

Toldot 5786

I am here to mount a defense of Rebecca. I think Rebecca gets a bad rap in this week's parasha. And I think it's not fair. Especially after last week's parasha, when she is the paragon of kindness and courage. If we remember, last week Abraham, recognizing that he's nearing the end of his life, sends his trusty servant Eliezer to his homeland to find a wife for Isaac. Eliezer meets Rebecca, who immediately offers to draw water from the well for not only Eliezer but his ten camels. This chesed, this loving and generous kindness to a stranger, is the quality and qualification to be Isaac's wife. Then, when presented by her family with the option to follow this unknown man (Eliezer) to another land to marry Isaac, a man she's never met, she decides she wants to go.

There are those who see Rebecca as Abraham's spiritual heir even more than Isaac. She makes a journey like Abraham's into the unknown. She receives a blessing, like Abraham, that her descendants will be "thousands of myriads." And in this week's parasha, she secures the continuity of the covenant, not only by giving birth to its bearer, Jacob, but by working to ensure that the covenant goes through him.

This is where her reputation takes a hit. Instead of being known as our primary example of chesed, she's associated with adjectives like dishonest, conniving, manipulative. When Jacob becomes known for these same qualities, it is Rebecca of course who is blamed for teaching them to him. And we can understand why she is blamed for these things. When her husband Isaac is blind and old and bedbound, and ready to give the birthright to their son Esau, Rebecca instructs Jacob to impersonate his brother, and lie to his father, in order to receive it instead.

I'm not even going to try to defend these actions. I do not condone them or excuse them or recommend them. I would suggest that they have something to do with the relative lack of authority granted to women in the Biblical family. Even so, she probably could have handled the situation in a more ethical manner.

But I'd like us to approach Rebecca's character with the benefit of the doubt, and ask why she was in this position in the first place. Why was Rebecca so certain that the birthright should go to Jacob? And why did she feel personally

responsible for changing the outcome of what was happening around her? What made her know that she should act?

A couple of chapters earlier, we find a possible answer. Rebecca is pregnant with twins. וַיִּתְרַצְצוּ הַבָּנִים בְּקֶרְבָּהּ וַתֹּאמֶר אִם-כֵּן לָמָּה זֶה אֲנֹכִי וַתֵּלֶךְ לְדֹרֵשׁ אֶת-יְהוָה:

The children struggled in her womb, and she said “If so, why do I exist?” and went to seek out Adonai.

What exactly is going on here? The question she asks, Lama = why; zeh = this; anochi = me. It could be “Why me?” It could be “What is this that’s happening to me?” Rashi thinks it means she’s merely regretting choosing to be pregnant because it’s so painful. Chizkuni thinks she’s saying she’d rather die than go through so much pain. Sforno thinks she’s blaming Isaac for getting her pregnant and her family for wanting her to be the mother of myriads. It’s possible that her query is this mundane.

But Ibn Ezra says that Rebecca went around and asked other women if they’d experienced something similar, and they had not. So given that something abnormal was happening to her, she wanted to understand why. Ramban thinks that Rebecca is asking a metaphysical question. What is this unusual phenomenon? How do I make sense of what’s happening to me? Is there something I’m supposed to understand? Is there some purpose I have here? *Vatelech lidrosh et Adonai*, and she went to inquire of, to seek out Adonai. Ramban says, “I have not discovered the word drisha/lidrosh in relation to G-d, except in the context of prayer.”

In other words, Rebecca, not understanding what was happening, not understanding what her role was in it, decided to pray. Rebecca is the first person in the Torah who asks G-d about the meaning of her life. When unsure how to understand the events happening around and within her, she seeks out G-d. How should I understand what’s happening? What do you need from me, G-d? What am I here to do? It was out of this encounter with G-d that Rebecca understood that Jacob was meant to receive the birthright, and when she saw that Isaac was doing the wrong thing, she had to act. If it hadn’t been for her prayer and for her action, the Jewish people would not exist.

Not only did she act decisively to found the Jewish people, she taught us about our lives now, about what to do when we're confused or afraid, and we don't know what to do.

Perhaps you saw the Times Editorial piece today and the video this week of people who were detained by ICE and Border Patrol, telling of the hell they experienced in detention. The extreme cold. The lights on 24 hours a day. The rats. The food that made them sick. The mocking humiliation by the guards. That they weren't told of any charges or any reason that they were taken. Jemmy Jimenez Rosa was returning from vacation with her husband and two children when she was taken from them in Boston Logan Airport. Imagine coming home from vacation and your mother is just taken, no explanation. She has been a legal permanent resident of the US since she was nine years old. She had committed no crime other than being found in possession of marijuana more than 20 years ago. According to the Migration Policy Institute, as of September, 71.5 percent of people held in detention had no criminal record at all. Of the rest many had a minor infraction, like driving with a broken tail light. Many are here legally.

