

A core belief of Rabbinic Judaism is that “there are no extra words in the Torah”. But what makes something “extra”? For example: If a text is more beautiful, or more accessible, because (it is) written less efficiently, does the longer form contain “extra words”?

Orthodox day students are generally¹ educated to the approach Dr. Yaakov Elman has labeled “omnificance”, in which every detail of the text must provide otherwise inaccessible meaning. This approach is both theologically attractive and true to the Midrashic masoret. On the other hand, Torah was written in the Hebrew of its time, and redundancy is an essential feature of human language². Any human message written with maximal efficiency will also be tremendously vulnerable to misunderstanding, as a single error can then reverberate unchecked throughout an interpretation. Even those Tannaim who formally denied the principle “dibrah Torah k’lashon benei Adam” (The Torah speaks in human language), and suggested that, for example, repetition purely for emphasis is not a legitimate explanation of Biblical phenomena, had difficulty interpreting every direct object marker (*et*) in Torah, and apparently did not try to interpret every possessive suffix (although they did interpret some).

Moreover, Biblical poetry is characterized by the phenomenon of “parallelism”, which many rishonim understood as “kefel hadavar bemilim shonot” (repetition of the substance in different words). While commentators such as Malbim, and in his footsteps contemporary Professor James Kugel, have contested this claim and found extra meaning in each linguistic variation on a theme, there seems no way to describe the parallelistic form as hyperefficient.

From a literary perspective, I often find the premises and results of omnificance exegesis very much to my taste. But I think that taking it as a theological principle sometimes requires denying Torah’s status as a Divine work of art which has affective as well as cognitive goals, and which teaches through subtlety and irony as well as direct exposition. In other words, apparent redundancy can have substantive effects that cannot be concretized into propositions.

¹ This picture should be made more complex, as follows: they are educated to this approach by their Gemara teachers, but their Tanakh teachers may convince them that this approach is true but not pshat, as per Rashbam’s (Averroistic) double-truth position.

² My thanks for these insights to Professor Alan Huffman’s course on Linguistics at Yeshiva College 20+ years ago, and to my father Dr. Jacob Klapper for his explanations of signal processing theory over the years. Any errors or imprecisions are of course my own.

These reflections were originally stimulated by the Flood story, which often conveys the same information not twice but three or four times³. But I was reminded of them while translating Chapter 17 of Bereishit in preparation for this dvar Torah, and it is to that chapter that we now turn. (I encourage you to review the chapter in advance, and in particular to have accessible the formatted text and translation attached to this dvar Torah.)

The chapter begins and ends by telling us how old Avra[ha]m is, which, unsurprisingly, is the same ninety nine at the end as at the beginning. This is unsurprising because we are told immediately before that Avraham acted on the very same day that G-d commanded him. The repetition of Avraham's age therefore appears redundant.

I have two possible “omnisignificant” approaches. The first follows R. Yosef ibn Caspi's explanation⁴ that this chapter, rather than presenting a series of discrete Divine communications, instead represents Avraham's gradually deepening understanding of a single prophetic experience. On this reading, Avraham only gradually came to understand that circumcision was the appropriate response to the Divine promise that he would have many descendants. While he acted immediately upon achieving that comprehension, the process of comprehension might have taken any amount of time, and so the narrator comes to tell us that it took less than a year for Avraham to understand his obligations. But this fails to satisfy me – why should we care how long it took?

The second approach notes a second apparent redundancy; the actual circumcisions are reported twice, consecutively, at the close of the chapter. However, in the first iteration Avraham only circumcises others – in the second, he circumcises himself as well. With this in mind, we can look back at the text of G-d's speeches and discover that Avraham is never personally commanded to circumcise himself, and that indeed only the first iteration, but not the second, concludes with “as G-d had spoken with him”. Perhaps the repetition of Avraham's age then tells us that he circumcised himself voluntarily, even though G-d would never have commanded him to do so, owing to his great age.

Or we can combine these two approaches and suggest that it was only at the very end, after everyone else had been circumcised, that Avraham understood that he too was commanded to be circumcised.

³ See in this regard the section on Noach in my “Who Wrote the Torah? An Intellectual Defense of Unified Authorship for High School Students”, available [here](#)

⁴ Attached and translated

None of these approaches, however, seems to account sufficiently for the drumbeat of occurrences of “circumcised” in the text – five times in the command, and five times in the execution. These seem more intended to set the theme of the section, together with “covenant”, which occurs thirteen times. It may be more fruitful to ask for the collective purpose of these repetitions, than to ask what specific additional information each occurrence provides.

Seeing them as thematic markers, however, enables us to notice that ‘covenant’ does not appear in the description of Avraham’s actions. Why not?

