

Parshat Chukat

Moshe and Israel

In this week’s parsha, it tells of the messengers that were sent to Sichon to request permission to pass through his land. The verse states that “Israel sent messengers.” This Sicha analyzes the reason why at times the Torah says Moshe sent and other times it states that Israel sent. Doing so, Rashi sheds new light on the essence of Jewish leadership.

This week’s *parsha* tells of the messengers that were sent to the Amorites to request passage through their territory in order to journey to the Land of Israel.

Text 1

Israel sent messengers to Sichon the king of the Amorites, saying: "Let me pass through your land. We will not turn into fields or vineyards, nor drink well water. We shall walk along the king's road, until we have passed through your territory."

Bamidbar 21:21-22

On the verse, Rashi comments on the words “Israel sent messengers” and notes as follows:

Text 2

Elsewhere, the sending [of messengers] is ascribed to Moshe, as it says, “So I sent messengers from the desert of Kedeimot” (Devarim 2:26). Similarly, “Moshe sent messengers to the king of Edom...” (Bamidbar 20: 14), but concerning Yiftach it says, “Israel sent messengers to the king of Edom...” (Shoftim 11:17). These verses supplement each other; one holds back [information by not informing us who authorized the sending of the messengers] and the other reveals [that Moshe sent them].

Moshe is Israel, and Israel is Moshe, to teach you that the leader of the generation is like the entire generation, because the leader is everything.

Rashi, Bamidbar 21:21

Rashi explains that although elsewhere the Torah insinuates that Moshe was the one that sent the messengers to Sichon and not Israel, there is actually no contradiction between the verses. The reason for this is because Moshe is Israel and Israel is Moshe. An act of Moshe can be referred to as an act of Israel. Being that the two can be used interchangeably, here the verse states that Israel sent the messengers, while elsewhere the verse states that Moshe sent the messengers.

While superficially Rashi’s intent is to explain the seeming contradiction between the verses as to whether the messengers were sent by Moshe or by Israel, this cannot be the case for the following reason:

The verse stating that *Moshe* sent messengers is stated in the book of Devarim, which comes after the book in which our Torah portion is found—Bamidbar. As such there is no reason to explain the contradiction here.

Text 3

“So I sent messengers from the desert of Kedemot to Sichon, king of Cheshbon, with words of peace, saying, ‘Allow me to pass through your land: I will go along by the highway, I will turn neither to the right nor to the left. You shall sell me food for money that I may eat; and give to me water for money, that I may drink; I will only pass through by my feet.’”

Devarim 2:26-28

As a rule, Rashi only answers questions on a verse as they arise. Rashi, who wrote his commentary with the assumption that the reader is studying the Torah in order, does not assume that the reader is aware of a verse that is stated later in the Torah.

As such, when the reader arrives at the verse in the current Torah portion which states that “Israel sent messengers,” he will not yet be bothered by the fact that *later* the Torah says that Moshe sent these messengers.

Accordingly, it would make sense for Rashi to answer the contradiction of the verses in the book of Devarim, and not to explain it in the book of Bamidbar, where the reader is not yet aware of the contradiction between the verses.

Based on the above rule, it is clear that Rashi’s intent is *not* to answer a contradiction of the verse in Devarim, but to answer a question that arises on this verse *itself*. (Nonetheless, through explaining the verse at hand, Rashi answers *as well* the contradiction between the verses in each book.)

Explanation

Rashi’s intent is not to explain the discrepancy between the two verses regarding the

messengers sent to Sichon. Rather, his intent is to explain the difference between the expression of the verse concerning the messengers that were sent to Sichon and a *previous* verse regarding the messengers that were sent to Edom.

Regarding the messengers that were sent to Edom, the verse states:

Text 4

Moshe sent messengers from Kadesh to the king of Edom: "So says your brother, Israel, 'You know of all the hardship that has befallen us... Please let us pass through your land; we will not pass through fields or vineyards, nor will we drink well water. We will walk along the king's road, and we will turn neither to the right nor to the left until we have passed through your territory.'"

Bamidbar 20:14-17

Rashi is bothered as to why regarding the messengers that were sent to Edom the Torah states that “Moshe sent messengers,” while concerning the messengers that were sent to Sichon the verse states “Israel sent messengers.”

In order to answer *this* question, Rashi explains that Israel and Moshe are used interchangeably because “Moshe is Israel, and Israel is Moshe.”

He explains this idea through clarifying that *even* regarding the messengers that were sent Sichon itself, the Torah attributes the sending first to the Jewish people, stating, “Israel sent messengers,” and elsewhere the verse testifies that Moshe sent the messengers.

By explaining that Moshe and Israel are used interchangeably, it is understood that although the earlier verse stated that “*Moshe* sent messengers...to the king of Edom,” the Torah can

nevertheless declare that “*Israel* sent messengers to Sichon the king of the Amorites.”

