

Thinking Torah

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Parshat Toldot:

Yitzchak And Rivka: Opposites Attract?

Rivka left her home, her family. How did she fare in the house of Avraham? What adult personality emerged from the vivid image of the young woman that we met last week at the well-side? There Rivka appeared as a person with immense energy, an unusual confidence, possibly generated by her untiring trait of giving, Chesed. Her personal decision to leave home, following Avraham's servant to her destiny, (her parents let her decide) demonstrated a maturity of mind, a strident and self assured personality. But what became of her afterwards?

Chavruta

Obviously, we are interested in Rivka:

1. As a personality in her own right
2. As a wife: vis a vis Yitzchak
3. As a mother: vis a vis Yaakov and Esav

Here are some episodes to focus our attention.

I. In Padan Aram

Ch. 24 describes the behaviour of the youthful Rivka in her home-town of Padan Aram. We see her offering water to a stranger at the well. What personality traits do you identify in Rivka as you read this episode?

II. Her meeting with Yitzchak: 24:61-67

- One of the most interesting comments which impacts the Rivka-Yitzchak relationship can be found in the Ha'emek Davar commentary by the Netziv (Rav Naftali Tzvi Berlin 19-20 Cent. Russia.) See his comments on 24:65 "And she took the scark and covered herself"

II. Pregnancy and children: 25:19-25

1. v.21 "Yitzchak implored God opposite his wife"
- What is strange about the wording in this passuk?
 - Look at Rashi ("lenochach" and "vaye'ater"): Do the two comments of Rashi match each other?
 - How does Rashi understand the phrase "lenochach"? Compare with Rashbam, Seforno. How does Rashi's comment differ to theirs?
 - How do these sources compare with this Midrash: (Midrash Rabba 63:5)
"Opposite his wife - Yitzchak prostrated himself and Rivka also prostrated herself. He said: 'Master of the universe - may all the children that you deem to give me be from this righteous woman.' She said the same thing: 'May all the children that you deem to give me be from this righteous man.'"

3. v. 22 "she went to seek God" - How does Ramban interpret differently to Rashi and the Rashbam. To your mind, which is the more appropriate reading?

4. To whom does she relay the message that she receives from God? Does she tell Yitzchak? (See Ramban 27:4)
5. v.28 Why does Yitzchak love (prefer, favour) Esav? Why does Rivka favour Yaakov?

III. The episode of the blessing: 26:34-28:5

Can you explain Rivka's actions here? See Rav Steinsaltz in Biblical images and Rav Hirsch on passuk 1.

The Shiur Section

On one level, we see Yitzchak and Rivka as a loving couple. Of all the Avot, it is only with Yitzchak and Rivka that the Torah uses the words "ahava":

"Isaac ... took Rivka as his wife; **Isaac loved her** and was comforted after the death of his mother."
(24:66-7)

Moreover, Rivka provides a sense of companionship and relationship to Yitzchak which helps him with his grief over his mother's death.

The closeness and caring between Yitzchak and Rivka is expressed also in their heartfelt prayers for children. They are married for twenty years without having a child. The Midrash portrays an image of harmony between them:

"And Yitzchak prayed opposite his wife: ... He said: 'Master of the universe - may all the children that you deem to give me be from this righteous woman.' She said the same thing: 'May all the children that you deem to give me be from this righteous man.'"

Likewise, when reading the story in which Yitzchak and Rivka go to the Philistine region of Gerar (see Ch.26) meeting with the same unpleasant events as Avraham and Sarah before them, we gain a glimpse of Rivka and Yitzchak in a similar light as the ultimate covenantal couple; Avraham and Sarah. From all these sources, the closeness, intimacy and togetherness of Yitzchak and Rivka is explicit and self-evident.

