The Sin of Adam & Eve:
Understanding Rashi's Comments

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A First Word

The beginning of the Torah is most dramatic. The creation of the world is a whirlwind tour of God’s omnipotence and omniscience. The creation of Adam and Eve is described so that humanity is placed in the context of all of the animal kingdom. Then we read the story of the sin that brings the world crashing down around the heads of Adam, and Eve.

The Torah’s description of the snake convincing Eve to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and all that proceeds from that strange event is short and to the point. Rashi, however, fleshes out the story with material culled from the Midrash and Talmud and in doing so, he raises many questions: Why did he expand the tale? Why did he choose only these Midrashic statements? What is Rashi trying to teach us?

On verse 8, Rashi writes: “There are many Aggadaic expositions which our Sages have already organized in their proper order in the Berayshit Rabbah and in other Midrashim. But, I have come only to give the plain meaning of Scripture (Peshat) and the Aggadah which serves to clarify the words of Scripture in a way which fits those words.” Is that all that Rashi is doing? Is the sole purpose of his commentary to teach us the explicit meaning of the text, the Peshat? If so, then why include some of the Aggadic stories? Indeed, this almost casual comment by Rashi makes us even more suspicious of what he is trying to accomplish.

The Texts

Here are the verses of the story with specific comments by Rashi. Not all of his comments are quoted here. It would be preferable, of course, to open a Chumash and to read both the Torah text and Rashi’s comments in the original Hebrew.

Chapter 2

25. They were both naked, the man and his wife, but they were not ashamed.

Chapter 3

1. And the serpent was more cunning than all the beasts of the field that God the Lord had made, and it said to the woman, "Did God indeed say, 'You shall not eat of any of the trees of the garden?'"

Rashi: The serpent was more cunning.
Why is this incident inserted here? He should have connected it [to] "He made for Adam and his wife garments of skin and clothed them" (Berayshit 3:21). Rather, it comes to teach you the cause of the serpent's assailing them. He saw
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them naked, indulging in marital relations unashamedly and he coveted her. 
(Berayshit Rabbah 18:6)

Did [He] even say, etc.
Did He perhaps tell you not to eat from any of the trees of the garden, etc.? And, although he saw them eating from the other fruits he indulged her in conversation so that she should be obliged to answer him, and give him the opportunity to speak about that particular tree.

2. The woman said to the serpent, "Of the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat, 3. but of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, the Lord said, ‘You shall not eat of it, and you shall not touch it, lest you die.’ “

Rashi: Neither shall you touch it.
She added more to the command; therefore, it caused her to diminish it, as it is said: "Do not add to His words" (Mishlay 30:6)

4. The serpent said to the woman, "You will surely not die.

Rashi: You certainly will not die.
He pushed her until she touched it [the tree]. He then said to her: "Just as there is no death in touching so, too, there is no death in eating.” (Berayshit Rabbah 19:3)

5. For the Lord knows that on the day that you eat thereof, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like angels, knowing good and evil."

Rashi: For the Lord knows.
Every craftsman resents his fellow-craftsmen. He [i.e., G-d] ate from the tree and was able to create the world. (Berayshit Rabbah 19:4)
And you will become as gods.
[With the ability] to create worlds (see Pirkay deRabbi Eliezer 13)

6. The woman saw that the tree was good for food and that it was a delight to the eyes, and the tree was desirable to make one wise; she took of its fruit, she ate, [and] she also gave to her husband with her, [and] he ate.

Rashi:
That the tree was good
To be like a god.
it was a delight to the eyes
As he told her "Your eyes will open."
desirable to make one wise
As he told her: "Knowing good and evil."
she also gave it to her husband
So that she will not die while he will live and marry another.

7. The eyes of both of them were opened; they knew that they were naked; they sewed fig leaves and made themselves girdles.

Rashi:
they knew that they were naked.
Even one who is blind knows when he is undressed. Then what is “they knew that they were naked”? They had one command [to follow] and they stripped themselves of it. (*Berayshit Rabbah* 19:6)

8. They heard the voice of God the Lord moving through the garden along the wind of the day; the man and his wife hid from before the God Lord in the midst of the trees of the garden.

9. God the Lord called to man; He said to him, "Where are you?"

   **Rashi:**
   Where are you?
   He [i.e., God] knew where he was. It was only to engage in conversation with him so that he will not be too bewildered to repent, if He would have punished him suddenly. (*Berayshit Rabbah* 19:11) . . .

