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“REBEKAH:
A PORTRAIT OF OUR SECOND MATRIARCH”

“The Image of Rebekah in the Rabbinic Literature”

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Digest

This thesis attempts to present a complete portrait of the life of the second matriarch Rebekah, through the use of the biblical text supplemented by the writings of the Rabbis. The texts are dealt with in a chronological order, paralleling the sequence of events as presented in chapters 22-28 of the book of Genesis.

I have attempted to assemble, translate, and interpret the rabbinic literature about Rebekah. Rebekah is a complex and intriguing character. She is presented as God's choice to marry Isaac. In many ways she resembles Abraham and Sarah, and contrasts dramatically with the character of Isaac. Her strengths are shown to counterbalance, though sometimes overwhelm, her husband's weaknesses. Consequently, her own actions are viewed from a number of perspectives: some positive, some negative.

Rebekah is the most important figure in the second generation of the Jewish people. Through her understanding of her own role and her actions throughout the texts, she single-handedly works to ensure the perpetuation of the line of Abraham and Sarah, continuing the blessing and covenant established between the first patriarch and God.

Most of the material in this thesis is taken from *Bereishit Rabbah*. In addition, midrashim from other sections of *Midrash Rabbah*, as well as *Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer* and *Pesikta Rabbati*, are utilized and examined. The midrashic literature is then supplemented by the writings of the medieval commentators, primarily Rashi, Ramban, and Sforno.

INTRODUCTION

The character of Rebekah, our second matriarch, is one of the most intriguing and complex in the entire Genesis narrative. Rebekah is simultaneously very similar to and quite different from the patriarchs and matriarchs who precede and follow her. She plays the largest role within the second generation of the Jewish people – it is her responsibility and challenge to see to it that the blessing of Abraham is properly transmitted to the future descendants of Abraham and Sarah. To that end, Rebekah is presented as clever and decisive, as loving and nurturing, as understanding and far seeing, and as manipulative and cruel. The goal of this thesis is to present a portrait of Rebekah, as seen through the eyes of the rabbinic literature.

Rebekah is first introduced in the biblical text as being the daughter of Abraham's nephew, Bethuel. We first meet Rebekah at the well outside of Haran, where Eliezer, the servant of Abraham, has been sent to fetch a bride for Isaac. Rebekah is God's choice to be Isaac's wife. She heeds the Divine call and returns to Canaan with Eliezer. Upon meeting her, Isaac takes Rebekah into his mother's tent as his wife, and she is able to fill the void in his life left by the death of his mother Sarah.

Life, however, is not easy for Isaac and Rebekah. Rebekah remains barren for many years. Finally, Isaac pleads before God, and Rebekah conceives.

Rebekah is pregnant with twins, who struggle fiercely within her womb. God informs Rebekah that "Two nations are in your womb, two peoples shall issue forth from your body; one people shall be mightier than the other, and the older shall serve the younger" (Gen. 25:23). Rebekah then gives birth to the twins, Esau and Jacob. While Isaac favors Esau the first-born, Rebekah favors Jacob.

The struggle between the two boys continues as they grow older. Esau proves to be an outdoorsman and hunter, while Jacob prefers to remain around the home, engaged in study. Rebekah acknowledges that Jacob is the worthier heir and more deserving of the blessing of Abraham over his wicked brother Esau. Therefore, she devises a plan to ensure that Isaac, despite his own desires, blesses Jacob.

These stories comprise an outline of the life of Rebekah, as presented through the biblical narrative. In this thesis, I will systematically work through the text of Genesis chapters 22 – 28, using the narrative as a guide to the lives of Rebekah and her family.

I will then move from the biblical text to the literature of the Rabbis. The Rabbis, through midrash and commentaries, attempt to explain the stories and add in the missing details. They, through their own insights, as well as biases, will add color to the portraits of the biblical characters. This thesis will attempt to assemble, translate, and interpret the rabbinic literature about Rebekah. The primary rabbinic text will be *Bereishit Rabbah*, which serves as the foundation for all midrashim pertaining to this section of Genesis.

In addition to *Bereishit Rabbah*, I will incorporate passages from other midrashic works, including various sections of *Midrash Rabbah*, as well as *Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer* and *Pesikta Rabbati*, that were located through the use of subject and verse indices. Several passages from the Talmud are also cited.

The midrashim are supplemented by the writings of the medieval commentators. I will rely especially on the commentaries of Rabbi Shlomo Itzhaki (Rashi, 1040-1105), Rabbi Moses ben Nachman (Ramban, 1194-1270), and Obadiah Sforno (1475-1550). In several instances, I have also sought assistance in understanding the material from modern commentaries. I found especially useful the JPS Torah Commentary's *Genesis*, edited by Nahum Sarna. Finally, I also have attempted to incorporate some of the views presented in modern feminist literature interpreting the Bible.

I. REBEKAH -- ABRAHAM'S KINSWOMAN

An Introduction to Rebekah and Her Family

GENESIS 22: 20-24

(20) Some time later, Abraham was told, "Milcah too has borne children to your brother Nahor: (21) Uz, the first-born; and Buz, his brother; and Kemuel, the father of Aram; (22) and Chesed; Hazo; Pildash; Jidlaph; and Bethuel" -- (23) Bethuel being the father of Rebekah. These eight Milcah bore to Nahor, Abraham's brother. (24) And his concubine, whose name was Reumah, also bore children: Tebah, Gaham, Tahash, and Maacah.

These verses introduce the character Rebekah for the very first time in the book of Genesis. This section immediately follows the account of the "Binding of Isaac" and concludes *Parashat Vayera*. The two chapters immediately following the *Akedah* include the two great tasks that remain for Abraham: acquiring a burial plot for himself and Sarah and their descendants (chapter 23), and finding a wife for Isaac (chapter 24) in order to ensure his progeny and have God's blessing fulfilled:

... Because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your favored one, I will bestow My blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands on the seashore.... (Gen. 22: 16-17)

This final section, then, serves as a direct link between chapters 22 and 24 of Genesis and between the *parashiot* "*Vayera*" and "*Chayei Sarah*."

These verses also serve as a personal link between Abraham and his future daughter-in-law, Rebekah. According to the above section, Rebekah is the daughter of Bethuel. Bethuel is Abraham's nephew,¹ born to Abraham's brother Nahor and his wife Milcah. It is important to note that while Nahor had children with both his wife Milcah (8 sons) and his concubine Reumah (4 children),² Rebekah descends from the offspring of Milcah, who earlier in Genesis is mentioned alongside of Sarah: "Abram and Nahor took to themselves wives, the name of Abram's wife being Sarai and that of Nahor's wife, Milcah, the daughter of Haran, father of Milcah and Iscah" (Gen. 11:29). Thus, Rebekah is the grandniece of Abraham.

The placement of the above verses at the end of chapter 22 is puzzling. They seem to be out of place, without any sort of connection to the story preceding them. The Rabbis, therefore, sought to explain their position through use of midrash.

"And it came to pass after these things, that it was told to Abraham, saying: 'Behold, Milcah, she also has borne children...'" (Gen. 22:20).

It is written: *"A tranquil heart is the life of the flesh"* (Proverbs 14:30) -- thus, while he was still on Mount Moriah [Abraham] was informed that his son's mate [Rebekah] had been born, as it says, *"Behold, Milcah, she also has borne..."* *"It shall be health to thy navel, and marrow to thy bones"* (Prov. 3:8). For while he was yet on Mount Moriah he was

¹Thus Bethuel is of the same generation as Lot, also Abraham's nephew, the son of Abraham's brother Haran.

informed that his son's mate had been born, as it says, "*Behold, Milcah, she also has borne children.*"³

According to this midrash, these verses are here because the message contained therein was told to Abraham while he was still at Mount Moriah. After the traumatic episode of almost sacrificing his son, these words are meant to provide comfort for Abraham. Knowing that a kinswoman had been born who would eventually be the wife for Isaac is intended to provide Abraham with a "tranquil heart." A wife must mean that Isaac will have survived and that Abraham will have his descendants.

This theme of providing comfort for Abraham is repeated in the following midrash:

"As cold waters to a faint soul, so is good news from a far country" (Prov. 25:25). We learned elsewhere (*Berachot* 54a) -- For rains and good tidings one recites the blessing: "Blessed be He who is good and does good." What do we see next to "good tidings"? The falling of rain. R. Berechiah said in the name of R. Levi: According to "*As cold waters to a faint soul, so is good news from a far country,*" what is the "good news"? "Blessed be He who is good and does good." So for cold waters [rain] [one recites the blessing,] "Blessed is He who is good and does good." Another interpretation: "*As cold water to a faint soul, so is good news from a far country*" -- while Abraham was still on Mount

² The line of Jacob, grandson of Abraham, parallels that of Nahor -- like Nahor, Jacob had 8 sons with his wives, and 4 children by his concubines. See *Bereishit Rabbah* 57:3.

³ *Bereishit Rabbah* 57:1.

Moriah, he was informed that his son's mate had been born, in accordance with the verse, "*Behold, Milcah, she also has borne....*"⁴

According to a third midrash, it was natural for Abraham to focus immediately on the need for a wife for Isaac after the *Akedah*.

"*And it came to pass after these things.*" After contemplation over these things. Who was contemplating? Abraham was contemplating. He said: "Had [Isaac] died on Mount Moriah, he would surely have died without children! Therefore, now what should I do? I will give him in marriage to one of the daughters of Aner, Eshcol, or Mamre, for they are righteous women; for what does their birth matter to me?" Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to [Abraham]: "You do not need this, for Isaac's mate has already been born"; hence, "*Behold, Milcah, she also has born....*"⁵

Thus, according to this midrash, Abraham was told of the birth of Rebekah while he was still on Mount Moriah not to provide comfort for Abraham, but rather to keep him from finding another wife for Isaac. Rebekah is, therefore, directly appointed by God to be Isaac's bride.

In his commentary to the end of chapter 22, Rashi repeats this last midrash. Commenting on verse 23, Rashi adds that "the entire genealogical record is given here only for the sake of this verse."⁶

⁴ *Bereishit Rabbah* 57:2.

⁵ *Bereishit Rabbah* 57:3.

⁶ Rashi's comment to 22:23; A.M. Silbermann, ed., *Chumash with Rashi's Commentary*, Vol. I, p. 97.

Nachmonides also finds the position of these verses confusing. According to his commentary to verse 20, it would have been impossible for Abraham not to have known about his brother's children previous to the *Akedah* -- the distance between Mesopotamia and Canaan not being great enough to keep news of this sort from traveling. Therefore, God "performed a miracle" for Nahor and Milcah, visiting them with children in their old age, just as God had done for Abraham and Sarah. Ramban then agrees with Rashi in his comment to verse 23, stating that only Rebekah -- her older brother, Laban, who also plays a major role in the stories of Genesis, is excluded from the text -- is mentioned "since the entire chapter is written to make known her genealogy."⁷

Sforno's commentary is similar to that of the Ramban. He, too, points out that Abraham must have already known about the children of Nahor and Milcah. The news of the birth of Rebekah is reported here, according to Sforno, to tell Abraham that he would be able to find a wife for Isaac from within his father's house, and thus would not have to be associated through marriage with the Canaanites. This is further emphasized by the report of the birth of Maacah in verse 24. Maacah would be an additional available bride for Isaac, from within the family still, if he should choose not to marry Rebekah.⁸

This section, though, is tied not only to what precedes it -- the *Akedah* -- but also to what follows it -- the death of Sarah. According to midrash, Rebekah,

⁷ Ramban's comment to 22:23; Charles Chavel, ed., *Ramban Commentary on the Torah, Sefer Bereishit*, pp. 279-280.

⁸ Sforno's comment to 22:24; Raphael Pelcovitz, ed., *Sforno Commentary on the Torah* (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 1997), pp. 112-113.

the second matriarch, must be introduced into the story before her predecessor, Sarah, can depart.

"The sun also rises, and the sun goes down..." (Ecclesiastes 1:5). R.

Abba said: Do we then not know that the sun rises and the sun goes down? Rather the meaning is that before the Holy One, blessed be He, causes the sun of one righteous man to set, He causes the sun of another righteous man to rise. Thus, on the day that R. Akiva died, our Teacher [R. Judah HaNasi] was born, and they applied to him the verse, *"the sun also rises, and the sun also goes down."* On the day that R. Adda bar Ahabah dies, R. Abin was born, and the same was applied to him....

Before the Holy One, blessed be He, caused Moses' sun to set, He caused Joshua's sun to rise, as it says: *"And the Lord said unto Moses, 'Take thee Joshua the son of Nun...'"* (Numbers 27:18). Before the sun of Joshua set, the sun of Othniel, the son of Kenaz, rose Before the Holy One allowed Sarah's sun to set, He caused that of Rebekah to rise. Thus we first read, *"Behold, Milcah, she also has borne children,"* and after that, *"And the life of Sarah was a hundred years and seven years and twenty years; these were the years of the life of Sarah"* (Gen. 23:1).⁹

These verses, along with the aforementioned midrashim and commentaries, help to explain Rebekah's genealogy and relationship to the patriarch Abraham. However, they do not tell us anything about the person Rebekah -- what was she like as an individual and why she merited to marry Isaac. Her name itself also adds little information. A number of explanations

⁹ *Bereishit Rabbah* 58:2.

behind the name "RIVKAH" have been offered.¹⁰ One states that the name derives from a fairly widespread Semitic root meaning "to loop a cord over the head of a lamb or kid." Other possibilities include derivations of "a threshing team," or "a stall," or from an inverted form of "BAKAR," meaning here "a female calf." In a more modern sense, "RIVKAH" could come from the root meaning "to bind or tie."¹¹ This sense of her name will prove to be the most fitting, as I will attempt to make clear.

To learn more about her character, we must first investigate her background. Midrash provides a few more details.

"And Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel the Aramean, of Paddan-Aram, the sister of Laban the Aramean, to be his wife" (Gen. 25:20). R. Isaac said: If it is to teach us that she was from Aram-Naharayim, behold it already says "from Paddan-Aram." Why does Scripture state "Aramean" [as well as] *"the daughter of Bethuel the Aramean"*? [And] why does Scripture state, *"the sister of Laban the Aramean"*? Rather it comes to teach you that her father was a rogue,¹² and her brother was a rogue, and the people of her town were likewise rogues, and this righteous woman who came forth from among them might well be compared to *"a lily among thorns"* (Song of Songs 2:2). R. Pinchas said in the name of R. Simon: It is written, *"And Isaac sent away Jacob, and he went to Paddan-Aram unto Laban, son of*

¹⁰ Nahum Sarna, ed., *JPS Torah Commentary, Genesis*, p. 155.

¹¹ Alfred Kolatch, *Best Baby Names for Jewish Children* (Jonathan David Publishers, Inc., New York, 1998), p. 221.

¹² This is a play on the word "ARAMI" (Aramean) and "RAMAI," meaning a "rogue or cheat."

Bethuel the Aramean" (Gen. 28:5) -- this teaches that the whole population were included in the category of rogues.¹³

The reference of Rebekah as "a lily among thorns" is repeated in *Midrash Rabbah* in two other locations.¹⁴ This midrash does not present her family or hometown in a favorable light. Her immediate family members, as well as being rogues, are also referred to as being "idolatrous."¹⁵ The fact that she was able to overcome her family's background and the environment in which she was raised is proof of her being a "righteous woman" and "woman of valor"¹⁶ and of her being fit to marry the son of Abraham.

In his book *Biblical Images*, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz labels Rebekah as "the white sheep in the family."¹⁷ Steinsaltz agrees that understanding Rebekah's background and family-life is crucial towards understanding her true character. He portrays the genealogical line of Nahor as being in a decline, as epitomized by the actions of Bethuel and Laban. As Abraham's side of the family grew increasingly wealthy and powerful, Nahor's side of the family "was deteriorating, depleting its resources, preoccupied with pettiness as it sank into decay."¹⁸ Steinsaltz, therefore, refers to Rebekah as an "atavistic figure,

¹³ *Bereishit Rabbah* 63:4.

¹⁴ See *Vayikra Rabbah* 23:1 and *Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 2:4.

¹⁵ *Bereishit Rabbah* 65:4.

¹⁶ *Midrash HaGadol* includes Rebekah as one of the twenty-two women of valor as mentioned in the Bible: Noah's wife, Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, Rachel, Bithiah (foster-mother of Moses), Jochebed, Miriam, Hannah, Jael, the widow of Zarephath, Naomi, Rahab, Bath-Sheba, Michal, Hazlelponith (Samson's mother), Elisheba (Aaron's wife), Serah (Asher's daughter), the wife of the prophet Obadiah, the Shunammite, Ruth, and Esther.

¹⁷ Adin Steinsaltz, *Biblical Images* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1994), pp. 43-51.

¹⁸ Steinsaltz, p. 48.

portrayed as containing within herself the strength and vitality of the great line from which the patriarchs were descended."

In the mixture of different strains, she was the healthy person in a sick family. And the healthy, bright child in a degenerate, flawed family is a gift from heaven. In Rebekah's case, it is she who had to be the one to make quick, sharp decisions, because no one in her environment was trustworthy. She had to be the one to determine the course of events, while her menfolk were absorbed in "wheeling and dealing." From childhood, she had learned that the responsibility rested with her, and this characteristic resolution remained with her throughout her life.¹⁹

Steinsaltz concludes his chapter on Rebekah by calling her life "a personal victory over her environment, her origins, her birth, and she tried thereafter throughout her life to adhere to what was essentially good: the good family, the continuity of the good line."²⁰

These traits of the character Rebekah, as outlined by Steinsaltz, become clearly visible as the reader sees Rebekah "in action." Her story really begins, therefore, with her introduction in chapter 24, as Abraham sends his servant to his homeland in order to find a wife for Isaac.

¹⁹ Steinsaltz, pp. 48-49.

²⁰ Steinsaltz, p. 51.

II. REBEKAH — SARAH'S SUBSTITUTE

REBEKAH LEAVES HOME TO MARRY ISAAC

ABRAHAM COMMANDS ELIEZER

GENESIS 24: 1-9

(1) Abraham was now old, advanced in years, and the Lord had blessed Abraham in all things. (2) And Abraham said to the senior servant of his household, who had charge of all that he had owned, "Put your hand under my thigh, (3) and I will make you swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and the God of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites among whom I dwell, (4) but will go to the land of my birth and get a wife for my son Isaac." (5) And the servant said to him, "What if the woman does not consent to follow me to this land, shall I then take your son back to the land from which you came?" (6) Abraham answered him, "On no account must you take my son back there! (7) The Lord, God of heaven, who took me from my father's house and from my native land, who promised me on oath, saying, 'I will assign this land to your offspring' -- He will send His angel before you, and you will get a wife for my son from there. (8) And if the woman does not consent to follow you, you shall then be clear of this oath to me; but do not take my son back there." (9) So the servant put his hand under the thigh of his master Abraham and swore to him as bidden.

As noted at the beginning of Chapter II, following the *Akedah* two great tasks remained for Abraham: the acquisition of land within Canaan for a burial

plot and the betrothal of his son Isaac. The story of Abraham's purchase of the Cave of Machpelah and his burying Sarah is contained in chapter 23 of Genesis. The above verses serve as the link between these two remaining tasks: the death of Sarah and Abraham's recognition of his own advanced age and mortality lead him to take the necessary steps in finding an appropriate wife for his beloved Isaac.

Rashi, in an attempt to explain how these verses function as an introduction to the story that follows, focuses on the word "*BAKOL*" in verse one ("The Lord had blessed Abraham *BAKOL*"). Rashi points out that the numerical value of "*BAKOL*" is the same as the numerical value of "*BEN*," meaning "a son." Thus, the opening verse suggests that God had blessed Abraham with a son, and since he had a son, it was his duty to find a wife for him.¹

Nachmonides, commenting on the same verse, seems to concur with Rashi. He interprets "had blessed Abraham *BAKOL*" to mean that God had given him "riches, possessions, honor, longevity, and children, which are the treasures of man." Thus, Abraham was "perfect in every detail, lacking in no respect save seeing his son have children who would inherit his superior position and honor."² Therefore, he desired to find a wife for Isaac.

¹ Rashi's comment to 24:1; Silberman, pp. 100-101.

² Ramban's comment to 24:1; Chavel, p. 290.

Abraham then turns to his senior servant, he "who had charge of all that he owned," and charges him with this great task and responsibility. Though the text here does not mention the servant by name, the midrash and commentaries are unanimous in assuming that the servant is Eliezer, who is mentioned previously by Abraham as "the one in charge of my household."³

We must ask, though, why was he given this job? According to *Bereishit Rabbah*, Eliezer resembled his master, physically as well as intellectually and spiritually.⁴ Therefore, Abraham must have felt confident that Eliezer was capable of fulfilling such an assignment. Sforno comments that Abraham felt himself too old to do the job himself; he feared that he was incapable of making the journey and might die before the task could be completed.⁵ Ramban, offering another interpretation, suggests that Eliezer was the administrator of his possessions, and Abraham commanded him to marry off Isaac in accordance with his will (only then could Isaac inherit his father's estate).⁶

Abraham's command to Eliezer is threefold. First, Eliezer is not to take a wife for Isaac from among the Canaanite women. Second, he is to travel to the land of Abraham's birth and only there find a wife for Isaac. Third, Eliezer "on no account" may take Isaac out of the land of Canaan and back to Abraham's homeland. Abraham makes Eliezer swear that he will obey Abraham's command.

