

בס"ד

THE RASHI OF THE WEEK

Week of

Parshas Nitzovim

27 Elul, 5781 – September 4, 2021

Compiled from the works of
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**An Outline of the Rebbe's Explanation of Rashi
Parshas Nitzovim**

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Rashi in His Own Words

דברים ל', ו': ומל ה' אלקיך את לבבך ואת לבב זרעך לאהבה את ה' אלקיך בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך למען חייך:

Devorim 30:6: And the Lord your G-d will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, (in order) to love the Lord your G-d with all your heart and with all your soul, for the sake of your life.

Synopsis

In this week's Torah portion, Nitzovim, we are told that upon returning to the Lord, He will gather our exiles and restore the land to the Jewish people. Furthermore, the Torah tells us that¹ "The Lord your G-d will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, (in order) to love the Lord your G-d with all your heart and with all your soul, for the sake of your life."

Rashi's primary goal is to explain Peshat. Hence Rashi answers any question which one could pose based on Peshat. Yet here, we have a seemingly obvious question which Rashi does not address. How can the Torah say that G-d will circumcise our hearts? Earlier, the Torah said that we must circumcise our hearts' (spiritual) "foreskin." There are two explanations for this. One is the blockage of our hearts. In other words, this spiritual "foreskin" prevents our hearts from connecting with Hashem. The second explanation is the foolishness of our hearts, which leads us along wrong paths. However, why would we need to circumcise, or cut, our heart itself? Yet Rashi does not explain to a beginning student the meaning of "circumcising a heart!"

The explanation is that before this verse, the Torah went on at great length, describing our suffering throughout the long exile. It also told what led to this bitter exile. Namely, it was our straying from Hashem and following our hearts. What caused us to stray from Hashem? The inappropriate things which we saw in Egypt. Human nature is that first the eyes see, and then the heart desires. G-d "circumcising" our hearts means that He will separate the connection between our eyes and heart, thereby removing the cause of our straying. Love of Hashem will follow as a matter of course.

Rashi's Explanation

In this week's Torah portion, Nitzovim, we are told that as a result of returning to the Lord, He will gather the exiles and restore the land to the Jewish people. The Torah tells us that² "You will return to Hashem with all your heart and with all your soul, and you will listen to His voice according to all that I am commanding you and

1. Our Parshah, Devorim 30:6.

2. Ibid. 30:2-3.

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your children today; then Hashem will bring back your exiles, and He will have mercy upon you. He will once again gather you from all the nations where He had dispersed you." In our verse, the Torah goes on to tell us the reward for returning to Him. It tells us that³ "The Lord your G-d will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, (in order) to love the Lord your G-d with all your heart and with all your soul, for the sake of your life." Rashi finds no need to explain anything whatsoever in this verse.

Difficulties in Understanding Rashi

As has been discussed numerous times, Rashi explains Peshat, meaning the simple understanding of the Torah. Not only that, but Rashi answers each question that one could ask, according to Peshat. The only tool a child who is just beginning to study the Torah needs to understand the Torah from beginning to end is Rashi's commentary. This being the case, if we find a question with which Rashi does not deal, it must mean one of two things. Often, upon further examination, we will discover that it is not a question at all. Alternatively, it may be a question which Rashi answered in the comments he made earlier.

In the above-cited verse, we find a question that begs to be asked. Why does the Torah say that G-d will "circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring?" What is the meaning of circumcising the heart? In an earlier verse, the Torah spoke of circumcising the *foreskin* of the heart. Rashi explained that this refers to a spiritual foreskin. The Torah said that⁴ "you shall circumcise the foreskin of your heart." There Rashi cites the words "the foreskin of your heart" and explains that it means "the blockage and covering of your heart." the spiritual "foreskin" of the heart which must be removed

Rashi does not deal with this obvious question in our verse poses an even more incredible difficulty. There are several Aramaic translations of the Torah. Targum Onkelos is the standard translation. In most instances (unlike other Aramaic translations), it translates and explains the Torah according to Peshat. Here the Targum translates this verse as, "The Lord your G-d will remove the *foolishness* of your heart." This translation is clearly a response to our question. However, Rashi does not deal with this question at all.

The Explanation

We can understand why Hashem "will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring" based on the verses preceding it. First, the Torah says⁵ that "And it will be when all these things come upon you ... *and you will return* to the Lord, your G-d, *with all your heart and with all your soul.*" The Torah then continues, "...and the Lord, your God, will circumcise your heart ..." In other words, the prophecy that G-d will circumcise the hearts of all Jews follows the prophecy that the Jewish Nation will return to Hashem with a complete heart. Once the Jew's hearts are whole, it would not be appropriate to say that Hashem will circumcise the "foreskin" of their

3. See Footnote 1.

4. Parshas Eikev, Devorim 10:16.

5. Our Parshah, Devorim 30:1-6.

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hearts. He will have removed both the "blockage and covering" (as previously stated by Rashi) and the "foolishness" of the Jew's hearts (as explained by Onkelus)!

Therefore, we must say that by circumcision, the Torah is referring to a higher level of Divine service. Previously, the Torah spoke about "negative spiritual circumcision," i.e., removing the foolishness and blockage from our hearts. Here, the Torah is discussing "positive spiritual circumcision," meaning that it is a product of the love of Hashem. This is in keeping with the end of the verse, "that you may love the Lord your G-d." To put it somewhat differently, earlier, the Torah was talking about returning to Hashem out of fear or awe. Here the Torah is discussing returning to G-d out of love for Him.