10. He said, "I heard Your voice in the garden, and I was afraid because I am naked; so I hid."

11. He said, "Who told you that you are naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?"

12. The man said, "The woman that You gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree; so I ate."

13. God the Lord said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent enticed me, and I ate."

14. God the Lord said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed be you more than all the cattle and more than all the beasts of the field; you shall walk on your belly, and you shall eat dust all the days of your life.

   **Rashi:**
   Because you did this.
   From here [we learn] that we do not attempt to mitigate the sin of a seducer. For had He asked him: "Why did you do this?" he could have answered: "[When one is faced with obeying] the words of the master or the words of the student, who is it that should be obeyed?" (*Berayshit Rabbah* 20:2)

15. And I shall place hatred between you and between the woman, and between your seed and between her seed. He will crush your head, and you will bite his heel."

   **Rashi:**
   I will put hostility.
   [G-d said:] Your sole intention was that Adam should die by eating first and then you would marry Chavah and you only spoke to Chavah first because women are easily influenced and know how to influence their husbands. Therefore: "I will set enmity [etc.]" (see *Avot deRabbi Natan* 1; *Pirkay deRabbi Eliezer* Ch. 13)

16. To the woman He said, "I shall surely increase your sorrow and your pregnancy; in pain you shall bear children. And to your husband will be your desire, and he will rule over you."

   **Rashi:**
   Your desire will be for your husband for marital relations. And, yet, you will not have the audacity to demand it outright from him, but, rather, "he will
dominate you.” [I.e.] all [the initiative] will come from him and not from you.  
(Ayruvin 100b)

17. And to man He said, "Because you listened to your wife, and you ate from the tree from which I commanded you saying, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed be the ground for your sake; with toil shall you eat of it all the days of your life.

18. And it will cause thorns and thistles to grow for you; and you shall eat the herbs of the field.

19. With the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, until you return to the ground, for you were taken from there, for dust you are, and to dust you will return."

20. The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all life.

21. God the Lord made for Adam and for his wife shirts of skin, and He dressed them.

22. God the Lord said, "Behold man has become like one of us, having the ability of knowing good and evil, and now, lest he stretch forth his hand and take also from the Tree of Life and eat and live forever."

23. God the Lord sent him out of the Garden of Eden, to till the soil, from where he had been taken.

24. He drove the man out; He stationed from the east of the Garden of Eden the cherubim and the blade of the revolving sword, to guard the way to the Tree of Life.

Understanding Rashi

A number of years ago, my son, Naftali, and I had an extended discussion about Rashi’s commentary on the Torah. Two things became clear to us: The first is that Rashi did not reserve his comment exclusively to problems in the Torah text. The second and most important conclusion was that despite his protests to the contrary, Rashi was more that a simple Torah commentator. Rashi was an educator. Rashi’s true goal in his commentary is to teach us the meaning of the Torah in a broader sense along with Torah values.

With that in mind, we can take another look at Rashi’s comments to the Adam and Eve story. We shall see that Rashi’s choice of Aggadic comments works on two levels: The Aggadot of the Sages help us understand the undercurrents running through the Torah’s text and, at the same time, they convey the lessons that we are meant to take away with us from reading the Torah.

The texts above begin with the last verse of chapter 2 because Rashi sees a connection between the end of that chapter and the beginning of chapter 3. In general, Rashi, along with the rest of us, understands that the serpent is the representative of the Yetzer HaRa, the evil inclination. Rashi was certainly aware of a Midrash statement that he does not quote, namely that there is no Parshah separation between chapters 2 and 3. Thus, the two chapters are connected. It is on this basis that Rashi tells us how the serpent witnesses Adam and Eve open, unashamed conjugal life, which is implied in the last verse of chapter 2. The point is that the Yetzer HaRa always has an agenda. In this case, the serpent wants Eve for himself. When we are confronted by the seducements of the Yetzer HaRa, we must realize that this is not a random threat. Rather, there is a goal: We are being tempted because there will be negative ramifications if we give in.

Part of the serpent’s cunning behavior is that he starts very innocently. Notice, that later on, God uses the same “trick” to enter into a conversation with Adam (see verse 9). Most temptations start very innocuously. “It never hurts to look?” “There is no harm in just tagging along, is there?”

