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WHEN MIDRASH GOES TOO FAR: THREE REJECTED MIDRASHIC PASSAGES

Over the course of Jewish history, many *midrashim* have been collected in the Talmud and classical midrashic texts such as *Mekhilta*, *Sifra*, *Sifri*, *Midrash Rabbah*, *Midrash Tanhuma*, and others. They have become popularly known by being quoted by Rashi and other commentators. However, not all *midrashim* have the same status. R. Hai Gaon explains that *midrashim* that are found in the Talmud are considered to be superior to those found only in midrash collections. He states that the *midrashim* included in the Talmud should be explained and clarified, while those not found in the Talmud can be rejected if they do not seem reasonable.¹ The classical midrashic texts are popular collections of *midrashim* representing material from varying eras that did not undergo any canonization process. Only the *midrashim* found in the Talmud can be viewed as canonical, by virtue of their inclusion in a canonical text, the Talmud.² The distinction between Talmudic and extra-Talmudic *midrashim* was noted in more recent times by the Hatam Sofer,³ paraphrasing Ramban,⁴ that there is no obligation to accept *midrashim* that

¹ *Otsar ha-Geonim*, B.M. Lewin, ed., (Jerusalem: 1932) vol. 4, *Haggiga* 14a., 59-60: “But what is not established in the Talmud we do not need so much, if it is proper and good we study and teach it, and if not we take no heed of it.” See also the footnotes there that refer to similar statements.

² See, for example, R. Yehuda ben Barzillai of Barcelona (11th century) in his *Peirush Sefer Yetsira*, S.J. Helberstam, ed., (Berlin: 1885), 89, where he calls *midrashim* that are not included in the Talmud “external *aggadot*” and explains that only those included in the Talmud are accurate “because they were elucidated and mentioned in the Talmud.”

³ *She’eilot u-Teshuvot Hatam Sofer*, Orah Hayyim, 16.

⁴ Chaim Chavel, ed., *Kitvei Ramban* (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1963), vol. 1, 308, see the notes there, and the letter regarding them in *Hadarom* 20 (1964), 160.

are not included in either the Babylonian or Jerusalem Talmud.⁵ Even the 13th century sage R. Moshe Taku, who takes a literal approach to midrashic literature,⁶ distinguishes between *midrashim* found in the Talmud and those that are not, noting that we only rely on *midrashim* that were included in the Talmud.⁷

Some *midrashim* were not included in the classical midrashic texts, and occasionally we find an early Torah exegete referring to a *midrash* for which we have no earlier source.⁸ If not for this mention, these *midrashim* would have otherwise been lost to us. These found *midrashim* generally enter the corpus of normative Torah commentary, but not always. Since they do not have the provenance of the classical *midrashim*, there is more room to be critical of their content and even reject them as unacceptable. However, as we have noted, even those found in the classical midrashic texts may be subject to rejection. In this article, we will examine *midrashim* that were considered by some commentators to be beyond the pale of legitimacy.⁹ The way these commentators approached these interpretations demonstrates just how far a midrashic commentary can go beyond the simple meaning of the text and still remain acceptable.

The Injury of Isaac

According to the Torah, Isaac emerged from the experience of nearly being sacrificed by Abraham physically unscathed. The *midrash* emphasizes this by telling us that the angel made sure that no harm at all would befall Isaac. *Bereshit Rabbah*, in its interpretation of Genesis 22:12, relates that the angels destroyed the knife that Abraham was holding. Undeterred, Abraham asked if he should perhaps strangle Isaac. He was told, “Do not stretch out your hand against the lad.”

⁵ See the discussion of this statement of the Hatam Sofer by R. Eliezer Waldenberg in *Tsits Eliezer* vol. 10, 36:4.

⁶ Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Myth and Rabbinic Mythmaking* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 253-254.

⁷ He calls non-Talmudic midrashic works “*sefarim hitsonim*.” See his statement regarding *Midrash Mishlei* in his work *Sefer Ketav Tamim*, found in *Otsar Nehmad*, vol. 3, Ignaz Blumenfeld, ed., (Vienna: 1860), 63.

