

Parashat Vayishlach 5777, 2016:

*Rashi and the Pursuit of Truth*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzhak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, David ben Elazar Yehoshua, the refuah shlaimah of Devorah bat Chana, Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka and Leah bat Shifra, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* contains the rather perplexing *pasuk* (verse): “And G-d went up from him [Jacob] in the place where He had spoken with him.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 35:13, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) We immediately find that “the place where He had spoken with him” is not identified. These words, therefore, do little to advance our understanding of the encounter that transpired between the Almighty and Jacob. Little wonder, then, that this mysterious phrase led Rashi (1040-1105) to declare: “I do not know what this is coming to teach us” - “*aini yodeah mah melamdanu.*”

Rabbi Shabbetai Bass (1641-1718), in his celebrated supercommentary on Rashi’s work of Torah exegesis, *Siftei Chachamim*, noted that Rashi cited the words of Reish Lakish: “The Patriarchs were surely the chariots [i.e. the footstools] of the Almighty,” (*Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 82:6) in his explanation of, “And He finished speaking with him, and G-d went up from above Abraham.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 17:22) Why, therefore, asked Rav Bass, did Rashi refrain from employing this interpretation to elucidate our text? He replied that Rashi viewed our verse’s expression, “in the place where He had spoken with him,” as superfluous, since it is not found in the previously referenced parallel verse. As such, Rashi found no rationale for the inclusion of

this phrase in the Torah. It was, therefore, his unshakable intellectual honesty that was the driving force behind his noteworthy admission, “*aini yodeah mah melamdanu.*”

Professor Nechama Leibowitz *zatzal* (1905-1997), one of the most renowned Bible scholars and teachers of the previous generation, built upon the conceptual underpinning of Rav Bass’ gloss. She underscored both Rashi’s humility and never-ending search for the truth in her discussion of the one other instance in which Rashi states, “*aini yodeah mah melamdanu*”:

Why did Rashi see fit to proclaim to the world his failure to find a plausible explanation of the superfluous text? Surely the admonition of our Sages to “teach your tongue to say ‘I do not know’” [*Talmud Bavli, Berachot 4a*] was meant to apply only in response to an inquiry. But no one was called upon gratuitously to proclaim his ignorance. Surely Rashi has left many passages in the Torah unexplained, and he could very well have passed over our text without comment, since he had none to make.

After formulating this classic problem of Rashi analysis, Professor Leibowitz answered this question in a manner that teaches us a great deal regarding Rashi’s approach to Torah and truth:

But this presents no difficulty. Rashi left those texts unexplained which were plain to him that he presumed would be clear to any Torah student. If he had remained silent, in our context, he would have been guilty of misrepresentation, allowing scholars to imagine that everything was crystal clear, failing to draw attention to a difficulty in the text. He therefore proclaimed to the world his failure to give adequate explanation [of our phrase, “in the place where He had spoken with him,”] throwing out a challenge to commentators and scholars to search, probe deeper and labor in their efforts to find their own solution. (*Studies in the Book of Genesis: In the Context of Ancient and Modern Jewish Bible Commentary*, translated and adapted from the Hebrew by Aryeh Newman, page 287, brackets my own)

For Professor Leibowitz, the words, “*aini yodeah mah melamdanu,*” present Rashi as the rebbe *par excellence*, who unhesitatingly put forth “a challenge to commentators and scholars to search, probe deeper and labor in their efforts to find their own solution.” In so doing, Rashi emerges as the exemplar of the individual praised in *Sefer Malachi*: “True teaching (*Torat emet*) was in his mouth, and injustice was not found on his lips...” (2:6)

With Hashem's help, may we have the strength of character to emulate Rashi's unswerving pursuit of the truth when we encounter the Almighty's holy Torah. Moreover, may we ever remember that the Torah is the ultimate source of Divine wisdom: "Delve and delve into it, for all is in it; see with it; grow old and worn in it; do not budge from it, for there is nothing better."

(*Pirkei Avot* 5:21, translation, Chabad.org) *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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They may also be found on [YUTorah.org](http://YUTorah.org) using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* for Women on "Tefilah: Haskafah and Analysis," may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.