

Complex Simplicity: An Analysis of the Opposition To 'Pshuto Shel Mikra'

Introduction

The popular term “book bans” has a dramatic flair, but in reality all they are is exactly what the heading says: a Gilui Da’as. The community of yarei shamayim are entitled to be made aware when a popular sefer is *ein ruach chachamim nocha himeno*, and rely on the *einei haeidah* to provide this sort of guidance. Aside from the heated controversies they inevitably stir up, there’s no essential difference between a ‘book ban’ and any other halachic or hashkafic directive.

The most recent such tumult is over the Chumash ‘Pshuto Shel Mikra’. The opposition has generated a great deal of confusion; it’s not immediately clear what could be offensive about a running commentary on Chumash – almost entirely comprised of paraphrased extracts from *gedolei hameforshim* – that provides the reader with clarity in the simple reading of the words. The presented examples of objectionable material at times seem to be hairsplitting, and even if some inadvertently do cross a line does that invalidate an entire five volume work? Can’t the mistakes simply be edited out of future editions?

The mystery itself should alert us that we likely have something to learn from this episode. Because as much as it’s tempting to dismiss the whole opposition – maybe some hotheaded kanoim just gave the rabbis a paper to sign and they did so without asking too many questions – the facts on the ground are far too complicated for that. Too many *Gedolei Torah* are proactively outspoken about their deep consternation over this sefer to allow the wiggle option any credibility. As such, if you and I cannot fathom what could possibly be questionable, the rational conclusion is that we’re missing either context or sensitivity.

We wouldn’t dare to weigh in one way or the other on the core question of the sefer’s acceptability, but as serious consumers of rabbinic hashkafa we should want to explore the theory behind the concern. The following is my humble attempts at such an investigation.

As is inevitable in all such nuanced matters, the opposition is phrased in a variety of ways. While it is always the most sensational allegations that are easiest to fling around and naturally attract the most attention, it seems likely that the primary concern here rests on far more subtle, but no less fundamental, considerations. And so before we search for heretical content or nefarious hidden agendas, it may be beneficial to examine the stated purpose and practical function of the sefer on its own terms. After all, what we have here is an accessory to our most basic heritage – the Chumash – that is utilized by young and old alike. The litmus test of acceptability is not limited to whether or not it contains *kefira*; if the objective itself is misguided that alone is more than sufficient as a cause for concern.

To that end, our analysis will be divided into 3 sections:

- In Section 1 we will take a closer look at the actual purpose of the sefer, to see if it is in keeping with normative goals in *limud haTorah*.
- In Section 2 we will examine how the sefer’s approach plays itself out practically, and what effects it may have on our existing assumptions and relationship with Torah.
- In Section 3 we will examine some hashkafic underpinnings that may be associated with the sefer’s methodology and presentation.

Nowhere do we intend to imply any malicious intent or ideological deviances on the part of the editors of this work. Even in our third section, our concern is only with the associations and unintended hashkafic consequences of the approach, not to assess any individual’s intellectual leanings. But ultimately, the personal opinions are not what matter; what matters is the effects that such a work can have on a reader, and on a society in which it has fast become mainstream. That, and only that, is the subject of this essay.

Section 1

The opposition to Pshuto Shel Mikra is commonly seen as a protest for the honor of Rashi – the pirush tends to explain the Chumash in a different way than he. Moreover, it regularly omits many of the midrashim and lofty ideas that Rashi cites.

At face value, this first objection seems strange, and serves to undermine the second one as well: They aren't attempting to replace Rashi – they have Rashi, along with a running elucidation, printed right there on the page! And the reason their pirush leaves out all those midrashim is specifically *because* they're not trying to rewrite Rashi; they're writing a different sort of Chumash sefer. Virtually every explanation they provide is based on ideas found in Rishonim and Acharonim – it has been argued that a protest against this sefer essentially constitutes a protest against the Rashbam, ibn Ezra, Seforno, and Malbim.

The question then is not so much about what is left out, but rather about what the objective and mission statement of this new running Chumash commentary is meant to be.

This pirush is, as the name suggests, an attempt at a level one understanding of the simple reading of the Torah's words¹. To this end it focuses primarily on how the pesukim can be read without background information, through basic internal analysis of the text².

This analysis is then presented in an easy to read condensed form, as a line by line explanation of the pesukim. It is not a likut sefer along the lines of a Otzar Harishonim or the several other similar style seforim on the market, as it generally cites only one pshat [of the editor's choosing] per pasuk³. Nor is it a functional tool for learning chumash biyun, because it provides little context or rationale for the chosen pshatim, it simply provides a different pshat. And it's certainly not an Artscroll style translation – it does not merely teitch the pessukim; it comes to explain them, often elaborately. Ultimately, whatever its original stated purpose was, this sefer serves the function of a running "baseline" commentary; that's how it's presented, that's the niche it fills, and that's almost certainly how it is used.

And used it is. The sefer has become quite popular throughout the frum world as a tool for the basic learning of Chumash. Shuls have shelves filled with a dozen or more dog-eared copies. Baalei batim use it to be maavir sidra. Bar mitzvah bachurim receive it as gifts and use it to help them take their first fledgling steps in learning chumash on their own.⁴ Cheder rebeim use it as a teaching tool. (I've seen children's Chumash sheets asking them to explain the pasuk "according to the simple pshat, and then according to Rashi").

And therein lies the imperative to look very closely at what this sefer does. Because it is not a collection of someone's ideas or nice vertlach on Chumash, nor is it an on-the-shelf reference sefer to be consulted by those

¹ There has been some contention over how much can be read into the title – insiders insist that it was a last minute choice with no real intention behind it. Be that as it may, a close look at the pirush makes it clear that, intentional or otherwise, the name aptly describes the mission and common usage of the sefer.

² This is an overgeneralization, as it departs from this model at times. But it's safe to say that this accurately captures a basic picture of the overall theme of the work.

³ Nor does it limit itself to faithful citation; it usually paraphrases, and at times combines different ideas to form original pshatim. It also at times quotes Rashi himself as their favored pshat, which makes it impossible to describe as a likut of other meforshim to be learnt alongside Rashi.

⁴ I recently visited a certain Mesivta and counted three full shelves of *private* Pshuto Shel Mikra Chumashim Bereishis. The Yeshiva apparently has a robust Chumash seder, and a substantial percentage of these teenagers utilize this sefer to work their way through it.

who would like to see another mehalech in the parsha. It is a **guide** through the Chumash, intended and used as a first approach to the basic 'voss shteit' of the Torah's text⁵.