⁸ There are entire collections of *midrashim* that are sometimes quoted, particularly in *Yalkut Shimoni*, and thus we know their titles, but are otherwise lost to us, such as *Midrash Esfa* and *Midrash Avkir*; see Reizel, Anat, *Introduction to the Midrashic Literature* (Alon Shvut: Tevunot, 2011), 423-429.

⁹ Some midrashic works were rejected because they seem to reflect non-Jewish influences; see Hananel Mack, *The Aggadic Midrash Literature* (Tel-Aviv: MOD Books, 1989), 22-24. These *midrashim* will not be discussed here.

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Abraham then asked if he should just let a drop of Isaac's blood, to which he was told, "nor do anything to him," not even a blemish.¹⁰ This *midrash* illustrates the idea that God abhors human sacrifice of any kind, at any level.

There is an alternate midrashic tradition that states that Isaac was in fact mortally wounded by Abraham and had to be rescued by the angels. The book *Hadar Zekenim* is a compilation of the Torah commentaries of the Tosafists. Therein it is stated that Riva (R. Yitzchak ben Asher, c. 1055-1125), an early French Tosafist who studied for a time under Rashi,¹¹ "found a *midrash*." This *midrash* teaches that Isaac was taken away to the Garden of Eden for two years so that he could heal from the wound that Abraham made as he began to slaughter him.¹² This also explains why only Abraham is mentioned as returning from Mount Moriah in Genesis 22:19.

This *midrash* is mentioned in the book *Pa'aneah Raza* by R. Yitshak ha-Levi (13th century) in his commentary to Genesis 23:2. There we read that "Abraham came to eulogize Sarah and to cry for her." According to Masoretic tradition, the Hebrew word for "and to cry for her" (*ve-livkotah*) is spelled here without the letter *vav* and with an undersized letter *kaf*. *Pa'aneah Raza* explains that the missing and small letters hint to the fact that there was less crying at her funeral than there should have been, because Isaac was not in attendance. In fact, Isaac is not mentioned in all of Genesis, ch. 23. This is because Isaac was still in the Garden of Eden, recovering from the wound that Abraham had inflicted.¹³ *Pa'aneah Raza* also references this *midrash* in his commentary to Genesis 24:62, "And Isaac came." He notes that the numerical value of those words in the verse is equal to the numerical value of the words "from the Garden of Eden," hinting that until then Isaac was still with the angels, getting his wound healed.¹⁴

This *midrash* is referenced by another of the Tosafists, R. Yaakov of Vienna (14th century) in his commentary to Genesis 23:2, also as an explanation for why Isaac was not at his mother's funeral. R. Yaakov writes

¹⁰ *Bereshit Rabbah*, 56:7. The end of this *midrash* uses a play on the word for "anything" (*me'umah*) which is similar to the word for "blemish" (*mum*).

¹¹ Avraham Grossman, *The Early Sages of France* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2001) [in Hebrew], 442-444.

¹² *Hadar Zekenim* (Bnei Brak: *Makhon le-Hafatsat Peirushei Baalei ha-Tosafot Al ha-Torah*), 56, Genesis 25:27.

¹³ *Pa'aneah Raza* (Jerusalem: Machon Torat ha-Rishonim, 1998), 107, Genesis 23:2.

¹⁴ *Pa'aneah Raza*, 116, Genesis 24:62. The numerical value of both phrases is 217.

that Isaac was still in the Garden of Eden, recovering from “the small wound” that Abraham made.¹⁵

This *midrash* appears periodically in various commentaries.¹⁶ For example, the 17th century collection *Yalkut David* uses this *midrash* to explain a rabbinic interpretation of Genesis 27:27. In the verse, Isaac says that Jacob smells like a field, which is interpreted in the *midrash* as the smell of the Garden of Eden.¹⁷ How did Isaac know what the Garden of Eden smelled like? Because he spent time there recovering from when Abraham cut “most of his two *simmanim*” (the wind pipe and esophagus) on Mount Moriah.¹⁸

