ESSAYS FROM THE RASHI WEBSITE
Volume 1, Number 8 Oct 2026
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HOW DO YOU COUNT IN BIBLICAL HEBREW?

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ABSTRACT: Gn23-01, *Sarah lived 100 years, 20 years, and 7 years the years of Sarah's lives* contradicts the standard method of indicating 3-digit numbers in Biblical Hebrew: e.g. 895 years is verbally indicated as *5 and 90 years and 800 years* (Gn05-17); 162 years is indicated *2 and 60 years and 100 years* (Gn05-18); 365 years is *indicated 5 and 60 years and 300 years*. The deviation from the grammatical rule is akin to a deviation from spelling creating a pun which the author obviously intended (spelling puns have the technical name *metaplasmus*). Thus, the *straightforward* meaning of the text, the *peshat,* incorporates the pun: *Sarah lived the life of the 100 year person, the 20 year life, and the 7 year life;* (thus she had lived) *with multiple lifestyles in a very rich life.* It is most instructive to see how the various commenters deal with Rashi's reading which in fact is the reading of the Midrash. Some commenters were unaware of the grammatical rule for 3-digit numbers; moreover, due to a corruption in one of the midrashic texts the commenters spend much time trying to justify the corrupt version. Then, there are moralistic commenters who explain why the Bible bothered to report this. All in all, this innocuous looking text gives rise to a rich set of commentaries. After reading this essay it should come as no surprise that even today academic scholarship boasts of recent doctoral theses on how counting is done in the Bible.

THE BIBLICAL AND RASHI TEXTS

Gn23-01 states , *Sarah lived 100 years, 20 years, and 7 years the years of Sarah's lives*.

Prior to presenting Rashi's comments on this verse, we recall a rule of grammar, brought down by the *Gur Aryah* that in biblical Hebrew the three digit number *XYZ years* is verbally indicated as *Z and Y years and X years.* It is easy to verify this rule by simply inspecting the 3 digit numbers in Gn05 and Gn11 not to mention numerous other times in the bible. Some relatively straightforward examples are the following: 895 years is verbally indicated as *5 and 90 years and 800 years* (Gn05-17); 162 years is indicated *2 and 60 years and 100 years* (Gn05-18); 365 years is *indicated 5 and 60 years and 300 years*.

Still another grammatical rule needed to understand Rashi are the rules governing puns whether in English or Hebrew. A common type of pun, *the metaplasmus,* is achieved through a deliberate misspelling of a word thereby suggesting an added nuance. Since the word is deliberately misspelled, we consider such puns intended by the author. For example, if Abe on a dinner date with Raisy says *pass me the Roisens,* then we all understand this as a pass towards Raisy, his date. A similar effect can be achieved by deviating from grammar. This occurs in all languages.

With these two grammatical rules, we can present Rashi, who citing the *Midrash Gadol* and the *Bereishith Rabbah* (58:1), translates the verse: *Sarah lived the 100-year life, the life of a 20 year old, and the 7-year life; the years of Sarah's lives.* Rav Hirsch in his commentary is quick to point out that this Rashi-Midrashic comment addresses three important general stages of life: Maturity (the 100-year old), attractiveness (the lives of 20 year olds), and child-like innocence (the lives of 7 year olds), concluding that *Sarah had a rich life experience with expertise in the major stages of life.* Rav Saadia Gaon further explains that the Torah told all this to us so we should be aware of good character traits and strive for them.

CORRUPTION IN MIDRASHIC TEXT

The actual Rashi text, in fact, based on the Midrashic text explains *At 100 years of age she was like a 20 year old with regard to sin; at 20 years of age, she was like a 7 year old with regard to beauty.* So, the Midrash seems to equate maturity with the 100-year life, lack of sin with the 20 year life, and beauty with the 7 year life. But intuitively we all know that the 100 year life refers to maturity supported by experience; the 20 year life refers to the years of attractiveness and all that goes with it; the 7 year life refers to child-life innocence, lack of awareness of sin. Thus, the Midrash contradicts our intuition.

In fact, several commenters deal with this contradiction. Rashi resolves it by pointing out that one is not punished for one's sins until one is 20 and several commenters note that this is a forced contrived explanation. The *Shadal,* motivated by this problem, found a very ancient handwritten manuscript in one of the library collections which indeed writes *At 100 she was like a 20 year old to beauty.* So, the explanation based on our intuition is correct: The 100 year life, the 20 year life, and the 7 year life refer to maturity, attractiveness, and innocence. It is worth nothing however, that because earlier commenters were unaware of this manuscript they spent a lot of time dwelling on resolving it.

This shows the importance of understanding Rashi through the lens of *rules.* By citing the rules governing 3 digit numbers and puns we are able to reconstruct Rashi. Of course, the purist will argue that you can't be certain till you find a manuscript; but the reading through the grammatical lens gives us direction by which to understand Rashi.

WHY THE *GUR ARYEH* 'S GRAMMATICAL APPROACH IS CHOSEN

There are other commenters besides the *Gur Aryeh. RaDaQ* calls the repetition of years a *nicety of language* and labels the Midrashic explanation a *derash. Ramban* disagrees primarily with Rashi's treatment of the terminal phrase in the verse *the years of Sarah's lives,* but also labels the repetition of years as the way of language.

