

The Ethical-Religious Precondition for Miracle Performance in Rashi's Biblical Commentary*

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the explicit occurrence of the term 'nes' (miracle) in Rashi's biblical commentary. Seven examples from Rashi's commentary are presented which illustrate his tendency to draw attention to the theological principle that there are preconditions for G-d's miraculous intervention. Each example is preceded by the narrative background necessary to understand it and Rashi's commentary in each case is delineated, with emphasis placed upon the philosophical principle he introduces. According to Rashi there is a link between human behaviour and G-d's salvation, both regarding salvation of the individual and of the collective, Israel. In order to merit receiving miraculous intervention, the recipient may draw upon merit accruing from one of three sources: the recipient's present-day merits, his future merits, or his forefathers' past merits.

A INTRODUCTION

Surprisingly very little has been devoted to investigating Rashi's attitude towards miracles.¹ Grossman (1995:204) even argues that 'Rashi did not deal with difficulties arising from philosophical investigations since philosophy had not [yet] penetrated into the consciousness of French and German Jewry in his period.' In the first stage of my research I collected all the explicit instances where the word *nes* appeared, in one form or another, in Rashi's commentary.²

* I delivered a lecture on this topic at the eighth EAJS Congress in Moscow on July 27, 2006.

¹ Avraham Grossman (2006:180-184) devoted a few pages to this topic in a recent book; however, his comments are not relevant to this discussion.

² Using the *Keter* CD-ROM, which is an electronic version of the *Revised and Augmented Scientific Edition of 'Mikra 'ot Gedolot' based on the Aleppo Codex and Early Medieval MSS* (Cohen 1992), created at Bar Ilan University by Professor Menahem Cohen's team, I discovered one hundred and five references to *nes* in one form or another; eighty-nine times meaning *pele* (wonder) and sixteen times possessing other connotations. Due to the breadth of this topic, in this paper, I will limit myself to discussing the term *nes*, leaving the investigation of cognate terms such as *pele* (wonder), *mofet* (marvel), *ot* (sign) and others similar to them for another study.

Having studied the verses with the term *nes*, I became convinced that Rashi wove into the fabric of his commentary several fundamental theological premises regarding biblical miracles; elucidating the ethical-religious precondition for miracle performance will be the subject of this paper.³

In discussing the term *nes* herein, I will refer to an unexpected occurrence, which the faithful can only explain as direct divine intervention in the predictable, ordinary unfolding of natural and human events; a typical, though not necessary, sign that a miracle has occurred is a violation of the laws of nature.⁴

In the Bible many miraculous occurrences are described without any explicit reference made to the worthiness of their recipients. In contrast the Sages in the midrashic literature tend to stress the necessary conditions for miraculous salvation.⁵ In this paper, I will produce seven examples from Rashi's commentary illustrating his tendency to draw attention to the theological principle that there are preconditions for G-d's miraculous intervention. The examples are arranged to allow for maximum pedagogical effect. I have introduced each example with the narrative background necessary to aid in its understanding and I have explained Rashi's commentary on it while highlighting the philosophical principle he introduces.⁶

B MIRACULOUS SALVATION IS CONTINGENT UPON THE RELIGIOUS-ETHICAL BEHAVIOUR OF THE MIRACLE'S RECIPIENT

1 The Individual's Miraculous Salvation

a) During the famine in Samaria, the Kingdom of Israel, Elijah found refuge in Zarepath in the kingdom of Sidon. Elijah, ensuring that the widow was provided with food, instigated the miracle of 'the jar of flour shall not give out, and the jug of oil shall not fail' (1 Kings 17:14).⁷ Shortly thereafter, the child, saved from starvation by Elijah, fell desperately ill and his condition deteriorated.

³ In another article (Himmelfarb, forthcoming), I presented examples from Rashi's commentary in which he integrated theological-philosophical principles governing two particular miracle related fields: (1) Principles dealing with the miracle worker – aspects related to his personality and to his *modus operandi*. (2) Principles dealing with the miracle's recipient – before and after the miracle occurs.