The problem is that Klal Yisroel already has a baseline 'voss shteit' in Chumash. And that is Chumash al pi Rashi (more accurately: al pi Chazal). To insist on upholding that status quo is not any more of an insult to other Rishonim than is the fact that every basic Chumash you see in shul is printed with Rashi, not ibn Ezra or Abarbanel. Of course there's a critical place for broader and more comprehensive study, but there's also the basics.

The issue is not merely one of choosing a favorite commentator, it is of choosing a fundamental underlying methodology. Because Rashi is not just a different pirush; it is a fundamentally different way to learn Chumash.

Ultimately, the question is not which *Rishon* we learn, the question is which *Chumash* we learn. Chumash on its own has no coherent 'voss shteit'; it simply is not written to be learned without commentary of some kind. There are gaps in the text, and grammatical irregularities, and unqualified statements⁶. Torah Shebiksav was given together with a Torah Shel Baal Peh without which it would be incomprehensible, or worse, misleading.

And that is the superlative contribution of Rashi⁷: drawing on the vast body of Chazal he provides the necessary background information to have pessukim flow coherently, cohesively, consistently, in a logically and theologically

⁵ The most emphatically worded pamphlet decrying the opposition to the PSM, entitled *לא ידעו ולא יבינו*, is based almost entirely on an alternate representation of the sefer's function. The author (who does not claim inside involvement with the sefer's production) describes it as clearly placing Rashi *first*, with the pshuto shel mikra alternatives "placed on the side, to broaden the knowledge of those who have already satisfied themselves with Rashi and Chazal". He does not appear to have noticed that amongst the rishonim occasionally quoted to 'supplement Rashi' is... Rashi, when he suites their preferred approach to a passage.

The author goes on to declare that "only an idiot" would think that this is used as a chinuch tool (in general the kuntrus appears to have been written on a wager to see how many times the words 'שוטה' and 'טיפוש' can be crammed into one 8 page document).

Unfortunately, absolutely nothing about the name, formatting, marketing, functionality, and plausible common usage of the sefer supports his version of its *matara*. His retroactive rebranding is further belied by the running elucidation "Mikra Malei" section, which regularly leads the reader through the text in accordance to the PSM's explanation, contrary to Rashi's. As for its usage in chinuch, I can only report that my own children have been taught from PSM, and my own colleagues have taught from it. We assume that once alerted to this reality the author of *לא ידעו ולא יבינו* will be grateful for the campaign to correct a situation he had so stridently declared unfathomable.

In one particularly convoluted statement, *לא ידעו ולא יבינו* explains the rationale for his scorching denunciations (in many instances by name) of the Rabbanim and Roshei Yeshiva who don't see the issue the way he does. You see, he is concerned that in taking such a foolish position they will lower the prestige of Talmidei Chachamim in the eyes of the masses (calling them stupid will somehow raise it again). The alternative possibility – that our author has simply failed to grasp what the concern is about – is immediately confirmed in that same paragraph when he chortles that those who oppose PSM ought to have a problem with Divrei Yoel as well; after all, the Satmar Rav also occasionally quotes Rishonim other than Rashi.

At any rate, one reasonable takeaway is that we all agree that as a baseline commentary PSM is detrimental.

⁶ Take, for one of countless examples, the pasuk in Parshas Re'ei – *כי בחודש האביב הוציאך ה' אלקיך ממצרים לילה (ט"ז, א')* – As a matter of fact, we left מצרים in the morning. A פירוש is necessary to explain that the התחלת הגאולה that took place the night before was significant enough to be referred to as our "leaving" from מצרים. There'd be little value in insisting on explaining the pasuk "כפשוטו" that we left at night – you'd simply be wrong.

Of course, there are no doubt important reasons why the Torah chooses to phrase the pasuk the way it does, but that does not therefore make the literal translation "poshut pshat".

⁷ There's a reason why the greatest of the ba'alei Tosfos – Rabbeinu Tam – declared that while he'd be able to duplicate Rashi's commentary on Shas, the Chumash commentary is something completely beyond us, see Chida Sheim Hagedolim, ערך ש' [ל"ה] רש"י. The Chida further cites a tradition from the רמ"ע מפאנו that Rashi fasted 613 taaneisim before beginning

sound manner⁸. Rashi did not sit down to write a *Little Medrash Says*, he did not simply compile a collection of intriguing ma'amarei Chazal al seder haparshios. A glance at any of the gedolei meforshei Rashi will give you an idea of his methodology: each Chazal that Rashi cites is specifically necessary to explain an extra vav, an out of order Passuk, a textual twist of some sort. The result is the seamless fusion of Torah Shebiksav with Torah Shel Ba'al Peh – Chumash, along with the basic background information that the Author wants you to have in order to read it on a baseline level⁹.

There is a world of other drashos and ma'amarei Chazal – the seforim are on the shelf waiting to be learned. But the basic midrashim are the ones needed to be mefarish "דבר דבר על אפניו"; those are the ones that Rashi has us weave into our reading of the pesukim. They are the neshama of the Chumash, the context and background that we are meant to be aware of if it is to be read fluidly. To be sure, there are innumerable other levels of pshat to be gleaned from within the body of text itself, and that is the contribution of the gedolei hapashtanim. Their seforim are there to be learned, but for baseline Chumash Klal Yisroel has long since accepted Rashi's Chazal based approach¹⁰.

his monumental work. The קדמונים understood Rashi to be more than a sefer on Chumash – it is the authoritative guide to baseline Chumash.

⁸ For an articulation of how Rashi presents us with 'pshuto shel mikra' see Mizrahi and other gedolei meforshei Rashi to Parshas Mishpatim 'ח, כ"ב, as well as Mizrahi Parshas Pinchas ל"ט, כ"ט. See also Rashi's own hakdama to Shir Hashirim where he elaborates a bit on his approach.

⁹ We are specifically avoiding the technical terms 'pshat' and 'drash' etc. Certainly, Rashi contains much drash. But in his system these are the drashos that are necessary to properly read the text. The fact that we happened not to be aware of the information if not for the mesorah of Torah shel ba'al peh does not make it any less baseline for learning Chumash.