Here we must look at the overall structure of the chapter, keeping Ibn Caspi’s insight about the process of prophecy ever before us. The key here is that Avraham’s insight develops along two lines – understanding of the covenant, and understanding of the promise of descendants. The covenant initially seems generic, but then moves on to a Divine promise of land, and then to circumcision. The promise begins with a generic “increase”, moves on to “a multitude of nations”, and finally to Yitzchak. But this last transition does not occur where it should, in G-d’s third speech – rather, it occurs in the fourth, in other words only after the covenant has concretized as circumcision.

Now we can notice that “covenant” appears throughout G-d’s discussion of Yitzchak – He particularly emphasizes that the covenant between Him and Avraham will be upheld only with Yitzchak. Circumcision is not mentioned in that discussion. Why? Presumably because Yitzchak was not yet born. But here we have a paradox – the covenant has been concretized as circumcision, but the heir of the covenant cannot yet be circumcised.

What I want to suggest, accordingly, is that Avraham’s *zerizut*, his immediate performance of circumcision, is not merely the product of religious alacrity. Rather, it is part and parcel of his ongoing desire to have Yishmael included within the covenant.

By circumcising himself, however, Avraham makes Yitzchak qualitatively unique – he is the heir who is born into the covenant. Perhaps Avraham was aware that this would inevitably lead to Yishmael’s exclusion, and that is why he saved his own circumcision for last – why he acknowledged its necessity only at the end of his process of understanding, if still on the very same day.

What is the moral of the story? R. Yehuda Gilad and others have focused in next week’s parashah on what they term “Akeidat Yishmael”, the story of how Avraham is

compelled to send away Yishmael against his own moral scruples and emotional desires⁵. Their goal is to show that Torah recognizes the moral costs of excluding Yishmael, and accordingly that we should seek to minimize such costs in any contemporary reenactment. Malbim⁶, by contrast, here apparently feels compelled to offer a deeply implausible textual claim that Yishmael is excluded from the covenant – he cites the verse as if Yishmael were included in the group of household members, when in fact Yishmael is given an independent sentence between them and Avraham. And halakhically, the verse “But my Covenant I will uphold with Yitzchak” is read as excluding Ishmaelites from the command of circumcision⁷

But that verse need not have been read as “but my covenant”; it could have been read as “and my covenant”. In other words, even at the end Avraham may have hoped that Yishmael would be included in the covenant; “If only Yishmael could live in your presence”.

But Avraham was wrong; Yishmael was excluded. Here we can ask a classic lomdishe question: Is the havah amina (initial thought) that Yishmael was part of the covenant rejected totally, or do we accept our kinship with him in principle, and reject only extending it as far as covenant? As with Akeidat Yitzchak, much depends on whether G-d desires Avraham’s fierce moral intuition only as the greatest possible sacrifice to His service, or rather because only someone with that intuition could be trusted not to pervert His service into amoral worship of Divine power.

I prefer the latter.

Shabbat shalom!

⁵ We may discuss this in more detail next week.

⁶ attached and translated

⁷ Although in practice Maimonides obligates them, because they have become intermixed with the descendants of Avraham via Keturah.

בראשית פרק יז

ויהי אברם בן תשעים שנה ותשע שנים
וירא יקוק אל אברם
ויאמר אליו

אני אל-ש-די

התהלך לפני והיה תמים:

ואתנה בריתי ביני ובינך

וארבה אותך במאד מאד:

ויפל אברם על פניו

וידבר אתו א-להים לאמר:

אני הנה בריתי אתך

והיית לאב המון גוים:

ולא יקרא עוד את שמך אברם והיה שמך אברהם

כי אב המון גוים נתתיך:

והפירתי אתך במאד מאד

ונתתיך לגוים ומלכים ממך יצאו:

והקמתי את בריתי ביני ובינך ובין זרעך אחריו לדרתם לברית עולם

להיות לך לא-להים ולזרעך אחריו:

ונתתי לך ולזרעך אחריו את ארץ מגרין את כל ארץ כנען לאחזת עולם

והייתי להם לא-להים:

ויאמר א-להים אל אברהם

ואתה את בריתי תשמר אתה וזרעך אחריו לדרתם:

זאת בריתי אשר תשמרו ביני וביניכם ובין זרעך אחריו

המול לכם כל זכר: ונמלתם את בשר ערלתכם

ובן שמנת ימים ימול לכם כל זכר לדרתיכם

יליד בית ומקנת כסף מכל בן נכר אשר לא מזרעך הוא:

