



Choosing Meaning

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Sarah, our foremother, lived a complex life full of heartbreak and healing, challenges and redemption. Her life ends as this week's *parashah* begins, and the first verse of the *parashah* distills Sarah's life into just the number of years that she lived.¹ Yet, Sarah's life and example had tremendous impact on generations to come belied by this summary. And R. Akiva sees some influence as being recorded in this verse and embedded in the specific number of Sarah's years:

בראשית רבה נחג

רבי עקיבא היה יושב ודורש והצבור מתנמנם. בקש לעורר. אמר - מה ראתה אסתר שתמלוק על שבע ועשרים ומאה מדינה? אלא תבא אסתר שהיתה בת בתה של שרה שחיתה ק' וכל' וז' ותמלוק על ק' וכל' וז' מדינות.

Bereishit Rabbah 58:3

R. Akiva was sitting and teaching, and the community was nodding off. He wanted to wake them. He said: What did Esther see that she could rule over 127 provinces? Rather let Esther, who was the granddaughter of Sarah who lived for 127 years, come and rule over 127 provinces.

This *midrash* is somewhat unusual and surprising, and it is intentionally so. R. Akiva sees that his students are bored and beginning to fall asleep, so he decides to wake them up by introducing a teaching that is completely unexpected. Just as this strange, ostensibly coincidental connection, was brought by R. Akiva in order to wake his students, so too the *midrash* is brought to the reader in order to wake us up. But why are we “sleeping,” and how does this teaching serve as an alarm? What does it teach us about the right way to use the Torah in our lives?

¹ Bereishit 23:1.





If we understand ourselves and see ourselves as the community members in the story, the accusation of this *midrash*, and the point it is making, become clearer. When we learn Torah, we are being taught by R. Akiva himself or someone of his caliber, and nevertheless we are falling asleep! Or to put it even more forcefully: We are being taught by Moshe Rabbeinu and maybe even by God Himself, and yet, we are nodding off; we are finding the Torah soporific and just plain boring. We, along with R. Akiva's contemporaries, are asleep in class, either literally or metaphorically asleep in shul during the reading of the Torah or the delivery of the sermon because we don't always feel that the Torah is speaking to us, because we don't always see the correspondence between the Torah and our lives. We don't see it as relevant. We don't see it as interesting.

R. Akiva, by drawing a correspondence between the lives of Sarah and Esther, addresses this issue in a few ways. First, he claims that a fact, in this case the number 127, which we might think of as coincidental, is anything but. It is not casual or meaningless. When there is something that is open to being interpreted either as coincidental and devoid of content or as connected and intrinsically meaningful, R. Akiva is inviting us to find the connection and meaning. Any story that we read in the Torah can be read as "just" a story, but we are cheating ourselves when we read these texts as irrelevant to our lives. R. Akiva teaches his students to make the connection, to see the irrelevant as personal and interesting, to be awake to the possibility that the texts, the laws, and the stories, are more interconnected than they appear.

He also suggests that texts that seem remote are actually more connected to us, more fresh and recent than they seem. Although Sarah and her life were in the distant past for his audience, Esther and her story occur more than 1,000 years later, much closer to the time period that R. Akiva's students themselves are in. The characters in Esther, a book which is closer to contemporary, are living a life that R. Akiva's students can more readily imagine.

And, though R. Akiva leaves working out the details to the reader, Sarah and Esther, who do not seem to be obviously connected in any way, have a few ways in which they clearly correspond to one another. The name Sarah means princess, and Esther herself was a queen. Sarah was taken to be in the harem of two kings, Avimelekh² and Pharoah,³ and though Esther was also brought into Ahashverosh's house to be the queen, their marriage was certainly not monogamous. Although Esther was clearly chosen, she felt insecure of her status and afraid to approach the king.⁴ Esther may have been emboldened to step into her role as queen, even

² Bereishit 20.

³ Bereishit 12:10-20.

⁴ Esther 4:11.



though she herself was an orphan when she thought of her ancestor and therefore herself as royalty. Sarah's 127 years could have had nothing to do with Esther's 127 provinces, or they could have been essential to her reign. Esther could have done what R. Akiva suggests and looked at Sarah's story for inspiration. She could have chosen to frame her life in terms of the Torah she has received, to make the connections that will make her more successful and her life more meaningful.

Although we have no proof that Esther herself did this, we do have testimony about an anonymous woman who drew strength from her ancestry in Massekhet Sukkah:

תלמוד בבלי סוכה לא.

היהא סבתא דאתאי לקמיה דרב נחמן. אמרה ליה ריש גלותא וכולהו רבנן דבי ריש גלותא בסוכה גזולה הוו יתבי. צווחה ולא אשגח בה רב נחמן. אמרה ליה - איתתא דהוה ליה לאבוהא תלת מאה ותמני סרי עבדי צווחא קמייכו ולא אשגחיתו בה?⁵

Talmud Bavli Sukkah 31a

[A story of] one old woman who came before Rav Nahman. She said to him, "The Exilarch and all of the Rabbis of his house are sitting in a stolen *sukkah*!" She cried out, but he paid no attention to her. She said, "A woman whose father had 318 servants is crying out before you and you don't pay attention to her?!"