The concept of אין מקרא יוצא מידי פשוטו does not mean that the 'pshat' is always the proper first level reading. This is evident from the very Gemara that introduces us to the concept (שבת סג.) – it was obvious to Chazal that the primary interpretation of חגור חרבך על ירך is a reference to limud haTorah. Only as an additional exegesis does the Gemara maintain that there is also something to be gleaned from a literal reading as well – that there's an element of glory to being girded with a physical sword (with the resultant ramifications for הלכות שבת).

The oft cited Rashbam in Parshas Vayeishev is actually quite clear on this point. He agrees that Rashi's approach is the primary baseline reading, whereas 'עומק הפשט' is a specialty interest (suitable for 'אוהבי שכל', but something to be enjoyed responsibly – "אל תרבו בניכם בהגיון"). And Rashi agrees that Rashbam's approach is also an important facet of limud haTorah, one which he would have written an additional sefer on had he had the time. But being a facet of limud haTorah does not make it the basic reading of the text. (Those who quote the Rashbam as championing his 'עומק הפשט' approach as more primary than Rashi's – and that Rashi agreed to this (!) – have clearly never read through the passage inside). Also pertinent is the Rashbam's statement at printed at the end of Parshas Pekudei or beginning of Vayikra (depending on the Chumash) עיי"ש.

There are innumerable levels of depth in Torah. All would recognize that a pirush written על דרך רמז should not be presented as a running baseline commentary; 'עומק הפשט', as per the Rashbam, is no different.

¹⁰ The fact that our baseline Chumash is Chumash-Rashi needs no citation, and is self evident to anyone familiar with normative Jewish life and scholarship. Those who refuse to accept realities that don't have a footnoted reference can see Shulchan Aruch v'nosei keilav to OC siman 285 regarding the מצוה of תרגום ואחד מקרא שנים, which can be accomplished by learning Chumash specifically with Rashi, as opposed to other pirushim, for his pirush is the "עיקור שהוא בנוי על יסוד" (see for example Magen Avraham and Machtzis Hashekel).

Nor is this – as some would have it – specifically an issue of chinuch, that for children we must teach Rashi 'first'. The poskim are describing the ikkur Chumash that should be studied as such by a 65 year old who is being ma'avir sidra as well. Presumably, they also recognize the value of learning b'iyun. But there's b'iyun, and there's pshuto shel mikra. A sefer that is presented and used as a different sort of basic guide quite simply conflicts with centuries of accepted premises.

Many similar sources describing the primacy of Rashi as our basic approach to Chumash exist, אלא דהמאריך להביא ראיות, על דבר פשוט הידוע לכל הרי"ז בגדר מוסיף גורע.

Anyone observing the PSM phenomenon cannot avoid the impression that the status quo is being tampered with. PSM users learn a different baseline Chumash. They are guided through the parshios al pi 'pshuto shel mikra' as the level one 'voss shteit', and then turn to Rashi for the midrashim and hergeishim. Rashi then becomes what some PSM defenders believe it to be¹¹, and exactly what it is not: a collection of yesodos and drashos, an inspirational work of Jewish lore, but not quite Chumash. The end result is an altered baseline experience in learning through the parsha.

The concern over such an alteration has nothing to do with Rashi's kavod or gadlus. Indeed, it really has nothing to do with Rashi at all. It is a concern over Chumash. A change in the baseline Torah that we learn and absorb is a change in the DNA of Klal Yisroel. There's no need to pinpoint what exactly is detrimental about the change: the very fact that our Chumash is being modified, even if it's by a group of well meaning yareim v'sheleimim, is definitely cause for alarm.

When pushed to the wall, we'd imagine that most people would agree that tampering with the basics is not a good thing, despite being closer to the simple reading. Let's take an example: we all know, it is baked into our basic knowledge of Torah and history, that Yosef's brothers sold him into slavery. Klal Yisroel has been blighted by this stain for thousands of years, *al michram bakesef tzaddik*, the *asara harugei malchus*, and so forth. Interestingly, a simple reading of the pasuk in Parshas Vayeishev (ל"ז, כ"ח) will leave you with a different impression – that the Midyanim actually beat the Shevatim to it; Yosef's brothers did not sell him at all. This is indeed how the Rashbam explains the pasuk, in accordance to his mehalech of 'עומק הפשט' (see also Rabbeinu Bachai). Rashi, following subtle textual pointers, explains al pi Chazal the story as we all know it so well.

PSM here takes care to explain that it was the brothers who sold Yosef¹². We can't read minds, but it's safe to assume that all recognize that there's be something uncomfortably jarring about presenting an alternative version of mechiras Yosef as baseline commentary, despite the Rashbam's approach being a tighter read of the words. Some things are basic enough to a Torah Jew's knowledge base that it would ring as almost sacrilegious to uproot it as the normative understanding, even though Rashi is right there on the page to provide us with Chazal's information as well.

This is not because there's something heretical about the Rashbam ש"ח. Nobody is trying to suppress the pashtanim – they are right there in the standard Mikroas Gedolos or local otzar haseforim for perusal. The initial issue has nothing to do with apikorsis or Haskala or a concern that someone will go off the derech by learning other meforshim¹³. There is just an inborn recognition that certain things are basics; altering the version of Chumash we absorb on a baseline level simply cannot be a good thing.

¹¹ In a recent shiur on the topic (prefaced by a disclaimer that we “don't mean to refer to any particular sefer or pashkivil”), Rabbi Daniel Neustadt characterized Rashi's function thus: “Rashi is not a sefer of pshat. It is a sefer of Yiddishkeit. ... So Rashi throws in all this little information, not because it's necessary to understand *Torah*, but because it is necessary to understand *Yiddishkeit*!” Achar bakahas mechila, even a cursory look at the tedious technical analysis that fills seforim like Gur Aryeh, Mizrachi, or Sifsei Chachamim will tell you that this is quite incorrect. To be sure, Rashi is the sefer of Yiddishkeit – but that is because it is the authoritative interpretation of *Torah* on its own terms.

¹² Although they depart from Rashi about who it was that physically removed Yosef from the pit, they carefully emphasize that it was all overseen by the brothers, and it was they who profited from the sale.

¹³ On a more farsighted level there may be Yiddishkeit related concerns as well, which we will discuss in Section 3. But those are additional issues, and not necessary for the recognition that changing basics is a bad idea in and of itself.

