



## People Are Complicated Or: Sensitivity is a Dangerous Thing

Rabbi Shai Held

Human beings are complex creatures, capable of deep kindness and stunning selfishness. In the span of just three chapters of Genesis, one biblical character scales the heights and plumbs the depths of human behavior. One of the matriarch Rebekah's great virtues is her ability to discern what a vulnerable, reticent man wants but cannot ask for. But that very insight is also dangerous, because it comes with an ability to manipulate, to utter just the right words in order to get what she wants. As we shall see, Rebekah can care for her husband Isaac, but she can also play him. Rebekah's gift for identifying people's vulnerability is a sign of her greatness; it is also, tragically, her undoing.



Sent to the land of Abraham's birth to find a suitable wife for Isaac, Abraham's servant devises a test to determine suitability. Standing by the spring as the young women come out to draw water, the servant prays, "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'" (Genesis 24:14). Although some traditional commentators insist that the servant is engaged in some form of divination,<sup>1</sup> the simple

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meaning of the text is that he has crafted a test of character. Rashi (1040-1105) explains that the purpose of the servant's test is to identify a woman committed to performing acts of

<sup>1</sup> Maimonides (Rambam, 1135-1203), Mishneh Torah, Laws of Idolatry, 11:4.



lovingkindness (*gemilut hasadim*), since only such a person “is fit to enter the house of Abraham” (Rashi to Genesis 24:14). Recall that when Abraham had seen three men standing near him in the heat of the day, he had run to greet and feed them (18:6-7). Bible scholar Meir Sternberg observes that Abraham’s servant thus crafts “a shrewd character test. What touchstone could be more appropriate than the reception of a wayfarer to determine a woman’s fitness to marry into the family of the paragon of hospitality?”<sup>2</sup>

The test is demanding in the extreme. A single camel “requires at least twenty-five gallons of water to regain the weight it loses in the course of a long journey,” and the Torah informs us that Abraham’s servant has no fewer than ten camels with him (24:10)! One scholar estimates that dozens of trips (and presumably several hours) would have been required to fully quench the animals’ thirst.<sup>3</sup> To be sure, the test the servant constructs works to establish “nobility of character. The ideal wife must be hospitable to strangers, kind to animals, and willing to give of herself to others.”<sup>4</sup> But it is also checks for energy, industriousness, and raw physical strength.<sup>5</sup> As Sternberg notes, “It is a stiff test... since it would require far more than common civility to volunteer to water ‘ten’ thirsty camels.”<sup>6</sup>

All of this is obviously important, but I suspect something deeper may underlie the servant’s test. He plans to ask the young woman for water, but the real measure of her appropriateness for Isaac is whether she offers to water the camels without his prompting. On one level, of course, this is simply a test of her generosity: She is so kind that she does more than she is asked, and beyond her concern for people, she cares also for the needs of animals. But at

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<sup>2</sup> Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (1987), p. 137.

<sup>3</sup> Jack M. Sasson, “The Servant’s Tale: How Rebekah Found a Spouse,” *Journal of Near East Studies* 65:4 (2006), pp. 241-265; relevant passage is on p. 251.

<sup>4</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis* (1989), p. 164.

<sup>5</sup> Cf., for example, Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (2001), p. 325.

<sup>6</sup> Sternberg, *Poetics*, p. 137.



another level, the servant may understand something critical about traumatized, taciturn Isaac: He is not capable of asking for everything he needs. A suitable wife for Isaac will need not only to listen to what he says, but also to try and intuit what he cannot say. The servant's test is about compassion, but it is also about sensitivity and discernment, about responding to unspoken needs and yearnings.

The young woman whom the servant encounters—the narrator tells us that her name is Rebekah, and that she is Abraham's grandniece (24:15)—passes the test with flying colors. She encounters the servant and immediately launches into a whirl of activity, which the text conveys with a flurry of active verbs: "She said, 'Drink, my lord,' and she hurried and lowered her jug upon her hand and let him drink. She let him drink his fill and said, 'For your camels, too, I shall draw water until they drink their fill.' And she hurried and emptied her jug into the trough and she ran again to the well to draw water and she drew water for all his camels" (24:19-21). Rebekah's actions "dramatize a single point: That the young woman's performance surpasses even the most optimistic expectations."<sup>7</sup>

The Torah tells us that Rebekah "hurried" (*va-temaher*) (24:18, 20) and "ran" (*va-tarotz*) (24:20, 28) to be of service to the servant.