It is interesting to note how various sources refer to the extent of the wound that Abraham made, from R. Yaakov of Vienna’s “small wound” to “most of his two *simmanim*” in *Yalkut David*. On the one hand, there is an approach that seeks to minimize the harm that Abraham caused Isaac, making Abraham obedient to the angel’s command not to harm Isaac. The other approach, which maximizes the wound, prefers to emphasize the zeal with which Abraham wanted to fulfill his understanding of the original command of God, the charge to offer up his son. Other versions of this *midrash*, including the original statement in *Hadar Zekenim*, do not detail the extent of the injury that Abraham made, though it must be seen as a fairly serious wound if Isaac had to spend a long time recovering in the Garden of Eden.

While this *midrash* may be handy as an explanation for Isaac’s absence at his mother’s funeral, and for why he did not go out himself to seek a wife, it seems to contradict the major lessons of the narrative. One of the themes is that Abraham was totally obedient to God and willing to sacrifice his son, yet in this *midrash*, Abraham goes too far, disobeys the new command, and harms his son. The other lesson, that God does not

¹⁵ *Commentary of Rabbi Yaakov of Vienna on the Torah* (Mayence: R. Asher Lehmann, 1888), 25-26 (Hebrew). Note that in this version it is stated that Isaac was in the Garden of Eden for twenty years (the numerical value of the letter *kaf*), but this was corrected in the book *Tosafot ha-Shalem*, Genesis 23:2, item 15, to read “two years.” The copyist’s error arose because of the similarity of the letters *kaf* (20) and *bet* (2).

¹⁶ For a full history of the idea that Isaac was in fact sacrificed, see Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial* (Woodstock: Jewish Lights, 1993) especially 38-50. This idea particularly resonated with the Jews in Europe during the Crusades, who themselves experienced widespread martyrdom, leading to its popularity, see Spiegel, 120, n. 158, and 134. See also Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003), 233, n. 255.

¹⁷ *Bereshit Rabbah*, 65:22.

¹⁸ David Posner, *Yalkut David* (Ashdod: Merkaz Zikaron Le-Kedoshei Polin, 1999), Gen. 27:27.

want human sacrifice, is also contradicted by the *midrash* that portrays Isaac as being sacrificed with no critique of Abraham.

This *midrash* is not found in any of the classic midrash collections. *Midrash ha-Gadol* does mention the idea that Isaac was taken by God to the Garden of Eden as part of the story relating that Sarah died when she saw Abraham returning home alone from Mount Moriah. *Midrash ha-Gadol* states that Isaac was in the Garden of Eden for three years, but does not mention why he was taken there.¹⁹ *Hizkuni* also mentions the possibility that Isaac was in the Garden of Eden for three years, but also does not mention why he was taken there, leaving out the wounding element of the *midrash* above.²⁰

Bereishit Rabbah provides alternate explanations for why only Abraham was mentioned as returning from Mount Moriah in Genesis 22:19. R. Berekhia explains that Abraham sent Isaac to go learn at the house of study of Shem and Ever. R. Hanina explains that Abraham sent Isaac away under the cover of night in order to avoid the evil eye.²¹ *Midrash ha-Gadol* in the name of R. Elazar adds that Abraham gets credit as if he sacrificed Isaac, so it is as if Isaac was not around anymore.²²

In his glosses to *Pa'aneah Raza*, R. Yitshak Katz, son-in-law of the Maharal of Prague, states that it makes no sense to say that Abraham injured Isaac. Abraham was told specifically, “Do not stretch out your hand against the lad.”²³ Since one of the themes in this chapter is Abraham’s complete obedience to God, there is no way that he would harm Isaac after being told not to. R. Yitshak offers an alternate interpretation, that Isaac was taken to the Garden of Eden by the angels in order for them to heal his eyes from the injury that their tears caused when they fell into his eyes.²⁴

Another lost midrashic passage along these lines is preserved by R. Tsidkiyyah ben Avraham ha-Rofeh in the discussion of Shemoneh Esrei in *Shibbolei ha-Leket*.²⁵ He writes that he “found an *aggadah*” that explains that every benediction in the Amidah is connected to an event in the life of a Biblical figure. The second blessing, which deals with the resurrection of the dead, is said to refer to Isaac being brought back to life by God after being burnt to ashes on the altar. The idea of Isaac dying during the *akeida* and being revived by God is found in classical *midrashim* as well,

¹⁹ *Midrash ha-Gadol*, Genesis 22:19.