Those who are disturbed by the ubiquity of PSM are merely applying this same principle. They find it equally unsettling that Yiddin now absorb as the more “poshut” reality to be that Lavan kissed Yackov out of cousinly affection¹⁴, or that Yissachar is compared to a donkey because he farmed local land, or that Rivka was suffering from a standard high risk pregnancy, or that Yaakov actually placed only one stone under his head, or that Avraham asked his guest to wash their feet out of concerns for hygiene, or any of the countless other departures from the standard Chumash we all take for granted. Even if there’d be nothing specifically objectionable about the particulars of the change¹⁵, what we have here is a chumash that tweaks the basics of our yedi’as haTorah – certainly something the consumer should be warned about.

Section 2

And what are we changing it to?

One notable feature of Rashi's Chazal-based Chumash is its romemus; its consistent emphasis on the heightened level of the Avos, and the underlying ruchniyus inherent in the Torah's narrative. This is not because Rashi decided to overlay the Chumash with a musar sefer and inspirational sipurei tzadikim, but rather because – as per the background provided by Chazal and the subtle pointers within the text – this is the real message and correct baseline interpretation of Chumash.

When we trade that in for a simplistic approach, what we're left with is a relatively mundane piece of literature, to be read and understood in much the same way we would Shakespeare, להבדיל. Characters act and react to base psychological impulses, timeless lessons are brushed over, and glimpses of the world of nitzchiyus recede into invisibility¹⁶. Our natural relationship with the world of Tanach is brought in line with our everyday experiences, and no longer serves as an entry point to a world beyond them.

Take, for one example, the Torah’s report of Rachel’s jealousy toward Leah:

ותקנא רחל באחיתה (בראשית ל', א')

Rashi, based on Chazal, explains the jealousy was a קנאת סופרים over Leah’s מעשים טובים – Rochel recognized that her sister had reached certain heights in avoda that qualified her to be a mother of Klal Yisroel, and thereby felt an urging to attain a similar stature.

Now, we can probably assume that Rashi was well aware of what a more superficial understanding of the words could be. It’s safe to say that Rashi explained the way he did not because the ‘simple’ pshat evaded him, but specifically to disabuse us of such an earthy – and incorrect – impression of our אמהות הקדושות. When we learn Torah al pi Rashi and Chazal, the more appropriate appreciation is implanted in our consciousness.

¹⁴ In general, Lavan comes across as quite the machnis orach, both in his enthusiastic welcome of Eliezer (you guessed it: 'פניתי הבית' means he decluttered to make room for his guests) and his generous hosting of Yaakov.

¹⁵ In Section 2 we will explore possible problems that may indeed exist with the particulars, but here too their existence is not crucial to the objection.

¹⁶ Yes, we can still look over at Rashi to read the stories. But in transforming the way we learn Chumash al pi “pshat”, we also transform how we relate to the Avos, the stories, and the Chazal. The base reality is what it says, Rashi, if absorbed at all, is then processed as an innovative twist, a nice vort, or even pious apologetics.

PSM, on the other hand, explains this passage differently: that Rochel was jealous of Leah's having children while she remained childless – exactly how Rashi and Chazal tell us *not* to read it. What emerges is a baseline impression of a 'normalized' Rochel, who reacts emotionally to circumstances in much the same way you and I might.

And then imagine going through Chumash like this, consistently stripped of its refined assumptions and lofty overtones: Avraham was out for some air, not looking for guests¹⁷; Leah was simply unattractive, not battle worn from freeing herself from עשו של גורלו¹⁸; Rivka overheard Esav talking about his plans, no ruach hakodesh involved¹⁹; Avraham and Lot's shepherds quarreled over grazing rights, not inyanei gezel²⁰; Yitzchok didn't smell Gan Eden on Yaakov, just a whiff of the field²¹; no water came up for Rivka, rather it was *she* who went up a hill with the pail of water²²; Yaakov felt rejuvenated, no return of the shechina²³; הקול קול יעקב is a reference not to his refined manner of speech, but to the sound of his voice²⁴; Yehuda was sent ahead to get directions, not to establish a Yeshiva²⁵, and on and on and on. More than anything else, this is what defines the change in baseline Chumash from Rashi to PSM – it's not just a change in the information we study, it's even more so a transformation of the reality we experience. The world of Chumash-Rashi is a world where shechina, nissim, ruach hakodesh, lofty calculations are a given: they are so much to be expected that they constitute the most natural interpretation of the events. PSM, on the other hand, keeps our axioms and assumptions firmly planted in our own narrow reality, and interprets Chumash through that lens.

Is this a harmless innovation? Well, for one thing, we might want to consider a very basic advantage of Rashi's *hanachos*: they are true. The first problem with 'dressing Yaakov Avinu in our kapoteh' is not so much that it is a chutzpah, it's that it is false. We don't view the Avos as spiritual giants because it is more frum to do so; we view

¹⁷ בראשית י"ח, א': 'והוא ישב פתח האהל כחם היום' Rashi, as we all know, explains the passage as an emphasis on Avraham's mesiras nefesh in looking for guests despite the sweltering heat. PSM has him sitting there "להתקרר". (See below fn. 31)

¹⁸ בראשית כ"ט, י"ז: 'ועיני לאה רכות ורחל היתה יפת תאר ויפת מראה' Rashi, based on the כ"ג ב"ב קכג which sees it as untenable that the תורה would simply tell us some negative information about Leah's looks, explains that the focus is on Leah's crying and davening so as not to become עשו's wife. PSM informs us that the "passuk interrupts the narrative to tell us about the two daughters of Lavan, their ages, and the differences in the quality of their appearance".

¹⁹ בראשית כ"ז, מ"א-מ"ב: 'ויאמר עשו בלבו יקרבו ימי אבל אבי ואהרגה את יעקב אחי. ויגד לרבקה את דברי עשו בנה הגדל וגו' Rashi sees the description of Rivka being informed of something that Esav said 'in his heart' as indication of ruach hakodesh. PSM tells us she heard about it.

²⁰ בראשית י"ג, ז': 'ויהי ריב בין רעי מקנה אברם ובין רעי מקנה לוט' Rashi explanation of the ethical nature of this dispute is so well known that it forms for us the integral storyline. PSM users read that there wasn't enough grazing land in the area for the two flocks, so they found themselves bickering regularly.

²¹ בראשית כ"ז, כ"ז: 'ויגש וישק לו וירח את ריח בגדיו ויברכהו' In Rashi the שדה refers to גן עדן; in PSM it refers to a field.

