



***Rivkah Imeinu* / Our Mother Rebecca: The Most Influential Matriarch**

R. Yitz Greenberg – ygreenberg@hadar.org

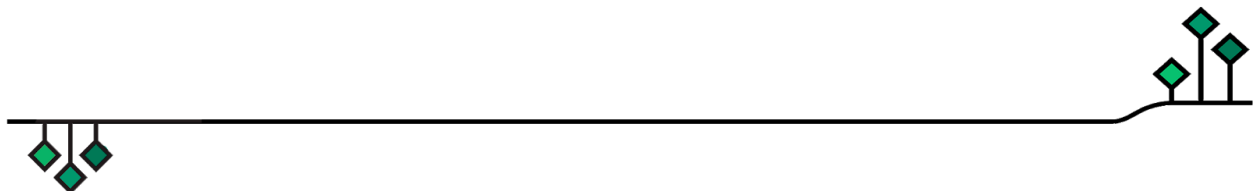
Parashat Toldot 5781

Our mother Sarah is generally considered the greatest of the four mothers of the Jewish people, because, acting as a full partner with Abraham, she launched the covenantal chain.¹ In history, Rachel has been the iconic matriarch. She is portrayed as continually coming to God, mourning Jewish exile and suffering, and pressing for swift redemption.² Our *parashah*, however, makes the case that Rebecca is the most important matriarch of all. On her own initiative, she boldly intervened to assure the right succession in the covenant. Thereby she changed the course of Jewish history and religion for good.

We first get a sense that Rebecca is someone special when she meets Abraham's servant and shows loving-kindness to him and the animals with him. Then she signals that she is a courageous and even adventurous person: she offers to go immediately to a faraway land to join an unknown stranger who will become her husband, even though her family suggests delay and thinking it over. In Canaan, Rebecca matures, as she goes through an extended

¹ See my previous essay "Covenantal Pluralism: Parashat Lekh Lekha" available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/covenantal-pluralsim>.

² E.g. Jeremiah 31:15 etc.



period of barrenness, but perseveres until she conceives. While the Torah does not describe her emotions during this period, we can guess the level of pressure, frustration, and self-doubt that she had to overcome by looking at Rachel's parallel, albeit shorter, experience. Rachel cries out to Jacob, "Give me children—for if not, I will die!" (Genesis 30:1). When Rebecca's pregnancy turns out to be full of sharp pain and inner bodily turmoil, she is not passive. On her own initiative, she seeks out a personal encounter with God to give some guidance and meaning in her troubles (Genesis 25:22-23).

When the twins, Esau and Jacob, are born and grow up, Isaac fixates on Esau as his son and successor. Presumably, a big factor in this choice is the strongly entrenched tradition that the first born son is the divinely chosen successor. One can speculate on Isaac's emotional reasons for this preference. Traumatized by almost being sacrificed, perhaps looking back at the experience and wishing that he might have been a bit less passive, Isaac is drawn to the elder son, a hunter with a fiery temper—more active and assertive than the younger son, who stays in his tents because he is shy, maybe even withdrawn. Perhaps Isaac imagines Esau as the one who will confront the Philistines who seal the wells his father Abraham had dug (Genesis 26:18). The leader of the covenant should be ready to fight against a hostile world. Isaac cannot conceive that Jacob would have the inner fire to face down the shepherds of Gerar who repeatedly poached on the fresh wells he dug, claiming that they had the water rights in that area (Genesis 26:20-21). To Isaac, who has been shy and withdrawn himself—close to and protected by his mother (see Genesis 24:67)—Esau is everything he is not (but maybe wishes he were): a person with swagger, in-your-face feistiness, able to take down large animals and human enemies alike.

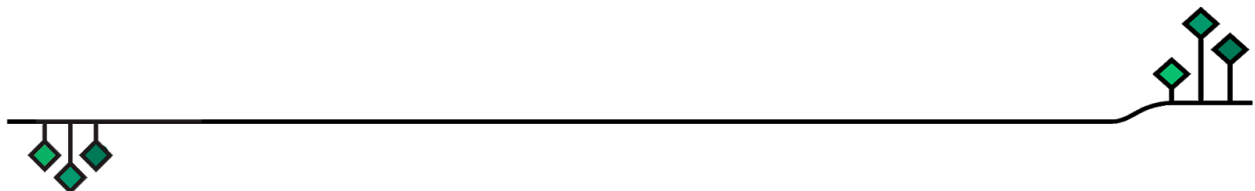
Rebecca has a very different perspective. Coming from an Aramean home and culture, she sees the momentous difference in the beliefs and commitments of a covenantal household. She notes that this faith—while not dismissing the importance of birth and genetic



heritage—teaches that nurture, choice, commitment, and ability to live up to covenantal standards are equally important in deciding who is fit to lead.

Rebecca spends more time with the boys than Isaac does and sees them up close. She detects that Esau is assertive but not very steady. She sees the impulsiveness and devil-may-care personality that later shows up. Esau, at the end of a day of hard hunting, feels tired, impatient, reckless, and ready to give up his ultimate birthright for some instant gratification of hot soup (Genesis 25:29-34). Rebecca notices, just under the surface, Esau's temper and rage, which he later flashes when he vows to kill Jacob out of exasperation that his brother has snatched the birthright blessing. She sees that, whereas Esau takes for granted that he will get the birthright, he does not think much about its meaning and purpose. By contrast, Jacob yearns for it, and thinks about God and the purpose of the covenant (Genesis 27:20). Jacob grabs at the opportunity—half serious, half joking—where Esau will sell the succession to him. Rebecca internalizes that, in the end, Jacob cares deeply, while Esau is ultimately contemptuous of the first born privilege and willing to sell it for a mess of pottage.

