

D'var Torah for the 50th Anniversary of Bat Mitzvah

Shabbat Vayishlach 5783

Back in 1972, Shabbat Vayishlach fell on November 24th-25th. In keeping with my family's congregation's still new practice, reflecting the compromise that kept girls off the bimah during the better-attended Shabbat morning services when the Torah was read, my bat mitzvah took place in the sanctuary the night after Thanksgiving.

The established adults, presumably in consultation our rabbi, had discussed moving this celebratory rite of passage to a date closer to my actual birthday, the 25th of Shevat. My paternal grandfather felt that we should go ahead as planned.

My most vivid memory of my entry in Jewish adulthood and possibly the saddest moment in my life up to that point occurred during that Friday night service. In the first rows, my grandfather, great uncle, father, and aunt rose to say kaddish for my grandmother who had died a few weeks earlier. On the bimah, I stood, too, weeping for my grandmother and my family.

Now the same age that my grandmother was when she died and having subsequently lost all these family members and others, I stand here today in awe and with tremendous gratitude for having known them.

As a 12-year-old, I couldn't have imagined looking back on my bat mitzvah 50 years later, as a grandmother myself, much less as a rabbi and having so recently completed 11 months of kaddish for my dad.

My thoughts on this week's parashah are for all of you in the sanctuary and on Zoom, also for my 12-year-old self, the young person who still lives within me.

Our teacher Rabbi Professor Judith Rebecca Hauptman recently proposed in her drash on parashat Hayyei Sarah (Genesis 23:1–25:18) that the biblical Rebekah, second of the matriarchs, by virtue of her courage and faith, was the true successor to Abraham rather than Isaac, her husband:

Like Abraham, she is willing to leave home and family behind, at great personal cost, and go and live with Isaac in Canaan. She understands that that is what God is asking of her. This decision, most remarkably, places her on par with Abraham, who also heeded the voice of God and left his family and birthplace behind...When she answers "yes, I will go," she is saying that she sees the future unfolding of Jewish history and the role she is being asked to play in it. ("Rebecca the Patriarch," Torah from JTS, p.1)

Long before she says, אֵלֶּיךָ אֵלֶּיךָ ("I will go"), indicating that she will leave home immediately with Isaac's servant, Eliezer, Rebekah is exceptional.

We know this because her birth is reported in the genealogy in Genesis 22, an anomaly to biblical practice of only mentioning sons:

וּבְתוֹאֵל יָלַד אֶת־רִבְקָה שְׁמֶנָּה אֵלֶּה יִלְדָה מִלְכָּה לְנָחוֹר אֶחָי אַבְרָהָם :

Bethuel became the father of Rebekah. These eight Milcah bore to Nahor, Abraham's brother.
(Genesis 22:23)

Rashi states of the first clause:

כָּל הַיְחֻסִּין הִלְלוּ לֹא נִכְתְּבוּ אֶלָּא בְּשֵׁבִיל פְּסוּק זֶה :

The entire genealogical record is given only for the sake of this verse.

Ramban goes even further:

לֹא הַזְכִּיר הַכְּתוּב לְבֵן וְאִם הוּא גָדוֹל מִרְבֵּקָה כִּי לֹא בֵּא לְהַזְכִּיר רַק הַשְּׁמוּנָה שִׁילְדָה
מִלְכָּה לְנָחוֹר אֲבֵל הַזְכִּיר רִבְקָה כִּי לְהוֹדִיעַ יְחֻסָּהּ בְּאֵה הַפְּרָשָׁה :

The verse does not mention Laban, even though he was older than Rebekah, for its intent is only to mention the eight children which Milcah bore to Nahor. However, Rebekah is mentioned since the entire chapter is written to make known her genealogy.

