

PSHUTO SHEL MIKRA

From the Teachings of Rav Yehuda Copperman zt"l

PARSHAT BALAK

How Midrash in One Pasuk Can Be Based on Pshat in Another Pasuk

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו בְּלֶק לֵךְ נָא אִתִּי אֶל מְקוֹם אַחֵר אֲשֶׁר תִּרְאֶנּוּ מִשָּׁם

Balak said to him (Bilaam), "Go now with me to a different place from which you will see them" (Bamidbar 23:13)

Journeying Back to Lech Lecha

The discussion in our present chapter begins by looking into Rashi's words in *Bereishit* 12:1, where Hashem tells Avram, "לֵךְ לֵךְ," which literally translates as "Go yourself." The background to Rashi's comment is that the word "לֵךְ — yourself" seems to be redundant, for when a person goes somewhere, does he not always go there "himself"? Rashi therefore explains this word to mean, "להנאתך ולטובתך — For your benefit and for your good." In other words, the word "לֵךְ" here does not mean "yourself" but "for yourself," i.e. for your benefit.

Ramban's Objection

Commenting on these words of Rashi, the Ramban raises a very interesting objection:

There is no need (for this explanation), for this is in keeping with the normal use of language, as we find for example, "הַגֶּשֶׁם הִלֵּף הַלֵּךְ לֵר" — the rain is over and gone"

(*Shir HaShirim* 2:11), “אֶל הַגְּדֹלִים לִי אֵלֶכָה — *I will go to the leaders*” (*Yirmiyahu* 5:5) and “קָמוּ וְעָבְרוּ לָכֶם אֶת נַחַל זֶרֶד — *Rise and cross the Zered Brook,*” and many other such cases.

We note that the Ramban is not claiming that Rashi’s *peirush* is incorrect; rather, that it is unnecessary. Through the examples he quotes, Ramban demonstrates that the added word “לך” (or its variants) is entirely normal, and hence not redundant. Therefore, it does not require any comment from Rashi, whose goal has been stated (Rashi, *Bereishit* 3:8, s.v. *vayishme’u*) as “לִישֵׁב פְּשׁוּטוֹ שֶׁל מִקְרָא — *To resolve pshuto shel mikra.*” In our instance, says the Ramban, there is nothing to resolve!

The Mizrachi’s Response

The foremost *mefarsh* on Rashi, **Rabbeinu Eliyahu Mizrachi**, quotes the question of the Ramban, and in response, explains Rashi’s position with the following words, “הִכָּא דְאִיכָא לְמִדְרַשׁ דְּרִישׁוֹן — *Wherever there is room to engage in drash, we do so.*”

In other words, the Mizrachi accepts Ramban’s claim that the word “לך” is not redundant, so that no resolution is required, but nonetheless defends Rashi’s *peirush* on the basis that this word allows for the drash to be made.

At first glance, these words of the Mizrachi sound very problematic, for they don’t seem to have answered the Ramban’s question at all. The Ramban argued that in terms of Rashi’s own methodology there was no need — and hence no room — to comment on this word, and the Mizrachi replied by saying that he did anyway because he could!

It appears that these words of the Mizrachi confirm our understanding regarding the goal of Rashi’s *peirush* on the Torah, which we have discussed in an earlier chapter,¹ namely, that resolving the pshat of the *pasuk* is not Rashi’s **goal**, but rather his **method**. Rashi has certain teachings he wishes to impart which he feels are necessary to have when learning *Chumash*, as well as for living as a Jew. The way Rashi imparts those teachings is through resolving *pshat* in the *pesukim*. This understanding allows for the possibility that on occasion Rashi will impart a teaching even though the *pshat* of the *pasuk* did not require him to do so, if he feels the teaching warrants it.

If our analysis is correct, it emerges that the basis of the dispute between the Ramban and the Mizrachi over whether this comment of Rashi was necessary is essentially a dispute over Rashi’s methodology itself.

The Gur Aryeh’s Approach

In contrast to the Ramban and the Mizrachi who both agree that the word “לך” is not problematic on a *pshat* level (differing only on the question as to whether there was

¹ See *Parshat Behar*, Chapter 71.

nonetheless room for Rashi to comment), the *Maharal* in his *peirush Gur Aryeh* explains that the word “לך” does indeed present a problem on a *pshat* level, except the problem is not one of redundancy, but of contradiction!