⁴ So defined by Licht (1968:874, s.v. *nes*, *nissim*). On the complexity involved in defining the concept of *nes*, see, for instance, Kasher (1981:30ff.) and Yaron (1997, Part 1, 14-17).

⁵ See Kasher (1993:217-229).

⁶ Unless otherwise specified, all commentaries are cited from the *Keter* CD-ROM (above, note 2).

⁷ Biblical translations are based upon the New JPS translation (The Jewish Publication Society 1985).

rated to the point where ‘he had no breath left in him’ (1 Kings 17:17). The widow castigated Elijah, blaming him for the death of her son:

וְהִיאֲמַר אֶל-אֱלֹהֵיהּוּ מַה-לִּי וְלָךְ אִישׁ הָאֱלֹהִים בָּאתָ אֵלַי לְהַזְכִּיר
אֶת-עֲוֹנִי וְלְהַמִּית אֶת-בְּנִי

[She said to Elijah: What harm have I done you, O man of G-d, that you should come here to recall my sin and cause the death of my son? (1 Kings 17:18)]

That is to say, the widow claimed that Elijah’s very presence in her house caused her sin to be remembered and consequently, the death of her son.⁸ The superior ethical level of this woman is apparent from her ability to recognize her sin. However, the biblical narrator did not find it appropriate to specify the widow’s sin. What sin is she alluding to?

Some biblical commentators, who post-dated Rashi, suggested a specific sin committed by the widow.

For instance, R. Joseph Kara in his first interpretation, discovered the source of the sin in the widow’s earlier words to Elijah ‘and we shall eat it [the little bit of food], and then we shall die’ (1 Kings 17:12). Radak hypothesized that her sin is related to hosting Elijah imperfectly. Rashi and Ralbag refrained from suggesting a specific sin, perhaps because the verse makes no explicit reference to the widow’s sinfulness.⁹ Furthermore, the verse describes a woman possessing positive moral and spiritual strengths.¹⁰

Rashi and Ralbag claimed that no specific sin was committed; rather, the notion of the widow’s ‘sin’ resulted from the re-evaluation of her behavior in a new light once Elijah arrived.

Rashi explained: והזכיר את עוונִי - עד שלא באת אלי, היו שוקלין מעשיי ומעשה עירי, והייתי ראויה לנס; משבאת לכאן לא נחשבתי לכלום, ואין צדקתי נזכרת.

[to recall my sin – before you came to me, my behaviour was measured against that of my fellow townspeople, and I was worthy of a

⁸ Regarding the widow’s accusation, see Simon 1980 (especially 72, n. 49).

⁹ Simon (1997:203) notes that ‘Elijah expressed his complete identification with the widow by repeating her words in his own prayer “to kill her son” (1 Kings 17:20).

¹⁰ First, she stopped gathering sticks in order to give the stranger some water and then, even though she and her son had food for only one remaining meal – as she says, ‘and we shall it eat [the little bit of food], and then we shall die’ (1 Kings 17:13) for they had no more food – she responds to Elijah’s entreaties and gives him a small cake even before feeding herself and her son.

miracle; after your arrival, I was considered to be [worth] nothing, and my righteousness was not remembered.^{11]}

Rashi, in his commentary, explained what the woman considered to be a sin. She believed that the system of divine justice is relative since everyone is judged in comparison to those in his or her environment. Before Elijah's arrival she had been worthy of a miracle, since in contrast to her townspeople, she was a righteous woman. However, in contrast to Elijah, her actions did not warrant G-d's miraculous intervention.

