

ParShaT **VaYaYRaH**- One Pager Series

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[Background: We devote this year's issues to defenses of Rashi from other commentators and bible scholars. Today we present a drama of dialogues between 4 commentators]

Rashi #1 Biblical Text: Gn18-12,13b [Sarah hears about her upcoming pregnancy] Sarah laughed inside herself: 1)After I have withered, I would have delight? 2)My master is old God said to Abraham: Why did Sarah laugh saying Can I indeed give birth 3) I am old

Rashi: #1: Citing the Talmud (TB BM 87a) "The Bible changed (language) for the sake of peace for it said 'I am old'"

Modern Scholarship: Cohen (2003) argues that there are two schools: The Talmudic *derash* school and the 10th-13th century new *peshat* school. Cohen's language is illuminating: The Rabbis were eager. They pounce on the contrast of 1-2) and 3) leading to a moral message. Cohen *incorrectly understands* Rashi's treatment of the difference between 1,2, and 3) as follows

1) I have withered 2) My master is old
----- 3) I am old

In other words, Cohen thinks that Rashi thinks that the Bible changed "My master is old" to "I am old" and hence teaches the moral lesson that one should change language for the sake of peace.

Ibn Ezra: Ibn Ezra states that 1), 2) and 3) should be read as follows (and therefor these is no change from 2) to 3)):

1) I have withered 2) My master is old
3) I am old

RaDaQ: RadaQ defends Ibn Ezra. "Both #1) "I have withered" and #3) "I am old" have the same meaning. The meaning is repeated with equivalent words. [And therefore, the Talmud does not have a basis for its *derash*]

ChisQuNi: Chisquni one of the great Rashi commentators ingeniously defends Rashi / Talmud by reading as follows:

1) I have withered 2) My master is old
3) I am old -----

Chisquni claims that the Rashi/Talmudic statement "The Bible changed language" does not refer to the *withered-old* change but rather to the *omission* of clause #2). Sarah said #1) and #2) but God only cited #3) corresponding to #1. The omission that "Sarah said 'my master is old'" is the change God made for the sake of peace.

RaDaQ: Radaq disagrees with ChisQuni. "The reason the phrase "my master is old" is omitted is because older men can have children, so it is not the most important part of Sarah's laughter/astonishment. The most important part is the statement that "I am withered" which God cited as "I am old" which has the same meaning in equivalent words.

Rashi, our approach: The approach of this newsletter is to emphasize *tone*. Contrastively the approach of Ibn Ezra, Radaq, and Chisquni, is what we might call a *contract-law* approach studying every word. Thus, the three approaches of Ibn Ezra, Radaq, Chisquni are #A) "My master is old" vs "I am old", #B) "I am withered" vs. "I am old" (which may not be significant), and #C) A two clause statement "I am withered; my master is old" vs. a one-clause statement "I am old."

Rashi, tone: Contrastively, Rashi emphasizes *tone* as understood by a literate speaker in biblical Hebrew. Words have connotations. In English the word-phrases "has been", "over the hill", "at the end of the trail" are all more pejorative in tone than the word-phrases which have the same meaning (but different tone) "matured", "aged". The Hebrew word Sarah used, *belothi*, comes from the root *to wither*, and connotes something fading. Contrastively, the word God used in citing Sarah, *zakanti*, connotes *maturity* and *life experience*.

Rashi, Talmud revisited: Thus, we could rephrase the Talmudic-Rashi statement as follows: Sarah lacked self-esteem, she considered herself *withered*, a has-been. God in citing her, changed the words she used which although equivalent in meaning has a more positive tone: "I am aged, and matured: How can I have children." The Talmud notes that such changes in citation are warranted for the sake of peace.

Reading literacy: We emphasize that this interpretation of Rashi could easily occur on a reading-literacy test. E.g. "Sarah says she is withered" What is Sarah's attitude on herself A) Negative, B) positive, C) Can't be determined, D) Factual." The correct answer would be A). This shows the objectivity of the Rashi comment.