



VA'ERA

HOW BIG QUESTIONS BRING US CLOSER TO G-D

Reframing doubt as a pathway to spiritual growth

PARSHA OVERVIEW

VA'ERA

G-d reveals Himself to Moses. Employing the “four expressions of redemption,” He promises to take out the Children of Israel from Egypt, deliver them from their enslavement, redeem them, and acquire them as His own chosen people at Mount Sinai; He will then bring them to the Land He promised to the patriarchs as their eternal heritage. Moses and Aaron repeatedly come before Pharaoh to demand in the name of G-d, “Let My people go, so that they may serve Me in the wilderness.” Pharaoh

repeatedly refuses. Aaron’s staff turns into a snake and swallows the magic sticks of the Egyptian sorcerers. G-d then sends a series of plagues upon the Egyptians. The waters of the Nile turn to blood, swarms of frogs overrun the land, and lice infest all humans and beasts. Hordes of wild animals invade the cities, a pestilence kills the domestic animals, and painful boils afflict the Egyptians. For the seventh plague, fire and ice combine to descend from the skies as a devastating hail. Still, “the heart of Pharaoh

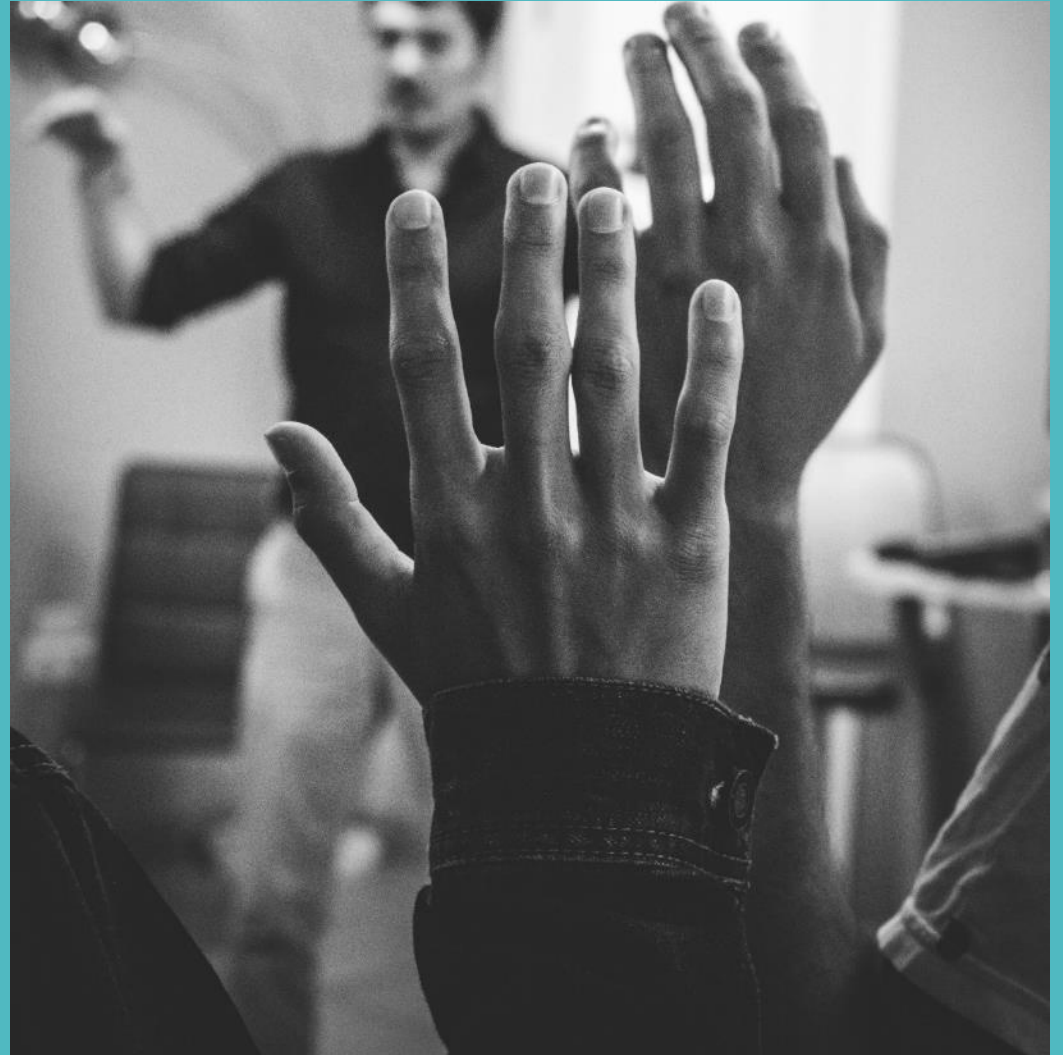
was hardened, and he would not let the Children of Israel go, as G-d had said to Moses.”

