

Parashat Vayeshev 5782, 2021:

Aleh Toldot Ya'akov

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, Shayndel bat Mordechai Yehudah, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The Torah contains eleven instances of the phrase, “*aleh toldot*,” seven of which appear with the letter “*vav*” prefixed to “*aleh*.” Except for *Sefer Bereishit* 2:4, wherein *aleh toldot* may be translated as “these are the chronicles,” all other cases of this phrase refer to the generations, or descendants, of a particular individual. As such, we find in Parashat Bamidbar: “These are the descendants (*v'aleh toldot*) of Aharon and Moshe on the day that the L-rd spoke to Moshe at Mount Sinai. These are the names of the sons of Aharon: Nadav the firstborn, Avihu, Eleazar, and Itamar.” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 3:1-2, this, and all Torah and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) It is crucial to note that in nearly every case we have a complete listing of the children’s names when *aleh toldot* conveys this meaning.

Our *parasha* contains a glaring exception to the previous observation: “These are the generations (*aleh toldot*) of Ya'akov: when Yosef was seventeen years old, being a shepherd, he was with his brothers with the flocks, and he was a lad, [and was] with the sons of Bilhah and with the sons of Zilpah, his father’s wives...” (37:2) At this juncture, all twelve of Ya'akov’s sons and his daughter, Dinah, have been born, yet, only Yosef’s

name is cited. Moreover, his name is mentioned in the context of a new Torah narrative that eventuates in his sale and transport to Egypt and our forebears' descent to Egypt, rather than as Ya'akov's child per se. As we might expect, these issues have been addressed by the *meforshim* in a variety of ways. In his *Commentary on the Torah*, Rashi (1040-1105) presents a two-pronged approach that reflects both *peshat* (direct meaning) and midrashic analysis:

“These are the generations of Ya'akov.” And these are those of the generations of Ya'akov. These are their settlements and their wanderings until they came to settle. The first cause [of their wanderings]: when Yosef was seventeen years old, etc. Through this [the events that unfolded], they wandered and descended to Egypt. This is according to the plain explanation of the verse, putting everything in its proper perspective.

Herein, Rashi interprets *toldot* as “settlements and wanderings.” He presents a very different explanation, however, in his midrashically-suffused statement: “...whatever happened to Ya'akov happened to Yosef. This one (Ya'akov) was hated, and that one (Yosef) was hated. This one, his brother (Eisav) sought to kill him, and that one, his brothers sought to kill him; and likewise many [other similarities related] in *Bereishit Rabbah* [84:6].” In this portion of his gloss, Rashi maintains that *toldot* connotes occurrences. In both sections, however, he deviates from the standard meaning of *aleh toldot*. Significantly, the Ibn Ezra (1092-1167), in his *Commentary on the Torah*, also follows the midrash's path in interpreting this phrase.

The Ramban (1194-1270), in his *Commentary on the Torah*, rejects Rashi's *peshat*-level explication of *aleh toldot*, as he maintains “the term ‘*toldot*’ has nothing to do with the notion of settlement.” He also rebuffs the exposition of the Ibn Ezra, stating: “a person does not bring about those things that happen to them, and it is only to days can one attribute such things.” Alternatively, the Ramban suggests the following line of reasoning:

The correct interpretation in my opinion is as follows: “These are the generations of Ya’akov: Yosef and his brothers, whom the Torah will mention further on.” The Torah here adopts a concise approach to their names since it already mentioned them above. [35:23-26] But the intent of the verse is to say that these are the generations of Yosef and his brothers to whom the following happened. (Ramban, *Commentary on the Torah, Sefer Bereishit* 37:2, translation, Rabbi Dr. Charles B. Chavel, underlining my own)

In this gloss, the Ramban is pursuing what can be characterized as “fundamental *peshat*.”

In his view, on the etymological level, *toldot* equals generations and descendants, and any attempt to recast this word in some other manner is unacceptable. In this instance, and unbeknownst to him, he is espousing the methodology of Rashi’s grandson, Rabbeinu Shmuel ben Meir (Rashbam, 1085-1158), who is universally recognized today as the greatest proponent of *peshat*-level exegesis:

And now, wise ones, look how earlier commentators [that is, Rashi and the Ibn Ezra] analyzed the phrase, “*aleh toldot Ya’akov*,” namely: “These are the events which happened to him, and the occurrences which befell him.” Behold this [explanation] is utter nonsense! This is the case, since all instances of *toldot* that appear in *Torah, Nevi’im*, and *Ketuvim* signify either an individual’s children or, in many *pasukim*, the grandchildren of a particular person. (*Perush HaRashbam HaShalame al HaTorah*, David Rosen edition, *Sefer Bereishit*, Parashat Vayeshev, 37:2, translation and brackets my own)

The range of opinions of these *gedolei Torah* regarding the meaning of *aleh toldot Ya’akov* reflects the dynamism and creativity that are the hallmarks of true Torah study. As *Chazal* declared long ago: “*Shivim panim baTorah* — there are 70 approaches to the study of the Torah.” (*Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah* 13:16) Each day, we proclaim in our *tefilot*: “*Ashreinu mah tov chelkeinu u’mah nayim goraleinu ...* (“Joyous are we in the goodness of our [Torah] portion! And how pleasing is our lot [to study Torah]! ...) May we ever recognize the beauty of our Torah inheritance — *u’mah yafah yerushateinu! V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of Rabbi Soloveitchik's English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link: [The Rav zatzal](#)