המול ימול יליד ביתך ומקנת כסף

וערל זכר אשר לא ימול את בשר ערלתו ונכרתה הנפש ההוא מעמיה

ויאמר א-להים אל אברהם

שרי אשתך לא תקרא את שמה שרי כי שרה שמה:

וברכתי אתה וגם נתתי ממנה לך בן

וברכתי והייתה לגוים מלכי עמים ממנה יהיו:

ויפל אברהם על פניו

ויצחק

ויאמר בלבו

הלבן מאה שנה יולד

ואם שרה הבת תשעים שנה תלד:

ויאמר אברהם אל הא-להים

לו ישמעאל יחיה לפניך:

ויאמר א-להים

אבל שרה אשתך ילדת לך בן וקראת את שמו יצחק

והקמתי את בריתי אתו לברית עולם לזרעו אחריו:

ולישמעאל שמעתיך

הנה ברכתי אתו

והפירתי אתו

והרביתי אתו במאד מאד

שנים עשר נשיאם יוליד

ונתתיו לגוי גדול:

ואת בריתי אקים את יצחק אשר תלד לך שרה למועד הזה בשנה האחרת:

ויכל לדבר אתו

ויעל א-להים מעל אברהם:

ויקח אברהם את ישמעאל בנו

ואת כל ילידי ביתו

ואת כל מקנת כספו

כל זכר באנשי בית אברהם

וימל את בשר ערלתם

בעצם היום הזה

כאשר דבר אתו א-להים:

ואברהם בן תשעים ותשע שנה

וישמעאל בנו בן שלש עשרה שנה

בהמלו בשר ערלתו:

בהמלו את בשר ערלתו:

נמול אברהם וישמעאל בנו:

בעצם היום הזה

וכל אנשי ביתו יליד בית

ומקנת כסף מאת בן נכר

נמלו אתו: פ

Genesis 17

Avram was 90 years plus nine years old when Hashem appeared to Avram and said to him:

I am the Divine Who Suffices;
Find your way in My Presence and be whole.
I will grant My covenant between Myself and You, and
I will very greatly increase you.

Avram fell on his face.

G-d spoke to him:

As for me – Behold My covenant is with you,
and you [will] (have) become the sire of a multitude of nations.
No longer shall your name be called Avram; your name will be Avraham,
for I have made you the sire of a multitude of nations.
I will very greatly fructify you,
and I will develop you into nations, and kings will emerge from you.
I will establish My covenant between Myself and you, and between your descendants after you, through their generations, as an eternal covenant,
so that I will become your G-d, and for your descendants after you.
I will grant you, and your descendants after you, the land of your sojourning, the whole land of Canaan, as an enduring landhold,
so that I will become for them G-d.

G-d said to Avraham:

As for you – observe My covenant, you and your descendants after you, through their generations.
This is My covenant which you (plural) must observe, between Myself and between you (plural), and between your descendants after you (singular) – **Circumcise** every male among you.
You must be **circumcised** of the flesh of your foreskin, and
this will serve as a proof-of-covenant between Myself and between you.
When eight days old, every male among you must be **circumcised**, through your generations;
whether born to the house or bought for money from among any not-recognized-as-family, who is not among your descendants; they must surely be **circumcised**, those born to the house and those bought with your money, and
My covenant will be in your flesh, as an enduring covenant.
But a foreskinned male, who does not **circumcise** the flesh of his foreskin – that soul will be cut off from its nation –
My covenant he nullified.

G-d said to Avraham:

Sarai your wife – her name must no longer be called Sarai, for Sarah is her name.
I will [have] bless[ed] her and also granted from her to you a son;
I will [have] bless[ed] her and she will develop into nations; kings of peoples will develop from her.

Avraham fell on his face;

He laughed;

He said in his heart:

Will a man one hundred years old sire
and as for Sarah – will a woman ninety years old bear?!

Avraham said to G-d:

If only Yishmael could live in Your Presence!

G-d said:

But Sarah your wife is bearing you a son, and you will call his name “Yitzchak”.
I will uphold My covenant with him as an enduring covenant, and with his descendants after him.
But as for Yishmael – I have heeded you;
Behold I [have] bless[ed] him and
I [have] fructify[ed] him
and I [have] very greatly increase[d] him.
He will sire twelve *nesi'im* and
I will place him as a great nation.
But My covenant I will uphold with Yitzchak, whom Sarah will bear for you at this time in another year.

When He ceased to speak with him,

G-d rose from above Avraham.

Avraham took Yishmael his son,

and all the children born to his house,

and all those bought with his money –

every male among the people of the House of Abraham –
on that very day,

and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins

as G-d had spoken with him.

