

בס"ד

THE RASHI OF THE WEEK

Week of

Parshas Nitzovim-Vayelech

Elul 23, 5783 – September 9, 2023
Shnas Hakhel

Compiled from the works of
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An Outline of the Rebbe's Explanation of Rashi
Parshas Nitzovim-Vayelech
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Rashi in His Own Words

דברים ל', ו': ומל'ה' אלקיך את לבבך ואת לבב זרעך לאהבה את ה' אלקיך בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך למען חייך:

Devorim 30:6: And the Lord your G-d will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, (in order) to love the Lord your G-d with all your heart and with all your soul, for the sake of your life.

Synopsis

In this week's Torah portion, Nitzovim, we are told that upon returning to the Lord, He will gather our exiles and restore the land to the Jewish people. The Torah then tells us,¹ "The Lord your G-d will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, (in order) that you love the Lord your G-d with all your heart and soul, for the sake of your life."

Rashi's primary goal is to explain Peshat. Hence, Rashi answers any question that could be posed based on Peshat. Yet here we have a seemingly obvious question that Rashi does not address. How can the Torah say that G-d will circumcise our hearts? Earlier, the Torah said that we must circumcise the (spiritual) "foreskin" of our hearts. There are two explanations for this. One is the blockage of our hearts. In other words, this spiritual "foreskin" prevents our hearts from connecting with Hashem. The second explanation is the foolishness of our hearts, which leads us along the wrong paths. However, why would we need to circumcise or cut our hearts? Yet Rashi does not explain to a beginning student the meaning of "circumcising a heart!"

The explanation is that before this verse, the Torah described our suffering throughout the long exile at great length. The Torah also tells what led to this bitter exile. Namely, it was our straying from Hashem and following our hearts. What caused us to stray from Hashem? The inappropriate things that we saw in Egypt. Human nature is that first, the eyes see, and then the heart desires. G-d "circumcising" our hearts means that He will separate the connection between our eyes and heart, thereby removing the cause of our straying. Love of Hashem will follow as a matter of course.

1. Our Parshah, Devorim 30:6.

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Rashi's Explanation

In this week's Torah portion, Nitzovim, we are told that as a result of returning to the Lord, He will gather the exiles. Hashem will then restore the land to the Jewish people. The Torah tells us,² "You will return to Hashem with all your heart and with all your soul, and you will listen to His voice according to all that I am commanding you and your children today; then Hashem will bring back your exiles, and He will have mercy upon you. He will gather you again from all the nations where He had dispersed you." In our verse, the Torah tells us the reward for returning to Him³. "Hashem will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring. (As a result of this) You will love the Lord your G-d with all your heart and soul, for the sake of your life." Rashi finds no need to explain anything whatsoever in this verse.

Difficulties in Understanding Rashi

As discussed numerous times, Rashi explains Peshat, meaning the simple understanding of the Torah. Not only that, but Rashi answers every question that one might ask, according to Peshat. The only tool that a child who is just beginning to study the Torah needs to understand the Torah from beginning to end is Rashi's commentary. This being the case, if we find a question with which Rashi does not deal, it must mean one of two things. Upon further examination, we often discover that it is not a question. Alternatively, it may be a question that Rashi answered earlier.

In the above verse, we find a seemingly obvious question. Why does the Torah say G-d will "circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring?" What is the meaning of circumcising the heart? In an earlier verse, the Torah spoke of circumcising the *foreskin* of the heart. Rashi explained that this refers to a spiritual foreskin. The Torah said,⁴ "You shall circumcise the foreskin of your heart." There, Rashi cites the words "the foreskin of your heart" and explains that it means "the blockage and covering of your heart," meaning the spiritual "foreskin" of the heart, which one must remove

The fact that Rashi does not deal with this obvious question in our verse poses an even more incredible difficulty. There are several Aramaic translations of the Torah. Targum Onkelos is the standard translation. In most instances (unlike the others), it translates and explains the Torah, according to Peshat. The Targum translates this verse as, "The Lord your G-d will remove the *foolishness* of your heart." This translation answers our question. However, Rashi does not deal with this question at all.

2. Our Parshah, 30:2-3.

3. See Footnote 1.

4. Parshas Eikev, Devorim 10:16.

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The Explanation

The reason that the Torah writes that Hashem will "circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring" can be understood from the verses leading up to it. First, the Torah says⁵, "And it will be when all these things come upon you ... and you will return to the Lord, your G-d, with all your heart and *soul*." The Torah then continues, "(the Lord, your G-d, will bring back your exiles ... And the Lord, your G-d, will bring you to the land ...) and the Lord, your God, will circumcise your heart ..." In other words, the prophecy that G-d will circumcise the hearts of all Jews follows the prophecy that the Jewish Nation will return to Hashem with a whole heart. It would not be appropriate to say that G-d will circumcise the "foreskin" of our hearts. The "blockage and covering" of our hearts (as explained by Rashi) and their "foolishness" (as said by Onkelus) will have been removed!

We must, therefore, say that by circumcision, the Torah is referring to a higher level of Divine service. Previously, the Torah spoke about "negative spiritual circumcision," i.e., removing the foolishness and blockage from our hearts. Here, the Torah is discussing "positive spiritual circumcision," meaning that it is a product of the love of Hashem. This is in keeping with the end of the verse, "that you may love the Lord your G-d." To put it somewhat differently, earlier, the Torah talked about returning to Hashem out of fear or awe. Here, the Torah discusses returning to G-d out of love for Him.