However, it would seem that this is only half of the story, for indeed, Yitzchak and Rivka seem to be very different people. Their respective preferences for their children - And Yitzchak favoured Esav because game was in his mouth whereas Rivka favoured Yaakov (25:28)- already tells us that their personalities lead them in different directions. In addition Rivka's subversive actions in the "blessings" episode is certainly not the actions of a woman who agrees with and has open communication with her husband. What is the source of their differences?

ACTIVE AND PASSIVE

To begin our study of contrasts, we may start with the image of Rivka as we meet her – by the village Well, This is a classic betrothal scene [1], much like the meeting between Yaakov and Rachel or Moshe and Tzipora later in the chumash. What is striking however is the fact that the suitor, the active and impressive subject of the story is Rivka! She is the one who draws the water. Usually the prospective suitor – the man – draws the water. This is true of Yaakov (29:10), and Moshe (Shemot 2:19.)

The scholar of Biblical Narrative, Robert Alter¹, writes the following:

"The role played here ...by bridegroom and bride is a pointed divergence from the convention. Isaac is conspicuous by his absence from the scene: this is in fact the only instance where a surrogate rather than the man himself meets the girl at the well. That substitution nicely accords with the entire career of Isaac, for he is manifestly the most passive of the patriarchs. We have already seen him as a bound victim for whose life a ram is substituted; later, as a father, he will prefer the son who can go out to the field and bring him back provender, and his one extended scene will be lying in bed, weak and blind, while others act on him.

As a complement to this absence of the bridegroom, it is only in this betrothal scene that the girl, not the stranger, draws water from the well. Indeed, the narrator goes out of his way to give weight to this act by presenting Rebekah as a continuous whirl of purposeful activity. In four short verses (Gen. 24:16, 18-20) she is the subject of eleven verbs of action and one of speech, going down to the well, drawing water, filling the pitcher, pouring, giving drink. One might note that the two verbs of rushing and hurrying (*rutz* and *maher*) generally reserved for the bringing of the news of the stranger's arrival are here also repeatedly attached to Rebekah's actions at the well..."

Yitzchak does not choose his wife. She is chosen for him. In contrast, Rivka is very much present. She is thoroughly impressive. The Torah relays to the reader at length her kindness and her industriousness. Furthermore, her personal opinion is trusted and respected by her family too. When her parents agree to the terms of the marriage, they say:

"Let us call the girl and ask for her reply." (24:57)

And she replies quite confidently in the affirmative. Rivka is the decision-maker. Rivka is the primary actor. In her actions and speech, her quiet self-possession, we see a future matriarch.

The irony of the scene is that on the one hand Yitzchak is not there, but on the other, he is the centre of the mission, he is the entire motivation for the servants expedition. This simply heightens the sense of Yitzchak living in the shadows, allowing others to act, partially eclipsed. Even at the moment of meeting between them, Yitzchak is simply standing in a field, whereas Rivka is full of activity (more about that scene in a moment.) Of all the Avot, Yitzchak is surely the most passive². It would seem that from the Akeida onwards he is a "victim", always the subject of other people's arrangements for him

Following through, we might say note that in Rivka's pregnancy, **she** goes to "seek God." Some people say that she prayed, other commentators see her as visiting a prophet. Whichever way, where was Yitzchak? Where is he? Could he not pray? Could he not serve as the communicator between Rivka and God? Or did Rivka for some reason feel

that she could not tell him? In the blessings story too, Isaac is blind, inactive, acted upon (manipulated?) by others. Rivka is active. She is orchestrating things from behind the scenes. She ensures that events follow the scheme that she has designed, over and above Yitzchak's head.

So there is a personality difference, a difference in role. But that is only part of the story. As we shall see, the Netziv will stretch the contrast between Yitzchak and Rivka to a more extreme place.

