

Is There a Connection between Fear and Hair Standing Up? Understanding Rashi to Deut. 32:17

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In *Ha'azinu*, verse 32:17 begins: “They sacrifice to demons,¹ no-gods, gods that they knew not, new gods that came up of late.” The verse continues: *lo se'arum* (שְׁעָרוֹם) *avoteikhem*.

I was fascinated by Rashi's first explanation of those last three words. He suggests that the meaning is that their ancestors' hair did not stand up out of fear of them, as *derekh se'arot ha-adam la'amod mahmat yirah*. Rashi's source for this interpretation was *Sifrei* Deut. 318.²

I doubted that this was a plain-sense interpretation. Getting older (and still having much of my hair), I decided to investigate this issue. The first step in my analysis was to survey the root שְׁעָר in the Bible.

Of course, a main meaning of the root שְׁעָר is hair. Also, a goat is called a שְׁעִיר because of its unusual amount of hair. (The name of the animal literally means: “the hairy one.”)

Then there is the word שְׁעֵרָה for “barley.” Most likely, it is called this due to its hairy appearance as it grows in the fields.³

¹ The Hebrew word used here is *sheidim*.

² Rashi offers a second interpretation as well: their ancestors did not deify them. Here he is relying on the “demon” meaning of שְׁעָר.

³ See, e.g., Brown-Drive-Briggs (1906), p. 972, E. Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language for Readers of English* (1987), p. 672, and L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, *The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (1995, revised edition), pp. 1345–46. See also the sketch in *Da'at Mikra* to Ex. 9:31.

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Also, four times in *Tanakh* we have שַׁעִיר in the singular or plural where the context supports—or perhaps supports—a “demon” meaning. The best example of the “demon” meaning is Leviticus 17:7: “They shall no more sacrifice their sacrifices to *se’irim* after whom they go astray...” The other three verses where our word perhaps means “demon” are Isaiah 13:21 and 34:14, and 2 Chronicles 11:15.

A widespread (but not unanimous) view is that if a “demon” is intended in these verses, it is a demon in the shape of a goat.⁴

The root שַׁעַר also has a meaning like “be whirled away.”⁵ This meaning is usually viewed as related to the root סַעַר, with its “storm” meaning. Also, at Isaiah 28:2 and Nahum 1:3, we have שַׁעַר with a meaning like “storm.”⁶ In addition, at Deut. 32:2, we have שַׁעִירִים as a type of rain.⁷

Finally, relating to our original question, the root שַׁעַר has a meaning related to “fear” in a few verses. Let us review these verses.

At both Ezekiel 27:35 and 32:10, there is a double use of שַׁעַר. The first verse has וּמַלְכֵיהֶם שָׁעְרוּ שַׁעַר. The second verse has וּמַלְכֵיהֶם יִשְׁעְרוּ שַׁעַר. The context in both verses is that kings are or will be terrified.⁸ The Jewish Publication Society of America translation of 1917

⁴ See, e.g., Brown-Driver-Briggs, p. 972, *HALOT*, p. 1341, Klein, p. 672, and Radak, *Sefer Ha-Shorashim*.

According to Rabbi Dr. Hertz, *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs*, 2nd Edition (1975), p. 486, “worship of the goat, accompanied by the foulest rites” was widespread in Lower Egypt (=northern Egypt).

At Isa. 34:14, שַׁעִיר with its possible “demon” meaning is in the same verse as לִילִית. This is the only reference to Lilit in *Tanakh*. For more on this demon in extra-Biblical sources and later midrashic sources, see *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (1972) 11:245.

⁵ See, e.g., Ps. 50:3 and 58:10, and Job 27:21. See also Dan. 11:40.

⁶ See also perhaps Job 9:17. Most likely, *sin* was the original first letter in this meaning of the root. See *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 10 (2000), pp. 291–92. Based on this, some want to connect this “storm” meaning with the “fear, shudder” meaning. See, e.g., Klein, p. 673, and *TDOT*, *ibid*.

⁷ It falls on *desheb*. The phrase is parallel to *revivim* in the same verse, which falls on *eisev*. *Revivim* appears a few times in *Tanakh* and can be translated as “copious showers,” from the root רָבַב, abundant. Most likely, *se’irim* should be translated as parallel to *revivim*, with a meaning like “heavy rains,” related to the root סַעַר. Other interesting suggestions: 1) light rain, see, e.g., Ibn Ezra (and the explanation in n. 14 in the *Torat Hayyim*: thin, like hair), 2) heavy rain supposedly produced by demons/deities, see, e.g., S. D. Luzzatto (citing I. S. Reggio), and 3) rain clouds that look like goats, see Klein, p. 672.

