



May You Be Like Sarah and Milcah

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Ateret Zvi Prize in Hiddushei Torah 5778

When I was a kid growing up in Los Angeles, we would go to Disneyland every year, and I couldn't wait to use the E-tickets. Not electronic tickets. The Disneyland tickets were coded from A to E. I wasn't that interested in the A-tickets. The newest and most popular rides—the roller coasters—those were all E-tickets.

How often do we read Torah the same way? There are E-tickets that we can't wait to discuss every year. Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden, the midwives' defiance of Pharaoh's decree, Moses' punishment and inability to cross into the land of Israel. But there are a lot of A-tickets sprinkled in there too, stories and verses that most of us don't pay as much attention to. Who can name the ten generations between Adam and Noah? You get extra credit if you can name the ten generations from Noah to Abraham.

This is as a result of one of those genealogies that we often overlook. Immediately after the story of the Akeidah—the ultimate E-ticket—comes the genealogy of a rarely discussed woman named Milcah, a mysterious woman about whom we simply must learn more. The genealogy reads:

בראשית כב:כ-כג

²⁰וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַיֵּגַד לְאַבְרָהָם לֵאמֹר הִנֵּה יֵלְדָה מִלְכָּה גַם־הוּא בָנִים לְנַחֹר אַחִי:
²¹אֶת־עוֹץ בְּכֹרוֹ וְאֶת־בוֹז אַחִיו וְאֶת־קִמּוֹאֵל אָבִי אָרָם:
²²וְאֶת־כְּשֵׁד וְאֶת־חִזּוֹ וְאֶת־פִּלְדָּשׁ וְאֶת־יִדְלָף וְאֶת־
²³בְּתוּאֵל: וְבְתוּאֵל יָלַד אֶת־רַבְקָה שְׂמֹנֶה אֵלֶּה יֵלְדָה מִלְכָּה לְנַחֹר אַחִי אַבְרָהָם:

Genesis 22:20-23

²⁰Sometime later, Abraham was told, "Milcah too has borne children to your brother Nahor: ²¹Uz the first-born, and Buz his brother, and Kemuel the father of Aram; ²²and



Kesed, Hazo, Pildash, Jidlaph, and Bethuel”²³Bethuel being the father of Rebekah. These eight Milcah bore to Nahor, Abraham’s brother.

The detail that caught my attention initially is that verse 20 is in the passive voice—“Sometime later, Abraham was told.” Why is the sentence passive? Why don’t we know *who* told Abraham? As far as I can determine, this is the only genealogy in the Bible that is specifically reported as being “told” to any of its characters. The rest of the genealogies appear to be for the benefit of the listener or reader. What is unique about this one that it had to be “told” to Abraham?

When I continued examining this passage, I had more questions. In a Bible full of genealogies and “begets,” it is rare for the mother to be mentioned, much less named as Milcah is here. And if the point of this is only genealogy, why is Rebekah mentioned as the child of Bethuel, but not her brother Lavan, a brother who plays such a prominent role later in the story of Jacob?

Because I wanted to know more about Milcah, I looked up every reference that I could find in the text about her. The Torah’s first reference to Milcah comes toward the end of parashat Noah:

בראשית יא:כו-כח

וַיְחַי־תֵּרַח שִׁבְעִים שָׁנָה וַיֻּלְּד אֶת־אַבְרָם אֶת־נְחוֹר וְאֶת־הָרָן׃²⁷ וְאֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדֵי תֵּרַח תֵּרַח הוֹלִיד
 אֶת־אַבְרָם אֶת־נְחוֹר וְאֶת־הָרָן וְהָרָן הוֹלִיד אֶת־לוֹט׃²⁸ וַיָּמָת הָרָן עַל־פְּנֵי תֵּרַח אָבִיו בְּאֶרֶץ מוֹלְדֵתוֹ בְּאוּר
 כַּשְׁדִּים׃

Genesis 11:26-28

²⁶When Terach had lived 70 years, he begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran. ²⁷Now this is the line of Terach: Terach begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran begot Lot. ²⁸Haran died in the lifetime of his father Terach, in his native land, Ur of the Chaldeans.

Note that the first two verses seem to repeat the same information: Abraham, who is called Abram at this point in his life, had two brothers Nahor and Haran. However, the first verse states that all three are born in the same year. Does that mean that Abraham was a triplet or twin?!