Two points may be made here, contradicting the popular belief that all commenters are *equally* valid Torah. First, The *Gur Aryeh* states the existence of a grammatical rule while *RaDaQ* and *Ramban* simply aren't aware of the rule. This is different to a controversy where Rabbi R says X and Rabbi S says Y. Rather here, Rabbi R says X, and Rabbi S simply describes it as *the way of the language.* But more deeply, the *Gur Aryeh* rule allows a wider applicability; the rule can be applied to several verses. It is this wider applicability to several verses using a simple consistent rule that drives choosing the *Gur Aryeh* approach. In the next section, we show examples of this applicability. As a general principle we always prefer rule-based explanations allowing a broad range of applicability.

APPLICABILITY OF THE *GRAMMATICAL RULE* TO OTHER VERSES

Looking through Genesis, we find three other examples of violation of the grammatical rule for 3 digit numbers:
(i) *These are the years of Abraham's life that he lived: 100 years, 70 years, and 5 years...*(Gn25-07); (ii) *There are the years of Ishmael's live: 100 years, 30 years, and 7 years ...*(Gn28-17). As with Sarah we interpret the violation of the grammatical rule to a similar violation of spelling, metaplasmic puns. We can still, as with Sarah, interpret 100 years as the 100-year life, indicating maturity, the ability to give advice to those younger. We similarly still, as with Sarah as corrected by the ancient manuscripts mentioned by the *Shaddal,* interpret 7 and 5 years as the years of innocence and playfulness, characteristic of children.

We can interpret 30 years, as the 30 year life, representing a typical stage of life where one over-indulged in their 20s and resumed back to normal in their 30s. This would fit in neatly with Ishmael whom we know started off as a wild person but repented at the end of his life (Rashi Gn25-07b).

We can interpret 70 years, as the 70 year life, representing a typical stage of life when one has doubts and searches for meaning and identity. Indeed, God first appeared to Abraham at 75; the Bible does not tell us anything about his early life. However, the Midrash fills in that during his early years Abraham doubted the idolatrous environment he was brought up in and searched for a God that unifies the world. We summarize these findings in Table 1.

TABLE 1: *VARIOUS STAGES OF LIFE AND THEIR DOMINATING QUALITY*

Phrase	**Stage of Life**	**Person**	**Verse**
100 year old life	Maturity experience	Sarah, Abraham, Ishmael	Gn27-01, Gn25-07, Gn28-17
7 year old life, 5 year old life	Childlike Innocence	Sarah, Abraham, Ishmael	Gn27-01, Gn25-07, Gn28-17
20 year old life	Years of Attractiveness	Sarah	Gn27-01
30 year old life	Years of repenting from the wildness of one's earlier years	Ishmael	Gn28017
70 year old life	Year of doubt, searching for identity and meaning	Abraham	Gn25-07

Table 1 shows the virtue of a rule based approach; we obtain broader applicability. We also obtain confidence in that wider applicability. By contrast, it is interesting that some commenters mention that a corresponding Rashi comment is found by Abraham and not by Ishmael. But this need not concern us as Rashi frequently mentions principles once or twice even though the rule occurs in many more verses.

Two commenters, Rav Saadia and Rav Hirsch dealt with moral implications of the Rashi on Sarah. Rav Saadia in his commentary observes *the text taught us these stages so we should emulate and yearn for them.* Rav Hirsch observes ;in the case of Sarah that these are typical stages of life that all people go through. Together, we are told that there are lessons with personal relevance to each individual in these comments.

OUR CONTRIBUTION TO THE COMMENTERS

We have made three contributions to understanding these commenters. First, we have brought in the modern theory of *grammatical rules* with its emphasis on wide frequency of applicability. This gives us a yardstick by which to assess the various rules.

Second, we have brought in the modern theory of puns, itself a new branch of grammar. Thus, while the midrashim use a standard template *at 100 (s)he was like at 70, 30, 20,* we have instead identified each year mentioned as a separate stage of life consistent with idiomatic phrases in many languages: *the life of the 20 year olds; the 100-year life.*

Third, by approaching the Midrash and Rashi as rule based, we avoid the *form* in which the midrashic and Rashi comments are phrased which as just mentioned is of the form *at 100 (s) was like at 70, 30, 20.* Our position is that Rashi or the Midrash might express grammatically based rules using catchy forms which are not the reasons proper for the comment but just a clever way of formulating them. We of course support these forms which facilitate retention of the Rashi comment. Our contribution is to expose the underlying grammatical principles.

THE UNKNOWN: CURRENT AND FUTURE RESEARCH

We must emphasize that despite the richness of the commenters and the grammatical rules there is still work to be done. It is the 21st century and we still do not fully understand the rules governing numbers in biblical Hebrew. Current research is active. In fact, in 2021 Susan Rothstein, working under her thesis advisor Adina Moshavi, published her doctoral thesis on the way numbers are indicated in the bible.[1] Both these researchers support the modern approach to *grammatical rules* as an interaction between *form* and *meaning* supported by a large basis of scriptural examples. We might also add in this regard the comment of the *Chizkuni* that by Sarah it says *100 years* while elsewhere it says *the 100-year (life)* using the construct state. *Chizkuni* uses this as a basis for understanding the Rashi; while his approach is not as applicable as the *Gur Aryeh,* it points to what we don't know; to areas of current and future research.

NOTES

[1] Adina Rothstein and Adina Moshavi, **Ordinals in Biblical Hebrew,** in *Linguistic Studies in Biblical Hebrew,* (Mioshavi Ed.), pp. 60—83, Brill Publishing, 2021.