⁸ עַלְיָךְ in the second verse probably means “because of you.”

translates the phrase in both verses as “horribly afraid.”⁹ Probably, the translation uses the word “horribly” because of the double use of שָׁעַר. Most of the rabbinic commentaries on both verses and the *Da’at Mikra* translate the expression as if the meaning is related to סָעַר (storm, tempest). But several standard scholarly works, namely the Brown-Driver-Briggs lexicon (1906) and *The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (1995), translate both phrases as if the meaning is something like “hair bristled with terror.”¹⁰ According to *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language: The Unabridged Edition* (1983), “bristle” means “to stand or rise stiffly like bristles.”

We have two more fear-related שָׁעַר meanings in *Tanakh*. At Job 18:20, we have *aphazu sa’ar* (=stricken with panic). At Jeremiah 2:12, we have: “The heavens should be astonished at this,¹¹ *ve-sa’aru*, be exceedingly dried up...” i.e., the heavens should lose their moisture due to their horror at this.¹²

The two scholarly lexicons that I mentioned above do not postulate a separate “fear” meaning for שָׁעַר. **They subsume this meaning within the “hair” meaning**¹³; i.e., they view the root as fundamentally meaning “hair” and that this meaning expanded to “hair bristling, fear.”

Most significantly, in a different verse, Job 4:15, where the context is fear (see Job 4:14), and שָׁעַר means “hair,” we have *tesamer sa’arat besari*. The root סָמַר means “stand up.”¹⁴ The entire phrase means: “The hair of my flesh stood up.”

Going back to our verse at Deuteronomy 32:17, Rashi’s first explanation is a plain-sense one in that “rising hair” and “fear” are well connected in *Tanakh*.¹⁵

But is “rising hair” actually the best understanding of שָׁעַרוֹם in this particular verse? It turns out that many scholars today take a different

⁹ The King James Bible had “sore afraid” in the first verse and “horribly afraide” in the second.

¹⁰ E.g., Brown-Driver-Briggs, p. 972, and *HALOT*, pp. 1343–44.

¹¹ In all four of the verses where שָׁעַר has a meaning related to fear, it is parallel to a verb from the root שָׁמַם.

¹² The reference is to a nation changing its God to one that is not effective.

¹³ Brown-Driver-Briggs, p. 972, and *HALOT*, pp. 1343–44.

¹⁴ As to this meaning for סָמַר, see also Ps. 119:120, and see *Da’at Mikra* to both verses. A מַסְמַר in *Tanakh* is a nail.

¹⁵ It is worth mentioning that Rashi does not give the שָׁעַר phrase a hair-related meaning at either Ezek. 27:35 or 32:10. He does not comment on the phrase in either verse.

approach to that verse than that of Rashi. שֶׁעָרָוּם in our verse is parallel to יָדְעוּם. In the Semitic language of South Arabic, a language that existed in the Biblical period,¹⁶ there is a root that is the equivalent of the Hebrew *shin-ayin-resb* that has the meaning “to know.” This root passed on to classical Arabic with this meaning.¹⁷ This root with its initial *shin* letter is not that different from our *sin-ayin-resb* root. Because of the parallel to יָדְעוּם, many modern scholars prefer this approach based on South Arabic, and give שֶׁעָרָוּם the “know” meaning here.¹⁸ The “know” meaning is also a better fit grammatically in our sentence. “They did not hair them” is too awkward a reading.

Conclusion

We have seen that what we initially thought was a strange interpretation by Rashi has much basis to it. The connection between “fear” and “rising hair” is well-reflected in the language of *Tanakh*. Nevertheless, many modern scholars prefer a different interpretation based on South Arabic. This interpretation fits the verse better. ❧

¹⁶ This language is known from inscriptions from the southwest corner of the Arabian Peninsula. Due to the availability of carbon dating, these inscriptions are earlier than had been thought a few decades ago, See D. Vainstub, “Incense from Sheba for the Jerusalem Temple,” *Jerusalem Journal of Archaeology* 4: 42–68 (2023), 45–46. As stated there, most of these inscriptions date perhaps to the eighth century BCE, but even the eleventh century BCE is a possibility.

¹⁷ Our sources for classical Arabic begin in the seventh century.

¹⁸ See, e.g., Brown-Driver-Briggs, p. 973, *HALOT*, p. 1344 and Klein, p. 673. This is also how the word is translated in the Septuagint, which was probably only a guess based on the parallel to יָדְעוּם.

The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy (1996) has, as its official translation: “Who stirred not your fathers’ fears.” Its commentary, however, mentions Arabic *sha’ara*, with its meaning “know, be cognizant,” as a possible alternative.