

## The four levels

I have always been fascinated by how much you can extract from the Torah, if you put your mind to it. Our Sages tell us that there are four levels of understanding of the Torah. Each level is deeper than the previous one. As you move below the top levels and reach for the deep ones, new meanings come to light. Even if you don't believe a story literally, you can understand it as a parable that provides valuable teachings.

Let's define these four levels:

- First, there is the "p'shat", the plain and simple meaning of the words
- Then there is the "remez", the subtle meaning that is only hinted at
- Then there is the "drash", the derived meaning, the scholarly meaning
- Finally, there is the "sod", the hidden or secret meaning, the mystical meaning

If you make an acronym with the names of these four levels, you get the Hebrew word "pardes", which means orchard. Indeed, when you taste the fruit of the orchard, you taste it on four levels:

- First, there is the simple taste, experienced while you eat the fruit
- Then there is the subtle taste, which stays with you after you are finished eating
- Then there is the derived taste, such as when you make wine out of grapes
- Finally, there is the deepest taste, the secret, long-term memories associated with the experience, which French author and fellow Jew Marcel Proust told us so much about.

For a concrete example of these four levels of Torah interpretation, let's pick a passage from this week's Torah portion, Parshat Toledot. In the opening verses, a strange phrase is used to describe Rebecca's pregnancy with Esau and Jacob: "*Vayit-rotsatsu habanim b'kirba*" - "And the children struggled together within her" [Genesis 25:22].

Let's begin with the literal meaning, the "pshat". The verb "vayit-rotsatsu" means "to crush" or "to oppress". This is the only place that word is found in the Torah. So the phrase means "they crushed each other". This plainly describes the relationship between Jacob and Esau, as later events would demonstrate.

Then we move on to the allegorical meaning, the "remez". The three-letter root of the word "vayit-rotsatsu", "resh-tsadi-tsadi", is quite close to the word "rats", to run, and the word "ratsah", to desire. Struggling, running and desiring are all related. All three are characteristic of Jews. All three imply great intensity. In his 1992 book called \*Tribes: How Race, Religion and Identity Determine Success in the New Global Economy\* [Random House], Joel Kotkin says that this is the part of our "cultural DNA" that has helped us survive the harsh environments we faced throughout the centuries.

Now let's talk about the "drash", the derived meaning, the scholarly meaning. Our sages saw Esau and Jacob as the very incarnation of good and evil.

In the Midrash, Esau is equated with Rome, idolatrous and bloodthirsty, while Jacob is equated with Jerusalem, vulnerable and spiritually pure. The Midrash suggests that our natures are determined in our mothers' wombs, that we have no choice in the matter [Genesis Rabbah 63:6]. It interprets the words "struggled within her" as follows:

-When Rebecca stood near synagogues or schools (clearly an anachronism), Jacob struggled to come out. It cites Jeremiah [1:5]: "Before I formed you in the belly, I knew you". This means that God knew Jacob's righteousness even in the womb.

-But when Rebecca passed idolatrous temples (clearly NOT an anachronism), Esau struggled to come out. It cites Psalm 58 [58:4]: "The wicked are estranged from the womb".

Indeed, the tension between idolatry and monotheism is played out in every generation of their descendants.

Finally, we come to the "sod", the hidden meaning, the mystical meaning. The book of Jewish mysticism, the Zohar, tells us that Rebecca was experiencing the struggle that exists in every human being between good and evil. Yet the Midrash says that, just because we all have within ourselves both Esau and Jacob, does not mean we should allow them to go to war uncontrolled. Both parts should be combined in wholeness and holiness to serve God.

\*But both parts are necessary\*. The Midrash [Ecclesiastes Rabbah 3:15 ] goes on to say: Does the evil inclination ever serve good? Yes, because without the evil inclination, no man would build a house, take a wife, raise a family or hold a job. If you are a Star Trek fan (and here I am citing ultimate authority) you may remember the episode where Captain Kirk is split into the Good Kirk and the Evil Kirk. Both of them turn out to be incomplete failures. Only the combination of the two, into a single individual, is a success.

So, when we say, in the Ve'ahavta, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart" -- "b'chol l'vavcha" -- [Deuteronomy 6:5], our Sages tell us this means we must love God with both our inclinations -- with the inclination to do good AND with the inclination to do evil.

Thus, even though we feel divided, we struggle, we run, we desire, our goal is always to grow into a single wholesome unit.

