

פרק א

וַיְהִי טוֹחֵן

VA-YEHI TOCHEN

Why Chazal Read Against the Peshat

וַיֹּאדָמוּהוּ כְּלָשְׁתִּים וַיִּנְקְרוּ אֶת־עֵינָיו
 וַיִּזְרְדוּ אוֹתוֹ עֲנָתָה וַיֹּאדָמוּהוּ בְּנִחְשָׁתִים
 וַיְהִי טוֹחֵן בְּבַיִת הָאֲסוּרִים

Shoftim 16:21

The pasuk in *Shoftim* 16:21 divides naturally in two. The first half tells us what the Plishtim did to Shimshon physically — וַיִּנְקְרוּ אֶת־עֵינָיו, "they put out his eyes" — and the Mishnah and Gemara in *Sotah* 10a draw their teaching from those words.¹

The second half says, וַיְהִי טוֹחֵן בְּבַיִת הָאֲסוּרִים — "and he was grinding in the prison."

Rabbi Yochanan teaches that טוֹחֵן אֶלְאָ לְשׁוֹן עֲבָרָה — "grinding," here, is not literal grinding but a euphemism for sin. He anchors the reading in a verse from *Iyov* — *titchan le-acher ishti*, "let my wife grind for another"² — and draws the inference: each of the Plishtim brought his wife to Shimshon in prison so that she would conceive a child by him, hoping to inherit his strength.

This reading is very difficult.

It places Shimshon — the *nazir mi-beten*, set apart from the womb — acting in a way that is hard to reconcile with who he was. And it raises an obvious question: why would Chazal go there at all?

The Radak, on the very same pasuk, prefers the pashut peshat: Shimshon was made to operate a millstone, as prisoners routinely were in the ancient world. He adduces a pasuk in *Shemos* — *ad bechor ha-shifcha asher achar ha-rechayim*, "to the firstborn of the maidservant who was behind the mill" — alongside a parallel — *ad bechor ha-shvi asher be-veit ha-bor*, "to the firstborn of the captive in the dungeon"³ — and reads them as a near-*gezeirah shavah*: a captive does what a maidservant does, which is grind a millstone.

The question before us is not merely what *tochen* means. It is why Chazal felt compelled to leave the pashut peshat of the Radak. What in this pasuk forced their hand?

¹ See *Sotah* 10a; *Mishnah Sotah* 1:8 on *middah k'neged middah* in the eyes.

² *Iyov* 31:10. The Gemara reads the verse as proof-text for *techinah* as euphemism for averah.

³ *Shemos* 11:5; *Shemos* 12:29.

VA-YEHI, NOT TACHAN

The Maharsha notices that the pasuk does not say *tachan oso lo li-tchon*, "they made him grind." It says *va-yehi tochen* — "and he was grinding" — language that connotes willing, with *ratzon*. Had the Plishtim simply forced Shimshon to operate a mill at sword-point, the Navi would have written it that way: a hifil, *va-yatchinuhu*, or a passive form. The active *va-yehi tochen* suggests something Shimshon was doing, not something being done to him.⁴

Tanach is precise about this distinction. There is a difference between what was made to happen and what someone did. Shimshon was a participant — and not a forced one. The pasuk's grammar already indicates that it was something other than physical labor.

WHAT IS MISSING FROM THE VERSE

The Maharal arrives at the same conclusion but from the opposite end of the verb. He notices that the pasuk doesn't tell us what Shimshon was grinding. If Shimshon were grinding wheat, the pasuk would say *va-yitchan kemach*, "he was grinding flour." The omission is conspicuous. The Maharal reads the silence as a *remez*: the verse is pointing past its surface to something it will not name.⁵

The Maharsha and the Maharal converge on the same point — something in the pasuk's grammar resists the literal reading — but they reach it from opposite ends of the verb. The Maharsha presses the form (*va-yehi*); the Maharal presses the absence of an object. Two *diyukim*, same conclusion.

SHIMSHON COULD NOT HAVE DONE IT

The Iyun Yaakov takes a third approach — not from the pasuk at all, but from fact. The Gemara records that Shimshon was *chigger bi-shtei raglav* — lame in both legs.⁶ A man crippled in both legs is not someone you assign to a millstone. The peshat reading depends on a Shimshon who can stand at the pole of a *recha'im* and walk the millstone's circle. If he physically cannot do that, the peshat collapses on its own. Chazal's reading is forced not by *drush* but by reality.