³ Genesis 15:2. Interestingly, this is the only reference to Eliezer by name in all of Genesis.

⁴ *Bereishit Rabbah* 59:8.

⁵ Sforno's comment to 24:1; Pelcovitz, p. 118.

⁶ Ramban's comment to 24:3; Chavel, p. 294.

"... And I will make you swear by the Lord, the God of Heaven and the God of the earth" (Gen. 24:3). R. Pinchas said: [Abraham said]: "Before I made Him known to His creatures He was the 'God of Heaven'; now that I have made Him known to His creatures, He is 'the God of the earth.'" "That you shall not take a wife for my son of the daughters of the Canaanites" (Gen. 24:3). He warned [Eliezer] against going to the daughters of Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre. "But you shall go unto my country, and to my kindred" (Gen. 24:4). R. Isaac commented: Even if the wheat of your own locality is poor, yet sow thereof.⁷

This midrash refers to a previous midrash concerning the daughters of the righteous Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre.⁸ Knowing of Abraham's relationship with these three, it would be natural for Eliezer to look for a wife among their daughters. However, Abraham warns against exactly that. The wife is to come from his own family, his own "stock," to whom he owes a higher loyalty.

Ramban emphasizes the need to understand Abraham's instructions clearly. Isaac's wife should not simply come from the land of Abraham's roots -- "But heaven forbid that the sacred seed [of Abraham] should mix with the sons of Ham, the sinful one!"⁹ Thus, he suggests that "MOLADETI" be understood to mean Abraham's family: "go to my country (EL-ARTZI) and to my family (EL-MOLADETI)."

Therefore, we can understand Ramban's commentary as pointing directly to Rebekah to be Isaac's wife. She fits this description, for she lives in Abraham's

⁷ Bereishit Rabbah 59:8.

⁸ Bereishit Rabbah 57:3.

homeland and is of his family, as was established by the text at the end of chapter 22. Without mentioning her by name, Abraham seems to be pointing Eliezer to Rebekah.

Sforno, however, sees things differently. For a second time, Sforno does not indicate that Rebekah has already been chosen to be Isaac's wife. Sforno writes that Abraham sends off Eliezer to another land simply because there was no worthy wife for Isaac in all of Canaan. Sforno adds that Abraham made Eliezer take an oath because he feared that someone, knowing of Abraham's great wealth (as alluded to in the opening verse of this chapter), would try to bribe Eliezer into selecting an unfit wife for Isaac.¹⁰

Eliezer's first response to Abraham's command is a question: what should I do if the woman does not agree to return to Canaan with me? The midrash hints that Eliezer thought here to create an alliance with his own family by taking a wife for Isaac from his own daughters. Abraham's answer is a harsh rebuke.

"And the servant said to him: Peradventure the woman will not be willing to follow me to this land" (Gen. 24:5). Thus it is written: "Canaan,"¹¹ the balances of deceit are in his hand" (Hosea 12:8). "Canaan" was Eliezer; "the balances of deceit are in his hand" -- for he sat and weighed up his daughter: is she fit [to be Isaac's wife] or is she unfit? "To rob the beloved one" (Hosea 12:8) -- to rob the beloved one of the world, namely

⁹ Ramban's commentary to 24:7; Chavel p. 295. According to Ramban, the Chaldeans were all descendants of Ham.

¹⁰ Sforno commentary to 24:1; Pelcovitz, p.118.

¹¹ Canaan, also interpreted as "a trader," is meant here to be Eliezer.

Isaac.¹² So [Eliezer] spoke to [Abraham] until he came to the word “ULAI”¹³ -- “[if she won’t return with me] then I shall give [Isaac] my own daughter.” “You are accursed,” said [Abraham] to him, “and my son is blessed; and the accursed cannot unite with the blessed.”¹⁴

Abraham thus reminds Eliezer of who is the master and who the servant -- though they may be much alike, their roots are different: Eliezer comes from an “accursed” line. Therefore, Isaac could not marry the daughter of even a righteous man such as Eliezer. Rather, the wife-to-be must come from Abraham’s own family.

“And Abraham said to him: ‘Beware ...’ (Gen. 24:6). “The Lord, the God of heaven, who took me from my father’s house” -- this means literally his father’s house. “And from the land of my nativity” -- that is [Abraham’s] neighborhood. “And who spoke unto me” -- in Haran.¹⁵ “And who swore unto me” -- between the pieces.¹⁶ “He will send His angel before you.” R. Dosa said: A particular angel is meant.¹⁷ At the time when our father Abraham said, “He will send His angel before you,” the Holy One, blessed be He, appointed two angels for him -- one to bring Rebekah out [to the well], and the other to accompany Eliezer. “And if the woman peradventure be not willing ... only you shall not bring my son back there.” [The term] “Only” is used as a limitation: my son will not return, but my son’s son¹⁸ will return.¹⁹

Understanding both the assignment itself as well as its importance to his master, and accompanied by angels, Eliezer prepares now for his long journey.

¹² Eliezer had the power to “rob” Isaac by depriving him of his rightful wife and by giving him his own daughter instead.

¹³ The midrash here is playing with the words “ULAI” and “ELI.”

¹⁴ *Bereishit Rabbah* 59:9.

¹⁵ Genesis 12:1.

¹⁶ Genesis 15: 1-21.

¹⁷ An “angel,” not simply a “messenger.”

¹⁸ This refers to Isaac’s son, Jacob, who is permitted to leave Canaan and return to Abraham’s and Rebekah’s homeland in order to find a wife.

ELIEZER'S JOURNEY AND PRAYER

GENESIS 24: 10-14

(10) Then the servant took ten of his master's camels and set out, taking with him all the bounty of his master; and he made his way to Aram-Naharaim, to the city of Nahor. (11) He made the camels kneel down by the well outside the city, at evening time, the time when women come out to draw water. (12) And he said, "O Lord, God of my master Abraham, grant me good fortune this day, and deal graciously with my master Abraham. (13) Here I stand by the spring as the daughters of the townsmen come out to draw water; (14) let the maiden to whom I say, 'Please, lower your jar that I may drink,' and who replies, 'Drink, and I will also water your camels' – let her be the one whom You have decreed for Your servant Isaac. Thereby shall I know that You have dealt graciously with my master."

According to midrash, the trip from Kiriya Arbah to Haran was a journey of seventeen days. However, it took Eliezer only three hours to make the trip.²⁰ This was made possible by God, who thus hastened Eliezer's completion of this service of loving kindness for his master Abraham.

"And he arose, and went to Aram-Naharaim" (Gen. 24:10). R. Berekiah said in R. Isaac's name: [Eliezer arrived there] on that very day. Thus in the view of R. Berekiah in R. Isaac's name, *"And I came this day to the fountain"* (Gen. 24:42) means: I set out today, and I arrived today. Thus it is written: *"You have made the land to shake, You have cleft it; heal the*

¹⁹ *Bereishit Rabbah* 59:10.

²⁰ *Pirkei De Rabbi Eliezer*, Chapter 16, p.108 (Friedlander edition).

breaches, for it is collapsing" (Psalm 60:4). "You have made the land to shake" – in the days of Abraham; "You have cleft it" – in the days of Eliezer; "Heal the breaches thereof" – in the days of Jacob; "For it is collapsing" -- in the days of the inhabitants of Nob.... The Rabbis said: Even had he been at the end of the world, the Holy One, blessed be He, would have brought him in the twinkling of an eye, so that that righteous man²¹ should not be in distress...²²

Thus, with God's speed, Eliezer arrives in Nahor. According to the text, he comes, "taking with him all the bounty of his master." Rashi explains this verse to mean that Eliezer carried with him a deed of gift of all of Abraham's possessions bequeathed to his son, Isaac. The purpose for such a deed was none other than to make the family of the bride-to-be eager to send off their daughter.²³

Wisely, Eliezer heads first to the well (or "spring") located outside the city of Nahor. Public wells were logical first destinations for strangers, for they served two purposes. First, travelers could replenish their water supplies. Second, simultaneously, they could learn much information about the town and meet the townsfolk, the well being a gathering place for the townspeople and shepherds.²⁴ His time of arrival was especially fortunate – after the completion

²¹ The rabbis seem to apply this notion not only to Eliezer's rushing to relieve Abraham's distress, but also to Avishai the son of Zeruiah, who all of a sudden appeared to rescue his uncle, David (II Samuel 21:17). Jacob, too, according to this midrash, was able to cover a long distance in a miraculously short time.

²² *Bereishit Rabbah* 59:11.

²³ Rashi's comment to 24:10; Silberman, p. 102.

²⁴ See Sarna comment to 24:11 in JPS Torah Commentary, *Genesis*, p. 164. Further examples of wells serving similar purposes in the Torah can be found in the stories of Jacob at Haran (Gen. 29:2) and Moses in Midian (Ex. 2:15). In all three cases, the encounters at wells led to betrothals.

of their chores, the women would gather at the well to "dawdle over the task and engage in leisurely conversation."²⁵

The rabbis see Eliezer's next action as quite controversial. On one side, the rabbis argue that he offers a completely improper prayer. On the other hand, some see Eliezer as establishing good criteria and characteristics that will be required of Isaac's future wife and as requesting God's help in fulfilling his mission.

"At the time of evening, the time that women go out to draw water" (Gen. 24:11). R. Huna said: when a man goes to take a wife and he hears dogs barking, can he then understand what they are saying? [There was just as little reason in Eliezer's action.] "At the time of evening, the time that women go out to draw water."²⁶

R. Huna states here that there is no logic behind Eliezer's actions. He seems to question whether Eliezer is taking his responsibility seriously enough. Sarcastically he suggests that the servant could just as easily find a wife for Isaac by listening to the barking of dogs!

This theme is repeated in even harsher terms in the following midrash, which calls Eliezer's actions improper:

... Four asked improperly [of God]: three were granted their request in a fitting manner, and the fourth, in an unfitting manner. They are Eliezer, Caleb, Saul, and Jephthah. Eliezer: *"So let it come to pass, that the maiden..."* – even a bondmaid! Yet God prepared Rebekah for him and

²⁵ *Ibid.*

granted his request in a fitting manner. Caleb: "*He that smites Kiriat-Sepher and takes it, to him will I give Achsah my daughter to wife*" (Judges 1:12) – it might even be a slave! But God chose Othniel for him. Saul: "*And it shall be that the man who kills him, the king will enrich him with great riches, and will give him his daughter*" (I Samuel 17:25) – it might even be a slave! But God prepared David for him. Jephthah asked in an unfitting manner, and God answered him in an unfitting manner....²⁷

According to this midrash, Eliezer's prayer is ridiculous – if a bondmaid had arrived at the well precisely at that moment and offered Eliezer water for himself and the animals, would Eliezer have considered her as an appropriate wife for Isaac? Eliezer seems to have forgotten the requirement that the bride must come from Abraham's own family.

A very similar midrash can be found in *Leviticus Rabbah*. Eliezer is cited as one of four individuals who began their supplications with vows. Eliezer is one of the three who made their requests in an improper manner, and yet God answered them favorably. According to the midrash, God responds to Eliezer's supplication by saying: "If a Canaanite slave-girl, or a harlot, had come out, would you still have said, 'Let the same be she that You have designated for Your servant, Isaac?'" However, "the Holy One, blessed be He, did well for [Eliezer] and brought Rebekah to his hand."²⁸

This same notion is expressed almost identically in the Talmud, which cites three, instead of four, similar cases:

²⁶ *Bereishit Rabbah* 59:12.

²⁷ *Bereishit Rabbah* 60:3.

²⁸ *Vayikra Rabbah* 37:4.

R. Samuel b. Nachmani said in the name of R. Jonathan: Three [men] made haphazard requests [or asked not in a proper manner], two of them were fortunate in the reply they received and one was not, namely: Eliezer, the servant of Abraham; Saul, the son of Kish; and Jephthah, the Gileadite. Eliezer, the servant of Abraham, as it is written: "*So let it come to pass, that the maiden to whom I shall say, 'Let down your pitcher...'*" She might have been lame or blind, but [Eliezer] was fortunate in the answer given to him in that Rebekah chanced to meet him...²⁹

Thus, it was only through chance that Rebekah, instead of a woman who was lame or blind or a servant, appeared at the well at that moment. Eliezer's taking of such a risk is, according to these rabbis, highly improper.

The subsequent midrash, though, provides a different perspective:

"And it came to pass, scarcely before he had finished speaking..." (Gen. 24:15). R. Simeon b. Yochai taught: three men were answered even while their petition was still on their lips – Eliezer, Abraham's servant, Moses, and Solomon. Eliezer: "*And it came to pass, scarcely before he had finished speaking, that behold Rebekah came out.*" Moses: "*And it came to pass, as he made an end of speaking all these words, that the ground did cleave asunder*" (Numbers 16:31). Solomon: "*Now when Solomon had made an end of praying, the fire came down from heaven*" (II Chronicles 7:1).³⁰

According to this midrash, Eliezer is placed within the same category as the great figures of Moses and Solomon. If God had found his prayer to be inappropriate, then God would not have fulfilled his words in the same manner with which God made the words of Moses and Solomon come true.

²⁹ *Taanit* 4a.

³⁰ *Bereishit Rabbah* 60:4.

The commentator Rashi chooses to focus more on the test of character that Eliezer proposes than on his prayer. According to Rashi, Eliezer's test is quite appropriate. He seeks a woman who is "charitable." Only a woman who is charitable will be worthy of admission into the house of Abraham – Abraham being the paradigm of *tzedakah*. Therefore, Eliezer will know that the woman has been selected by God if she acts in a charitable manner. Thus, the test is Eliezer's proposal for understanding the will of God. The words, "*And thereby shall I know,*" compose Eliezer's petition that he know *through* her that God has shown kindness to Abraham. Eliezer thus says that he will know that God has shown his master kindness, if the charitable woman whom God provides is of Abraham's family and a fit companion for Isaac.³¹

The Ramban, after restating the words of Rashi, offers a second interpretation. He restates Eliezer's petition to God in these words:

"Make it happen to me this day that the girl to whom I shall speak be the one that You have appointed for Your servant Isaac, and with this, show kindness to my master Abraham for with this I will know that You have shown kindness to him if she be of his family and of good mind and of beautiful appearance."³²

Both interpretations, that of Rashi and of Nachmonides, reveal a more humble Eliezer, the faithful servant who asks of God help in completing the mission of his master. After all, Abraham did assure Eliezer that God would help by "sending His angel before you" (24:7). It is also clear, according to the two

³¹ Rashi's comment to 24:14; Silberman, pp. 102-103.

commentators, that the selection of the proper bride for Isaac is to be done solely by God.

Sforno agrees with the above descriptions of Eliezer's actions and words. Sforno attempts to make clear that Eliezer is not attempting to practice any form of divination. Rather, he is simply establishing criteria by which to choose a wife for Isaac. One criterion relates to the camels – according to Sforno, "one who asks should request less than he actually needs so as not to overly bother others, while the person responding should go beyond it and offer all, or more, than is needed." Thus Eliezer's request is less than he desired, and, as the text points out, Rebekah's response is quite proper. How does Rebekah know to respond in such a manner? Sforno chooses to understand "the one whom You have decreed" or "designated," as "the one whom You have instructed." God has, therefore, taught Rebekah "proper ethical understanding so that she is indeed worthy to be Isaac's wife."³³

Sarna, in his commentary, refers to the criteria that Eliezer establishes as "aspects of nobility of character."

The ideal wife must be hospitable to strangers, kind to animals, and willing to give herself to others. The grueling nature of the prescribed test can be appreciated only if it is realized that a single camel – and here there were ten! – requires at least twenty-five gallons of water to regain the weight it

³² Ramban's commentary to 24:14; Chavel, p. 299.

³³ Sforno's commentary to 24:14; Pelcovitz, p. 120.

loses in the course of a long journey. It takes a camel about ten minutes to drink this amount of water.³⁴

In other words, Eliezer seeks a wife for Isaac who comes not only from the family of Abraham but from his mold as well – the characteristics he seeks reflect the actions of his master, who is the model host (as can be seen in the story of Abraham's greeting the three strangers in Genesis 18). Only a woman with such nobility of character and in possession of these qualities and strengths and more will be a fitting wife for Isaac. Rebekah, as we shall see, not only meets these criteria; she exceeds them.

ENCOUNTER AT THE WELL – ELIEZER MEETS REBEKAH

GENESIS 24: 15-20

(15) [Eliezer] had scarcely finished speaking, when Rebekah, who was born to Bethuel, the son of Milcah the wife of Abraham's brother Nahor, came out with her jar on her shoulder. (16) The maiden was very beautiful, a virgin whom no man had known. She went down to the spring, filled her jar, and came up. (17) The servant ran toward her and said, "Please, let me sip a little water from your jar." (18) "Drink, my lord," she said, and she quickly lowered her jar upon her hand and let him drink. (19) When she had let him drink his fill, she said, "I will also draw for your camels, until they finish drinking." (20) Quickly emptying her jar into the trough, she ran back to the well to draw, and she drew for all his camels.

³⁴ Sarna, JPS Torah Commentary, *Genesis*, p. 164.

Eliezer is now prepared to begin his actual search for Isaac's bride. God does not keep Eliezer waiting long – God immediately answers the servant's prayer by leading him directly to Rebekah and by bringing Rebekah directly to him.

"Who is among you who fears the Lord, that hears the voice of his servant? Though he walks in darkness and has no light, let him trust in the name of the Lord and rely upon God" (Isaiah 50:10).... Another interpretation: "Who is among you that fears the Lord" alludes to Eliezer; "Who hears the voice of His servant," [this also alludes to Eliezer who listened] to the voice of Abraham who was servant of the Holy One, blessed be He, as it is written: "for the sake of Abraham My servant" (Gen. 26:24). "Though he walks in darkness" [refers to] when [Eliezer] went to fetch Rebekah.³⁵ "And has no light": who then gave him light? The Holy One, blessed be He, illumined his path with meteors and lightning [and led him directly to Rebekah]. "Let him trust in the name of the Lord, and rely upon God": thus it is written, "And he said, 'O Lord, the God of my master Abraham, send me, I pray, good speed this day.'"³⁶

Again, this midrash makes clear that God led Eliezer to Rebekah, lighting his way and directing his path.

Though she was mentioned earlier in Genesis (end of chapter 22), Rebekah makes her first appearance in the text here. The reader is immediately reminded of Rebekah's identity – she is the daughter of Bethuel, who was the son of Abraham's brother Nahor and his wife, not concubine, Milcah. Thus,

³⁵ It was as if he walked in darkness because he knew not exactly where he was going.

³⁶ *Bereishit Rabbah* 60:1.

even though Eliezer failed to mention the prerequisite of the maiden's family line in his own prayer, God provides the perfect match for Isaac; she will indeed fulfill all of Abraham's requirements and Isaac's needs.

Neither Abraham nor Eliezer had made mention of any physical preferences for Isaac's bride; and yet, the first description that the text yields states that she "was very beautiful" and "a virgin whom no man had known." The midrash states that she was a perfect virgin, a virgin in respect of never having been married and in respect of her hymen, which was not damaged by any sort of physical injury. Thus she was fit to be the first woman to be intimate for the first time with a man who had been circumcised at eight days.³⁷ It also meant that no man had even made improper advances to her, in accordance with the verse, "The scepter of the wicked shall never rest upon the land allotted to the righteous, that the righteous not set their hand to wrongdoing" (Psalm 125:3).³⁸

According to the midrash, God then provides a second miracle (the first being their immediate encounter):

"And she went down to the fountain, and filled her pitcher, and came up." All women went down and drew water from the well, whereas for her the water ascended as soon as it saw her. Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to her: "You have provided a sign [of blessing] for your descendants: as the water ascended immediately [upon] seeing you, so will it be for your descendants – as soon as the well sees them, it will immediately

³⁷ *Bereishit Rabbah* 60:5.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

rise." Thus it is written, "*Then Israel sang this song: Spring up, O well; sing unto it*" (Numbers 21:17).³⁹

Eliezer witnesses this miracle and takes it as a sign that she is the chosen one by God. Therefore he runs to greet her.⁴⁰ Now Eliezer speaks to the maiden for his first time and initiates his test. However, in order really to test her (and to test his own test), he asks only for a drink of water from her jar for himself. She responds by giving him water to drink and then immediately offering to draw water for his ten camels, as well. She, thus, passes the test – she does everything that Eliezer had hoped she would do without his asking.

Sforno points out that not only are her acts themselves impressive, but the manner in which she performs them is very impressive. She only speaks to Eliezer after he had finished drinking, in accordance with the teaching of the sages: "One should not converse at meals, lest the windpipe acts before the gullet" (*Taanit* 5b).⁴¹ Thereafter, she "quickly" emptied her jar in order to water the camels – haste being "a sign of regard and respect."⁴²

During the time it took Rebekah to draw water for all the camels (a considerable amount of time), the text states that Eliezer stood gazing at her, "wondering whether the Lord had made his errand successful or not." Sforno suggests that this waiting was part of Eliezer's test – he wanted to see if the

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ See Rashi comment to 24:17; Silberman, p. 103. Abravanel explains that the servant ran to greet her because he was impressed by the brisk and conscientious manner by which she went about her business, not wasting time in idle gossip (JPS Torah Commentary, *Genesis*, p.165).