RASHI RULES

1. Rashi is not an anthology of Midrash. When he quotes a Midrash, it's only to answer a problem in peshat.
2. Rashi usually quotes from a source verbatim. Deviation is intentional. It means he is trying to say something slightly, but significantly, different.

QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

Think about a question or problem you have with the Torah or Judaism. How does it affect your attitude toward that particular verse in the Torah or aspect of Judaism?



TEXT 1

Exodus 6:2-8

ב. וַיְדַבֵּר אֱלֹקִים אֶל מֹשֶׁה
וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֲנִי ה'.

ג. וַאֲרָא אֶל אַבְרָהָם אֶל יִצְחָק
וְאֶל יַעֲקֹב בְּקֹל שְׁדֵי-י וְשְׁמִי ה'
לֹא נֻדְעָתִי לָהֶם.

ד. וְגַם הִקְמַתִי אֶת בְּרִיתִי אִתְּם
לָתֵת לָהֶם אֶת אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן אֶת
אֶרֶץ מִגְרֵיהֶם אֲשֶׁר גָּרוּ בָּהּ.

ה. וְגַם אֲנִי שָׁמַעְתִּי אֶת נַאֲקַת
בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר מִצְרִים
מַעֲבָדִים אִתָּם וְאָזְכֹּר אֶת בְּרִיתִי.

2. And G-d spoke to Moses and said to him,
"I am G-d.

3. "And I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and
Jacob by the name of 'Kel Shakai,' but by
My name Havayah I was not known to them.

4. "I also established My covenant with
them, to give them the land of Canaan, the
land in which they lived as sojourners.

5. "And also I have heard the moaning of
the Israelites because the Egyptians are
holding them in bondage, and I have
remembered My covenant.

TEXT 1

Exodus 6:2-8

ו. לָכֵן אֶמַר לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲנִי ה'
וְהוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם מִמִּצְרַיִם סִבְלַת
מִצְרַיִם וְהִצַּלְתִּי אֶתְכֶם מִיַּעַבְדָּתָם
וְגֹאֲלְתִּי אֶתְכֶם בְּזֵרוּעַ נְטוּיָה
וּבְשִׁפְטִים גְּדֹלִים.

ז. וְלָקַחְתִּי אֶתְכֶם לִי לְעָם וְהָיִיתִי
לָכֶם לֵאלֹהִים וִידַעְתֶּם כִּי אֲנִי ה'
אֵלֶיְכֶם הַמּוֹצִיא אֶתְכֶם מִמִּצְרַיִם
סִבְלוֹת מִצְרַיִם.

ח. וְהִבֵּאתִי אֶתְכֶם אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר
נִשְׁאַתִּי אֶת יְדֵי לְתֵת אֹתָהּ לְאַבְרָהָם
לְיִצְחָק וְלִיַּעֲקֹב וְנָתַתִּי אֹתָהּ לָכֶם
מוֹרָשָׁה אֲנִי ה'.

6. "Therefore, say to the Israelite people: I am G-d; I will free you from the labors of the Egyptians and deliver you from their bondage. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and through extraordinary judgments.

7. "And I will take you to be My people, and I will be your G-d. And you shall know that I, the L-rd, am your G-d who freed you from the labors of the Egyptians.

8. "I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and I will give it to you for an inheritance; I am G-d."

VERSES 5-8

A Beacon of Hope



VERSES 2-5

Seemingly Unnecessary



THE NAMES OF G-D

ה'



The name of
trustworthiness.

קל שׂד-י



The name the
patriarchs experienced.