In this story, an older woman, who does not have high social status, feels confident in bringing her case against the most powerful political figures of her community—the Exilarch's household and the Rabbis close to him—to one of the most powerful Rabbis at the time, Rav Nahman himself. And indeed, even when Rav Nahman does not heed her claim that their *sukkah* was stolen from her, she will not be silenced because she is the descendent of a man who has 318 servants. According to Rashi,⁶ this anonymous wealthy ancestor is Avraham. This woman's awareness of herself as Avraham's descendant is what empowers her to demand what she believes is her right and allows her to assert herself before those who would dismiss her.

What these stories demonstrate is that we can shift our perspective of how we are supposed to relate to the characters and stories of the Torah. One of the most perplexing features of studying the Torah for adults and children alike is seeing that the biblical characters are so deeply flawed. It's hard to imagine what we learn from people whom we do not understand

⁵ In the end of the story, Rav Nahman still dismisses her complaint as unjustified on technical grounds. She claimed that the Exilarch is sitting in a stolen *sukkah*, which would mean that he would have to return the structure's materials to her. Rav Nahman concludes that she has a claim to the value of the wood, but is not owed the wood itself. Nevertheless, it is striking that she had the temerity to insist that he listen to her case.

⁶ Talmud Bavli Sukkah 31a, s.v. לאבוהא.



engaging in behavior that we ourselves find unattractive, at best, and deeply morally problematic at worst. Without the help of the *midrash* and later commentaries, it is often difficult or impossible to learn what moral and ethical behavior should look like from our forebears. R. Akiva's insight helps us to see that these characters are not there for us to emulate; they are there for us to be able to relate to and to see ourselves in their stories. R. Akiva does not say that Esther merited to rule because of Sarah's greatness; he merely says that Sarah's 127 prefigures Esther's.

So the stories in the Torah and the people in them are there for you to connect to, to make you feel that your situation is not so unique and to make you feel less alone. When Esther was cut off from her uncle Mordekhai and from her home among the Jews, she knew that she wasn't the first one to be taken to a palace against her will. And because she knew that Sarah was not forsaken by God, Esther herself could know that she too had God to depend upon.

R. Kalonymous Kalman Shapiro,⁷ the Piaseczno Rebbe, was one of the most important rabbinic figures providing guidance and support to our families who were suffering at the hands of the Nazis in the Warsaw Ghetto. His collection of teaching while in the Ghetto, the *Eish Kodesh*, reflects his commitment to using the Torah as a means to provide the Jewish people comfort, support, and the reassurance that God still loves us. In his teaching on *Hayyei Sarah*, he goes so far as to suggest that Sarah chose to live her life—and, in fact, to give up her life—in order to provide a model for us to attach ourselves to and to have her example serve as a comfort to her children in our time of deepest distress.⁸

He bases his teaching on two of Rashi's comments from the beginning of our *parashah*. The first teaches about how Sarah lived, and the second teaches about why she died:

⁷ 1889-1943, Poland.

⁸ In the seventh chapter of *Hakhsharat HaAvreikhim*, R. Kalonymous Kalman Shapiro also teaches about the importance of imagining ourselves as characters in the Torah. He argues that it is a way to expand our consciousness, as we become emotionally educated in the experience of our ancestors and becoming more invested in the stories about their lives,

When you learn Tanakh, you should try to participate in all of the holy occurrences that took place as if you were also there. You should participate in the journey of Avraham our father and Yitzhak to the Akeidah, in the pain of Ya'akov, our father, when he prayed to God, "**Save me now from the hand of my brother, the hand of Esav for I fear him**" (Bereishit 32:12)... But now you should proceed to a renewed thought process in order to expand and extend that which has been given to you even if you do not know that it was truly the way that you imagine it in your mind, for are you not thinking along the lines of what has been said in the Torah and *midrash*?! Only you are also expanding your thoughts through them.



רשי בראשית כג:א,ב

(א) ויהיו חיי שרה מאה שנה ועשרים שנה ושבע שנים. לכך נכתב שנה בכל כלל וכלל, לומר לך שכל אחד נדרש לעצמו, בת ק' כבת כ' לחטא, מה בת כ' לא חטאה שהרי אינה בת עונשין, אף בת ק' בלא חטא, ובת כ' כבת ז' ליופי:

(ב) לספוד לשרה ולבכתה. נסמכה מיתת שרה לעקידת יצחק, לפי שעל ידי בשורת העקידה, שנזדמן בנה לשחיטה וכמעט שלא נשחט, פרחה נשמתה ממנה ומתה:

Rashi Bereishit 23:1 and 2

1) The years of Sarah's life were 100 years, 20 years, and 7 years. Why were years mentioned at each point? To teach you that each one should be expounded independently. When she was 100, she was like 20 with regards to sin, just as a 20 year-old hasn't sinned because she isn't subject to punishment, so [Sarah] was sinless at 100. And when she was 20, she was as beautiful as a 7 year-old.

