

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': ניאמר משה פה אומר ה' פקצת 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. פקצת is like (II Kings 3:20) "when the meal offering was offered up (פְּעֻלוֹת)"; (it is also like) (Tehillim 124:3) "when their anger was kindled (בְּהָרוֹת) against us." This is its simple meaning, which fits its context that פקצת is not a noun denoting a half. Our Rabbis, however, interpreted it like פקצי הלילה, *at about* midnight [lit., half the night], and they said that Moshe said, פקצת, *about* midnight, meaning near midnight, either before it or after it, but he did not say בפקצת, 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, בפקצת, *at* midnight.

**A Brief 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 first born 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 at approximately midnight. As the Talmud asks, is it possible that Hashem wasn't sure of the time? Rather, as Rashi explains, Hashem told Moshe that He would come at exactly midnight. Moshe, fearing that the Egyptian astronomers would miscalculate, changed G-d's words from "at midnight," to "at about midnight."

Among the other questions are why it was necessary for Hashem to give a time that the plague would take place altogether. This was not the case with most of the plagues. Additionally, telling Pharaoh that it would happen at, or about midnight, was of no benefit to him. Moshe did not tell him what day it would take place.

Rashi is actually 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, 'כחצות הלילה – *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 the first born of Egypt.

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

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

Rashi then offers the second translation. "Our Rabbis, however, interpreted it as כחצי הלילה - 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,' "In other words, despite the fact that Moshe generally repeated what Hashem said verbatim, in this instance he changed Hashem's words. The idea was, that even for the fraction of a second by which the Egyptians may have miscalculated, they would not think that Moshe, and consequently Hashem, was not telling the truth.

The supercommentary to Rashi, Sefer HaMizrachi<sup>6</sup>, as well as others, explain that Rashi states both translations in order to explain an apparent difficulty with the verse. It is the same question which the Talmud<sup>7</sup> asks; "Does G-d have a doubt?" If the verse is using the words "חצות הלילה - 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 that Hashem does not know the exact time! Why would G-d approximate the time?

It is in order to explain this that Rashi cites two explanations. The first is that "חצות הלילה - Chatzos HaLayloh" is

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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.

7. See Talmud Berachos 3, b

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not being used as a noun, meaning midnight. It is rather expressing the night being divided. The prefix “כ - Ka” is being used to mean “when.” 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 first born.

According to Rashi’s second explanation the question is also explained. G-d did not say that he will come out at about midnight. He told Moshe that he would come “at midnight.” However, in order to avoid a suspicion on the part of the Egyptians 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 are assuming that when one says “about” or “approximately,” it shows that they have a doubt. Why should we assume that? Perhaps Hashem was going to go out in Egypt a few minutes before or after midnight. This is especially true in light of the Levush’s<sup>8</sup> question; people very 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>9</sup> that “it happened at midnight that G-d smote every first born in Egypt.” This makes it clear that the killing of the first born was *precisely* at midnight, not near midnight. However, we cannot say that Rashi is basing his commentary here, on something which the Torah will say further on. One of the principles which Rashi consistently follows is that he does not rely on the beginner knowing a verse which he has not yet learned.

Rashi states regarding his first explanation that “this is its simple meaning which fits its context, that 'הצוֹת - Chatzos' is not a noun denoting a half.” However, in his second explanation he says that, “Our Rabbis, however, interpreted it as 'כהצִי הלילה - 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 "הצוֹת - Chatzos" as meaning when the night is divided be more in keeping with Peshat than explaining it as a noun, midnight. This word is used in two other places in the Tanach<sup>10</sup>, and in both places, it means midnight! We must say that when Rashi concludes his first explanation and writes that “this is its simple meaning ... that "הצוֹת - Chatzos" is not a noun denoting a half,” he is writing that in order 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* that 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 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 which explain Peshat and can be explained according to Peshat. Why does Rashi say that G-d told Moshe “at midnight” which forces us to say that Moshe changed Hashem’s words? Perhaps Hashem, realizing that the Egyptians would not know the exact moment of

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8. 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.

9. Shemos 12:29.

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

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midnight, actually told Moshe to say “at about midnight.”

Rashi is precise about the words which he quotes for the heading of his commentary. Why does Rashi cite the words “כחצות הלילה – when the night is divided / at about midnight,” when he is not explaining the word “הלילה – night?” All that he is explaining is the word(s) "כחצות - Kachatzos." According to Rashi's first explanation it means when it is divided, and according to the second explanation it means about half way. However, in either case Rashi is not explaining the word "night."

### The Explanation

We will understand the answer to all of these questions by first explaining the unusual expression Rashi uses here. There are instances that 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 חצות, nor because of the impossibility of saying that Hashem has any doubt. The difficulty which 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 which 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 which 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 that 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>11</sup> “I am going to rain down at this time tomorrow.” Rashi comments there 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 special purpose. It was in order to allow the Egyptians that feared G-d the opportunity to remove their livestock, etc. from the fields. Here that reason does not apply at all.

By explaining "חצות - 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 take place at *about* midnight was not in order to let him know when to expect it. We must say that Moshe was giving over a qualitative idea about the plague. Saying that it would be “at approximately midnight” emphasized the fact that “I will go out,” this plague will be performed by G-d Almighty Himself in His essence and His glory.

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

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11. Shemos 9:18.

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It is in order to answer this question that Rashi begins by translating "כַּחצוֹת - Kachatzos" as "when the night was divided." The moment that the night is divided in half is not a duration of time; it's not a second or a nanosecond. It cannot be measured in any way, shape or form. If it was a duration of time which could be measured, it would be divisible as well. Only G-d Almighty Himself could possibly be able to determine this moment. That is how the words "כַּחצוֹת הַלַּיְלָה – when the night is divided" demonstrates that Hashem Himself would go out into Mitzraim and destroy the first born<sup>12</sup>.

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

Therefore, Rashi adds a second explanation which is not totally consistent with *Peshat* (although it is 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 find any mention of G-d telling Moshe one thing, and then telling him to transmit to Pharaoh differently, it is Midrashic rather than Peshat.

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

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12. 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 "חצוֹת – 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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