THE ANGEL OF GOD. RIVKA'S FEAR

When the servant returns with the young bride Rivka, their first view of Isaac is of Isaac "meditating in the field." Rashi suggests that he was praying. reaction is described in a short passage that invites both imagination and interpretation:

"Yitzchak went out to the field at evening time, to meditate. He looked up, and saw camels approaching. Rivka looked up and saw Yitzchak, and she fell (alighted?) from the camel. She asked the slave 'who is this man in the field, approaching us?' 'It is my master,' replied the servant. She took the veil and covered herself." (24:64-65)

Rivka's strange "falling" or even alighting from the camel, before she knew the identity of the stranger in the field puzzles the commentators. Likewise, her act of face-covering raises certain questions. Rashi comments:

"She saw his lordly appearance and gazed at him in astonishment."

as if to say that she was impressed by his dignified visage. But others see the entire episode rather differently. Here is the fascinating comment of the Netziv:

"Rivka looked up and saw Yitzchak: while he was in prayer. He looked like an angel of God; fearful in appearance. And she fell off the camel: from fright! She did not know who he was. ... She covered her face with a veil: From fear and embarrassment, as if with a realisation that she was not worthy to be his wife. From that moment on, there was always a sense of trepidation in her heart. Her relationship with Yitzchak was very different to Sarah's with Avraham or Rachel and Yaakov. With them, if there was a problem, they would not be afraid or apprehensive to talk it through. This was not the case with Rivka.

This story is the prologue to the story in Parshat Toldot where Yitzchak and Rivka have very different opinions. Rivka could never bring herself to talk to Yitzchak about the truth she felt regarding Esav. The same was true about the bestowing of the blessings ..."

The Netziv pinpoints two things here. The first is Yitzchak's spiritual intensity. He is an *Olah Temima*³ - a pure and perfect sacrifice, an angel of God. Yitzchak in prayer is a fearful sight. Might we suggest that Yitzchak never quite came down from Mt. Moriah? He always had some of that fire of the Akeida with him throughout his life. The second point is the effect of this state of being. The self-assured Rivka loses confidence in the face of the spiritual whirlwind that is Yitzchak. We do not so much as witness Yitzchak and Rivka conversing in their initial

¹ See a more comprehensive literary analysis in Robert Alter's "Art of Biblical Narrative" pgs 51-54.

² See Rav Steinsaltz's article - "Isaac" - in his book "Biblical Images" where he deals with the problem of Isaac's passivity.

³ See Rashi 26:1

meeting. In fact the Torah barely records them speaking to each other at all. The first words they say to each other in the Torah's narrative is only after the explosive episode of the blessings. In a family so in need of communication, silence reigns⁴. In the Netziv's reading here, Rivka cannot communicate with Yitzchak. She is in awe of him. When a sensitive situation arises, Rivka cannot discuss things with Yitzchak. This, says the Netziv, is the source of many of the problems in our Parsha.

RIVKA - A TRAGIC FIGURE?

This unconventional and tragic reading helps us understand many episodes in the parsha. It is echoed by the Ramban (27:4) who suggests that Rivka never told Yitzchak about the prophecy she had received while pregnant about the turbulent and confrontational future of their twins. She was simply too scared to tell him. It helps us understand why Rivka must subvert Yitzchak's plan. This method is easier for her than confronting Yitzchak directly. But what a tragic situation! What an awful state of being!

Aviva Zornberg advances this tragic theme (maybe a little melodramatically) by noting:

"Rebecca, whose loving alacrity and energy are reminiscent of Abraham's, meets Isaac in the field, and her whole body falls, she veils herself, before the otherworldliness of an Isaac, rapt in prayer.

The girl who unhesitatingly- in response to her family's demoralising doubts, 'Will you go with this man?' - 'I will go' becomes the woman who questions, time and time again, the value of her life. Her visceral reaction to her daughters-in-law is a kind of revulsion: 'I am disgusted with my life because of the Hittite women. If Jacob marries a Hittite woman ... what good will life be to me?(27:46). The 'Why life?' question - this is the literal form in the original Hebrew - strikes a new note in the biblical register. She is the philosopher who interrogates life, harshly, sceptically - puts life to the question. Most striking in this vein, however, is her enigmatic cry as the infants "struggle" in her womb: 'If so, why do I exist?(25:22)" (The Beginning of Desire pg.159)

OPPOSITES ATTRACT!