Rashi does not define his interpretation as *peshat* or *derash*. Rabbi Joseph Kara, whose second interpretation is identical to Rashi's, references his source as the midrash aggadah in *Genesis Rabbah* (Mirkin 1956:217, 50:11):

Rabbi Berekhya and Rabbi Levi in the name of Rabbi Chama bar Chaninah: Two people said the same thing – Lot and Zarepath. Zarepath said: 'Before you [Elijah] came to [lodge with] me, the Holy One Blessed Be He saw my deeds and the deeds of my fellow townspeople, and my deeds were more numerous than the deeds of the townspeople and I was [considered] righteous among them. Now that you have come to [lodge with] me, you have come to remind [the Holy One Blessed Be He] of my iniquity and to kill my son...'.¹²

In the midrash, the woman is described positively; her deeds, that is to say, her good deeds, are more numerous than those of her fellow townspeople. In the midrash cited above from *Genesis Rabbah* she attained the status of being known as a 'righteous [woman]'.¹³ A comparison of Rashi's choice of language with that of the midrashim calls attention to the absence of the term *nes* (miracle) in the midrashim. Rashi seemingly added the term *nes* in his commentary to call attention to the principle that good deeds and righteous character traits endow their possessor with the merit necessary to receive a miracle.¹⁴

¹¹ Translations of Rashi on the Pentateuch are based upon M. Rosenbaum and A. M. Silberman's translation found in Silberman (1973). Translations of Rashi's commentary elsewhere on the Bible are my own. Hereafter Rashi compares this situation with that of Lot and Abraham: 'Lot also declares: "I cannot flee to the hills" (Gen 19:19) where Abraham dwells, for my merits will go unnoticed in his company.'

¹² Unless specified otherwise, all translations from the Midrash and Talmud are my own. In *Midrash Bereshit Rabba: Critical Edition with Notes and Commentary* (Theodor and Albeck 1965:529, 50:11) the words 'and I was [considered] righteous among them' do not appear.

¹³ In *Pesikta Rabbati* (Friedmann 1963:10) the widow is described as *kesherah* (literally, kosher) a virtuous woman.

¹⁴ Zahari (1993c:100) succinctly remarks: 'Rashi fashioned the midrash in keeping with his language and his style.'

Perhaps Rashi was also influenced by another midrash recounting the widow's miracle-enabling meritorious behavior: 'Zarepath, by feeding Elijah, merited to resurrect her son' (Dunsky 1980:62).

From this instance, we can adduce a principle adopted by Rashi: The religious-ethical behaviour of the miracle's recipient – the widow, in this case, is a necessary precondition for the Divine performance of a miracle – in this case, the resurrection of her son. In other words, the miraculous salvation of the individual in need of a miracle is contingent upon his or her merits.

b)

שְׁמַע-נָא יְהוֹשֻׁעַ הַכֹּהֵן הַגָּדוֹל אֶתְּהָ וְרֵעֶיךָ הַיֹּשְׁבִים לְפָנֶיךָ כִּי-
אֲנֹשִׁי מוֹפֵת הִגָּמָה כִּי-הִנְנִי מֵבִיא אֶת-עַבְדֵי צִמְחָ

[Hearken well, O High Priest Joshua, you and your fellows sitting before you! For they are *mofet* men that I am going to bring my servant, *Tzemach* [literally, the Branch, a metaphor for the future king of David's line](Zechariah 3:8).]

Rashi commented: - אתה וריעריך - חנניה מישאל ועזריה היו אנשי מופת - גברין כשרין למעבד להון ניסין"; שאף הם נעשה להם נס.

[You and your fellows – they were Chananyah, Mishael and Azaryah; *mofet* men – 'kosher (virtuous) men, worthy of having miracles performed for them'; for they even had a miracle performed for them.]