TEXT 2A

Rashi, Exodus 6:3

THE RASHI

"וַאֲרָא". אֶל הָאֲבוֹת.

"בְּקֵל שַׁכַּי". הַבְּטָחוֹת הַבְּטָחוֹת וּבְכָלן אָמַרְתִּי לָהֶם אֲנִי קֵל שַׁכַּי.

"וַיִּשְׁמִי ה' לֹא נֹדַעְתִּי לָהֶם" . . . לֹא נִכְרַתִּי לָהֶם בְּמִדַּת אֲמִתּוֹת שְׁלִי, שֶׁעָלֶיהָ נִקְרָא שְׁמִי ה', נֶאֱמָן לְאִמַּת דְּבָרִי, שֶׁהָרִי הַבְּטָחוֹתִים וְלֹא קִיַּמְתִּי.

"And I appeared." To the patriarchs.

"By the name of Kel Shakai." I made certain promises to them, and in the case of all of these I said unto them, "I am Kel Shakai."

"But by my name Havayah I was not known to them." . . . I was not recognized by them in My attribute of "keeping faith," because of which My name is called "Havayah." This particular name denotes that I am certain to substantiate My promise. Indeed, I made promises to them, but did not fulfill them during their lifetime.

TEXT 2B

Rashi, ibid.

THE RASHI,

CONTINUED

"לְכֵן". עַל פִּי אוֹתָהּ הַשְּׁבוּעָה.

"אָמַר לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲנִי ה'". הַנֶּאֱמָן בְּהַבְטָחָתִי.

"וְהוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם". כִּי כֵן הַבְטָחָתִי, "וְאַחֲרַי כֵּן יֵצְאוּ בְּרֶכֶשׁ גָּדוֹל".

"Therefore." I.e., in accordance with that promise.

"Say to the Israelite people: I am G-d." Who is faithful in My promise.

"I will free you." For so did I promise them, "and afterward shall they go out with great substance" (Genesis 15:14).

RASHI'S FIRST EXPLANATION

The Torah mentions the patriarchs and their relationship with G-d as an introduction and a rationale for why G-d will redeem the Jewish people. It connects their redemption to G-d's promises to the patriarchs, showing how this moment is the fulfillment of those earlier commitments.

TEXT 3

Exodus 5:22-23

RASHI'S SECOND

EXPLANATION

*Response to
Earlier Verses*

כב. וַיָּשָׁב מֹשֶׁה אֶל ה' וַיֹּאמֶר אֲדֹנָי לָמָּה הִרְעַתָּה לְעָם הַזֶּה לָמָּה זֶה שְׁלַחְתָּנִי.

כג. וַיִּמָּאֵז בְּאֶתִי אֵל פַּרְעֹה לְדַבֵּר בְּשִׁמְךָ הִרַע לְעָם הַזֶּה וְהֵצִל לֹא הֵצִלְתָּ אֶת עַמְּךָ.

22. And Moses returned to G-d, and said, "G-d, why have You brought harm to this people? Why have You sent me?"

23. "From the moment I have come to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has harmed this people, and You have not saved Your people."

TEXT 4

Rashi, Exodus 6:9

THE RASHI,

CONTINUED

ורבותינו דרשוהו לענין של מעלה,
שאמר משה למה הרעתה,

אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא "חבל על
דאבדין ולא משתכחין" – יש לי
להתאוון על מיתת האבות, הרבה
פעמים נגליתי אליהם בקל שד-י ולא
אמרו לי מה שמך, ואפה אמרת "מה
שמו מה אמר אליהם".

"וגם הקמתי וגו'". וכשבקש אברהם
לקבר את שרה לא מצא קבר עד
שקנה בדמים מרבים. וכן ביצחק
ערערו עליו על הבארות אשר חפר.
וכן יעקב ויקן את חלקת השדה,
לנטות אהליו, ולא הרגרו אחר מדותי,
ואפה אמרת למה הרעתה?

Our rabbis expounded this section as referencing what precedes it—what Moses said (5:22), "Why have You brought harm to this people?"

G-d told him, "Alas, for those who are gone [i.e., the patriarchs] and are no longer! I have reason to grieve the death of the patriarchs. Many a time did I reveal Myself to them by the name Kel Shakai, and not once did they ask Me, 'What is Your name?' But you said (Exodus 3:13): [If they ask] 'what is His name,' what shall I say to them?"!

