



Ketubah for the wedding of Judah Leon, son of Jehiel mi-Salom, and Rachel, daughter of Moses Hai Curiel, Friday, May 30, 1749, Venice, Italy

In this *ketubah's* unusually romantic engagement articles, the bride and groom “agree to conduct their mutual life with love and affection, without hiding or concealing anything from each other; furthermore, they will control their possessions equally. However, in case of a quarrel, God forbid, between them, they shall follow the customs of the Ashkenazim in Venice in this matter.” The latter stipulation was inserted because the contract celebrates a “mixed” marriage between a Sephardi bride and a non-Sephardi, presumably Ashkenazi, groom.

The decoration is characteristic of Venice and the surrounding environs. The floral border contains the twelve signs of the zodiac, as well as implements from the ancient Jerusalem Temple in the corners. A love knot that has no beginning or end is borrowed from Italian folk culture.

See the full *ketubah* at www.jtsa.edu/venetian-ketubah

Hayyei Sarah 5779

חיי שרה תשע"ט



Falling Wisely

Dr. Sarah Wolf, Assistant Professor of Talmud, JTS

Hayyei Sarah offers us a scene straight out of a romantic comedy. By the middle of the parashah, Rebekah has agreed to follow Abraham's servant back to Canaan, where she will meet and marry Isaac. Rebekah and the servant near their destination on camelback as the afternoon draws to a close, and Isaac is wandering in the fields. The mood is set for an elegant and romantic first meeting.

But instead of a picturesque moment in which the betrothed parties walk steadily toward each other, their cloaks blowing gently in the wind, Genesis 24:64 tells us:

Rebekah lifted her eyes, saw Isaac, and fell off the camel.

A straightforward read of the scene would suggest that this was not the first impression Rebekah would have wanted, and her subsequent behavior also suggests a hint of embarrassment on her part. Instead of proceeding immediately toward Isaac, she first asks Abraham's servant who this field-wanderer might be. When he responds that it is his master (and hence her betrothed), she immediately covers herself with a veil—perhaps out of modesty, but perhaps simply because she is mortified.

Yet several of the classical commentators do not read Rebekah's fall as accidental at all, but rather as a deliberate decision. In fact, they read both the fall and the veil as intentional indications of her modesty. Comparing the use of the verb “to fall” here with its purposive meaning in the expression “to fall upon one's face,” meaning “to worship,” Ibn Ezra envisions Rebekah launching herself off the camel as a submissive reaction to seeing her future husband. Rashbam suggests that she was ashamed before him because she had been riding the camel “like a man” instead of side-saddle.

The commentators may have chosen this less likely interpretation because they were uncomfortable with this passage's subversion of what feminist film critic Laura Mulvey termed the "male gaze," often more accurately referred to as the "straight male gaze"—that is, the fact that movies, art, and visual descriptions in literature frequently take the perspective of a heterosexual man gazing with desire on the female form. Western culture's focus on women as erotic objects of course long predates film and is ubiquitous across the ancient world. Yet in this passage, the typically gendered roles of sight and desire are reversed. Isaac does look up from his meditations in the field, but Gen. 24:63 implies that all he notices are the camels. It is Rebekah who sees the cute guy in the field, is so overwhelmed by her feelings in response that she briefly loses her composure, and turns to the person next to her to whisper, "Who's *that*?" This unchecked expression of female desire might not have been particularly amenable to commentators who wished to portray a modest, seemingly, virtuous matriarch, and so they opted instead to depict her as self-sacrificingly modest.

While this is undeniably a misogynistic interpretive move, it also is worth noticing that in attributing modesty to Rebekah, the commentators also attribute more agency to her. Rebekah surely understood the behavior expected of her as a woman in her society, and maybe the commentators assume that she—like them—thought that her best bet was to conform to them as closely as possible. If we imagine that Rebekah's fall is completely intentional, we might imagine a woman who is not (literally) swept away by her feelings, but rather a woman who sees someone she suspects may be her future husband and makes a quick, calculated decision about how to act.

Most of us, I think, experience the newest of new beginnings—a burgeoning friendship or romance, a new academic path, or an exciting career opportunity that presents itself—as some combination of these two types of "falling."

On the one hand, it is no coincidence that many of our metaphors for these beginnings, especially the ones we find most delightful, refer to the unintentional type of falling: we fall head over heels for someone; a job falls into our laps. We see ourselves as responding wholeheartedly to an exciting situation, spontaneously reacting to experiences as they present themselves to us. This is an important way of relating to the world as our full selves, acknowledging that we are not always in control and that as we go through

the world we (whatever gender we may be) may experience and sometimes act on strong, even overwhelming emotions.

On the other hand, we also need to make decisions about how we present ourselves in new situations, and we might decide that it's worth whatever it takes to prove from the outset that we are exactly who we want to be in our new role. As we launch ourselves into a job or a relationship, we often want to establish control over our own behavior and how others perceive us, which can be just as valuable and important as our moments of emotional expression.

The Netziv (Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, head of the Volozhin yeshiva in Lithuania in the 19th century) offers yet another read of Rebekah's fall from the camel in *Ha'amek Davar*, his commentary on the Torah. He suggests that she fell out of neither love nor modesty, but because she saw Isaac and felt fear. Noting that only afterwards does she ask the servant about the stranger's identity, the Netziv adds, "However, she didn't even know who she was scared of." I think this comment gets at the heart of Rebekah's reaction to seeing Isaac, however we choose to interpret it. Feelings of fear, overwhelming excitement, and desire for control are all responses to facing the unknown. When we find ourselves at the start of something whose end is still hidden from us, may we have the courage and the wisdom to know how to fall.

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דבר אחר | A Different Perspective

A Venetian *Ketubbah*

The Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary

This week's parashah prominently features the mission of Abraham's servant to find a wife for Isaac. The account includes the giving of gifts to Rebecca and her family (24:22, 53) and the assurance from Abraham's family that they themselves are wealthy (Gen. 24:35). For thousands of years, *ketubbot* (Jewish marriage contracts) have established the financial responsibilities in a Jewish marriage. This notable *ketubbah* is one of over 500 in The JTS Library's world-renowned collection.