***Rebekah, like Abraham, is committed to a life of lovingkindness***

These words call to mind Abraham's own generosity in welcoming strangers: He, too, "hurried" (*va-yemaher*) (18:6, 7) and "ran" (*va-yarotz*) (18:2, 7) to ensure that his guests were properly greeted and fed.<sup>8</sup> Rebekah thus proves herself worthy not only of marrying into Abraham's family but also of being of his ethical and spiritual heir: She, like him, is committed to a life of lovingkindness (*hesed*).

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<sup>7</sup> Sternberg, *Poetics*. p. 138.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Sternberg, *Poetics*, p. 138. Cf. also Esther Shkop, "Rivka: The Enigma Behind the Veil," *Tradition* 36:3 (2002), pp. 46-59; relevant passage is on p. 56, and Menorah Rotenberg, "A Portrait of Rebecca: The Devolution of a Matriarch into a Patriarch," *Conservative Judaism* 54:2 (2002), pp. 46-62; relevant passage is on p. 50.



Rebekah’s mirroring of Abraham runs even deeper. Asked whether she will delay or go to Canaan with Abraham’s servant right away, Rebekah answers simply, “I will go” (*eilekh*) (24:58). Her terse response is a clear echo of God’s initial call to Abraham, “Go” (*lekh*) (12:1). Like Abraham—but unlike Isaac, who stays put in the land—Rebekah embarks on the long journey to the land of promise. “Rebekah rather than Isaac parallels Abraham; she continues the faithful response of leaving home and family that furthers God’s purposes.”<sup>9</sup> As she is about to set out for Canaan with Abraham’s servant, Rebekah receives a blessing from her family: “O sister! May you grow into thousands of myriads; may your offspring seize the

***It is Rebekah rather than Isaac who is described as living out Abraham’s legacy.*** gates of their foes” (24:60). The blessing given to Rebekah is strikingly reminiscent of the blessing given to Abraham after the Akedah:<sup>10</sup> “I will bestow My blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands of the seashore; and your descendants shall seize the gates of their foes” (22:17). Rebekah thus both “follow[s] exactly in Abraham’s footsteps and... receive[s] the same blessing.”<sup>11</sup> She is “a kind of Abraham-figure in her own right.”<sup>12</sup>

Remarkably, then, it is Rebekah rather than Isaac who is described as living out Abraham’s legacy—she is the continuator of his kindness and hospitality; she undergoes a journey

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<sup>9</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, “The Book of Genesis: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 1 (1994), p. 509. In a similar vein, Shkop writes that “both Abraham and [Rebekah] come from a common source and both are called to wander to a place unknown, leaving their paternal homes... and abandon all that is familiar to pursue a future veiled in mystery.” Shkop, “Rivka,” p. 55.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Rashi to Genesis 24:60.

<sup>11</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, “Genesis” p. 510.

<sup>12</sup> Jon D. Levenson, “Genesis,” in Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *Jewish Study Bible* (2004), comment to Genesis 24:4. Psychotherapist Menorah Rotenberg posits that Rebekah is Abraham’s “double and inheritor of his spiritual mantle”; although I do not agree with every part of her analysis (I have serious doubts about whether the Torah sees Rebekah and Abraham as “ruthless”), she insists, correctly, that “the textual literary links between [Rebekah] and Abraham are numerous, deliberate, and unmistakable.” Rotenberg, “A Portrait of Rebecca,” p. 46.



directly parallel to his; and she is blessed with the very same words as he. With total fidelity to the text, we could easily speak of the God of Abraham, Rebekah, and Jacob.<sup>13</sup> Exploring the Torah’s portrayal of Rebekah, Bible scholar Mary Donovan Turner writes,

“we may be encouraged to lay aside our exclusive designation of the patriarchal narratives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and more appropriately refer to them as stories of our ancestors.”<sup>14</sup>

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The Rebekah of Genesis 24 is a model of spirited generosity. But we soon encounter another, very different side of Rebekah. Overhearing Isaac planning to bless Esau, Rebekah immediately launches into action. Working to thwart her husband’s plans, she displays her characteristic alacrity and decisiveness, only this time in the service of a duplicitous and destructive plot.<sup>15</sup> Rebekah forcefully commands her favored son Jacob to heed her words and deceive his father, thus wresting the coveted blessing away from his older brother (27:8, 13).