"Also I set up, etc." And yet when Abraham wished to bury Sarah, he could not obtain a grave until he purchased one at a high price. So, too, in the case of Isaac, people fought with him for possession of the wells that he had dug. Similarly, of Jacob it is stated (Genesis 33:19), "He purchased a parcel of field" in which to pitch his tent. Yet none of them criticized My dealings with them, while you say, "Why have You brought harm to this people?"

QUESTIONS ON RASHI

1. Why is Rashi quoting an interpretation from the Midrash? What was wrong with the first interpretation?

TEXT 5

Rashi, ibid.

THE RASHI,

CONTINUED

וְאֵין הַמִּדְרָשׁ מְתִינֵשׁב אַחֵר הַמִּקְרָא
מִפְּנֵי כְּמָה דְּבָרִים.

אַחֲת, וְשֶׁלֹּא נֶאֱמַר וַיִּשְׁמִי ה' לֹא
שָׁאֲלוּ לִי . . .

וְעוֹד הֵיאָדָּה הַסְּמִיכָה נִמְשָׁכֶת
בְּדָבָרִים שֶׁהוּא סוֹמֵךְ לְכָאן וְגַם אֲנִי
שֶׁמַּעֲתִי וְגו' לָכֵן אֶמַר לְבָנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל?

לְכָךְ אֲנִי אוֹמֵר יִתְיַשֵּׁב הַמִּקְרָא עַל
פְּשׁוּטוֹ, דְּבוּר דְּבוּר עַל אֶפְנִיּוֹ.
וְהַדְרָשָׁה תְּדַרְשׁ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "הֲלוֹא
כֹּה דִּבְרֵי כָאֵשׁ נָאֵם ה' וְכַפֵּטִישׁ
יְפֹאֲצֵץ סֵלַע" – מִתְחַלֵּק לְכְּמָה
נִיצוּצוֹת.

However, this Midrashic exposition does not fit in with the text for several reasons.

First, because the verse does not state, "And they did not ask of Me regarding My name, Havayah. . . ."

Moreover, how does this interpretation fit within the context of the following verses, "And also I have heard. . . . Therefore, say to the Israelite people, etc."?

Therefore, I say: Let the verse be explained according to its literal sense so that each statement fits into its proper setting. And let the Midrashic exposition be expounded, as it is stated, "My words are like fire, says G-d, and like a hammer shatters a rock" (Jeremiah 23:29)—into many sparks.

MORE QUESTIONS ON RASHI

1. Why is Rashi quoting an interpretation from the Midrash? What was wrong with the first interpretation?
2. If a second interpretation is necessary, why dismiss it right away?

TEXT 6

*Talmud, Shabbat
88b*

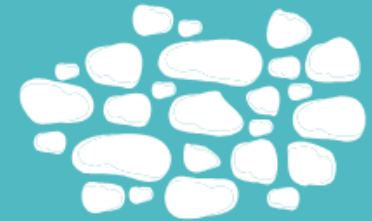
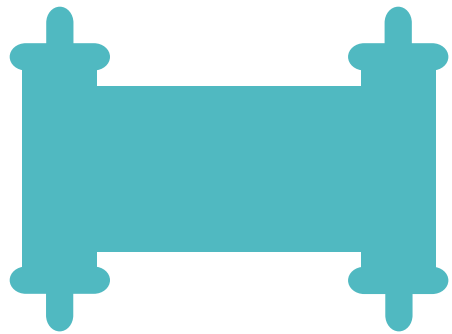
תַּנִּי דְּבֵי רַבִּי יִשְׁמָעֵאל: "וְכַפֵּטִישׁ יִפְצֹץ סֵלַע", מָה
פִּטִּישׁ זֶה נִחְלָק לְכַמָּה נִיצוּצוֹת.

The school of Rabbi Yishma'el taught, "like a hammer shatters a rock" (Jeremiah 23:29): Just as this hammer breaks a stone into several fragments.

EVEN MORE QUESTIONS ON RASHI

1. Why is Rashi quoting an interpretation from the Midrash? What was wrong with the first interpretation?
2. If a second interpretation is necessary, why dismiss it right away?
3. Why does Rashi deviate from the source and quote the entire verse?

