A Life of Searching

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Something just short of miraculous happens in this week's *parashah*. Rivkah asks God a question, and God actually answers her.

בראשית כה:כב

וַיִּתְרֹצְצוּ הַבָּנִים בְּקִרְבָּהּ וַתֹּאמֶר אִם כֵּן לָמָּה זֶּה אָנֹכִי וַתֵּלֶךְ לִדְרֹשׁ אֶת ה׳׃

Genesis 25:22

But the children struggled in her womb, and she said, "If so, why do I exist?" She went to inquire of God.

Struggling with the confusing and jarring sensations of her pregnancy, Rivkah looks to God. She asks a question of God and receives an answer in the next verse: "Two nations are in your womb… but the older will serve the younger."

However, for many of us, this is not quite the case. It is not so easy to just turn to God and receive answers. Rather, some of us may find it hard to encounter God at all let alone receive a straightforward response.

How exactly did Rivkah inquire after God? What did she do that resulted in her successfully finding God and receiving God's answer? While our traditional commentators offer some ideas regarding what this search entailed,[1] interestingly, they do not seem to think it is remarkable that Rivkah asked a question of God and received an answer.

While our *parashah* may make it seem easy to get an answer from God, the Book of Psalms tells a different story. There are any number of Psalms in which the psalmist cries out to God, feeling abandoned and unheard by God. For example:

תהלים כב:ב-ג

[2]אֵ-לִי אֵ-לִי לָמָה עֲזַבְתָּנִי רָחוֹק מִישׁוּעָתִי דִּבְרֵי שַׁאֲגָתִי: [3]אֱלֹקַי אֶקְרָא יוֹמָם וְלֹא תַעֲנֶה וְלַיְלָה וְלֹא דֳמִיָּה לִי:

Psalm 22:2-3

[2]My God, my God, why have You forsaken me? Why are You so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish? [3]My God, I cry out by day, but You do not answer; by night, but I find no rest.

In Psalm 13, the psalmist expresses similar feelings of abandonment and despair in the absence of God's response.

תהלים יג:ב-ג

[2]עַד אָנָה ה' תִּשְׁכָּחֵנִי נֶצַח עַד אָנָה תַּסְתִּיר אֶת פָּנֶיךָ מִמֶּנִּי: [3]עַד אָנָה אָשִׁית עֵצוֹת בְּנַפְשִׁי יָגוֹן בִּלְבָבִי יוֹמָם עַד אָנָה יָרוּם אֹיְבִי עָלָי:

[1] See, e.g., the comments of Rashi and Rashbam on this verse.

Psalm 13:2-3

[2]How long, God, will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me?

[3]How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart?

Both of these psalms seem more relatable to an experience in which a person calls out to God and doesn't receive an answer. How are we to make sense of the ease with which Rivkah encounters God in our *parashah* in contrast to the psalmist's struggles as recorded so painfully and honestly in Psalms? How might these texts that offer very different experiences of searching for God inform our own inquiries of God in which we seek God and look for answers to our questions?

Perhaps, we may find an answer in Psalm 105 in which the psalmist writes,[2]

תהלים קה:ד

דִּרְשׁוּ ה׳ וְעֻזּוֹ בַּקְּשׁוּ פָנָיו תָּמִיד׃

Psalm 105:4

Turn to God, to divine might; seek God's presence always (*tamid*).

The use of the word *tamid*, meaning "always" or "constantly," suggests that inquiring or seeking God is not a one-time affair. One does not simply search for God and, after either succeeding or failing, move forward with one's life. We do not seek God and move on, ask a question and receive an answer. Rather, our relationship with God is defined by being in a continual state of searching. We should be in a constant search for God.

[2] See also Isaiah 55:6.

Midrash Tanḥuma is curious about the use of the word *tamid* in this verse and asks, why does the verse teach the word always? Why must one always be in search of God? This *midrash* answers:

מדרש תנחומא האזינו ד

שֶׁהַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא יִתְבָּרֵךְ שְׁמוֹ, פְּעָמִים נִרְאֶה וּפְעָמִים אֵינוֹ נִרְאֶה, פְּעָמִים שׁוֹמֵעַ וּפְעָמִים אֵינוֹ רוֹצֶה לִשְׁמֹעַ, פְּעָמִים עוֹנֶה וּפְעָמִים אֵינוֹ עוֹנֶה. פְּעָמִים נִדְרָשׁ וּפְעָמִים אֵינוֹ נִדְרָשׁ, פְּעָמִים מָצוּי וּפְעָמִים אֵינוֹ מָצוּי, פְּעָמִים קָרוֹב וּפְעָמִים אֵינוֹ קָרוֹב.