²² בראשית כ"ג, ט"ז-י"ז: 'ותרד העינה ותמלא כדה ותעל. וירץ העבד לקראתה ויאמר הגמיאני נא מעט מים מכדך.' Rashi famously explains that Eliezer ran towards Rivka because he saw the neis that transpired in which the water came up for her. Many thus understand the word ותעל as a reference to the water that rose. PSM has Eliezer choosing Rivka because she was טובת מראה, and running toward her to catch up before she can get too far from the well. ותעל is explained as a reference to Rivka herself, who had to climb a hill after drawing the water, the well apparently being on low ground. (See below, fn. 31.)

²³ בראשית מ"ה, כ"ז: 'ותחי רוח יעקב אביהם' In Rashi, the reference is to the שכינה that had departed from him through the years of mourning; in PSM he felt as if he had come back to life.

²⁴ בראשית כ"ז, כ"ב: 'ויגש יעקב אל יצחק אביו וכו' ויאמר הקל קול יעקב.' Rashi teaches us that this refers to Yaakov's refined manner of speaking to Yitzchok such as saying with תחנונים "please stand", unlike Esav who said "stand up father!".

²⁵ בראשית מ"ו, כ"ח: 'ואת יהודה שלח לפניו אל יוסף להורת לפניו גשנה.' As per Rashi, Yehuda was tasked with setting up a Yeshiva; in PSM Yaakov was unsure where in Goshen they were supposed to go, so he sent Yehuda ahead to find out.

them that way because they were. They lived and operated on a different plane than we do, a reality intertwined with ruchniyus and romemus in ways we can barely relate to²⁶.

And yet, through limud haTorah, we can get a glimpse of it. So, yes, there is strong reason to keep these assumptions in mind as we learn about them. Their elevated stature is not merely incidental, and understanding it is not just an issue of giving great men their due respect. They were beyond us because the real world is beyond what we see with our myopic tunnel vision. Rashi is "יותר עיקור מיתר פירושים" in part because of realities his Chumash works within. We study the מעשי אבות to break out of our spiritually numb artificial reality and try to appreciate what they represented, and by extension the true nature of Torah, humanity, and the ratzon Hashem in this world.

But then there's the standard counterargument: How can you denigrate these pshatvna interpretations, there are sources in the gedolei meforshim for almost all of them.

This is indeed a good answer – but to the wrong question. True, nobody can call these pshatim illegitimate or bad. But the discussion on the table is not any individual's religiosity or scholarship; we're discussing if this is an appropriate mehalech to install as a baseline guide through Chumash.

Of course there are many layers of understanding in the pessukim. The Torah obviously chooses to phrase itself the way it does for a reason, and there's value to delving into the flow of the most literal reading as well²⁷. And that is what many of the pashtanim do, each within his own framework and toward his own purposes. (One thing we can say with a fair amount of confidence is that someone whose takeaway from the other meforshim is that they actually believed the Avos to be regular folk *definitely* should stick to learning Rashi.²⁸) We can spend delightful hours discussing the various approaches of the many commentators, the richness each one adds to a comprehensive limud, and where they differ from Rashi versus where they supplement him. Scholarly works on the topic abound, but PSM is not one of them.

PSM is presented and used as a handbook to Chumash k'pshuto; its utility and appropriateness must be judged in that light. And by this metric it comes up short: our Chumash k'pshuto is – and has been for as long as anyone can remember – the spiritually laced document that Rashi and Chazal present us with. This defines not just what our Chumash is, but our primary goals in learning it. Did someone commission this machon to change that? Was there a nimnu v'gamru that henceforth Mesivta bachurim should learn as baseline Chumash-Ralbag? Or that Baalei Battim should be ma'avir sidra Chumash-Abarbanel? Or that our 'pshuto shel mikra' should now be literary

²⁶ This is of course not to say they were infallible. On their plane they certainly were fallible and to the contrary their missteps were far more consequential than anything we can imagine. But that was fallibility within their unique sphere of existence; a modern man of this modern epoch who claims to fully grasp their sins is, in the words of Chazal, "אינו אלא טועה".

²⁷ See Rashi to 'להבין משל ומליצה' (א', ו').

²⁸ It's strange that some see it as a defense of PSM to claim that other Rishonim have a more earthy understanding of מעשי אבות. A comprehensive analysis of the premises and approaches of the full spectrum of mefarshei Chumash is beyond the scope of this essay, but it is at any rate unnecessary for our purposes. The argument crumbles under its own weight: if it were true that there is a school of thought that fundamentally contradicts Rashi (and Chazal) in their view of the world of Tanach, then that would make the sefer all the *more* objectionable for presenting that school in a baseline Chumash commentary. Assuming there's a dispute on the topic, then Klal Yisroel has long since taken on Rashi's hanachos for our limud Chumash.

As it is, it's more likely that there's no essential dispute on the reality; there's simply different layers of learning Chumash. And once again, the layer we have traditionally treated as "עיקור" is the one Rashi engages in. So why would anybody want to change that?

analysis based on natural and 'normal' axioms, and that our basic appreciation of the Avos should now be as relatable everymen?

Much ado has been made about the fact that the sefer was published with no *haskamos*²⁹. But in truth, given its ubiquity and usage, it can be argued that a few Rabanim signing off on its contents would not either suffice – a foundational transformation of this sort should require a consensus of *manhigei Yisroel*³⁰. As it is, nobody has yet demonstrated why this is called for altogether. The other *mehalchim* are all already available, both in original form and in various *likutim*, to be consulted and learned in the way they have been for centuries. Who decided that this *mehalech* should now be reformulated and presented as the running baseline commentary in a standard issue *Chumash*?

All this would be true even if the *pirush* would just faithfully report the approaches of the *meforshim* it quotes³¹. However, there also do seem to be some valid concerns about the sefer's methodology, even in context of the 'pshuto shel mikra'. In choosing which *pshatim* to present, the sefer often seems to be specifically seeking the

²⁹ The printed *haskamos* were reprints of those given to the earlier 'Rashi K'pshuto'.

³⁰ A good analogy would be the Artscroll revolution, which would never have been deemed acceptable were it not for the proactive backing of that generation's leaders. And that itself was achieved largely because it was seen as merely a tweak in the packaging, but with strong fidelity to traditional approaches.