In the second and third verse, we learn that Lot was the son of Haran, the brother who dies young. At first, no mention is made that Lot had any sisters. That is revealed when the passage continues:



בראשית יא:כט

וַיִּקַּח אַבְרָם וְנָחוֹר לָהֶם נָשִׁים שֵׁם אִשְׁת־אַבְרָם שָׂרָי וְשֵׁם אִשְׁת־נְחוֹר מִלְכָּה בַת־הָרָן אֲבִי־מִלְכָּה וְאֲבִי־יִסְכָּה:

Genesis 11:29

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, the father of Milcah and Iscah.

Abraham married Sarah while Abraham’s brother Nahor married Milcah. Milcah is the daughter of Haran, the third brother who died young. So, now we know that Lot and Milcah are siblings. But then, in an unusual repetitive construction, the Torah describes Haran as being the father of Milcah, which we already knew from the previous phrase.

The text continues that Haran had a second daughter Iscah. Who is Iscah? It’s complicated. That name never shows up again in the Bible. That’s why the *Etz Hayim humash* reports that Iscah has been lost to history. Lost to history, but not to modern times. The modern name Jessica comes from a Shakespeare character in *The Merchant of Venice*. According to scholars, Shakespeare borrowed this name Jessica from Iscah, or how it is pronounced in Hebrew *Yiscah*.

You may have noticed that when this passage introduced us to Sarah, unlike Milcah, we didn’t learn anything about her parents. Who was Sarah’s mother? Who was her father? We don’t know.

This is where rabbinic tradition steps in. Rashi teaches that Iscah is another name for Sarah. Because the name Iscah derives from a root meaning “seeing,” this interpretation led to the tradition that Sarah was a prophetess:

רש"י על בראשית יא:כט

יִסְכָּה. זו שָׂרָה, על שם שְׂסוּכָה בְרוּחַ הַקֹּדֶשׁ, וְשֶׁהִלַּל סוֹכֵין בְּיִפְיָהּ. וְעוֹד, "יִסְכָּה" לְשׁוֹן נְסִיכוּת, כְּמוֹ "שָׂרָה" לְשׁוֹן שְׂרָרָה:

Rashi on Genesis 11:29

Iscah—This was Sarah; she was also named Iscah (from a root meaning “to see”, “to look”) because she could see the future by holy inspiration, and because everybody looked (gazed) at her beauty. The name Iscah also has reference to princely dignity (נְסִיכוּת) just as the name Sarah (שָׂרָה) has an allusion to “ruling”(שְׂרָרָה).

Although Rashi’s interpretation gives us more context, we still don’t know much about Milcah. There are a few other mentions of her in the Torah. Eliezer, Abraham’s servant, was standing at the well in Ur Kasdim, where he had been sent to find a spouse for Isaac.



בראשית כד:טו

וַיְהִי־הוּא טָרַם כְּלָה לְדַבֵּר וְהִנֵּה רִבְקָה יֹצֵאת אֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה לְבְתוּאֵל בֶּן־מִלְכָּה אִשְׁתֵּי נְחוֹר אָחִי אַבְרָהָם וְכַדָּה עַל־שִׁכְמָה:

Genesis 24:15

He 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.

We learn from this source once again that Milcah married Abraham's brother Nahor, that they had a son named Bethuel, and that Bethuel was the father of Rebekah, all information that we knew. Later in the chapter, Rebekah was talking to Eliezer, and identified herself with the same information:

בראשית כד:כד

וַתֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו בֵּת־בְּתוּאֵל אֲנִי בֶן־מִלְכָּה אֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה לְנְחוֹר:

Genesis 24:24

She replied, "I am the daughter of Bethuel the son of **Milcah**, whom she bore to Nahor."

Note that Rebekah self-describes her father as being the son of Milcah. Still later, Eliezer is again speaking, this time to Lavan and Bethuel:

בראשית כד:מז

וְאֲשָׂאל אֹתָהּ וְאָמַר בְּתָמִי אֵת וַתֹּאמֶר בֵּת־בְּתוּאֵל בֶּן־נְחוֹר אֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה־לּוֹ מִלְכָּה וְאִשְׁם הַנְּזָם עַל־אָפֶה וְהִצְמִידִים עַל־יָדָיָהּ:

Genesis 24:47

I inquired of her, 'Whose daughter are you?' And she said, 'The daughter of Bethuel, son of Nahor, whom **Milcah** bore to him.' And I put the ring on her nose and the bands on her arms.

