

# DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

## Parshas Lech Lecha

### The Rashi Experience – Understanding “Lech Lecha”

This week’s discussion is devoted to a comment of Rashi, whose peirush on the Torah remains unique in that, on the one hand, it is studied by school-children, while on the other hand, it is pored over by the greatest minds of the generations, endeavoring to uncover its deeper implications and meaning.

Our parsha begins with the test of *Lech Lecha* – for Avram to leave everything behind and follow Hashem to a destination that He will make known. The words “*Lech Lecha*,” translate literally as, “Go for yourself”. Rashi’s comment on this double expression is very well-known:

לך לך: להנאתך ולטובתך. ושם “ואעשך לגוי גדול”, וכאן אי אתה זוכה לבנים, ועוד שאודיע  
טבעך בעולם

*Lech Lecha: For you benefit and for your good; and there, “I will make you into a great nation,” whereas here you will not merit to have children. Furthermore, I will make your nature known to the world.*

#### IDENTIFYING RASHI’S ISSUE WITH THE VERSE

As always, before analyzing Rashi’s words themselves, we first need to establish what it is in the verse that Rashi is responding to. Here, the answer appears quite obviously to be one of redundancy: the extra word “*lecha* – for yourself”; what does it add to the command itself of “*lech* – go”? To this Rashi answers that Hashem is informing Avraham that the journey will be “*lecha* – for you,” i.e. for your benefit.

Having said this, we note that Rashi seems to have responded to the issue of one extra word with four separate explanations:

1. For your benefit.
2. For your good.
3. There you will have children
4. I will make your nature known to the world.

That is a lot of explanations!

However, upon closer inspection, we will realize that Rashi is in fact saying two things and then elaborating upon them. For let us ask: What is the difference between the two terms “for your benefit” and “for your good”? Is not everything that is for one’s benefit also for their good? Rather, the difference

is that “for your benefit” denotes things that will be beneficial *for Avraham*, while “for your good” refers to the good that Avraham will be able *to do for others*. To these two terms, Rashi then adds elaboration and illustration:

1. “For your benefit” – I will make you into a great nation.
2. “For your good” – I will make your positive nature know to the world, so that people will be inspired to emulate you.

Nevertheless, even scaling Rashi’s comments down to two positive outcomes still leaves them in excess of the one redundant word “*lecha*”.

### **RAMBAN’S OBJECTION: DERECH HAKASUV**

Getting back to the matter of redundancy, The Ramban objects most strongly to Rashi’s comment. The basis of his objection is that he claims that the word “*lecha*” is not redundant! The definition of redundancy is when something is “extra”, i.e. beyond what would normally be used to express that idea. In our instance, however, we see that throughout Tanach that it is the normal way of the verse to attach the term “לך, לי, לך” denoting, “myself, himself, yourself.” For example, the verse says “אֶלְכָה לִי – I shall go myself.”<sup>1</sup> Since this is not at all unusual, Rashi shouldn’t have commented on it!

In other words, the Ramban has no issue with the Rashi’s Midrashic comment in and of itself. Rather, the Ramban’s issue is specifically with Rashi *citing* this explanation. Since Rashi’s commentary is devoted to resolving pshat issues in the verse, he should not have given entry to an explanation of a word that does not need to be resolved on a pshat level! This is a truly amazing situation, wherein the Ramban is not debating Rashi over the meaning of a word, but rather, over whether Rashi – in terms of his own methodology – even needed to explain its meaning in the first place!