²⁰ *Hizkuni*, Genesis 22:19.

²¹ *Bereishit Rabbah*, 56:11.

²² *Midrash ha-Gadol*, Genesis 22:19.

²³ Genesis 22:12.

²⁴ *Pa'aneah Raza*, 107, Genesis 23:2. See *Bereishit Rabbah* 65:10.

²⁵ *Shibbolei ha-Leket*, *Inyan Tefilla*, 18.

but there Isaac dies of fright before any injury can take place.²⁶ On the other hand, this found midrashic passage takes the *midrash* of Riva much further: Isaac was actually sacrificed during the *akeida*, not just injured.

Ibn Ezra was aware of this approach and takes a strong position, writing that whoever claims that Isaac was slain is saying the opposite of the text. He notes that Isaac is not mentioned specifically as returning from Mount Moriah simply because he was under the care of Abraham, so it is enough that Abraham's return is written. It cannot be claimed that Abraham "slaughtered him and left him."²⁷ The point of this episode is to demonstrate that God does not want human sacrifice, and that lesson is contradicted if Isaac was in fact slaughtered by Abraham.²⁸

One of the functions of rabbinic *midrash* is to explain anomalies or fill in gaps in the biblical narrative. The *midrash* cited by Riva can be used to answer some questions raised by the text of Genesis 22 and 23 regarding the absence of Isaac. However, other commentators felt that this *midrash* could not be accepted since it contradicts the lessons of the biblical narrative so completely. For these commentators, this *midrash* is rejected and other ways to deal with the textual questions were found. There seems to be a philosophical dispute behind the proponents of Riva's *midrash* and those who reject it; what is the message that the *akeida* comes to teach: is it meant to demonstrate Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, or God's rejection of human sacrifice? If it is Abraham's willingness, then to go through with the act of sacrifice makes Abraham even more impressive, while if it is the rejection of human sacrifice, under no circumstances could Abraham have gone through with such an abhorrent act.²⁹

The Son of Moses Given Over to Idolatry

One of the more cryptic narratives in the Bible is the "Bridegroom of Blood" episode recorded in Exodus 4:24-26. Moses' life is saved by Ziporah when she circumcises their son. Much has been written on these

²⁶ See for example *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, ch. 31, where Isaac dies the moment the knife touches his throat. See Spiegel, 30-32.

²⁷ Ibn Ezra, Genesis 22:19.

²⁸ See Spiegel, 73, "The Akedah story repels once and for all the primitive notion of the...demand for the literal sacrifice of children. The Akedah story declared war on the remnants of idolatry in Israel and undertook to remove root and branch the whole long, terror-laden inheritance from idolatrous generations."

²⁹ On the two messages of the *akeida*, see David Shatz, *Jewish Thought in Dialogue: Essays on Thinkers, Theologies, and Moral Theories* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2009), 265, 266.

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three verses,³⁰ but what concerns us here is the reason that Moses' son was not circumcised earlier. The Talmud (*Nedarim* 31b-32a) records the explanation given by R. Yose:

God forbid that Moses should have been apathetic towards circumcision, but he reasoned thus: 'If I circumcise [my son] and [straightway] go forth [on my mission to Pharaoh], I will endanger his life, as it is written, "and it came to pass on the third day, when they were sore" (Gen. 34:25). If I circumcise him and tarry three days, the Holy One, blessed be He, has commanded: "Go, return unto Egypt" (Ex. 4:19)! Why then was Moses punished? Because he busied himself first with the inn, as it is written, "And it came to pass by the way, in the inn" (Ex. 4:24).

