



לקוטי שיחות
PROJECT
LIKKUTEI
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Likkutei Sichos

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“If” -- Option or Obligation?

A note on the translation: Great effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the translation, while at the same time striving for readability. However, the translation carries no official authority. As in all translations, the possibility of inadvertent errors exists. Feedback is always appreciated!

1. In his commentary on the verse teaching of the obligation to extend loans, Rashi quotes the following words: “If¹ you lend money to my people.”² Rashi then goes on to quote an explanation of this verse: “Rabbi Yishmael says: ‘Every single “if” in the Torah³ implies something optional, except for three places that imply an obligation, and our verse is one of those three instances.’”

It would seem that Rashi’s intention is to clarify the seemingly odd phrasing in the verse. Why would the Torah write, “**if** you lend money”, which implies that it is a person’s choice whether to lend money or not? We know that performing acts of kindness⁴ is an obligatory *mitzvah*; therefore, the verse should have expressed this *mitzvah* as an obligation, and not as a choice. Rashi explains that in this verse, “if” does not imply something optional, as it does elsewhere; since the topic of this verse is the **obligation** to lend, the word “if” is to be understood as implying an obligation. To alleviate the difficulty of giving such an uncommon translation of this word, Rashi explains that “if” implies an obligation in three other places in the Torah: “And if you make for me an altar of stones”,⁵ “And if you bring a meal offering of the first grains...”,⁶ as well as the verse at hand.

However, we need to understand the following:

- There are many other places throughout Torah that the word “if” cannot be understood as implying something optional. Yet, in those places Rashi does not explain that they are obligatory. For example, when Hashem tells Cain, “**If** you improve, it will be forgiven you,”⁷ the intention is that **certainly** Cain will improve; it is his **obligation** to do so. The verses, “Now **if** you will listen, yes listen to my voice...”,⁸ and “**If** you walk in my statutes...”,⁹ are all clearly understood to be obligations. So why does Rashi explain that the word “if” is to be understood as an obligation only in our *parsha* (¹⁰and at the end of *parshas Yisro*)?
- Rashi explicitly writes in his commentary to our verse, “Every single “if” in the Torah implies something optional, except for **three** places,” yet Rashi **himself** explains “if” does not imply something optional but rather an obligation, in **five** places in the Torah

¹ The Hebrew word used for “if” in this verse is “*im*.” Although “if” is the conventional translation of this word, Rashi indicates that in this verse, it is to be understood as an **obligation** to extend loans -- “**when** you lend money,” rather than “**if** you lend money.”

² Shemos 22:24

³ In the original, *kol im ve'im*, which is literally translated, “every if and if.” This will be analyzed in section 9.

⁴ *Gemilus chassadim* in the original.

⁵ Shemos 22:24

⁶ Vayikra 2:14

⁷ Bereishis 4:7

⁸ Shemos 19:5

⁹ Vayikra 26:3

¹⁰ Parentheses in the original.

(in addition to the the places mentioned above)! On the verse, “If an atonement fine is levied upon him,”¹¹ Rashi comments: “The word “if” implies an obligation, **similar** to the verse, ‘If you lend money.’ It is to be understood to mean “when,”¹² and it teaches us that the Jewish court is obligated to assess a fine for damage caused by a person’s animal. Similarly, regarding the verse, “And if you bring a meal offering of the first grains...”¹³ Rashi explains, “The word “if” means “when,” because bringing this offering is not optional. So, too, the verse ‘If the children of Israel will have a Jubilee’¹⁴ implies that the Jewish people **will** have a Jubilee.