On meeting Eliezer, Rebekah identifies herself, citing her grandmother as the central figure in her lineage:

בְּתַבְּתוֹאֵל אֶנְכִּי בְּרַמְלָה אֲשֶׁר יִלְדָה לְנָחוֹר :

I am Bethuel's daughter; [he is] the son of Milcah, whom she bore to Nahor. (Genesis 24:24)

When Rebekah marries Isaac, the biblical narrator describes her in a typically masculine way underscoring her stature in relation to men and identifying her exclusively with the two men closest to her in her patrilineage:

רִבְקָה בְּתַבְּתוֹאֵל הָאֲרָמִי מִפְּדַן אַרְגָּם אֲחֹת לְבֹן הָאֲרָמִי.... :

Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean.
(Genesis 25:19)

On learning that God's intention is to maintain the covenant through Jacob, Rebekah single-mindedly fulfills the divine will, though it means deceiving Isaac and disinheriting Esau, her older son. In classical midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 63:6), Rebekah's virtuous behavior accords the merit for the twelve tribes springing directly from her through her son Jacob (Carol Bakhos, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, p. 150).

Surprisingly, Rebekah is the only matriarch whose death is absent from the Torah's narrative. Or maybe not.

Amidst all the drama in parashat Vayishlach surrounding Jacob's reunion with his estranged brother while in route to their ancestral home with his wives, servants, children and their herds and other wealth, Jacob's wrestling with a divine envoy, Dinah's rape by Shechem and her brothers' revenge, Jacob's name change to Israel, and even the extensive genealogy of Esau's descendants, there is a very short, seemingly incongruous story:

וַתָּמָת דִּבְרָה מִיַּנְיָקוֹת רִבְקָה וַתִּקְבָּר מִתַּחַת לְבֵית־אֵל תַּחַת הָאֵלֹן וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ אֵלֹן בְּכוֹת: (פ)

Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died, and was buried under the oak below Bethel; so it was named Allon-bacuth. (Genesis 38:5)

Rabbinic commentators throughout the ages understand this verse as an allusion to Rebekah's death, elaborating on the Torah's account to explain the story's appearance here, why Deborah is present, and how Rebekah's death affects the narrative's hero, Jacob.

Feminist scholars have read this verse as a reference to the matriarch's death, as well. Dr. Ruth Fagin, who sees Deborah as a psychological stand-in for Rebekah, holds that she is such a powerful character that her death cannot even be mentioned lest Jacob's life derail. The Torah represses Rebekah's death and mentions Deborah instead, as a kind of mother-substitute – a veiled allusion to the real mother-loss.

Roni Tabick, who views Vayishlach as "the parashah of repressed mourning," carries this line of thought a step further:

Deborah's grave lies beneath the altar of Yaakov's new tribe. This place of new beginnings and fulfilled blessings is also a place of remembered mother-loss. Repression of the mother, human and/or divine, is being placed at the core of tribal memory.

As much as I am drawn to the uplifting of Rebekah's memory and centering her story in the narrative of our collective origin, I find Funlola Olojede's counter-reading of the biblical text most compelling of all. A scholar focused on human dignity and biblical tradition, she says of Deborah:

The respect accorded to this extraordinary wet nurse at her funeral shows that, to the mourners, Deborah was not an insignificant person; neither does the text portray her as a nobody. In death, she was accorded the kind of mourning reserved for heroes and great women or men. That the text recognized Deborah in this manner shows that, in God's script, there are no little people. The tendency to gloss over Genesis 35:8, to pretend that Deborah is not there or that she is someone else (for instance, Rebekah) is uncalled for.

Olojede adds:

It seems highly unlikely that commentators would have perceived Genesis 35:8 as puzzling, if the death of Rebekah or Sarah were reported in that verse. However,

because Deborah is regarded as an ordinary maid who could not have earned that much praise in death, they wonder how the verse got to its present location (The "First Deborah", *Acta Theologica June 2016*).

On this Shabbat morning, I offer you and me, us together, this challenge in four questions:

- ~ *In Torah and in our daily lives, whose stories do we elevate?*
- ~ *To what lengths are we willing to go to do so?*
- ~ *Where can we arrive, individually and together, when every day we live the belief that "in God's script, there are no little people"?*
- ~ *Who has the courage and the faith to say, אֲלֵכֶם – I will go now?*

Shabbat Shalom.

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