



THE SECOND JEWISH MATRIARCH PERFECTED THE SKILLS OF KINDNESS.

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The Torah introduces Rivka, the second matriarch, as soon as she is born. Avraham returns with Yitzhak from the Akeida ("binding") episode, pondering the future generations that must come from Yitzhak. Avraham realizes how close Yitzhak came to losing his life and with it, the Jewish future. So Avraham decides the time has come to find Yitzhak a wife.

At that moment, God informs Avraham that his brother Nachor is married and has eight sons, including one named Bethuel. "And Bethuel had a daughter Rivka" (Genesis 22:23). The Torah introduces us to Rivka at the same moment that Avraham is looking for a marriage partner for Yitzhak.

Similarly, the last time the Torah mentions Rivka is also in the context of arranging a marriage, this time for her son, Yaakov:

And Rivka told Yitzhak: "I'm sick of my life because of the Hittite women (which Eisav has married) ... let Yaakov go to Haran and take a wife from the daughters of Lavan, my brother." (Genesis 27:46)

A look at the meaning of Rivka's name further connects us to the concept of marriage:

Rivka = "a yoke used to join two animals of the same species together, to fulfill a purpose or work together in the fields." (Hebrew-Hebrew dictionary, Even Shoshan)

Sounds like marriage to me!

What is it about "Rivka" that is associated with bringing two different creatures together to fulfill a joint purpose? Let's explore Rivka's background and the life she leads with Yitzhak, the second patriarch, to come to an understanding of this enigma.

Rivka's Background

When first mentioned in the Torah, we learn that Rivka is the daughter of Bethuel, and the sister of Lavan (also known as the conniving, greedy father of Rachel and Leah, who switched Rachel for Leah, and extorted Yaakov for all he was worth). Bethuel is not a nice guy either, as related in the Midrash:

"...[Bethuel] was evil and tried to prevent Rivka from going with Eliezer, and he tried to poison [Eliezer]." (Rashi, Genesis 25:51)

So we see that Rivka comes from a rather despicable family background:

Since God knew that the Jewish people would be spread out among the nations when in exile, and typically one is influenced by his surrounding culture, He wanted our matriarchs and patriarchs to be among evil people and withstand their influence. In this way, their descendants will have the strength to hold onto their religion even in exile, since "the acts of the ancestors are a sign for their descendents." (Tifferet Tzion)

Rivka is a beacon of light in an otherwise dark world of deceit. She is chosen to genetically transmit to her descendants, the Jewish nation, the ability to adhere steadfastly to morality, values and truth -- despite whatever antagonistic circumstances.

Kindness

We first meet Rivka at the well of water: Avraham's servant, Eliezer, has set out to find a wife for Yitzhak, and requests a sign from God, to know for certain that he has found Miss Right:

"If the girl should say to me: 'Drink, and also I will give your camels to drink,' she is the one You have designated for... Yitzhak." (Genesis 24:14)

The fulfillment of this condition is carried out by Rivka, with great alacrity:

"And she said: "Drink"... and she hurried and lowered the pitcher... and she rushed and poured the water into the trough, and ran back to the well to draw for all the camels." (Genesis 24: 18-20)

The energy and devotion that this young girl exhibits is nothing short of amazing -- especially given that this task could have reasonably been delegated to Eliezer, a stranger. Yet she kept lowering her pail, over and over again, until she was satisfied that Eliezer and all 10 camels (!) had quenched their thirst.

Here is a woman (a young girl, really) who, against the odds, has learned to become a giving, selfless individual -- while living amidst greedy, materialistic, selfish scoundrels.

Rivka's independent streak becomes evident once again when her family wishes to delay her departure with Eliezer, who claims to be in service of a holy man with a mission. They ask Rivka's opinion, and she states unequivocally, "I will go" (Genesis 24:58).

Rivka makes herself clear: I want to leave here and go become part of something big, a mission to spread monotheism and ethics to the world, away from this family and culture which have little to offer.