³¹ Even when they quote from the *pashtanim* accurately, there seems to be a tendency to seize the *pashtus* but neglect to mention underlying theme of the approach. When they explain ותעל (see above, fn. 22) as a reference to Rivka returning up a hill after drawing water, for example, they are technically correct that some *Rishonim* teach the words that way. However, those *Rishonim* also have a purpose in this *pshat* – some say it emphasizes Rivka's *tzniyus* and *zrizus* in that she didn't loiter around after getting the water, others say it emphasizes her *chesed* in that she turned back to help Eliezer even though she was already on the way home. To read PSM's rendition one comes away with nothing other than a description of the landscape. Not untrue, but rather pointless; and a pointlessness that is supported by no *Rishon*.

PSM has Avraham Avinu sitting in the entrance "to cool off" (see above fn. 17). An accurate quote from Ramban, except that in the Ramban the point is to emphasize Avraham's level of *ruchniyus* that Hashem appeared to him even without his preparation (עיי"ש בלשונו "והזכיר זה להודיע"). As far as a PSM reader is made aware the *pasuk* is simply reporting on his afternoon siesta.

They quote Ramban again in their *pirush* of (בראשית כ"ה, ח') 'וימת אברהם בשיבה טובה': that Avraham came to the end of his life with all that he needed. They stop it there however, whereas the Ramban goes on to explain what the stress is – that *tzaddikim* see satisfaction without wanting for extras, as opposed to the standard course of יש לו מנא רוצה מאתיים.

The camels bringing Yosef to Mitzraim carried (בראשית ל"ז, כ"ה) נכאת וצרי ולט. Rashi famously explains the inclusion of this seemingly random information: this was something specifically orchestrated out of Hashem's special concern for צדיקים, the nice smelling spices being a pleasant alternative to the tar that *Yishmaelim* generally carried. PSM explains that the spices came in small containers so there was room for Yosef on the camel. They quote this from the *Netziv*, which is correct except that the *Netziv* goes on to stress how the פסוק shows us the special concern that Hashem has for *tzaddikim* that he should be comfortable on the camel – identical to Rashi's approach if not his specific *pshat*, something that PSM neglects to include.

The Torah tells us about Yaakov's placement of twelve stones, as per Rashi, as a prelude to the *neis* where they complained ויניח צדיק את ראשו and subsequently conjoined. PSM tells us it was only one rock from the beginning. And why did Yaakov put it there (or why does the Torah mention it)? Well, the one stone *mehalech* is quoted from (פרשת ויצא, זר חדש) מאמר 'ויפגע המקום', ועיין בפירוש מתוך מדבש שם) where the *medrash* explains that it served as an *aveilus* over the *churban*. PSM tells us it was there for a pillow.

Again and again the sefer works us through the *pesukim* with empty *pashtus* for the sake of *pashtus* – a *mehalach* that is often unsupported by the *meforshim* they cite, and certainly a curious one to be submitting as an innovation to our *limud Chumash*.

normalized view, not as a byproduct of pshat, but as its defining quality. References to any higher ideals or inyanei ruchni are brushed over (and at times explicitly negated), in contexts that have nothing to do with finding a simpler 'pshat' in the passuk. Uncomfortably often, the reader comes away with the impression that what is being sought is not so much the simplest reading of the words but rather the most temporal and earthy rendition of the storyline³².

Take for example the exchange between Avraham Avinu and his celestial guests.

אִיהָ שָׂרָה אֲשֶׁתְּךָ וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה בָאֵהָל (בראשית י"ח, ט')

Why was Sarah in the tent (or, more relevantly, why does the Torah mention it)? We've always seen in this an emphasis on Sarah Imeinu's modesty, she remained in the tent rather than join in dinner conversation with three strange men. This is how the passage is explained, not only by Rashi, but by virtually all of the "pashtanim" as well³³. It appears that there's nothing in the rules of pshat that proscribes explaining a pasuk to be a discussion of tzniyus.

However, PSM readers are told that the more baseline reading of the story is actually a statement on Sarah's social status. Having no children to tend to, she had little reason to go in and out, thus she spent most of her time in the tent. A very touching, human, and eminently relatable interpretation.

This pshat is ostensibly taken from Abarbanel; in reality it is not a fully accurate citation³⁴. But the more important question is not so much if such an approach does or does not exist somewhere in the vast body of Torah literature, the question is why we would mine this one up and present it as the simple baseline reading of the story. The passuk gives no information at all as to why she was in the tent; any possible motivation for staying indoors fits equally well into the words. So what is it about this singular interpretation that deems it appropriate to be presented as the "pshuto shel mikra"?

It seems that it was chosen specifically *because* of its humanity and relatability. And therein lies as close to a running theme as any – 'pashut' seems to be defined as 'normal', or even something akin to 'secular'. Tzniyus is a lofty idea, certainly that's a deeper lesson that can be learned from the Torah, but – the thinking apparently goes – that's not the baseline Chumash. Baseline Chumash is to be understood through the prism of our earthy preconceptions, not above them.

Is that really the hanacha we want leading us through our limud of מעשי אבות?

Normalcy is apparently a goal in its own right, irrespective of universally accepted premises. And thus we find the sefer inventing a new interpretation for **וַיֹּאסֶף אֵל עַמּוּי (בראשית כ"ה, ח')**, for another example. Virtually all commentators – pashtanim or otherwise – understand this as a reference to Avraham joining the righteous in

³² Again, this is not to ascribe any malicious intent on the part of the authors. We are discussing here the end result of the pirush as it is, not ascribing agendas or flinging accusations. Ultimately it makes little difference what the intent was, because this is the impression imbibed by the readers. And that's the relevant criteria to deciding whether a sefer may be an unadvisable read.

³³ See Radak, Ralbag, Chizkuni, Pirush HaTorah L'Baalei Hatosfos, and others.

³⁴ Abarbanel also explains that Sarah was really in the tent for out of modesty, it was just Avraham's answer to the guests that focused on other reasons. Only the latter point makes it into the PSM's commentary.

Olam Habah³⁵. PSM chooses instead to see it simply as a term of classification – he joined the group listed as 'deceased'. No simplicity, textual or otherwise, is achieved by this innovation; its sole benefit is that it gets us through the passuk without any reference to ruchnius – a somewhat strange consideration when the sefer being interpreted is the Torah itself.