- Since Rashi’s commentary only relates to the words, “If you lend money,” why does Rashi cite the words “to my people” as part of his opening quote¹⁵ of the verse? The words “to my people” seem unrelated to his commentary.
 - There is a well known rule mentioned in previous *sichos* that in the vast majority of cases, Rashi does not mention the name of the author of the interpretation whom he cites. When (uncharacteristically) Rashi does note the name of the author of a teaching, he does so in order to further clarify our understanding of the verse. What do we learn from the fact that Rabbi Yismael is the author of this teaching?
2. In the previous *parsha*, the verse states: “And if you make for Me an altar...,”¹⁶ and there Rashi cites the teaching of Rabbi Yishmael for the **first time**.¹⁷ Rashi’s more extensive quotation there continues: “In this context, the word ‘if’ means ‘when,’... for you have an obligation to build an altar of stones, as the verse states: ‘You shall build of whole stones.’¹⁸ Similarly, the verse ‘If you lend money’ is obligatory, as the verse states: ‘And you shall lend, yes lend him’... Similarly, ‘And if you bring a meal offering of the first grains’¹⁹ -- this refers to the *omer* offering, which is obligatory.”²⁰

Rashi’s commentary above also needs clarification:

¹¹ Shemos 21:30

¹² *Asher* in the original. See the Rebbe’s note 12 in the original, which clarifies that *asher* is synonymous with *ka’asher*, “when.” This verse is to be understood to mean, “**When** an atonement fine is levied upon him... he shall pay.”

¹³ Vayikra 2:14

¹⁴ Bamidbar 36:4

¹⁵ *Dibbur hamaschil*. Rashi begins each of his comments by quoting one or more words of the verse, known as the *dibbur hamaschil*. His usual methodology is only to quote words that pose a difficulty, or otherwise relate to his explanation of the verse.

¹⁶ Shemos 20:22

¹⁷ In footnote 14 in the original, the Rebbe comments that Rashi gives a longer explanation of this teaching in his commentary on *parshas Yisro* as it is the first time Rashi quotes his teaching. In our *parsha*, Rabbi Yishmael’s teaching is quoted more briefly, as Rashi relies on his readers remembering his earlier comments.

¹⁸ Devarim 27:6

¹⁹ Vayikra 2:14

²⁰ Rashi on Shemos 20:22

- Why doesn't Rashi bring a verse to prove that the *omer* is an obligation, as he does regarding the obligations to build an altar and lend money?
 - Why did Rashi choose to prove that building a stone altar is an obligation from the verse "You shall build of whole stones,"²¹ and not from the **previous** verse, "You shall build there... an altar of stones."?²²
 - Why does Rashi note the name of the author, Rabbi Yishmael in **that place** ?
3. To explain all the above, we must understand Rabbi Yishmael's "rule" that the Torah's use of the term "if" implies something optional, except for three cases. His rule **only** applies in instances where "if" is written in a context **determined clearly to be either optional or obligatory**. In such cases, "if" can be construed to imply something optional (using the conventional meaning of the word "if"), or it can be construed to imply something obligatory, (understanding "if" to mean "when," in the three cases specified by Rabbi Yishmael).

However, there are other cases in which the word "if" appears as **part of a story**, or as a **condition**. The word "if" could also appear in the framework of an obligation, but it is clear from the context that the term "if" **does not imply an obligation**. Rabbi Yishmael never intended his rule to apply to these cases.

There are many verses in which the meaning of the word "if" is made obvious by the context: "Except **if** the bread that he eats..."²³ "**If** an animal, **if** a person..."²⁴ (verses already known to a Torah student²⁵), in which the word "if" is understood to mean "however"; "only"; or "or." These verses could **not** be misconstrued to be speaking about an **optional** or an **obligatory** context.

The same applies to the following verses (although the word "if" is used differently). Hashem tells Kayin, "**If** you improve, it will be forgiven you."²⁶ Hashem is not commanding Kayin to improve his conduct, since it is obvious that he must, and he does not have to be told to do so. Rather, this verse is a continuation of the dialogue between Hashem and Kayin, "Why has your face fallen?" Hashem informs Kayin that obtaining forgiveness for his sin is up to him: "If you improve, it will be forgiven you."

²¹ Devarim 27:6

²² Devarim 27:5

²³ Bereishit 39:6

²⁴ Shemos 19:13

²⁵ Rashi assumes the student reading his commentary is familiar with all earlier parts of the Torah. (The Principles of Rashi, Kehot Publication Society 1991 (Hebrew), 3:7 p. 82)

²⁶ Bereishit 4:7

Here, too, from the context it is clear that “if” is not meant in terms of optionality or obligation.