STEPS OF A METAPHOR





Torah is not just like
a stone splitting into
pieces; it is like a
fire spraying sparks
in all directions.

TEXT 7A

Exodus 6:2

וַיִּדְבֹּר אֱלֹקִים אֶל מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר
אֵלָיו אֲנִי ה'.

And G-d spoke to Moses and said
to him, "I am G-d."

TEXT 7B

Rashi, ad loc.

"וַיִּדְבֹּר אֱלֹקִים אֶל מֹשֶׁה". דְּבַר אֱתוֹ מִשְׁפָּט,
עַל שֶׁהִקְשָׁה לְדַבֵּר וְלוֹמַר "לָמָּה הִרְעַתָּה
לְעָם הַזֶּה".

"And G-d spoke to Moses." He spoke harshly with him because he had spoken so brazenly when he said, (Exodus 5:22) "Why have you brought harm to this people?"

"אֱלֹקִים"

"G-d"



"וַיִּדְבֹּר"

"And He Spoke"



These words both connote judgment and harshness.

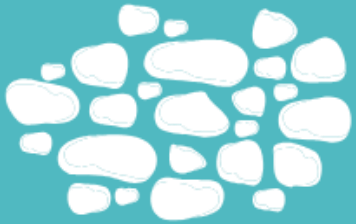
THE QUESTION NO ONE'S ASKING

Where is the harshness in the
dialogue between G-d and Moses?

Both perspectives
are necessary to
understand the story.



STONES



- The stone can shatter in the same place.
- The pieces of stone are different in shape and size.

SPARKS



- The sparks fly in different directions.
- The sparks are all the same.

TWO INTERPRETATIONS



1. One meaning is primary, and the other adds depth.



2. Both meanings are essential.

ANSWERS

1. There is a missing piece in the puzzle that only the derash explains—the second conversation between G-d and Moshe.
2. The second conversation between G-d and Moshe is necessary to understand the story, but it remains derash.
3. In contrast to the Talmud, Rashi quotes the entire verse to support this idea of simultaneous interpretations.
4. The rebuke is only conveyed through the Midrash.

TEXT 8

Rashi, Genesis 28:5

"אִם יַעֲקֹב וְעֵשָׂו." אֵינִי יוֹדֵעַ מָה
מִלְמַדְנוּ.

"Mother of Jacob and Esau." I do not know what the addition of these words is intended to tell us.



Why does Rashi admit
that he does not know
the answer?

