



Ba-kol, Mi-kol, Kol: **The Blessing of Avraham's Mythic Daughter**

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The first chapter of Talmud Bavli Bava Batra deals primarily with borders and boundaries. How does one construct a wall? Are effective fences required to cordon off one's fields, or are a representative but flimsy wall of palm branches sufficient? What should someone do if, God forbid, their neighbor builds their border wall so wide that it encroaches on their own land? Who pays for such a wall? Who needs walls, and protection, and who does not? The *sugya* of the chapter architect discusses that range over all of these questions and more, occasionally dipping into *aggadah* concerning the origins of King Herod (whose biography crosses boundaries between aristocracy and slavery, megalomania and *yirat Hashem*, the slaughtering of the rabbis and the building of the *Beit ha-Mikdash*), and halakhic stories about *Hazal* themselves resisting taxation and fighting with their neighbors. But the end of the *perek* turns to boundaries even more intimidating: the wall that that *Hazal* situate between genders, and the one which sits between life and death. In Bava Batra 16b-17a, a debate among the rabbis about whether having daughters can be as good as having sons. From amidst the comparison of the need for both merchants of sweet smelling spices and of foul-smelling leather tanners in the world (I'll let you guess which occupation corresponds to which gender) there arises a tannaitic dispute about the effects of divine blessing upon the lives of the Patriarchs, and how holiness and personal encounter with Hashem affected the end-of-life experiences of the biblical *gedolim*—and even a few of the *gedolot*. It is within this *sugya* that we encounter the figure of Bakol, the midrashic daughter of Abraham.

תלמוד בבלי בבא בתרא טז:

כתנאי "וה' ברך את אברהם בכל" (בראשית כד:א). מאי בכל?



Talmud Bavli Bava Batra 16b

There was a Tannaitic disagreement about the verse “And Hashem blessed Avraham *bakol*” (Bereishit 24:1). What does “*bakol*” mean?”

Typically, the word “*ba-kol*” is read as the word “*kol*” with a prepositional “*bet*” before it, meaning “in all,” or “in everything.” The Talmud, however, sees things differently. Two Tannaim, R. Yehudah and R. Meir, immediately weigh in, also with arguments comparing sons and daughters. The more senior source confirms at least once part of the preceding Amoraic discussion: implicitly here is the notion that to be blessed “in everything” must include being blessed with both sons and daughters.

R. Meir insists that Avraham’s blessing was in not even having to raise a daughter: **שלא היתה לו בת**. R. Yehudah, however, insists on the opposite: **היתה לו בת**: Avraham’s blessing was that he did indeed have a daughter. The Gemara then goes on to cite an anonymous source (in the name of *aherim*, “others”), who says that not only did Avraham Avinu have a daughter, but that her name was *Bakol*!

A parallel to this discussion appears elsewhere in *masekhet* Bava Batra, in chapter nine (Bava Batra 141a), in the middle of yet another conversation about preferences for sons or for daughters. But interestingly, this version of the dispute contains a notable difference: what was presented as a statement of *aherim* in chapter one now appears absorbed into the opinion of R. Yehudah.

תלמוד בבא בתרא קמא.

דתניא "וה' ברך את אברהם בכל". רבי מאיר אומר: שלא היה לו בת. רבי יהודה אומר: שהיתה לו בת ובכל שמה!
 אימור דשמעת ליה לרבי יהודה ברתא נמי לא חסריה רחמנא לאברהם דעדיפא מבן.

Talmud Bavli Bava Batra 141a

It is taught in a *baraita*: “And Hashem blessed Avraham *bakol*.” R. Meir says, “[*Bakol* refers to the fact] that he [Avraham] did not have a daughter.” R. Yehudah says, “[*Bakol* refers to the fact] that he [Avraham] did have a daughter, and *Bakol* was her name!”

One could tentatively understand, according to R. Yehudah, that a daughter also was not kept from him by the Merciful One, that [a daughter] is better than a son.

