

The Four Levels

Introduction

In this week’s Torah portion, *Toldot*, a strange phrase is used to describe Rebecca's pregnancy with the twins Esau and Jacob:

וַיִּתְרָצְצוּ הַבָּנִים בְּקֶרֶבָּהּ -- *Vayit-rotsatsu habanim b'kirba*.

It is usually translated as:

And the children struggled together within her. [Genesis 25:22]

What does it mean? Our Sages tell us that there are four levels of understanding of the Torah. Each level is deeper than the previous one. As you move below the top levels and reach for the deep ones, new meanings come to light. Even if you don’t believe a story literally, you can understand it as a parable that provides valuable teachings.

Pardes

These four levels are:

- First, the *p'shat* (פְּשָׁט - *surface*): the plain meaning of the words.
- Then, the *remez* (רֵמֵז - *hints*): the subtle meaning, only hinted at.
- Then, the *drash* (דְּרָשׁ - *inquiry*): the derived, scholarly meaning.
- Finally, the *sod* (סוֹד - *secret*): the hidden, mystical meaning.

The first letters of these four levels spell the Hebrew word *pardes* - פָּרְדֵּס - meaning “orchard”. Indeed, you taste a fruit on four levels:

- First, the simple taste, experienced while you eat.
- Then, the subtle taste, which stays after you eat.
- Then, the derived taste, such as wine made from grapes.
- Finally, the deep taste, the long-term memories associated with the experience (which French author and fellow Jew Marcel Proust told us so much about).

Let us identify the four levels in our verse.

Pshat

The literal meaning of the verb *vayit-rotsatsu* is “to crush” or “to oppress”. This is the only place that word is found in the Torah. So the phrase means “they crushed each other”. This describes the relationship between Jacob and Esau, as later events would demonstrate.

Remez

The allegorical meaning is derived from the three-letter root of the word *vayit-rotsatsu*: *resh-tsadi-tsadi*. It is quite close to the word *rats*, to run, and the word *ratsah*, to desire.

Struggling, running and desiring all imply great intensity. They are characteristics of Jews.

In his 1992 book, sociologist Joel Kotkin concludes that this is the part of our “cultural DNA” that has helped us survive the harsh environments we faced throughout the centuries. [Kotkin, *Tribes: How Race, Religion and Identity Determine Success in the New Global Economy*, Random House, 1992.]

Drash

The derived, or scholarly, meaning is that Esau and Jacob are the very incarnation of good and evil. In the Midrash, Esau is equated with Rome, idolatrous and bloodthirsty, while Jacob is equated with Jerusalem, vulnerable and spiritually pure. It suggests that our natures are determined in our mothers' wombs, that we have no choice in the matter [Genesis Rabbah 63:6]. It interprets the words “struggled within her” as follows:

-When Rebecca stood near synagogues or schools (Bet ha-Midrash of Shem and Ever), Jacob struggled to come out. It cites Jeremiah:

Before I formed you in the belly, I knew you. [Jeremiah 1:5]

This means that God knew Jacob's righteousness even in the womb.

-But when Rebecca passed idolatrous temples, Esau struggled to come out.

It cites Psalm 58:

The wicked are defiant even while in the womb. [Psalms 58:4]

Indeed, the tension between idolatry and monotheism is played out in every generation of their descendants. Esau is forever trying to kill Jacob.

Another view is that they quarreled about how to divide the world they will inherit. [Yalkut Shimoni on Torah 111:2].

Sod

The hidden, mystical meaning is found in the Zohar. Rebecca felt the struggle every person feels inside between good and evil -- not just between Jacob and Esau, but every one of us. The Midrash says that both parts should be combined to serve God, that *both parts are necessary*. When the Torah says:

And God saw every thing that He had made, and, behold, it was very good [tov me-od], [Gen 1:31]

God, for the first time added “very” to “good”. What was added at the end to make it “very good”? Answer: The Evil Inclination:

Nachman said, in Rav Shmuel's name: “And, behold, it was very good” refers to the Evil Inclination. Can then the Evil Inclination [then] be “very good”? That would be extraordinary!

Yes, [because] without the Evil Inclination, no man would build a house, take a wife, beget a family, and engage in work.

So said [King] Solomon [in Ecclesiastes]: “And I saw that all labor and all achievement in work was the result of man's envy and rivalry with his neighbor.” (Eccl. 4:4) [Genesis R. 9:7, Eccl. R. 3:15]

The Talmud adds that when we say, in the Ve'ahavta:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart (*b'chol l'vavcha*) [Deuteronomy 6:5],

it means we must love God with both our inclinations -- the inclination to do good *and* the inclination to do evil. [Sifrei Devarim 32:3; Berakhot 54a]

Thus, even though we feel divided, we struggle, we run, we desire, our goal is always to grow into a single wholesome unit.