However, I must admit, that I find this portrayal of the marriage of Yitzchak and Rivka disturbing. Maybe at an a priori faith level I simply refuse to accept that our Avot and Imahot would live in a silent marriage filled with fear, distance and misunderstanding. Furthermore, there are pesukim (see the opening of the Shiur section) which seem to describe an intimacy between Yitzchak and Rivka, not an alienation. The suggestion that the polarity in personality between Yitzchak and Rivka necessitates a tragic consequence is not the only possible way of viewing things.

⁴ According to Rashi (25:20), there was a 37 year age gap between Yitzchak and Rivka. Rashi has his reasons for adopting this Midrashic view but I personally find it rather far fetched to suggest that the "well" scene is happening when Rivka is only 3 years old! I would prefer to suggest that Rivka was of marriageable age at the time - maybe 12? 16? 22? Even so, that would still give a 15+ age-gap between Yitzchak and Rivka (Yitzchak got married only after Sarah's death at the age of 40 - see 25:20.) This could not have helped their mutual communication.

Rivka and Yitzchak seem to agree in their disapproval of Esav's wives and their advice to Yaakov to marry into Lavan's household. They have points upon which they agree!

Rav Steinsaltz prefers to see Yitzchak and Rivka's differences as facilitating a **loving relationship** in which one partner will complement and complete the other.

"Rebecca is the opposite of Isaac **and complementary to him**. Isaac appears outstandingly as a person who does NOT make decisions ... at every stage of his life, it was Rebecca who decided and acted, accordingly, confident; whereas Isaac was hesitant and unsure...

Rebecca was the opposite of Isaac⁵ who grew up surrounded by trustworthy folk ... he had an aristocratic mother and a father of the noblest character ... Isaac's world was supportative, secure; he could hesitate or even err because there were always others, loving and concerned to back him up ... Isaac knew little of the world of evil and deceit... Rebecca on the other hand , grew up in a world (the house of Laban) whose failings she knew all too well. She had learned the meaning of cheating, of hypocrisy; and this knowledge lay at the root of the difference between Rebecca and Isaac and the relationship with their sons.

... Thus the relationship between Rebecca and Isaac acquired additional significance: for her, he represented another world, a higher level of being ... **she was bound to him and perhaps loved him** because of his purity." (Biblical Images pgs 44-46)

According to Rav Steinsaltz, Rivka and Yitzchak were aware of each other's strengths and failings. Their love for each other was a **product** of their differences. Might we possibly entertain the possibility that the differences between Yitzchak and Rivka, were precisely the glue that attracted them to one another.

Let us try this reading.

In the above scene in which Rivka and Yitzchak meet, I am always struck by the touching symmetry in which Yitzchak "looks up," to be followed in the next passuk with Rivka who similarly "looks up." One might say that it describes the manner in which their eyes met for the first time: He looked up – She looked up! What did Rivka see in this lonely individual standing in the field? Maybe this girl who grew up spiritually starved in a Pagan household saw the image of Yitzchak praying and was filled with longing, knowing that here was a person on her own wavelength⁶. Maybe for the first time, she

⁵ Rav Hirsch argues that this was the source of Yitzchak and Rivka's strange favouritism of their children:

That Isaac's sympathies were more inclined towards Esau, Rebecca's to Jacob can moreover easily be explained by the attraction of opposites. We see Isaac,... Esau's lusty active nature appealed to him ... he perhaps saw in him a force which he had... Rebecca on the other hand saw in Jacob's whole being, a picture of a (holy) life unfolding, of which in her father's house she never had the remotest idea."

Rav Hirsch criticises Yitzchak and Rivka for this favouritism and sees it as a factor in the fragmentation of the family.

