

## Teach your tongue to say "I do not know"

In this week's Torah portion, *Toldot*, we read:

And Isaac sent Jacob... to Laban... the Aramean, the brother of Rebecca, the mother of Jacob and Esau. [Gen. 28:5]

Now, we know full well, at this point in the narrative, that Rebecca is the mother of Jacob and Esau. So why does the Torah give us this information again? The Sages teach that nothing in the Torah is superfluous, that every word is there for a reason. So we have to ask ourselves: What is the hidden teaching in this repetition?

For an answer, let us turn to Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, the great Rashi, the 11<sup>th</sup>-century French grandmaster of all biblical commentators, the obligatory first stop for Jews eager to understand the meaning of Torah and Talmud, the one whose succinct and brilliant commentary graces every *chumash* and Talmud edition. And what does the Master say? Quote:

**I do not know what this teaches us.**

Well, thank YOU! And if you dig a little deeper in Rashi's life work you find that he confesses his ignorance 77 times in his Bible commentary and 44 times in his Talmud commentary! The great Rashi does not know! How can that be? Because he just doesn't know. He is not omniscient. It takes courage to admit simply, clearly and humbly that you don't know. Now, Rashi does not comment on every single line. When the meaning is obvious, he does not elaborate. He could have just skipped the parts he did not understand, so as not to reveal his ignorance, and to make you feel like a moron for being stumped by a line that is so clear it requires no commentary. But he didn't. He was intellectually honest and went out of his way to point out that he did not have an explanation.

The Talmud says:

למד לשונך לומר איני יודע

*Lamed l'shoncha lomar: "Eni yodea"*.

Teach your tongue to say: "I do not know". [Ber. 4a]

And it continues: "... for otherwise you will be led to uttering falsehoods."

Very sage advice. I put these words in a frame on the wall of my study. I taught them diligently to my children. When my oldest son took his oral examinations for his doctorate at Yale, he got written feedback that said: "The committee was pleased to see that [Michael] did not try to bluff when he didn't know an answer." Nevertheless, fortunately for him, he did not have to say "I don't know" TOO often, and passed with flying colors!

Note that the Talmud says that you have to say the actual words "I do not know", and not merely imply them. You must not say things like "That's a very good question" or "The matter requires serious thought" and leave it at that. You must not spread the blame for ignorance by saying "WE need to better understand the context", "WE need to know more about the background before WE can answer". You must not act mysterious by saying, "Here is what I can tell you". You must not make scholarly-sounding statements that do not explain anything, hoping to make your listener feel that he is too stupid to understand. As Hillel said in *Pirkei Avot*, the "Crown of the Talmud":

Do not say something that is not readily understood, in the belief that it will ultimately be understood. [Pirkei Avot 2:5]

You must not be vague by saying "There are many possible answers", or start inventing things. You may not put the monkey on the questioner's back by saying, "What do YOU think?", "Oh, come on, YOU can answer that!" And so on. Just say, "I do not know". In the same *Pirkei Avot*, we read:

[One thing that characterizes] a wise man is: If he does not understand, he says "I do not understand". [Pirkei Avot 5:7]

And Rashi is not the first to admit ignorance. In the Talmud, when the Sages debated a point of law and could not reach agreement, they concluded with "*Teku*", תיקו the equivalent of "Let it stand", "We do not know". This phrase appears no less than 321 times in the Talmud!

Some say "*Teku*" is an acronym for תשבי יתרץ קושיות ובעיות "*Tishbi Y'taretz Kushiot Uv'ayot*", which means that when the Prophet Elijah (the "Tishbite") comes back, he will be able to "answer these questions and problems."

Another term that appears frequently in the Talmud at the conclusion of discussions is “*kashya*”, קשיא meaning “There is a difficulty”. With this word, the rabbis are admitting that they can't resolve it. (Of course, even more often they say: “*lo kashya*” לא קשיא meaning “There is no difficulty”, a phrase which appears 904 times in the Talmud, but that's another story.)

It is no sin to admit that you don't know. It is frequently even a virtue. You must not lead your listeners or students astray by pretending to know what you don't know, and the more prominent you are in your field, the more this advice is important, because people will act on what you say. We all give advice we are not qualified to give. We all like to pretend we are know-it-alls. Even more worrisome, some well-known experts in one area feel qualified to dispense advice in a different area they know nothing about.

But there is another danger. Consider the story of the tragic and mysterious death of two of Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu. The Torah says that they:

...offered strange fire before the Lord, which He did not command them... and fire from the Lord devoured them, and they died. [Leviticus 10:1-2]

What is this “strange fire” and why is it such a major infraction? We are not told. This left the field open for a lot of disturbing speculation that seems to “dump” on the brothers. The ancient commentators say that the brothers died because they came too near, because they did not consult with each other before offering the fire, because they were drunk, because they were not wearing the proper clothing, because they did not first wash their hands and feet, because they had no children, because they thought no woman was worthy of them and so did not marry, because they wished Moses and Aaron would die so they could succeed them, because they gave a legal decision in the presence of their master Moses, because their father Aaron helped make the Golden Calf and God was punishing him with the death of his children, etc. [Lev. Rabbah 20:6,9,10; Sanhedrin 52a; Eruvin 63a; Rashi on Deut. 9:20]

Is such speculation really necessary? To be sure, it is legitimate to try to understand what caused an unexplained, mysterious, or seemingly senseless death, at least to avoid making the same fatal mistake again. Also, one can always attach a valid teaching to each speculative “explanation”. But when does this constitute dumping on the deceased by creatively trying to find fault with them? Is it rabbinically-sanctioned *lashon hara*, evil gossip? What should be its limits?

Let's go back to our Torah portion. Why DID the Torah say that Rebecca was the mother of Jacob and Esau, when we already knew that? This line appears when we are told that Esau is furious with Jacob because Jacob took his blessing, and Rebecca tells Jacob to flee. Many commentators attempted to guess the reason. For example, the Tur, in 14<sup>th</sup>-century Spain, says that it teaches us that she loved her two children equally, as mothers always do, even though one (Esau) was the bad guy and was trying to kill the other one, the good guy (Jacob). But that's speculation. When Rashi said he did not know the reason, he really meant, "I can speculate as well as the next man, but I do not really KNOW, in the sense that I could not find a source that explains it, and I want you to know that, because I don't want to mislead you. Also, I *have* thought of many possible explanations, but none of them seems compelling to me, so I won't list them."

And that's what we should all do. As Mark Twain put it so well, "It's better to be quiet and be thought a fool than to open your mouth and remove all doubt."

Shabbat shalom.