Meeting Yitzhak



Rivka and Eliezer return to the Land of Israel (Canaan). As Rivka nears, atop her camel, she views a holy man in the field, immersed in prayer:

She asked, "Who is this man?" [Eliezer] answered, "This is my master." She fell off the camel, and covered up with a shawl." (Genesis 24:64)

This strange reaction is analyzed by the Netziv, a 19th century commentator:

"She fell off the camel" -- out of fear and awe. Although Rivka didn't know exactly what she feared, she asked the servant, "Who is this man who awakens this fear in me?" When she heard he was to be her husband, she took a scarf and covered up out of reverence and shame, as if she realized she is not worthy of being his wife.

From this moment on, intimidation found a permanent place in her heart, regarding her husband. Thus, you will find that [Rivka's] relationship with Yitzhak, was not like Sarah with Avraham, or Rachel with Yaakov, who felt equal to their husbands and never feared to confront them with complaints or criticism..." (Ha'Amek Davar, Genesis 24:64-65)

This first meeting between Rivka and Yitzhak sets the stage for all future interactions. Yitzhak is a man who, having once alighted the altar in anticipation of death, has come away from that experience somewhat removed from the world of the living. In that first glimpse of him, Rivka intuits this level of holiness and other-worldliness -- and concludes that she is an inadequate partner in such a union.

For Yitzhak, however, Rivka is perfect:

And Yitzhak brought her to his mother Sarah's tent. And he took Rivka to be his wife, and he loved her. And he was comforted after his mother's death. (Genesis 24:67)

Yitzhak sees Rivka as a righteous, holy woman who, like his mother, is worthy of the title of Jewish Matriarch, his partner in life and mission. The text emphasizes that after Yitzhak marries her, he *then* loves her. The more he gets to know her,

the more she gains his love and respect. Rivka's feelings of inferiority are her own, not encouraged or shared by Yitzhak.

Infertility

While Rivka fails to conceive after many years of marriage, the couple intensifies their prayers:

"Yitzhak prayed to God, opposite his wife." (Genesis 25:21)

"Opposite his wife": This teaches that Yitzhak and Rivka prayed facing each other, and Yitzhak said: "Almighty, all the children that you give me, let them be from this righteous woman..." (Midrash - Breishit Rabba, 63:5)

Yitzhak makes sure not to repeat what he considers to be a mistake of the past, when Sarah's infertility led Avraham to take Hagar -- resulting in the birth of Yishmael.

However, God had unique plans for this pregnancy as well:

Rivka conceived, and the sons struggled within her until she said, "If this is the case, why am I (alive)?" And she went to ask of God. (Genesis 25:22)

Rivka's pregnancy is intensely difficult. This womb, which she yearned for so long to put to good use, turns into a battleground between two children, two nations. The struggle, which will last for generations to come, has already begun.

As most mothers of twins can testify, a pregnancy such as this is tough. But Rivka reacts with such extreme agitation as to almost have a death wish. Couldn't this situation be handled by this righteous woman who has waited 20 years to conceive?!

Obviously, there is additional psychological distress factoring into the equation. Perhaps Rivka thought she is suffering because of a spiritual flaw within her. How otherwise could she understand such a circumstance?

When Rivka passed by a house of idol worship, Eisav (in utero) would kick and try to get out; when she passed a house of God, Yaakov would kick and get excited. (Midrash - Breishit Rabba 63:6)

Rivka must have felt that she was carrying a very mixed kind of child, with extreme forces of good and evil within him. Would this be someone who could build a nation? Where was that evil energy coming from? Surely not from her holy husband!

Rivka did not have access to an ultrasound which would allay her fears and tell her she's carrying "double trouble." So she worried that perhaps, due to her family background, she was not worthy of bearing the third Jewish patriarch. And if that were the case, what would be the point of this pregnancy? Even more, what could be the purpose of her life?

