

A Taste of Torah

A commentary by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, director of Israel Programs, JTS.

The Challenge of Tomorrow's Blessing

Parashat Toledot opens in life and closes with the threat of death. Having wrestled with infertility, Rebekah and Isaac finally give birth to Jacob and Esau. Far from being an uneventful pregnancy, Rebekah becomes troubled by a feeling of “struggle” in her womb and goes to inquire of God. God tells Rebekah that two nations are in her womb and that one of those nations will serve the other (NB the Hebrew: *rav ya'avod tzair* is ambiguous, meaning either “the older (Esau) will serve the younger (Jacob)” or “the older (Esau)—the younger (Jacob) will serve”). Once the two are born, we telescope to a fateful episode in which Jacob is in the midst of a “Martha Stewart” moment, cooking lentil stew, when his famished older brother comes in from the field. Esau demands to have some of the lentil stew, but Jacob drives a hard bargain and, in return, demands that Esau give him the birthright. Esau agrees and fills his stomach; Jacob is content in his manipulative ways and leads himself further down a path of alienation. Still, Torah concludes this episode with a curious statement—namely, “Thus did Esau spurn his birthright” (Gen. 25:34). How are we to understand this editorial comment?

Ramban says, concerning “spurn his birthright,” that “One who despises the word will suffer thereby” (Prov. 13:13). But Torah has already explained the reason that Esau acquiesced to the sale. This was because he was already in mortal danger from his profession (hunting animals). It was likely that he would die while his father was alive, and the birthright carried no meaning until the passing of the father. So of what benefit was the birthright to him? After having eaten and drunk, he returned to his hunting in the field, which was the reason he despised his birthright. “For there is no desire in fools” (Eccles. 5:3) except to eat and drink and to fulfill their momentary desire, not caring about tomorrow.” So Ramban suggests that it was not simply a spontaneous act on the part of Esau. The picture he paints of Esau is of both a deliberate and reckless character. According to Ramban, Esau is resigned to his fate as a hunter. Because he has chosen a dangerous vocation and seems to live recklessly, he has no reverence for the future.

Consciously or unconsciously, many of us engage in dangerous habits—living wantonly and selfishly without regard for the future. We spurn “birthrights” every day as we continue to smoke, overeat, abuse others, overwork, etc. The challenge in each of our lives is to recognize and value “tomorrow's blessing.” We cannot simply live our lives in the moment. Ephemeral pleasures often give way to long-term suffering. Unlike Esau, we must come to recognize that some things are far more valuable than physical satisfaction.

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Torah from JTS

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Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Julia Andelman, director of Community Engagement, JTS.

In Search of God

Through the unexpected and serendipitous Shabbat meal invitations that often seem to come about when one is studying in Jerusalem, I found myself many years ago sitting at the festive Shabbat table of an ultra-Orthodox family one autumn Friday night. The parashah was Toledot, and the father—garbed in his black suit and black hat—sat at the head of the table proudly quizzing his children on what they had learned in school that week about the Torah portion.

One of the girls—probably eight or nine years old—excitedly shared the very same verses that had caught my eye during my own studies that week: “But the children struggled in her [Rebecca's] womb, and she said, ‘If so, why do I exist?’ She went to inquire of the Lord, and the Lord answered her, ‘Two nations are in your womb’” (Gen. 25:22-23) *Va-teilekh lidrosh et Adonai . . . Va-yomer Adonai lah* Rebecca goes to seek God out, trying to understand if there is any higher meaning behind her physical anguish—and God answers her. Rebecca has a two-way conversation with God.

How had I gone through life thinking that God spoke only to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses . . . only to men? The little Hareidi girl and I were similarly delighted and inspired by this discovery that one of our biblical foremothers had communicated with God just as directly and reciprocally as her husband and son had. I could tell that our reactions were the same: in the midst of all the patriarchy that dominated the Jewish texts and traditions shaping our studies and our daily lives in Jerusalem, here was the refreshing surprise of seeing *someone like us* rise to the highest level of holiness, of closeness to God, in the most sacred book of our tradition.

The father listened to his daughter share her revelation with the assembled family members and guests, and then patiently explained to her that, while it may seem on the surface as if God spoke to Rebecca, of course this could not be the case, since God does not speak to women. The parshanut on this verse—the explanations provided by the ancient midrashim and the great medieval commentators—made it clear that God spoke to Rebecca through a male intermediary.

The little girl responded insistently, “*Aval b’li parshanut*—but without the parshanut—” At that moment, her father, eyes no longer twinkling, brought his fist

down hard onto the table and shouted angrily, “*Ein davar ka-zeh, b’li parshanut*—there is no such thing as ‘without the parshanut!’” Crushed, the girl fell silent.

This was my lesson in the authority of the *Torah she-be’al peh*—the Oral Torah—in parts of the Jewish world. A text, and an interpretation of that text—authored centuries later, cited and reinforced by authorities even further centuries away from the original, in a completely different part of the world—can be compressed into one definitive meaning that leaves no room for threatening forces such as feminism. Even the excitement of a bright and engaged young girl upon encountering a biblical story that spoke to her was not enough to free the text from the layers of authoritative interpretation that had been piled onto it—not even for a moment.