Similarly, the following verses do not imply obligation: “If you listen, yes listen to my voice...”²⁷; and “If you walk in my statutes...”²⁸; the intent of these verses is not to inform us of the obligation to listen to Hashem and observe his laws. These obligations were commanded **previously**, in various Torah verses. The intent of **these** verses is to predicate the reward described in the verses that follow, upon fulfilling the **conditions** set out in these verses: “If you listen...” then “you will be my treasured people”;²⁹ “If you walk in my statutes” then “I will give your rains in their time.”³⁰

In summary, when reason dictates that the intent of a verse is not to imply an obligation, such as in the above verses, the word “if” is to be understood in its plain sense, as a condition. Such verses are not governed by Rabbi Yishmael’s rule regarding “option” and “obligation.”

4. There is, however, a limitation on the Torah’s use of the word “if” as a condition. “If” can be understood as conditional only when the Torah uses the word “if” in connection with an issue whose obligatory nature is **already** known, either based on previous verses, or due to the obvious nature of the obligation in that case. But in a case where we are unfamiliar as to whether the subject is obligatory or not, it is not reasonable to say that “if” implies a condition.

Rabbi Yishmael’s three exceptions are examples of cases in which the status of something as obligatory or optional is not known to us. Although the verse “**If** you lend money to my people...” might be (erroneously) interpreted as conditional (based on the conclusion of the verse, “...you shall not charge him interest”),³¹ the fact that prior to this point, the Torah did **not** inform us that performing acts of kindness is obligatory, indicates that the word “if” in this verse is **not** to be understood as conditional. For it would not make sense for the Torah to predicate another commandment (not to charge interest) upon a prior statement (regarding extending loans), the obligatory status of which remains ambiguous.³²

That is why Rashi explains that the word “if” in this verse implies an **obligation** (as it is to be understood as saying “**when** you lend money”). This is different than “every [other]

²⁷ Shemos 19:5

²⁸ Vayikra 26:3

²⁹ Shemos 19:5

³⁰ Vayikra 26:4

³¹ Shemos 22:24

³² In other words, it doesn’t make sense for the prohibition of interest to be conditional upon lending, when we don’t know if lending is obligatory or not.

“if” in the Torah,” described in Rabbi Yishmael’s “rule” (which, as detailed above, only applies in cases where the obligatory status is unambiguous).

Similarly, it cannot be argued that the word “if” in the verse, “And **if** you make for Me an altar of stones...”³³ implies a condition, upon which the phrase which follows, “you shall not build them of hewn stones,” depends, because we don’t know at this point in the Torah if building an altar is obligatory. Likewise, the word “if” in the verse, “And **If** you bring a meal offering of the first grains”³⁴ cannot be understood as implying a condition. At the point that this verse appears in the Torah, the *mitzvah* obligating the *omer* offering has not been given. Therefore, this verse should not be understood as a condition upon which the phrase which follows, “as soon as it ripens, parched over the fire,” depends.

The word “if” in all three of these verses, the exceptions to Rabbi Yishmael’s rule, have been shown to imply an obligation, and not something optional. They are to be understood to mean “when,” rather than “if.”

5. Based on the above, we now understand why Rashi in *parshas Yisro* quotes verses that appear later in the Torah, which explicitly state that acts of kindness and the building of an altar are obligatory, yet he does not quote a verse stating that the *omer* offering is obligatory. He quotes these verses regarding acts of kindness and building an altar to emphasize that Torah will **later** instruct us that these are obligatory, and to inform us that the Torah had **not** indicated that these commandments are obligatory **prior** to the verses that appear in our *parsha*. Rashi’s reason for quoting these verses is to caution us against interpreting the word “if” in these verses as implying something conditional, based on the above reasoning.³⁵ (His purpose for quoting these verses is **not to prove** that these commandments are obligatory.)³⁶

The reason Rashi informs us that prior to our *parsha* the Torah had not yet indicated that acts of kindness and building an altar are obligatory, is because we would have mistakenly thought that these commandments were already known to be obligatory, based on verses in *Sefer Bereishis*. Regarding Avraham, the Torah writes **earlier**: “For I have known him because he commands his sons and his household after him... to perform **tzedaka**³⁷ and justice....”³⁸ Regarding Ya’akov, the Torah writes **earlier**: “he took the **stone**... and he set it up as a monument.”³⁹ Rashi therefore had to inform us

³³ Shemos 20:22

³⁴ Vayikra 2:14

³⁵ In section 4.

