

Hayyei Sarah 5783

חיי שרה תשפ"ג

## Rebecca the Patriarch

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This week's parashah, Hayyei Sarah (Genesis 23:1–25:18), is about continuing the line, producing progeny. The parashah opens with a report of Sarah's death at 120 years old. It closes with a list of Abraham's children from concubines and Ishmael's many offspring (25:1–18). But the central story of the parashah, the entire chapter of Genesis 24, is about finding a wife for Isaac.

Abraham asks his servant to travel back to Aram Naharayim, Abraham's birthplace, to find his son a mate. Abraham stipulates that the bride should be a blood relative. In addition, he makes his servant swear that the wife he finds for Isaac will agree to leave her birthplace and family and move to Canaan, where Abraham and Isaac now live. Abraham understands that for God to fulfill His promise that the Jewish people will become as numerous as the stars in the heaven (Gen. 15:5), future progeny must not be born in Aram Naharayim but in Canaan.

The servant, elsewhere called Eliezer (Gen. 15:2), sets off on the voyage. He prays that God will lead him to the right bride. A well-known scene at the well follows. Rebecca shows up with a water jar on her shoulder. Eliezer comments that she is beautiful. She graciously offers water to him, a stranger, and to his camels. She also offers him lodging overnight. He gives her a gold nose ring and bracelets and follows her back to her family's home.

Bethuel, her father, and Laban, her brother, upon hearing Eliezer's request that Rebecca marry Isaac, accept the proposal (v. 51). Eliezer gives generous gifts to Rebecca, her mother, and her brother (v. 53). The next morning Eliezer wishes to leave with Rebecca but her mother and brother suggest that she instead depart in ten days. They then call her in "and ask her [what she thinks]" (Gen. 24:57). "Will you go with this man," (v. 57) they want to know, and she replies,

"I will go" (v. 58). The question for the commentators is, what does Rebecca mean when she answers the question in the affirmative? And do these words suggest that a woman's consent is required for marriage?

According to Rashi, who bases himself on a midrash, she is saying that she consents to go with this man and marry Isaac. Others say that she was agreeing not to delay for ten days but to leave right away.

I think there is a third, more likely interpretation. The point repeated several times over, at the beginning of the chapter, is that the bride Eliezer brings back for Isaac must leave her birthplace and move to Canaan, as did Abraham himself when God called out to him (Gen. 12:1). Only if she does so will her future child be able to continue the line of people to whom God made several promises. When she says "yes," knowing that her father and brother have already accepted a marriage proposal on her behalf, she is saying that she is willing to leave home and family behind, at great personal cost, and go and live with Isaac in Canaan. She understands that that is what God is asking of her.

This decision, most remarkably, places her on par with Abraham, who also heeded the voice of God and left his family and birthplace behind. In fact, Rebecca is more like Abraham—more a courageous person of faith—than her husband Isaac. When she answers "yes, I will go," she is saying that she sees the future unfolding of Jewish history and the role she is being asked to play in it. Given the reports of her actions in coming chapters, in particular how she secured the firstborn blessing for her second-born son Jacob, I think it is more correct to say that the three patriarchs of Genesis are not Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, as generally thought, but Abraham, Rebecca, and Jacob.

Returning to the question posed earlier: can we learn from Rebecca that a woman must consent to marriage? The answer is both yes and no. It is clear that Rebecca was married off by her father and brother without her consent. However, Midrash Bereishit Rabbah (60:12) does derive from v. 57 that a woman must consent to marriage. And the rabbis of the Talmud later institute the rule that a woman has to agree to a marriage for it to be valid (BT Kiddushin 8b). Broadly speaking, if we read v. 57 together with v. 58, they jointly say that Rebecca understood the huge sacrifice she was being asked to make, leaving home and family behind, and, without hesitation, heroically accepted these terms.