However, if the Torah speaks of positive action, meaning loving Hashem, why is it expressed with negative language, circumcising, cutting off, or removing the blockage? Furthermore, why does the Torah say that *G-d* will circumcise our hearts? If the point is to love Hashem, that is something which we must do ourselves; it is a positive commandment.

This, too, will be understood by understanding the verses leading up to it. The Torah discussed at great length the trouble that will occur to us in exile. The fact that⁶ "they (the Jews) abandoned the covenant of the Lord" is the cause of exile. The Torah describes the factors which led to this behavior⁷. "For you know ... in the land of Egypt ... you *saw* their abominations ... Perhaps there is among you one ... *whose heart strays* ... to go and worship the deities of those nations ..." From this, we can understand that "the Lord your G-d will circumcise your heart" removes the cause of spiritual descent. It removes even the *possibility* of *seeing* their abominations, as a result of which "our hearts *stray*."

In other words, there are two general causes for a Jew straying from the path of Torah and Mitzvos:

- a. The heart itself lacks something; the "foolishness" or a "blockage" of the heart.
- b. Something outside of the heart, something external, causes one to stray. This is in keeping with Rashi's statement⁸, "the eyes see, and (consequently) the heart desires." The fact that one saw something tempting *brought him* to desire it with his heart.

Based on the above, we can understand that the term circumcision, cutting away or removing, appropriately describes a means to bring the heart to love Hashem. The cutting refers to removing the cause of straying from G-d. It means *cutting* the connection between the eyes and the heart.

Furthermore, we can understand why Hashem must circumcise our hearts; we cannot do it ourselves. A person, through his Divine service, can remove a blockage of the heart. However, one cannot remove the

6. Our Parshah, Devorim 29:24.

7. Our Parshah, Devorim 29:15–17.

8. See Rashi's comments to Parshas Shelach, Bamidbar 15:39.

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connection between vision and the heart. That is a part of a person's nature which G-d created. Hence only He can remove it.

This also explains the continuation of the verse. "The Lord, your G-d, will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, (so that you may) love the Lord your G-d with all your heart and with all your soul." He will remove the potential cause for straying; hence we will naturally come to love Hashem.

A Deeper Lesson from Rashi

The two types of circumcision taught in the Torah represent two different levels of G-dly service. The type of circumcision whereby we remove the blockage from our hearts is the service of Teshuvah, meaning returning to G-d. The second is where Hashem circumcises our hearts. This immediately brings about our love of G-d. This is associated with the love of Hashem.

According to Rashi's approach to our verse, it is discussing the service of love of G-d. We have already returned to G-d with all of our heart and soul. He removes the one possible cause for straying, and we automatically love Him. However, according to Onkelos, it is the idea of Teshuvah, our removing the foolishness from ourselves.

Our Torah portion, Nitzovim, is always read before Rosh Hashanah. In other words, we read it at the end of the month of Elul, which is the last month of the Jewish calendar. What is our job throughout the month of Elul? How do we prepare ourselves for the New Year? This is hinted at by an acronym formed from a verse in the Song of Songs, called in Hebrew Shir Hashirim⁹. The verse reads¹⁰, "I am to my beloved, and my beloved is to me." The Hebrew is "אני לדודי ודודי לי." The first letter of each word forms an acrostic which spells the name of this month, "Elul – אלול." There is a connection between the month of Elul and "my beloved." This demonstrates that an essential part of our service is the love of Hashem.

However, "I am to my beloved" precedes "my beloved is to me." in other words, the job begins with us. Only after our efforts is "my beloved is to me." This is Hashem's response to our efforts.

The Alter Rebbe uses a well-known allegory to describe this month. He compares our service throughout the month of Elul to a king who is returning to his palace. On his way back, he stops in a field. There, he graciously greets everyone without exception with a pleasant countenance. Once he returns to his palace, it is not easy to arrange to see the king. Moreover, the king does not smile at everyone. Even if one does merit entering the king's chamber, he must first make the proper preparations.

The same is true throughout this month. Hashem is, as so to speak, in the field. He greets each one of us with a "smiling countenance." Our service is in a manner of "I am to my beloved." However, He provides us with

9. The entire Song of Songs appears to be a love story. Indeed, it is the greatest love story of all time. It allegorically depicts the love between the Jewish people and G-d. He is our husband and we are His wife.

10. Shir Hashirim 6:3.

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great help to attain that level. This means that He is *in the field* (metaphorically speaking) to grant us great revelations. This enables us to reach our goal. He reveals an extremely high level of G-dliness, which is known as the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy. This gives us a "boost" to provide us with the strength to accomplish what we must in preparation for the New Year.

Once the New Year begins, G-d is, as so to speak, in the palace. Then, one requires exceptional merit to greet "the King." We must use all of the energy He bestowed upon us throughout the month of Elul to merit greeting Him.

Hashem should help that all of us, without exception, be inscribed and sealed for a good, sweet year. In particular, we should merit the blessing foretold in our Torah portion of Moshiach Now!

(Adapted from talks given on Shabbos Parshas Nitzovim 5734, and Shabbos Parshas Nitzovim Vayelech 5743)

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

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