Here, when Eliezer is talking directly to Bethuel, he changes Rebekah's words. Instead of describing Bethuel as the son of Milcah as Rebekah did, Eliezer quotes Rebekah as saying that Bethuel is the son of Nahor, although he still includes Milcah as being Bethuel's mother. Finally, the name Milcah is mentioned again, but it's not the same Milcah.

במדבר כו:לג

וַיִּצְלַפְחַד בֶּן־חֲפָר לֹא־הָיוּ לוֹ בָּנִים כִּי אִם־בָּנוֹת וְשֵׁם בָּנוֹת צְלַפְחָד מַחֲלָה וְנָעָה חֲגֵלָה מִלְכָּה וַתִּרְצָה:



Numbers 26:33

Now Zelophehad son of Hepher had no sons, only daughters. The names of Zelophehad's daughters were Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, **Milcah**, and Tirzah.

Here, and the rest of the instances where the name Milcah appears in the Bible, it's the daughter of Zelophehad who is mentioned, not the Milcah who is Abraham's niece and sister-in-law.

At first, I was frustrated that these other mentions of Milcah did not seem to provide additional information about her. But, upon reflection, some clues to a deeper understanding of her were hidden in plain sight. First, and most importantly, why is Milcah mentioned several times as Rebekah's grandmother? Think about Sarah, our quintessential matriarch. How many times are Jacob or Esav identified in the text as being Sarah's grandsons? To use the language from Genesis 24, we never read a phrase "Jacob, son of Isaac, son of Abraham whom Sarah bore to him." Think about Dina, the daughter of Jacob, or any of Jacob's twelve sons. They are never identified explicitly as the grandchildren of Rebekah.

In a Torah that mostly identifies people through their fathers and occasionally their grandfathers, the identification of Milcah as the grandmother of Rebekah—not just once, but four different times—is highly unusual. And, what was so significant about Milcah that babies were named after her, even generations later? We only read in the Bible about one Abraham and one Sarah. Apparently, there was something about Milcah that people still remembered with fondness at the time of the Exodus, centuries later.

Going back to Genesis 11, this understanding helps explain that strange phrase where Milcah is identified as the daughter of Haran, "Milcah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah and Iscah." Why does the verse continue that Haran is the father of Milcah? Because the importance of Haran did not come from his relationship to his brother Abraham. Rather, his importance derived from his status as the father of Milcah and Iscah.

And, of course, we can't forget Milcah's name. If Sarah's name provides a reference to her as a princess, what does Milcah's name tell us about her? That she was a queen.

Rashi comments on the opening words of Parshat Vayikra that the gaps in the written Torah text provide space for reflection between one section and another. Perhaps, the paucity of information about Milcah is meant to challenge us to demand our participation in Torah. We are given just enough information to discover that she had an oversized importance in her time. It is up to us to figure out why.



I think that the questions of Milcah's significance might be better than my answers, but I will offer a few suggestions. Perhaps, Milcah's importance is to provide context for the behavior of Rebekah. We know that Isaac can be understood in psychological terms as being the product of his father Abraham. Isaac repeats many of Abraham's activities, like digging wells and telling the king of Gerar that his wife is his sister.¹ Parshat Toldot begins with the words "ve-eileh toldot Yitzhak ben Avraham," "this is the *toldot* of Isaac, son of Abraham. Translating "*toldot*" as "legacy," instead of "descendants," means that the legacy of Isaac was that he was the son of Abraham.

In parallel fashion, the Torah might be telling us that the legacy of Rebekah was that she was the granddaughter of Milcah. So, for example, when Rebekah was pulling the strings and telling Jacob to trick Isaac into giving his blessing to Jacob, could it be that she was acting on inherited characteristics, or even teachings, from her grandmother Milcah? After all, Milcah witnessed the breaking apart of a family when her grandfather Terah, her sister Sarah, and her uncle/brother-in-law left Ur Kasdim.

Or perhaps the importance of Milcah has to do with her theology. The *midrashim* about Abraham's father Terah tell of his being an idol worshipper and owning a store full of idols.² But, if that is true, then why would Abraham, the person who is bringing monotheism to the world, send Eliezer back to the old country to find a wife for Isaac?