Add to that the president's indifference to the cold-blooded murder committed by a foreign leader. Add to that the blowing up of people at sea with no evidence of wrongdoing. Add to that a hundred other actions, all of a kind. All about devaluing human life.

Why are we not stopping everything to stop this government?

In 2016 and 2017, during the first Trump administration, 10,000 people organized here at CBE, establishing 40 different efforts to defend human dignity, the social safety net, and our basic notions of shared humanity. Now, our federal government is being dismantled and reshaped. Our societal norms are being shattered. Our economy, our entire legal system, our very social contract are all threatened. It's almost as if, because it's so big and so total, we don't know what to do or how to do it.

For the most part, we have been speaking about this moment as if it is solely concerning our form of governance, as if what is at stake is only our democracy. Yes, we are losing our democracy. But what concerns us most is not one person one vote. What concerns us most is not a system of checks and balances. What

concerns us most is not the Bill of Rights. Obviously, these concern us greatly. But the reason they concern us greatly is not a reason of politics or governance. It is because they represent something even more precious than that. They represent moral truth. The moral truth that every human being has equal and inherent dignity. Or, in Jewish language, that every human being is created in the image of G-d. That every human life is sacred, is the equivalent of an entire world. And therefore what is hateful to us we must not do to another. We of all people know what it means to keep silent when those bedrock principles are violated.

When innocent people are brutalized and snatched by agents of our government with no due process, it is not just a legal violation, it is a violation of the soul. All of our souls.

When capricious cruelty is celebrated by our government, it is not just a political crisis. It is a crisis of the soul.

When truth and justice are utterly erased by the people in charge, it is not just a societal catastrophe. It is a catastrophe of the soul.

That knowing in our soul of right and wrong. That compass point in our soul about what is good and what is evil. That essence in us that is connected to and a part of the Oneness, to G-d who cares most of all for the widow and orphan and stranger, for the vulnerable and the hungry, and the terrified. G-d who stood against Pharaoh. Our souls are attuned to that G-d.

And for those who are new here, I'll say something I say often. When you come across the word G-d, whether I say it or it's in your siddur, if that is an obstacle for you, or something you don't feel connected to or relate to, translate it. It means that we are part of something so much bigger than us. It means that we look out at the mystery of existence, the universe, life, time, and we stand in wonder and awe, it means that we know that there's so much we don't know. And prayer – for some of us it means speaking to G-d, and for some of us it means speaking into the unknown or speaking to the Oneness, or speaking to the vastness or speaking to our own souls. No matter what you call it or how you understand it, our souls are desperate to be heard, to be listened to, to reach for guidance and comfort and help through prayer.

I humbly suggest to you that it is time to pray. Here, together, as we have just done and do. And also not here. At home and when we're on our way. When we wake up and lie down. In our quiet moments throughout the day. Yes, prayers of gratitude for the simple blessings of being alive and being sustained and getting another day to live. But also different kinds of prayers. Prayers of sorrow and grief. Prayers of fear and worry. Prayers of accountability to our Source and to our purpose. Prayers for guidance. Prayers for help. We need help.

"Please, G-d, let me not be like those who watched and did nothing.

Please, G-d, I do not know what to do.

Please, G-d, let me not be silent.

Please, G-d, I am afraid, give me courage."

"I am so grateful for my life, please show me how to live through this time. I know that people are suffering all around me. I know that people are afraid and feel alone and don't have what they need. I want to do right. I want to be proud of how I've shown up. But it all feels so overwhelming and unstoppable, I don't know what I can do to make a difference, and I'm afraid that if I do anything I'll just put myself in danger. Show me how, G-d, please."

There are many prayers in our tradition that can serve our needs right now, mostly outside of the Shabbat liturgy. The weekday Amidah, for example, contains a prayer asking for discernment and wisdom, a prayer asking G-d to help us with our struggles and our afflictions. A prayer for the oppressed and for freedom. A prayer that our judges and our leaders will govern justly. A prayer that governments of wickedness will be shattered and vanish from the earth. A prayer that truth and justice will flourish and we will be saved, a prayer that our voices will be heard.

And, you don't even need a siddur to pray. In the noble tradition of Rebbe Nachman and so many others of our luminaries, you can simply pour out your heart in your own words. Like Rebecca, you can simply ask *Lama Zeh Anochi*. Give me guidance. Show me why I'm here. Show me how I'm needed. Show me who to be right now.

When we pray, we will hear the voice of our souls and find our way to show up to this moment. Here at CBE we have our Meet the Moment campaign. There are myriad opportunities in this community to show up with others.

I believe that we are all here to rise to moments just like this. I believe we are all here to be brave. I believe we are capable of embodying our highest ideals and most fundamental values. Of being the people who say “No, not in my name.” Who say, “You are not alone. I am with you.” Who say, “Hold my hand. We will get through this together.”

Prayer can help us find our way there. May each of us find our way.

Shabbat Shalom.