With this distressing line of thought, Rivka "went to ask of God," i.e. to consult with prophets and sages who could give her advice. The fact that she did not go to the greatest prophet of the generation -- her own husband, Yitzhak -- is a sign of Rivka's state of mind, of her shame and embarrassment, of feeling that this all must be a result of her lowly spiritual level, and the evil which lies somewhere within her.

And yet, Rivka receives a prophecy that is quite reassuring:

"Two peoples are in your womb... two nations from your innards will separate, and one nation will be strong on the account of the other, and the elder will serve the younger." (Genesis 25:23)

And yet, she chooses not to tell Yitzhak of this prophecy which points to the superiority of the (future) younger son. Instead, she keeps the information to herself, until such time when she must act to preserve its fulfillment.

Parental Preference

Sure enough, the two boys are born, and by Bar Mitzvah age they are rapidly moving in separate directions. Eisav becomes a man of the field -- aggressive,

manly, pursuing the physical aspects of life. Yaakov is a scholar, involved in spiritual and intellectual endeavors.

Yitzhak loved Eisav, for hunting was in his mouth. But Rivka loved Yaakov. (Genesis 25:28)

Rashi: Eisav would trick his father with his mouth, asking him [detailed halachic questions]... and so [Yitzhak] thought he was righteous.

Rivka obviously loved both her sons, as did Yitzhak. So why did "Yitzhak love Eisav, and Rivka love Yaakov"? Yitzhak is fooled by Eisav's exterior, his scholarly questions, and imagines him to be the future leader of the family and the Jewish nation. Rivka, on the other hand, with characteristic feminine insight, as well as her first-hand childhood experience with deceit and facade, sees through Eisav. She knows Yaakov to be the rightful heir, with his whole essence -- far beyond the external -- appropriate for the Jewish national destiny and mission.

The Blessings

The children grow into adults, Yitzhak reaches old age, and the time comes to bestow the significant blessings which will determine the future of the two sons. Yitzhak plans to bless Eisav and sends him out to hunt and prepare a meal for him, to create a conducive atmosphere for this meaningful event.

Rivka, hearing of the plan, realizes that she now needs to step in. Once again, however, she chooses to bypass confrontation at all costs and concocts a scheme: She will masquerade Yaakov as Eisav, allowing Yitzhak to be tricked into giving him the blessing. This is so bizarre and devious that it rivals those relatives whose character traits she worked so hard all these years to avoid!

Why did Rivka not appreciate that perhaps the time had come to explain to Yitzhak his mistaken perception of Eisav? Why not tell him of the prophecy that she heard before the birth: "And the elder shall serve the younger"?

In this episode, we see the timidity with which Rivka always interacted with Yitzhak collide head to head with her steadfast commitment to fulfill her mission and preserve the truth.

In respectful deference to Yitzhak, she could not confront him about his mistake. So by tricking Yitzhak, and allowing him to experience himself the results of this deceit by the eventual arrival of the "real" Eisav, Rivka accomplished two key things:

1) Yitzhak would give the blessings to Yaakov with a full heart, not having been persuaded to give them by his wife.

2) Through realizing that he'd been tricked, Yitzhak would experientially appreciate the existence of deceit, of things not being as they seem. This would prove to him -- more than any rational words -- that Eisav, too, had been fooling him all along. Yitzhak would then understand that it was God's will for Yaakov to receive the blessings, and for Yitzhak to be saved from his own folly and lack of understanding.

When looked at from this perspective, we can appreciate what an ingenious, purposeful, respectful way of dealing with differences of opinion! The text makes no further mention of the matter (along the lines of "I told you so"), aside from Yitzhak's ready admission and sudden epiphany when Eisav returns in anticipation of receiving the blessing:

Yitzhak shook with a great fear and said, "Who, then, hunted and gave me to eat and I blessed him? In fact, let him remain blessed." (Genesis 27:33)

Yitzhak concludes: *If this trick could happen to me, then I know I may have been fooled my whole life. Therefore, Yaakov should remain blessed, for he is the one deserving of the blessing.*

