

# DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

## PARSHAS NOACH

### The Opening Rashi

#### Discussion: When Rashi Gives Two Explanations

אֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדֹת נֹחַ נֹחַ אִישׁ צַדִּיק תָּמִים הָיָה בְּדוֹרֹתָיו

*These are the offspring of Noach, Noach was a perfect righteous man in his generations<sup>1</sup>*

#### INTRODUCTION – AND DIGRESSION

Commenting on the words of our opening verse, Rashi says:

הואיל והזכירו סיפר בשבחו שנאמר “זכר צדיק לברכה”.  
דבר אחר, ללמדך שעיקר תולדותיהם של צדיקים מעשיהם הטובים

*Having mentioned him, [the verse then] spoke in his praise, as it says, “The remembrance of the righteous shall be for a blessing.”*

*Alternatively, it is to teach you that the primary offspring of the righteous are their good deeds.*

The issue to which Rashi is responding is quite clear: The verse begins with words that appear to introduce Noach’s children and then immediately proceeds to veer from that topic, talking instead about Noach himself!

In response to this, Rashi cites the above two explanations from Chazal.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, having identified the issue, we can see that Rashi’s two explanations actually relate to this issue in fundamentally different ways:

- ▷ The first approach concedes the notion that the verse interrupted its discussion to talk about Noach, explaining why it did so (“*zecher tzaddik li’vracha*”).
- ▷ The second approach, in re-translating Toldos as referring to good deeds, explains that there is actually no interruption in the verse.

<sup>1</sup> Bereishis 6:9.

<sup>2</sup> See Bereishis Rabbah 30:6.

## WHEN ARE TWO BETTER THAN ONE?

It is an established rule among the classic commentators on Rashi that whenever Rashi presents two explanations of a certain matter, it is because each explanation contains some merit or advantage not found in the other in resolving the issue at hand. The commentators then proceed to discuss what it was about each explanation which still left the matter requiring resolution, resulting in Rashi presenting an alternative answer.

In our case, starting backwards, it is easy to understand why Rashi was not prepared to suffice with the second explanation alone, for it entails the dramatic step of redefining the “toldos” as good deeds, while the simple meaning of this term throughout the Torah relates to one’s biological children. The question remains however, why was Rashi not content with the first explanation, which indeed understands Toldos as children, and explains the interruption to talk about Noach himself based on the principle of “*zecher tzaddik li’vracha*”? In this regard, a number of straightforward explanations come to mind:

- ▷ If the interruption is based on “*zecher tzaddik li’vracha*,” why are there not similar interruptions when describing the other tzaddikim in the Chumash?
- ▷ This is not the first time Noach is mentioned in the Torah. He has already been introduced in the final section of Parshas Bereishis. Why did the Torah not interrupt there, when mentioning him, to speak in his praise?

Although one can certainly suggest answers to these questions, and the commentators do, at the same time it is also easy to understand why Rashi saw fit to suggest an additional approach to this matter.

However, as we will see, it is possible that what lies behind the two explanations of Rashi is a question of a much more fundamental nature.

## THE MEANING OF “BERACHAH”

In his classic work, *Nefesh Hachaim*,<sup>3</sup> R’ Chaim of Volozhin discusses at length the meaning of the Hebrew word “baruch”. He cites a widely held notion that the word baruch is a term of praise, belonging therefore to the family of words like *shevach* and *hallel*. In this light, another way of saying “Blessed are You” would be “Praised are You.” R’ Chaim strongly rejects this view. In his opinion, the word baruch is not an expression of praise, and he proceeds to demonstrate this from the following episode recounted in the Gemara.<sup>4</sup>

*Said R’ Yishmael ben Elisha, “On one occasion I entered the holy of holies to offer the incense, and I beheld an apparition of Hashem sitting on a high and exalted throne, and He said to me, ‘Yishmael my son, bless Me.’ I responded, ‘May it be Your will that Your mercy should suppress Your anger, and that Your mercy should prevail over Your other attributes, and that You deal with Your children with the attribute of mercy, and that You enter with them within the letter of the law.’ ”*

How does this episode help shed light on the meaning of the word baruch? Explains R’ Chaim, if baruch is an expression of praise, then having been asked by Hashem to bless Him, R’ Yishmael should have responded with some words of praise! But he didn’t; he responded by asking for things such as mercy and forbearance. We see clearly, says R’ Chaim, that the word baruch does not mean praised.

However, having established what the word baruch does not mean, we need to proceed and find out what it does mean.

R’ Chaim explains that the word berachah is an expression of increasing something. Thus, we find for

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<sup>3</sup> *Sha’ar 2, chap 2.*

<sup>4</sup> *Berachos 7a.*

example, the verse says: “He [Hashem] will bless your bread.”<sup>5</sup> This doesn’t mean that Hashem will praise our bread. It means that He will bring about an increase in our harvest.<sup>6</sup>

This understanding of *berachah* has profound implications for how Berachos work. We preface by saying that our knowledge of Hashem and our relationship with Him is specifically in terms of His connection to the world. His existence outside of that context is completely beyond our grasp. Therefore, when we say “*Baruch Ata Hashem*”, we are saying that our recognition of Him as the Ultimate Source should bring about an increase of His involvement and Divine input in the world.

Similarly, says R’ Chaim, when R’ Yishmael was asked to bless Hashem, he responded by asking for an **increase** in Divine mercy and grace.