³⁶ Parentheses in the original.

³⁷ = acts of kindness.

³⁸ Bereishis 18:19

³⁹ Bereishis 28:18; The “monument” here is understood to be an altar.

that the commandments establishing acts of kindness and the building of an altar as obligatory, only appear later in the Torah. Rashi does not need to quote a verse indicating the obligatory nature of the *omer* sacrifice, because there is no earlier verse referring to the *omer* sacrifice.

6. Based on the above approach⁴⁰ that Rabbi Yishmael's "rule" is limited to a context determined clearly to be either optional or obligatory, it is understood that word "if" does not imply an obligation in the verse "If the children of Israel will have a Jubilee."⁴¹ The Jubilee year (when it was in force) came about automatically, and was not dependent upon human choice or action. It is clear, then, that the word "if" in the verse does not imply obligation or optionality.

From the perspective of human involvement, the word "if" in the context of the Jubilee is much different than in the context of the three exceptions to Rabbi Yishmael's "rule."⁴² Nonetheless, the definition of the word "if" is similar in all four verses. "If the children of Israel will have a Jubilee" is to be understood to mean, "**when** the children of Israel will have a Jubilee."⁴³ All four verses refer to a certainty, not to a case of doubt. (The difference between them is that in the three exceptions of Rabbi Yishmael, the word "if" implies an obligation, and in the verse about the Jubilee, the word "if" refers to an occurrence that will certainly take place, albeit automatically.)⁴⁴

Therefore, when Rashi explains the **usage** of the word "if" in the verse, "And if you bring a meal offering of the first grains,"⁴⁵ and Rashi explains, "The word "if" means "when," he brings an example of the verse, "If the children of Israel will have a Jubilee"⁴⁶ because the word "if" also **means** "when" in that verse. (Clearly, Rashi's intent is *not* to compare these verses in terms of *obligation*, because the Jubilee occurs automatically.)

As well, in the verse, "If an atonement fine is levied upon him,"⁴⁷ the word "if" is not included under Rabbi Yishmael's "rule", even though "His **sentence** is that the court levy an atonement fine upon him,"⁴⁸ the term "obligation" does not apply in this case. The term "obligation" is applied only to commonplace, routine situations, in which a person is **obligated** to do something specific. In our case, an atonement fine only comes about by **happenstance**, (an uncommon event, which runs **contrary** to the

⁴⁰ In section 3.

⁴¹ Bamidbar 36:4

⁴² The arrival of the Jubilee year **does not** involve human action; extending a loan, building an altar and offering the *omer* sacrifice **do** involve human action.

⁴³ Similar to "when you lend money"; "when you make an altar"; and "when you offer the *omer*."

⁴⁴ Parentheses in the original.

⁴⁵ Vayikra 2:14

⁴⁶ Bamidbar 36:4

⁴⁷ Shemos 21:30

⁴⁸ Rashi on Shemos 21:30

natural order of the world). When a person's ox gores and kills a person, the owner is tried by the court, which then pronounces his sentence. We would not say that the sentence is an **obligation** on the court. Since there is not not in the realm of an obligation, it does not fall under the "rule" of Rabbi Yishmael.

Still, the meaning of the word "if" in the law of the atonement fine is similar in its meaning in Rabbi Yishmael's "rule." In both cases, the word "if" implies the need for certainty that a particular event has taken place. (A fine is imposed only **after** the court has ascertained that the person's ox killed someone; and the prohibition of interest only applies **after** a loan has been given). That is why in explaining the use of "if" in this case, Rashi compares it to the case of lending money, teaching: "This "if" is not meant as conditional; but **it is like** its use in the verse, "If you lend money."

