

Dimensions in Chumash

Parshas Shemos

Concept: Composite Words in Torah Reflecting Complex Situations

Introduction

Lashon Hakodesh consists of clearly defined categories, both in terms of its nouns (e.g. masculine and feminine), as well as its various grammatical forms (e.g. active, passive, causative etc.). However, once in a while, something unusual happens. There are times when the Torah appears to depart from these rules, using words in a way which either seems incongruous with the context in which they are stated, or alternatively, which do not reflect any recognized category at all! This phenomenon leads certain commentators to develop a fascinating idea regarding the Torah's use of language: At times, the formal boundaries between the categories are relaxed, *grafting together different elements* into one word, in order to reflect an additional or complex element within the situation to which the word relates. Let us consider some classic examples of this idea as found our parsha.

1. Blended Nouns – Yisro's Daughters

Chapter 2 describes how when Moshe runs away from Egypt, he arrives at the well in Midian, where the daughters of Yisro also presently arrive to draw water. Verse 17 then states:

וַיָּבֹאוּ הָרֹעִים וַיִּגְרְשׁוּם וַיִּקָּם מֹשֶׁה וַיִּשְׁעֶן

The shepherds [then] came and drove them away, and Moshe rose up and saved them.¹

If we look at this verse, we will notice something unusual. The final *mem* of the word “וַיִּגְרְשׁוּם” denotes the pronoun “them”, in this case, Yisro's daughters. However, a final *mem* is always used when describing a plural *masculine* noun;

¹ Shemos 2:17.

while for a plural *feminine* noun a final *nun* is used.² As such, the appropriate spelling of this word should have been “וַיִּגְרְשׁוּן”!

R' Yaakov Zvi Mecklenberg³ explains that through this unusual spelling, the Torah is indicating an additional element within the situation. The harassment of Yisro's daughters was not an arbitrary occurrence. The Midrash⁴ informs us that Yisro was originally the priest of Midian. However, at a certain point, he saw through the falsehood of paganism and abdicated that position. As a result of this, Yisro became a *persona non grata* in town and his family became subject to hostility on the part of its inhabitants, including the trouble his daughters encountered when they went to draw water at the well. In order to indicate the background to the daughters' distress, i.e. the moral stand of their father, the Torah uses a final *mem* in the word that describes them being driven away, thereby incorporating a masculine element within that word!⁵

2. Blended Verbs – Miriam's Vigil

In the beginning of Chapter 2, the Torah describes how Yocheved, who was no longer able to hide Moshe, placed him in a basket near the banks of the Nile. Verse 4 then states:

וַתִּתְצַב אַחֲתוֹ מֵרַחֵק לְדַעַה מַה יַעֲשֶׂה לוֹ

His sister [Miriam] stood at a distance to know what would be done with him.

The word “וַתִּתְצַב” is most interesting. On the one hand, the presence of two letter *tav*'s indicates that it is a reflexive, the translation of which would be, “she stood herself.” However, the correct spelling for the reflexive form would have been “וַתִּתְצַבְּ”, whereas the *tzerei* under the first *tav* in this word is more indicative of the passive form – “she was made to stand”. In other words, this word does not entirely fit into either of the above categories, appearing instead to have elements of both!

² As indeed we find in the following phrase – “וַיִּוֹשְׁעוּן”.

³ Haksav ve'Hakabbalah, Parshas Shemos.

⁴ Cited in Rashi to our verse.

⁵ In a similar vein, R' Mecklenberg explains the use of the final *mem* in the concluding phrase “וַיִּשְׁקוּ אֶת צֹאנֵיהֶם” – and he watered their flock” as a reference to the idea states in the Midrash that Moshe proceeded to water the flock of all those present, hence the more generic masculine pronoun is used. For further examples of this idea in his commentary, see Haksav ve'Hakabbalah to Bereishis 29:32 and 41:8, Bamidbar 22:33 and Devarim 21:8.

What are we to make of all this? What does it tell us about Miriam's decision to stay behind and see what would happen?

The Maharal explains.⁶ The background to Miriam's actions, as discussed in the Gemara,⁷ was the prophecy she received which stated that he would be the future savior of the Jewish people. With Moshe now being set on the Nile, Miriam felt compelled to stay and see what would happen in light of her prophecy. As such, says the Maharal, her staying behind was comprised of two elements:

- On the one hand, she *chose* to stay, for no one told her to do so.
- On the other hand, given the prophecy she had received regarding Moshe, Force of Destiny dictated that she *had* to stay behind and see what would happen to him.

This blended situation, says the Maharal, is reflected in the word “וַתִּתְצַב” which, as we noted, combines both reflexive and passive elements. This combination gives us the composite picture of someone who both chooses (reflexive) *and* is compelled (passive) to stay!

3. Nouns and Verbs Blended Together – The Meaning of “Sarei Misim”

The opening chapter of our parsha describes Pharaoh's persecution of the Jewish people. Verse 11 relates that he placed “שָׂרֵי מִסִּים” over them. What are “sarei misim”?