## IN DEFENSE OF “BERACHAH” AS PRAISE

The Nefesh HaChaim’s understanding of “berachah” as increase, as well the accompanying proof from the episode with R’ Yishmael, is to be found in earlier works dating back to the Rishonim.<sup>7</sup> Having said that, there are others among the Rishonim who in fact endorse the notion that berachah is an expression of praise.<sup>8</sup> Naturally, we will be moved to ask, how would they respond to the proof from Yishmael’s “berachah”?

A disarmingly simple answer to this is found in the writing of one of the earliest Rishonim, Rabbeinu Chananel.<sup>9</sup> Commenting on Hashem’s request of R’ Yishmael, “*Bless Me*,” R’ Chananel writes:

*The meaning of this “blessing” is praise, as we find in the verse “ברכו ה’ מלאכיו – bless [i.e. praise] Hashem, O His angels”... And having offered blessing and praise before Hashem’s glory, he [R’ Yishmael] offered the following prayer: “May it be Your will etc.”*

In other words, according to Rabbeinu Chananel, R’ Yishmael’s prayer was not the response to the request “bless Me”; rather, it followed the praise which was said in response to that request.

Perhaps we may add another suggestion. The Gemara<sup>10</sup> states that one should not add requests in the first three blessing of the Shemoneh Esrei since they are dedicated from praise only. However, the Geonim qualify this restriction as referring only to requests of the individual. Requests for the community, on the other hand, can be made even in these first three blessings.<sup>11</sup> The explanation of this distinction is offered by the Tosafos HaRosh, namely, that petitions for the community are in effect a praise of Hashem, for they indicate that the entire community needs Him. Here, too, since R’ Yishmael’s offered a prayer on behalf of the entire Jewish people, that too, constitutes praise in response to Hashem’s request “bless Me.”

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5 Shemos 23:25.

6 The Maharal explains in a number of places that the nature of the Hebrew language is such that the root letters of a word can convey the message that the word represents. With regard to the word *baruch*, Maharal (Tiferes Yisrael chap. 34) concurs with the definition of increase, and indeed notes that this connotation is embedded within the root letters of the word, which are **ב-ר-ך**. All of these letters represent the basic level of increase from one to two. The numerical value of **ב** is two, **כ** is twenty and **ך** is two hundred. Hence, the very root of the word **בִּרְךָ** is made up of letters which are a product of the type of increase that the word represents.

7 See Rashba, commentary to *Aggados Berachos*, *ibid.*, commentary of Rabbeinu Bachye to Devarim 8:10, and his work *Kad Hakemach*, s.v. “*berachah*.” See also Rashi, *Sotah* 10a, s.v. “*bameh*,” and Sefer HaIkarim, maamar 2, chap. 26.

8 See e.g. Chizkuni to Bereishis 24:27 and Abarbanel to *ibid.* 27:1 [See also Yaaros Devash, vol 2, drush 16.]

9 Commentary to Maseches Berachos *loc. cit.*, cited in Ohr Zarua, Hilchos Kriyas Shema sec. 8.

10 Berachos 34a.

11 Indeed, this is the basis of the insertion of the request “*Zachreinu Le’chaim* – remember us for life,” at the end of the first blessing of Shemoneh Esrei during the Ten Days of Teshuvah.

## A SOURCE IN THE SAGES

So far, we have seen that the meaning of the word “berachah” is a matter whose discussion goes back as far as the early Rishonim. However, a bit more reflection will reveal that it goes back further still.

Let us return to our question regarding Rashi’s two explanations of our verse. The first explanation invokes the idea of “*zecher tzaddik livracha*,” yet Rashi was not entirely satisfied by this and therefore added a second approach. Perhaps now we can understand why.

- ▷ The first approach can only work if one adopts the understanding of the word “berachah” as praise. If so, one can say explain the verse’s apparent interruption praising Noah based on this idea.
- ▷ However, if one understands “*berachah*” not as praise but as increase, the concept of “*zecher tzaddik livracha*” will be of no relevance or assistance here, since the verse’s interruption did not bring about any increase within Noah. Hence, that approach toward “*berachah*” will require an alternative explanation of our verse, which Rashi provides.<sup>12</sup>

It is fascinating to consider how a basic question such as this, which is first expressed in the Rishonim and subsequently elaborated upon by the Acharonim, has its roots in the words of Chazal themselves when we ponder and contemplate their meaning.

In our own experience, this discussion has major ramifications for our understanding of the words “Baruch Ata Hashem” which we recite many times each day. Beyond this, when we use the term “*zecher tzaddik livracha*” regarding a righteous person who has passed away, the meaning will depend on the above. If berachah means praise, then we are purely speaking in praise of them. However, if it means increase, then we are also speaking about ourselves, for we are saying that bringing the *tzaddik* to mind should lead to an increase in our promoting and adhering to the values which they held dear.

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<sup>12</sup> R’ David Pardo, Commentary Maskil le’David on Rashi. It should be noted that Rashi also invokes the concept of “*zecher tzaddik livracha*” later on in Bereishis (18:18-19) where Hashem says, “Am I withholding from Avraham that which I am doing [regarding Sodom]?” and then states, “And Avraham will be a great and mighty nation.” Here, too, there appears to be an interruption, which Rashi explains based on “*zecher tzaddik li’vrachah*.” We note that in this second instance, the interruption was not speaking in praise of Avraham, but foretelling the greatness that would come from him, reflecting the understanding of “berachah” as increase. [See also Yoma 38b where the Gemara identifies the source for the concept of “*zecher tzaddik livracha*” as the verse dealing with Avraham. Although, as a rule, one normally cites the first instance where an idea is found in the Chumash, which in our case would seem to be Noah, that opinion in the Gemara clearly understands “berachah” as increase, in which case the first instance of this in the Chumash is not Noah, but Avraham.]