



Rivkah: The Ambivalent Matriarch

R. Tali Adler – adler@hadar.org

Parashat Toldot 5785

We all know the story we are supposed to tell about our matriarchs and their journeys to motherhood.

The story structure is simple, even if the journey is not. Woman wants to be a mother. Woman cannot become a mother. Woman waits, prays, and, if necessary, enlists help to conceive. Woman becomes pregnant, finally gives birth to a child, and thanks God.

It's a tidy story, and it expresses most of what we want to think about mothers—that more than anything, that state is what they've dreamed for, longed for; that all their lives they have dreamed of holding a baby in their arms; that they are willing to endure any suffering, face any obstacle, endure any humiliation, to reach that moment.

But we know that that is not the story for all mothers. We know that motherhood, for many women, is a much more fraught, complicated, even ambivalent journey. And we know that some women, some mothers, never wanted children at all.



And the Torah knows that too.

Rivkah, the matriarch at the center of this week's *parashah*, never indicates that she has any desire for children at all.¹

Unlike the barrenness of other matriarchs, which is mentioned at the beginning of extended narratives about their quests for children, Rivkah's is introduced in the same verse that mentions the solution—not her own prayers, but her husband's:

בראשית כה:כא

וַיַּעֲתֹר יִצְחָק לֵה' לִנְכַח אִשְׁתּוֹ כִּי עֲקָרָהּ הִוא וַיַּעֲתֹר לוֹ ה' וַתַּהַר רִבְקָה אִשְׁתּוֹ:

Bereishit 25:21

Yitzhak pleaded with God before (*le-nokhah*) his wife, because she was barren; and God responded to his plea, and his wife Rivkah conceived.

Where was Rivkah as her husband prayed? A *midrash* in Bereishit Rabbah (63:5) suggests that Rivkah was in the same room as Yitzhak, praying the same prayers. In this image of the couple, they are united in their desire for children and the pain they feel during the long wait.

But Rivkah's silence is conspicuous and forces us to entertain another possibility: perhaps it is only Yitzhak who wants children enough to pray for them. This possibility paints a different picture, one in which Yitzhak prays fervently in one corner of a room while Rivkah, in another corner, remains silent—maybe simply ignoring his prayers, or maybe going so far as to hope that his prayers will be ignored.

¹ For another examination of Rivkah's complicated relationship to motherhood, see Rabbanit Leah Sarna's essay, "Catastrophic Miracles and Miraculous Catastrophes: The Torah of Pregnancy in Tazria and Toldot," which was awarded the Ateret Zvi Prize in *Hiddushei Torah* in 5784, available here: <https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/catastrophic-miracles-and-miraculous-catastrophes>.



The possibility of Rivkah's ambivalence is reinforced in the next verse:

בראשית כה:כב

וַיִּתְרַצְצוּ הַבָּנִים בְּקֶרֶבָהּ וַתֹּאמֶר אִם כֵּן לָמָּה זֶה אֲנִי

Bereishit 25:22

But the children struggled in her womb, and she said, "If so, why do I exist?"

Rivkah's reaction to her pregnancy is a direct contrast to Rahel's later reaction to her inability to become pregnant. Whereas Rahel says she will die if she does not have children, Rivkah, once she begins to experience the pregnancy physically, despairs.

Another *midrash* in Bereishit Rabbah elaborates on Rivkah's desperation and sense of isolation:

בראשית רבה סג:ו

וַתֹּאמֶר אִם כֵּן לָמָּה זֶה אֲנִי, רַבִּי יִצְחָק אָמַר מִלֵּמַד שֶׁהִיְתָה אִמְנוּ רַבְּקָה מְחַזְרֶת עַל פְּתִיחֵיהֶן שֶׁל נָשִׁים וְאוֹמֶרֶת לָהֶן הִגִּיעַ לָכֶם הַצֶּעַר הַזֶּה בִּימֵיכֶם, אִם כֵּן הוּא צָעַרְו שֶׁל בָּנִים וְהִלּוּאִי לֹא עֲבָרְתִּי. רַבִּי הוּנָא אָמַר אִם כֵּן אֲנִי עֲתִיד לְהַעֲמִיד שְׁנַיִם עֶשְׂרֵי שְׁבָטִים הִלּוּאִי לֹא עֲבָרְתִּי מִיָּנִי זֶה. תָּנִי בְּשֵׁם רַבִּי נַחֲמִיָּה רְאוּיָהּ הִיְתָה רַבְּקָה שֶׁיַּעֲמִדוּ מִמֶּנָּה שְׁנַיִם עֶשְׂרֵי שְׁבָטִים.

Bereishit Rabbah 63:6

"And she said 'If so, why do I exist?'" R. Yitzhak said: This teaches that Rivkah our mother would go around to all the women and asked them, "Did you experience pain like this? If this is the standard pain of pregnancy, better that I should never have become pregnant." R. Huna said "If I am destined to give birth to all 12 tribes, better than I had not conceived this many." It is taught in the name of R. Nehemiah: Rivkah was worthy to give birth to all 12 tribes.