Rav Schlesinger sharpens this further. He reports a tradition that Shimshon in prison was bound — hands and feet both.⁷ A man bound hand and foot cannot grind, on any reading. Whatever *tochen* means here, it must be something a bound, blinded, lame man could still do. That narrows the field considerably.

⁴ Maharsha, *Chiddushei Aggados* on *Sotah* 10a, s.v. *va-yehi tochen*.

⁵ Maharal, *Chiddushei Aggados*, ad loc.

⁶ *Sotah* 10a, derived from *Beresheis* 49:17, *shfifon alei orach*.

⁷ Rav Yosef Shlesinger, *Iyunei Rashi, Shoftim* ad loc. [verify citation].

BE-VEIT HA-ASURIM — THE FRAMING

The Rif, in the name of the Maharash, draws a fourth diyuk from the verse's framing. The pasuk specifies where this was taking place, *be-veit ha-asurim* — but why? Many forced labors in Tanach are recorded without their venue. The specification, the Maharash teaches, is itself a remez:

לְלַמֵּד נְשֹׂתַן דְּבָרִים הָאֲסוּרִים לוֹ

— to teach that he was engaged in things forbidden to him.⁸ *Devarim ha-asurim* — that is, *bnos nechar*, the daughters of foreign nations. This is the most direct of the readings, and also the most uncomfortable. *Be-veit ha-asurim* is no longer naming a location. It is naming what was happening there.

THE KREI AND THE KSIV

The Kli Yakar extends this into a more precise form. He notes that the very word the Maharash leaned on — *ha-asirim / ha-asurim* — is itself a krei and ksiv. The text is written one way and read another. The kesiv is *ha-asirim*, "of the prisoners." The krei is *ha-asurim*, "of the forbidden things." Both are in the pasuk, simultaneously.⁹

Chazal, on this reading, are not replacing the peshat with their drush. They are reading both ideas at once. The *kesiv* gives us Shimshon literally in prison, which works with the Radak's reading. The *krei* gives us Shimshon doing what is forbidden to him — *bnos nechar*. The verse holds both.

So was Shimshon actually in prison or not? The answer is both — that is the whole point. The verse carries both readings simultaneously because both happened. The *kesiv* anchors the historical fact; the *krei* opens the second meaning that Chazal saw and the Radak resisted. A man imprisoned, and a man who fell among the *bnos nechar* he had been set apart to oppose.

⁸ Rif on *Ein Yaakov*, *Sotah* 10a, in the name of the Maharsha.

⁹ Kli Yakar, *Shoftim* 16:21.

MIDDAH K'NEGED MIDDAH

The Ein Eliyahu has a different kind of argument, drawing not on grammar but on Shimshon's hashgachah. Everything in Shimshon's life was *middah k'neged middah*. He never asked anyone for help — the Gemara notes that he never even asked Hashem for *havras makeil*, a stick to lean on after his blinding.¹⁰ He carried himself, always.

If that is the pattern, then hard physical labor in prison does not fit it. Shimshon never made anyone work for him; forced labor would not be a natural *middah k'neged middah* for someone like him. The hashgachah points elsewhere — to a punishment fitted to where he had actually stumbled:

כָּל אֶחָד הֵבִיא לוֹ אִשְׁתּוֹ • וַיִּנָּשׂוּ בְמֵה שֶׁקִּלְקַל

Each man brought him his wife, and Shimshon was punished through the very thing he had failed in.¹¹

SIX MEFORSHIM, SIX DIYUKIM

- i. *Va-yehi tochen* — the form is willing, not forced (Maharsha).
- ii. *Tochen* without an object — the verse does not tell us what was being ground (Maharal).
- iii. Shimshon was *chigger bi-shtei raglav* — physical impossibility (Iyun Yaakov, sharpened by Rav Schlesinger).
- iv. *Be-veit ha-asurim* — more than a location (Rif in the name of the Maharash).
- v. The *krei* and the *ksiv* hold both readings simultaneously (Kli Yakar).
- vi. Shimshon's *middah k'neged middah* points away from labor and toward the *kilkul* (Ein Eliyahu).

Together they resolve why Chazal read what they read. But they do not resolve the harder question the sugya raises: even granting all six diyukim, why would Shimshon have done this? The *nazir mi-beten* who stood opposite everything the Plishtim represented — why would he do something that looks, on its face, like falling to the very klipah he was sent to oppose?

That is where the next chapter begins.

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¹⁰ *Sotah* 10a; cf. Ein Eliyahu, ad loc.

¹¹ *Sotah* 10a. The phrasing *kilkel* mirrors the Gemara's earlier treatment of *va-yenakru et einav* as *middah k'neged middah* in the same sugya.