7. An explanation is still needed as to why Rashi cites the words "to my people" as part of his opening quote on the verse requiring a person to lend money. The words "to my people" seem unrelated to his commentary. Even though the Torah obligates us to perform acts of kindness, it would still be possible for a person to erroneously interpret "if you lend money" as implying something optional, if this verse also applied to lending money to gentiles. One might have thought that the verse uses the word "if" in order to imply an option; because gentiles are included in this law, it is different than other acts of kindness, which are obligatory.

In order to disabuse readers of that impression, Rashi cites the words "to my people," clearly refuting the above misinterpretation. As Rashi clearly teaches, "This is the meaning of this verse: 'When you lend money,' lend it to 'My people,' and not to a gentile." Rashi cites the words "to my people" as proof that this verse refers only to loans to Jews,⁴⁹ and we are thus compelled to conclude that the word "if" implies an obligation, and not an option.

After all that has been said, there is yet another reason (to be discussed below)⁵⁰ for interpreting the word "if" as implying that lending is optional, and not obligatory. Rashi negates that reason by citing the author of his interpretation: "**Rabbi Yishmael** says..." Rashi cites him by name to hint to us that it is impossible for this verse to imply that lending money is optional, as such an interpretation would run contrary to **Rabbi Yishmael's** position, as will be explained below.

⁴⁹ In footnote 28 in the original, the Rebbe notes that earlier in his commentary, Rashi teaches that *precedence* is given to a Jew, seemingly indicating that loans *are* to be extended to gentiles. See the footnote for a detailed analysis.

⁵⁰ In the next section. Parentheses in the original

8. The *parsha* of the manna⁵¹ (which a student, studying the Torah sequentially, has already learned), helps shed light on this issue. There, we read of Moshe commanding the Jewish people to store the manna: “Let one *omer* of it be preserved for your generations.” Rashi comments on the words “for your generations”: “In the days of Jeremiah, when Jeremiah rebuked them, saying ‘Why do you not engage in the Torah?’ They would say, ‘Shall we leave our work and engage in the Torah? From what will we support ourselves?’ He brought out to them the jug of manna. He said to them, ... ‘With this, your ancestors supported themselves. Hashem has many agents to prepare food for those who fear Him.’”⁵²

Rashi’s explanation ostensibly demonstrates that Jewish people should not work for a living; they should be involved in Torah study full-time, and Hashem will provide them with sustenance, **similar to the manna**. It is self-understood that when a person conducts himself according to the dictates of the Torah, with complete and true devotion to the Torah and its commandments, Hashem will provide him with all of his needs in a manner similar to the Jewish people when they ate the manna, and he will not need to rely on charity and human kindness. However, if his needs are not fulfilled completely by Hashem and he needs to borrow money to sustain himself, his hardship indicates that his conduct does not meet **the Torah’s expectations**. (Rather, he involved himself in worldly matters, and he worked at making a living through natural means.)

This way of thinking implies that lending money is **not** an obligation, because a person who adheres to the Torah’s commandments and directives will not need to borrow money, and our verse about loans is not relevant to him. Consequently, the verse is only relevant to a recipient whose behavior does not accord with the Torah’s commandments. This leads to the following conclusions:

- It is unusual for a Jewish person to live a life that runs contrary to the dictates of the Torah. It is highly unusual for the Torah to enact an obligation that only applies in exceptional or uncommon circumstances.
- Since a person needs a loan precisely because he sinned and caused a blemish,⁵³ it would stand to reason that extending a loan to him should not be an obligation; it should be optional.

Why, then, does Rashi say that the verse. “If you lend money...” implies an obligation, while in all other instances in the Torah (except for two) where the word “if” appears, the word implies optionality?

⁵¹ Shemos 16:32

⁵² Rashi on Shemos 16:32

⁵³ A person’s sin in this world can even cause a blemish in the supernal worlds. See Tanya ch. 29.