⁴¹ Sforno comment to 24:19; Pelcovitz, p. 121.

⁴² Sforno comment to 24:20; Pelcovitz, p. 121.

maiden's actions were motivated by natural kindness or by the hope of reward. The fact that she never asks for any kind of compensation is a sign that she was "doing it purely from a motivation of kindness."⁴³

Eliezer's response to Rebekah's kindness is curious. In verse 22, we read that Eliezer gives Rebekah a gift: a gold nose-ring and two gold armbands. At first glance, the reason for the presentation of gifts seems to be either a token of his gratitude for the maiden's arduous efforts in drawing water for the servant and his caravan, or to celebrate his finding an appropriate bride for his master's son – for the maiden has passed Eliezer's test and seems to be God's designated choice (especially in the view of the midrash). However, again Eliezer seems to have forgotten part of his requirements – he doesn't know yet who the maiden is or what her family background is. Only after he presents her with these gifts does he ask her, "whose daughter are you?"⁴⁴

Both Rashi and Ramban address this difficulty within the text. Rashi offers a simple solution. Eliezer is confident that, on the account of the merit of his master Abraham, the Holy One, blessed be He, has made his journey successful.⁴⁵ Therefore, this maiden who passed Eliezer's initial test, must meet all of Abraham's requirements. This is the maiden whom God has brought to him, and Eliezer, out of his own relief and joy, presents Rebekah with these gifts.

⁴³ Sforno comment to 24:21-22; Pelcovitz, p. 122.

⁴⁴ This is according to the text of chapter 24, verses 21-23. When Eliezer retells his story to Rebekah's family (verse 47), he seems to reverse the order: asking first about her identity and only afterwards offering her the nose-ring and armbands.

Ramban offers another interpretation. He explains that in verse 22, Eliezer only "takes" ("VAYIKACH") out the nose-ring and armbands – the text does not state what he does with the gifts. Therefore, Ramban reads the verses as such:

"And the man took a golden ring and two bracelets which would be upon her hands, and he said to her, 'Whose daughter are you?' And after she told him, 'I am the daughter of Bethuel,' he put the ring upon her nose and the bracelets upon her hands."⁴⁶

In his commentary, Sforno does not indicate that there is a problem in the text. The armbands themselves, according to Sforno, are part of the test. When he placed them on her arms, they fit perfectly – providing further proof that Eliezer has indeed found the intended match for Isaac.⁴⁷

In any case, Eliezer presents Rebekah with these gifts. Thus he shows his gratitude to her and his pleasure in having found her. In addition to this, the gifts are partly intended to win her good will and to impress her family – for his mission is not complete: he must still convince her to return to Canaan with him and marry his master's son. Rebekah responds to the gifts by announcing her identity and by her second act of kindness and hospitality – she invites Eliezer to her home to eat and spend the night.

In verse 28, we read that after extending this offer of hospitality to the servant, Rebekah "ran and told all this to her mother's household." Rabbi

⁴⁵ Rashi comment to 24:23; Silberman, p. 104.

⁴⁶ Ramban comment to 24:22; Chavel, p. 301.

Yochanan comments in the midrash: [in that society] a woman is accustomed to repair only to her mother's house"⁴⁸ – therefore, the wording of the text should not appear strange. The next verse of the Genesis narrative introduces a new character – Rebekah's brother, Laban. Laban, as noted above, had been left out of the earlier genealogies of Rebekah and her family. In contrast to the introduction of Rebekah, no description of Laban is provided in the text. However, the midrash attempts to fill in a few details.

"And Rebekah had a brother, and his name was Laban" (Gen. 24:29).

R. Isaac said: He was exceptionally white [*"LAVAN"*]. R. Berekiah said: He was a refined rogue.⁴⁹

This description is important because both statements of the rabbis contrast greatly with the description of Rebekah. Whereas Rebekah is described as being very beautiful, her brother is "exceedingly white" in his complexion. Rebekah is shown to be a righteous woman; Laban is described as nothing but a rogue.

It is Laban, not the father Bethuel, who greets the servant and invites him to enter and to lodge overnight with the family. According to one interpretation, Laban extends such a courteous greeting – "Come in, O blessed of the Lord" (Gen. 24:31) – because he thought the man was actually Abraham himself (Eliezer's features being very similar to those of his master).⁵⁰ In his commentary, though, Rashi continues to present Laban as the rogue-figure. Rashi explains that Laban ran out to greet Eliezer because Laban saw that the

⁴⁷ Sforino's comment to 24:2 and notes; Pelcovitz, p. 122.

⁴⁸ *Bereishit Rabbah* 60:7.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

man was rich and he had an eye to his money.⁵¹ Sforno agrees with Rashi, adding that Laban ran outside merely to see the wealthy visitor and not to offer hospitality.⁵²

Laban invites Eliezer to enter, saying: "why do you remain outside, when I have made ready the house and a place for the camels?" (Gen. 24:31). The rabbis interpreted this verse to mean that Laban had cleared the house from the pollution of idols.⁵³ This is another reminder of Rebekah's idolatrous family and roots – which she will have to overcome in order to take her place as a matriarch of the Jewish people.

Having entered the house, Eliezer refuses any food until after he has had the chance to speak. What follows is a long, uninterrupted speech by Eliezer to the family of Rebekah. First, he introduces himself as the servant of Bethuel's kinsman, Abraham. Second, he updates them on the status of Abraham and his family. Much has changed since Abraham left town – God blessed him and he became rich, Sarah (who left childless) bore a child in her old age, and Isaac stands to inherit all that belongs to his father. All of this is meant to entice Rebekah's family, especially Laban, who has already let his own greed become known. Next he describes in full detail his mission and Abraham's command, emphasizing his oath and the seriousness of the matter at hand. He also recounts his petition of God and his experience at the well with Rebekah. His

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Rashi's commentary to 24:29; Silberman, p. 105.

⁵² Sforno comment to 24:29; Pelcovitz, p. 122.

⁵³ *Bereishit Rabbah* 60:7.

words emphasize that Rebekah has been designated by God to marry Isaac. He concludes his sixteen-verse monologue by asking for an answer from Rebekah's family: will they give her to marry his master's son?

Not only is Eliezer's speech long and repetitious, but this whole chapter detailing the betrothal of Rebekah is quite long – sixty-seven verses. In comparison, the story of the *Akedah*, which comprises most of chapter 22, consists of only nineteen verses. The rabbis, therefore, address the question of why the text spends so much time telling this tale in such exact detail.

"And he gave straw and feed to the camels..." (Gen. 24:32). R. Acha said: The mere conversation of the slaves of the Patriarchs' household is more important⁵⁴ than the Torah of their descendants. This chapter dealing with Eliezer covers two or three columns [of text within the Torah scroll], and [his conversation] is not only recorded, but also repeated. Whereas [the uncleanness of] a reptile is an integral part of the Torah, and yet it is only from an extending particle in Scripture that we learn that its blood defiles as its flesh. R. Simeon b. Yochai deducing it from the form "*HA-TAMEH*" (Lev. 11:29) where "*TAMEH*" would suffice, while R. Leazar b. R. Jose learns it from "*VE-ZEH*" (*ibid.*) instead of "*ZEH*."⁵⁵ *"And water to wash his feet..."* (*ibid.*). R. Acha said: The washing of the feet of the slaves of the houses of the Patriarchs is more important than the Torah of their descendants, so that even the washing of their feet must be recorded, whereas [the uncleanness of] a reptile is an integral part of the Torah, and yet it is only from an extending particle in Scripture that we learn that its blood defiles as its flesh – R. Simeon b. Yochai deducing it

⁵⁴ The Hebrew "*YAFAH*" is used here. It could also be translated as "lovely" or "valued."

⁵⁵ The "extending particle" referred to is either the "*HA*" of "*HA-TAMEH*" (according to the first rabbi) or the "*VE*" of "*VE-ZEH*" (according to the second rabbi), both of which can be as extraneous. Rashi, in his commentary to 24:42, quotes this passage from *Bereishit Rabbah*, but uses the term "slight indications" or "hints" (in Hebrew, "*BI-REMIZAH*").

from "HA-TAMEH" instead of "TAMEH," while R. Leazar b. R. Jose deduces it from "VE-ZEH" instead of "ZEH."⁵⁶

GENESIS 24: 50-53

(50) Then Laban and Bethuel answered, "The matter was decreed by the Lord; we cannot speak to you bad or good. (51) Here is Rebekah before you; take her and go, and let her be a wife to your master's son, as the Lord has spoken." (52) When Abraham's servant heard their words, he bowed low to the ground before the Lord. (53) The servant brought out objects of silver and gold, and garments, and gave them to Rebekah; and he gave presents to her brother and mother.

After the servant's long, impassioned speech, Rebekah's brother and father offer a short response. They seem to accept the idea that God has selected Rebekah to marry the son of Abraham, and they are resigned to allowing the betrothal to take place. One midrash clearly supports this reading:

"Then Laban and Bethuel answered and said, 'The matter has gone forth from the Lord...'" (Gen. 24:50). Whence had it gone forth? From Mount Moriah: this is the view of R. Joshua b. R. Nehemiah in the name of R. Chanina b. Isaac. The rabbis said: Whence had it gone forth? From [this very incident; hence], *"And let her be your master's son's wife, as the Lord has spoken"* (Gen. 24:51).⁵⁷

This midrash reflects the idea that God had told Abraham while he was still on Mount Moriah of the birth of Rebekah, Isaac's future wife (see chapter II). Since it had been previously decreed by God, Rebekah's family has no choice but to give Rebekah's hand in marriage.

⁵⁶ *Bereishit Rabbah* 60:8.

This response seems out of character for two reasons. First, Laban's name is mentioned before his father's. Rashi explains that Laban, the greedy brother, was "a wicked person" and rushed in to answer before his father could speak.⁵⁸ Second, the response seems too righteous for Rebekah's family. At a first reading, it appears that Rebekah's father and brother are putting the fulfillment of God's will above their own self-centered desires. Even Rashi agrees that the two men seem to acknowledge that it was God Himself who brought Eliezer and Rebekah together.⁵⁹

However, that does not mean that they will not attempt to take advantage of the situation. They quickly give their approval that evening. In the morning, though, they seem to try to change the plan and bargain with Abraham's servant. After arising in the morning, Eliezer seeks permission to begin the trip back to Abraham with Rebekah. Rebekah's brother and mother now speak up, saying: "Let the maiden remain with us several days or even ten days; then you may go" (Gen. 24:55). The rabbis explain that this response indicates the family's desire to change the plan.

"And her brother and her mother said..." (Gen. 24:55). But where was Bethuel? He wished to hinder [the arrangement], and so he was smitten during the night.⁶⁰ Thus it is written, *"The righteousness of the sincere shall make straight his way"* (Prov. 11:5). *"The righteousness of the sincere"* alludes to Isaac; *"Shall make straight his way,"* alludes to the

⁵⁷ *Bereishit Rabbah* 60:10.

⁵⁸ Rashi comment to 24:50; Silberman, p. 109.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ He died suddenly during the night.

way of Eliezer. "*But the wicked shall fall by his own wickedness*" (*ibid.*) alludes to Bethuel, who wished to hinder it and was smitten during the night. "*Let the maiden remain with us several days or ten.*" "Days" refers to the seven days of mourning for [Bethuel]. "Or ten": this refers to the twelve months granted to a virgin to make her necessary preparations.⁶¹

Rashi explains that Bethuel wished to prevent the marriage from taking place – therefore, God sent an angel to come and kill him.⁶² This explanation, thus, emphasizes once again two main themes: the wickedness of Rebekah's family and the designation by God of Rebekah as Isaac's wife. Bethuel was killed because he attempted to thwart God's plan. Rashi then explains that "days" really means a year, in accordance with the custom of a maiden having twelve months to prepare for her marriage after her betrothal.⁶³ "Or ten" is the family's compromise position – if you are in too much of a hurry to grant her an entire year, give her at least ten months.

Eliezer responds by saying that this is unacceptable. He does not wish to delay his return even one day, for he has confidence that God has made his trip successful and because he wants to get back hurriedly to Abraham. Laban and Rebekah's mother now resort to their next delay tactic. Thinking that Rebekah would not go against their wishes – or that she would be scared to leave in such a hurry – they suggest that they call Rebekah and ask her if she will go.

"*And they said, 'We will call the maiden, and inquire at her mouth...'*" (Gen. 24:57). From this we learn that a fatherless maiden may not be

⁶¹ *Bereishit Rabbah* 60:12.

⁶² Rashi comment to 24:55; Silberman, p. 109.

⁶³ See *Kethubot* 57b.

given in marriage without her consent. *"And they called Rebekah, and said unto her: 'Will you go?'"* (24:58). R. Chanina, the son of R. Adda, said in R. Isaac's name: They hinted to her, "Will you [really] go?" *"And she said, 'I will go'"* (*ibid.*): I will go in spite of you, whether you wish it or not.⁶⁴

Eliezer, from the very beginning of his mission, has feared the possibility that the maiden selected to be Isaac's wife might not agree to return to Canaan with him. His initial response to Abraham's command had been to ask that very question – what should he do if she does not consent? Thus the text hinted from the beginning of this story that its conclusion would hinge on the answer of the maiden herself. Now Rebekah speaks for the first time since she returned from the well. Her one word answer – *"EILECH"* – is a product of her great inner strength and sense of independence. She surprises her scheming brother and mother by agreeing to go, without delay, with Eliezer (as had been agreed the night before) to marry his master's son.

REBEKAH'S DEPARTURE FROM NAHOR

GENESIS 24: 59-61

(59) So they sent off their sister Rebekah and her nurse along with Abraham's servant and his men. (60) And they blessed Rebekah and said to her, "Our sister! May you grow into thousands of myriads; may your offspring seize the gates of their foes." (61) Then Rebekah and her maids arose, mounted the camels, and followed the man. So the servant took Rebekah and went his way.

⁶⁴ *Berēishit Rabbah* 60:12.

Rebekah has made up her mind, and now her family must abide by her decision. Midrash explains that because of the family's "wretched circumstances" and poor financial situation, they have no dowry to give Rebekah except for their blessing – a dowry of words.⁶⁵

The words themselves are very important. The blessing of Rebekah's family is a repetition of the blessing God bestowed upon Abraham following the *Akedah*: "I will bestow My blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands on the seashore; and your descendants shall seize the gates of their foes" (Gen. 22:17). It is her family's wish for her that through Rebekah Abraham's blessing will come true. It is Rebekah who will serve as the most important link between the generations of Abraham and Isaac, and it will be up to her to ensure the transmission of that blessing to the next generation after her.

Sforno points out that when Eliezer, as the agent of Isaac, takes Rebekah from the custody of her father's house, she becomes wedded to Isaac. She is now his mistress, and he is her servant.⁶⁶ Ramban adds that it was with great zealously that Eliezer took Rebekah and guarded her from any mishap along the way. Out of this zealously, Eliezer felt no weariness during the journey.⁶⁷

"And Rebekah arose, and her maids, and they rode upon the camels"

(Gen. 24: 61). R. Levi said: That was because the camels are bred in the

⁶⁵ *Bereishit Rabbah* 60:13.

⁶⁶ Sforno comment to 24:61; Pelcovitz, p. 126.

⁶⁷ Ramban comment to 24:61; Chavel, p. 303.

east. The rabbis said: As a camel possesses one mark of uncleanness and one of cleanness, so did Rebekah give birth to one righteous and one wicked son. "*And followed the man*" (*ibid.*). Said R. Jochanan: Because it is improper for a man to walk behind a woman.⁶⁸

In the Talmud we read that it was unusual – perhaps even considered indecent – for women to ride on camels.⁶⁹ Therefore, R. Levi, in this midrash, explains that it was the custom in the east (including Rebekah's homeland) for women to ride camels, and thus she and her maids were justified in their using this form of transportation. It is also interesting to note that the Talmud uses this last verse as a proof text for the fact that it is improper for a man to walk behind a woman.⁷⁰

REBEKAH REPLACES SARAH

GENESIS 24: 62-67

(62) Isaac had just come back from the vicinity of *Beer-lachai-roi*, for he was settled in the region of the Negev. (63) And Isaac went out walking in the field toward evening and, looking up, he saw camels approaching. (64) Raising her eyes, Rebekah saw Isaac. She alighted from the camel (65) and said to the servant, "Who is that man walking in the field toward us?" And the servant said, "That is my master." So she took her veil and covered herself. (66) The servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. (67) Isaac then brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he took Rebekah as his wife. Isaac loved her, and thus found comfort after his mother's death.

⁶⁸ *Bereishit Rabbah* 60:14.

⁶⁹ *Pesachim* 3a.

⁷⁰ The reason given is to prevent the rise of impure thoughts in the man. See *Berachot* 61a.

Isaac now makes his first appearance in chapter 24 – even though this entire story has been concerning him. Isaac has played no role in the finding of his wife; he has been notably absent so far. Not only has he not yet appeared or spoken a word, but neither has he been discussed much. Eliezer in his speech to Rebekah's family talks much more about Abraham and himself than he does about Isaac. He describes Isaac as the inheritor of his father's wealth; nothing else is said of him. The fact that Rebekah is willing to depart with Eliezer and marry this strange man in a foreign land about whom she knows nothing is further testament to her strength and independence. It also hints at her sense of vision and of Divine purpose. In *Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer*, the verse "a virgin whom no man had known" (24:16), is reinterpreted to state that "she did not know who the man was."

A daughter of kings, who in all her life had never gone forth to draw water, went out to draw water in that hour [after Eliezer's arrival at the well]. And the girl, who did not know who the man was, accepted [the proposal] to be married to Isaac. Why? Because she had been destined for him from his mother's womb, as it is said, "*In the balances they will go up; they are together lighter than vanity*" (Psalm 62:9).⁷¹

Rebekah, thus, is presented as being aware of her destiny and of God's plan for her. She understands that she is to marry Isaac and to become a mother of the people Israel. Isaac, on the other hand, seems unaware of anything.

Just as God had contracted the earth, according to midrash, to hasten Eliezer's journey to Nahor, God speeds the servant's return trip as well.

At the sixth hour of the day [at noontime], the servant went forth from Haran, and he took Rebekah and Deborah her nurse and made them ride upon the camels. So that the servant should not be alone with the maiden by night, the earth was contracted before him, and in three hours the servant came to Hebron at the time of the prayer of the afternoon-evening. And Isaac had gone forth to say the afternoon-evening prayer, as it is said: "*And Isaac went forth to meditate in the field towards evening...*" (Gen. 24:63).⁷²

The question arises of what was Isaac doing at the time that Eliezer returned home with Rebekah. Most explanations agree that Isaac had been out praying.

"*And Isaac came from coming...*" (Gen. 24:62), [meaning] he came from a mission to fetch someone. And where had he gone? "*To Beer-lachai-roi*" (*ibid.*) – he had gone to fetch Hagar, the one who had sat by the well ("*BE'ER*") and besought Him who is the life ("*LA-CHAI*") of all worlds, saying, "Look upon ("*RE-EH*") my misery."⁷³ "*And Isaac went out to meditate in the field at the evening time*" (Gen. 24:63). Prayer is meant by meditation, as it says: "*A prayer of the afflicted when he faints, and pours out his meditation [prayer] before the Lord*" (Psalm 102:1); and thus, too, it says: "*Evening and morning and at noonday will I pray...*" (Psalm 55:18).⁷⁴

Rashi adds to this midrash that Isaac had gone to fetch Hagar to bring her back to Abraham that he might take her again as his wife after the death of Sarah.⁷⁵

⁷¹ *Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer* (PRE), chapter 16; Friedlander ed., pp. 108-109.

⁷² PRE, chapter 16; Friedlander ed., pp. 109-110.

⁷³ The story of Hagar and the well can be found in Genesis 16: 7-14.

⁷⁴ *Bereishit Rabbah* 60:14.

⁷⁵ Rashi comment to 24:62; Silbermann, p. 110.

Sforno asks the question: for what was Isaac praying? He then supplies his own answer – Isaac was praying for a wife and had gone to the place where Hagar's prayer had been heard. However, before he had even prayed, his prayer had been answered and his wife was approaching. On his way back from Beer-lachai-roi, he turned away from the public path, so as not to be interrupted by wayfarers, and went into the field to pray again – still not knowing that his prayers had already been answered and that Rebekah was on her way to him.⁷⁶

"And he lifted up his eyes and saw, and, behold, there were camels coming. And Rebekah lifted up her eyes, and when she saw Isaac, she alighted from the camel" (Gen. 24: 63-64). R. Huna said: She saw his hand stretch out.⁷⁷ *"And she alighted from the camel"*: she descended, as in the verse, *"Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down"* (Psalm 37:24).⁷⁸

Rashi explains this passage to mean that Rebekah saw Isaac's lordly appearance and gazed at him in astonishment. She did not "fall" from the camel, but rather inclined herself towards the ground.⁷⁹ Sforno understands the passage to mean that she bowed her head to Isaac from her seat on the camel, as a sign of respect.⁸⁰

This passage in the biblical narrative is very important to our understanding of both Isaac and Rebekah. Isaac looks up and only sees the camels. Throughout his life, Isaac appears to suffer from near-sightedness. His

⁷⁶ Sforno comments to 24:62-63; Pelcovitz, pp. 126-127.

⁷⁷ The meaning of this passage is uncertain. According to one note, it probably means that Isaac's hand was raised in an authoritative fashion, whereby she understood that he was a man of importance, and so she alighted (p. 537).