Mother of Two Sons

How painful it must have been for Rivka to have to "steal" the blessing from her husband. Although it is clear to her that Yaakov is to continue the line and mission of the Jewish people, by the command of God, she still equally loves Eisav. Differently from her predecessor, Sarah, *she* has to create the separation within her own home between two of her *own* sons, and allow them each to develop into the nations they are meant to be, without wishing either any harm:

Rivka was aware of Eisav's words (that he wanted to kill Yaakov), so she sent and called Yaakov and said, "Your brother, Eisav, wants to kill you... Go run away to my brother, Lavan... until his anger abates... for how can I lose both of you at one time?" (Genesis 27:42-43)

Rivka is concerned that one might kill the other, either out of revenge or in self-defense. Either way, were that to happen, she would lose the other as well as the murderer of his brother. As she sends Yaakov away to her family which she rejected so long before, Rivka intends this for the good of both her sons:

Yaakov went to Padan Aram, to Lavan, the brother of Rivka, (who was the mother of Yaakov and Eisav. (Genesis 28:5)

To the end, this matriarch, true to her name, serves as the yoke trying to hold two disparate nations together, to fulfill God's ultimate purpose.

Kindness: Giving and Weaning

The only actual conversation recorded in the Torah between Rivka and Yitzhak involves finding a marriage partner for Yaakov.

Rivka said to Yitzhak: "I'm sick of my life because of the Hittite women (Eisav's wives). Let Yaakov travel to Haran... for if Yaakov marries a woman from Canaan, my life would be pointless..." (Genesis 27:46)

Spoken like a true mother-in-law! Rivka is protecting Yitzhak from the news that his sons are at war with each other, and that Yaakov has to flee Eisav's wrath for fear of being killed. Instead, in a seemingly selfish manner, she asks Yitzhak to do her the favor of giving Yaakov advice to leave Canaan to find a wife. Then, Yitzhak, as if on his own accord, gives Yaakov his approval and tells him to go to Haran, to Rivka's family, to try his luck there at finding his soulmate.

Even at this late stage, as Rivka finally brings herself to confront Yitzhak and ask for something, it is out of great kindness and selflessness. She doesn't want to burden him with painful information about their sons, nor does she want him to

dwell on his misconceived impression of Eisav. She even tries to make it seem like Yaakov leaving town is Yitzhak's idea to begin with.

This is what kindness and giving should be in a marriage. A marriage is when two different people care about each other, and give so much to each other that they recapture the initial oneness of that dual male-female human that preceded the separation of Eve from Adam. It's no longer "my needs against yours... I was right and you were wrong," but rather: "Your pain is my pain, your self-respect is my need, just as much as my own."

In Hebrew, the word for acts of kindness is "*Gemilut Chesed*" - literally: the weaning of kindness. (*Gemilut* means "to wean off.") Isn't this a contradiction in terms? Weaning means to distance oneself and create separation, while kindness means to give, connect and join.

We see from here that true kindness is to give the recipient the feeling that he is not receiving at all; rather that he is completely independent and weaned from you. Otherwise, the bit of shame that the recipient inevitably feels would make the kindness less complete.

This is the type of goodness which God bestows upon us: He gives us everything, but makes us think that we are working to arrange it and that we deserve it. (When in fact God is orchestrating everything!) This is the method we should emulate in marriage: We give to our partner, without giving the feeling that we are in charge and the benefactors.

This is Rivka's essence: From the time we first meet her, as she tirelessly and effortlessly draws water for man and beast, then in her marriage to Yitzhak and the birth of her sons, she influences them to do what she knows is best, but never at the expense of their self-respect.

How fitting, then, that Rivka appears for the first and then for the last time in the context of finding a marriage partner: the first time for Yitzhak, and the last time for Yaakov, her son. The quintessential matriarch of kindness, named for the double-yoke holding two disparate elements together, teaches us a lesson for eternity about weaning and independence, about marriage and the nature of real giving.