Based on this, it was the youngest son of Moses, Eliezer, a newborn at the time, that was not yet circumcised. The dilemma that Moses faced when presented with two conflicting obligations, timely circumcision and God's command to go to Egypt immediately, is a formidable one and Moses is only blamed for making arrangements at the inn before circumcising his son, which he was planning to do as soon as possible.

However, a different reason is found in the *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael* (Yitro, *parasha alef*, on Ex. 18:3). There R. Elazar ha-Modai explains that when Moses asked Jethro for his daughter's hand in marriage, Jethro agreed on the condition that Moses would set aside his firstborn son for idolatry. Moses would be able to raise all subsequent children as he saw fit. According to the *midrash*, Moses agreed to this condition and swore to uphold this bargain when pressed to do so by Jethro. Based on this, it is Gershom, the firstborn son of Moses, who was left uncircumcised as part of this arrangement. It now becomes understandable why Zipporah had to perform the circumcision, as Moses was bound by his oath to Jethro not to do so.

The idea that Moses agreed to leave Gershom uncircumcised as part of a deal with Jethro is also found in Targum Yonatan to Ex. 4:24, and in the later midrashic works *Midrash Aggada*³¹ and *Sefer ha-Yashar*.³² The more obscure *Midrash va-Yosha* explains that the arrangement was to "have half the children raised as Jews and half as Ishmaelites."³³ While

³⁰ For a basic overview, see Yehuda Nachshoni, *Hagahot Be-Parshiyot Ha-Torah* (Bnei Brak: Sifriati, 1989), 221-224, and Baruch Rakovsky, *Birkat Avot* (Jerusalem: 1990), *siman* 13.

³¹ *Midrash Aggada*, Ex. 18:3.

³² *Sefer ha-Yashar* (Brooklyn, New York: Tiferes Publishing, 1960), 223.

³³ J.D. Eisenstein, ed., *Otsar Midrashim* (New York: Noble Offset Printers, 1915), 150.

these sources are of questionable authorship and later composition, the *Mekhilta* is a highly regarded Tannaitic Midrash, one of the oldest midrashic works, completed around 400 CE. It cannot be disregarded as obscure or not authoritative.³⁴

It is very strange to portray Moses as agreeing to leave his firstborn son uncircumcised. However, this *midrash* can be seen as following the flow of the text, as immediately before the “Bridegroom of Blood” episode we find God speaking to Moses in Ex. 4:22-23 saying: “And thou shalt say unto Pharaoh: ‘Thus saith the Lord: Israel is My son, My firstborn. And I have said unto thee: Let My son go, that he may serve Me; and thou hast refused to let him go. Behold, I will slay thy son, thy firstborn.’” According to the approach of the *Mekhilta*, while this threat was overtly directed to Pharaoh, it may be seen as including a warning to Moses regarding his own firstborn son. The *midrash* may also be viewed as a continuation of the portrayal of Moses in the text as fleeing any connection with his Israelite brethren in Egypt, adapting to a quiet life among the Midianites and returning to his people only reluctantly at God’s insistence. Among the Tosafists, this *midrash* was used to explain why only the second son of Moses has a name of God as part of his name (Eliezer), which is because Moses did not want to give a holy name to his uncircumcised eldest son,³⁵ and why the chapter dealing with the laws of circumcision in Tractate *Shabbat* begins specifically with a statement from R. Eliezer (130a).³⁶ This *midrash* is also cited as the reason that Moses’ grandson, the son of Gershom who was set aside for idolatry, would later turn to idolatry himself.³⁷

While there may be some way to justify a *midrash* that Moses agreed to leave Gershom uncircumcised, the *Mekhilta* actually goes beyond this and explicitly states that Moses agreed to raise him as an idolater, something far more difficult to explain. This is also the version preserved in *Yalkut Shimoni*.³⁸ Many have attempted to explain this *midrash*. R. Yaakov ben Asher (*Baal ha-Turim*) in his commentary to Ex. 2:16 explains that this was all a ruse by Moses as part of his long range plan to get close

³⁴ Jacob Z. Lauterbach, *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), xxv.

