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Counting Years

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1.

RASHI'S CONTRASTING COMMENTS

In this week's *parshah*, the Torah informs us of the lifespans of Sarah, Avraham, and Yishmael: At the beginning of the *parshah*¹ — “The life of Sarah was one hundred years, and twenty years, and seven years”; and at the end of the *parshah* — “And these are the days of the years of Avraham’s life... one hundred years, and seventy years, and five years,”² “And these are the years of Yishmael’s life: one hundred years, and thirty years, and seven years.”³

We find something remarkable about these passages in Rashi’s Torah commentary: Although concerning Sarah, Avraham, and Yishmael, the word “years” is recorded in the Torah when listing the hundreds, the tens, and the single years, Rashi in his commentary gives a different explanation for each of them as to why the Torah lists them in this way:

Regarding Sarah,⁴ Rashi writes: “This is why the word ‘years’ was written after each value: To tell you that each value is to be expounded **on its own**.” As such, the verses are expounded as intimating that “when she was one hundred years old, she was like a twenty-year-old regarding sin... and when she was twenty, she was like a seven-year-old regarding beauty.”

Regarding Avraham,⁵ Rashi writes, “When he was one hundred years old, he was like a seventy-year-old; and when he was seventy years old, he was like a five-year-old, without sin” — which means (simply) that (**unlike** Sarah, where “each one is to be expounded **on its own**,” we are taught about **two** of her virtues — Sarah was without sin and possessed beauty. In contrast, regarding Avraham) we expound only one idea and virtue — that even at the age of one-hundred, Avraham was (like a seventy-year-old; and at age seventy, he was) like a five-year-old — “without sin.”

¹ Bereishis 23:1.

² Bereishis 25:7.

³ Bereishis 25:17.

⁴ Rashi on Bereishis 23:1.

⁵ Rashi on Bereishis 25:7.

Regarding Yishmael,⁶ however, Rashi doesn't explain why "the word 'years' was written after each value."

The above discrepancies in Rashi's commentary are discussed and analyzed extensively by commentators on Rashi.⁷ However, aside from the various difficulties that can be raised with each of their answers (and this is not the place to discuss their proffered solutions at length), a **general** question arises (as addressed several times):

Since these discrepancies in Rashi's interpretations are not simple at all — to the extent that commentators offer different explanations — Rashi, whose mandate is to explain the meaning of the verses (even) for a novice student of Torah,⁸ should have offered a **clear** explanation to dispel any doubt as to the intent of his comment.

Therefore, we must say that Rashi's intent is clear from the wording of his commentary, and it is unnecessary to add to it.

2.

AVRAHAM'S UNIQUE VIRTUE

The explanation:

As discussed, Rashi writes concerning Sarah: "This is why the word 'years' was written after each value: To tell you that each value is to be expounded **on its own**... when she was one hundred years old..." Meaning, since the word 'years' is written after *each* value, it is clear "that each value is meant to be expounded **on its own**... regarding sin... regarding beauty..." — It is self-understood that later, concerning Avraham, for whom "the word 'years' was

⁶ Rashi on *Bereishis* 25:17.

⁷ *Bereishis* 23:1.

⁸ {In the Hebrew original, "*ben chamesh leamikra*"; meaning, "a five-year-old beginning to study Scripture." This is a term borrowed from *Pirkei Avos*, which teaches that the appropriate age for a child to begin studying *Chumash* is at the age of five. Rashi wrote his commentary on *Chumash* to solve problems that a five-year-old student would encounter in understanding the simple meaning of a verse. Additionally, Rashi never expects a student to know more than the plain meaning of earlier verses in the Torah.}

also written after each value,” each value must be “expounded **on its own.**” And doing so teaches **two** ideas.