Additional questions

While the above explains Rashi’s general intent in his comments, the specifics of Rash’s elucidation are not understood. Rashi stated,

Text 5

These verses supplement each other; one holds back and the other reveals. Moshe is Israel, and Israel is Moshe, to teach you that the leader of the generation is like the entire generation, because the leader is everything.

Rashi, Bamidbar 21:21

- A) For what purpose does Rashi preface his explanation with a seemingly superfluous statement of, “these verses supplement each other; one holds back and the other reveals?” It does not seem to add to the explanation.

[Seemingly one might be able to answer the above question by explaining that Rashi is merely quoting the Medrash that uses these words.

Text 6

All of Torah is interdependent. What one holds back the other reveals. Here [the verse states] “Israel sent messengers” and elsewhere the sending of messengers is ascribed to Moshe, as it says, “So I sent messengers from the desert of Kedeimot” (Devarim 2:26). Elsewhere [the verse states] “Moshe sent messengers to the king of Edom...” (Bamidbar 20: 14). These verses supplement each other; one holds back as Moshe is Israel, and Israel is Moshe, to teach you

that the head of the generation is the entire generation.

Medrash Tanchuma, Bamidbar 23

As such, one can explain the reason that Rashi uses the preface that “these verses supplement each other; one holds back and the other reveals” is because he is quoting the Medrash that uses this terminology.

This, however, is not an adequate explanation for the following reasons:

- 1) When Rashi explains a verse, his intent is *only* to explain the rudimentary understanding of the verse. As such, if he does quote from the Medrash it is *only* because it is pertinent to the simple understanding of the verse. Therefore, although it seems that Rashi is simply replicating the words of the Medrash, there must be a relevance to the understanding of the verse’s simple meaning.
- 2) The Medrash stated, “*all* of Torah is interdependent,” while Rashi stated, “*these* verses supplement each other.” It is understood that the Medrash is explaining the *general* manner in which the Torah works and therefore this preface is important. Rashi though only explains specific verses. If this is so, why does he need the above preface?

This extra sentence of Rashi’s thus still seems superfluous.]

- B) What is the purpose of the seeming redundancy of “Moshe is Israel, and Israel is Moshe?”
- C) If, for whatever reason, Rashi felt it pertinent to state that “Moshe is Israel, and Israel is Moshe,” he should have as well done the same in his conclusion. Instead of only stating “the leader of the generation is like the entire generation,” he should have also said that “the entire generation is like the leader.”
- D) Why does Rashi conclude with “the leader is everything,” when he already stated that “the leader of the generation is like the entire generation?” Not only are the two statements redundant, but they are in contradiction to one another. In the first statement it expresses that the leader is only “*like* the entire generation,” and in the second statement it indicates that “the leader *is* everything.” I.e., he is not only *like* the entire generation, but is *actually everything* of the generation.

Rashi’s question

In order to understand the above questions it is important to preface a statement of Rashi that sheds light onto what exactly Rashi is bothered by in the discrepancy between the various verses.

When Rashi points out the inconsistencies of the verses regarding the messengers he begins by using a seemingly longwinded expression: “Elsewhere, the sending [of messengers] is ascribed to Moshe, as it says, ‘So I sent messengers...’”

This language seems to be lengthy, as he could have simply stated, “Elsewhere it says, ‘so I sent.’” The reader would automatically

understand that this statement was expressed by Moshe in regard to sending the messengers to Sichon, the king of Cheshbon.

From the fact though, that Rashi does indeed employ this language, it is evident that within these words the difficulty which Rashi wishes to address is emphasized.

While the verse at hand regarding sending messengers to Sichon states, “Israel sent messengers,” and the verse regarding the messengers that were sent to Edom states, “Moshe sent messengers,” it is already obvious that this does not mean that Moshe sent messengers to Edom, while Israel was the one to send messengers to Sichon.

Though concerning the messengers that were sent to Edom the verse states that “Moshe sent messengers,” it is obvious that he did not do this on *his own* but that this was on behalf of *all* of Israel. It is for this reason that the verse states, “So says your brother, Israel... let us pass through your land.”

The reason that the verse states, “Moshe sent messengers,” although it was in truth, on behalf of all of Israel, is self-understood; all acts on behalf of Israel were done by Moshe and he was the one who actually sent them.

The same is true of the messengers that were sent to Sichon. Although the verse states, “Israel sent messengers,” it is obvious that the actual sending was done by Moshe. The Torah’s expression of “Israel sent messengers” is because the messengers were *for* the entirety of Israel. It was done, like all major acts for Israel, by Moshe.