2) To eulogize Sarah and cry for her. Sarah's death is placed adjacent to the binding of Yitzhak (*Akeidat Yitzhak*) because it was through the news of the Akeidah—that her son was brought to the slaughter and almost *was* slaughtered—that her soul departed, and she died.

The Eish Kodesh explains that these two comments of Rashi are connected to each other. The Torah testifies to the goodness of the entirety of Sarah's life as a reaction to the circumstances of her death:

ספר אש קודש - פרשת חיי שרה

היינו שמשה רבינו רעיא מהימנא סמך מיתת שרה לעקדת יצחק כדי להמליץ טוב בעדנו ולהראות שעל ידי יסורים חס וחלילה יותר מדאי מה נעשה, שפרחה נשמתה, ועוד באם נעשה כן בשרה, צדקת גדולה כזו... ומכל מקום לא יכלה לסבול יסורים קשים, ומכל שכן אנחנו:

עוד אפשר לומר שגם שרה אמנו עצמה שנתנה כל כך אל לבה מעשה העקדה עד שפרחה נשמתה, לטובת ישראל עשתה, להראות לד' איך אי אפשר לישראל לסבול יסורים יותר מדי, ואפילו מי שבחמלת ד' נשאר חי גם אחר יסוריו מכל מקום חלקי כחו מוחו ורוחו נשברו ונאבדו ממנו, מה לי קטליה כולו ומה לי קטליה פלגא:

Sefer Eish Kodesh

That is why Moshe Rabbeinu, trusted shepherd, placed the death of Sarah next to Akeidat Yitzhak—in order to speak good on our behalf and to show that through suffering that is too great—what can we do!—her soul left her. And further, if this happened to Sarah... and she still couldn't withstand difficult suffering, we certainly can't.

It is also possible to say that even our mother Sarah herself, who fixed her heart upon the Akeidah so much that her soul left her, did so for the sake of Israel, to show God that it's



actually impossible for Israel to withstand excessive suffering. And even someone who, through God's mercy, remains alive after his suffering regardless, some components of his strength, his mind, and his spirit are broken and lost to him—so what difference is it to kill all of him or part of him?!

According to the Eish Kodesh, Moshe strategically positioned the Torah's stories in order to teach about how Sarah suffered and died. But this was not done in order to teach us a moral lesson, but rather to validate the reality of suffering. When you are experiencing suffering worse than Akeidah after Akeidah, there is no moral lesson that Moshe intends to teach you. And when you turn to the Torah, the example of Sarah is not meant to be instructive at all. The Eish Kodesh continues to say that if Sarah's example is at all instructive, it is not coming to teach us, rather it is coming to teach God. Sarah's life and death show and teach God that we cannot be blamed for how we react to unimaginable suffering. We don't have to come out of our pain stronger and better, we can come out of it weak and broken. In fact, we can not make it out at all, and no one has the right to evaluate or judge our reaction and behavior.

Sarah's story doesn't teach us what to do, it teaches us that sometimes it is cruel and inappropriate to even ask the question of "should." When we feel ourselves blaming ourselves, when we imagine that God is blaming us, the lesson to be learned is that no one was more blameless than Sarah, and even she could not withstand the suffering. We aren't being told to be heroic like our ancestors, but to understand that we may be as un-heroic, as human, as flawed as they are. And even God may not condemn us for it.

Not only does this change how you study the stories of the Torah—for comfort and succor as opposed to instruction and rebuke—it also changes what in Torah you should focus on. If the purpose of the stories is to teach me to be someone other than who I already am, then I should look to learn from the people who are my opposite and focus on the sections of the Torah that present an ideal that is very different from the way that I currently live. However, R. Issi suggests just the opposite. Study the Torah that is already reflective of who you are:

ויקרא רבה ז:ג

אמר ר' איסי: מפני מה מתחילין לתינוקות מתורת כהנים, יתחילו להן מבראשית! אלא אמר הקב"ה: הואיל וקרבתנות טהורים והתינוקות טהורים, יבואו טהורים ויתעסקו בטהורים.

VaYikra Rabbah 7:3

R. Issi said: Why do children begin with the book of VaYikra ("Torat Kohanim")? They should start with Bereishit! Rather the Holy Blessed One said: Since the sacrifices are pure, and the children are pure, let the pure come and delve into the pure!





The book of VaYikra doesn't make the children pure; the children identify with it because they are *already* pure. And like them, we too have the option of reading the Torah as not only speaking to us, but speaking for us and speaking about us.

Wishing you a Shabbat of strong identification.