In the vision in Zechariah of Yehoshua, the High Priest, the Bible reports, that the men of *mofet* are witnesses to the coming of *Tzemach*, that is, to the coming of the branch from the tree trunk of Jesse (the future king from the Davidic line). Rashi identified the *mofet* men as Chananyah, Mishael and Azaryah, and interpreted the appellation '*mofet* men' by citing *Targum Yonatan* 'kosher [virtuous] men, worthy to have a miracle performed for them.' Rashi's interpretation is in perfect accord with the statement in bTa'anit 18b: 'Chananyah, Mishael and Azaryah were completely righteous men, and they were worthy of having a miracle performed for them.' Thus we may infer that in his commentary here Rashi argues for a conditional relationship between the individual's miraculous salvation and his prior meritorious behaviour: if you are worthy (like Chananyah, Mishael and Azaryah), you may have a miracle performed for you.¹⁵

¹⁵ Kasher has already noted that the description of Chananyah, Mishael, and Azaryah's actions and their miraculous salvation (Daniel 3) attests to the fact that 'salvation can only occur within a clear and explicit religious or ethical context' (Kasher 1993:218).

2 The Miraculous Salvation of the Collective – the Nation

a) Following the splitting of the Red Sea and the song sung to G-d by Moses and the Israelites, the Bible reports the women's actions:

וּתְקַח מִרְיָם תְּנַבֵּיָאָה אֶחָדָה אֶתְרֵן אֶת-הַתֶּף בְּיָדָהּ וַתֵּצֵאֵן כָּל-
הַנָּשִׁים אַחֲרֶיהָ בַתְּפִילִים וּבַמְּחֹלֹת

[And Miriam, the prophetess, sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women went out after her in dance and with timbrels (Exodus 15:20).]

The question begging to be asked regarding the biblical report is: Where did the women get timbrels from shortly after leaving Egypt?

Rashi responded: בתופים ובמחולות - מובטחות היו צדקניות שבדור שהקדוש ברוך הוא עושה להם נסים, והוציאו תופים ממצרים.

[In dance and with timbrels – the righteous women of the generation were assured that the Holy One Blessed Be He would perform miracles for them, so they brought timbrels from Egypt.]

A cursory examination of Rashi's language here indicates that G-d performs נסים, miracles, for righteous women.¹⁶

In *Pirque de Rabbi Eliezer* (Horowitz 1972:152, line 49) we find the following midrash, the apparent source for Rashi's commentary:

And where did they get timbrels and *meholot* from? Rather say, the righteous always know and are appeased by the knowledge, and are promised that the Holy One Blessed Be He performs miracles and mighty acts for them, before they left Egypt they prepared timbrels and *meholot* for themselves.¹⁷

The critical distinction between *Pirque de Rabbi Eliezer* and Rashi is that Rashi replaced the term 'righteous' with 'righteous women'. The implication of the midrash's version – 'the righteous always know' – is that the midrash is describing a routine picture of an established reality characterized by the promise to the righteous that G-d will perform miracles in the future.¹⁸ In contrast, Rashi's choice of language (צדקניות שבדור) implies that we are dealing with the specific and unique promise of miraculous intervention made to the righteous

¹⁶ Indeed, bSotah 11b reports, 'Rav Avira offered the following homiletical interpretation: as a reward for the righteous women of that generation – Israel was redeemed from Egypt.'

¹⁷ Zahari (1993b) did not cite a midrashic source for Rashi's interpretation.

¹⁸ In the *Mekhilta de Rabbi Simeon b. Yohai* (Epstein and Melamed, 1955:101, 15:20) there is an addition to our midrash: 'that the Holy One Blessed Be He performs miracle and mighty acts for them at the time of their exodus from Egypt.'

women of the Exodus generation. Rashi's interpretation hints at the link between miracles that were performed on behalf of the Israelite nation and the behaviour of the Israelite women.¹⁹

b) The author of Psalm 88 wondered:

הַלְמִתִּים תַּעֲשֶׂה-בְּלֵא אִם-רְפָאִים יִקְוֶמוּ יוֹדוּךָ סֵלָה

[Do You work wonders for the dead? Do the *refaim* (shades) rise to praise You? (Psalms 88:11)]

Rashi commented: הַלְמִתִּים - לַרְשָׁעִים, שֶׁאֵף בְּחַיֵּיהֶם קְרוּיִים מֵתִים לֵהֶם, אֲתָה עוֹשֶׂה נֹסִים?