To dispel this flawed line of thinking, Rashi cites Rabbi Yishmael by name. A sharp student might recall the following dispute between Rabbi Yishmael and Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, in tractate Berachos: “You shall gather your grain.”⁵⁴ Why did the Torah have to say this? For since it is stated: ‘This book of the Torah shall not depart from your mouth,’⁵⁵ it would be possible to think that the words of the Torah here are meant literally as they are written (i.e. one must study Torah day and night and thereby be precluded from earning a living). The Torah therefore states: ‘You shall gather your grain,’ to teach us that we must conduct our lives in the way of the world (i.e. Torah study should be combined with earning a living), these are the words of Rabbi Yishmael. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai says, Can it be as you say? If a man ploughs at the time of ploughing, and sows at the time of sowing, and harvests at the time of harvesting, and threshes at the time of threshing, and winnows when it is windy, what will become of the study of Torah? Rather, when the Jewish people fulfill Hashem’s will, their work will be done for them by others, ... but when the Jewish people do not fulfill Hashem’s will, they must do their work themselves, as the verse says, ‘You shall gather your grain.’”

Based on this Talmudic passage, Rabbi Yishmael’s opinion is that a person must be involved in worldly matters in order to make a living. In his own words, “We must conduct our lives in the way of the world.” Rabbi Yishmael assures us that if he conducts his business affairs properly, taking care not to violate any Torah prohibitions, and setting aside time for Torah study, then Hashem will provide a person’s necessities without him having to take loans. Still, since a person **must** expend effort in earning a living through natural means, he could easily fail to properly evaluate how much effort to expend (either qualitatively or quantitatively). As a result of this failure, he may find himself in need of a loan. It is obvious that under these circumstances, in which it is difficult to properly evaluate how much effort to expend earning a livelihood, there is an **obligation** to lend.

9. One may venture to say that Rabbi Yishmael’s explanation (that “if” may imply an obligation) only applies in instances when the word “if” is used alone, without being preceded by the conjunction “and.” But when the word “and-if”⁵⁶ appears in the Torah, it would seem to indicate doing something differently than the way it was done earlier (such as, “**and-if** you do it differently, the law is...”). This word appears to indicate an optional change in a person’s actions. Therefore, it would seem impossible to interpret the word and-if as implying an obligation.

⁵⁴ Devarim 11:14

⁵⁵ Yehoshua 1:8

⁵⁶ In Hebrew “and-if” is written as a single word, *ve'im*.

Yet the fact that the majority (two-thirds) of the exceptions to Rabbi Yishmael's rule contain the word and-if -- "And if you make for me an altar of stones";⁵⁷ "And if you bring a meal offering of the first grains..."⁵⁸ -- indicates that the word "and-if" *could* imply an obligation. (However, Rabbi Yishmael's "rule" applies a **novel** interpretation, which precludes all three cases from being obligatory).⁵⁹ In order to indicate that "and-if" is included in Rabbi Yishmael's rule, Rashi is very precise in his choice of words. Rashi writes, "Every if and-if..."⁶⁰ (which doesn't mean simply "every single case of if," but rather, "every case of 'if' and 'and-if'").⁶¹ Rashi's intention in his precise choice of words is to stress that Rabbi Yishmael's rule applies whether the Torah uses the word "if," or the word "an-if," (and secondarily to teach us that both "if" and "and-if" imply something optional, with three exceptions).⁶²

Following his methodology, Rashi is forced to say as follows, in analyzing the verses concerning the construction of the altar:

The verse, "An altar of earth you shall make for Me,"⁶³ (which precedes the verse "And if you make for me an altar of stones..."),⁶⁴ refers to the altar that the Jewish people constructed in the desert. Rashi brings two interpretations on this verse: "Attached to the ground, meaning that the altar should not be built on pillars. Alternatively, 'an altar of earth' means that the hollow of the altar would be filled with earth when they camped."

According to the second interpretation, one could ostensibly interpret the verse, "And if you make for me an altar of stones" as an extension of the previous verse, and implying something optional. The verse would then intend to teach that if a person filled the **desert** altar with stones (and not earth), "he should not build them of hewn stones..."⁶⁵ But according to the first interpretation, the second verse could not be interpreted as an extension of the first verse, because they are describing two unrelated issues: "If you make for me an altar of stones..." relates to the materials from which the altar itself is to be constructed, and "an altar of earth" relates to the **method of construction** of the altar. Since this is the first (and therefore, main) explanation, Rashi must⁶⁶ interpret the words, "If you make for me an altar of stones..." as an obligation, and as a second,

⁵⁷ Shemos 22:24

⁵⁸ Vayikra 2:14

⁵⁹ Parentheses in the original.