⁷⁸ *Bereishit Rabbah* 60:15.

⁷⁹ Rashi comment to 24: 64; Silberman, p. 110.

ignorance as he approached Mt. Moriah with his father serves as an earlier example of his not being able to see what was going on around him. As a father, he is unable to see the faults and sins of his favorite son Esau, and in his later years he goes blind altogether. Rebekah, on the other hand, looks up and sees Isaac – and immediately she reacts. She seems to know at once who it is on the horizon and acts properly. Rebekah is blessed with vision, as was already evidenced by her decision to leave home to come to Canaan. It is her eyesight and vision, as well as her decisiveness and keen understanding, that will ensure the proper transmission of Abraham's blessing and values to the next generation.

"And she said unto the servant: 'What man is this ["HA-LA-ZEH"] that walks in the field to meet us?" (Gen. 24:65). R. Berekiah said in the name of R. Chiyya, his father: she saw that [Isaac] was comely, as in the verse, "Behold, this ["HA-LA-ZEH"] dreamer comes" (Gen. 37:19).⁸¹ The rabbis said: "HALAZEHE" refers to his guardian angel, meaning "this one [the angel] is for his service." "And the servant said: 'It is my master.' And she took her veil and covered herself." Two covered themselves with a veil, and they gave birth to twins – Rebekah and Tamar. Rebekah: "And she took her veil and covered herself"; Tamar: "And she covered herself with her veil" (Gen. 38:14).⁸² "And the servant told Isaac all the things that he had done" (Gen. 24:66). R. Eleazar said: There is more general statement in the Torah than detailed statement, for had he wished, he could have written two or three columns. The rabbis said: [Eliezer] disclosed to [Isaac] the more welcome incidents [only, such as] that the earth had contracted before him.⁸³

⁸⁰ Sforno comment to 24:64; Pelcovitz, p. 127.

⁸¹ This reference is to Joseph, who is described as being "well-built and handsome" (Gen. 39:6). The use of the word "HALAZEHE" indicates that Isaac, too, was very good-looking.

⁸² The twins born to Rebekah and Tamar are the only sets of twins mentioned in the Tanach.

⁸³ *Bereishit Rabbah* 60:15.

The text does not tell us whether Isaac knew beforehand of Eliezer's mission. Therefore, it is important that the servant tell Isaac what has occurred – most likely beginning with the command from Abraham himself and focusing on God's providence in making his mission successful.

According to a midrash found in *Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer*, Abraham enters the story in order to instruct his son in what to do next.

Rabbi Simeon said: Abraham spoke to Isaac his son [saying], "This servant is suspected of all the transgressions of the Torah, and deceit is in this servant, as it is said, '*He is a Canaanite, the balances of deceit are in his hand; he loves to defraud*' (Hosea 12:8). See, lest he has defiled her, therefore bring the girl into the tent and examine her tactually; and if she be undefiled, behold, she is destined for you from her mother's womb." He brought her into the tent and examined her tactually, and he showed the result to Abraham, his father, and afterwards he took her to be his wife, as it is said, "*And Isaac brought her into the tent of Sarah his mother... And Isaac was comforted after his mother's death*"; for the deeds of Rebekah were like unto those of Sarah...⁸⁴

This is an interesting midrash, telling us more about Eliezer than about Rebekah. It concludes with Eliezer being rewarded, both by Abraham – who sets him free – and by God. From this midrash, though, we see not only the importance of providing proof that a bride is a virgin (important in setting the bride-price), but also the idea that Abraham truly believed that Rebekah was chosen by God to be Isaac's wife. It is important for Isaac to understand that it was God who brought him Rebekah – just as Rebekah believed it was God who led her to Isaac.

Bereishit Rabbah presents a different view of the end of this part of the story. Here, we find a lonely and sad Isaac, who had mourned the death of his mother for three years without finding comfort.⁸⁵ The arrival of Rebekah, though, changes Isaac's outlook and life. Rebekah, whose deeds "were like unto those of Sarah," is able to fill the sandals of Sarah and the needs of Isaac, as she takes on the role of the mother-in-law whom she never met.

*"And Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent" (Gen. 24:67). You find that as long as Sarah lived, a cloud hung over her tent; when she died, that cloud disappeared -- but when Rebekah came, [the cloud] returned. As long as Sarah lived, her doors were wide open; at her death, that liberality ceased -- but when Rebekah came, that openhandedness returned. As long as Sarah lived, there was a blessing on her dough, and the lamp used to burn from the evening of the Sabbath until the evening of the following Sabbath; when she died, these ceased -- but when Rebekah came, they returned. And so when he saw her following his mother's footsteps, separating her *challah* in cleanness and handling her dough in cleanness, straightway, "And Isaac brought her into the tent ... and he took Rebekah as his wife. Isaac loved her, and thus found comfort after his mother's death."⁸⁶*

This is only the second mentioning in the Torah of love -- the first being in reference to Isaac, the son whom Abraham loved (Gen. 22:2). We move from the love between a parent and a child, to the bond between a husband and wife. Nachmonides offers the following commentary on this verse:

The purport of the verse is to tell of the honor that Isaac bestowed upon his mother for from the time that Sarah died they did not take down her

⁸⁴ PRE, chapter 16; Friedlander, pp. 110-111.

⁸⁵ PRE, chapter 32; Friedlander, p. 234. Thus Isaac, who was 37 years old at the time of the *Akedah*, married Rebekah at the age of 40.

⁸⁶ *Bereishit Rabbah* 60:16.

tent because they said, "Let not another woman come into the tent of the honorable mistress." But when he saw Rebekah, he brought her into the tent in her honor and there he took her as his wife. This is the meaning of the words, "*and he loved her, and he was comforted,*" indicating that he was deeply grieved for his mother, finding no comforter until he was comforted by his wife through his love for her. Otherwise, what reason is there for Scripture to mention a man's love for his wife? But Onkelos explained: "*And Isaac brought her into the tent*" and, behold, she was like "*Sarah his mother.*" It is for this reason that Scripture mentions the love he had for her because it was on account of her righteousness and aptness of her deeds that he loved her and was comforted by her.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Ramban comment to 24: 67; Chavel, p. 306.

III. REBEKAH — ISAAC'S WIFE *REBEKAH AND ISAAC START A FAMILY*

PREGNANCY AND CHILDBIRTH

GENESIS 25: 19-26

(19) This is the story of Isaac, son of Abraham. Abraham begot Isaac.

(20) Isaac was forty years old when he took to wife Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-Aram, sister of Laban the Aramean.

(21) Isaac pleaded with the Lord on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and the Lord responded to his plea, and his wife Rebekah conceived. (22) But the children struggled in her womb, and she said,

"If so, why do I exist?" She went to inquire of the Lord, (23) and the Lord answered her, "Two nations are in your womb / Two separate peoples shall issue from your body; / One people shall be mightier than the other, / And the older shall serve the younger." (24) When her time

to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. (25) The first one emerged red, like a hairy mantle all over; so they named him Esau.

(26) Then his brother emerged, holding on to the heel of Esau; so they named him Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when they were born.

The biblical narrative provides few details concerning the early years of the marriage between Isaac and Rebekah. Immediately following the end of chapter 24 and its story of their betrothal, the text returns to Abraham. The beginning of chapter 25 tells of the last years of Abraham's life – Abraham takes another wife and has more children with her. Of his eight children, though, Abraham wills "all that he owned to Isaac" (Gen. 25:5). We then read that

Abraham died at the age of 175 years: "And Abraham breathed his last, dying at a good ripe age, old and contented" (Gen. 25:8). Isaac and Ishmael, his two oldest sons (not listed in chronological order), return to bury their father in the cave of Machpelah. The section that follows Abraham's death contains a description of the "line of Ishmael," listing all of his descendants.

With verse 19, the narrative switches to focus now on Isaac – this is also the beginning of a new Torah portion, *TOLEDOT*. Both Rashi and Ramban explain that the word "*TOLEDOT*" should be understood as referring to the children of Isaac – Esau and Jacob.¹ Their story begins here; Isaac connects the first and third generations of the Jewish people. The text seems to repeat itself, as it states "Isaac, the son of Abraham," followed by "Abraham begot Isaac." Rashi explains that this repetition is necessary because cynics argued that Sarah became pregnant with the child of Abimelech. We read in Gen. 11:30 that "Sarai was barren; she had no child," and later (Gen. 16:1), "Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children." Sarah became pregnant only after having been kidnapped by Abimelech (Gen. 20). Therefore, explains Rashi, God shaped Isaac's facial features to resemble exactly those of Abraham, so that everyone would know that Abraham begat Isaac.² Ramban explains that the text makes clear that Isaac was the favored son and the only heir – it was as if Isaac were the only son whom Abraham begat. Therefore the text repeats that "Abraham begot

¹ Rashi comment to 25:19; Silbermann, p. 114. Also, Ramban comment to 25:19; Chavel, p. 313.

² Rashi comment to 25:19; Silbermann, p. 114.

Isaac." This also compensates for Ishmael's being listed before Isaac, even though it was Isaac who held the status of the firstborn.³

After having already read two genealogies within the first half of chapter 25, we may expect to find a listing of the "TOLEDOT" of Isaac and Rebekah.⁴ However, the text in verse 21 informs us that Rebekah, like Sarah, is barren, and thus there are no children to list. The rabbis offer a number of explanations as to why Rebekah was barren for so long.

One explanation deals with Rebekah's family and the blessing they gave her.

"And they sent away Rebekah ... and they blessed Rebekah and said to her, 'O sister! May you grow into thousands of myriads...'" (Gen. 24: 59-60). R. Berekiah and R. Levi in the name of R. Chama b. Chaninah said: Why was Rebekah not remembered [with children] until Isaac prayed for her? So that the heathens might not say: "Our prayer bore fruit" – rather, "And Isaac entreated the Lord for his wife."⁵

Thus, Rebekah had to remain barren – otherwise the prayer and blessing of her heathen family would have come true. Instead of answering their prayer,

³ Ramban comment to 25:19; Chavel, p. 314.

⁴ A second apparent repetition is found in verse 20, in which we read again the lineage of Rebekah. Rashi explains that "we are told these facts once more to proclaim her praise" – despite the wickedness of her family and those around her, Rebekah did not learn from their ways (Rashi comment to 25:20; Silberman, p. 114). Rashi quotes the midrash from *Bereishit Rabbah* 63:4 (see above in chapter II).

⁵ *Bereishit Rabbah* 60:13.

according to this midrash, God waits and answers the prayer of the righteous – Isaac.

“... *Because she was barren*” (Gen. 25:21). R. Judan said in the name of Resh Lakish: She lacked an ovary, whereupon the Lord [after Isaac’s entreating] fashioned an ovary for her.⁶

According to this midrash, Rebekah is unable to become pregnant because of a physical deficiency of her own – one that only God can fix.

The following midrash from *Shir HaShirim Rabbah* begins by addressing the question of Rebekah’s barrenness and then expands the question to deal with all of the matriarchs.

R. Judah b. Simon said in the name of R. Simeon b. Eleazar: Why was Rebekah so long childless? So that the gentiles⁷ should not say, “Our prayer was effective,” since they said to her, “*Our sister, may you be the mother of thousands of ten thousands*” (Gen. 24:60). Therefore, she did not bear children until Isaac prayed for her; then she was visited, as it is written, “*And Isaac entreated the Lord for his wife*” (Gen. 25:21). R. Azariah said in the name of R. Chanina b. Papa: Why were the matriarchs so long childless? In order that they should not put on airs

⁶ *Bereishit Rabbah* 63:5. This same reason was offered to explain the barrenness of Sarah (see *Bereishit Rabbah* 53:5).

⁷ In particular, Laban and Bethuel – her brother and father.

toward their husbands on account of their beauty.⁸ R. Huna and R. Jeremiah in the name of R. Chiyya b. Abba said: Why were the matriarchs so long childless? In order that the greater part of their lives should be spent without servitude.⁹ R. Hunyi said in the name of R. Meir: Why were the matriarchs so long barren? In order that their husbands might enjoy their beauty. For when a woman conceives, she becomes clumsy and stout. The proof is that so long as Sarah was barren, she sat in her house like a bride in her bridal chamber, but when she became pregnant her charm faded; and so it says, "*In pain*¹⁰ you shall bring forth children" (Gen. 3:16). R. Levi in the name of R. Shila from Kfar Temarta and R. Chelbo in the name of R. Yochanan said: Why were the matriarchs so long barren? Because the Holy One, blessed be He, longed to hear their prayer. He said to them: "My dove, I will tell you why I have kept you childless; because I was longing to hear your prayer." Hence it says, "*[Let me hear your voice;] for sweet is your voice, and your countenance is comely*" (Song of Songs 2:14).¹¹

Finally, Rashi, in his commentary, offers a different view of Rebekah's barrenness. Rashi focuses on the ages of Isaac and Rebekah.

⁸ The Torah text specifically refers to three out of four of the matriarchs as being "beautiful." Sarah: "As [Abram] was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, 'I know what a beautiful woman you are...'" (Gen. 12:11); "When Abram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw how very beautiful the woman was" (Gen. 12:14). Rebekah: "The maiden was very beautiful..." (Gen. 24:16). Rachel: "Rachel was shapely and beautiful" (Gen. 29:17). Leah, however, is only described as having "weak eyes" (*ibid.*). All three were also barren at first, and only later became pregnant.

⁹ "Servitude" here means the bearing and rearing of children.

¹⁰ "In pain" can also be translated as "in gloom."

¹¹ *Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 2:41.

"And Isaac was forty years old" (Gen. 25:20). For when Abraham came from Mount Moriah, he received the news that Rebekah was born. Isaac was then thirty-seven years old, because from the birth of Isaac until the *Akedah* – when Sarah died – there were thirty-seven years, since Sarah was ninety years old when Isaac was born and one hundred twenty-seven when she died. Thus Isaac was thirty-seven years old. At that period, Rebekah was born, and [Isaac] waited until she was fit for marriage – three years – and then married her.

"Isaac was sixty years old when [Esau and Jacob] were born" (Gen. 25:26). Ten years passed from the time when Isaac married Rebekah until she became thirteen years old and capable of childbearing. A further ten years he hopefully waited, as his father did in regard to Sarah.¹² When even then she did not become with child, he realized that she was barren, and he prayed for her. But he did not wish to take a maidservant as a second wife because he had been sanctified on Mount Moriah¹³ to be a burnt-offering without blemish.¹³

Because Rebekah was barren, Isaac pleads on her behalf before God. This is a significant departure for Isaac from the path of his parents – when Sarah could not conceive, she resorts to offering her maidservant to Abraham so that he could have a child. Isaac and Rebekah, on the other hand, confirm their faith in God and in God's promise to Isaac and resort to prayer. This is the second

¹² "So Sarai, Abram's wife, took her maid, Hagar the Egyptian – after Abram had dwelt in the land of Canaan ten years – and gave her to her husband Abram as concubine. He cohabited with Hagar and she conceived..." (Gen. 16: 3-4).

instance of a prayer to God playing a major role in the story of Rebekah – the first being the prayer offered by Eliezer. Just as God answered the servant's prayer with a Divine act, so now God, too, answers the prayers of Isaac and Rebekah.

"And Isaac entreated the Lord" (Gen. 25:21). R. Yochanan and Resh Lakish explained this. R. Yochanan said: It means that [Isaac] poured out petitions in abundance. Resh Lakish said: [Isaac] reversed her destiny, and for that reason a pitchfork is called "*ATRA*,"¹⁴ because it turns the grain.¹⁵

According to other midrashim, Rebekah, too, prayed on her own behalf.

"[And Isaac entreated the Lord] on behalf¹⁶ of his wife" (Gen. 25:21).

This teaches that Isaac prostrated himself in one spot and she prostrated herself in another spot [opposite him]. He prayed to God: "Master of the Universe, may all the children whom You will grant me be from this righteous woman."¹⁷ She, too, prayed similarly, saying: "May all the children that You in the future will grant to me be from this righteous man."¹⁸

¹³ Rashi comment to 25:20 and 25:26; Silberman, pp. 114-116.

¹⁴ "*ATRA*" is a play on the word "*VAYEATAR*" – "he entreated." Just as a pitchfork overturns the grain on the threshing-floor, so did Isaac through his entreating of God overturn the Divine decree that Rebekah was to be childless.

¹⁵ *Bereishit Rabbah* 63:5.

¹⁶ The Hebrew word used here, "*LENOCHACH*," more accurately means "opposite." Thus, Isaac prayed in a position opposite to where Rebekah, too, was praying.

¹⁷ This midrash is repeated in *Ruth Rabbah* 7:14.

¹⁸ *Bereishit Rabbah* 63:5.

After all of this entreating, the text tells us that God "responded" to Isaac's pleas. The Hebrew word used, though, is the passive form of the verb "entreated."

"And the Lord let Himself be entreated of him" (Gen. 25:21). R. Levi said: This may be compared to the son of a king who was digging¹⁹ through to his father to receive a pound of gold from him – thus, one [the king] dug from within, while the other [his son] dug from without.²⁰

Rashi responds by explaining that God "allowed Himself to be entreated by him." The emphasis is on "him" – though both Isaac and Rebekah each prayed separately, God responded to Isaac because "there is no comparison between the prayer of a righteous person who is the son of a righteous person and the prayer of a righteous person the child of a wicked person."²¹

After informing the reader that Rebekah has conceived, the text in the following verse announces that she is pregnant with more than one child: "but the *children* struggled in her womb." The midrashim on this verse explain that from their very conception, even before they were born, Esau and Jacob were adversaries struggling against one another.

¹⁹ The verb "to entreat" can be connected to a form of the verb meaning "to dig."

²⁰ Thus, the king -- who wishes to help his son -- assisted his son in the digging, just as God assisted Isaac in making his prayers effective. *Bereishit Rabbah* 63:5.

²¹ Rashi comment to 25:21; Silbermann, p. 114.

"And the children struggled together within her" (Gen. 25:22). R.

Yochanan and Resh Lakish discussed this. R. Yochanan said: This one ran to kill that one, and that one ran to kill this one.²² Resh Lakish said: This one annulled the laws of that one, and that one annulled the laws of this one.²³ R. Berekiah observed in R. Levi's name: Do not think that only after issuing from his mother's womb was [Esau] antagonistic to [Jacob], but even while still in his mother's womb his fist was stretched out against him – thus it is written, *"The wicked stretch out their fists from the womb"* (Psalm 58:4).

"And the children struggled together within her." Any time [Rebekah] was standing near synagogues or houses of study, Jacob struggled to come out; hence it is written, *"Before I formed you in the belly, I knew you"* (Jeremiah 1:5). Any time she was passing by houses of idolatrous worship, Esau struggled to come out; hence it is written, *"The wicked are estranged²⁴ from the womb"* (Psalm 58:4).²⁵

Thus this midrash not only hints at the future relationship between the two brothers,²⁶ but it also provides an insight into the character of the two boys: it is Esau who will go on to be the more physical of the two, the hunter and idol-worshipper; Jacob becomes the faithful Torah scholar.

²² The root for the verb "to run" can be found in the verb *"VAYITROTSATSU"* – they struggled."

²³ This part of the midrash interprets *"VAYITROTSATSU"* as "annulling his laws" – *"MATTIR TSIVVUYO."* The point of the midrash is to show the hostility between the two boys – both physical and intellectual.

²⁴ Here *"ZORU"* is interpreted as being derived from the root *"ZAR,"* meaning strange. Earlier in the midrash the word was interpreted as "stretch out their fists."

²⁵ *Bereishit Rabbah* 63:6.

²⁶ It also hints at the future relationship between the nation of Rome (Esau) and the people of Israel (Jacob).

The struggling in her womb caused Rebekah great pain. In her anguish, she cries out, "If so, why do I exist?" This line can be read in many ways.

"And she said, 'If it be so, wherefore am I thus?'" (Gen. 25:22). R.

Haggai said in R. Isaac's name: This teaches that our mother Rebekah went about to women's houses and asked them, "Did you suffer so much in your time?" [Thus she exclaimed,] "If the pain of children is so great, would that I had not become pregnant!" R. Huna said: [She exclaimed,] "If I am to produce the twelve tribes only with such suffering, would that I had not conceived!"²⁷

This midrash paints a more negative picture of Rebekah, the matriarch. The pain caused by the children in her womb has, at least temporarily, made her forget her mission and her earlier prayer – that she should provide children for Isaac to ensure the transmission of the covenant between God and the line of Abraham. She has lost, according to the midrash, her great sense of vision and inner strength – two of the qualities that made her the ideal bride for Isaac.

This midrash is immediately followed, however, by a more flattering midrash.

It was taught in R. Nehemiah's name: Rebekah merited that the twelve tribes should spring directly from her. Thus it is written, *"And the Lord said unto her: 'Two nations are in your womb...'" (Gen. 25:23).* *"Two*

²⁷ *Bereishit Rabbah* 63:6.

nations" – there you have two. "*And two peoples*" – there you have four. "*And the one people shall be stronger than the other people*" – six. "*And the elder shall serve the younger*" – eight. "*And when her days to be delivered were fulfilled, behold there were twins in her womb*" – ten. "*And the first came out ruddy*" – eleven. "*And after that came forth his brother*" – total, twelve. Others deduce it from this verse: "*And she said, 'If it be so, wherefore am I ZEH'*" – ZAYYIN is seven and HAY is five: [together] this gives twelve.²⁸

This midrash leads us back to the merit of Rebekah – Rebekah was so great that she merited giving birth to the heads of the twelve tribes. The juxtaposition of these two midrashim could lead one to the conclusion that perhaps, despite her merit, she did not give birth to the twelve because of her complaining. On the other hand, one could argue that indeed the twelve tribes will indeed spring from her – the future heads of the tribes will be her grandsons, the sons of Jacob.

