

Speaking of Text

A WEEKLY EXPLORATION OF THE JEWISH BOOKSHELF



A Time for Silence and a Time for Speaking
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Whoever is able to protest against the [sins of the] people of his household and does not protest is caught in the [sins] of his household; against [the sins of] the people of his city [and does not protest] is caught in the [sins] of the people of his city; against [the sins of] the whole world [and does not protest] is caught in the [sins] of the whole world.

—Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 54b

In discussing the biblical obligation to rebuke one's fellow for wrongdoing (Lev. 19:17), the Talmud suggests that pursuing humility, even for improper motivations, can be more important than properly chastising another person (BT Arakhin 16b). Yet, while there may be appropriate times for remaining silent, there are also times at which we must raise our voices. The passage above confronts us with expanding concentric spheres of obligation: we must speak up when our family, when our community, and when the world around us strays from the path of pursuing what is good. Failure to protest in some sense renders us liable for the very sins of those who have strayed.

If Jews today, as inheritors of the Mosaic, prophetic, and rabbinic traditions, truly aspire to serve as ethical exemplars and a light to guide the nations, then we must harken to our interpersonal obligations. It is far too easy to cast our gaze inward and ignore the plight of those around us whose suffering stands removed from us by religion, gender, or socioeconomic status. Particularly when it is someone among us who causes the affliction, we are hesitant to reprimand them. But the Talmud admonishes us confront them, lest we in our silence tacitly inherit their guilt. First and foremost, we are responsible for the actions of those closest to us, those we may find hardest to challenge. The widening circles of obligation may ripple outward to encompass the whole world, but they begin at home.

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Hayyei Sarah 5778

חיי שרה תשע"ח



Leaving Home

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To the best of my knowledge, Hayyei Sarah contains the only instance in Tanakh of a parent asking his child's wishes. Laban and Betuel cannot come to an agreement with Abraham's servant—who we'll call Eliezer—about whether Rebecca should remain in Haran for a time or depart immediately to Canaan. And so, they ask Rebecca to state her preference. Contrary to her family's express wishes, Rebecca decides to leave immediately.

Prior to requesting that Rebecca remain in Haran for at least ten months (Gen. 24:55), Laban and Betuel had told Eliezer, "The matter is decreed by the Lord; we cannot speak to you bad or good. Here is Rebecca before you; take her and go" (24:50–51). Why the change of heart? Some propose that Rebecca's family wanted time to prepare her trousseau (cf. BT Ketubot 57a). Nahum Sarna suggests, on the basis of Laban's claim that had he known of *Jacob's* imminent departure he would have sent him off "with festive music, with timbrel and lyre" (Gen. 31:27), that perhaps they wished to mark Rebecca's departure with celebrations. However, if either of these was the motivation for the request to delay Rebecca's departure, the fact remains that these wishes were not made explicit at the time that Rebecca's family first consented to her departure. Therefore, given what we learn later about Laban's personality, it seems more likely that self-interest is at work here.

Abravanel and others adopt this reading when they suggest that Laban and Betuel hoped to receive more gifts from Isaac's family by delaying Rebecca's departure, perhaps thinking that these would be offered in exchange for letting Rebecca leave immediately (cf. Gen. Rabbah 60:12, Targum of Pseudo-Jonathan 24:55, *Da'at Zekenim* ad loc.).

If we adopt this reading, we can better understand Laban's proposal that Rebecca be consulted. For whatever reason, he felt that he stood to benefit from Rebecca tarrying in Haran and assumed that his sister would understand that she was expected to bow to her family's wishes regardless of her own desires. Along these lines Gen. Rabbah (loc. cit.) suggests that when Laban asked Rebecca "*hatelkhi*" (התלכי), "Will you go?", his tone communicated to her that he was speaking rhetorically, as if to say, "Would you actually leave in defiance of your family's wishes?!" By seemingly allowing Rebecca to make the final decision, Laban hoped to get his way without being seen as failing to honor his word.

Laban's behavior here foreshadows his deceitful dealings with Jacob, as is made clear through shared motifs and linguistic parallels. Laban's attempted use of Rebecca as a pawn to renege on an existing agreement reminds us of the bait-and-switch tactic he uses, substituting Leah for Rachel, to squeeze an additional seven years of labor out of Jacob. Laban's consent to Rebecca's immediate departure is followed by a festive meal; the next morning brings Laban's retraction. So too Jacob's purported betrothal of Rachel is followed by a feast before the wedding night. There is a rude awakening, as it were, for Jacob the next morning.

But Laban's plan fails, and in striking fashion. Rebecca replies, "*elekh*" (אלך), "I will go." The 19th-century commentator Malbim cites the observation of some (unnamed) grammarians that there is a variant form, "*elekhah*" (אלכה). The latter is generally used when seeking permission or approval for one's departure, and is sometimes followed by the word "na" (נא), "If it please you" (cf. Exodus 4:18). The form used by Rebecca is a straightforward expression of intent: "I will be going." The tone of her reply contrasts with the placatory response of Eliezer to Laban's insistence that Rebecca stay: "Do not delay me, now that the Lord has made my errand successful. Give me leave that I may go (*ve'elkha na*, ואלכה נא) to my master" (24:56). Even as a young woman Rebecca is independent and decisive.

This prepares us for future manifestations of these character traits. Suffering while pregnant from the commotion in her womb, "she went (*vatelekh*, ותלך) to inquire of the Lord" (25:22). It is she, not Isaac, who once again "goes" and learns what the future holds for their sons. And it is she, having decided that Jacob and not Esau is the rightful recipient of Isaac's blessing, who devises a stratagem ensuring that Jacob receives that

blessing. The execution of her plan begins with her instruction to Jacob, "Go now (*lekh na*, לך נא) to the flock and fetch me two choice kids" (27:9). As all these narratives demonstrate, Rebecca is a woman of action and purpose.

Returning to the moment of Rebecca's defiant declaration that she will depart for Canaan immediately, one may ask: Why is she so intent upon leaving? A midrash suggests that she seeks to escape a world of intrigue and duplicity. Rebecca is a "lily among the thorns," a daughter and sister of deceivers who nonetheless is, and wishes to remain, righteous (Gen. Rabbah 60:12). She can accomplish this only by finding a new home for herself.

I wonder whether the authors of this midrash were aware of the irony of their remarks. For while Rebecca separates herself geographically from her family, it has nonetheless left its mark upon her. In seeking a blessing for Jacob she turns to deception. When she seeks to save Jacob from Esau's murderous plans for revenge she maneuvers Isaac into dispatching Jacob to Haran (27:46–28:2). Intrigue and duplicity prove essential in accomplishing her purposes.

As in Greek tragedy, Rebecca ultimately is unable to cast aside the legacy of deception. Not only is her attempt to escape it by beginning a new life in Canaan unsuccessful; her deceptions lead to a return, not for her directly but through her son, to the place where lies and intrigue abound. And Jacob, having already served as the instrument of Rebecca's deceptive manipulation of Isaac, quickly learns what it means to live in Laban's world, and becomes both the victim and perpetrator of duplicity.

Whether or not we are the product of a nurturing and happy home, our upbringing almost certainly included exposure to some dysfunctional and destructive attitudes and actions. It is also more than likely that we have internalized some of them. Even if the days of our childhood are in the distant past, and even if we possess Rebecca's drive and self-assurance, these patterns of thought and behavior are still with us, capable of harming us and others. As it was for Rebecca, so too for us: it is hard to leave home.

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