Consequently, when Rashi says concerning Avraham, “When he was one hundred years old, he was like a seventy-year-old,” obviously, Rashi intends to communicate **not** just the beginning of **one** teaching (that concludes, “when he was seventy years old, he was like a five-year-old: without sin”). Instead, Rashi intends to communicate something supplemental, another **distinct** teaching. And Rashi doesn’t spell out what we learn from the comparison “when he was one hundred years old, he was like a seventy-year-old” because the marvel and phenomenon of Avraham being “one hundred years old... like a seventy-year-old” is stated **explicitly** in Scripture:

When Hashem informed Avraham that Sarah would bear him a son, the verse says,⁹ “He said in his heart, **‘To a man of a hundred years** shall there be born?’” Avraham was baffled. How was it possible that he would have a child at the age of one hundred? As **Rashi** explains,¹⁰ “In the days of Avraham, lifespans had already been shortened and a weakening of strength had come to the world... they hurried to father children at the ages of sixty and **seventy.**”¹¹

From this we can **clearly** understand how the statement, “when he was one hundred years old, he was like a seventy-year-old,” applies to Avraham: Although at that time (as a consequence of “a weakening of strength had come to the world”), the age of child-bearing was only until “**seventy,**” Avraham **did not** experience this “weakening of strength” (as can be seen by the fact that he had Yismael at the age of eighty-six)¹² and even at “the age of one-hundred” he was still like “a seventy-year-old.”

⁹ *Bereishis* 17:17.

¹⁰ {Rashi on *Bereishis* 17:17.}

¹¹ Terach fathered Avraham at age seventy (*Bereishis* 11:26). However, it’s unclear why Rashi mentions “sixty,” especially in the context of the ten generations from Noach to Avraham, where there is no mention of fathering at this age. Perhaps Rashi drew from the verse stating, “And Yitzchak was sixty years old when she bore them” (*Bereishis* 25:26), and later we don’t find Yitzchak and Rivka praying for children. Some versions of Rashi omit “sixty.” They may mention “**thirty** or seventy” or just “seventy.” Some versions say, “thirty or forty.”

¹² *Bereishis* 16:16.

[In light of this, we can appreciate and understand **Rashi's** explanation of “to a man of a hundred years shall there be born?” Avraham was not questioning how, at his age, he could possibly father a child. Rather, it was a rhetorical question expressing astonishment about a **fact**. “He said in his heart, ‘**Has such a kindness been done for another** as that which the Holy One is doing for me?’”]

In contrast, since “the female monthly cycle of Sarah had ceased,”¹³ it was impossible for her to bear children according to the laws of nature at that time (and **she** needed a miracle — “Is anything beyond Hashem?!”¹⁴ — in order for her to conceive Yitzchak). [Only, Sarah thought that Avraham also could not have children — “Sarah laughed.... ‘After I have withered’... and **my husband is old?**”]¹⁵

This also resolves a major difficulty. Why doesn't Rashi comment on the fact that Avraham had children (the sons of Keturah¹⁶) more than **forty years** after Yitzchak's birth?¹⁷ In addition, why doesn't Scripture mention the miraculous nature of **these** births?!"¹⁸

It is because this difficulty was resolved by the words, “When he was one hundred years old, he was like a seventy-year-old,” which informs us that Avraham's virility did not diminish in a way that would limit his childbearing to age seventy; the normal “weakening of strength” did not affect him. Consequently, he fathered children at one hundred and also much later. This is similar to his virtue of being “without sin,” which, despite the wording, “when he was seventy years old, he was like a five-year-old, without sin,” it certainly does not mean that after {age seventy}, this changed, G-d forbid. Rather, he remained without sin throughout his life.

¹³ *Bereishis* 18:11.

¹⁴ *Bereishis* 18:14.

¹⁵ *Bereishis* 18:12. See Rashi on *Bereishis* 16:5.

¹⁶ *Bereishis* 25:1, et sec.

¹⁷ *Bereishis* 24:62 states that Yitzchak encountered Rivkah after returning from Be'er Lechai Roee. Rashi explains that this journey was undertaken to bring Hagar {Keturah} to Avraham so he could marry her. Yitzchak's meeting with and subsequent marriage to Rivkah took place when he was forty years old (*Bereishis* 25:20).

¹⁸ *Ramban* and the commentaries on Rashi on *Bereishis* 17:17 discuss this at length.

3.

PREEMPTING SCOFFERS

In light of this difference between Avraham and Sarah, the differences in Rashi's wording will also be explained:

On the verse “Sarah would nurse children,”¹⁹ Rashi explains: “On the day of the feast, the noblewomen brought their children with them, and Sarah nursed them because **they** {the noblewomen} **were saying**, ‘Sarah did not give birth, but rather, she brought home an abandoned child from the marketplace.’” In the verse (at the beginning of *parshas Toldos*),²⁰ “Avraham begot Yitzchak,” Rashi says, “For scoffers everywhere were saying, ‘Avimelech impregnated Sarah.’ What did the Holy One do? He fashioned... and everyone attested, ‘Avraham begot Yitzchak.’”