A similar resistance to the esoteric comes up in their translation of Yehuda's acceptance of responsibility for Binyomin: if I don't return him here safely, Yehuda pledged to Yaakov, (בראשית מ"ג, ט'). Rashi, basing himself on the plural term hayamim, explains this as a pledge of both his Olam Hazei and Olam Habah. Once again, virtually nobody disagrees, and this understanding seems acceptable even to the pashtanim³⁶. Yet here too PSM feels that in the interest of pshat the statement must be explained as referring to specifically the duration of Yehuda's earthly existence.

Another revealing glimpse into the mindset of 'pshat' can be found in their explanation of the duda'im that Leah got from Reuvein and subsequently bartered to Rochel. Some rishonim, including such pashtanim as Ralbag and Seforno, describe the utility of these herbs as being beneficial for fertility. Others (ibn Ezra, Ramban, and Rabbeinu Bachai) question these medicinal properties, and conclude that – if they exist at all – they are of a metaphysical nature. At any rate they maintain that Rochel didn't purchase the duda'im for their roots at all, but rather for their fruits, which are known to provide a pleasant aroma.

PSM explains the passage by cobbling together these two approaches and sprinkling in a third – Rochel was actually hedging her bets on the chance that an old wives' tale may actually work; if not then at least she'll have the fruits to perfume the house.

The idea of the Torah reporting on the Avos and Imahos falling for a folk superstition is jarring to sensitive ears. The question again is not so much if a source can be found for the suggestion (in this case it happens that there can be – see Radak), the question is what is it that designates this outlying idea as the baseline pashtus, which must then be grafted into a concocted storyline that conforms with no rishon³⁷. And once again, the only perceivable accomplishment is the normalization of the Avos.

This association of 'poshut' with 'natural' leads to some fundamentals shattering revisions.

Few things are more widely assumed and inextricable from our worldview than the recognition of the otherworldly gadlus of Adam HaRishon kodem haCheit: Man at his moment of near perfection, the prototypical synthesis of guf and neshama, touched upon by Yaakov, transiently achieved at Sinai, and striven for as the ideal of human history. When the Torah describes Adam and Chava in that sublime state of Gan Eden mikedem as "ערומים... ולא יתבוששו", this is almost universally understood as a testament to their elevated pre-sin stature, the guf was fully קדוש and not a source of embarrassment.

PSM tells its readers that Adam and Chava weren't embarrassed because they were primitive. They had not yet gained the wisdom and sensitivity to avoid going naked.

³⁵ Seforno, Rabbeinu Bachai, Ralbag, and others

³⁶ See Radak. Also note the Tashbatz who insists it can be read as a reference *only* to Olam Habah, not Olam Hazei.

³⁷ Either the Seforno or the Ramban stand on their own as completely straightforward pshuto shel mikra. No streamlining is achieved by taking Ramban – that she desired the fruit for smell – but also inventing that she was taking her chances on the roots as well. Nor by explaining like Seforno – that she wanted the fertility benefits of the roots – but taking care to suggest that she might have been grasping at superstitious straws. Either approach would have fit nicely into the stated goal of the pirush; this hybrid construct adds only complexity, not pashtus.

Now, it is true that if one searches enough he may find a supporting source for even the most off the beaten track approach³⁸, which can then be wielded to fend off accusations of heresy or whatnot. But the question here is not about the author's *olam habah* – the question is why in Heaven's name would this far off the spectrum *da'as yachid*, which so violently contradicts so much and so many, be seized upon to weave into a baseline *pirush* purporting to present a 'simple' reading of the Chumash. What guiding principle leads them to give primacy to this *pshat*, and is that indeed the principle we want guiding *us* through the Chumash?

Many have struggled to explain the concept of the separated "upper" and "lower" waters with a *רקיע* between them as described in the Torah's account of the Second Day.

PSM keeps things simple: the *מים עליונים* is the clouds; the *רקיע* is the air under them.

The source for this understanding is given as the Malbim quoting *מורה נבוכים*. That is accurate for what it's worth, but they neglect to mention that the Malbim goes on to quote Abarbanel as referring to this *pshat* as *שקר וכזב*, and then proceeds at great length to build an approach which he describes as "*רחוקה מאד משיטת הרמבם*" and an "*עסק אחר מוסכם מדברי חז"ל והדבר אמת ונכון*". Apparently this interpretation was not accepted by the mesorah as normative, indeed it was roundly rejected. Why then is it this one, of all the available options³⁹, that PSM feels driven to present us with as the '*pshuto shel mikra*'? Presumably, because it avoids recourse to the supernatural. The definition of '*pshat*' – even within the context of the esoteric parshios of *ma'asei bereishis* – appears once again to be tied to what's most 'normal'.

These leanings crop up even when unrelated to *pirush hamikra*; on at least one occasion the *sefer* feels the need to proactively interject an innovative way of keeping things down to earth. The *צוהר* that Noach installed for illumination is understood, in one midrashic interpretation, as a precious stone that gives light. PSM cites this *pshat*, but then for some reason feels the need to assert that, since contemporary science is not familiar with a stone that gives its own light, we must assume ("*הדעת נוטה*") that Noach was really using candles for light and simply relying on the stone to reflect them.

One wonders how such a speculation fits the stated mission of the *sefer*, which is ostensibly to provide *pashut pshat* in Chumash. How did that branch out into also modifying accepted understandings of *ma'amarei Chazal* to conform with the list of phenomena we happen to be currently aware of?

What's important here is not to debate the specific issue of the nature of the *צוהר*. What's important is that this is a very well documented understanding that was heretofore assumed and accepted by virtually everyone⁴⁰, as

³⁸ One was eventually discovered in a recently published manuscript presumed to be from Rav Saadia Gaon.

³⁹ Malbim alone quotes five, aside from his own.

⁴⁰ Noteh or otherwise, the assertion runs contrary to numerous *Ma'amarei Chazal* and *Rishonim* who are quite clear that the stone was indeed *מעצמו*.

עי' פרקי דרבי אליעזר פרק כ"ג (מובא ברא"ש על התורה), "מרגלית אחת היתה תלויה בתבה ומאירה לכל הבריות כנר שהוא מאיר בגבורתו שנאמר צהר תעשה לתבה", תלמוד ירושלמי פסחים הלכה א', ילקוט שמעוני רמז נ"ג, ובראשית רבה פרשה ל"א אות י"א .