³⁵ *Peirush Rabbenu Ephraim al ha-Torah* (Jerusalem: Julius Klugman and Sons, 1992), Ex. 18:3, 237. This is also found in the commentary attributed to R. Elazar of Worms, *Peirush ha-Rokeah al ha-Torah* (Bnei Brak: Julius Klugman and Sons, 2001), Ex. 18:4, 97.

³⁶ *Peirush Rabbenu Ephraim al ha-Torah*, Ex. 18:1, 246.

³⁷ *Hizkuni*, Ex. 4:25. See Jud. 18:30, *Baba Batra* 109b.

³⁸ *Yalkut Shimoni*, Exodus, remez 169.

to Jethro and ultimately convert him, a plan that in fact succeeded. The Tosafist Rabbenu Ephraim explains that Moses only agreed to raise his son according to local custom, meaning adopting the Midianite language and dress, but certainly not to raise him as an idolater.³⁹ *Hizkuni* mentions this *midrash* in his commentary on Ex. 4:25 and concludes “we do not ask questions about *aggadot*.”

An interesting interpretation is found in the writings of R. Isaac Meir of Gur. He explains that Jethro wanted his grandson to find God the way he himself did, after investigating and experimenting with idolatry, but nobody intended that Gershom would remain an idolater in the long run.⁴⁰ This also resolves the conflict between this *midrash* and the idea found in *Midrash Tanhuma* that by the time Moses met him, Jethro had stopped being an idolater himself.⁴¹

Other approaches to explaining this *midrash* are found in two responsa by R. Eliezer Waldenberg,⁴² who feels that the best explanation is that offered by Radbaz in his own responsum on the subject.⁴³ Radbaz explains that Moses found a “loophole” in the oath Jethro made him take. Instead of saying the words “The firstborn will be set aside for idolatry and any son born from *then* on will be raised to fear God,” the oath was stated as “any son born from *now* on,” meaning from the time of the oath, not from the time after the first son was born. Thus Moses in fact did not agree to have any of his children raised as idolaters.

Some exegetes went a step further than trying to interpret this *midrash* and instead rejected it outright. This may even be hinted at in the discussion of the episode in *Nedarim* 31b. R. Menachem Kasher explains that the strong language used by R. Yose there, “God forbid that Moses should have been apathetic towards circumcision” may be directed against the *midrash* in the *Mekhilta*.⁴⁴ Ibn Ezra notes that some interpret God’s threat to Pharaoh, “Behold, I will slay thy son, thy first-born” as being directed to Moses. He calls such an approach insane (*shiggaon*).⁴⁵ Ibn Ezra also rejects the idea that Moses would agree not to circumcise his son, saying that “a prophet would not do that, and certainly not the

³⁹ Menachem Kasher, *Torah Sheleima* (Jerusalem: Beit Torah Sheleima, 1992), Ex. 2:21, n. 166.

⁴⁰ *Hiddushei ha-Rim* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRim Levin, 1992), 83. A version of this idea may also be found in the end of *Hizkuni*’s commentary to Ex. 4:25.

⁴¹ *Midrash Tanhuma*, Exodus 11. See also Rashi, Ex. 2:16-17.

⁴² Eliezer Waldenberg, *Tsits Eliezer* (Jerusalem: 1990) vol. 18, 52 and 53.

⁴³ *She’ilot u-Teshuvot Radbaz*, 6:2,168.

⁴⁴ Kasher, Ex. 2:21, n. 166.

⁴⁵ Ibn Ezra, Ex. 4:23.

prophet of prophets.”⁴⁶ R. Issachar Eilenberg (1570-1623), author of the book of responsa, *Beer Sheva*, in his work on the Torah, *Tseida la-Derekh*, voices a similar opinion. He notes that this *midrash* is in conflict with the *midrash* that by this time Jethro had left idolatrous practices. Beyond that, and even though we do not ask questions on a *midrash*, it seems strange to think that Moses would agree to this condition, such a thing is unacceptable for a Jewish person. He prefers the approach of most exegetes that it was the younger son who was not yet circumcised.⁴⁷

This *midrash* was rejected on the grounds that it is unfathomable that the greatest prophet and leader of the Jewish people would agree to have his son raised as an idolater. It goes against the character of Moses as portrayed in the Torah and understood by traditional exegetes. The fact that this *midrash* appears in a Tannaitic source could not protect it from such strong criticism and save it from rejection.

