how foretelling that the plague would occur at about midnight would help to express that Hashem Himself would slay the firstborn. On the contrary, as mentioned above, Moshe demonstrated to Pharaoh that the plague of hail would occur at the exact time God promised. On the other hand, Moshe told Pharaoh that it would be at *about* midnight! How could that help Pharaoh understand that this plague was coming directly from G-d?

It is to answer this question that Rashi begins by translating "כַּחצוֹת - Kachatzos" as "when the night was divided."

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10. Shemos 9:18.

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The moment that the night is divided in half is not a duration; it's not a second or a nanosecond. It cannot be measured in any way, shape or form. If it were a duration of time which could be measured, it would be divisible as well. Only G-d Almighty Himself could be able to determine this moment. That is how the words "כַּחֲצוֹת הַלַּיְלָה – when the night is divided" demonstrate that Hashem Himself would go out into Mitzraim and destroy the firstborn<sup>11</sup>.

However, we still need to explain why the Torah uses the word "כַּחֲצוֹת - Kachatzos," which can be understood in two different ways. Not only does this make the meaning unclear, but Rashi must bring proof from the Tanach to make his point. Moreover, one proof did not suffice; he needed to cite two. It would have been much more apparent and understandable, according to Peshat, had the Torah said, "בַּחֲצוֹת – at midnight!"

Therefore, Rashi adds a second explanation, which is inconsistent with *Peshat* (although consistent with the *Midrash*). According to the second explanation, Moshe began saying, "So said Hashem," and concluded, "at about midnight." However, even according to what our Rabbis said in a Midrash, "Hashem Who knows His times and His seconds (actually) said "at midnight." According to "Our Rabbis," this also makes the point that "I will go out in Mitzraim" – because otherwise, there would have been no reason to assign a time to the plague (as explained above at length). However, since we do not mention G-d telling Moshe one thing and then telling him to transmit it to Pharaoh differently, it is Midrashic rather than Peshat.

*(Adapted from a talk given on Shabbos Parshas Bo and Yisro 5740)*

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

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11. This also explains why Rashi also cites the word "הַלַּיְלָה – the night" in the heading, despite the fact that he only seems to be explaining the word "חֲצוֹת – half." By including the seemingly extra words, he emphasizes that unlike the plague of hail it was 1.) At night, so there was no way to make a scratch on the wall in order to see when the sun reaches it, and 2.) It was not at a particular second, but rather at an immeasurable moment of time.

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