Of course, the reading of female characters back into the biblical narrative is not unheard of. Lilith does not appear in the *peshat* of Bereishit, and yet she is mentioned multiple times in the Talmud. Likewise, Yishmael’s wives Fatima and Aisha meet and interact with Avraham in the midrashic work *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer*. However, the appearance of a third sibling in Avraham’s family might change consideration of the Avraham-Yishmael-Yitzhak dynamic so



present in Bereishit, and raises a number of questions about long-standing suppositions contributing to the banishment of Hagar and Yishmael. If Sarah had been able to conceive multiple children, would she have been as anxious about Yishmael’s status within her family? Or if Hagar had multiple children with Avraham, could Bakol’s existence be understood as a behind the scenes factor in Sarah’s explosion of rage towards her handmaiden? And where would Bakol herself fit into this family of prophets, schemers, and covenant-makers? Would she have found herself similarly offered up by her father as a sexual peace-offering to strangers, like her cousins the daughters of Lot? Would she have joined with her brothers at the end of Avraham’s life, regrouping as a family to bury their father? Would Bakol bat Hagar flee with Yishmael and marry one of Hagar’s kin in the desert, or would Bakol bat Sarah cause her father the same anxiety about finding a suitable mate, forcing Avraham’s servant Eliezer to undergo two odysseys in search of marriageable options for Avraham’s covenant-bound children?

The Tosafists consider these questions in their commentary on R. Yehuda’s opinion on Bava Batra 141a.¹ Unsurprisingly, they focus on Bakol’s marriage potentiality, perhaps seeking to place Bakol within the chain of Sarah-Rivkah-Leah-Rahel sexual and marital dramas in which the matriarchs—Bakol’s mother, cousin, and nieces—similarly engage throughout the narratives of their early lives in Bereishit. Upon reading about R. Yehudah’s assertion of the existence of Bakol, the Tosafot notes that one might quickly ask, “Why didn’t Bakol marry Yitzhal?” Citing laws about *benei Noah* from *masekhet Sanhedrin*, the medieval commentators assert that someone in Yitzhak’s position would certainly be permitted to marry his sister. Additionally, it may have saved Avraham quite a bit of panic, since the Patriarch becomes quite nervous when Yitzhak comes of age, anxious to marry Yitzhak not to a local Canaanite pagan, but rather a member of Avraham’s own clan. Considering their own question, Tosafot offers two potential answers to explain why such a match would not have been made. One might say that perhaps Bakol was much younger than Yitzhak and Avraham would not want to have married off his daughter while she was still underage. The other suggested answer locates itself within the same issue concerning Avraham in the *peshat* of Bereishit: lineage. Perhaps Bakol, the Tosafists say, was the daughter of Hagar and not of Sarah, and it was for this reason that Avraham did not want to make the match.

But the argument over Bakol’s parentage did not end with the Tosafists. Instead, the debate has continued within rabbinic scholarship, right up to our own era. Interestingly, the debate about Bakol shifted away from Bereishit 24:1—“God blessed Avraham *ba-kol*”—to an earlier verse:

¹ S.v. בת היה לו ובכל שמה.



ותמת שרה בקרית ארבע הוא חברון בארץ כנען ויבא אברהם לספד לשרה ולבכתה:

Bereishit 23:2

And Sarah died in Kiriatharba—the same as Hebron—in the land of Canaan; and Avraham came to mourn for Sarah, and to weep for her.”

In the *safrut* of the Torah scroll, the final word of this verse, *ve-livkotah*, is written quite uniquely. The *kaf* in the center of the word is written very small in comparison with the letters surrounding it. It is in this letter that we find the continuation of Bakol’s story, and perhaps a refutation to the Tosafists assumptions.

The 16th century Rabbi Shalom Shachna of Lublin is quoted in the later book *Ziknei Maḥaneh Yehudah* as saying that the small *kaf* reveals an important piece of the story of Sarah Imeinu’s life. Reb Shachna said that the smaller letter revealed that Sarah had a daughter, whose name was Bakol, and who died along with her mother in parashat *Hayyei Sarah*. As proof, the rabbi points to the *kaf*. Without the letter, he says, the word would read *v-livita*, rendering the verse “and Avraham came to mourn for Sarah, and for her daughter.”