Avraham was ninety years and nine years

Yishmael was thirteen years old

On that very day

when he self-circumcised the flesh of his foreskin.

when he self-circumcised the flesh of his foreskin.

were circumcised Avraham and Yishmael his son,

and all the people of his house,

those born to the house,

and those bought with money from those not-recognized-as-family,

were circumcised with him.

טירת כסף לר' יוסף אבן כספי

אחר ספר "ויהי אברם בן תשעים שנה ותשע שנים וירא ה' אל אברם וגו'".
ועתה שמעו בנים מה שגילה לי ה' בזאת המראה מסודות נפלאות, יורו בעצמם על עינים גדולים, ועל זולתם רבים
ונכבדים,
ואומר כי זאת המראה באה בסדור הקודמת, רצוני שבאו הגזרות הקודמות סתומות, והמאחרות מבוארות יותר,
כי המאחרות בהשגות הם המשובחות והשלמות ביותר,
זה מבואר אצלנו בעלי העיון, וכן הענין בבעלי הנבואה,
כי העיון והנבואה שניהם כחות הנפש,
לכן אומר אני כי כלל זאת המראה הוא מה שכלל המאמר הקצר המונח ראשון, רצוני מה שאמר "אני א-ל ש-די
התהלך לפני והיה תמים ואתנה בריתי וגו'",
וכל מה שבא אחר זה עד מלת "האחרת" הוא פירוש לזה המאמר הקצר,
עד שיהיה זה המאמר הקצר עומד מעמד משל להיותו סתום מאד.
אמנם כאשר הגיע המאמר ההוא לאברהם, כמו שהוא במלותיו הנזכרות, נפל אברהם על פניו בהתבודדות נבואי
להבין הוראת המאמר ההוא, כי המאמר מליצה מורכבת ממלות,
והיתה זאת הנפילה כענין מה שקדם למעלה "ותרדמה נפלה על אברם", והיה מאמר ה' הנה אחר הנפילה כמו
שפירשתי למעלה וגו' ואמר "ידע תדע", ונהכונה בזה שהגיעהו מאת ה' אחר נפלו על פניו פירוש המאמר הסתום,
וזהו מבואר באמרו "אני הנה בריתי אתך וגו'" והנמשך לזה . . .

מלבי"ם

"ואברהם" – הגם שהיה זקן בן צ"ט שנה, וישמעאל בן י"ג, לא עכב ישמעאל בעדו הגם שכחו חזק ונמול עמו ביום
הוא.
ויודיע שרק אברהם נמול מצד עצם המצוה, כי הוא שנכרת עמו הברית, אבל "ישמעאל וכל אנשי ביתו" רק "נמולו
אתו", שאם היו יוצאים מרשות אברהם לא היו חייבים במילה, וכן לא חל חיוב זה על זרעם.

Tirat Kesef – R. Yosef ibn Caspi

Afterward it narrates “Avram was ninety years and nine years, and Hashem appeared to Avram etc.”,

Now listen O sons what Hashem has revealed to me regarding this vision from among the wondrous secrets, which speak of themselves about great matters, and on great and distinguished matters outside themselves, so I will say that this vision comes in a progression, my intent being that the first sentences come as enigmas, and the later ones more explicated, because the later comprehensions are more praiseworthy and complete; this is clear to us possessors-of-analysis, and the same is true of possessors-of-prophecy, because analysis and prophecy are both abilities of the soul.

Therefore I say that the totality of this vision is contained in the statement laid down first, my intention being that which He said: “I am the Divine Who Suffices; Find your way in My Presence and be whole. I will grant My covenant between Myself and You, and I will very greatly increase you, and I will place My covenant etc.”, and everything that comes after that until “another year” is explanation of that short statement,

to the point that this short statement attains the status of a parable because it is so enigmatic, But when this statement reached Avraham, as it was in those wose words, Avraham fell on his face in prophetic meditation so as to understand the import of that statement, because the statement is a symbol comprised of words -

- this falling was like that mentioned above “and a trance fell on Avram”, with the statement of Hashem coming after the the falling as I explained above, saying “You must surely know” - the meaning of this being that after he fell on his face there reached him from Hashem the explanation of that enigmatic statement,

as is made clear when it says “ As for me – Behold My covenant is with you” and what follows after this . . .

Malbim

“And Avraham” – although he was an elderly man ninety nine years old, and Yishmael thirteen years old, Yishmael did not obstruct him even though he was stronger, and was circumcised with him on that say.

Scripture informs us that only Avraham’s circumcision was of the essence of the mitzvah, because the covenant was cut with him, but “Yishmael and all the men of his house” were only “circumcised with him”, because had they left Avraham’s authority they would not have been obligated with regard to circumcision, and so too this obligation would not apply to their descendants.