One possibility, of course, is that the rest of Abraham's family weren't really idol worshippers. Well before Abraham is told "*lekh lekha*," it is Terah who leaves his homeland and sets out to travel to the land of Israel before stopping for an unknown reason in Haran.³ But more intriguing, even if we take at face value the suggestion that Terah and most of Abraham's family were idol worshippers, maybe Milcah was not. To return to Genesis 11, the significance of Haran is that he was the father of Milcah and specifically Iscah, the name of Sarah that connotes prophecy. It would seem that by using that particular name of Sarah in that phrase, there is an implication that Milcah shared some version of that attribute. In other words, Rebekah was a suitable match for Isaac because she inherited from her grandmother a monotheistic orientation and maybe even some prophetic abilities. Some support for this possibility is found in the fact that, while *midrashim* about Milcah are few and far between, Yalkut Shimoni (Balak 23) records a *midrash* that Milcah was the ancestor of all prophets in the non-Jewish world.

¹ See Genesis 26.

² See, e.g., Bereishit Rabbah 38:13.

³ See Genesis 11:31.



Or perhaps the clue to Milcah's importance is hinted at from the location of her genealogy in the Bible. The Genesis 22 extract with which we began appears to be incongruously inserted into the narrative immediately after the Akeidah but before the death of Sarah. In the aftermath of Sarah's death, Abraham devoted himself to attending to her burial. Only after that burial does he start planning for Isaac's marriage. But, if that's the case, then logically the genealogy of Milcah, with its connection to Rebekah, should come after the burial of Sarah.

Could it be that this genealogy acts not only to bridge Isaac to Rebekah, but also to link Abraham with Milcah? At this point in the narrative, there has been no mention of anything that happened to Abraham's family in Ur Kasdim or Paddan Aram. By the time that Sarah died at the age of 127, it had been 62 years since Abraham and Sarah left Haran, and even longer since they left with Terah from Ur Kasdim. There is no reason for Abraham to know about any of his brother's children or grandchildren during those 62 plus years. Someone has to tell Abraham about an eligible granddaughter.

Furthermore, consider for a moment the perspective of Milcah. Even if Abraham decided that he wanted Isaac to marry within his extended family, why would Milcah, who appears to be the most important figure in that household, consent? Let's be honest. Abraham did some pretty strange things, most notably leaving Haran on a moment's notice without being able to tell anyone where he was going. Not even a postcard home for 62 years.

One possibility is that the burial of Sarah was done in part for its impression on Milcah, Sarah's sister. If Milcah is to be convinced to allow her granddaughter Rebekah to come to the land of Israel to live with Isaac, a man whom Milcah has never met, wouldn't it be easier if Milcah knew that the wives of Abraham's clan, and particularly Milcah's own sister Sarah, were treated with respect, even in death? Wouldn't it be easier if Milcah knew that Abraham had secured a legal property right in this faraway land? In short, could the placement of the genealogy of Milcah before the negotiations over Machpelah and the burial of Sarah be a clue that those activities were part and parcel of a strategy to woo Milcah, to obtain her consent to a marriage that Abraham wanted for his son?

Finally, I want to offer one last possibility for the significance of Milcah. Perhaps, like the *lamed vovnikim*, we are not meant to know too much about her. Perhaps she was the biblical equivalent of a Harley-driving grandmother, a woman who rebelled against societal norms, followed her own path, and was silently admired for her chutzpah. Or perhaps, Milcah is the nonrabbi, non-Jewish professional who, despite a lack of formal Jewish education, has insight to offer, not in place of our Jewish professionals but alongside them. Or maybe she was the equivalent of minority elements within our communities, such as our young adults,



LGBTQ individuals, people with disabilities—people rooted in family, estranged at times from tradition, but whose contributions have been marginalized or forgotten. We need to listen to and recognize ourselves and our history in these groups if we are to bring *shleymut*, wholeness, to our communities.

The Torah isn't Disneyland. In the Bible, it is not only the E-tickets, the headline stories, that deserve our attention. The A-tickets, the seemingly mundane and often neglected passages, are just as important. They give us an opportunity to reflect on the better known stories and characters, as well as our individual and communal relationship with the text. That relationship with the text is influenced by more than only the *machers* or professionals within our communities. That relationship is also affected by the Milcahs among us.

That takes us full circle back to the detail that first caught my attention. Out of all the genealogies in the Bible, this is the only one “told” in the passive sense. So, who was it that told Abraham about Milcah and her descendants?

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What do you think?