I decided that I needed to see for myself: how did the rabbinic interpretive tradition actually understand this apparent dialogue between Rebecca and God? I found that, indeed, the most prominent medieval commentators—including Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Rashbam, Radak, Hizkuni—are unanimous on the subject. God spoke to Rebecca through a prophet, a messenger, perhaps through Abraham. These readings are presumably based on Bereishit Rabbah, an earlier compilation of rabbinic midrashim on Genesis, where it is made clear that God spoke neither to Rebecca nor to Sarah (Gen. 18:15), despite appearances to the contrary in the biblical text. In fact, the midrash argues, Rebecca did not even seek God out directly to begin with. She went, rather, to the *beit midrash* of Sheim and Eiver (Noah’s son and great-grandson)—an institution of Jewish learning developed by the ancient rabbinic imagination, attended by both Isaac and Jacob at various points during their lives. This explains why the verb used to describe Rebecca’s search for God is *lidrosh*—since it shares the same root as *beit midrash*, a house of study. (Rebecca’s connection to this *beit midrash* came from the fact that whenever she passed by it while pregnant, Jacob would struggle to exit the womb in his eagerness to begin his life of Torah learning; thus her difficult pregnancy.)

On the surface, this collection of readings seemed to gut the biblical text of what had resonated so powerfully with me and my nine-year-old counterpart. The direct connection between God and our foremother was gone—erased by a projection backward in time of a world filled with male-dominated houses of study and other social institutions; a world in which women seem to have had even less of a voice than in the biblical era. Such a reading was necessary in order to jibe with the cultural norms of the rabbinic period in terms of gender roles—and, for that matter, the gender roles in modern Haredi society. But it left me feeling robbed of the one biblical text I had encountered that allowed for closeness between women and God—for a woman to cry out to God in a moment of pain and confusion, and to have God answer her, and explain to her the significance of her struggles.

As I read Parashat Toledot this year, however, I find myself wondering if some renewed reflection on this long-ago episode could perhaps bring to light a deeper understanding of the tradition of textual interpretation and its value. And I find myself taking my cues from Rebecca herself: *vateilekh lidrosh* . . . she went to seek God; to seek deeper meaning in her life experience and in her very existence. In the hermeneutic connection between this verb *lidrosh*, to seek, and the *beit midrash*, the house of study—the place of seeking wisdom and meaning—perhaps we can discern a parallel between Rebecca’s search for the meaning of her struggles to our own ongoing search for meaning in the biblical text. Rebecca’s need for a relevant interpretation of her situation is akin to our need for a relevant interpretation of

our sacred texts. Neither Rebecca nor we should necessarily be satisfied with the simple facts as they stand, if those facts do not respond sufficiently to our moral, spiritual, or existential questions.

In his book *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology*, Michael Fishbane defines *derash*, in contrast to *peshat* (the plain meaning of the text), as “the far-ranging theological and legal reformulations of scripture; providing more indirect and mediated meanings of the text, in response to the ongoing challenges of religious life and belief . . . In these ways, the life of scripture is extended to the life of ongoing religious culture.” In other words, for the ancient Rabbis and the medieval commentators (and possibly for the father who hosted me in his home that Friday night as well), a “mediated” reading of the encounter between Rebecca and God is what allowed the text of the Torah to stay relevant and sacred for them, and to remain a viable source of religious guidance and authority given the realities of their world view. For, as Fishbane writes, “*derash* deems scripture a book of spiritual instruction, not just a record of events, and as such it is a work for the generations.” For me, the unmediated recounting of Rebecca’s dialogue with God is what resonated so powerfully; for other generations, and even for other Jews in my own generation, the mediation of midrash in this case is, in Fishbane’s words, what “restores the textual inscription to a living voice”—a voice that is in keeping with their understanding of the world and their orientation in life.

I don’t need to look very far to find other midrashim that indeed render the biblical text more compelling and more authentic to my own sensibilities, in the same way that the midrashim on Rebecca and God have spoken to others’ world views. In response to another verse later in our own parashah (Gen. 27:1), Bereishit Rabbah offers a stunning interpretation of why Isaac’s eyes became weak and dim in his old age, such that Jacob was able to pass for Esau and deceitfully receive the blessing intended for his brother. In the moment when Abraham bound Isaac onto the altar to sacrifice him, the midrash says, the ministering angels wept: the tears flowed from their eyes into Isaac’s eyes and marked them permanently, so that his eyes became dim in his old age. Here is a midrash that responds to the gaping moral hole left by the binding of Isaac – mediating the biblical text, expanding upon its *peshat* meaning, so that it can remain a source of spiritual authority for me and for others who are troubled by the biblical text on its own. The world of possibilities opened up by the interpretive mode of *derash* therefore makes the Torah not a one-time revelation, but an ongoing one, through which the divine voice can speak to listeners and seekers across cultures and throughout history.

I have noticed—and perhaps you have as well—that my memories of that Shabbat dinner in Jerusalem do not include the mother of that precocious girl, the wife of that dogmatic man. Perhaps she was in the kitchen ladling out the chicken soup during the father-daughter exchange that I remember so vividly. Or perhaps she was sitting right there at the table, but her presence was not strongly felt by the rest of us because her spirit was, at that moment, off wandering somewhere else in search of meaning—in search of God. Perhaps she was even listening to God’s answer.

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