Eve adds to God’s prohibition – as Rashi points out – and that gives the serpent a way in to seduce her. He pushes her against the tree and when nothing happens, he uses rock-solid logic to convince her that nothing will happen to her if she eats from
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the fruit of the tree. The Yetzer HaRa does not act in a crazy, wild manner. Rather, the Yetzer HaRa is quiet and logical, “You see, logically, there is nothing wrong in what I ask you to do.”

More often than not, we are led to believe that the evil the Yetzer HaRa is suggesting will result in even greater, better things.

“For the Lord knows.” Every craftsman resents his fellow-craftsmen. He [i.e., G-d] ate from the tree and was able to create the world. “And you will become as gods” [With the ability] to create worlds. (Rashi’s comments on verse 5)

Why do people think that the road to greatness runs through forests full of forbidden behavior? The Torah teaches us, says Rashi, that this is exactly how the Yetzer HaRa works.

The next step in the process is rationalization. Here are Rashi’s comments on Eve’s perception of the Tree of Knowledge:

“The woman saw that the tree was good” to be like a god.
“and that it was a delight to the eyes,” as he told her “Your eyes will open.”
“and the tree was desirable to make one wise,” as he told her: "Knowing good and evil.”

So what if God said, “Don’t do that!” Look at all the benefits you reap in violating His command.

And then the Yetzer HaRa makes us jealous: “She also gave it to her husband” so that she will not die while he will live and marry another, says Rashi. Despite all of our protestations and rationalizations, when push comes to shove, we rarely act innocently. Eve knew what she was doing, explains Rashi. She was not “taking the fall” alone.

Rashi explains that the word, Arum – Arumim, changes its color and meaning throughout the story. At first, Adam and Eve were innocently Arumim, naked, physically. Then we read that the serpent was Arum. Not naked, but cunning and sneaky. Then, Adam and Eve realize that they are Arumim. Not physically naked, but morally naked. They realized that they had sinned and they were ashamed. The real triumphant victory of the Yetzer HaRa is to transform our innocence into shame once we realize that we have acted inappropriately or even badly.

In verse 14, God confronts the serpent after both Adam and Eve pass the buck, which is typical human behavior. While God asked Adam and then Eve questions, hoping to tease an admission of guilt out of them, He speaks to the serpent directly. Rashi teaches us that this is the only way to deal with the Yetzer HaRa, who can be very slimy and who easily slips out of taking any responsibility.

Rashi quotes the Sages who say that the serpent’s plan went awry. Things did not work out the way he wanted. The point is that from the perspective of the Yetzer HaRa, we humans are fickle. We do not always follow the plan, no matter how evil or how simple. Nevertheless, we are soon to discover that the results are usually disastrous.

The innocent behavior of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, where there was no sexual tension, is gone forever. Rashi’s comment of verse 16 helps us understand that intimacy between husband and wife is no longer a simple, innocuous matter. By eating from the Tree, things have changed from good to bad and that is the knowledge that we carry with us forever.

It is also interesting to see another connection between chapters 2 and 3: In verse 20, Adam gives his wife a name, Eve – Chavah, the mother of all life. The Sages in the Midrash Rabbah (20:11) give very angry and disparaging interpretations to this verse. One of the Sages says that the name, Chava, comes from the Aramaic, Chivyah, meaning, snake. Another Sage expands on this: Adam is saying that he no longer needs the serpent to tempt him. He has his own serpent, Chavah, his wife!

Rashi does not quote any of these statements. The name Chavah, explains Rashi, is “a play on the word Chayah, meaning alive, for she gives life to her children.” Here, too, Rashi plays the role of the educator. In opposition to the Sages, which is an
unusual stance for him, Rashi says that Adam understands that no matter how
disastrous or tragic the results of sin are, when all is said and done, one must look to
the future.

By eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, the two of them
changed the very reality of the world in which we live. And there is no going back. The
way back into the Garden is guarded forever by angelic cherubs who are really
murderous angels, as Rashi points out. If that is the case then what is left? Rashi
teaches us that the Torah indicates through Adam that first of all there is all of life
ahead of us. And even more important, the second lesson is that together with our
spouses, we will bring life and goodness and sweetness into the harsh world we have
created.

What almost seems like fairy tales and odd comments, are really Rashi’s way in
teaching us the depth of the Peshat of the Torah and the very important lessons about
life that are hidden among the folds of the Torah’s tapestry of text.