Accordingly, there was in fact *no difference* between the messengers that were sent to Edom and those who were sent to Sichon. Both were done for Israel by Moshe. The only difference between the two occurrences is the *language* that the verses employ.

When Rashi says, “Elsewhere, the *sending of messengers* is ascribed to Moshe,” he is pointing out that what bothers him is not the question of what actually *happened*. Rather, he finds difficulty with the fact that the verse *ascribes* the messengers that were sent to Edom to Moshe, and the messengers that were sent to Sichon to Israel.

What accentuates his question is, if concerning the messengers that were sent to Edom—where the verse stresses that *Israel* is the one that sent the messengers in its words, “So says your brother, *Israel*”—the verse nevertheless states, “*Moshe* sent,” all the more so in the verse concerning the messengers that were sent to Sichon—where the verse does not mention Israel—should the verse state “Moshe sent” as well.

Rashi is not bothered in regard to *who actually* sent the messengers, but is bothered as to the reason that the Torah changes the *language* that is used for each.

Supplementary verses

Seemingly one can explain, that the reason one verse assigns the sending of messengers to Moshe and the other to Israel is dependent on the accord of whom the messengers were sent. When it was *Israel's* idea to send the messengers, the verse says that *Israel* sent them, when it was *G-d's* idea to send the messengers it says that *Moshe* sent them.

It is possibly because of this difference that concerning the messengers that were sent to Edom the verse says, “Moshe sent messengers,” and concerning the messengers that were sent to Sichon the verse states, “Israel sent messengers.”

¹ Although the verse does not say outright that Moshe sent them as a response to G-d's directive, it is obvious this was the case. This is true in many

The messengers that were sent to Edom were a result of a directive of G-d, and therefore the verse states that Moshe—the emissary and servant of G-d—was the one that sent them¹.

However, the messengers that were sent to Sichon were not sent by a directive of G-d, as expressed in Rashi:

Text 7

Even though they were not commanded to offer them peace, they nevertheless sought peace from them.

Rashi, Bamidbar 21:22

If so, one can postulate that it is because the messengers were sent by Israel and not G-d that the verse states that Israel sent them and does attribute the dispatching to Moshe.

This reasoning is incorrect, however. In order to negate this explanation, Rashi begins his commentary by stating, “Elsewhere, the sending [of messengers] is ascribed to Moshe, as it says, ‘So I sent messengers from the desert of Kedemot.’” Being that concerning this dispatch of messengers *itself* the verse further on in the Torah testifies that Moshe sent them, it is impossible to conclude that the expression “Israel sent messengers” as opposed to mentioning Moshe, indicates a situation where Israel sent the messengers without a directive from G-d.

After showing that Moshe is also considered to be the sender of the messengers to Sichon, Rashi states the same idea concerning Edom as well: “Similarly, ‘Moshe sent messengers to the king

instances where the Torah does not express the directive to Moshe.

of Edom...’ (Bamidbar 20: 14), but concerning Yiftach it says, ‘Israel sent messengers to the king of Edom...’ (Shoftim 11:17).” This shows that the Torah’s intent in mentioning Moshe in the verse concerning the messengers to Edom, is *not* to say that it was Moshe who sent them—and *not* Israel—as the Torah clearly states elsewhere that Israel sent them.

It is for this reason that Rashi feels the need to mention, “These verses supplement each other; one holds back and the other reveals. For Moshe is Israel, and Israel is Moshe.”

Were the Torah to have only have written “Moshe sent” concerning the messengers that were sent to Edom, this would “hold back” and exclude that the messengers sent there were on behalf of Israel. If this would indeed be the *only* verse, it would be understood that the reason Israel was not mentioned is because Moshe sent them as an agent of G-d, and that it cannot be considered that Israel sent them.

The same would be true if concerning the dispatch of messengers to Sichon the verse only stated, “Israel sent.” Doing so would “hold back” and exclude the possibility that it was also considered a mission from Moshe, and one would assume that this was only a mission of Israel.

It is the second verse that “reveals” that “Moshe is Israel and Israel is Moshe.” For, when the verse says “Moshe sent,” it is as if it says “Israel sent,” for “Moshe is Israel.” Similarly, when the verse states “Israel sent,” it as if it says “Moshe sent,” as “Moshe is Israel.”

The statement “Moshe is Israel and Israel is Moshe” is therefore also not redundant. Rather, each part is supporting a different verse. The statement, “Moshe is Israel” explains the messengers that were sent to Edom, and statement, “Israel is Moshe” explains the messengers that were sent to Sichon.

Moshe and Israel

What remains to be understood though, is how it can truly be that “Moshe is Israel and Israel is Moshe.”

To clarify this Rashi says, “The leader of the generation is like the entire generation, because the leader is everything.

The two parts of this statement, a) “the leader of the generation is like the entire generation” and b) the leader is everything,” correlate to the two statements “Moshe is Israel and Israel is Moshe.”