We need to clarify why, regarding Sarah, Rashi says that the noblewomen (prominent women) said, “Sarah did not give birth,” and regarding Avraham, Rashi explains that “**scoffers everywhere** were saying, ‘Avimelech impregnated Sarah.’”

This is also unclear: The clause “Sarah would nurse children” only proves that **Sarah** gave birth (and this child is not “an abandoned child”). Still, it does not prove that it is Avraham's child — the noblewomen could have said (as scoffers everywhere did) that “Avimelech impregnated Sarah,” knowing that Avraham was one hundred years old!

The question here is even greater: In the Gemara,²¹ these two ideas are expounded as **one** continuous exposition:

Sarah would nurse children — people of all nationalities were gossiping... claiming that an abandoned child must have been brought from the marketplace.... Avraham invited all of the great men of that generation, and Sarah, our matriarch, invited their wives... and she nursed them all. Still, **those people continued to gossip**, saying to

¹⁹ Bereishis 21:7; see also Rashi on Bereishis 17:16.

²⁰ Bereishis 25:19.

²¹ Bava Metzia 87a.

one another: ‘Even if Sarah, at ninety years of age, can give birth, can Avraham, at one hundred years of age, father a child?’ Immediately, Yitzchak’s face was transformed....

However, based on the above discussion, this can be understood: The noblewomen were only ever baffled about Sarah, since “the female monthly cycle of Sarah had ceased...” she couldn't have children. In contrast, having witnessed that Avraham fathered Yishmael at eighty-six, they were unsurprised that he could father a child at one hundred.

For this same reason, prominent people, in general, were not surprised that “Avraham begot Yitzchak; it was only the “scoffers everywhere” — who do not care about truth and simply look for an opportunity to scoff — only **they** said (and in a scoffing manner) that “Avimelech impregnated Sarah.”

Hashem, though, wanted to silence the scoffers. Therefore, “He fashioned the form of Yitzchak’s face to resemble Avraham, and **everyone** attested, ‘Avraham begot Yitzchak.’”

4.

AVRAHAM’S UNIQUE VIRTUE

Regarding Yishmael, Rashi doesn’t explain that “when he was one hundred years old, he was like a thirty-year-old; and when he was thirty years old, he was like a seven-year-old” (even though also concerning Yishmael, the word “years” was written after each value”) because this is **self-understood**, based on **Rashi’s** explanation of the same phraseology used regarding Avraham: When he was one hundred years old, he was like a thirty-year-old — with no weakening of strength,²² and when he was thirty years old, he was like a seven-year-old — without sin (the verse informs us that Yishmael repented²³ from the age of thirty and on).

²² For “thirty is the age of strength” (*Avos* 25:21), and this fact is clear even to a five-year-old — see the text below.

²³ **Rashi** on *Bereishis* 25:9; see **Rashi** on *Bereishis* 22:1.

In light of this, however, we need to clarify Rashi's explanation **there**:

On the verse,²⁴ “These were the years of Yishmael's life...,” Rashi comments, “**Why** were the years of Yishmael counted? To trace the years of Yaakov through them” (as Rashi explains immediately, “From the years of Yishmael, we have learned that Yaakov served in the house of Ever for fourteen years”). Meaning, by telling us how long Yishmael lived, the verse does not intend to say (or hint at) anything regarding **Yishmael himself**; rather, the intent is “to trace the years of **Yaakov** through them.”

Furthermore, according to Rashi's explanation, it is quite perplexing as to “why the word ‘years’ is written after each value.”

This forces us to say that according to Rashi, the question as to “why the word ‘**years**’ **was written**...” is, from the outset, not difficult (once the explanation was given regarding Avraham, as mentioned above). The question, though, is: “Why were the years of Yishmael **counted**” **altogether**? After all, a novice student sees that Scripture only relates purposeful information, even about Chanoch or Mesushelach,²⁵ who were righteous —

and Rashi answers that this {the count of Yishmael's years} was written for the sake of Yaakov.