(For the dead – For the wicked, who even while they are alive, are considered dead, for them do You perform miracles?)

Rashi removed the word 'dead' from its usual semantic context and explained that the dead in the verse are living human beings, people who are considered dead because of their wicked actions. The identification of dead people with wicked people is found, for instance, in the Gemara discussing an unrelated matter: 'And the dead know nothing – these are the wicked people who during their lives are referred to as dead' (bBerakhot 18b). Rashi's rhetorical question, 'For the wicked ... You perform miracles?' teaches us that in Rashi's opinion the wicked have no right to expect miracles performed on their behalf. In other words, he links the righteousness of those who are 'not wicked' to God's performance of miracles on their behalf.

C MIRACULOUS SALVATION IS CONTINGENT UPON THE BEHAVIOUR OF THE MIRACLE'S RECIPIENT'S FOREFATHERS

Mesha, king of Moab, was defeated in war by Yehoram, king of Israel, and Yehoshaphat, king of Judah; in the later stages of the battle he unsuccessfully tried to cut a path through the army of the king of Edom (who was subservient to the king of Judah). The Bible recounts:

וַיִּקַּח אֶת-בְּנוֹ הַבְּכוֹר אֲשֶׁר-יִמְלֹךְ תַּחְתָּיו וַיַּעֲלֵהוּ עַל-הַתַּחֲמָה וַיְהִי קֶצֶף-גָּדוֹל עַל-יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּסְעוּ מֵעָלָיו וַיָּשָׁבוּ לָאָרֶץ

[And he [Mesha] took his first-born son, who was heir to the throne, and offered him up on the wall as a burnt offering. And there was a great wrath upon Israel, so they withdrew from him and returned to the land [of Israel/Judah] (2 Kings 3:27).]

¹⁹ Rashi also omits *meholot* from his version of the midrash, but this omission has no relevance to the topic at hand. See HaKohen (1998:72, n. 79).

Rashi, in typical fashion, begins his commentary with an answer making no mention of the issues troubling him. However, without doubt this is a very difficult verse for it is unclear based upon the biblical context who the king of Moav sacrificed, to whom the sacrifice was offered, and why.²⁰ Secondly, Rashi must have been bothered by what connection exists between Mesha's actions and the end of the verse where 'a great wrath' is unleashed on Israel.

Rashi commented: ויקח את בנו הבכור - בפסיקתא דפרשת שקלים - נדרש, ששאל את עבדיו: מה טיבה של אומה זו, שנעשים לה ניסים כאלה? אמרו לו: אביהם אברהם בן יחיד היה לו, ואמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא: הקריבהו לפני, ורצה להקריבו. אמר להם; אף הוא בן בכור יש לו, ילך ויקריבנו לעבודה זרה... ויהי קצף גדול על ישראל - שנזכרו עוונותם, שאף הם שוחטין בניהם לעבודה זרה, ואינן ראויין לנס.

[And he took his first-born son – In the *Pesikta* on *Parshat Shekalim* a homiletical interpretation relates that [Mesha] asked his servants: What is the nature of this nation for whom miracles like this one are performed? They replied to him: Their forefather Abraham had an only son, and the Holy One Blessed Be He said to him: 'Sacrifice him before me.' And Abraham wished to make this sacrifice. He said to them: 'He [Mesha] also has a first-born son, He will go and sacrifice him as a form of idol worship' ... and there was a great wrath – for their [the Israelites'] iniquities were remembered, for they too sacrificed their children as a form of idol worship, and were not worthy of a miracle.]