The *Maharal* explains that the addition of the word “לי” or “לו” etc. is indeed standard throughout Tanach. But, it is not redundant, for it denotes the person’s initiative and decision to go. Thus, when the *pasuk* (mentioned above) says, “אַלְכָה לִי אֶל הַגְּדֹלִים,” the word “לי” indicates that was my decision. Similarly, the *pasuk* “הַגֶּשֶׁם חָלַף הַלָּךְ לוֹ” is narrative in nature, and describes the rain as (figuratively) having “decided” to go (i.e. to stop). In light of this understanding, when we come to a situation where the word “לך” is attached to a command, we will appreciate that it is a contradiction in terms, for how can someone be commanded to make a decision of their own initiative? The initiative has been taken by the one commanding! That is why Rashi comments on the phrase “לָךְ לָךְ,” for it is indeed problematic on a *pshat* level. Therefore, Rashi explains that the “לך” here does not denote initiative, but rather that this journey would be for Avram’s benefit and his own good — “להנאתך ולטובתך.”

It is for this reason we find a parallel comment of Rashi elsewhere in a similar situation, namely, when Hashem commands Moshe to send spies to Eretz Canaan, saying “שְׁלַח לָךְ” (*Bamidbar* 13:2). There, Rashi, explains: “לדעתך, אני איני מצוה אותך — *As you wish, I am not commanding you.*” The problem Rashi is dealing with there is similar to our case: A word such as “לך” is fundamentally incompatible with a command (“שלח”)! Therefore, Rashi explains that indeed in that instance Hashem was not commanding Moshe to send spies, but rather left it up to Moshe to decide.

In the Midrash

Having seen how the great *Rishonim*, Rashi and Ramban, relate to the phrase “לָךְ לָךְ” in terms of *pshat*, let us now see how Chazal explained it on the level of midrash, for it is their comments which led us to our present discussion in *Parshat Balak*. In *Bereishit Rabbah* (39:8), we find:

ר' יהודה אומר "לך לך" שתי פעמים, אחת מארם נהרים ואחת מארם נחור. ר' נחמיה אומר "לך לך" שתי פעמים, אחת מארם נהרים ומארם נחור ואחת שהפריחו מבין הבתרים והביאו לחרן

R' Yehudah says, (the pasuk mentions) "lech lecha" — twice;² once from Aram Naharayim and once from Aram Nachor. R' Nechemiah says, "lech lecha" — twice, once from Aram Naharayim and Aram Nachor, and once when (Hashem) flew him from between the pieces ("bein habetarim") and brought him to Charan.

Without involving ourselves in the *machloket* itself between the two opinions in the

2 [I.e the *pasuk* has a double usage of the word “לך”.]

Midrash,³ we see that both opinions have explained the second word “לך” as denoting a second journey, i.e. as if **both words** are written as “lech — go.” Seemingly, this explanation is purely in the realm of *drash*, with no connection to *pshat* whatsoever, since the *pshat* of the word “lecha” means “to you” and is not an expression of “going” at all. However, in our *parsha* we see that this might not be the case.

There are many occasions in our *parsha* where Balak asks Bilaam to “go” and do something, and generally the word he uses is written “לכה,” which is in keeping with the way the one urges or encourages another to go somewhere, [as in, for example, “לכה דודי לקראת כלה.”]⁴ However, in one instance (23:13), we find “וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו בְּלֶק לְךָ נָא אִתִּי — *Balak said to him, ‘Go now with me.’*” Here, we see the word “לך” meaning “go” on the level of *pshat*.

This gives us a fascinating insight into the workings of midrash, for it demonstrates that the worlds of *pshat* and midrash are not necessarily as separate from each other as we may think. There will be times when the *peirush* of Chazal will be midrash, but still based on *pshat*! This will involve Chazal utilizing a *pshat*-meaning of this word as found elsewhere and applying to the word they are discussing. In our case, the Midrash in *Chumash Bereishit* [“לך” as meaning “go”] is “built” on the *pshat* in *Chumash Bamidbar* [where that is its *pshat*-meaning]. In the context where the phrase “לך לך” appears, it is not “the *pshat*,” but it is still integral to a “*pshat*-meaning” of the word.

3 See *Parshat Bo*, Chapter 38, where these opinions are discussed.

4 [See e.g. 22:6, 23:7, and 23:27. This form is known as the jussive or cohortative form.].