According to Sforno, she complains here out of true fear for her own welfare. She is afraid that because of the struggling, one of the children may die while still within her womb – in which case, she would be in great danger, as often happens when a dead infant is delivered. Out of this pain and fear, she exclaims, "Why am I thus?" Sforno interprets this as meaning, "why did my family insist, and why did I and my husband pray for, that the children of Isaac be born through me?" He seems to hint here that Rebekah would have been

²⁸ *Ibid.*

open to the idea of Isaac having a child through a concubine.²⁹ Similar to the first midrash, this view of Rebekah shows her losing sight of her earlier vision.

Rebekah – whether confused or scared – turns to God for an answer to her question. Thus, she seems to recover from her temporary lack of vision and resolve, putting her faith in God. This is the third time within her story that a direct request is made of God: first, Eliezer asked for a proper bride for Isaac; second, Isaac and Rebekah prayed for a child. Now, she asks merely for an answer to why she is suffering.

“And she went to inquire of the Lord” (Gen. 25:22). Were there then synagogues and houses of study in those days? Surely she went only to the college of Shem and Eber. Hence this teaches that to visit a sage is like visiting the Divine Presence.³⁰

Thus, according to this midrash, she turned to the nearest academy, the same academy at which her husband had studied after the Akedah, in order to inquire of God. According to another midrash, “she went to pray in the place where she and Isaac had gone” previously to pray for children.³¹

Rashi, commenting on the verb *“LIDROSH,”* explains that she went to inquire of God not so much as to why she was suffering, but rather to learn what

²⁹ Sforno comment to 25:22; Pelcovitz, pp. 130-131.

³⁰ *Bereishit Rabbah* 63:6.

³¹ *Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer*, chapter 32; Friedlander, p. 235.

would happen to her in the end.³² In his commentary on the same verse, Sarna writes that "the idiom employed means to seek divine guidance in a moment of great perplexity and anguish."³³

In the next verse, God responds to her plea: "And God answered her," or literally, God "said to her." The rabbis raise the question of whether God really spoke directly to Rebekah.

"And the Lord said unto her: 'Two nations...'" (Gen. 25:22). R. Judah and R. Simon and R. Yochanan, in the name of R. Eleazar b. R. Simeon, said: The Holy One, blessed be He, never engaged in speech with a woman, save with that righteous woman [Sarah], and that, too, was due to a special cause. R. Abba b. Kahana said in R. Biryi's name: And what a roundabout manner He sought in order to speak with her, as it is written, *"And He said: 'No, but you did laugh'"* (Gen. 18:15). But it is written, *"And she [Hagar] called the name of the Lord that spoke to her..."* (Gen. 16:13). R. Levi and Joshua b. R. Nehemiah answered in R. Idi's name: That was through an angel. But it is written, *"And the Lord spoke unto her"* – Rebekah. R. Levi said in the name of R. Jose b. Zimra: That was through the medium of Shem.³⁴

This midrash accomplishes two purposes. First, it reinforces the idea of the uniqueness of Sarah and the special position she holds as the first matriarch of

³² Rashi comment to 25:22; Silbermann, p. 115.

³³ Sarna, JPS Torah Commentary, *Genesis*, p. 179. He points out that similar expressions can be found in I Samuel 9:9, I Kings 14: 1-5, and II Kings 8:8 and 22:18.

the Jewish people. Not only is she the only woman within the Torah whose age is given at her death, but, according to this midrash, she is also the only woman with whom God directly spoke (God spoke indirectly with both Hagar and Rebekah). On the other hand, this midrash also develops a more direct link between these three mothers: Sarah, Hagar, and Rebekah. God spoke to all three – whether directly or indirectly – concerning their sons. Rebekah is truly linked by the text to both of these figures. Like Sarah, she too has been childless and will go on to become a matriarch of the people. Like Hagar, she prays to God, who listens to and answers her prayer. With all three women, the text paints a picture of God's loving hand taking care of the women and God blessing them and their offspring.

According to the text, God explains to Rebekah why she suffers and what the outcome of her struggles will be.

"Two nations are in your womb." There are two proud nations³⁵ in your womb, each taking pride in his world, and each in his kingdom. The two proudest of nations are in your womb: Hadrian of the Gentiles and Solomon of Israel. Another interpretation: two peoples hated by the nations are in your womb – all Gentiles hate Esau, and all Gentiles hate Israel. The hated of your Creator is in your womb, as it is written: *"But Esau I hated"* (Malachi 1:3).³⁶

³⁴ Bereishit Rabbah 63:7.

³⁵ The text is playing with the words "GOYIM," meaning nations, and "GE'IM," meaning proud ones.

³⁶ Bereishit Rabbah 63:7.

The midrash hints at the future of Rebekah's descendants. Each of the twins shall be the father of a people, and the two nations shall hate each other, as well as be hated by all other peoples. Jacob, of course, is the father of the people Israel – the nation named after him. In midrash, the Romans are believed to be the descendants of Esau.

"And two peoples shall be separated from your body." R. Berekiah said:

This shows that [Jacob] was born circumcised.... *"And the elder shall serve the younger."* R. Huna commented: If [Jacob] is deserving, [Esau] shall serve³⁷ him; if not, [Esau] shall enslave him.³⁸

This midrash reads the first line as the two peoples "shall be separate from each other" – they will be different from each other. How will they be different? One will be born circumcised, and this sign will prove that he is the worthier son regardless of the chronological order of their birth.

Ramban explains that God's words were meant to comfort Rebekah: she should not fear – the struggle in her womb was natural because she was carrying twins. In addition to providing comfort, God's words foreshadow the

³⁷ The unvocalized verb here could be read as "YAAVOD" – "he shall serve" – or as "YAABED" – "he shall enslave."

³⁸ *Bereishit Rabbah* 63:7.

relationship that will exist between the two brothers and, eventually, between the two peoples descending from them.³⁹

Sforno is even more specific in his commentary. He also explains that the struggle within Rebekah's womb is being caused by the two nations that will spring from her. By "nations," God means that the two will have different religions. By "peoples," God hints that the two will also have opposing ideas of nationalism. Sforno, like Ramban, also finds comfort in God's words for Rebekah: God, through this prophecy, assures Rebekah that neither baby will die within her womb from the struggling – nor will either son kill the other later in life.⁴⁰

Sarna, in his commentary, summarizes the importance of this Divine oracle for Rebekah and for her future actions, as well as for the future of the Jewish people.

Rebekah is informed that she carries twins, that each will be the progenitor of a people, that the movements in her womb result from sibling rivalry for priority of birth, and that physical strength would be decisive; ultimately, however, hegemony would belong to the loser in the uterine struggle. In historic terms, the seniority of Esau is reflected in his having achieved a settled kingdom earlier than Israel, as noted in 36:31; the supremacy of Jacob found expression in David's crushing victories over Edom. There is another aspect to the oracle. Its

³⁹ Ramban comment to 25:23; Chavel, p. 316.

⁴⁰ Sforno comment to 25:23; Pelcovitz, p. 131.

presence here actually suggests a moral judgement on Jacob's behavior, for it tacitly asserts that his claim to be heir to the divine promises rests solely upon God's predetermination. Thus, his election is thereby disengaged from the improper means he later employed to obtain his rights.⁴¹

Just as this chapter points to some of the similarities between Sarah and Rebekah, it also contains a sharp contrast between these two matriarchs. In chapter 18, Sarah responds to God's announcement that she will bear Abraham a son with incredulous laughter (which she then attempts to deny). No response from Rebekah upon hearing God's oracle, however, is given within the text. She does not complain nor question – rather, she seems to accept the word of God, internalizing its meaning. This oracle will go on to help guide Rebekah in the raising of her children.

In the entire Hebrew Bible, there are only two instances of the birth of twins: the twins born to Rebekah and the twins born to Tamar (Gen. 38: 27-30). The rabbis compared the descriptions of the two pregnancies.

"And when her days to be delivered were fulfilled." In the case further on, the period was abridged, whereas here it was complete.⁴² Below [38:27], *TE'OMIM* is written fully [with a VAV], for Perez and Zerah were both righteous; whereas here [*TE'OMIM*] is written defectively

⁴¹ Sarna comment to 25:23; JPS Torah Commentary, *Genesis*, p. 179.

⁴² In the case of Tamar, the text does not say that her "days to be delivered were fulfilled" – therefore, the rabbis taught that she did wait the full nine months before giving birth.

[missing a letter] because of Jacob and Esau – one was righteous, while the other was wicked.⁴³

It is interesting to note that, in the case of Tamar's twins, there is also a struggle for priority of birth.⁴⁴ Zerah apparently is the first to stick his hand out. However, as the hand is withdrawn, it is Perez who emerges first from the womb.

"And the first one came forth red." Another comment: Why did Esau issue first? So that he might issue and all the offensive matter with him. R. Abbahu said: Like the bath-attendant who first scours the bath and then washes the king's son; so also did Esau issue first so that he might come out together with the offensive matter. A matron asked R. Jose b. Chalafta: Why did Esau issue first? Because the first drop was Jacob's, he answered her. Consider: if you place two diamonds in a tube, does not the one put in first come out last? So also the first drop was that which formed Jacob.⁴⁵

From the very birth of the twins, the rabbis attempt to paint a picture of the evil Esau and blessed Jacob. The above midrash hints that Jacob is indeed worthy of being the first-born and actually was intended to be the first born. The physical description of Esau is very important. R. Abba b. Kahana declared that the color "red" – "The first one emerged red" – represents the color of blood,

⁴³ *Bereishit Rabbah* 63:8.

⁴⁴ This struggle, though, appears only as she is in the process of giving birth. Here the text gives no clue that twins were expected.

foreshadowing Esau's involvement in hunting and even murder.⁴⁶ Sforno comments on Esau's "hairy mantle" – because of this mantle, his birth should have been more difficult and, in fact, later than that of the smoother twin, Jacob. Therefore, they named the first son "Esau," hinting that he was "forced out" first.⁴⁷

Not only are the two names important, but also the question of who did the naming.

"And they called his name Esau" (Gen. 25:25). It is in vain⁴⁸ that I created him [Esau] in my universe. R. Isaac said: [God declared:] "You have given a name to your swine [Esau]; then I, too, will name My firstborn" – as it says, "Thus says the Lord, 'Israel is My son, My firstborn'" (Exodus 4:22).⁴⁹

According to the second part of this midrash, it is God – not Isaac or Rebekah – who names Jacob. In verse 25, the text states, *"VAYIKRU SHEMA EISAV,"* or "they named him Esau." However, in verse 26 we read, *"VAYIKRA SHEMA YAAKOV,"* or "He named him Jacob." Sforno agrees that it is God who names Jacob (based on the root meaning "he will remain at end"), explaining that this shows "that [Jacob] will survive after the destruction of all the nations, as it is

⁴⁵ *Bereishit Rabbah* 63:8.

⁴⁶ *Bereishit Rabbah* 63:8.

⁴⁷ Sforno is playing with the terms *"ESAV"* and *"E-SU-I,"* meaning "forced." Sforno comment to 25:24; Pelcovitz, p. 131.

⁴⁸ This midrash connects Esau's name with the Hebrew *"SHAV."*

⁴⁹ *Bereishit Rabbah* 63:8.

written, 'For I will make a full end of all the nations ... but I will not make a full end of you'" (Jeremiah 46:28).⁵⁰

THE BOYS GROW UP

GENESIS 25: 27-28

(27) When the boys grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the outdoors; but Jacob was a mild man who stayed in camp. (28) Isaac favored Esau because he had a taste for game; but Rebekah favored Jacob.

The text and commentaries have already listed or hinted at the differences between Esau and Jacob in regard to their appearance at birth and their future destinies. Now the text provides two verses focusing on the nature of the two boys and their relationships with each parent as the twins grow up.

"And the boys grew up" (Gen. 25:27). R. Pinchas said in R. Levi's name: They were like a myrtle and a wild rose-bush growing side by side – when they attained to maturity, one yielded its fragrance and the other its thorns. So for thirteen years both went to school and came home from school. After this age, one went to houses of study and the other to houses of idolatrous worship. R. Eleazar b. R. Simeon said: A man is responsible for his son until the age of thirteen; thereafter he

⁵⁰ Sforzo comment to 25:26; Pelcovitz, p. 131.

must say, "Blessed is He who has now freed me from the responsibility of this boy."⁵¹

Esau, the "wild rose-bush," became "a skillful hunter." The rabbis explain that this was true both literally and figuratively. Esau had great prowess as a hunter of game, trapping and killing wild animals.⁵² Esau would also "ensnare people by their words." R. Abbahu said that Esau "was a trapper and a fieldsman, trapping [i.e. deceiving] at home and trapping in the field."⁵³ Rashi adds that Esau was exceptionally skillful at deceiving his father.

"A *cunning hunter*" – meaning he "understood hunting." [Esau also] understood how to entrap and deceive his father with his mouth. He would ask him, "Father, how should salt and straw be tithed?" (although he knew full well that these are not subject to the law of tithe). Consequently, his father believed him to be very punctilious in observing the Divine ordinances. "A man of the field" – meaning a man without regular occupation, hunting beasts and birds with his bow.⁵⁴

⁵¹ *Bereishit Rabbah* 63:10.

⁵² Sarna adds the following note in his discussion of verse 27: "Hunting as a way of life was held in low esteem in Israel. The only hunter, other than Esau, mentioned by name in the Bible is Nimrod, in 10:9. Near Eastern art often portrays kings and nobles in pursuit of game, but no Israelite or Judean king or hero is ever mentioned as indulging in the sport. However, the fact that Lev. 17:13 legislates concerning the preparation for food of an animal caught in the hunt and that Deut. 14:5 includes wild animals among those permitted to be eaten proves that hunting was sometimes an economic necessity even in Israel. Nevertheless, it is highly significant that sacrifice in Israel was restricted to domesticated animals" (p. 181).

⁵³ *Bereishit Rabbah* 63:10.

⁵⁴ Rashi comment to 25:27; Silberman, p. 116.

Rashi then immediately contrasts Jacob with his brother, Esau. Rashi explains "TAM" to mean two things: that Jacob was not expert in all these things [that Esau excelled in – i.e. hunting], and that Jacob was not a deceiver – "one who is not ingenious in deceiving people is called TAM."⁵⁵ The midrash quoted above interprets TAM as "quiet:"

"And Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents" (25:27) – in two tents, viz. in the academy of Shem and the academy of Eber.⁵⁶

The two boys, evidently, could not have been more different in character and nature: Esau is presented as the thorny and wild rose-bush, who spent his time hunting and making trouble; while Jacob becomes the fragrant myrtle, quiet, remaining inside with his nose in a book.

The description of Esau and Jacob, though, is limited to a single verse. In the following verse, the reader learns that Isaac "loved" or favored Esau, while Rebekah "loves" or favors Jacob. Again, the text is succinct here – the only reason given for either favored state is that Isaac "had a taste for game." Therefore, the rabbis looked to expand this verse.

"Now Isaac loved Esau, because he did eat of his venison" (Gen. 25:28): choice meat and choice wine were reserved for [Isaac's] mouth. "And

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Bereishit Rabbah* 63:10.

Rebekah loved Jacob”: the more she heard his voice [engaged in the study of Torah], the stronger grew⁵⁷ her love for him.⁵⁸

There seem to be many possible answers as to why Isaac favored Esau. To begin with, Esau is his first-born son. With that status, in biblical times, came many privileges. Isaac has a natural bond with Esau – both are the first-born sons of their fathers’ favorite wives, establishing them as the heirs to their fathers’ position.

Two other ideas have already been suggested by the midrash. Esau deceived Isaac. Later the text informs us that Isaac’s “eyes were dim.”⁵⁹ However, it appears that Isaac was already “blinded” by Esau’s trappings and deceiving ways; Isaac simply could not see Esau’s true nature and behavior. The second answer is hinted at by verse 28 itself – Isaac enjoyed the food that Esau brought for him. According to the midrash, Esau did more than casually prepare the game for his father, but rather he doted on his father and waited on him with great fervor and respect.

“And Rebekah took the choicest garments of Esau her elder son, which were with her in the house” (Gen. 27:15) – in these he used to attend upon his father. R. Simeon b. Gamaliel said: All my lifetime I attended upon my father, yet I did not do for him a hundredth part of the service

⁵⁷ This comment is based on the use of the present participle, “OHEVET – she loves,” meaning her love was progressively growing.

⁵⁸ *Bereishit Rabbah* 63:10.

⁵⁹ Genesis 27:1.

that Esau did for his father. I used to attend upon my father in soiled garments and go out in the street in clean ones; but when Esau attended on his father, he attended upon him in royal robes, for he said, "Naught but royal robes befits my father's honor."⁶⁰

In his commentary to the book of Genesis, Rabbi Burton Visotzky offers another reason for Isaac's love for Esau. He suggests that Esau reminds Isaac of his older brother, Ishmael. Visotzky refers to Esau and Ishmael as "two of a kind, their affinities for each other uncanny... Is it any wonder, then, that in the absence of older brother Ishmael, Isaac transfers his affections for the macho man to his rough-and-tumble son?"⁶¹ Esau, in many ways, represents what Isaac himself is not: strong, hot-tempered and head-strong, daring and adventuresome, "a man's man." Isaac, perhaps, admires these traits in his son and may even have sought to live vicariously through Esau's adventures. On the other hand, because of these differences, one could also argue that Isaac seemed to favor Esau and treat him leniently not out of love, but rather out of fear of his first-born son.

The text is even quieter regarding Rebekah's love for Jacob, giving no direct reason. However, one reading of the text provides a possible answer: "Isaac favored Esau..., but Rebekah [in response to Isaac's preference] favored Jacob." Thus, her love for Jacob is an attempt to compensate for Isaac's love for Esau. From the text, we also know that Jacob "stayed in camp" – therefore, he

⁶⁰ *Bereishit Rabbah* 65:16.

⁶¹ Burton Visotzky, *The Genesis of Ethics* (NY: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1996), p. 136.

was the son who was around more often and probably provided company for his mother. Another reading suggests that Rebekah loved Jacob, her "smooth-skinned" and handsome son, for his physical appearance; Esau's "hairy mantle" did not appeal to Rebekah.

Other factors in Rebekah's preference for Jacob must come from Jacob's personality. As has been stated above, according to the midrash, Jacob was the son devoted to study, the one familiar with God's laws and the one with an appreciation for those laws. These are admirable traits in his mother's eyes. Visotzky focuses on Jacob's description as "*TAM*." If Jacob were "simple," then perhaps he reminded Rebekah of her beloved husband. Jacob appears quiet and manageable – adjectives also applicable to Isaac. "*TAM*" can also mean pure – Jacob was pure goodness in the eyes of his mother. Visotzky also points out that Jacob was the weaker son and more in need of his mother's love and support.⁶²

As was noted in chapter III, "vision" is something that differentiates Isaac and Rebekah. While Isaac seems to suffer from a lack of vision (noted when he first met Rebekah), one of Rebekah's greatest strengths is her keen eyesight and vision. It is possible, and more likely, that Rebekah was able to see through Esau and his deceptions. She, unlike Isaac, has a true sense of Esau's character and his flaws. It is also important to remember that it was Rebekah who received God's oracle pertaining to the future of the twins – not Isaac. It is she who knows that "the older shall serve the younger." Perhaps it is this knowledge that assists her

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 136-7.

in seeing the good deeds and merit of Jacob and the sins and unworthiness of Esau.

IV. REBEKAH — JACOB'S MOM AND ESAU'S MOTHER TRANSMITTING THE BLESSING

SALE OF THE BIRTHRIGHT

GENESIS 25: 29-34

(29) Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the open, famished. (30) And Esau said to Jacob, "Give me some of that red stuff [ADOM] to gulp down, for I am famished" — which is why he was named Edom. (31) Jacob said, "First, sell me your birthright." (32) And Esau said, "I am at the point of death, so of what use is my birthright to me?" (33) But Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. (34) Jacob then gave Esau bread and lentil stew; he ate and drank, and he rose and went away. Thus did Esau spurn the birthright.

As noted in the previous chapter, with the beginning of *Parashat Toledot* the focus of the Torah text falls on the third generation of Abraham's family. The story's main characters are now the twins, Esau and Jacob. The two have been rivals since their conception, struggling with one another from within Rebekah's womb, competing to emerge first from her womb. This struggle and competition will continue for most of their lives, exacerbated by the differences in their own personalities and character and by the special status Esau receives from their father and Jacob from their mother.

In the above verses, we find that the two boys have aged somewhat, with their character traits developing further: Esau as the hunter and outdoorsman, Jacob as the homebody. According to *Bereishit Rabbah*, Jacob is preparing a meal of lentils as the "mourner's meal of comfort" following the death of their grandfather, Abraham.¹ The midrash connects the death of Abraham with the sinful actions of Esau.