Rashi declares that the source for his commentary is the following midrash cited in *Pesikta de Rav Kahana* (Mandelbaum 1987:21, 2:5, s.v. *tzedakah teromem*):

And Mesha, the king of Moab, ... assembled all his astrologers and asked them: 'You have told me that I can make war upon all the nations and triumph over them, but [if I make war upon] those Jews, they will triumph over me. Tell me what merit ... Abraham' He said to them: 'Those [Jews] who do not sacrifice have miracles performed for them, if they sacrificed, how much more so [would they have miracles performed for them].' Now, he had an only son ... he went and sacrificed him, so that miracles might be performed for him.

²⁰ The question debated at length by the commentators of whether Mesha sacrificed his own son (Rashi) or the son of the King of Edom (Radak) is not relevant to our discussion. For further discussion, see Abrabanel (1970:515). Likewise irrelevant is the question of whether Mesha sacrificed the boy to his god, the sun, (Rashi) or to the God of the Israelites (Radak).

Rashi reworks the midrash at his disposal, placing the following question in the mouth of Mesha, the king of Moab: 'What is the nature of this nation for whom miracles like this one are performed?' That is to say, what merit enabled Israel to triumph over Moab aided by a miraculous form of divine salvation? The question is asked assuming that there is a connection between the performance of miracles and the behaviour of the miracles' recipients. This basic assumption directs the commentator to search for the meritorious actions of the miracle's recipient for only through his merits is he granted wondrous salvation.

In the case under discussion, the Israelites, themselves, are not really worthy of a miracle as the continuation of the verse, itself, seems to indicate: 'and there was a great wrath.' Rashi explained this verse as follows: 'for their iniquities were remembered, for they too sacrificed their children as a form of idol worship.' Rashi concluded with the explicit statement: 'and [they] were not worthy of a miracle.'²¹

When Israel's behaviour could in no way account for a miraculous salvation, the Sages and Rashi, in their footsteps, searched for its merit in the meritorious actions of the nation's forefathers: here they pointed to Abraham's willingness to offer his son as a burnt offering when commanded to do so by divine fiat.

Thus, we learn that Rashi adopted the Sages of the Midrash's approach explaining that national miraculous salvation may also be enabled by the merit of a recipient's forefathers.

D MIRACULOUS SALVATION IS CONTINGENT UPON THE FUTURE BEHAVIOUR OF THE MIRACLE'S RECIPIENT

During the revelation at the 'Burning Bush,' G-d appointed Moses his emissary to take the Israelites out of Egypt. Moses expressed doubts and misgivings, and at first asked:

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-הַאֱלֹהִים מִי אֲנֹכִי כִּי אֵלֶּךְ אֶל-פַּרְעֹה וְכִי אוֹצִיא
אֶת-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרָיִם

[Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and take the Israelites out from Egypt? (Exodus 3:11)]

Rashi explained: מי אנכי - מה אנכי חשוב לדבר עם המלכים? וכי אוציא את בני ישראל - ואף אם חשוב אני, מה זכו ישראל שיעשה להם נס ואוציאם ממצרים?

²¹ For a comprehensive discussion of the phrase 'and there was a great wrath upon Israel' (*va-yehi ketsef gadol al Yisrael*), see Mor (1990:106ff.).

[Who am I – of what importance am I that I should talk with kings?
That I should take the Israelites out – and even if I am important
[enough], by what merit do the Israelites deserve that a miracle
should be performed on their behalf, and I should take them out of
Egypt?]

According to Rashi, Moses' first justification for rejecting G-d's mission was intrinsically connected to his own character, 'of what importance am I that I should talk with kings?', while the second reason for his refusal was related to the Israelites, 'by what merit do the Israelites deserve that a miracle should be performed on their behalf, and I should take them out of Egypt?'²² That is to say, Rashi's basic assumption is that if the Israelite exodus from Egypt occurs miraculously, Israel must have a merit that should be searched for. Moses wonders what the nature of this merit possessed by the Israelites is that makes them deserving of G-d's miraculous salvation.