It is clear from Chazal that the stone gave off light like a candle, which obviously means that it had its own light just like a candle does. In fact, the *ירושלמי* and *ילקוט שמעוני* and *בראשית רבה* write that Noach knew through the stone when it was night and when it was day as the stone illuminated at night more than by day, the same way we know in a dark cave that when the candle light is brighter it is a sign that it is night. It is obvious from the *ירושלמי* that the stone had its own light

the authors were certainly aware. Why then does this Chumash feel a need to go out on the limb of informing us that their da'as is noteh otherwise? And what does this nityas hada'as have to do with the function of the sefer? The answer to these questions may shed light on the underlying approach of the rest of the sefer as well.

These more extreme examples highlight the theme – the point is not so much to explain the most *poshut* pshat in Chumash per se, it is rather to stress the most *natural* pshat. Throughout, the one unifying principle seems to be the drive to make things normal, relatable, down to earth: in keeping with our preexisting assumptions, and acceptable to a contemporary worldview. It is left to us to decide if a Chumash built on these principles is the Chumash we want to mainstreamed into our communal consciousness.

Section 3

All this leads us to the most harsh of the allegations, the association with a 'ruach' of Haskalah. Because, while we assume it to be inadvertent, the bends of thought touched upon here are exactly those that underlay deviant intellectual movements past and present.

The plain fact is that the dangers of an approach given to minimizing nissim and stifling the sublime undercurrents of the Torah has been documented as far back as the time of the Rishonim⁴¹, and has been a recurring theme throughout the ages.

This has held true regardless of the best intentions of those who promote the approach. אין חכם כבעל הנסיון – with the benefit of hindsight we should take into account where it ultimately leads. By now we have more than speculation, we have context and association: for generations there have been those who thrill in redefining assumptions in Yiddishkeit and limud haTorah, to cut Torah and the Avos and mesora and hashgacha down to size, make them more normal and natural and less mystical. They proudly view themselves as taking a more sophisticated approach to Torah and Yiddishkeit, the theme being it's much more grown up to avoid teitching things in supernatural ways⁴². And their ideology and methodology follows through to eventually disregarding kedushas hamesora entirely. Nothing is inviolable; the systematic removal of anything deeper than natural

and was not a reflection of candle light, for if it was a reflection of candle light one would know from the candles itself when it is day and when it is night.

וע"ע רבינו בחי" פרשת תצוה פרק כ"ח פסוק ט"ו "נקרא ברקת על שם שנוצצת כברק ומאירה כנר וכן תרגום ברקן, והוא אבן שתלה נח בתבה, והנביא קראה אקדח" על שם שקודח כגחלת והוא מלשון 'קודחי אש' (ישעי' נ', י"א), אברבנאל ישעי' נ"ד "אקדח וכו' שהיא מאירה בלילה כמו גחלי אש, ולכן קראה אבני אקדח", עטרת זקנים לבעלי התוס' בפרשת תצוה.

See also the discussion regarding using the צהר as light on שבת *instead* of candles:

מושב זקנים על התורה פרשת אמור פרק כ"ד פסוק ב', ופירושים ופסקים לרבינו אביגדור הצרפתי פסק רל"ג ורל"ד פרשת אמור (כ"ד, מהרש"ג חלק ב' סימן ק"ז and ב'),

See צהר תעשה לתיבה who discuss why a stone was specifically preferred instead of candles.

⁴¹ See for example the Sefer Ohr HaChaim from the Chasid Ya'avitz, much of which is devoted toward tracing the development of these thought processes and their tragic consequences, r"l.

⁴² The designation of their views as more sophisticated is self-chosen, and has no objective meaning in this context. Someone who doesn't believe in Hashem or nissim r"l may choose to call himself sophisticatedly scientific, as he operates only within a framework of what his physical senses can experience. But these gentlemen at least officially believe in Hashem and the Torah and by extension nissim. It's just that they argue that nissim were more uncommon than what we were taught by our morahs. Fine and well, but now the discussion is simply about how many nissim Hashem chooses to do. We can bring raiyos one way or the other, but to term your personal supposition of what hanhagas Hashem ought to be as objectively more scientific is curiously pretentious.

occurrences, historical context, random variations, and human foibles from Torah and the mesorah process leads inevitably to the deconstruction of all hanachos in emunos v'deios and normative yahadus.

In discounting any value in the mesorah, they take great delight in digging up obscure minority opinions to triumphantly pull out when their views are challenged. The fact that they fly in the face of the minyan ubinyan of accepted Torah ideology only makes them all the more sensationally provocative. Armed with a good search engine *nothing* can be qualified as inappropriate.

When we see a sefer that regularly touches on both of these concepts – the removal of the lofty undertones of the מעשי אבות, as well as the questionable havchana in assigning primacy to atypical approaches – it is understandable that the associations would make us uncomfortable. When we recall 200 years of the decimation of 90 percent of Klal Yisroel, and when we witness what happens to those who go down this route even today, we can appreciate the tendency toward extra vigilance in this regard.

Why, the very premise of some justifications given to this work – who says Rashi is the only way to learn Chumash – is straight out of the enlightenist playbook. Sure, centuries of Yiddin have absorbed Chumash-Rashi as their basic text, but why does it have to be that way? In fact, we can search up a line from a haskama, and some contextless quote from a Gadol, and presto – all mehalchim are now created equal.

The idea that the same Ribono Shel Olam who has miraculously kept Klal Yisroel thriving through the vicissitudes of golus also takes an active interest in the preservation of his Torah; that if Rashi's Chumash has been seen as *our* Chumash for 900 years it's not some accident of history but something we should shudder to tamper with, plays no role in their worldview.

This is not chv'sh to accuse the editors of this work of these intentions, chalila to associate them with the leitzanim and professors. But, regardless of where the pshatim come from, the ruach imbibed by the reader is not the deeper appreciation intended by the editors – it is rather a watered down appreciation of Torah. And that certainly is a cause for concern.

Conclusion

The purpose of this essay is not to provoke opposition or to influence policy in any way. By the time of this writing what has been said has already been said, what has been signed has been signed. Opinions on all sides have already been formulated; I have no intention to inject my personal views into the discourse, nor illusions that anyone wants them. This essay was written solely as a quest for clarity, to try and grasp the feelings toward Torah and Yiddishkeit that drives some wiser men than we to intuitively reject something that at face value appears innocuous. The דעת תורה expressed on this topic by now forms another chapter in the hashkafic history of the Olam Hatorah, we only hope to have learned up the sugya properly.