- Rashi associates this term with the word “מִס” , which means tax, explaining that they were tax-officers.
- In contrast, Onkelos translates “שלטונין מבאישין” , which means “officers who did evil”.

The Netziv⁸ explains that, in fact, *both of these connotations combined* emanate from the word “מִסִּים”. On the one hand, if it only refers to tax, then it should have said “מִסִּים” with a patach, – the plural of “מִס”! Rather, the reason the word is spelled with a *chirik* is because it also derives from the word “מִמִּסִּים” ,

⁶ Gevuros Hashem chapter 17.

⁷ Sotah 13a.

⁸ Commentary Haamek Davar to Shemos ibid.

which means “melting”,⁹ i.e. to subjugating and disheartening the Jewish people through persecution. This is the basis of Onkelos’ translation – “officers who did evil”. Having said that, the word “מַסִּים” cannot just mean “doing evil”, for it is clearly a plural noun denoting *things*, not a verb denoting *actions*. Hence, through a combined use of the letters for the word “taxes” with the vowelization of the word “persecuting” in describing these officers, the Torah presents a composite description of their role!¹⁰

4. From Words to Vowels – Avraham’s Guests

Moving beyond our parsha, and taking this discussion one stage further, we will discover that the idea of combining different elements to express a composite message can express itself not only within a single word – but even within a single vowel. The beginning of Parshas Vayeira¹¹ describes how Hashem appears to Avraham, who presently notices three wayfarers standing nearby. Verse 3 then reads:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֲדֹנָי אִם נָא מְצָאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ אַל נָא תַעֲבֹר מֵעַל עַבְדְּךָ

He [Avraham] said, “Adonoy, if I have found favor in your eyes, do not pass on from your servant”

Who is Avraham addressing with these words? The Midrash¹² offers two possible explanations:

1. Avraham was addressing the guests, beseeching them to stop and enjoy his hospitality. According to this explanation, the word “אֲדֹנָי” is the plural of the word “אֲדֹנָי” and means “my masters.”
2. Avraham was addressing Hashem, asking Him not to depart while he tended to his guests. According to this explanation, the word “אֲדֹנָי” denotes Hashem’s name.

⁹ See e.g. Yeshaya 10:18.

¹⁰ See also the Netziv’s Introduction Kidmas Ha’emek to Haamek Davar, sec 7, and Harchev Davar to Bereishis 2:25. For an example a composite word in the realm of halachah, see Malbim to Vayikra 4:23, who explains that the word which denotes a person’s awareness of a sin which obligates him to bring a sin-offering – “או הודע אליו” – **חטאתו** – combines both passive and causative elements which indicates that a person can be liable for such an offering through being informed of it by someone else (causative), provided that he accepts and believes their testimony, whereby the sin is known (passive) to him.

¹¹ Bereishis 18:1-2.

¹² Bereishis Rabbah 48:10, cited in Rashi to that verse.

There is, however, a basic problem, as pointed out by the commentators:

- The word “אֲדֹנָי” in the verse is spelled with a *kamatz* under the *nun* (Adonoy). This is indeed the vowelization for this word when used as Hashem’s name.
- In contrast, the word “אֲדֹנָי,” when spelled in the plural denoting “my masters”, is “אֲדֹנָיִם” (adonay) with a *patach*.¹³

As such, the presence of the *kamatz* in this word in our verse clearly indicates that Avraham was addressing Hashem! How is it even possible to suggest an alternative explanation, i.e. that he was addressing his guests?

The Shelah Hakadosh¹⁴ explains. Rashi himself notes that the rest of the verse is phrased in the singular (“וְעַבְדְּךָ ... בְּעֵינֶיךָ”), while only the following verse uses the plural (“וְיָקַח נָא מֵעַט מַיִם וְרָחֲצוּ רַגְלֵיכֶם” – *Take please some water and wash your feet*)! How can this be reconciled with the approach whereby Avraham was addressing his guests already in the first verse? Rashi explains that while Avraham was indeed addressing them as a group, he nonetheless intuited that one of them was the senior member, by whose decision the other two would abide; hence, he addressed his initial plea to that individual specifically. This, says the Shelah, is why the word “אֲדֹנָי” in the verse has a *kamatz*, even if it is not the name of Hashem! As we have noted, when addressing one person as one’s master, the word is spelled with a *chirik* under the *nun* – “אֲדֹנָיִ”, while when addressing a number of people, it is spelled with a *patach* – “אֲדֹנָיִם”. Yet what happens when one is simultaneously addressing *both* a group of people in general *and* one individual in particular? What vowel should be used then? The answer is: A vowel which combines both a *chirik* and a *patach* under the *nun*, which results in a *kamatz* – “אֲדֹנָיִ”!

It is simply incredible to behold how the nuance of the simultaneous duality within Avraham’s comments to his guests, as described by Rashi, is communicated by the Torah with a single vowel!

¹³ As used e.g. by Lot when addressing the angels later in that Parsha (19:2): “וַיֹּאמְרוּ הֵנָּה נָא אֲדֹנָיִם”.

¹⁴ Parshas Vayeira.