

**Parshat Va'era**  
**Does the Midrash Fit the Text?**  
**Rina Krautwirth - Advanced Kollel: Executive Ordination**

**וְגַם הִקְמַתִּי אֶת־בְּרִיתִי אִתְּם לָתֵת לָהֶם אֶת־אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן אֶת אֶרֶץ מְגֻרֵיהֶם אֲשֶׁר־גָּרוּ בָּהּ:  
I also established My covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan,  
the land in which they lived as sojourners (Exodus 6:4).**

At the start of Parshat Vaeira, God tells Moshe that God will fulfill the covenant to give Israel their ancestral land of Canaan. This verse seems perplexing. Did the forefathers in reality have a claim on the land of Israel? The Midrash, as quoted by Rashi in Exodus 6:9 (third comment), points out the inconsistency between this verse and information that appears elsewhere in the Torah:

**וְגַם הִקְמַתִּי וגו' – וכשבקש אברהם לקבר את שרה לא מצא עד שקנה בדמים מרובים, וכן יצחק – עוררו עליו על הבארות שחפר, וכן יעקב: ויקן את חלקת השדה (בראשית ל"ג:י"ט) לנטות אהלו, ולא הרהרו אחר מדותי, ואתה אמרת: למה הרעתה (שמות ה':כ"ב).**

In Exodus 6:4, it sounds as though the forefathers had some sort of claim to the land of Israel. However, the Midrash reminds us, when Avraham wished to bury Sarah in the land of Israel, he needed to purchase the land from Ephron at a very high price. Likewise, when Yitzchak dug wells in the land of Israel, people contested these wells. Finally, the Torah elsewhere states that Yaakov had to purchase land on which to pitch his tent. In all three cases, it sounds as though the forefathers never actually had ownership of the land of Israel, as Exodus 6:4 would have it seem. The Midrash uses this inconsistency to teach a moral lesson, as it so often does. The Midrash connects verse four to an earlier verse, Exodus 5:22, and envisions a conversation between G-d and Moshe about how in spite of not having a claim on the land, the forefathers did not question G-d's attributes (*midot*) whereas Moshe earlier had complained:

**וַיָּשָׁב מֹשֶׁה אֶל־יְקֹוֹק וַיֹּאמֶר אֲדֹנָי לְמָה הִרְעַלְתָּהּ לָעַם הַזֶּה לְמָה זָה שְׁלַחְתָּנִי:**

Then Moses returned to the LORD and said, "O Lord, why did You bring harm upon this people? Why did You send me?" (Exodus 5:22).

While this Midrash might raise some theological questions, such as why the Midrash faults Moshe for complaining, Rashi finds this Midrash difficult from a technical perspective:

**ואין המדרש מתיישב אחר המקרא מפני כמה דברים: אחת – שלא נאמר: זשמי יי לא שאלו לי, ואם תאמר: לא הודיעם שכך שמו, הרי תחילת שנגלה על אברהם בין הבתרים נאמר: אני יי אשר הוצאתיך מאור כשדים (בראשית ט"ו:ז). ועוד, היאך הסמיכה נמשכת בדברים שהוא סומך לכאן: וגם אני שמעתי וגו' (שמות ו':ה) לכן אמור לבני ישראל (שמות ו':ו)**

Rashi raises two objections as to how the Midrash about the forefathers does not seem to fit in with the *peshat* meaning of the text. Firstly, the first verse quoted above about the



forefathers, Exodus 6:3, does not state, “and My name they did not ask,” i.e. it does not seem to refer to questioning of G-d’s ways. Secondly, the Midrashic interpretation does not fit in contextually – *semichut* – with the surrounding verses, Exodus 6:5 and 6:6, which discuss G-d remembering the covenant to the forefathers and redeeming the Jews from Egypt.

Here we see a key aspect of Rashi that points to his overall methodology. Rashi views this Midrash as going against the *peshat*, the plain meaning of the text. Rashi in his commentary on Beresheet 3:8 spells out in a programmatic statement his approach to when he brings a Midrash in his commentary and when he does not. Prior to Rashi, when anyone learned the parsha, they used the Midrash as commentary. Rashi innovatively explains that he only brings Midrashim that support the *peshat*. Beresheet 3:8 states:

וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ אֶת-קוֹל יְהוָה אֱלֹקִים מִתְהַלֵּךְ בַּגֵּן לְרוּחַ הַיּוֹם וַיִּתְחַבֵּא הָאָדָם וְאִשְׁתּוֹ מִפְּנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹקִים  
בְּתוֹךְ עֵץ הַגֵּן: –

They heard the sound of the LORD God moving about in the garden at the breezy time of day; and the man and his wife hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden.”

In his commentary on this verse, Rashi perhaps famously states:

וישמעו. יש מדרשי אגדה רבים וכבר סדרום רבותינו על מכונום בב"ר ובשאר מדרשות; ואני לא  
באתי אלא לפשוטו של מקרא ולאגדה המישבת דברי המקרא דבר דבור על אפניו<sup>1</sup>; וישמעו.  
מה שמעו? שמעו את קול הקב"ה שהיה מתהלך בגן:

And they heard — There are many Midrashic explanations and our Teachers have already collected them in their appropriate places in Genesis Rabbah and in other Midrashim. **I, however, am only concerned with the plain sense of Scripture and with such Agadoth that explain the words of Scripture in a manner that fits in with them.** And they heard — What did they hear? They heard the sound of the Holy One, blessed be He, as He walked in the garden.

The key phrase of “**in a manner that fits in** with words of the text” (literally *seats* or *supports*) has led to much scholarship. This exact phrase echos in our Rashi, the commentary on Exodus 6:9, where Rashi writes: **מתישב אחר המקרא** – **But this Midrashic exposition does not fit in** with the text for several reasons.”

Rashi then concludes that he prefers to read the text literally, presumably based on his comments on Exodus 6:4 that the verse refers to the promise that G-d made to the forefathers. However, if one wishes to, one may use the Midrashic interpretation:

לכה אני אומר יתישב המקרא על פשוטו, דבור דבור על אפניו, והדרשה תדרש, ששנאמר "הלוא כה  
דברי כאש נאם ה' וכפטיש יפוצץ סלע" (ירמיהו כ"ג) – מתחלק לקמה ניצוצות (סנהדרין ל"ד):

<sup>1</sup> This phrase references a verse in Mishlei: **דבר דבור על אפניו**: – Like golden apples in silver showpieces Is a phrase well turned.



Therefore I say: **let Scripture be explained in its literal sense so that each statement fits into its proper setting**, but the Midrashic exposition may also be given, if you like, as it is said (Jeremiah 23:29) “Is not my word like as fire, saith the Lord, and like a hammer which, by the force of its own blow, the rock at which it strikes shatters in pieces.”

Regarding this last piece, Nechama Liebowitz in her *gilyonot* (worksheets) asks about the significance of the hammer analogy in the verse quoted by Rashi, as an open question. I will leave this as a thought question for the reader to ponder



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