A *derash* attributed to the Maharil Diskin, a 19th century Brisker Rabbi who wrote in the Russian Empire and later *Eretz Yisrael*, also speaks of the small *kaf* in verse 23:2, and its potential implications. Reb Diskin reportedly circled back to the question of the Tosafists, saying that although she was in fact a daughter of Sarah, Yitzḥak could not have married Bakol because she died alongside their mother. And it is this event, according to the *derash*, that spurs Avraham to search for a wife for his son and heir. However, a 1979 letter from the renowned late Rabbi Moshe Feinstein disputes whether or not the Maharil ever gave this drash, citing some logical inconsistencies. Firstly, he says, the implication of Bakol’s existence via the little scribal *kaf* is located after the death of Sarah takes place, which would imply that while Bakol may have died, it was at some point after her mother. Additionally, Feinstein asks: How could Bakol have been a blessing to Avraham, the daughter who ensured that he was “blessed in everything,” if she had died in her father’s lifetime? And if Bakol had died before Avraham began his search for Yitzḥak’s wife, Reb Moshe concludes, Tosafot would have not thought to ask about the potential marriage between brother and son, as the timeline of events would have rendered Tosafot’s question impossible.

So with all of these threads of inquiry and commentary, what might we conclude about Bakol? Our understanding allows us to draw a rough sketch of the much younger sister to two great nations, the daughter of Avraham and Sarah, dying young but sometime after the death of both of her parents. Bakol might have witnessed the price her family unit paid for being the



originators of a monotheistic covenant: a half-brother she barely knew, cast out into the wilderness with his mother; the silence between her brother Yitzhak and her father Avraham after they returned from their fateful journey on Mount Moriah; her mother's subsequent death, and the search for a wife for her brother. Perhaps the little *kaf* of *ve-livkotah* does hint at Avraham's double-pronged mourning: for his late wife, and for the small daughter she left behind to be raised in a family of fractious holy men.

While Bakol is a blessing for her father in his lifetime, where might her own story end? At the end of Avraham's lifetime, when he has lived out the fullness of his days, his two sons Yishmael and Yitzhak return to Hevron to bury their father together:

בראשית כה:ח-ט

וַיָּגַע וַיָּמָת אַבְרָהָם בְּשֵׂיבָה טוֹבָה זָקֵן וְשָׂבַע וַיֵּאָסֶף אֶל-עַמּוּיוֹ: וַיִּקְבְּרוּ אֹתוֹ יִצְחָק וַיִּשְׁמַעְאֵל בְּנָיו
 אֶל-מַעְרַת הַמְּכַפְלָה אֶל-שֵׂדֵה עֶפְרָן בֶּן-צֹחַר הַחִתִּי אֲשֶׁר עַל-פְּנֵי מַמְרֵא.

Bereishit 25:8-9

And Avraham breathed his last, dying at a good ripe age, old and contented; and he was gathered to his kin. His sons Yitzhak and Yishmael buried him in the cave of Makhpelah, in the field of Ephron son of Tzohar the Hittite, facing Mamre.

Bakol does not appear in this episode, neither in *peshat* or traditional commentary, but we may find in this moment of family reconciliation a hint of the forgotten sister. Perhaps the daughter who had so blessed Avraham had continued to live with him, after his sons grew up and moved away, and the Patriarch married Keturah and started a third family.

Just as Sarah and Rivkah endured literarily “rhyming” trials of concealed identity and sister-wifehood in the court of King Avimelekh in Bereishit 20 and 26, Bakol could have lived a life in parallel to with her cousins, the daughters of Lot. These two women sleep with their father—Avraham's nephew and former heir—after their mother is killed in their exodus from Sodom. Fearing that they will be alone and unpartnered, Lot's daughters push their father to drink himself into a stupor, and copulate with their father, becoming pregnant (Bereishit 19:31-38).

Instead of an episode of existential anxiety culminating in incest, perhaps we could we could imagine Bakol's rhyming story as an intertextual, midrashic complement to her cousins' fateful decisions. Rather of becoming another cast-out, violating, or nearly-sacrificed child like her cousins and brothers, one could imagine Bakol living alongside her father after her mother's death and her brothers' departures in a quiet healing. Perhaps it was with this last child of covenant that Avraham was able to form a parent-child relationship rooted not in



violence and divine injunction, but in healthy relationship. Perhaps we could imagine Bakol as the silent, healing matriarch, who stands among her turbulent family members as an example of familial love, free of rivalry or exploitation, behind the scenes, imbuing monotheism's first family with the only blessing that seems to escape them: healthy relationship.

Let us imagine, then, that when Avraham has lived out his days and his sons return to “gather his to his people,” that Yishmael and Yitzhak reunited also to gather and lay to rest alongside him their silent younger sister, whose blessing of relationship allowed her two broken brothers to return to their father in love and duty, and to give us the blessing of imagining room for dignity and love without exploitation, even within our most formidable families.