However, on this basis, it is clear that by adding “the word ‘years’ after each value,” the verse does not intend (only) to **compare** Yishmael's years (“When he was one hundred years old, he was like a thirty-year-old...” — which is only a novelty and (additional) virtue of Yishmael — since the verse's intent is not Yishmael **at all**, but rather, **Yaakov**).

The reason that Scripture, nevertheless, (also) writes “the word ‘years’ after each value” concerning Yishmael — separating each value of years, as mentioned — is to hint at Yishmael's virtue at each of those times (age one hundred, age thirty, age seven): The intention is **not** to **equate** the years of Yishmael to each

²⁴ Bereishis 25:17.

²⁵ Rashi on Bereishis 7:4.

other, to show that he had these virtues..., but “in order *leyaches*, to trace {the years of} **Yaakov** through them.” In other words, {interpreting the word *leyaches* differently} the Torah hints here at Yishmael’s virtues to inform us of Yaakov’s *yichus* (virtues).²⁶ This way, we will readily deduce that Yaakov’s years were **extraordinary**. For Yaakov possessed these same virtues of Yishmael, but in an **entirely different way**.

5.

YAAKOV’S INCOMPARABLE GREATNESS

The explanation of the preceding:

The change in Yishmael at age one hundred was that he was already a ***baal teshuvah***.²⁷ In his commentary,²⁸ **Rashi** writes that Yishmael repented during Avraham’s lifetime, and Yishmael was eighty-nine years old²⁹ when Avraham passed away.

Rashi preemptively explains that even though Yishmael was a *baal teshuvah*, to the extent that his passing is described as “he expired”³⁰ (a term reserved for the righteous),³¹ Yishmael’s virtues were insignificant compared to Yaakov’s.

The virtue of “age thirty” is — before the time of weakening of strength that comes at age sixty or seventy — “thirty is the age of **strength**” (in the words of the mishnah),³² and as even a five-year-old sees in **reality**, at the age of thirty, a

²⁶ Now, we can appreciate why Rashi used the term “***le’yaches*** {to trace},” and not “***leida*** {to know},” or something similar.

²⁷ {*Baal Teshuvah* — Lit., “a master of return”; the term *baal teshuvah* refers to an individual who has sinned in the past, has regretted his behavior, and turned himself around, resolving never to repeat his sins. Chassidus clarifies that the term *baal teshuvah* also relates to the Divine service of “returning” to Hashem after the soul’s descent into this world.}

²⁸ *Bereishis* 15:15; 25:9.

²⁹ When Yishmael was born, Avraham was 86 years old (as mentioned above), and Avraham passed away at the age of 175 (*Bereishis* 25:7)

³⁰ *Bereishis* 25:17.

³¹ **Rashi** on *Bereishis* 25:17.

³² *Avos* 5:21.

person's strength is at its peak. Yishmael, who had “his hand in everything,”³³ was a strong man at thirty.

Nevertheless, Yishmael's strength paled in comparison to that of Yaakov, as **Rashi** remarks on the verse,³⁴ “*He rolled the stone from upon the well* — Like a person removes a plug from a flask; **to let you know that his strength was great,**” although, at the time, according to **Rashi**,³⁵ Yaakov was seventy-seven years old.

The unique quality of a “seven-year-old” is seen clearly in Rashi's commentary above concerning Avraham — “when he was seventy years old, he was like a five-year-old, without sin” — that a minor is “without sin.”

We may have thought that regarding **this** detail, there is no room to differentiate between Yishmael and Yaakov — in being minors “without sin,” they were seemingly alike:

The Torah informs us that also regarding this virtue,³⁶ Yishmael was insignificant when compared to Yaakov. Yaakov's **core being** was different from that of Yishmael, the maidservant's son. Consequently, regardless of which virtue is being discussed, in every single detail, Yaakov was **entirely** different — higher than Yishmael.³⁷

For this reason, “Yishmael's years were counted (including the virtues hinted to by the three times the word “year” is written)... (only) in order **le'yaches** through them the years of **Yaakov**.”

— From a talk delivered on Motzaei Shabbos, *parshas Chayei Sarah*, 5740 (1979)

³³ Bereishis 16:12.

³⁴ Bereishis 29:10.

³⁵ Rashi on Bereishis 28:9.

³⁶ See **Rashi** on Bereishis 25:22.

³⁷ See *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 15, pp. 149 ff.