"And Esau came in from the field..." (25:29). R. Pinchas said in R. Levi's name, and the Rabbis in R. Simon's name: You find that Abraham lived 175 years. Isaac lived 180 years. God withheld these five years from Abraham's life because Esau outraged a betrothed maiden and committed murder. Thus it says, *"And Esau came in from the field,"* meaning that he violated a betrothed maiden, as it says: *"But if the man finds the betrothed maiden in the field, and the man takes hold of her and lies with her"* (Deut. 22:25). *"And he was faint"* signifies that he committed murder, as in the verse, *"For my soul faints before the murderers"* (Jeremiah 4:31)... Said the Holy One, blessed be He: "I made a promise to Abraham, assuring him, *'But you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age'* (Gen. 15:15). Is this a good old age when he sees his grandson practicing idolatry, immorality and murder? Better that he quit this world in peace!" Hence it is written, *"For Your loving-kindness is better than life"* (Psalm 63:4).²

¹ *Bereishit Rabbah* 63:11.

This is an important midrash. It not only points out the sins of Esau – idolatry, immorality, and murder – but it also shows Esau shares none of the qualities of his grandfather. God decides that it would be better for Abraham to die than to see the sins of his grandson. The midrash prepares the reader for the fact that Esau is not worthy of inheriting the legacy and line of Abraham.

The term “red” is important to understanding this story. The color red is symbolic of murder and war, and is thus closely associated with Esau.

He was red, his food red, his land red, his warriors were red, their garments were red, and his avenger will be red, clad in red. He was red: “*And the first came forth ruddy*” (Gen. 25:25); his food was red: “*Give me some of that red stuff...*”; his country is red: “*... To Esau his brother unto the land of Seir, the field of red [Edom]*” (Gen. 32:4); his warriors are red: “*The shield of his mighty men is made red*” (Nahum 2:4); their garments are red: “*The valiant men are in scarlet*” (ibid.); his avenger will be red: “*My beloved is white and ruddy*” (Song of Songs 5:10); clad in red: “*Wherefore is your apparel so red?*” (Isaiah 63:2).³

Esau becomes known by the name Edom, meaning “red.” Ramban points out that this name comes from the text’s mocking of Esau – he was called Edom for having sold his honorable birthright for a small dish of food.⁴ Sforno agrees and elaborates: “When they saw that Esau was totally committed to coarse

² Bereishit Rabbah 63:12.

³ Bereishit Rabbah 63:12.

meaningless labors not befitting civilized man, to the extent that he was incapable of even recognizing the lentils as such, [knowing only] their color [not their name], they called him Edom."⁵

"And Jacob said: Swear to me..." (25:33). Why did Jacob display such eagerness for the birthright? Because we learned: Before the Tabernacle was erected, the high places were permitted [as places to perform sacrifices], and the sacrificial service was performed by the first born. After [the Tabernacle] was erected, the high places were forbidden, and the sacrificial service was performed by priests. Said [Jacob]: "Shall this wicked man stand and offer sacrifices?" Therefore he strove so ardently to obtain the birthright. Thus it is written: *"I will doom you with blood; blood shall pursue you; I swear that, for your bloodthirsty hatred, blood shall pursue you"* (Ezekiel 35:6). Did then Esau hate blood? R. Levi said in the name of R. Chama b. R. Chanina: It refers to the blood of circumcision. R. Levi said in the name of R. Samuel b. Nachman: It means the blood of sacrifices sprinkled by the firstborn. The Rabbis interpreted: You have hated the blood of man while it is in his body;⁶ and thus it is written, *"Yea, he loved cursing, and it came unto him, and he delighted not in blessing..."* (Psalm 109:17). R. Levi said in R. Chanina's name: "He delighted not" in the birthright [instead of the blessing].⁷ R. Huna said: It refers to the blood of sacrifices, which

⁴ Ramban's comment to 25:30; Chavel, p. 317.

⁵ Sforino's comment to 25:30; Pelcovitz, p. 132.

⁶ Therefore Esau's lust to shed blood.

⁷ This is a wordplay with *BEKORAH* ("birthright") and *BERACHAH* ("blessing").

is called a blessing, as in the verse, "*An altar of earth you shall make unto Me ... I will come unto you and bless you*" (Exodus 20:21).⁸

This midrash continues to showcase the unworthiness of Esau. Jacob, the Torah scholar, is presented as knowledgeable and as understanding of the responsibilities that accompany being the firstborn son. Jacob is the son worthier of carrying out these responsibilities properly; therefore, he seeks the birthright.

"And Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew" (25:34). As a lentil is wheel-shaped, so is the world like a wheel. As a lentil has no opening, so a mourner has no mouth, for a mourner does not speak. As a lentil symbolizes mourning, yet also joy,⁹ so here too there was mourning – because of Abraham's death – and joy – because Jacob received the birthright.¹⁰

The concluding words of the chapter are very important: "Thus did Esau spurn the birthright." Rashi explains that the text testifies to Esau's wickedness – thus "[Esau] despised the Service to the Omnipresent!"¹¹ According to Ramban, Esau despised the birthright because it had no value to him. He was in mortal danger from all of his hunting; hence, it was likely that he would die while his father was still alive, and the birthright carried with it no distinction except after the death of the father. Therefore, the birthright was of no benefit for Esau.

⁸ *Bereishit Rabbah* 63:13.

⁹ Lentils were also eaten at banquets.

¹⁰ *Bereishit Rabbah* 63:14.

¹¹ Rashi's comment to 25:34; Silbermann, p. 117.

Ramban concludes: "*For there is no desire in fools*" (Ecclesiastes 5:3) except to eat and drink and to fulfill their momentary desire, not giving a care for tomorrow."¹² Sforno agrees with Ramban, claiming that to Esau the birthright was not worth the price Jacob set for it. He concludes by stating there was no "deception" in the transaction – Jacob did not try to deceive his brother or "cheat" him out of the birthright.¹³ The idea of deceit will play a crucial role in the remainder of this story.

ISAAC AND REBEKAH IN GERAR

GENESIS 26: 6-11

(6) So Isaac stayed in Gerar. (7) When the men of the place asked him about his wife, he said, "She is my sister," for he was afraid to say "my wife," thinking, "The men of the place might kill me on account of Rebekah, for she is beautiful." (8) When some time had passed, Abimelech, king of the Philistines, looking out of the window saw Isaac fondling his wife Rebekah. (9) Abimelech sent for Isaac and said, "So she is your wife! Why then did you say, 'She is my sister?'" Isaac said to him, "Because I thought I might lose my life on account of her." (10) Abimelech said, "What have you done to us! One of the people might have lain with your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us." (11) Abimelech then charged all the people, saying, "Anyone who molests this man or his wife shall be put to death."

Chapter 26 begins with a reaffirmation of the covenant between God and Isaac. Isaac has gone to Abimelech, king of the Philistines, in Gerar, because of a

¹² Ramban's comment to 25:34; Chavel, p. 320.

famine in the land. God commands him to reside in the land and not to go down to Egypt. God promises Isaac: "I will be with you and bless you; I will assign all these lands to you and your offspring, fulfilling the oath that I swore to your father Abraham" (26:3).

The episode described in the above verses reminds the reader of two earlier scenes involving Abraham and Sarah. In the first (Gen. 12: 10-20), Abram is on his way to Egypt to escape famine. He instructs his wife Sarai to identify herself as his sister "that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may remain alive thanks to you" (12:13). Sarai is then kidnapped and taken to the palace of Pharaoh. God protects Sarai by sending plagues afflicting Pharaoh until he returns Sarai to Abram. The second scene takes place in Gerar (Gen. 20). King Abimelech has the beautiful Sarah brought to him by force. God comes to Abimelech in a dream, warning him that he is to die unless he restores Sarah to her husband because she is a married woman.

The episode with Isaac and Rebekah is different in that there is no apparent danger. Rebekah is never kidnapped; she never leaves the protection of her husband. Consequently, there is also no Divine intervention – there is no need in this case.

The Rabbis are strangely reticent concerning this part of the story. In *Bereishit Rabbah* we read that Isaac's fondling of Rebekah is a sign that Isaac's

¹³ Sforino's comment to 25:34; Pelcovitz, p. 133.

mourning for his father had come to an end.¹⁴ Sarna, in his modern commentary, questions the timing of the story and its placement here in chapter 26. He claims that the story must have taken place before the birth of the twins since they are not mentioned – their presence would have made it much more difficult to pass Rebekah off as Isaac's sister. Therefore, he writes, "the insertion of the incident at this point in the cycle of Isaac narratives is determined by literary, not chronological, considerations. It temporarily diverts attention from the ongoing rivalry between Jacob and Esau."¹⁵ Sarna thus disagrees with the midrash stated above, as well as with Ramban, who writes that Isaac was prepared to explain the presence of the twins by stating that they were his children from another marriage.¹⁶

This episode is, however, very important in understanding the character of Rebekah. Rebekah is silent throughout this entire scene. Professor Sharon Pace Jeansonne points out that this is a very different view of Rebekah from what we may have expected: "the impression of Rebekah given in this scene differs from that of the strong and independent woman we saw earlier – a woman who would speak to a male stranger, make her will known to her family, and inquire of God."¹⁷ Jeansonne remarks that Isaac acts quite foolishly in this episode. First, after receiving assurances of God's blessing and protection, he needlessly fears his own welfare in Gerar. Out of this fear, he puts his wife, as well as himself, in danger. Second, he makes matters worse by publicly touching Rebekah so that

¹⁴ *Bereishit Rabbah* 64:5.

¹⁵ Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary*, Genesis, p. 184.

¹⁶ Ramban's comment to 26:7; Chavel, p. 333.

Abimelech knows for certain that she is his wife. Jeansonne concludes with the introduction of an important theme for what occurs next in the story – deception.

When the account is completed, the reader is relieved to learn that Rebekah is unharmed and is moved to discover that, like Sarah, she was almost abused because of her husband's fear. The narrator has allowed Rebekah to capture the reader's sympathies before it is known that she uses deception to obtain the blessing from Isaac. Moreover, because Isaac has already deceived Abimelech, his own deception by Rebekah comes as less of a surprise.¹⁸

ESAU TAKES TWO HITTITE WIVES

GENESIS 26: 34-35

(34) When Esau was forty years old, he took to wife Judith, daughter of Beerli the Hittite, and Basemath, daughter of Elon the Hittite; (35) and they were a source of bitterness to Isaac and Rebekah.

These two verses form an addendum to chapter 26 – they are unrelated to the information that precedes them, and yet they provide important foreshadowing. In this way, the two verses are similar to the addendum at the end of chapter 22 – the section that first introduces the character of Rebekah. Chapter 27 includes the story of Isaac blessing his two sons. The addendum here

¹⁷ Sharon Pace Jeansonne, *The Women of Genesis* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), pp. 63-64.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

provides further evidence of Esau's unworthiness to receive Isaac's "innermost blessing" and to become heir to the line of Abraham. In his introduction to this section, Sarna explains that Esau thus committed a "threefold offense:"

"breaking with social convention by contracting the marriage himself rather than leaving the initiative to his parents; abandoning the established practice of endogamy by marrying outside the kinship group; and violating the honor of his clan by intermarrying with the native women."¹⁹

"And when Esau was forty years old, he took to wife Judith, the daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and Basemath, the daughter of Elon..."

(26:34). It is written, *"Why did you breach the wall so that every passerby plucks its fruit, wild boars gnaw at it, and creatures of the field feed on it?"* (Psalm 80: 13-14). R. Pinchas and R. Chelkiah in R.

Simon's name said: Of all the prophets, only two – Moses and Asaph²⁰ – exposed it.²¹ Asaph: *"Wild boars gnaw at it."* While Moses said, *"And the swine, although it has true hoofs, it does not bring up its cud"* (Deut. 14:8). Why does he compare it [Edom] to a swine? For this reason: when the swine is lying down, it puts out its hoofs, as if to say, "I am clean." So does the wicked state [Rome] rob and oppress, yet pretend to be setting up a dais [for the execution of justice]. So for forty years Esau used to ensnare married women and violate them, yet when he attained forty years he compared himself to his father, saying, "As my father was forty years old when he married, so I will marry at the age of

¹⁹ Sarna, p. 189.

²⁰ This psalm is accredited to Asaph: "Of Asaph, a psalm" (verse 1).

²¹ The "it" here is the Roman state.

forty. Hence it is written, "*And when Esau was forty years old, he took to wife...*"²²

This midrash shows how Esau committed two sins: first, he ravaged married women, and second, he married Canaanite women.

R. Judan b. R. Simon began his lecture thus: "*God makes the solitary to dwell in a house...*" (Psalm 68:7). Now it is R. Judan b. R. Simon's opinion that even if a *mamzer* is at one end of the world and a *mamzeret* at the other end, the Holy One, blessed be He, brings them together and unites them in marriage. What is the proof? "*God makes the solitary to dwell in a house.*"²³ Thus, because it is written, "*You shall utterly destroy them: the Hittite ...*" (Deut. 20:17), therefore let this man [Esau] – his name be blotted out – come and marry this woman [Judith the Hittite] – her name be blotted out! Hence, "*And when Esau was forty years old...*"²⁴

Here, Esau's status is equated with that of the Hittite, the Hittites being a Canaanite people destined to be wiped out by the Israelites as they entered the Promised Land.

"*And they were a bitterness of spirit unto Isaac and to Rebekah*"

(26:35). Why to Isaac first? Because Rebekah, being the daughter of

²² Bereishit Rabbah 65:1.

²³ The *mamzer* is "solitary" because he is forbidden to marry a person of legitimate descent.

²⁴ Bereishit Rabbah 65:2.

idolatrous priests, did not object to the pollution of idolatry; whereas he [Isaac] was the son of holy parents and so objected – therefore [the marriages were a source of bitterness] to Isaac first. Another reason why to Isaac first is because she was the cause of it [Esau's wickedness], as it says, "*And the Lord said to her, 'Two nations are in your womb...'*" (Gen. 25:23) – hence to Isaac first. Another reason: it is a woman's nature to sit at home, and a man's to go out into the streets and learn understanding from people. But because Isaac's eyes were dim,²⁵ he stayed at home – therefore, to Isaac first.²⁶ R. Joshua b. Levi said: [Esau] was responsible for the Holy Spirit departing from his parents.²⁷

In addition to proving further Esau's unworthiness, these verses – in particular, the reaction of Isaac and Rebekah to Esau's marriages – also help to explain and give credence to Rebekah's plan for Jacob's escape from his brother's wrath (in chapter 28): she will have Isaac send Jacob away to find a wife, so that he does not marry in the same manner as did Esau.

PREPARING TO OFFER THE BLESSING

GENESIS 27: 1-4

- (1) When Isaac was old and his eyes were too dim to see, he called his older son Esau and said to him, "My son." He answered, "Here I am."
- (2) And he said, "I am old now, and I do not know how soon I may die."
- (3) Take your gear, your quiver and bow, and go out into the open and

²⁵ Genesis 27:1.

²⁶ Isaac was forced to stay at home because of his eyesight. Therefore, he was naturally struck by the wickedness that his daughters-in-law introduced into their home sooner than Rebekah, who, as a woman, was accustomed to staying at home.

hunt me some game. (4) Then prepare a dish for me such as I like, and bring it to me to eat, so that I may give you my innermost blessing before I die.”

With the beginning of chapter 27, we have reached the climax of the biblical story of Isaac and his family. All the preceding events, since the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah, have pointed to this day – the day on which Isaac would bless his sons, transferring the “innermost blessing” that he received from his father to the third generation, and thus naming the next father of the people of Israel. The Rabbis, through midrash and commentaries, have sought to prove that Esau is unfit for such a position and that Jacob, though the younger of the two sons, is the proper heir. It will be up to Rebekah to ensure that the appropriate son is blessed.

As noted previously, Isaac has had problems with his vision – both literally and figuratively. Chapter 27 begins by informing the reader that by this point, Isaac is no longer able to see. According to one midrash, his blindness is a punishment for his favoritism of Esau – “because he justified the wicked, his eyes grew dim.”²⁸

According to another midrash, just as Abraham died so as not to witness any more of Esau’s wicked deeds, Isaac became blind so as not to see the

²⁷ *Bereishit Rabbah* 65:4.

²⁸ *Bereishit Rabbah* 65:5. Isaac here is contrasted with the righteous Moses, whose eyes were not dim until his very death (Deut. 34:7). Sforno, on the other hand, compares Isaac with Eli, who also did not restrain

wickedness of Esau and to spare him from the public humiliation of having raised such a child.

"And his eyes were dim from seeing" (27:1). R. Eleazar b. Azariah said: It means, from seeing the evil of that wicked man [Esau]. The Holy One, blessed be He, said, "Shall Isaac go out into the marketplace and people say, 'Here is the father of that scoundrel!' Rather will I make his eyes dim, so that he shall stay at home." Thus it is written, *"When the wicked rise, men hide themselves"* (Proverbs 28:28). Hence it was said: He who raises a wicked son or a wicked disciple eventually suffers dimness of sight...²⁹

However, a third midrash explains that Isaac's blindness was unrelated to Esau; rather it was caused by his almost-sacrifice at the hands of his own father.

Another interpretation of *"from seeing"* (27:1) is as a result of that spectacle [the *Akedah*]. For when our father Abraham bound his son Isaac, the ministering angels wept, as it says, *"Behold, their valiant ones cry without, the angels of peace weep bitterly"* (Isaiah 33:7). Tears dropped from their eyes into [Isaac's], and left their mark upon them [his eyes], and so when he became old, his eyes were dimmed, as it is written: *"And it came to pass, that when Isaac was old ..."* (27:1).³⁰

the wickedness of his sons (I Samuel 3:13) and as a result, "His eyes were set and he could not see" (I Samuel 4:15). See Sforno's comment to 27:1; Pelcovitz, p. 139.

²⁹ *Bereishit Rabbah* 65:10.

The first verse creates an impression of impending death for Isaac.³¹ This, however, is a false impression. According to the text, Isaac was 100 years old when Esau took his two Hittite wives.³² According to midrash, this scene between Isaac and Esau takes place twenty-two years later.

R. Joshua b. Karchah made another comment on "*And said unto him, 'My son'*" (27:1). When a man comes to his parents' age, for five years before and five years after he must fear death. For thus did Isaac reason: If I am to attain my father's years, I am yet far short of them. But if I am to attain my mother's years,³³ then "*behold now, I am old...*" (27:2).³⁴

Thus, Isaac must have been 122 years old. He would go on to live another 58 years: "Isaac was a hundred and eighty years old when he breathed his last and died" (Gen. 35:28).

Esau is referred to in the first verse as "*BENO HAGADOL* – his older son." The text very carefully avoids calling Esau his "first-born" son, perhaps since Esau had sold his birthright.³⁵ Later, Esau is referred to as Rebekah's older son – "*BENAH HAGADOL.*" *Bereishit Rabbah* refers to these two titles as sarcastic --

³⁰ *Bereishit Rabbah* 65:10.

³¹ Isaac may have believed that he was indeed close to death. This can be compared to Esau's statement when he sold to Jacob his birthright: "I am at the point of death, so of what use is my birthright to me?" (Gen. 25:32).

³² Isaac was 40 years old when he married Rebekah; he was 60 at the birth of the twins. If Esau married at age 40, then Isaac must have been 100.

³³ Sarah died at age 127.

³⁴ *Bereishit Rabbah* 65:12.

"Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to them [Isaac and Rebekah]: 'If in your eyes he is great [GADOL], in Mine he is small,'" as it is written, "Behold, I make you [Edom] small among the nations" (Obadiah 1:2).³⁶

When Isaac calls his son, Esau responds by saying, "*HINEINI*" – the same phrase used by Abraham and Moses in response to the call of God.

"And said unto him, 'My son'; and he said unto him, 'Here I am'"
 (27:1). Thus it is written, *"When he speaks fair, believe him not..."*
 (Proverbs 26:25). Hezekiah the Interpreter quoted: *"For there are seven abominations in his heart"* (*ibid.*). You find that one abomination is written in the Torah where ten are actually enumerated: *"Let no one be found among you who consigns his son or daughter to the fire, or who is an augur, a soothsayer, a diviner, a sorcerer, one who casts spells, or one who consults ghosts or familiar spirits, or one who inquires of the dead. For anyone who does such things is abhorrent to the Lord..."*
 (Deut. 18: 10-12). How much more so here that *"seven abominations"* is stated! Hence *"for there are seven abominations in his heart"* indicates that there were seventy abominations in his heart.³⁷

As stated earlier, Esau was a master at fooling his father into thinking that he was righteous. His response to his father's call, according to this midrash, is a

³⁵ Sarna, p. 190.

³⁶ *Bereishit Rabbah* 65:11.

³⁷ *Bereishit Rabbah* 65:11.

blatant attempt by Esau to deceive Isaac and to hide the abominations of his heart – Esau must resort to words due to his father's blindness.

Isaac, who "favored Esau because he had a taste for game" (Gen. 25:28), now instructs Esau to take his hunting gear and to kill and prepare game as a meal for Isaac, so that afterwards Isaac may bless Esau.

