

# Problematic Midrashim!

Chayei Sarah 5782/2021

One of the primary goals of the Enlightenment was the ability for society to question, without fear of rebuke, teachings of the Church. While there was a greater move to science as the new religion of the people, and an uptake of the new religions of modernity; atheism, individualism, materialism, the core goal was to enable questioning.

Judaism has long been able to handle questioning. So much so, that it forms the very foundations of the construction of law and our primary texts. At the time of the codification of Jewish law by Rabbi Yosef Karo, which then led into the enlightenment period, suddenly deep questioning, and rejection of prior opinions became a no-go-territory – it was perhaps, the reaction to a more open minded (which was still relatively closed) society.

The trouble with this reaction is that it leaves those who feel the need to question a binary option in their future engagement with Judaism. Continue, as if the questions don't matter, like a herd of sheep. Or opt-out.

In this week's Parasha we learn of the relentless pursuit of Abraham's servant to find Isaac a wife, and the Parasha ends with Isaac taking Rebecca into his mother's tent and finding comfort. Finally, the broken man has found someone to make him whole<sup>1</sup>. In the beginning of next week's Parasha Rashi comments that Rebecca must have been three years old<sup>2</sup>. While other commentators work it out differently, the fact is, both to the ancient and modern reader, this reading of Rebecca's age is deeply problematic<sup>3 and 4</sup>.

How do we, as the modern reader, as a modern lover of Torah, look at this understanding without rejecting everything in its entirety? Dr Ruth Calderon explains the importance of looking at things holistically – understand who the author was, understand the sociological realities of the time, understand the external pressures facing the author, and understand the deeper message they are trying to deliver. But she also says that one needs to feel comfortable in rereading the text in a modern lens, and coming up with one's own explanations to engage with it. Only then, can we have some ability to own, and to literally be *l'asok bidivrei Torah*, toiling in the words of Torah.<sup>5</sup>

While this approach might seem appropriate, I would posit that perhaps it would still cause some to reject the text, thinker, or even the faith entirely.

Avi Garelik offers a new approach, which is to understand what it means to be toiling in the words of Torah, and perhaps what the adage of 70 facets of Torah truly represents. He argues that there are some understandings, some reading of the texts that can only happen as society progresses. Each generation comes to Torah study with his or her lens, and therefore add to the tapestry of Torah. When reading this Rashi, and the quote from Seder haOlam, when arguing with it, we don't reject the text or thinker, or even the faith, we become part of the conversation.

That is the richness of Judaism's approach. So don't be fearful of problematic midrashim, take them, own them, and reread them.