The *midrash* makes sure we understand the stakes of the conflict between what Rivkah wants and the maternal destiny that seems to have been fated for her. Rivkah's desire not to be pregnant is not simply about her private marriage and family. There are larger values at stake: she is the carrier of the Jewish future. According to R. Huna, not only is Rivkah meant to carry this already impossible-feeling pregnancy, she is meant to be the mother of ten more children—all 12 tribes.

The Etz Yosef, a 19th century commentary on a number of books of *midrash*, comments:

עץ יוסף בראשית רבה סג:

"ראויה היתה רבקה" כו'. ולפי שאמרה כן ניתנו ליעקב.

Etz Yosef on Bereishit Rabbah 63:6

"Rivkah was worthy"—but because she said this, the [12 tribes] were given to Ya'akov.

One could easily imagine a different scenario, one in which the importance of giving birth to all 12 tribes is emphasized to Rivkah and she agrees to quite literally carry that burden for the good of the people. Instead, God listens to what Rivkah says about her limits. The Jewish people might need 12 sons, but she cannot be their mother. God will not force—or even encourage—Rivkah to endure something she experiences as so excruciating. God in this *midrash* will not force motherhood upon Rivkah—not even in order to bring about the Jewish future.

But what about this pregnancy, already real and agonizing? R. Hayyim Paltiel, a 13th century French commentator, imagines that when Rivkah goes to seek God, she is really considering an abortion:



ר' חיים פלטיאל בראשית כה:כב

פרש"י שהלכה לבית מדרשו של שם ועבר. תימ' למה לא הלכה לב"מ של אברהם שעדיין לא מת?...
 וי"ל לכך לא הלכה לב"מ של חמיה שהיה בדעתה שיתירו לה לשתות שום סם שהייתה מפלת והם
 השיבו זה הצער שיש לה שני גוים בבטניך, וחשבה אם אלך אצל חמי אפי' אם מותר לא יתיר לי בשביל
 בנו.

R. Hayyim Paltiel on Bereishit 25:22

Rashi explains that Rivkah went to the *beit midrash* of Shem and Ever. And this is astonishing! Why did she not go to the *beit midrash* of Avraham Avinu, who was still alive?... It may be that the reason she did not go to her father-in-law's *beit midrash* was because she wanted to take an abortifacient... and she thought that if she went to her father-in-law he would not allow it—even if it was permitted—because of his son.

R. Paltiel elaborates on Rashi, who claims that when Rivkah goes “*lidrosh et HaShem*,” to inquire of God, she is going to seek guidance from the *yeshivah* of Shem, Noah's son, understood in *midrash* to be a teacher of Torah. Why, R. Paltiel asks, would Rivkah go to Shem's *beit midrash* when Avraham, the greatest Torah scholar of the generation, was her father-in-law?

R. Paltiel suggests that Rivkah has a halakhic question that is far too personal and too sensitive to bring to her father-in-law: whether she may terminate her pregnancy. She is afraid that Avraham, Yitzhak's father, may forbid it, not because of halakhic reasons, but because he doesn't want to cause pain for Yitzhak, who prayed for this pregnancy. Rivkah, like so many Jewish women, is made even lonelier in her suffering because of her fear of judgment and an overly restrictive halakhic guide who may see other concerns—his son, future grandchildren, the Jewish future—more clearly than he can see the scared woman in front of him.



But while Avraham, at least in Rivkah's mind, may be incapable of responding to her pain, God is not.

בראשית כה:כג

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' לָהּ שְׁנֵי גוֹיִם בְּבֶטְנְךָ וְשְׁנֵי לְאֻמִּים מִמֶּעֶינֶךָ יִפְרְדּוּ וְלֹאִם מִלֵּאִם יִאָּמֵץ וְרַב יַעֲבֹד צָעִיר:

Bereishit 25:23

God said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples will separate from your innards; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger."

God does not respond to Rivkah's halakhic query with a yes or no. Instead, God gives her information. "Here is what is happening in your body. Here is what it means. Here is what will happen if you go through with your pregnancy." While it is not explicit in the narrative, what God means in this moment might be this: "You searched for me, and I am here. Here is what you need to know. The choice is yours."

So often, we think about the journey towards a wanted pregnancy as the locus of communion between a woman and God. It is the site of tears, of prayers, and, when the story ends in a birth, joyous thanks.

But Rivkah's story of finding God is different. It is the story of a woman who may not want to be a mother at all, who may not fit the maternal role the world has imagined as her destiny. It is the story of a woman who, in pain and desperately seeking an answer, cannot turn to her own family or rabbis.

We often tell those stories as areligious ones. We consign them to the realm of secular rights, ignoring the fact that they happen to deeply religious women each and every day.



But in this telling of the story, Rivkah seeks out God precisely in this moment—not in a moment where she desires a pregnancy, but where she is considering ending one, in a moment when she is contemplating a choice that so much of the world might see as godless.

And in that moment, God is there. Not to chastise Rivkah, not to urge her to be a better woman, to reconcile herself to her role as a mother, not to tell her to bear her pain—but simply to give her the information she has so far been denied, and to be with her as she chooses what to do with what she has been told.

God speaks to directly to Rivkah, but reading her story, we might imagine God whispering through the text, to us: “There does not have to be any realm of human experience, of human choice, even the most agonizing, where you cannot seek Me out.”

“Even in this moment—especially in this moment—when the world might turn its back, I am here.”