The "sod", or hidden meaning of the Torah, has a long history. The Talmud tells of four influential rabbis who dabbled in mysticism. They entered "pardes", the Talmud tells us - that's the orchard we mentioned earlier. One died, one became mad, one left Judaism, and only one emerged whole. This is dangerous stuff.

As part of the "sod", we have "gematria", or numerology, very popular in kabbalistic literature. That's when the numerical values of each Hebrew letter in a Torah phrase are added up to give a single number, and you draw conclusions from that number.

-For example, as you all know, 18 is "chai" - "alive".

-Also, if another Torah phrase has the same total number, you conclude that the two phrases are connected somehow. For example, in Genesis [42:2] Jacob tells his sons "Go down to Egypt". "Go down" is "Redu", and "Redu" adds up to 210. And, sure enough, the Israelites stayed in Egypt for 210 years.

Today, in the age of the computer, people are looking for hidden codes in the Bible. Some say that if the letters in the Torah are rearranged in certain ways, you can read the foretelling of events that happened long after the Torah was revealed. They can also prove that the probability of this

occurring by chance is very low. Is this significant? Are there hidden codes in the Bible?

Let's begin at the beginning. Suppose you are given a sequence of numbers and asked to guess what the next one is. You all have done exercises like this in math class. Suppose the sequence is "2, 4, 6, 8". You might say: "It's easy: It's all the even numbers, and the next one is 10!". If the sequence is "1, 4, 9, 16", you have to think a little harder, but then you realize it's all the squares, and say the next number is 25. If the sequence is "89, 3, 1, 5018", you'll scratch your head and say you are stumped.

Well, here is the simple truth. You can prove that, given ANY sequence of numbers, there is ALWAYS a formula that ties them together and enables you to predict the next one, and the next one, and the next one. In fact, there is an infinite number of such formulas, and they predict different "next numbers".

If you are given one more number than originally given, you can eliminate many such formulas, but will still be left with an infinity of them. In that sense, NOTHING is truly "random". You can "make sense" out of anything.

I often wondered if this simple mathematical result does not apply to the world at large -- with startling conclusions. All the facts that the human adventure has revealed to us are, after all, only a finite collection. A very large finite collection, but a finite collection nevertheless. We try to tie all these facts together into a theory of the world. We do this because we don't like randomness. We like to see patterns; and behind the patterns, we like to see purpose and a designer. We are guaranteed to succeed (a comforting thought!), but only too well: There is an infinite number of such theories. When new facts come to light, many of these theories fall by the wayside, but that still leaves an infinite number of them.

This means good news and bad news. The good news is that there is always more than one way of making sense of the world -- an infinite number of ways. This should teach us tolerance. The other guy's understanding is not necessarily wrong, it may be just different, and just as valid. The bad news is that we will NEVER be able to reach THE "real" theory of the universe (except by a lucky guess, and even then we'll never know we are right) -- because we can only be in possession of a finite

number of facts. In fact, we can't even say that we are getting closer, since a finite number of facts always implies an infinite number of "theories" that ties the facts together. So the quest for knowledge continues, in an endless process.

But there is more. Can one theory be "better" than another, even if both fit the facts?

Let's go back to the sequence "2, 4, 6, 8". When asked for the next number, you will say "10" because the first thing that comes to mind is: "The sequence is all the even numbers". You think of that one first because it is the SIMPLEST formula. (It requires the fewest keystrokes to describe).

But, as I said, there is an infinite number of such formulas. For the mathematicians among you, all you have to do is solve a simple system of linear equations to find as many formulas as you want. I can give you a formula that predicts that the next number is 129.

For no reason other than elegance, scientists prefer to use, as a working hypothesis, the "simplest" theory. This is known as the principle of Occam's razor -- always go for the simplest explanation that fits the facts, but be mindful of the fact that there are other explanations, and that one of these others may be the right one.

Could it be that Judaism has the "simplest" philosophy of life, and that even though the others in existence are not "wrong", they are not as "simple", as minimalistic? We say that God is One -- that's the simplest "theory". Certainly not the first one that comes to mind, given the baffling diversity of the human experience, but the simplest nevertheless.

An even more sobering thought is that there *is* no right explanation! The human experience is an ever-increasing, but still finite, collection of facts. These facts, as we saw, can fit into any one of an infinite number of theories. But we are free agents and have much leeway in creating facts. Could it be that every time we witness or create a new fact, we are not merely making history, but also modifying the very fabric of the universe, creating the very laws that rule our universe, in partnership with the Almighty?

Think about it.

Shabbat shalom.