The reason that “Moshe is Israel” is because “the leader of the generation is like the entire generation.” Meaning to say, it is not that when Moshe does something for the congregation of Israel he has no *personal* involvement, as he is doing it for Israel and therefore one can interchange the words “Moshe” or “Israel.” Rather, the *very identity* of Moshe is that he is the “*leader of the generation*” and he is therefore like the entire generation. I.e., that a Jewish leader’s very essence is the community and therefore, by extension, all that he does is an act of Israel.

The same is true of “Israel is Moshe.” It is because “the leader is *everything*.” Here, Rashi does not write that the leader is “the generation,” as his intent is not to say that the identity of the leader is all the *individuals* of his generation. Rather, Rashi shows that all the particular needs of the congregation are the personal needs of the leader, and all their needs come *through* him. The leader is the conduit for both the physical needs and the spiritual needs of his generation. Since *everything* comes through the leader, “Israel is Moshe.”

Thus, Rashi’s declares that “These verses” are “to teach you that the leader of the generation is like the entire generation, because the leader is everything.” A verse that really should be assigned to Israel is assigned to Moshe and a

verse that should be assigned to Moshe is assigned to Israel as “the leader...is like the entire generation” and “the leader is everything.”

Deeper lessons

An amazing thought can be learned from a seemingly insignificant discrepancy between the language of Rashi and the language of the Medrash.

While the Medrash states, “the *head* of the generation is *the* entire generation,” Rashi writes “the *leader (nassi)* of the generation is like the entire generation.”

The difference between the head of the generation and the leader of the generation is as follows: The *head* of the generation is like the head of a body. Just as the head directs the body, so too, the head of the generation directs the generation. The head expresses interaction with the generation. The word *nassi*, however, means exaltedness and separation. The title *nassi* is expressive of an individual that is exalted above his generation.

The intent of the Medrash’s statement, “the *head* of the generation is *the* entire generation,” is that because the individual is the head, *therefore* he is the entire generation. Because his actions as a head are acts of leadership for the generation, this unites the generation into a single unit.

From this it is understood, that this quality of the leader being considered as the entire populace is only in regard to his actions that he performs as a public figure for the community, where his actions are for the “entire generation.” Thus, only when he is serving his role of a head and a leader can he be called the “entire generation.”

However, when Rashi says that “the *leader (nassi)* of the generation is like the entire generation,” it expresses that even when the leader is *exalted* as a *personal individual* (as the term “*nassi*” connotes) he is still *like* the *entire generation*.

What is brought out from Rashi’s statement is twofold:

- A) On one hand, he is called a “*nassi*,” which is expressive of exaltedness and separateness from the rest of the generation. That being the case, it is understood that even his private actions, which one would think are the same or relatable to the rest of the generation, are inherently of a different nature. In all his actions he is removed and exalted from the rest of the generation.
- B) On the other hand, because “the *leader (nassi)* of the generation is like the entire generation,” it is understood that even the exalted attributes of the leader, which are seemingly “from his shoulders and upwards, taller than any of the people,²” and not on the same wavelength, are nevertheless pertinent to the generation. Since “the *leader (nassi)* ...is everything,” it is understood that everything about him effects the generation.

The Rebbe

The *parsha* of Chukat falls out on many weeks between the dates of 3 Tammuz—the day that the Previous Lubavitcher Rebbe was released from prison—and 12 Tammuz—the day that he was completely freed from being exiled to the city of Kastroma.

² | Shmuel 9:2.

It is understood that the *parsha* that this event falls out in hints to the way that the Previous Rebbe served the Jewish people. In all his actions it was clear that “the leader (*nassi*) of the generation is like the entire generation,” and “the leader (*nassi*) is everything.”

Whether it was spreading Torah in communist Russia or his acts of spreading Judaism after he left Russia, he was completely given over to the Jewish People; not working in one specific field for the Jewish People, but servicing all their needs.

He sent *shochtim* (ritual slaughterers) and rabbis to places that were needed, built *mikvaot* in places that were lacking, established Yeshivos and schools for the youth, and spread the deepest secrets of the Torah to all Jews.

Not only was he completely given over to the spiritual needs of the Jewish people, he was dedicated to their physical needs as well. His dedication to saving lives, freeing captives and helping the needy is well known and documented.

No matter the area that he was working in it, he did so with complete dedication and literal self-sacrifice. It was clearly recognizable in all his actions that the “leader of the generation is like the entire generation,” and both the physical and spiritual needs of the Jewish People came through him as “the leader (*nassi*) is everything.”

(Based on Likutei Sichos 13, Korach 1, reworked by Rabbi Dovid Markel. To see other projects and to partner in our work, see: www.Neirot.com.)