The *sod*, or hidden meaning of the Torah, has a long history. The Talmud tells of four influential rabbis who dabbled in mysticism and entered *pardes*. One died, one became mad, one left Judaism, and only one emerged whole. This is dangerous stuff!

Gematria

Gematria, or Jewish numerology, is part of the sod and very popular in kabbalistic literature. It consists of adding up the numerical values of each Hebrew letter in a Torah phrase and drawing conclusions from that total. Example:

Jacob tells his sons: "Go down to Egypt". [Genesis 42:2] "Go down" is *Redu*, and *Redu* adds up to 210. And, sure enough, the Israelites stayed in Egypt for 210 years.

How many interpretations are there?

Two Jews, three opinions? No, eight. The Sages tell us that there are 600,000 ways to understand each of the four levels -- one for each of the Jewish men present at Sinai. [Maharsha, Chiddushei Aggadot on Berakhot 58a]

Another example

The Torah begins as follows:

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ

Bereshit bara Elokim et ha-shamayim ve-et haaretz.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth [Genesis 1:1]

Pshat:

There is a God and He created everything.

Remez:

-In Proverbs the Torah is called "the beginning" (רֵאשִׁית) [Proverbs 8:22] and in Jeremiah Israel is called "the beginning" [Jeremiah 2:3]. So the verse means: "God created the heavens and the earth for the sake of the Torah and the Jewish people." [Rashi]

-All 613 commandments are hinted at in the first word, *bereshit*. For example, *pidyon haben* (the redemption of the first-born) is in the acronym of the letters of *Bereshit*: *Ben rishon acharei shloshim yom tifdeh* -- The first son you shall redeem after thirty days. [Vilna Gaon, Aderet Eliyahu on Gen. 1:1]

Drash:

Why does the Torah begin with the letter "bet"? Because "bet" is closed on three sides and open on the fourth. This means you may not ask: "What came before the Torah, what is above the Torah, or

what is below the Torah?” Worry only about the Torah itself. The Torah also closes with a lamed, which is a barrier, meaning “Do not ask what will come after the Torah”. [Genesis Rabbah 1:10 and others]

Sod:

Bereshit is the key by which everything is hidden, as it locks and unlocks. With this key, six gates are locked and unlocked. So, when it locks those gates, and includes them within itself, then it is for sure Bereshit: a revealed word that includes within it a concealed word. Bara, wherever it appears, is a word that hides and guards a secret, locks it up and does not unlock it. [Zohar 1:3b:8]

Is the plain meaning ever correct?

Yes. The four meanings coexist and are complementary. You can't pick just the one you like. In particular, the Talmud says that the plain meaning (*pshat*) of the Torah never loses its value when other interpretations are put forth:

אין מקרא יוצא מידי פשוטו -- *En mikra yotze midei pshuto*.

A verse does not depart from its literal meaning. [Shabbat 63a]

This point is emphasized by commentators:

Rashi:

No Scriptural verse can lose its literal meaning. [on Ex. 12:2]

Rabbi Albo:

No one has the power to abolish the literal meaning of the commandments by interpretation. [Sefer ha-Ikkarim 3, 21:2]

But counterexample: The Torah teaches the law of retaliation:

A fracture for a fracture, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Just as he inflicted an injury upon a person, so shall it be given to him. [Lev. 24:20, also Ex. 21:23-5 and Deut. 19:21]

The Talmud [Baba Kamma 83b-84a] makes a convincing argument that it should be interpreted *only* as financial compensation. Indeed, there is no record of Jews ever applying the injunction literally.

How do we reconcile the two teachings? By saying that financial compensation *is* the *pshat* and that the popular understanding is not an interpretation at all?

The Rambam argues that the Torah only talks about what the perpetrator *deserves*, not what the actual punishment should be:

It does not mean to inflict injury on this man as he did on the other, but that the offender fittingly deserves to be deprived of a limb or wounded in the same manner as he did. [Mishneh Torah, One Who Injures a Person or Property 1:3]

If so, why does this approach not apply to *all* punishments?

Elsewhere, he adds, mysteriously:

You must not raise an objection to our practice of imposing a fine in such cases. Here, we propose [only] to give the reason for the precepts mentioned in the Torah, and not for what is stated in the Talmud. I have, however, an explanation for the interpretation given in the Talmud, but it will be communicated only by word of mouth. [Guide for the Perplexed 3:41]

Conclusion

New meanings can always be found. But by going further and further from the plain meaning, can we make up just about anything? Is four levels the limit or we can dig even deeper? We might end up with nonsense – or anything at all. Can anything be interpreted to mean anything with enough imagination? Can anything be derived from anything? It's a dangerous process that needs rules. Food for thought.

Shabbat shalom.