TEXT 9

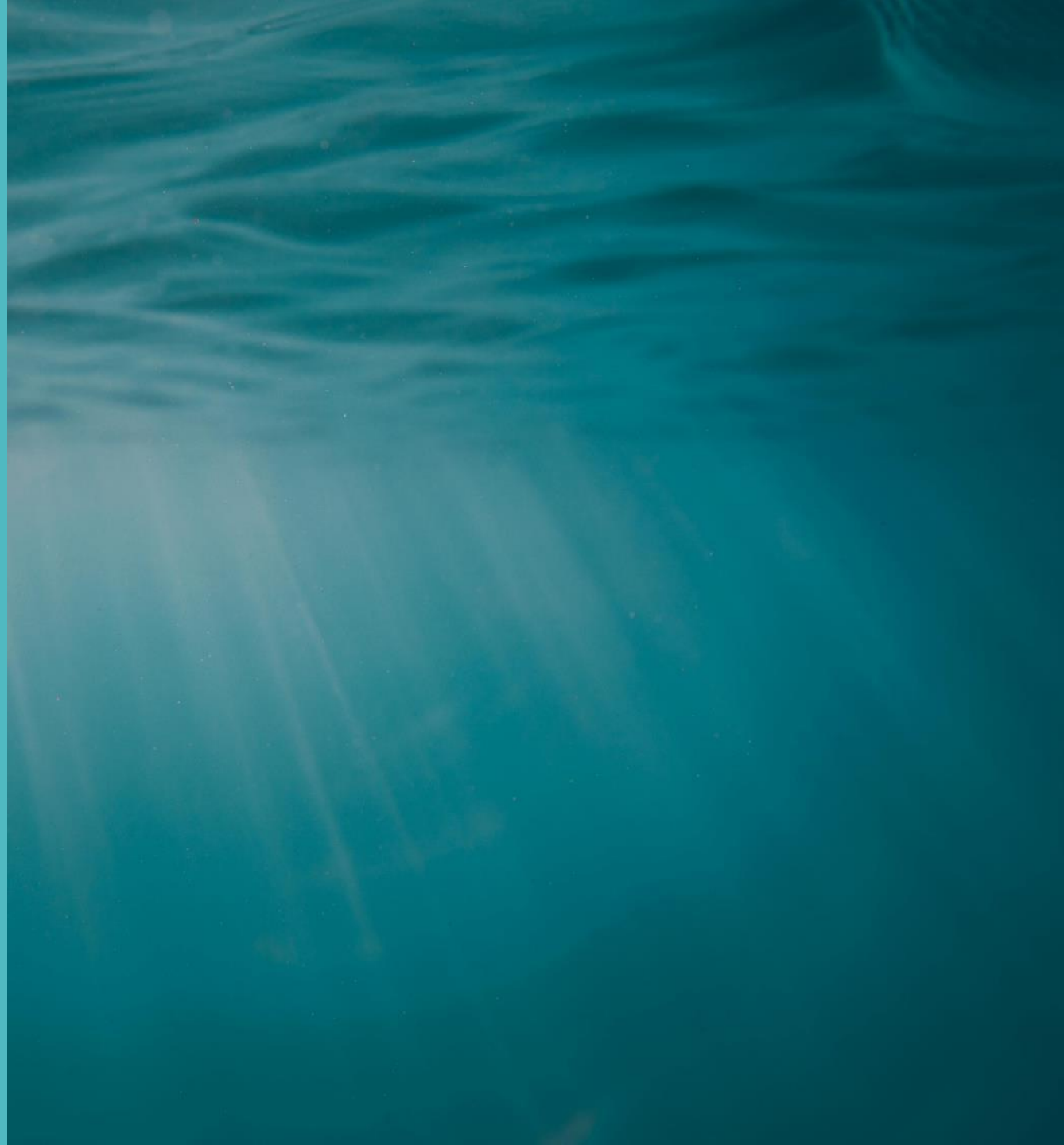
*The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, Sichot
Kodesh 5741:2, p. 88*

איז דער ביאור בזה: רש"י מיינט דערמיט אז "לא ידעתי" דעם
פירוש אין פסוק על דרך הפשט, וואס דאס איז זיין דרך הלימוד על
התורה. אבער על דרך הדרוש וכו', ווייס איך א פירוש. נאר ווייל
דאס איז ניט דרך לימודו בפירושו — איז עס "לא ידעתי".

The explanation: When Rashi says he doesn't know, he means, "I don't know how to explain this in the plain meaning," which is Rashi's methodology—explaining the text according to its plain meaning. However, on another layer of understanding, such as homiletically, "I do know an explanation." Since it is outside of his preferred methodology, he says he doesn't know.

It's OK not to have the
answers right now.

An unanswered question
is an opportunity for
deeper Insight.



TEXT 10

*The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, ibid.*

און ווי דאס איז מודגש אויך אין דעם וואס
מלמדים זיינען רגיל זאגן צו זייערע תלמידים.
מיין מלמדים פלעגט דאס זאגן, און מסתמא איז
אזוי אויך געווען בא אנדערע, און מסתמא אויך
בא די קינדער וואס געפינען דיך דא אין און
ווילן משיח "נאו" — אז זייערע מלמדים זאגן
צו זיי, אדער וועלן צו זיי זאגן מארגן: ווען דו
וועסט עלעטר ווערן וועסטו פארשטיין.

וואס אויך אין דערויף לייגט דער תוכן פון "לא
ידעתי" אין פירוש רש"י. און די מיינונג דערביי
איז: דו זאלסט נישט מיינען וויבאלד מ'פארשטייט
נישט איצטער איז דאס א זאך וואס מ'וועט שוין
קיינמאל נישט פארשטיין. ניין! בשעת מ'וועט
עלטער ווערן וועט מען זען אז ס'איז דא א
פירוש על דרך הרמז על דרך הדרוש על דרך
הסוד וכו', און דעמולט וועט מען עס פארשטיין.