The source for Rashi's commentary here is *Midrash Exodus Rabbah* (Shinan 1984:125, 3:4):

And take the Israelites out, what merit do they possess which will enable me to redeem them from bondage ... As you said: 'Based upon what merit will I redeem them from Egypt...'

However, while the midrash implied that Moses wondered whether the Israelites merited being redeemed from Egypt, an approach raising questions about Moses' propriety in criticizing the Israelites, Rashi integrated the miraculous component into Moses' words: 'by what merit do the Israelites deserve that a **miracle** should be performed on their behalf, and I should take them out of Egypt?'²³ In his commentary, Rashi minimizes the difficulty arising from Moses' criticism, limiting Moses' critique to the question: Did the Israelites possess a level of merit commensurate with the performance of a miracle on their behalf?

To this question the Holy One Blessed Be He replies:

²² See for the purpose of comparison the diametrically opposed interpretation of the Rashbam who explained that Moses is the subject in both parts of his response; based upon this reading, Moses continues to argue that he lacks the qualifications necessary for the job.

²³ While Zahari (1993b:24) cites a midrashic source, 'what merit do they possess, that will enable me to take them out [of Egypt]' as a parallel for Rashi's statement: 'by what merit do the Israelites deserve that a miracle should be performed on their behalf, and I should take them out of Egypt?' he does not explain the difference between them. In contrast, in HaKohen (1992, Part 1, 82, n. 12), the author writes: 'in explaining [the verse] "that I should take the Israelites out of Egypt," which is the second question, which is intended to question "By what merit do the Israelites ...", the words of Rashi and the segment found in *Exodus Rabbah* are the same.'

וַיֹּאמֶר... וְזֶה-לְךָ הָאוֹת כִּי אֶנְכִּי שְׁלַחְתִּיךָ בְּהוֹצִיאֲךָ אֶת-הָעָם
מִמִּצְרַיִם תַּעֲבֹדוּן אֶת-הָאֱלֹהִים עַל הַהָר הַזֶּה

[... And this will be the sign for you that I sent you – when you take the nation out of Egypt, you will worship G-d on this mountain (Exodus 3:12)]

Rashi commented: כי אנכי שלחתיך - וששאלת: מה זכות יש ביד ישראל שיצאו ממצרים? דבר גדול יש לי על הוצאה זו, שהרי עתידים לקבל את התורה על ההר הזה לסוף שלשה חדשים.

[That I sent you – And regarding your question: What merit does Israel possess that warranted their exodus from Egypt? This exodus comes to fulfil a great purpose of mine, for they are destined to receive the Torah on this mountain three full months after they leave Egypt.]

Rashi explained, based upon the midrash, that the miraculous salvation of the Israelite nation would be underwritten by their future. If the recipient of the miracle lacks present-day merit – as our Sages, of blessed memory, taught that the Israelites in Egypt had sunk to the forty-ninth level of spiritual impurity – their future merit can take its place. The future willingness of the Israelites to accept the Torah would make them worthy of the miracle of the exodus from Egypt.

E AN EXCEPTION

The only time Rashi describes a miraculous occurrence in a manner breaking the pattern I have described, occurs in his commentary upon the results of the war between the four kings from across the Jordan and the five kings from the Jordan plain. The Torah relates:

וַעֲמֵק הַשְּׂדִימוֹת בְּאַרְתַּחַשְׁתָּר חֲמֹר וַיִּגְסוּ מֶלֶךְ-סֹדֶם וַעֲמֹרָה וַיִּפְּלוּ-
שָׁמָּה

[Now the Valley of Siddim was [full of] pits [and more] pits of bitumen, and the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled and fell into them (Gen 14:10)]

Rashi explained: בארת בארת - הרבה היו שם, שנוטלין אדמה משם לטיט של בניין. ומדרש אגדה: שהיה הטיט בהם, ונעשה נס למלך סודם שיצא משם; לפי שהיו באומות מקצתם, שלא היו מאמינים באומרם להם שניצל אברהם באור כשדים מכבשן האש, וכיון שיצא זה מן החמר, האמינו באברהם למפרע.