We should avoid oversimplifying a complicated text. The Rebekah of this story is not an odious villain. She must contend with a husband who favors his eldest son for the most superficial of reasons, namely that he likes the game that son hunts for him (27:4). It is not just that Isaac “gives priority to his physical appetite over his spiritual discernment”<sup>16</sup>; in so doing, he tries to obstruct God’s plans for Jacob to be the bearer of divine election (25:23). In

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<sup>13</sup> Recall that Jacob is a journeyer like Abraham and Rebekah before him. Cf. Mary Donovan Turner, “Rebekah: Ancestor of Faith,” *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 20:2 (1985), p 42-50; relevant passage is on p. 43.

<sup>14</sup> Mary Donovan Turner, “Rebekah,” p. 42.

<sup>15</sup> In the interests of space, I will not recount the details of Rebekah’s plan here. In order to fully understand what follows, the reader may wish to consult Genesis 27.

<sup>16</sup> Waltke, *Genesis*, p. 374.



insisting upon blessing Esau, Isaac goes against Rebekah's wishes, but also, crucially, against God's.

And yet Isaac's blindness—in this story, physical blindness is at least in part a symbol of spiritual blindness (27:1)—does not justify Rebekah's underhanded plot. "Her spiritual values are sound," one Bible scholar comments, "but her method is deplorable."<sup>17</sup> Another notes: "To exploit a man's blindness was not only prohibited on grounds of humanity; God himself watched over dealings with the blind and deaf (Leviticus 19:14; Deuteronomy 27:18)."<sup>18</sup> Rebekah's plot advances the divine plan, but it also sows enduring discord and brings devastation in its wake. Rebekah "arranges the fulfillment of the divine plan... [but] in a manner that is morally offensive to a high degree."<sup>19</sup> She pays a steep price: After sending Jacob away, she never sees him again. And strikingly, the text simply ignores her death (Genesis 35:8).<sup>20</sup>

How can Rebekah behave this way? Her family has fallen apart, and so, it seems, has her marriage. The story is structured as a set of seven dialogues: Isaac and Esau (27:1-4); Rebekah and Jacob (27:5-17); Isaac and Jacob (masquerading as Esau) (27:18-29); Isaac and Esau (27:30-40); Rebekah and Jacob (27:41-45); Rebekah and Isaac (27:46) and Isaac and Jacob

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(28:1-5). Crucially, Jacob and Esau never interact, and Rebekah and Isaac communicate only briefly, after the blessing has been stolen, and then only so that Rebekah can manipulate him into aiding

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<sup>17</sup> Waltke, *Genesis*, p. 377.

<sup>18</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, trans. J.H. Marks (1972), p. 277.

<sup>19</sup> Levenson, "Genesis," comments to Genesis 27:5-13.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Genesis 23:1-2.



Jacob's escape from his infuriated brother (27:46). Typically in biblical narratives only two characters engage in dialogue at one time. "Here, however, the number of separate meetings and their manner imply intentional exclusion and reflect the deep division within the family." This is a family "wrecked by jealousy, deception, and power struggles."<sup>21</sup>

Rebekah and Isaac do not communicate at all; they have fallen far indeed from the days when Isaac prayed on behalf of his wife, and in her presence (25:21).<sup>22</sup> Why does Rebekah not speak to Isaac? R. Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin (Netziv, 1816-1893) suggests that their lack of communication is rooted in the fact that Rebekah holds Isaac in awe (Ha'amek Davar to Genesis 24:64-65), but it seems more likely that the opposite is the case: Rebekah does not speak to Isaac because she has lost all respect for him. Perhaps his passivity and weakness, coupled with his stubbornly superficial reasons for preferring Esau over God's chosen Jacob, have alienated her. A woman in awe of her husband does not play him for a fool (27:5-17); a woman who thinks little of her husband just might.

The first psalm distinguishes starkly between "the way of the righteous," on the one hand, and "the way of the wicked," on the other. But the truth is that most of us are neither purely righteous nor totally wicked; we are

***The truth is that most of us are neither purely righteous nor totally wicked; we are capable of both deep kindness and staggering selfishness.***

capable of both deep kindness and staggering selfishness. We may be tempted to believe that attunement to other people's vulnerabilities leads ineluctably to care and concern for them. But emotional sensitivity is no guarantee of kindness; the ability to understand other people's

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<sup>21</sup> Waltke, *Genesis*, p. 373.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. what I have written about Isaac's virtues in "In Praise of Isaac: The Bible's Paragon of Marital Empathy," CJLI Parashat Toldot 5774, available [here](#).



experience can elicit generosity, but it can also enable scheming and manipulation—often in the very same person. In its portrayal of Rebekah, the Torah presents a sobering reminder of what is perhaps the simplest and deepest truth we know about ourselves: people are complicated.

Shabbat shalom.

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