

These and These

Eruvin 13b:10-11

Rabbi Abba said in the name of Shmuel, For three years, the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai argued. One said, 'The halakha is like us,' and the other said, 'The halakha is like us.' A heavenly voice spoke: "These and these are the words of the living God, and the halakha is like the House of Hillel." A question was raised: Since the heavenly voice declared: "Both these and those are the words of the Living God," why was the halacha established to follow the opinion of Hillel? It is because the students of Hillel were kind and gracious. They taught their own ideas as well as the ideas from the students of Shammai. Not only for this reason, but they went so far as to teach Shammai's opinions first.

- What values do you see at work in this text?
- When have you been able to respect and teach other opinions even when they're different from your own? When have you struggled with that? What made it possible for you to do that in some cases but not in others?
- Are you more likely to see someone with a Hillel approach (as described here) as more of a trustworthy leader than one who doesn't take that approach? Why or why not?
- What are some examples you've seen of teachers who follow in Hillel's footsteps?

From "Argument as Emergence, Rhetoric as Love" by Jim Corder:

Each of us is an argument, evidenced by our narrative. What happens, then, if the narrative of another crushes up against our own -- disruptive, shocking, incomprehensible, threatening, suddenly showing us into a narrative not our own? What happens if a narrative not our own reveals to us that our own narrative was wanting all along, though it is the only evidence of our identity? What happens if the merest glimpse into another narrative sends us lurching, stunned by its differentness, either alarmed that such differentness could exist or astonished to see that our own narrative might have been or might yet be radically otherwise than it is? Do we hold our narratives? Keep telling the story we have been telling? At all costs?

We react, of course, in many different ways. Sometimes we turn away from other narratives. Sometimes we teach ourselves not to know that there are other narratives. Sometimes - probably all too seldom - we encounter another narrative and learn to change our own. Sometimes we lose our plot, and our convictions as well; since our convictions belong to our narratives, any strong interference with our narrative or sapping of its way of being will also interrupt or sap our convictions. Sometimes we go to war. Sometimes we sink into madness, totally unable to manage what our wit or judgment has shown us: a contending narrative that has force to it and charm and appeal and perhaps justice and beauty as well, a narrative compelling us to attention and toward belief that we cannot ultimately give, a contending narrative that shakes and cracks all foundations and promises to alter our identity, a narrative that would

עירובין י"ג ב: כ"ז-ל"ב

א"ר אבא אמר שמואל שלש שנים
נחלקו ב"ש וב"ה הללו אומרים
הלכה כמותנו והללו אומרים הלכה
כמותנו יצאה בת קול ואמרה אלו
ואלו דברי אלהים חיים הן והלכה
כב"ה וכי מאחר שאלו ואלו דברי
אלהים חיים מפני מה זכו ב"ה לקבוע
הלכה כמותן מפני שנוחין ועלובין
היו ושונין דבריהן ודברי ב"ש ולא
עוד אלא שמקדימין דברי ב"ש
לדבריהן

educate us to be wholly other than what we are...

How can we take that one chance I mentioned just now and learn to change when change is to be cherished? How can we expect another to change when we are ourselves that other's contending narrative?

- Corder believes that our identities are made up of the things we believe (which he calls “arguments” here), which come from our understanding of our experiences (which he calls “narratives”). Do you agree? Why or why not?
- Corder is also using the term argument not to refer to an angry or heated discussion but to refer to a process of reasoning. When in your life have you been able to explore various paths of reasoning on a controversial or complicated issue without that process becoming heated or stressful?
- Have you ever had the kind of experience Corder is describing, where you come to see a narrative that truly comes into conflict with your own? How did you react when that happened?

Genesis 28:5

(5) Then Isaac sent Jacob off, and he went to Paddan-aram, to Laban the son of Bethuel the Aramean, the brother of Rebekah, mother of Jacob and Esau.

בראשית כ"ח:ה'

(ה) וַיִּשְׁלַח יִצְחָק אֶת־יַעֲקֹב וַיֵּלֶךְ פְּדָנָה אֲרָם אֶל־לָבָן בְּדִבְתוֹיָאֵל הָאֲרָמִי אֶת־י רֵבֶקָה אִם יַעֲקֹב וְעֵשָׂו:

Rashi on Genesis 28:5

(5) MOTHER OF JACOB AND ESAU — I do not know what the addition of these words is intended to tell us.

רש"י על בראשית כ"ח:ה':א'

(ה) אִם יַעֲקֹב וְעֵשָׂו אֵינִי יוֹדֵעַ מָה מְלַמְּדֵנוּ:

Reflection by Rabbi Aaron Alexander on Rashi's commentary on Genesis 28:5

I guess if you just randomly opened up to Genesis 28:5, learning that Rebecca was Jacob and Esau's mother could be useful. But if one has even a cursory knowledge of the story, or has been following along up until this point, this information is totally superfluous.

Enter Rashi. He always has something to offer, an insight that doesn't render the words useless. Once again, he delivers, but not in the way we would expect. "I have no idea what this comes to teach me." Brilliant.

The super commentators are baffled. Siftei Hachamim cannot believe he doesn't actually have an answer. If not, why didn't he just say silent? They posit that in this case there were many reasonable midrashic explanations available but just he couldn't decide which one was closest to the truth.

But I think this could be Rashi's greatest one liner yet. An expression of humility from someone beyond the insecure need to always impress.

Sometimes "I don't know" is as exquisite as intellectual gymnastics. It allows for possibility. Something never before imagined or uttered.

It's the Torah I needed to stumble across today. It seems that so many answers are needed and sometimes it's hard to even know where to start.

- What do you think is the value of saying “I don’t know?”
- Why is it hard to do that?
- What would help you to be able to admit more readily when you don’t feel sure of an answer?