[pits pits – There were many pits there, for they took earth from there to use as clay for construction. And the midrash aggadah [teaches] there was [very sticky] clay in them, and a miracle was

performed for the king of Sodom so that he could escape from there; for there were some among the nations who did not believe the tale that Abraham had been saved from the fiery furnace in Ur-Kasdim, but when he [the king of Sodom] escaped from the bitumen [pits], they retrospectively believed Abraham's story.]

Rashi's first interpretation explains that the kings fell into pits that had been emptied of their clay. The second interpretation explains that the king of Sodom fell into pits that were full of clay. Rashi explicitly notes that the source for his interpretation is the midrash aggadah. *Midrash Bereshit Rabba* (Theodor and Albeck 1965:413, 41:10, s.v. *va-yanusu melek Sedom va-Amorah*), the midrash aggadah upon this verse, states:

[and the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled ...] According to the opinion of R. Nehemiah, R. Azaryah, R. Yonatan in the name of R. Yitzhak: When Abraham, our forefather entered the fiery furnace and was saved, some among the nations believed and others did not. After the king of Sodom fell into the bitumen pits and was saved, they began to believe in Abraham's tale retrospectively.

While the midrash is satisfied with simply noting that the king of Sodom 'was saved' when he escaped from the clay, according to Rashi 'a miracle was performed for the king of Sodom so that he could escape from there'.²⁴

Unsurprisingly, we find no behaviour either by the king of Sodom himself or even by his forefathers to legitimate his being worthy of miraculous salvation.²⁵ If so, why was the king of Sodom miraculously saved, the king of a people that is described by Scriptures as: 'exceedingly wicked and sinners before the Lord' (Gen 13:13)? Rashi explains: 'but when he [the king of Sodom] escaped from the bitumen [pits], they retrospectively believed Abraham's story.' That is to say, the Holy One Blessed Be He saved the king of Sodom in a miraculous fashion in order to bolster Abraham's claim that he had experienced a miraculous salvation.²⁶

F CONCLUSION

In summation, Rashi draws attention in his commentary to the theological principle stipulating G-d's miraculous salvation upon the religious-ethical behaviour of the miracle's beneficiaries, establishing a link between how people act and how G-d saves, both regarding salvation of the individual and salvation of the collective, Israel. As I have shown, the necessary merit may be found in one

²⁴ Zahari (1993a:57) makes the following generalization: 'Rashi fashioned the materials in keeping with his spirit and his reason.'

²⁵ See HaKohen (1986 Genesis, Part 1, 141 n. 15) which noted that it is unreasonable to presume that there was a miracle.

²⁶ See, for instance, Nahmanides' critique of Rashi's interpretation.

of three places: the recipient's present-day or future merits, and the recipient's forefathers' past merits. Rashi did not introduce this principle on every occasion he discussed the term *nes* for, as a commentator, he only responded to questions that had to be raised. If a question did not need to be asked, he did not provide a gratuitous response.

Appropriately, the legend about how Rashi's father came to merit such a son teaches the very lesson that religious-moral behaviour is a precondition for receiving miracles.²⁷ The story is told that an expensive pearl came into Rashi's father's possession. Fearing that the pearl would be used for idol worship, with no regard for his own economic loss, he discarded it in the river. In return, explains the legend, he merited a son – a precious pearl – who lit up the world with his commentaries on the Bible and Talmud; meritorious religious behaviour, teaches the legend, is a precondition for receiving miracles.

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²⁷ Cited in Avineri (1980-1985, vol. 1, 20-21), and see Grossman (1995:180): 'these legends ... of course, have no real historical value in establishing his life story'.

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