The Death of Abraham's Daughter

The Talmud, *Baba Batra* 16b, records a discussion of whether Abraham had a daughter or not, based on the verse “And Abraham was old, well stricken in age; and the Lord had blessed Abraham in all things” (Gen. 24:1). R. Meir explains that part of this blessing is that Abraham did not have a daughter. R. Judah says the opposite, that part of being blessed “in all things” is that Abraham had a daughter. Others comment that the verse is teaching the name of Abraham’s daughter, “*ba-kol*,” literally, “in all things”.

The idea that Abraham had a daughter is used by some commentators to explain the undersized letter *kaf* in the Hebrew word for “and to cry for her” (*ve-livkotah*) describing Abraham’s mourning for Sarah in Genesis 23:2. One of the standard ways to interpret small letters is to read the word as if the small letter does not appear.⁴⁸ Reading the word without the small *kaf* gives us “and for her daughter” (*u-leBittah*). The Tosafist Rabbenu Ephraim explains that this indicates that Abraham cried along with his daughter, or that Abraham cried also because Sarah died before seeing her daughter get married.⁴⁹ R. Abraham Menachem Rappaport

⁴⁶ Ibn Ezra, Ex. 4:25. See also Ibn Ezra on Ex. 2:22, 4:20, where he warns not to rely on the *midrashim* that Moses spent time as king of Ethiopia.

⁴⁷ Issachar Eilenberg, *Tseida la-Derekh* (Prague), 59a-59b.

⁴⁸ Abraham Jacobs, *Haser u-Maleh ba-Tanakh* (Jerusalem: Refael Cohen Publishing, 1976), 7, 12.

⁴⁹ Jacob Gellis, *Tosafot ha-Shalem* (Jerusalem: Mifal Tosafot haS-halem Publishing, 1983) vol. 2, 232, item 26.

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(Italy, 1520-1596) in his Torah commentary *Minha Belula*, states, “I found a *midrash* that the *kaf* is small and is as if it is not there and the word is read *u-leBittah* because her daughter also died on that day... and there is no chronological order in the Torah.”⁵⁰ This explanation is also found in the collected Torah commentaries of R. Yehoshua Leib Diskin (known as Maharil Diskin, 1818-1898), although without reference to *Minha Belulah*.⁵¹ According to this *midrash*, the text is hinting that Sarah and her daughter died on the same day.

The publication of this interpretation of Maharil Diskin in the 1970s prompted a question from R. Ephraim Greenblatt to R. Moshe Feinstein.⁵² R. Feinstein writes that he himself has not seen this book and never saw this idea in any *midrash*, and while that does not constitute evidence, it seems implausible to say that Abraham received such a great punishment, to have his wife and daughter die on the same day. If such a tragedy is not mentioned explicitly in the verses it should not be said about Abraham. Furthermore, since the very idea that Abraham had a daughter at all is based on the words “and the Lord had blessed Abraham in all things,” what sort of blessing is it if she died on the same day as her mother? Especially when we consider that this verse that presumably teaches that Abraham’s daughter was a blessing for him is found in the Torah after she allegedly died! R. Feinstein concludes, “Therefore it is clear that this is an error and if it is found in any source it is an error there, as we see that it is not found in the commentaries of the early Sages.”⁵³

Among the reasons he gives for rejecting this *midrash* is that it contradicts the basic theme of the verse that “the Lord had blessed Abraham in all things.” A great tragedy such as this negates the message of the Torah that Abraham lived a blessed life. It is interesting to note that the

⁵⁰ R. Avraham Menachem Rappaport, *Minha Belula* (Bnei Brak: Sela Publishing, 1989), 72.