⁶ רבה פרשה ס בראשית
ותשא רבקה את עיניה ותרא את יצחק, אי"ר הוּנָה צַפַּת שִׂידוֹ שְׂטוּחָה בְּתַפְלָה אִמְרָה וְדָא אָדָם גְּדוּל הוּא

was meeting an individual with religious concerns that reflected her personal thoughts and inclinations, thoughts that she had never been able to voice to another person. Maybe it was "love at first sight?"

Robert Alter (above) described the classic "Well" scene in which the young suitor meets his future wife. He claimed that Yitzchak is absent in this classic betrothal scene. However maybe we can rethink here. Possibly the image in which Rivka sees Yitzchak meditating in the field is the TRUE well-side betrothal scene! After all, the verse informs us (most mysteriously) that Yitzchak is coming from **Beer** Lachai Roe, apparently a local well! Rather than the approach of the servant in her home-town, it is here that Isaac meets Rivka in person. Indeed, this scene ends with Isaac consummating the marriage. And if that is true, then we see something new in this genre of well-side betrothals. Rather than Moses' act of heroism, or Yaakov's physical strength as he pushes the stone from the well, Yitzchak's impressive characteristic is the image of his prayer in the field. **It is this intense quality that draws Rivka to him.** In the very next scene, at the start of our parasha, we view Yitzchak and Rivka praying **together** (if we follow Rashi's reading 25:21.) Maybe this spirituality was their common ground.

And then we can see Rivka's frantic industriousness and Yitzchak's inactivity as complementary, a contrasting temperament; opposites attract! This was match made in heaven.

THE BLESSINGS EPISODE

All of this forms something of a prelude to the chapter of the *berachot*, one of the most difficult chapters in the lives of our Avot. Rivka orchestrated Yaakov's crude masquerade, and the subsequent cruel deceit of his father. We wonder what she was thinking.⁷

⁷ Why did she trick Yitzchak? A few scenarios have been suggested:

1. That she acted on the basis of her nevuot (at the start of the parsha.) She had never communicated the content of this nevuot to Yitzchak, but she knew that the "older shall serve the younger". Now she must act to realise the prophetic plan.

2. She thought that Yitzchak was mistaken in his plan of choosing Esav. She could not tell him because she was so intimidated by her husband. So she found a subversive way to push her view through.

Obviously, these theories have problems with them. Did Rivka think that this could all happen without being "found out"? Is it possible that a blessing from God will not find its true address? - even if Jacob stood before his father, if Isaac blessed Esav would the bracha not be bestowed upon the true recipient - Esav!

A third theory is appropriate. Rav Hirsch again:

"Isaac ... believed that the Abraham-ic calling was to be carried out by Esau and Jacob in brotherly union. He therefore intended on giving Esav a blessing of material content, but for Jacob, a spiritual one but Rebecca knew from Lavan and her own home the impossibility and the failure of such a division .. "

Rav Hirsch explains that whereas Yitzchak wished to divide the family leadership between his active son who was the go-getter, and his spiritual philosopher son - Yaakov, Rivka disagreed. Rivka claimed that Esav had no sensitivity to spiritual values and thus would not make any room for Yaakov's value system. Yitzchak insisted that Rivka had misjudged Esav. According to Rav Hirsch, they had discussed and argued about this for many years.

At any rate, I hope that we have shed some light upon the personality of Rivka and the Yitzchak- Rivka relationship. Certainly there is much upon which to speculate and the "evidence" in the text is sparse. We shall have to keep learning to discover some more answers!

Shabbat Shalom to you all.

Now, at the last moment, Rivka's deceit came to tell Yitzchak one thing. She knew that the deceit would be revealed! How could it not! But she wanted to show Yitzchak in the most blunt possible way, that he was gullible, and that he could be tricked. And this was to prove her ultimate claim, that Esav had been misleading his father, all these years.