

Last week, I described how Eliezer, Avraham's servant, went above and beyond the basic call of his vow to find Yitzhak a wife, by devising a test of generosity – as well as physical strength: would the woman he asked for water not only give it to him – but also offer to water his camels? A prodigious task.

So this week, the primary character in our narrative is Rivka, the woman who displayed such intuitive generosity in last week's Torah portion. While Abraham and his grandson, Yaakov, who born in this week's parashah, are both the dominant character's of their narratives, in the middle generation, Rivka stands out as the vibrant, active spouse in partnership with Yitzhak, who seems to be more passive and even fearful. Writing about Rivka, Avivah Zornberg writes, "in an obvious sense, as she runs back and forth at the well, eagerly providing for the needs of the servant and the camels, she resembles Abraham welcoming his angel-guests – impatient, energetic, overflowing with love (*hesed*). For Isaac, withdrawn, haunted by the shadows in his mother's tent, she will re-evoke the hopeful involvement of an Abraham, connecting, integrating, generating life."¹

Rivka's introduction sets her up as a spiritual giant, and the beginning of this week's parashah, Toldot, affirms the affection between Yitzhak and Rivka, in that he prays with her when she is barren. It also affirms the force of her spiritual intuition: in the midst of her difficult pregnancy, she alone receives the prophecy that for her twins the normal order of primogeniture, the pre-eminence of the firstborn, will be subverted.

But later in the parashah, we see Rivka's proactivity and insight primarily turned towards her favored son Jacob, and to making sure he receives the blessing that her husband, Yitzhak, intends for Yaakov's twin, the firstborn, Esav. She not only helps Yaakov disguise himself as Esav before his blind father, but cooks the meal for Yaakov to present to Yitzhak, and when Yaakov protests in fear that his father

¹ Zornberg, Avivah. *The Beginnings of Desire: Reflections on Genesis*. P. 139-40

will curse him for the deception, she insists, in Chapter 27, verse 13: “Your curse be upon me!”

Rabbi Shai Held writes: “. . .Working to thwart her husband’s plans, she displays her characteristic alacrity and decisiveness, only this time in the service of a duplicitous and destructive plot. . .

“Her spiritual values are sound,” one Bible scholar comments, “but her method is deplorable.”¹⁷ Another notes: “To exploit a man’s blindness was not only prohibited on grounds of humanity; God himself watched over dealings with the blind and deaf (Leviticus 19:14; Deuteronomy 27:18).”¹⁸ Rebekah’s plot advances the divine plan, but it also sows enduring discord and brings devastation in its wake. Rebekah “arranges the fulfillment of the divine plan... [but] in a manner that is morally offensive to a high degree.”¹⁹ She pays a steep price: After sending Jacob away, she never sees him again.”²

Rivka not only never sees Jacob again, but the love and affection that characterizes her relationship with Yitzhak in the early years disappears from the text, and she certainly alienates herself from her unfavored son, Esav, who continues to be the one she lives with.

Reading this story in a contemporary context, it is easy to be horrified by Rivka’s behavior, or in Rabbi Held’s case, to use it as a model that, as he sums up, “People are complicated,” and even those with best moral intuition can sometimes behave despicably.

But I think there is more than the complication of the individual or even the family here. Yes, there is dysfunction in the parents who each open favor one child over the other. But such dysfunction may be inherent in a system of patriarchy and primogeniture.

² Rabbi Shai Held, “People Are Complicated.” <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/people-are-complicated#source-2176>

Yitzhak, knowing himself to be second-born, quiet and passive, may find comfort in knowing that his first-born – who by rights of the time will inherit everything – is such a strong and aggressive personality. In emotionally rejecting his second-born, Jacob, he is perhaps rejecting the aspects of himself that shame him the most, including, perhaps, a residual guilt over the banishment of his elder half-brother Yishmael.

And Rivka, possessing a prophetic knowledge that the younger son will ultimately supplant the elder, may decide to invest all of her emotional energy in him, especially given the limitations on where else she could invest it. Her moral energy is not welcome in the public sphere in the same way that of her father-in-law was. I personally, deeply relate: I love parenting, but I don't think I would be a decent parent at all if all of the attention and meaning of my life was wrapped up in my children. Some people are meant to be homemakers, some are meant to be other things as well, and what was it like for Rivka to not have the option to consider any purpose other than motherhood?

But beyond that, though her sphere is domestic, she hardly exerts egal control even there. She does not have the legal power to rewrite the will, so to speak. As woman, she cannot bestow a physical inheritance upon her younger son. Perhaps she was never taught to value the power of her own blessings, so instead she makes sure that Yaakov receives Yitzhak's blessing.

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg argues that Rivka only used deception as a last resort, after years of arguing with Yitzhak and trying to persuade him. The problem with their dynamic was bigger than either of them. He writes: "Rebecca functioned in a patriarchal society. In that culture, men made the big decisions, and inherited norms such as primogeniture governed. Isaac heard her out—but he did not quite hear her. So Rebecca, like many of the important women in the Bible, worked through the conventions and powers-that-be. As did Miriam and like Abigail and Bat Sheba in David's time, they maneuvered and whittled and persisted and

bowed and got their way without confronting the establishment. They certainly did not try to overthrow it. They even broke through barriers, but they won by being smart, far-sighted, strategic, but never openly confronting the dominant paradigm. And for them, that included the patriarchy.”³

What might this story look like had it been set in a culture in which parents made joint decisions about inheritance, or in which a woman’s blessing was valued like a man’s, and in which the presumption was that children would be treated equally? What if this story came from a context in which a woman was expected to live out her own ambitions and intuitions, instead of needing to invest them exclusively in her sons? There might, in fact, *be no story*. All of the moral problematics of this story stem from the moral problematics of its cultural context.

Rivka’s tragedy is the tragedy of a woman full of hesed and spiritual insight in a world where the only way for a woman to enact her gifts was in the sphere of the household, a world where worth was assigned at birth, and some people mattered less.

We still live in that world, though the valuations are of course *somewhat* different. Torah still invites us to imagine a world in which we could assert our gifts directly, and in which we would have to try to steal blessings from anyone else, knowing that our own blessings are sufficiently powerful. What blessings might you offer, if you knew your blessing mattered?

³ Rabbi Yitz Greenberg. “our Mother Rebecca” <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/our-mother-rebecca>