"Now therefore take, I pray thee, your weapons..." (27:3). [By this Isaac means,] "Sharpen your weapons so that you may not supply me with *nevelot* and *tereifot*. Again, take your own weapons so that you may not supply me with the proceeds of robbery or violence."³⁸ "*Your quiver.*" He said to him, "Behold, the blessings are in suspense"³⁹ – he who deserves to be blessed will be blessed."⁴⁰

According to this midrash, Isaac appears to have doubts as to Esau's character and worthiness. He feels compelled to remind Esau of some of the rules of *kashrut* and admits that the recipient of the blessing is yet to be determined. Sforno agrees with this interpretation and writes in his comment to the verse:

[Isaac] asked for savory food that Esau should occupy himself with filial honor (*KIBUD AV*), that the blessing be effective; for even though he did not recognize Esau's great wickedness, nonetheless he did not feel

³⁸ Any animals killed or found this way would be unfit for Isaac to eat.

³⁹ This is based on a wordplay, in which "your quiver – *TELYECHA*" is derived from the root "*TALUY*," meaning "hanging" or "in suspense."

⁴⁰ *Bereishit Rabbah* 65:13.

him worthy to receive the blessing that he had in mind to give him. Because of this, when he blessed Jacob later [before Jacob left for Haran], Isaac did not request him to bring savory food, but blessed him at once, saying, "*And God Almighty bless you,*" for he knew that Jacob was worthy to be blessed.⁴¹

REBEKAH'S INTERVENTION

GENESIS 27: 5-13

(5) Rebekah had been listening as Isaac spoke to his son Esau. When Esau had gone out into the open to hunt game to bring home, (6) Rebekah said to her son Jacob, "I overheard your father speaking to your brother Esau, saying, (7) 'Bring me some game and prepare a dish for me to eat, that I may bless you, with the Lord's approval, before I die.' (8) Now, my son, listen carefully as I instruct you. (9) Go to the flock and fetch me two choice kids, and I will make of them a dish for your father, such as he likes. (10) Then take it to your father to eat, in order that he may bless you before he dies." (11) Jacob answered his mother Rebekah, "But my brother Esau is a hairy man, and I am smooth-skinned. (12) If my father touches me, I shall appear to him as a trickster and bring upon myself a curse, not a blessing." (13) But his mother said to him, "Your curse, my son, be upon me! Just do as I say and go fetch them for me."

Unlike her husband, Rebekah has no doubts as to which son is worthy of the blessing. From the beginning, she has been able to identify the true character

⁴¹ Sforzo's comment to 27:4; Pelcovitz, p. 140.

of both of her sons. She knows that it is Jacob who must receive his father's blessing. Therefore, she devises a plan to ensure that Isaac will bless Jacob and not Esau.

Rebekah can be certain in her decision not only because of her knowledge of her two sons, but also because of the Divine oracle she received while pregnant with the twins. It is God who informed her that "two nations are in your womb ... and the older shall serve the younger" (25:23). In order for this prophecy to come true and following the will of God, she gives Jacob these instructions on the steps he must take to secure the blessing.

In his comment to verse 4, Ramban emphasizes that Isaac is intent on bestowing upon Esau the blessing of Abraham. Ramban then raises a very important question – does Isaac know of the prophecy Rebekah received from God? His answer is no. Therefore, Rebekah must find a way for him to bless Jacob in order to protect her husband.

It would appear that Rebekah never told Isaac of the prophecy which God had related to her, i.e., "*And the older shall serve the younger*," else how would Isaac "*transgress the commandment of the Eternal, seeing that it shall not prosper*" (Numbers 14:41). Now at first she did not tell it to him due to ethical modesty, for the verse, "*And she went to inquire of the Eternal*" (Gen. 25:22), suggests that she went without Isaac's permission. [Perhaps she did not tell him because] she said, "I need not relate a prophecy to a prophet, for Isaac is greater than the one who told

it to me.”⁴² And now she did not want to tell him, “So it was said to me in the name of God before I gave birth,” for she reasoned that because of his love for Esau he will not bless Jacob, but he will leave everything in the hands of Heaven. And she further knew that by this arrangement of hers, Jacob would be blessed from Isaac’s mouth by an undivided heart and a willing mind. Perhaps these are causes induced by God so that Jacob would be blessed, and Esau as well with the blessing of the sword, *“And by Him alone actions are weighed”* (I Samuel 2:3).⁴³

The Rabbis, in the following midrash, also present Rebekah as trying to protect her husband and keeping him from making such a huge error as blessing the wrong son:

“He that justifies the wicked, and he that condemns the righteous man, even they both are an abomination to the Lord” (Proverbs 17:15). R. Joshua b. R. Levi said: It was not because Rebekah loved Jacob more than Esau that she did this thing, but because she said, “Let him not go in and mislead that old man [Isaac],” in which case one might apply to him, *“Even they both are an abomination to the Lord.”* And because he justified the wicked, his eyes grew dim, as it says, *“And it came to pass, that when Isaac was old, and his eyes were dim.”*⁴⁴

⁴² This is a reference to the tradition that says that the prophecy was not revealed directly to Rebekah by God, but rather through Shem, the son of Noah, who then told it to Rebekah.

⁴³ Ramban’s comment to 27:4; Chavel, pp. 338-339.

⁴⁴ *Bereishit Rabbah* 65:6.

Rebekah thus deceives her husband out of her love and concern for her husband and not out of her favoring of Jacob. She fears Isaac's "justifying the wicked and condemning the righteous," which would have happened had he blessed Esau and not Jacob. From the fact that Isaac's eyes were dim, she knows, too, that Esau would have been able to mislead his father if he had returned to Isaac first. Therefore, Rebekah has no choice but to take matters into her own hands.

Another midrash suggests that the reason for Isaac's blindness was to make possible his blessing of Jacob.

R. Chanina b. Papa commenced thus: "*Many things have You done, O Lord my God, even Your wondrous works, and Your thoughts toward us...*" (Psalm 40:6). Said R. Chanina: All the works and thoughts that You have wrought have been toward us, for our own sake. Thus, why did Isaac's eyes grow dim? So that Jacob might come and receive the blessings. Hence, "*And it came to pass, that when Isaac was old....*"⁴⁵

In her repetition of Isaac's instructions to Esau, Rebekah adds the phrase "with the Lord's approval," or literally "in the presence of the Lord." These words would have been lost on Esau. However, she adds them here for emphasis, "in order to impress upon Jacob the importance and solemnity of the occasion."⁴⁶ It is part of her "selling" the plan to her son. Ramban agrees and adds that Rebekah said to Jacob, "The blessing will be before the Eternal with the

⁴⁵ *Bereishit Rabbah* 65:8.

⁴⁶ Sarna, p. 190.

RUACH HAKODESH, and if Esau your brother be blessed with it, it will remain with his children forever, and you will have no standing before him."⁴⁷

Jacob's only response to his mother's plan is to express his own fear – he is afraid that if Isaac touches him, Isaac will discern that he is not Esau and that he will curse Jacob instead of blessing him. As Ramban points out, one might think that Jacob would be more concerned with his voice, not his smooth skin, revealing his true identity to his blind, and thus more sensitive, father.⁴⁸ Ramban then suggests that the voices of Esau and Jacob must have been similar. Rebekah attempts to allay Jacob's fear.

"My father will peradventure feel me, and I shall seem to him as a trickster" (27:12). A "trickster" means, like one who errs, like an idolater.⁴⁹ *"And I shall bring a curse upon me, and not a blessing"* – even the one blessing that [Isaac] would eventually give me, he will not give me. *"And his mother said unto him, 'Upon me be your curse, my son.'"* Said R. Abba b. Kahana: [She exclaimed to him:] "When a man sins, is it not his mother that is cursed, as it says, *'Cursed is the ground for your sake'* (Gen. 3:17)? So you too – upon me be your curse." R. Isaac said: [She answered him:] "I undertake to go in and tell your father, Jacob is righteous and Esau is wicked."⁵⁰ *"And he went, and*

⁴⁷ Ramban's comment to 27:7; Chavel, p. 339.

⁴⁸ Ramban's comment to 27:12; Chavel p. 339.

⁴⁹ One who deceives his father is as though he practiced idolatry.

⁵⁰ This is how Rebekah will take responsibility for any reaction by Isaac.

fetches, and brought them to his mother" (27:14), under constraint, bowed down, and weeping.⁵¹

By Jacob's response, he fears detection by his father – he does not question the morality of the act. After his mother assumes responsibility, he does exactly what he is told. Sarna, echoing the idea expressed at the end of this midrash, points out that "the Hebrew has a staccato succession of three short verbs – 'He went, he took, he brought.' The effect is a picture of Jacob performing the unpleasant deed with nervous haste."⁵²

JACOB APPROACHES ISAAC

GENESIS 27: 18-27

(18) [Jacob] went to his father and said, "Father." And he said, "Yes, which of my sons are you?" (19) Jacob said to his father, "I am Esau, your first-born; I have done as you told me. Pray sit up and eat of my game, that you may give me your innermost blessing." (20) Isaac said to his son, "How did you succeed so quickly, my son?" And he said, "Because the Lord your God granted me good fortune." (21) Isaac said to Jacob, "Come closer that I may feel you, my son – whether you are really my son Esau or not." (22) So Jacob drew close to his father Isaac, who felt him and wondered, "The voice is the voice of Jacob, yet the hands are the hands of Esau." (23) He did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like those of his brother Esau; and so he blessed him. (24) He asked, "Are you really my son Esau?" And when he said, "I am," (25) he said, "Serve me and let me eat of my son's game that I

⁵¹ *Bereishit Rabbah* 65:15.

⁵² Sarna, p. 191.

may give you my innermost blessing." So he served him and he ate, and he brought him wine and he drank. (26) Then his father Isaac said to him, "Come close and kiss me, my son"; (27) and he went up and kissed him. And he smelled his clothes and he blessed him, saying, "Ah, the smell of my son is like the smell of the fields that the Lord has blessed."

This scene is the culmination of the previous two conversations: first, between Isaac and Esau and second, between Rebekah and Jacob. Jacob, following his mother's instructions, goes before Isaac pretending to be Esau in order to receive his father's innermost blessing. Rebekah has devised the plan, instructed her son, taken responsibility for his actions, dressed Jacob, and prepared the food for Isaac. She has done all that she can do to ensure that Jacob will receive the blessing, acting with confidence and cleverness, supported by her firm belief that she is following the will of God. According to one midrash, her last words to Jacob as she accompanies him to the door and hands him the food to deliver to Isaac are, "From here onward, your Creator will assist you."⁵³

Now the savory food, as well as Jacob's fate, is out of her hands. Rebekah can only wait and hope that Jacob is able to play his role effectively enough to achieve the desired results.

The question throughout this scene is what does Isaac really know: is he truly fooled by Rebekah's plan? Does he know that it is Jacob and not Esau before him? Which son does he sincerely desire to bless? How much of what is

⁵³ *Bereishit Rabbah* 65:17.

happening is Isaac able to comprehend? The Rabbis attempt to answer many of these questions through midrash.

"And Isaac said to his son, 'How is it that you have found it so quickly, my son?'" (27:20). [What he is really asking is,] "How is it that you have found the blessing so quickly, my son? Your father was blessed at the age of seventy-five,⁵⁴ while you are sixty-three years old." "And he said, 'Because the Lord your God granted me good speed.'" R.

Yochanan and Resh Lakish – one said: [Jacob answered] "If the Holy One, blessed be He, provided you with your sacrifice" – as it says, *"And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold behind him a ram"* (Gen. 22:13) – "how much more so with your food!" The other said: Jacob answered, "If God provided you with your wife" – as it is written, *"And he saw, and, behold, there were camels coming"* (Gen. 24:63) – "how much more so with your food!" ... For when [Jacob] said, *"Because the Lord your God granted me good speed,"* Isaac said, "I know that Esau does not mention the name of the Holy One, blessed be He. Since this one does mention Him, he is not Esau but Jacob." Since Jacob spoke thus, Isaac said to him, *"Come closer that I may feel you, my son."*⁵⁵

According to this midrash, Isaac clearly knows that it is Jacob, not Esau, before him.

⁵⁴ The age of Isaac when Abraham died and when Isaac, thus, received his blessing.

Ramban agrees that Jacob's words seem to give himself away; however, Ramban agrees for a different reason.

But I wonder about this [the mentioning of God being a distinguishing mark for Jacob], for Esau was not wicked in his father's eyes! Perhaps Isaac thought that since Esau is a man of the field and his heart is set on the hunt, he is not wont to mention the Name of Heaven for fear that he might mention it in some unclean place and without proper concentration. In the eyes of his father, this was considered a manifestation of [Esau's] fear of Heaven.⁵⁶

As Sarna points out, "deprived of his eyesight, Isaac summons to his aid the remaining senses of hearing, touch, taste, and smell."⁵⁷ Isaac listens to the voice, feels his son's hands, tastes the food that he is presented, and smells his son's clothes. Could Isaac have truly believed that it was Esau whom he was about to bless after all of these tests? Sforino seems to find this difficult to believe. As proof of his disbelief, he writes that the only way that Isaac could have thought that the hands of Jacob, disguised with the hair of a kid, were the hands of Esau is if Isaac's sense of touch were as dimmed as his eyesight.⁵⁸

"He did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like those of his brother..." (27:23). When wicked men sprung from him, Isaac

⁵⁵ *Bereishit Rabbah* 65:19.

⁵⁶ Ramban's comment to 27:21; Chavel, p. 340.

⁵⁷ Sarna, p. 192.

⁵⁸ Sforino's comment to 27:22; Pelcovitz, pp. 141-142.

recognized him not.⁵⁹ *"And his father Isaac said to him, 'Come close and kiss me, my son'"* (27:26). He said to him, "You will kiss me at burial, you and none other."⁶⁰ *"And he went up and kissed him. And he smelled the smell of his clothes and blessed him..."* (27:27). R.

Yochanan said: Nothing has a more offensive smell than skins stripped from goats, yet you say, *"And he smelled the smell of his clothes and blessed him."* The fact, however, is that when Jacob went in to his father, the Garden of Eden entered with him – and it was to this smell that he alluded in the words, *"The smell of my son is like the smell of the field that the Lord has blessed"* (27:27). But when Esau went in to his father, the Gehenna went in with him. Thus it is written, *"When arrogance appears, disgrace follows..."* (Proverbs 11:2).⁶¹

Thus, Isaac resorts to his other senses to help determine which son has come before him. His hearing tells him that it is Jacob; his sense of touch tells him that it cannot be Esau; his sense of taste should have been able to discern the taste of domesticated meat from the taste of freshly-hunted game; and now his sense of smell informs him that it is Jacob, not Esau, who has entered the room. With all of this information, Isaac prepares to bless Jacob. The text supports this conclusion. In this entire dialogue, Isaac asks Jacob if he is Esau, but not once does he refer to him directly as Esau – rather, he simply calls him *"BENI – my son."*

⁵⁹ This reflects the idea that Isaac did not recognize the wickedness of his son Esau.

⁶⁰ "Kiss" can be understood literally as well as metaphorically: "you will be near to me in burial in the Cave of Machpelah – you and not your brother."

Isaac bestows confidently his innermost blessing upon Jacob: "May God give you of the dew of heaven and the fat of the earth, abundance of new grain and wine. Let peoples serve you, and nations bow to you; be master over your brothers, and let your mother's sons bow to you. Cursed be they who curse you; blessed they who bless you" (Gen. 27: 28-29).

ESAU RETURNS

Genesis 27: 30-36

(30) No sooner had Jacob left the presence of his father Isaac – after Isaac had finished blessing Jacob – than his brother Esau came back from the hunt. (31) He too prepared a dish and brought it to his father. And he said to his father, "Let my father sit up and eat of his son's game, so that you may give me your innermost blessing." (32) His father Isaac said to him, "Who are you?" And he said, "I am your son, Esau, your first-born!" (33) Isaac was seized with very violent trembling. "Who was it then," he demanded, "that hunted game and brought it to me? Moreover, I ate of it before you came, and I blessed him; now he must remain blessed!" (34) When Esau heard his father's words, he burst into wild and bitter sobbing, and said to his father, "Bless me too, Father!" (35) But he answered, "Your brother came with guile and took away your blessing." (36) [Esau] said, "Was he, then, named Jacob that he might supplant me these two times? First, he took away my birthright, and now he has taken away my blessing....

Jacob exits the presence of his father, and, simultaneously, Esau enters.

Esau has done exactly what his father had asked him to do: he has hunted game

⁶¹ *Bereishit Rabbah* 65:22.

with his gear, prepared a dish for Isaac such as he likes, and brought it to his father. Upon learning that it is now Esau who stands before him, Isaac goes through a number of reactions, the first being physical trembling.

"And Isaac was seized with very violent trembling" (27:33).... R.

Yochanan observed: When a man has two sons, and one goes out while the other comes in, does he then tremble? Surely not! The reason, however, was that when Esau went in, Gehenna went in with him. R.

Acha said: The walls of the house began to seethe [through the heat of Gehenna].⁶²

After trembling,⁶³ Isaac asks, "Who is it then?" According to R. Chama b. R. Chanina, Isaac is really asking here, "Who was it that became an intermediary between me and the Almighty that Jacob should receive the blessings?" Isaac then realized that the intermediary was Rebekah – and his trembling stopped.⁶⁴

Esau was a very skillful hunter. He had to be absent from the scene for quite some time – long enough for Rebekah to put her plan into action. The Rabbis used this delay as further evidence that God intended for Jacob to receive Isaac's blessing.

⁶² *Bereishit Rabbah* 67:2.

⁶³ Ramban offers another explanation for Isaac's trembling: "From the moment he blessed him, Isaac knew by *RUACH HAKODESH* that his blessings indeed rested upon Jacob. This then is the reason for his violent trembling, for he knew that his beloved son Esau had lost his blessing forever" (Ramban's comment to 27:33; Chavel, p. 343).

⁶⁴ *Bereishit Rabbah* 67:2.

... R. Eliezer, the son of R. Yosi the Galilean, interpreted it: Shall not the Holy One, blessed be He, delay and postpone the trickster's prey? For R. Joshua b. Levi said: Esau spent the whole of that day catching deer and trussing them, but an angel came and freed them; also birds, which he tied together, but an angel came and liberated them. And why was this? Because as it is written, "*A negligent man never has game to roast; a diligent man has precious wealth*" (Proverbs 12:27). Thus, Jacob, who was diligent, might come and receive the blessings that had been determined as his from the very beginning of the world.⁶⁵

Isaac, somewhat surprisingly, explains to Esau that once he has blessed Jacob, "now he must remain blessed" (27:33). Could he not have rescinded the blessing? Rashi interprets Isaac's words as confirming his own blessing – "In order that [Esau] may not say, 'If Jacob had not deceived his father he would never have received the blessing,' [Isaac] therefore confirmed it, blessing him now of his own free will."⁶⁶ Sforino interprets this passage similarly; according to him, Isaac is thus stating that "he who brought me the game did so deceitfully; still he merited to be blessed for I felt at the time I blessed him that it took effect..."⁶⁷

Finally, it is Esau himself who, though unknowingly, provides Isaac with the concluding evidence that he has indeed blessed the proper son.

⁶⁵ *Bereishit Rabbah* 67:2.

⁶⁶ Rashi's comment to 27:33; Silberman, p. 127.

"I ate of it before you came..." (27:33).... "But what did he actually give you to eat?" [Esau] demanded. "I do not know," he replied, "but I tasted in it the taste of bread, the taste of meat, the taste of fish, the taste of locusts, and the taste of all the delicacies of the world." R. Berekiah observed: As soon as he mentioned the taste of meat, Esau wept, exclaiming, "For the plate of lentils which he gave me, he took my birthright; how much more then for the meat he has given you!" R. Levi said: Our father Isaac felt misgivings, thinking, "Perhaps I did not act rightly in making him the firstborn who is not so [Jacob]." But when Esau said, *"He took away my birthright"* (27:36), Isaac exclaimed, "Rightly did I bless him!"⁶⁸

THE AFTERMATH AND DEPARTURE OF JACOB

GENESIS 27: 41-45

(41) Now Esau harbored a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing which his father had given him, and Esau said to himself, "Let but the mourning period of my father come, and I will kill my brother Jacob." (42) When the words of her older son Esau were reported to Rebekah, she sent for her younger son Jacob and said to him, "Your brother Esau is consoling himself by planning to kill you. (43) Now, my son, listen to me. Flee at once to Haran, to my brother Laban. (44) Stay with him a while, until your brother's fury subsides – (45) until your brother's anger against you subsides – and he forgets what you have done to him. Then I will fetch you from there. Let me not lose you both in one day!"

⁶⁷ Sforno's comment to 27:33; Pelcovitz, p. 144.

The reader cannot be surprised by Esau's violent reaction – he plots to kill Jacob, the brother who, in his mind, has cheated him. Esau, however, decides to wait until after the death of Isaac to take his revenge on Jacob. Ramban offers two reasons for this decision, stating that either Esau did not desire to bring grief to his father during his lifetime, or that Esau feared his father's cursing him and his blessing would then turn into a curse, as well.⁶⁹

If Esau said these words, though, "to himself" alone, then how did Rebekah learn of his evil intentions? The Rabbis asked, "Who told Rebekah?" According to R. Haggai (said in R. Isaac's name), all the matriarchs were prophets. Therefore, Rebekah discovered Esau's plans through prophecy.⁷⁰ On the other hand, Ramban suggests that once Esau had made up his mind concerning Jacob, he was comforted by his decision, and he himself told Rebekah of his decision to kill Jacob.⁷¹

Rebekah then devises a second plan – this time her goal is to save Jacob's life. Her actions are again decisive and cleverly arranged. Rebekah calls Jacob to her to explain Esau's actions. According to Rashi, Esau was comforting himself

⁶⁸ *Bereishit Rabbah* 67:2.