⁶⁰ In our translation at the beginning of section 1, we translated "Every single if," for ease of comprehension, however, in the original idiomatic Hebrew, it appears as "*kol im ve'im*," which is literally translated "every if and-if."

⁶¹ Parentheses in the original. The Rebbe illustrates this further in these parentheses, see the original Hebrew.

⁶² Parentheses in the original.

⁶³ Shemos 20:21

⁶⁴ The verse continues, "you shall not build them of hewn stones..."

⁶⁵ Shemos 20:22

⁶⁶ According to Rashi's methodology, the first explanation he brings is primary, and he must interpret the verse on the basis of that explanation.

distinct commandment to build an altar after crossing the Jordan River. This verse does not refer to the altar built in the desert.

This serves as an additional reason for Rashi to cite Rabbi Yishmael by name in his commentary on *Parshas Yisro*. Rabbi Yishmael interprets the verse, “An altar of earth you shall make for Me” to mean that it should not be built on pillars.⁶⁷ As explained above, according to this interpretation, the second verse does not extend the first, as they are describing two unrelated issues, and the word “if” in the second verse, “And if you make for me an altar of stones...” implies an obligation. That second verse presents a second, distinct commandment to build an altar after crossing the Jordan River. This verse does **not** refer to the altar built in the desert. By quoting Rabbi Yishmael by name, Rashi clearly indicates that the word “if” in the second verse does not imply option; it implies an obligation.

10. A weak argument could still be made that in spite of the **obligation** to build a stone altar, the *verse*, “And if you make for me an altar of stones...” implies something **optional**. If the definition of “stone” can (in some instances)⁶⁸ include brick, then the verse requiring the altar to be built of stone (elsewhere in the Torah)⁶⁹ that obligates the Jewish people to build an altar of stone does not preclude them building a brick altar. That is, they have the **option** to build a stone altar, or a brick altar. The word “if” in the above verse could then be interpreted according to its plain meaning, implying something optional: “And if you make an altar of stones (and not of bricks), you may make it that way, but don’t make it of hewn stones.” (For the term “hewn” only applies to an altar made of actual stones, and not bricks.)⁷⁰

That is why Rashi⁷¹ proves that it is obligatory to build an altar of stones from the verse, ‘You shall build of whole stones,’⁷² (and not from the previous verse, “And there you shall build... an altar of stones.”) The simple understanding of the term “whole stones” is an actual stone that is not man-made. It is naturally whole, and was in the same form from the time of its creation. This indicates that according to the plain meaning of the Torah’s text, there is an **obligation** to make an altar from actual stones. Therefore, the verse, “And if you make for me an altar of stones...” must imply an **obligation**, and not something optional.

⁶⁷ Rabbi Yismael is the author of this teaching, found in the Mechilsa on this verse.

⁶⁸ Parentheses in the original.

⁶⁹ Parentheses in the original.

⁷⁰ Parentheses in the original.

⁷¹ Rashi on Shemos 20:22

⁷² Devarim 27:6

11. There is an additional reason why Rashi cites Rabbi Yishmael by name. We find a dispute between Rabbi Yishmael and Rabbi Akiva in the Talmud,⁷³ where they discuss whether certain ambiguous passages in the Torah imply an obligation or a choice. Rabbi Yishmael is of the opinion that each of these passages implies a choice, and Rabbi Akiva is of the opinion that each of these passages implies an obligation.

Rabbi Yishmael's position in the Talmud is in line with his position as quoted in Rashi, "Rabbi Yishmael says: 'Every single "if" in the Torah⁷⁴ implies something optional....'" Rabbi Yishmael stresses that **every** instance of the word "if" implies an option (even if there is room to interpret them as implying an obligation).⁷⁵ On the other hand, there are clear proofs for each of the three exceptions cited by Rabbi Yishmael that **force** him to explain that they imply obligations.