### **GUR ARYEH: WHEN THE WORD “LECHA” NEEDS TO BE RESOLVED**

A classic explanation of Rashi’s position is found in the commentary Gur Aryeh by the Maharal. In truth, he explains, the word “*lecha*” is never just “there” as a matter of linguistic form. It always has a meaning, for it denotes that the decision regarding the enterprise comes from the person himself. Thus, for example, “אֶלְכָה לִי” means “I have decided to go.” In this regard, the word “*lecha*” as “for you” means “it is your decision.” If so, however, then we will appreciate that it cannot have this meaning when the person is *being commanded to go by someone else* – such as in our case. By definition, in commanding Avraham to go, Hashem was initiating the journey. As such, the word “*lecha*” regarding Avraham cannot assume its normal meaning of him being the one to decide. That is why even though Rashi agrees that while this kind of word is not generally redundant, nevertheless, in our situation, it needs a resolution. Hence, he brings the midrashic interpretation of: “for your benefit.” For even though the initiative for this journey was not Avraham’s, nevertheless, given that it was for his benefit, it is something that he would want to do and thus in accord with his will.

### **A TALE OF TWO “LECH LECHA”S**

A completely different perspective on Rashi’s comment can be found in the commentary Maskil le’David by R’ David Pardo. He begins by pointing out that this is not the only time Hashem addresses Avraham with the words “*lech lecha*”; rather, it is one of two places. At the end of next week’s parsha, in the episode of the Akeyda, Hashem appears to Avraham and says “לך לך אל ארץ המורה – go yourself to the land of Moriah.”<sup>2</sup> As such, we will appreciate that if we wish to gain a full understanding of Rashi’s approach to this phrase, we will need to consult his words on that second occasion as well. However, when we do, we will discover that Rashi has no comment on that occasion. We now have a most

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1 Yirmiyahu 5:5.

2 Bereishis 22:2.

perplexing situation. On the one hand, when this phrase appears in the beginning of our parsha, Rashi responds with *four* comments, which we are then able to whittle down to two. By contrast, when the *very same phrase* appears at the end of next week's parsha, Rashi makes no comment at all!

What are we to make of all this? Does the second word "*lecha*" require an explanation or not?

Says the Maskil le'David: In reality, as far as Rashi is concerned, the word "*lecha*" does not require any explanation. In this regard, Rashi agrees entirely with the Ramban that this is "*derech hakasuv*" – the normal way the verse writes things. This is true even if the context is Hashem commanding someone, adding the extra word "לך" or "לכם". Indeed, we find that even with instances such as these in the Torah, Rashi makes no comment.<sup>3</sup> Rather, what causes Rashi to comment on the phrase "*lech lecha*" in our parsha is not the extra word "*lecha*", but something much more fundamental.

### **MASKIL LE'DAVID: TWO TERMS FOR "GOING"**

The Hebrew word for "go" is "לך". However, as we go through the Chumash and Tanach we will notice the following:

- ▷ The term "לך" is always used with reference to the place *toward* which the person is going.
- ▷ If the verse is describing a person going *from* a certain place, the word it will use is "צא – to leave".

A classic example of these two usages can be seen in the first verse of Parshas Vayetzei,<sup>4</sup> which reads:

וַיֵּצֵא יַעֲקֹב מִבְּאֵר שֶׁבַע וַיֵּלֶךְ חָרָנָה

*Yaakov went out from Be'er Sheva, and went toward Charan.*

We see that when referring to the place Yaakov was going from (charan), it uses the term "וַיֵּצֵא", while when describing where he was going toward it says "וַיֵּלֶךְ". With this in mind, let us come back to the beginning of Parshas Lech Lecha and we will encounter a most unusual situation. The places mentioned in the verse are those Avraham is going from, "מֵאֶרְצְךָ וּמִמְּלֶכְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ" – From your land, from your birthplace and from your father's house." If so, then the command should not have been "לך לך", but "צא לך"! This, says the Maskil le'David, is Rashi's issue with the verse; not that the second word "*lecha*" seems to be redundant, but that the first word "*lech*" seems to be inaccurate!

Now we can understand why Rashi makes no comment at all on the second instance of "*lech lecha*". Since Hashem's command there to Avraham was to go "to the land of Moriah," everything is in order: the first word "*lech*" is the appropriate term, and the second word "*lecha*" is *derech hakasuv* – a normal feature within the verse – and hence not redundant.

Yet, having identified Rashi's issue with the first "*lech lecha*," how do we understand his response?