Rebecca detects, under Jacob's diffident and yielding front, the tensile steel in his character that will enable him to stand up to her brother Laban, a shrewd and exploitative master who will try repeatedly to cheat him. Later, with the help of God, who is with him always, Jacob faces down Laban—despite being outnumbered, unarmed, and threatened. Most of all, with deep psychological insight, she sees his capacity to grow. She senses that inside Jacob, the trickster who tries to get by without confrontation, waiting to come out is Israel, the mature keeper of the covenant, who is capable of wrestling with God and with people to uphold his commitments and values (Genesis 32:28).



Amazingly, despite her very different perspective on the brothers, Rebecca is able to relate to and care for them equally. When the die is cast and she has broken with Esau's claim and installed Jacob in his place, she is still worried about both sons. This is unlike Jacob's future parental behavior, by which all his children will pick up that Joseph is his favorite because of his unquenched, unfulfilled love for Rachel. Rebecca manages to nurture each twin so faithfully that Esau leaves his finest clothes with her in the house. They are available to use for the ruse she perpetrates to gain Jacob the birthright blessing.

Rebecca has the inner conviction of Jacob's worthiness to be the successor. When she hears Isaac instruct Esau to bring him the hunt in preparation for receiving the blessing, she instantly takes charge to steer the succession to Jacob. With piercing clarity, she sees what must be done to get it right, even if this requires cheating. In her mind's eye, she sees the covenant triumphantly upheld by Jacob through decades of trouble and struggle, and passed on urgently to his children. In Esau's hands, the *brit* would be worn down, diverted into the culture of a warrior band, living by the sword, or dissipated in intermarriage with the local Canaanites and Ishmaelites, and finally sidetracked in the land of Seir.³

Rebecca takes over, pushing Jacob to act. She overrides his hesitation and fear of his father's reaction when his father discovers the cheating. She knows Isaac. She knows that he will experience the resonance with God and humans of the blessing given to Jacob. She knows that Isaac will overcome the shock of being kept in the dark and maneuvered, and will recognize the rightness of this successor. Buoyed by her memories of the oracle, she is convinced that Isaac will join her in saving Jacob and sending him to find his wife and his destiny in Aram. Thus, Rebecca—a "convert", an outsider, a latecomer—determines the future of the covenant and sets its direction and trajectory for all time. Thereby she made herself the mother of all mothers in Judaism.

³ See Genesis 26:34; 28:9; 36:8.



One question remains. Why did Rebecca not go directly to Isaac earlier? Why did she not set out to him the differences between the brothers and who was appropriate to be the designated successor? We sense that Rebecca achieved more equal status than the other matriarchs. The others lived in a polygamous household; Isaac took no other wife. In itself, polygamy fosters a family culture in which even women who may be well treated are intrinsically on a lower rung. Why did she not negotiate as an equal until they came to an agreed choice? Maybe if she had done that years ago, Esau would have come to accept the needed successor and settled peacefully for a different blessing. Maybe Isaac would not have had to be fooled. Maybe years of exile and fear and torn family bonds could have been averted.

The answer is that Rebecca tried in a thousand private conversations and family moments. Part of her conviction that Isaac would come around grew out of those discourses in which she planted the seeds of Isaac's acceptance of her judgement. Still, Rebecca functioned in a patriarchal society. In that culture, men made the big decisions, and inherited norms such as primogeniture governed. Isaac heard her out—but he did not quite hear her. So Rebecca, like many of the important women in the Bible, worked through the conventions and powers-that-be. As did Miriam and like Abigail and Bat Sheba in David's time, they maneuvered and whittled and persisted and bowed and got their way without confronting the establishment. They certainly did not try to overthrow it. They even broke through barriers, but they won by being smart, far-sighted, strategic, but never openly confronting the dominant paradigm. And for them, that included the patriarchy.⁴

In truth, this is what I see as the covenantal way. The tradition works toward a final goal of equality of human beings regardless of gender, of open conversation and free negotiation between partners. But it is constrained by the existing system in every culture. If patriarchy is

⁴ On Miriam, see Exodus 15:20-21; Numbers 12. On Abigail, see I Samuel 25. On Bat Sheba, see I Kings 1.



the dominant culture— as it surely was in the ancient near east, and throughout much of our history since then -- then we have to be ready to confront that elements of the local culture—even elements not in consonance with the Torah’s ultimate values—may be absorbed into the system.

The Torah sometimes confirms behavior that is not the ideal behavior, but the best that can be imagined at the time. Future generations must analyze the culture and separate out the local from the eternal. The effectiveness of the Torah’s *halakhah* system and its achievement of its long-term ideal goals depend on the process of change and the movement for repair never stopping, until the ultimate stage is reached.

Because we live in a time when the paradigm of patriarchy is finally being resisted, we are able to envision equality of access to Jewish leadership and roles, regardless of gender, at a higher level than ever.

However, I believe that, as in every area of social transformation, until the final level is reached, the covenantal way depends for its success on people like Rebecca, who see the better possibilities and put themselves on the line to bring it home, working inside the covenantal system, toward a changed world that is still partly in the future, rather than abandoning it for its imperfections. As our *parashah* illustrates, there is often a loss or a price paid for accommodation. However, when it works, the covenantal way is the long-way-that-is-the-short-way, because it does not destroy the inherited: it transforms it, bringing in a better world.