⁵¹ *Hiddushei Maharil Diskin al ha-Torah* (Jerusalem: 1971) p. 54.

⁵² *Iggerot Moshe, Orach Hayyim* 4 (40:6).

⁵³ This is reminiscent of R. Feinstein’s attitude towards the commentary of R. Judah he-Hasid on the Torah, regarding certain passages that he considered heretical, that they could not have been written by him and must be a forgery, *Iggerot Moshe, Yoreh Deah* 3 (114,115). On this, see Marc Shapiro, *The Limits of Orthodox Theology* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004) 101, n. 73. See also Haym Soloveitchik, “Two Notes on the *Commentary on the Torah* of R. Yehudah he-Hasid” in *Turim: Studies in Jewish History and Literature Presented to Dr. Bernard Lander* vol. 2 (Touro College Press: New York, 2008), 241-251. This seems to be one of the ways R. Feinstein deals with works that he considers objectionable; see for example, Alan Jotkowitz, “On the Methodology of Jewish Medical Ethics,” *Tradition* 43:1, (2010), 44.

Hatam Sofer brings a similar explanation that Abraham's daughter had died previously and now at the funeral of Sarah, Abraham felt the loss of his daughter intensely and so he was crying over both of them.⁵⁴ According to this, Abraham's daughter died before the "blessed in all things" verse, but at least she did not die on the same day as her mother. Since an aspect of the great tragedy noted by R. Feinstein is not mentioned in this commentary, it was not seen as beyond the pale of legitimacy. As with the Riva's *midrash* above, there seems to be a theological issue behind the question of whether to accept or reject of this *midrash*, namely whether or not it is acceptable to state that God would cause the simultaneous loss of both the wife and daughter of the righteous Abraham, and, more generally, whether it is valid to say that tragedies occur to righteous individuals for no apparent reason.

In fact, R. Feinstein does not shy away from calling for emendations even in classical midrashic texts when he feels they contain what he considers theologically untenable ideas. In another responsum, R. Feinstein characterizes a passage in *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* (34:4) where Ezra is described as being responsible for putting dots over certain letters and words in the Torah that he was unsure of, as "a clear error" that must be emended, even though it appears in all manuscripts and was never emended by any authority previously.⁵⁵ The same passage appears in *Bemidbar Rabbah* 3:13, implying that R. Feinstein would call for that to be emended as well. Theological concerns take precedence not only over obscure, lost midrashic passages, but even over established texts.

Just because a *midrash* is not found in a classical collection does not mean that it is automatically rejected. For example, R. Yaakov ben Asher (*Baal ha-Turim*) in his commentary to Ex. 7:12 mentions a midrash that, just as the staff of Aaron swallowed the staves of the Egyptian magicians, so too later, after the Korah rebellion, when Moses collected the staves of the tribal leaders, Aaron's staff swallowed them all and spat them out right before Moses came to take them, thus preventing them from sprouting.⁵⁶ This is a fanciful *midrash*, not found in earlier sources. However, it does not undercut any biblical theme or theological idea and therefore did not arouse any opposition, even as it lacked provenance. Similarly, as we have seen, just because a *midrash* is included in one of the classical works, it is not automatically accepted.

⁵⁴ R. Moses Sofer, *Torat Moshe* (Pressburg, 1879), 12b.

⁵⁵ *Iggerot Moshe, Yoreh Deah* 3:114.

⁵⁶ *Baal ha-Turim al ha-Torah*, Yaakov Reinitz, ed. (Bnei Brak: Rubenstein's Press, 1985) vol. 1, 129, see n. 20.

TRADITION

Even accepting that midrashic commentary is not meant to be taken literally, there are limits to what may be said in such a commentary. We have seen that found *midrashim* with no tradition of being part of the corpus of traditional Jewish exegesis were sometimes rejected on the grounds that they subverted the plain meaning, underlying theme, or theological message of the biblical narrative. However, even classical *midrashim* which do not appear in the Talmud are not guaranteed safety from rejection on the same grounds, and in fact were discounted by rabbinic authorities from medieval to contemporary times.