### **DRASH RESPONSES TO PSHAT QUESTIONS**

As Rashi himself informs us,<sup>5</sup> while his preferred method of resolving issues in the verse is through pshat, if necessary, i.e. if no pshat resolution seems forthcoming he will invoke a drash approach. Similarly, in our instance, there does not appear to be a pshat explanation for the choice of the word "*lech*". Hence, Rashi adopts a drash approach, namely, that the Torah chooses to use the first word "לך – *lech*" due to its affinity with the second word "לך – *lecha*". In light of this, we now start to take

3 E.g. Devarim 1:14, "וְאַתֶּם פָּנוּ לְכֶם וְסָעוּ הַמְדַבְּרָה" and ibid. 2:13, "אֶת נַחַל זָרָד, וְעָבְרוּ לְכֶם אֶת נַחַל זָרָד".

4 Bereishis 28:10.

5 See Rashi Bereishis 3:8 s.v. *va'yishme'u*.

notice of the second word “*lecha*”, something we would not have done had the first word been the intuitive choice of “צא”, but which we now come to see as having been “highlighted” by the first word “*lech*”. Accordingly, we note that the word “*lecha*” literally translates as “for yourself,” and hence, Rashi explains that the message is that the journey would be for Avraham’s benefit.

Indeed, there is more. The full impact of the Torah using “*lech*” as the opening word on account of its similarity with “*lecha*”, is that now it is as if the word “*lecha*” has been *written twice*. Therefore, Rashi comments that there will indeed be *two positive outcomes* from the journey: “להנאתך ולטובתך – For you benefit and for your good.”

Stunning!

### **FOLLOW-UP AND FURTHER INTRIGUE: RASHI’S SECOND SWEEP ON “LECH LECHA”**

And there the matter rests. Until, that is, we get to another comment of Rashi a little further on in our verse. The first place Hashem tells Avraham to leave is “אַרְצְךָ – your land,” which, according to Rashi, refers to Ur Kasdim. The problem is, at this stage, Avraham was already in Charan, having moved there from Ur Kasdim! Why is Hashem telling him to leave a place he has already left? To this, Rashi responds by explaining that the meaning was, “התרחק עוד משם – distance yourself further from there.”

As we can appreciate, this comment of Rashi could potentially re-open our entire discussion. If we now ask the question as to why Hashem used the word “לך” to tell Avraham to go, and not “צא”, we would appear to have a very simple answer: Having already left his land, Avraham could not be told to “leave it,” he could only be told to “go from it” and distance himself further. If this is so, then we would seem to have found a *pshat answer* to Rashi’s *pshat question*! While this is, of course, good news, it will then cause us to look back to the opening Rashi and ask: Why did Rashi feel need to provide a *drash answer* regarding the Torah’s choice of the word “לך”, when a perfectly good *pshat answer* exists ten lines later in Rashi?

The reason for this, says the Maskil le’David, is as follows. While it is true that Rashi’s later comment would resolve the question of why Avraham was told to “go” from his land (Ur Kasdim), there are two other places there from which he is also told to go: “ממולדתך ומבית אביך”. The final term “בית אביך” means “your father’s house.” However, as we know, Avraham’s father was with him in Charan, which made his father’s house something that he actually would be leaving now. Additionally, the term “מולדתך”, which some commentators translate as “your birthplace”, is translated by others as “your family”, again, denoting people who Avraham was currently with and whom he would need to leave.

It turns out that Rashi was faced with a fascinating” *pshat / drash trade-off*:

- ▷ On the one hand there is a *pshat answer* to the use of “לך”, which is always preferable for Rashi. However, that answer does not satisfy all three places apropos of which the command to “go” was given.
- ▷ On the other hand, the *drash answer* explains the choice of “לך” entirely, but it is a *drash answer*.

Rashi therefore includes both approaches, beginning with the *drash answer* that resolves the totality of the matter, and then offering a *pshat approach* which could resolve part of the matter!

Thus does one of the master commentators guide us through the inner workings of Rashi’s well-known comment on the words “*lech lecha*.”