A Three Year Old Bride? Thoughts on Parashat Hayyei Sarah

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Hayyei Sarah

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While studying this week's Torah portion, students were told by their teacher that Rivka was three years old when she married Yitzhak--who was forty years old. A student asked: how was it possible for a three year old girl to be strong enough to water camels? If she were so young, how could she have made a decision to get married? Is it reasonable to think that a forty year old man like Yitzhak would marry a three year old girl? The rabbi responded: if our sages say that Rivka was three years old, that's how old she was! There is no room for further discussion.

Actually, there is a lot more room for discussion. And the discussion needs to be on the nature of midrashic statements. The teacher cited above--like so many others--seems to think that midrashic statements must be taken to be factually correct and must be understood as being literally true. Yet, such an approach requires students to accept many strange and even contradictory statements.

In his introduction to Perek Helek, Rambam inveighed against those who insisted on the literal veracity of midrashim, even when the midrashim veered from reason and scientific fact: "This group of impoverished understanding--one must pity their foolishness. According to their understanding, they are honoring and elevating our sages; in fact they are lowering them to the end of lowliness...By Heaven! This group is dissipating the glory of the Torah and clouding its lights, placing the Torah of God opposite of its intention."

When we study and teach midrashim/aggadot, we must be sophisticated enough to view these passages in their literary and rhetorical context. We must understand the nature of symbolic language and the use of hyperbole.

The calculation that Rivka was three years old at the time of her marriage to Yitzhak assumes that the Akeidah, the death of Sarah and the birth of Rivka all happened on the same day. There is no historical reason to believe this is so. The Torah itself never specifies how much time elapsed between these events. The midrashic statement that Rivka was three is actually a way of saying that she was at least three--but may well have been older. Indeed, the Tosafot (Yevamot 61b, on the words "ve-khein hu omer") reports a rabbinic calculation which concludes that Rivka was fourteen years old at the time she watered the camels and married Yitzhak. Thus even within rabbinic tradition there is a difference of opinion about Rivka's age.

The view that she was three years old apparently wishes to underscore the unusual, even miraculous, qualities of Rivka, just as a midrash has Abraham discovering God at the age of three. There is no way our sages could have known that Rivka or Abraham had been three years old: this was their way of stressing how unusual these individuals were.

No parent or teacher should insist that a child or student must believe that Rivka was three "because Hazal say so." Hazal also said she was fourteen! Midrashic statements are often made to convey a lesson, not to record historical fact. We should not compel people to accept the literal veracity of the midrash that has a three year old Rivka marrying a forty year old Yitzhak. To accept such a statement is not only religiously unnecessary, but morally repugnant.

Angel for Shabbat