

## Rashi on Toledot

### Tackling Educational Obstacles

**[25:20] Yitzhak was forty years old when he married Rivka.** *Rashi: When Avraham came from Mount Moriah he was told that Rivka was born. Yitzhak was then 37 years old, since Sarah died at that time... she was 90 when he was born and a 127 when she died. Yitzhak waited until she was 3 so he could consummate marriage and then married her.*

Rashi's commentary is based on Seder Olam, a Midrashic work whose goal was to fill gaps in the biblical narrative, particularly the chronology. It uses few available details to arrive at a conclusion, which in this case is shocking and unnecessary. The conclusion rests on the assumption that the Akedah, Rivka's birth, and Sarah's death all occurred simultaneously, since they are written next to each other. Following that logic, the story which preceded the Akedah, of Avraham's pact with Abimelech (21:22-34), also took place at the same time. One more step back will take us to the expulsion of Hagar, and if that also happened at the same time, we have a serious problem, because it came immediately after Avraham celebrated Yitzhak being weaned. The clear and logical explanation is that the Torah only highlights the important events, and unless there is a date or age, there is no way to determine the exact time of the event.

The impossibility of the Midrashic statement has been expressed by Ibn Ezra (Gen. 25:5)<sup>1</sup>:

*The sages said that Yitzhak was 37 years old. If they had a tradition, we will accept it, but it does not make sense, because if so, Yitzhak should be praised and rewarded for his devotion. The Torah says nothing of Yitzhak's age. Some say he was five years old, but this also is illogical because he carried the firewood. The most reasonable is to assume that he was around 13 years old, and his father forced and bound him against his will.*

If Rivka indeed was born around the time of the Akedah, she would have been 24 at the time of her marriage.

Rashi's commentary is also directly refuted by the Daat Zeqenim commentary, written by Rashi's disciples. The rejection of Rashi's commentary is based on a different Midrashic statement, and the conclusion of Daat Zeqenim is that Rivka was 14 years old at the time of her marriage.

To conclude, there is no indication in the Torah of Rivka's age in any of the important events of her life, and it would be safe to assume that she was in her early twenties when Yitzhak married her.

**[25:22] Yitzhak prayed to God for [also: in front of] his wife... and God answered his prayer...** *Rashi: He stood in one corner and prayed, and she stood in another corner and prayed. God answered him and not her, since he was righteous and his father was righteous, while Rivka was righteous but her father was not.*

This commentary seems to draw a beautiful image of a couple engaged in common prayer, but it makes them detached from each other, and eventually pits them against each other. The Midrashic statement that God prefers the prayer of a second generation Tzaddik over that of one whose father was a pagan was directed at Hellenist Jews, and tried to convince them to adhere to their parents' tradition. In addition, when the prayer is answered, both Rivka and Yitzhak are blessed with a child, and not only Yitzhak. Is the Midrash suggesting that maybe Rivka prayed for years but was never answered until Yitzhak joined in prayer? That idea of the way God hears our prayers is hard to accept, and I believe it should not be taught to our children.

The message the Torah conveys in describing Yitzhak's prayer is that he loved Rivka and cared deeply for her. He does not pray for himself but for her, as opposed to his father who complained to God that he does not have children, without mentioning his wife (Gen. 15:2-3). Not only that, after Ishmael is born, Avraham is willing to waive the promise that Sarah will have a child, and tells God that he is satisfied with Ishmael, to which God responds, as if being surprised: "But, Sarah, your wife, will bear you a child!" (Gen. 17:17-19).

**[25:22] The children struggled within her, and she said, "if this is so, why am I alive?" so she went to seek God's word.** *Rashi: When she would pass by the study halls of Shem and Ever,*

*Yaakov would struggle to get out, and when she would pass by pagan temples, Esau would struggle to get out... she said, why do I pray and desire to be pregnant?*

This commentary is part of a broader worldview of the Midrash in which Esau is the archenemy of Yaakov. Accordingly, he is described later in Rashi's commentary as a trickster (25:27), a robber (27:5), one who does not mention God's name (25:21), a murderer (25:29), and a hypocrite (33:4). The reason for the perception of Esau by the Midrash as the personification of evil, is that after the Roman takeover of Israel, he became identified with Rome. Associating Esau with Rome was not based on historical evidence or geographic proximity, since Esau's descendants, the Edomites, were residents of the Cisjordan and genetically close to the Israelites. It was rather based on a prosaic and external detail, the red color which featured prominently in the royal garb and military regalia of the Romans. The identification of "Red" Esau with Rome, and consequently, with Christianity, led to the vilification of Yaakov's twin in Midrashic literature.

The second part of the commentary, in which Rivka questions her desire to have a child, is challenged by several commentators. Nahmanides simply says ואיננו נכון – it is incorrect. R. Ovadia Sforno explains that she knew she had twins but was afraid that she would lose one of them, which would have put her life at risk. R. Haim ben Attar says that one cannot agree with Rashi – אין הדעת מסכמת עליו. He explains that she was concerned that she will lose both fetuses, and was therefore satisfied with the answer which guaranteed a healthy delivery.

**[25:26] After that his brother emerged holding unto Esau's sole.** *Rashi: I have heard a Midrash which explains this according to the Peshat. Yaakov's claim for the right of the firstborn was justified, since Yaakov was created from the first drop and Esau from the second. This is analogous to a narrow tube, in which you put two stones. The one which came in first will come out last. Yaakov, who was created first, was trying to emerge first and become the firstborn as he was entitled to.*

This commentary presents us with important insights:

- Rashi's distinction between Midrash and Peshat is different than ours.
- Rashi, like the Sages before him, relies on the "scientific" knowledge of the Greeks.
- The Midrash doesn't bother to research the full implication of its statements.

In addition to these general insights, the obvious agenda of the Midrash and Rashi is to clear Yaakov, and Rivka, from any accusations of mischief, deception, and wrongdoing in taking the blessing from Esau. That agenda is contradictory to the rest of the narrative of Beresheet and the high price Yaakov had to pay for his actions. Now let us return to the insights.

- When Rashi says that the Midrash explains the text according to the Peshat, he does not use the word Peshat in the sense of literal meaning, as is common today, but rather as an interpretation which fits the context of the narrative.
- The description of fetuses as stones deposited in a narrow tube follows Greek embryology. The Greeks believed that the male sperm contains tiny humans, and that the mother's womb is no more than a vessel for them to grow in. This reliance on outdated science does not harmfully impact our understanding of this particular story, but it has serious and even life-endangering implications when applied to Halakha.
- Finally, when saying that Yaakov was rightfully the firstborn, the Midrash not only validates his deceitful actions, but also gives license to any second twin to claim that he is the firstborn, and maybe even encourage them to deceive their twins. This probably was not the intention of the Midrash, but it could have happened.

When reading Midrash, or Rashi's commentary which is 85% Midrash, we must be careful not to accept things as they are written, we should conduct research, and not hesitate to reject that which seems illogical. It is our right and duty.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi Haim Ovadia

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ורז"ל אמרו שהיה יצחק כאשר נעקד בן שלשים ושבע שנים. ואם דברי קבלה נקבל. ומדרך סברא אין זה נכון, שהיה<sup>1</sup> ראוי שתהיה צדקת יצחק גלויה, ויהיה שכרו כפול משכר אביו שמסר עצמו ברצונו לשחיטה, ואין בכתוב מאומה על יצחק. ואחרים אמרו שהי' בן חמש שנים, גם זה לא יתכן, בעבור שנשא עצי העולה. והקרוב אל הדעת שהיה קרוב לי"ג שנים, והכריחו אביו ועקדו שלא ברצונו