However, if the Torah speaks of an action, meaning loving Hashem, why is it expressed with negative language, circumcising, cutting off, or removing the blockage? Furthermore, why does the Torah say that *G-d* will circumcise our hearts? If the point is to love Hashem, that is something which we must do ourselves; it is a positive commandment.

This, too, will be understood by understanding the verses leading up to it. The Torah discussed at great length the trouble that will occur in exile. The exile is caused by⁶ "they (the Jews) abandoned the covenant of the Lord." The Torah describes the factors which led to this behavior⁷. "For you know ... in the land of Egypt ... you *saw* their abominations ... Perhaps there is among you one ... *whose heart strays* ... to go and worship the deities of those nations ..." From this, we can understand that "the Lord your G-d will circumcise your heart," is to remove the cause of the spiritual descent. It removes even the *possibility* of *seeing* their abominations, as a result of which "our hearts *stray*."

In other words, there are two general causes for a Jew straying from the path of Torah and Mitzvos:

- a. Something is lacking within the heart: the "foolishness" or a "blockage" of the heart.

5. Our Parshah, Devorim 30:1–6.

6. Our Parshah, Devorim 29:24.

7. Our Parshah, Devorim 29:15–17.

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- b. Something outside of the heart, something external, causes one to stray. This is in keeping with what Rashi says⁸, "the eyes see, and (consequently) the heart desires." The fact that one saw something that seemed tempting made him desire it with his heart.

Based on the above, it is understood that circumcision, cutting away or removing, appropriately describes a means to bring the heart to love Hashem. The cutting refers to removing the cause of straying from G-d. It means *cutting* the connection between the eyes and the heart.

Furthermore, we can understand why Hashem must circumcise our hearts; we cannot do it ourselves. Through his Divine service, a person can remove a blockage of the heart. However, one cannot remove the connection between vision and the heart. That is a part of a person's nature, which G-d created. Hence, only He can remove it.

This also explains the continuation of the verse. "The Lord, your G-d, will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring (so that you may) love the Lord your G-d with all your heart and soul." He will remove the potential cause for straying; hence, as a matter of course, we will come to love Hashem.

A Deeper Lesson from Rashi

The two types of circumcision taught in the Torah represent two levels of G-dly service. The type of circumcision whereby we remove the blockage from our hearts is the service of Teshuvah, meaning returning to G-d. The second is where Hashem circumcises our hearts. This immediately brings about our love of G-d. This is associated with the love of Hashem.

Rashi's approach to our verse discusses the service of the love of G-d. We have already returned to G-d with all of our heart and soul. He removes the one possible cause for straying, and we automatically love Him. However, according to Onkelos, it is the idea of Teshuvah, our removing the foolishness from ourselves.

Our Torah portion, Nitzovim, is always read before Rosh Hashanah. In other words, it is read at the end of Elul, the last month of the Jewish calendar. What is our job throughout the month of Elul? How do we prepare ourselves for the New Year? This is alluded to by an acronym formed from a verse in the Song of Songs, called in Hebrew by the book Shir Hashirim^{9 10}, "I am to my beloved, and my beloved is to me." The Hebrew is "אני לי לדודי ודודי לי." The first letter of each word forms an acrostic which spells the name of this month, "Elul – אלוּל." The fact that the month of Elul is connected with "my beloved" demonstrates that an essential part of our service is the love of Hashem.

8. See Rashi's comments to Parshas Shelach, Bamidbar 15:39.

9. The entire Song of Songs appears to be a love story. Indeed, it is the greatest love story of all time. It allegorically depicts the love between the Jewish people and G-d. He is our husband and we are His wife.

10. Shir Hashirim 6:3.

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However, "I am to my beloved" precedes "my beloved is to me." In other words, the job begins with us. Only after our efforts is "my beloved is to me." This is Hashem's response to our efforts.

There is a well-known allegory used by the Alter Rebbe to describe this month. He compares our service throughout the month of Elul to a king returning to his palace. On his way back, he stops in a field. There, he graciously greets everyone without exception, with a pleasant countenance. Once he returns to his palace, it is not all that easy to arrange to see the king. Moreover, the king does not smile at everyone. Even if one does merit entering the king's chamber, he must first make the proper preparations.

The same is true throughout this month. Hashem is in the field. He greets each one of us with a "smiling countenance." Our service is in a manner of "I am to my beloved." However, He provides us with great help to attain that level. This means that He gives us great revelations, which enable us to accomplish what is needed. He reveals a very high level of G-dliness, known as the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy. He gives us a "boost" to give us the strength to accomplish what we must do in preparation for the New Year.

Once the New Year begins, G-d is in the palace. Then, one requires exceptional merit to greet "the King." We must have used all of the energy that he bestowed upon us throughout the month of Elul to merit greeting Him.

Hashem should help that all of us, without exception, be inscribed and sealed for a good, sweet year. In particular, we should merit the blessing foretold in our Torah portion of Moshiach Now!

(Adapted from talks given on Shabbos Parshas Nitzovim 5734, and Shabbos Parshas Nitzovim Vayelech 5743)

I hope you gained as much by reading this as I did by translating and adapting it.

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