⁶⁹ Ramban's comment to 27:41; Chavel, p. 347.

⁷⁰ *Bereishit Rabbah* 67:9. The Talmud also refers to Rebekah as a prophet (*Sotah* 13a): "At that time was the prophecy of Rebekah fulfilled, as it is written, 'Why should I be bereaved of you both in one day?' Although the death of the two of them [Jacob and Esau] did not occur on the one day, still their burial took place on the same day."

⁷¹ Ramban's comment to 27:41; Chavel, p. 346.

for the loss of the blessing by plotting to kill Jacob.⁷² In fact, according to a midrash, Rebekah informs Jacob that Esau is acting as if he had already carried out his plan: "he affects to be desolate over you, as though you were already dead. He accepts condolences over you as if you were already dead, and he has already drunk the cup of consolation over you."⁷³

"Now, therefore, my son, listen to me. Flee at once to Haran, to my brother Laban. Stay with him a while... Then I will fetch you from there" (27: 43-45). "A while" – or literally, "a few days." It is written, *"And Jacob served seven years for Rachel; and they seemed unto him but a few days"* (Gen. 29:20). R. Chanina b. Pazzi said: "A few days" is written in both texts; just as there "a few" meant seven years, so the "few" mentioned here also means seven years.⁷⁴

These are Rebekah's last words to her favorite son – she will not live to see Jacob again after he flees for Haran. She will be unable to bring Jacob back "after a while" herself; he will have to make the return trip without her guidance.

Throughout this chapter, Rebekah has played a "behind-the-scenes" role. At first glance, therefore, her plan seems too simple. She now begins the second half of her plan to save Jacob – convincing Isaac himself to send away Jacob.

⁷² Rashi's comment to 27:41; Silberman, pp. 128-129.

⁷³ *Bereishit Rabbah* 67:9.

GENESIS 27:46 – 28:5

(46) Rebekah said to Isaac, "I am disgusted with my life because of the Hittite women. If Jacob marries a Hittite woman like these, from among the native women, what good will life be to me?" (1) So Isaac sent for Jacob and blessed him. He instructed him, saying, "You shall not take a wife from among the Canaanite women. (2) Up, go to Paddan-aram, to the house of Bethuel, your mother's father, and take a wife there from among the daughters of Laban, your mother's brother. (3) May El Shaddai bless you, make you fertile and numerous, so that you become an assembly of peoples. (4) May He grant the blessing of Abraham to you and your offspring, that you may possess the land where you are sojourning, which God assigned to Abraham." (5) Then Isaac sent Jacob off, and he went to Paddan-aram, to Laban the son of Bethuel the Aramean, the brother of Rebekah, mother of Jacob and Esau.

Rebekah's argument before Isaac is very persuasive. It is based on both her own reaction and Isaac's to the earlier marriages of Esau. In fact, she is so persuasive that she needs to say only one line. A first then occurs -- Isaac, the passive figure in this entire chapter, takes the initiative. He, without being instructed by Rebekah, sends for Jacob, blessing him and instructing him in what he is to do next.

"And Isaac called Jacob and blessed him." R. Abbahu said: [Jacob's] hold on the blessings was in fact only weak. Where was it strengthened? Here: *"And Isaac called Jacob..."* R. Eleazar said: The validity of a document is established by its signatures. Thus, lest you should say, "Had not Jacob deceived his father he would not have received the

⁷⁴ Bereishit Rabbah 67:10

blessings," Scripture states: "*And Isaac called Jacob and blessed him.*"

R. Berekiah said: It may be likened to a king's son who was digging through to his father for a pound of gold. Said the king to him, "Why this secrecy? Come and take it openly!" Thus it says, "*And Isaac called Jacob...*"⁷⁵

Rebekah's plan is thus very effective in accomplishing a number of goals. First, she ensures the safety and survival of Jacob. Second, she helps Isaac, the husband she loves, to take an active role in the story. Third, without the use of any type of deception, Isaac blesses Jacob, his worthy heir and owner of the birthright, with the blessing of Abraham. Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, Rebekah enables Isaac to act for the first time as a "Patriarch" – by sending his son off to find a wife from his own kin, Isaac follows in the path of his father, fulfilling his role as a father of the people of Israel.

⁷⁵ Bereishit Rabbah 67:12.

V. REBEKAH — OUR MATRIARCH *CONCLUSIONS*

THE END OF THE STORY

PARASHAT VAYEITSEI begins with Jacob's leaving Beer-sheva and setting out for Haran (Gen. 28:10). The narrative will focus first on his journey and then on his sojourn with Uncle Laban, including his years of servitude and his marriages to Leah and Rachel.

Rebekah is mentioned only once within the text of *VAYEITSEI*: "Jacob told Rachel that he was her father's kinsman, that he was Rebekah's son; and she ran and told her father" (Gen. 29:12). The text includes no more details on Rebekah's life – it is as if once she has secured the blessing for Jacob and sent him off, she has completed her role within the book of Genesis.

Nor are there any details included within the text about Rebekah's death. This is in sharp contrast to the death of the first matriarch, Sarah. With Sarah, we know exactly when she died and how old she was at the time of her death: "Sarah's lifetime – the span of Sarah's life – came to one hundred and twenty and seven years. Sarah died in Kiriyat-Arba, now Hebron, in the land of Canaan; and Abraham proceeded to mourn for Sarah and to bewail her" (Gen. 23: 1-2). Sarah's death provides Abraham with the impetus to procure land for a burial

site there in Kiriyaṭ-Arba: "And then Abraham buried his wife Sarah in the cave of Machpelah, facing Mamre – now Hebron – in the land of Canaan. Thus the field with its cave passed from the Hittites to Abraham, as a burial site."

The death and burial of Abraham are also recorded within the text:

This was the total span of Abraham's life: one hundred and seventy-five years. And Abraham breathed his last, dying at a good ripe age, old and contented; and he was gathered to his kin. His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron son of Zohar the Hittite, facing Mamre, the field that Abraham had bought from the Hittites; there Abraham was buried, and Sarah his wife (Gen. 25: 7-10).

The death and burial of Isaac are also recorded later in Genesis; however, a number of details appear missing.

And Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre, at Kiriyaṭ-Arba – now Hebron – where Abraham and Isaac had sojourned. Isaac was a hundred and eighty years old when he breathed his last and died. He was gathered to his kin in ripe old age, and he was buried by his sons Esau and Jacob (Gen. 35: 27-29).

The text, here, does not state the location of Isaac's burial. Also left out is the status of Isaac's wife – the text does not inform the reader as to whether she is still living and, if not, where she is buried.

The only mention of the death or burial of Rebekah can be found in the instructions Jacob gives to his sons regarding his own burial:

Then he instructed them, saying to them, "I am about to be gathered to my kin. Bury me with my fathers in the cave which is in the field of Ephron the Hittite, the cave which is in the field of Machpelah, facing Mamre, in the land of Canaan, the field that Abraham bought from Ephron the Hittite for a burial site – there Abraham and his wife Sarah were buried; there Isaac and his wife Rebekah were buried; and there I buried Leah – the field and the cave in it, bought from the Hittites." When Jacob finished his instructions to his sons, he drew his feet into the bed and, breathing his last, he was gathered to his people (Gen. 49: 29-33).

These verses also contain the only reference to the death and burial of the matriarch Leah. The tragic death of Rachel, though, is described in more detail.

They set out from Bethel; but when they were still some distance short of Ephrath, Rachel was in childbirth, and she had hard labor. When her labor was at its hardest, the midwife said to her, "Have no fear, for it is another boy for you." But as she breathed her last – for she was dying – she named him Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin. Thus Rachel died. She was buried on the road to Ephrath – now Bethlehem. Over her grave Jacob set up a pillar; it is the pillar at Rachel's grave to this day. Israel journeyed on, and pitched his tent beyond Migdaleder (Gen. 35: 16-21).

Thus Rachel is the only one of the seven patriarchs and matriarchs of Israel not to be buried in the cave of Machpelah.

The deaths of Rachel and Isaac are both recorded in chapter 35 of Genesis. However, there is a third, more mysterious, death that is also included in this same chapter and that precedes their deaths.

Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died, and was buried under the oak below Bethel; so it was named *Allon-Bacuth* (Gen. 35:8).

Deborah is a new character to the Genesis narrative – her only previous mention might be as the unnamed nurse who accompanied Rebekah from Haran with Eliezer, as Rebekah journeyed to Canaan to meet Isaac for the first time: "So they sent off their sister Rebekah and her nurse along with Abraham's servant and his men" (Gen. 24:59).

The Rabbis interpreted this verse containing the death of Deborah as also alluding to the death of Rebekah.

"*And Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died...*" (Gen. 35:8). R. Samuel b. Nachman said: This is Greek, in which "*ALLON*" means another, indicating that while [Jacob] was mourning for Deborah, tidings reached him that his mother died. Hence it is written, "*And God appeared again unto Jacob on his arrival from Paddan-aram, and God blessed him*" (Gen. 35:9). With what blessing did God bless him? Said R. Acha in R. Jonathan's name: With the mourner's blessing.¹

R. Samuel b. Nachman thus interprets "*Allon-bacuth*" as "another weeping" – while Jacob was mourning for Deborah, he also cried upon learning of the death of his mother.

This same theme can be found earlier within *Bereishit Rabbah*, as well.

R. Abbahu said: The Holy One, blessed be He, took a cup of blessing and blessed them. R. Judah b. R. Simon said: Michael and Gabriel were Adam's "best men." R. Simlai said: We find that the Holy One, blessed be He, blesses bridegrooms, adorns brides, visits the sick, buries the dead, and recites the blessing for mourners. He blesses bridegrooms, as it is written, "*And God blessed them*" (Gen. 1:28). God adorns brides, as it is written, "*And the Lord God built the rib ... into a woman*" (Gen. 2:22). God visits the sick, as it is written, "*And the Lord appeared unto him...*" (Gen. 18:1). God buries the dead, as it is written, "*And He buried him in the valley*" (Deut. 34:6). R. Samuel b. Nachman said: God also visits mourners, as it is written, "*And God appeared unto Jacob again, when he came from Paddan-aram and blessed him*" (Gen. 35:9). How did God bless him? With the blessing of mourners.²

Rashi does not seem satisfied with this explanation. He asks: "how did Deborah come to be in Jacob's house?" Rashi then connects her appearance with Rebekah's promise to send for Jacob when Esau's anger subsides (Gen. 27:45). Thus, according to Rashi, Rebekah sent Deborah to Jacob to Paddan-aram to tell

¹ *Bereishit Rabbah* 81:5.

him to leave that place and to return home. Deborah then dies on the return journey.³

This verse in chapter 35 may allude to Rebekah's death, but it does not answer the question of why there is no direct mention of Rebekah's death and burial. A fuller explanation can be found in *Pesikta Rabbati*. Piska 12:4 begins with the following words:

4. Another comment: *Remember*.⁴ Concerning this exhortation, R.

Tanchuma Berabbi began his discourse as follows: It is to be considered in the light of the verse, "*Let the iniquity against his fathers be brought to remembrance unto the Lord; and let not the sin against his mother be blotted out*" (Psalm 109:14).⁵

The text then gives three explanations for the "sin against his mother." First, according to R. Judah, when Esau left the belly of his mother, he ripped her womb, as it is written, "Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Edom ... because he destroyed the womb whence he came" (Amos 1:11).⁶ Second, R. Nehemiah explains that Esau's sin was having brought it about that Rebekah

² *Bereishit Rabbah* 8:13.

³ Rashi's comment to Gen. 35:8; Silberman, p. 170.

⁴ "Remember what Amalek did unto you" (Deut. 25:17). This text comes from a *Shabbat Zachor* sermon. Amalek is reported to be a descendant of Esau, the subject of the verse from Psalms that follows.

⁵ *Pesikta Rabbati*, Piska 12:4, p. 221.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 224.

was not to become the mother of the twelve fathers of the tribes – a privilege she deserved because of her virtue and piety.⁷

The third explanation deals with Rebekah's death.

Our Masters taught: What was the sin against his mother? That because of him, when she died, her body had to be taken out at night. Indeed she herself asked that this be done, saying, "My son, the righteous Jacob, is not here. My husband, the righteous Isaac, stays at home because his eyes are grown dim. If I be taken out during the day with this wicked one [Esau] walking before my bier, it will be said, 'Alas for the breast that gave suck to such a one.'" Therefore she commanded that her body be taken out at night, although usually when Matriarchs died, their bodies were taken out during the day, they were given a public funeral, and all came and accorded them loving reverence. Because the body of this matriarch was taken out at night, Scripture, as R. Jose ben Chanina used to say, does not record her death as it records the death of Sarah, of whom it is said, "*And Sarah died*" (Gen. 23:1). Instead, Scripture records that "*Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died...*" (Gen. 35:8), thus by indirection making it known through the death of Deborah that Rebekah's death had already occurred. R. Abbahu added in the name of R. Jose ben Chanina: Because no public funeral was given to Rebekah as to the other Matriarchs, her death was not a matter of public record and thus Scripture did not make it a matter of public record.⁸

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 224-225.

Thus the Rabbis explain the death of Rebekah. This is one last praise as to the worthiness of the righteous Rebekah – the lack of a report of her death within the biblical text is not due to any of her own actions, but rather, once again, to the wickedness of her older son.

BINDING THE GENERATIONS

As noted in chapter II of this thesis, one way to understand the Hebrew name of Rebekah is to view it as coming from the root meaning "to tie or bind." This is an accurate way to look not only at the name of our second matriarch, but also at the role she plays within the biblical narrative. It is Rebekah who binds together this family; she is the one who ensures that the values and traditions of the first generation are passed down to the second and third generations.

Abraham is presented as the founding father of the people of Israel. He is a "larger-than-life" character, who leaves behind large sandals for his successor to fill. The text is filled with comparisons between Abraham and Isaac. These comparisons, in most cases, yield quite a contrast between father and son. Abraham is the one who answers the call of God by bravely leaving home and taking his family to a new land. He is the adventurer, with far-reaching vision and a strong will. Isaac, on the other hand, never leaves home – in fact, he is commanded not to leave the land of Canaan. Isaac appears to lack initiative and

even, sometimes, faith. Whereas Abraham fought battles against greater odds, Isaac turns away from situations that may cause him apprehension and avoids conflict. Isaac attempts to imitate his father – he digs again his father's well and even tries to treat his wife as Abraham treated his mother, referring to her as his sister in Gerar. Isaac, though, is no Abraham. Abraham is active; Isaac is passive.

Abraham knows his son and understands his shortcomings. Therefore, he takes great care in finding a wife for Isaac. It is a responsibility he takes very seriously, because he knows of the importance of such an act. Abraham will need the aid of Isaac's wife to ensure that God's blessing will come true and be passed down to his future descendants.

Therefore God sends Abraham Rebekah, God's choice to be Isaac's wife and partner. Rebekah is introduced as a righteous woman and "a lily among thorns." Unlike Isaac, she resembles Abraham in many ways. Like Abraham, she is a model of hospitality and of welcoming the stranger. She is sensitive to the needs of others. She, too, answers the Divine call of "*LECH LECHA*," willing to leave behind the house of her father and mother and venture forth unto a new land. Like Abraham, she also seems to understand that she is part of a bigger picture, a Divine plan, in which she will have a large role to play. Rebekah also comes to learn the importance of transmission – this will be her greatest responsibility.

Isaac meets Rebekah and immediately brings her into his mother's tent. Because of Rebekah, for the first time since Sarah's death, Isaac is able to find comfort. Just as Rebekah resembles Abraham, so, too, does she resemble Sarah, the first matriarch. Like Sarah, she has a sense of daring and is willing to join her husband in leaping into the unknown. Both women understand the role of their husbands in God's plan as well as their husbands' need for children. Like Sarah, Rebekah is barren for many years, unable to give Isaac the child he requires. Both are also involved in competition for the love of their husbands: Sarah must compete for Abraham's love with Hagar; Rebekah competes with Isaac's memory of Sarah. Perhaps most importantly, Rebekah resembles Sarah by the way in which she loves, cares for, and respects Isaac.

Whereas Rebekah greatly resembles Abraham and Sarah, on the other hand, she contrasts just as strongly with Isaac. Isaac is not allowed to leave home; Rebekah volunteers to journey far away from her homeland and begin a new life. Isaac often appears weak, both physically as well as spiritually and emotionally. Rebekah is presented as strong, both physically – as evident by the scene at the well with Eliezer and his camels – and especially strong-willed. Isaac has weak eyesight and perhaps an even weaker sense of vision: as Rebekah approaches for the first time, he is only capable of seeing the camels. Isaac is also blind to the wickedness of Esau and the virtue of Jacob. Rebekah, on the other hand, is blessed with great vision, both with regard to the present and the future: she sees Isaac for who he is, and she sees the true nature and destinies of both of her sons. Isaac is passive; things seem to happen to Isaac. Rebekah is an active

force; she makes things happen. She is sharp and decisive, willing to take the lead when necessary, but also able to plan from "behind the scenes."

God reveals to Rebekah, while the twins struggle within her womb, the destiny of both of her sons. This oracle is made clear to Rebekah, not Isaac. It will be up to her to make this vision come true. Isaac does not understand the vision; nor is he able to play the role of the patriarch without the guidance of his wife. Neither Esau nor Jacob, on his own, understands the role he plays within God's bigger picture. Esau displays this lack of knowledge by spurning his birthright, selling it for a bowl of lentil stew. Jacob, too, does not fully understand. He seems content with the birthright he has procured, and does not understand the need for his father's blessing, as well. In fact, he appears reluctant to take the necessary steps to receive Isaac's blessing. Rebekah must convince Jacob to assume the role that God has assigned to him. And so Rebekah devises a plan. Her goal is not to deceive her husband and play him for the fool, nor is it to punish Esau. Rather it is her desire to make God's vision come true and to see Isaac bless the appropriate son. She helps Isaac in fulfilling his role of transmitting the blessing of Abraham to the third generation, and thus, for the first time, reaching his potential as a patriarch of the people of Israel. Rebekah is able to accomplish her goals through her love for Isaac and her understanding of God's ways.

In his article, "A Woman for All Seasons," Leon Kass emphasizes the themes of "transmission and sanctification" within the stories of Genesis – this is the highest duty of both fathers and mothers within the Jewish way. Kass,

therefore, refers to Rebekah as the "hero" of the second generation of the Jewish people.

... Thanks to her, Isaac is brought into a proper relation to his sons; thanks to her, Jacob is compelled to recognize the need for – and to obtain – the blessings of his father; thanks to her, fratricide is (for the time being) averted; and thanks to her, Jacob is sent off to find a proper wife, on a journey that will also tame his cleverness and bring him at last into a more proper relation to his brother and, even more important, to God.

How does Rebekah do this? In the only way possible, not by force and not by confrontation, but by guile. But not by guile alone. At the same time, she acts with tact, delicacy, and affection; though she arranges his deception, she does whatever she can to preserve and promote the dignity of her husband, whom she serves out of love. By the end, Rebekah's Isaac rises to the work of transmission, and becomes truly the son of Abraham.⁹

Kass is correct – Rebekah is truly a hero and a role model.

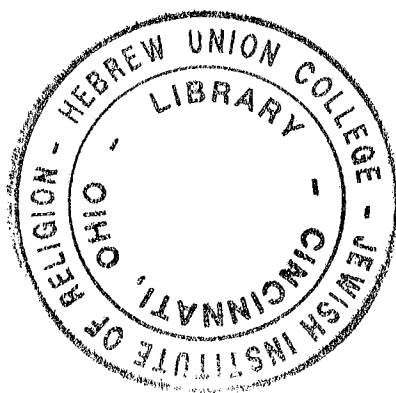
According to *Vayikra Rabbah* 30:10, the four species of the lulav can be interpreted to represent the Patriarchs. The etrog represent Abraham, who was "honored" with a good old age. Isaac is represented by the palm branches, for he was tied and bound upon the altar. The myrtle, with its many leaves, represents Jacob, who was blessed with many children. Joseph is like the willow

⁹Leon Kass, "A Woman for All Seasons," *Commentary*, Vol. 92, Number 3, Sept. 1991, pp. 30-5.

in that he died before his brothers, just as the willow is the first of the four species to wilt.

The midrash goes on to compare the four species with the four matriarchs. Sarah, for the same reason as her husband, is likened to the etrog. The palm branch, with its edible fruit as well as its prickles, represents Rebekah, who brought forth a righteous son as well as a wicked son. Leah is like the myrtle because of all the children she produced. Rachel, who died before her sister, is compared with the willow.

The palm branch is, in many ways, a fitting symbol for Rebekah. Not only, as stated above, does it yield both fruit and prickles, but the palm-branch also has taste without aroma, and it stands straight, representing the spine. Rebekah is like the palm in that she was full of such good taste inside – strength, love, caring, understanding, and vision. However, she often lacked aroma: she was willing to play her role from behind the scenes, so much so that others did not even know of her intentions – they could not detect her aroma. Even more importantly, Rebekah stood tall and firm: in her decisiveness, in her willingness to take action, in her faith and belief in God, in her understanding of her role and mission to transmit the blessing of Abraham, and in her love for her husband.



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