This serves as an additional reason for Rashi citing Rabbi Yishmael by name. Rashi alludes to us that interpreting these three exceptions as an obligation is an absolute necessity, for even Rabbi Yishmael who always interprets ambiguous verses to imply something optional, is of the opinion that these three imply an obligation.

12. From the "wine of Torah"⁷⁶ in Rashi's commentary: The dispute between Rabbi Yishmael and Rabbi Akiva whether certain ambiguous passages in the Torah imply an obligation or a choice is consistent with the distinct mode of each sage, in serving Hashem.

Rabbi Yishmael was the High Priest.⁷⁷ The legacy bequeathed to the High Priest from birth, (in his very nature),⁷⁸ is to be "holy to his G-d."⁷⁹ His mode of service is that of the *tzaddikim*.⁸⁰ Rabbi Akiva was a descendant of converts, and only started to study Torah at the age of forty. He served Hashem via the pathway of *teshuva*.⁸¹

These two modes of divine service can be seen in the analysis by the Maggid of Mezritch of a midrashic teaching. The Sifra teaches: "A person should not say, 'It is impossible for me to eat pork...' (because it disgusts him) ... rather, a person should say, 'I really could eat it, but what can I do? My Father in heaven decreed that it is forbidden.'"⁸² The Maggid of Mezritch explains that this teaching of the Sifra applies to

⁷³ Sota 3a

⁷⁴ In the original, *kol im ve'im*, which is literally translated, "every if and if." This will be analyzed in section 9.

⁷⁵ Parentheses in the original.

⁷⁶ i.e the teachings of *Chassidus*.

⁷⁷ *Kohen (Gadol)* in the original. See footnote 45 in the original for sources regarding Rabbi Yishmael's position.

⁷⁸ Parentheses in the original.

⁷⁹ Vayikra 21:7

⁸⁰ = The righteous.

⁸¹ = Repentance.

⁸² Sifra, end of *Parshas Kedoshim*

someone who has never sinned before. However a *ba'al teshuva*,⁸³ who is prone to return to his previous way of living,⁸⁴ must say, "it is **impossible...**"

The same applies regarding the optional and the obligatory. The *tzaddik*, who by nature is repulsed by anything antithetical to holiness, is able to serve Hashem in the realm of holiness, and he had no obligation to involve himself in mundane, earthy matters. Yet he does have the **option** to work with those **ambiguous** areas, areas where he as a *tzaddik* has no obligation, in order to refine them. (Being a *tzaddik* though, he will likely involve himself in areas that for him are only optional.)⁸⁵ In contradistinction, the *ba'al teshuva*, who must be extremely alert and cautious not to fall back into old habits, must treat areas of **ambiguity** as **obligations**. If his habit was to study one page, he is now **obligated** to study two pages.⁸⁶

Therefore, when the status of a directive in Torah is ambiguous, Rabbi Yishmael instructs us to treat it as optional, as his method of divine service is that of the *tzaddikim*. In contrast, Rabbi Akiva instructs us to treat it as obligatory, as his method of divine service follows the approach of the *ba'al teshuva*.

13. This provides a clear response to those who question the revelation of the teachings of *chassidus* in our generation. They ask, "Is this generation worthy?" The response is that generation is most worthy! Specifically in our era, as a result of the redoubled darkness in our times, greater strength and fortitude is needed to stand up against any obstacle.

Through our efforts to spread the wellsprings of the teachings of *chassidus* outwards, the master, king *Moshiach* will arrive soon indeed!

-From *sichos* delivered Shabbos Parshas Mishpatim 5767 & 5769 (1967 & 1969)

⁸³ = A penitent, a person who has returned to Jewish observance, or is in the process of increasing his level of observance. Literally, a "master of return," in that he is returning, or trying to get closer, to Hashem.

⁸⁴ *Suro ra* in the original. He has developed bad habits before he became a *ba'al teshuva*, and is more easily tempted to sin.

⁸⁵ Parentheses in the original. In the original, the Rebbe adds that there is a logic to an argument that the *tzaddik* should be obligated to be involved with the mundane, and directs us in footnote 52 to the Talmud's discussion of the optional war, Sotah 42b.

⁸⁶ 4th section of Tanya, Iggeres haTeshuva, end of ch. 9.