Midrash Tanḥuma Ha'azinu 4

To teach you [that] the Holy Blessed One sometimes appears and sometimes does not appear; sometimes hears and sometimes does not want to hear; sometimes answers and sometimes does not answer; sometimes is pursued and sometimes is not pursued; sometimes is found and sometimes is not found; sometimes is close and sometimes is not close.

Why must we seek God always? Because, apparently, God is not always there. God is sometimes close and sometimes far. God sometimes hears and sometimes God doesn't want to hear us. God is sometimes found and sometimes God is not found. Therefore, we must search for God always precisely because God is not always present with us. In very clear and honest language, Midrash Tanḥuma speaks to a reality of what it means to be in a relationship with God in which one does not always readily feel God's presence. This reality is reinforced by the plain text of the Torah, where centuries pass and entire generations go by without God speaking to them—from Cain to Noah, Noah to Abraham, and Jacob to Moses. Given that it is

simply a reality that God is both near and far, found and not found, we must search for God always.

R. Shalom Noah Berezovsky[3] taught often of our search for God and God's hiddenness in this world. He brings the following talmudic teaching:

תלמוד בבלי חגיגה ו.

כל שאינו בהסתר פנים אינו מהם.

Babylonian Talmud Hagigah 6a

Anyone who doesn't experience God's hiddenness isn't from among [the Jewish people].

Much like the teaching from Midrash Tanhuma, our Rabbis spoke of God's hiddenness as a fact. What it means to be Jewish is to experience God's hiddenness. In fact, one who doesn't experience God as hidden is discounted from being among the Jewish people. For this reason, when Moses asks to see God's face directly, God only allows Moses to see God's back, as God passes him by on the cleft of the mountain.[4] R. Berezovsky teaches,

נתיבות שלום פרשת כי תשא

וזה היה הגילוי של וראית את אחורי ופני לא יראו, שתכלית הבריאה היא וראית את אחורי ... ולהגיע להשי"ת מתוך ההעלם וההסתר, זה תפקידו של יהודי בעולמו.

Netivot Shalom Parashat Ki Tissa

This is the revelation of "You will see My back and My face will not be seen," because this is the point of creation, "You will see My back," and to come to the Holy One from within the hiddenness and concealment, this is the purpose of a Jew in God's world.

[3] Also known by his book as the Netivot Shalom (1911-2000).
[4] Exodus 33:22-23.

It is not only Moses who must encounter God through his back and not his front. It is all of us. We must all find our way to God through hiddenness and concealment. When confronted with God's back turned to us, our work is to endeavor to find God and seek God out.

It is our ultimate purpose as Jews to seek God and to find God within the hiddenness that is simply a fact of our relationship with God. This is not something we do once or twice, either succeeding or failing and moving forward. Rather, this purpose that R. Berezovsky speaks of is a life's work; the search itself is a sacred part of our relationship with God. There's holiness in the very act of seeking God.

So then what happened for Rivkah such that she was able to find God so easily? Perhaps, relationship with God is not all struggle. Sometimes, we too may be like Rivkah, fortunate enough to seek God out and encounter God. We may have our moments in which our desire to connect with God is met with a sense of being heard and answered. But a relationship with God is not a one-off pursuit. Other times, we may find ourselves to be more like the psalmist, wondering why we keep crying out only to receive no answer.

R. Berezovsky teaches us: the point is the search. We may not always get the answer we're looking for, or we may not receive an answer at all. That is part of the hiddenness that is embedded into the Jewish experience. But our work, our spiritual work, is to keep calling out to God, to keep searching, despite and within the concealment. This is the work of a lifetime.

In the Book of Amos, we read,

עמוס ה:ד

כִּי כֹה אָמַר ה׳ לְבֵית יִשְׂרָאֵל דִּרְשׁוּנִי וִחְיוּ׃

Amos 5:4

Thus said God to the House of Israel: “Seek Me, and you will live.”

As God teaches us, there is life in the very act of searching for God. Sometimes God will be close and sometimes God will be far. Sometimes God will be found and sometimes God can’t be found. But, as long as we keep searching for God *tamid,* as the psalmist teaches us, seeking God out and turning to God with our questions, there will be life.