We see this approach in practice when teachers tell their students, "When you get older, you'll understand." My teacher would say this, and it's probably the case with others, and probably even with the children who are here now, and want Mashiach now. Their teachers surely tell them, or will tell them, the same thing.

This is similar to Rashi saying, "I do not know." What he means is this: Don't think just because you don't understand something now, you'll never be able to understand it. No! This is not true. When you grow older, you'll learn about allegorical meaning, homiletical meaning, mystical meaning, etc.—and then you'll understand.



Education should be
about fostering questions.
A question is a window to
something deeper.

TEXT 11

*Rabbi Akiva Wagner,
“And Nonetheless . . .
It Happened”
[www.chabad.org/
779714](http://www.chabad.org/779714)*

What’s going on? How can that be? How is that possible?

The answer is: we don’t know! We don’t know the answer. . . . It can’t be! It’s impossible! The Talmud says it can’t be. . . . Impossible!

But . . . af al pi ken . . . nonetheless . . . It happened. The questions are all there, but that’s how it is. We get another lesson in the limitation of our intellect. We have calculations, logical ones, Torah-based ones, that we are certain about and we have a license to be. We know certain things can’t happen.

You’re right, says the Talmud. But . . . af al pi ken . . . nonetheless . . . it happened. We cry out in unmanageable pain, in frustration, in anger, and in shocked disbelief. But then we bow our heads in humility, and we accept. We move forward. Because one of the basic foundations of our religion is the conviction that G-d is infinite, and it would be arrogant and foolish for us to even dream of understanding Him. And from time to time things continue to happen that don’t make sense in our book, that don’t even seem to make sense in His book, and . . . nonetheless . . . they happen. And we can only turn our tearful eyes heavenwards, and ask: “It happened, we accepted; isn’t it time to let us understand? Isn’t it time for the era when, as Isaiah says, we will ‘thank You for having [been] wrathful with us’?!”

TEXT 12

*The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, Likutei
Sichot 21, pp. 36-37*

נאר נאך מער: אויך ווי יעדער חלק פון
תורה איז אין זיין באשטימטן "ארט",
און דער לימוד פון דעם חלק אין תורה
איז דוקא לויט די כללי הלימוד
המתאימים לחלק זה — ווארום יעדער
חלק אין תורה האט זיינע כללי הלימוד.
איז מצד דעם וואס עס איז א טייל פון
תורת ה' וואס איז "דברי כאש" —
למעלה מהתחלקות (ווי די פשיטות פון
אש) — בלייבט עס (במהותו
ובאמתתו) איין זאך מיט כל שאר חלקי
התורה, ביז אז אן ענין וואס איז מוכרח
אין פשוטו של מקרא קען
אריינגעשטעלט ווערן אין חלק הדרש.

The unity of Torah is such that even though each area of Torah has its distinct place and operates within its own set of rules, it remains intrinsically connected to the whole. As part of G-d's Torah, which is likened to "fire"—an entity that transcends distinction and embodies the attribute of indivisibility—every aspect of Torah is interconnected in its entirety. This unity is so profound that insights essential for understanding the plain meaning (peshat) can be found within the homiletical dimension (derash) of Torah.

Torah is like a fire—a unified whole. Every area of Torah is interconnected with the other. Each part is essential to understanding the whole.





Our questions about
Torah and Judaism are
not barriers but
indicators that there is
always more to learn.

KEY POINTS

1. Rashi offers two interpretations for G-d's words to Moshe at the start of the *parshah*: one grounded in the plain meaning (*peshat*) and the other Agadic (*homiletic*).
2. Rashi rejects the Midrashic interpretation for *peshat* purposes, but supports its necessity through a metaphor of a stone splitting and sparks from fire.
3. By deviating from the Talmudic, Rashi emphasizes the precise nature and function of the dual interpretations: each one remains in its genre, yet they are both critical to understanding the text.
4. Rashi's willingness to admit "I don't know" when facing unresolved questions highlights intellectual humility and encourages deeper exploration of Torah.
5. Questions should be embraced as an integral part of learning and spiritual development, with the understanding that not every answer is immediate or simple.

