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## Rebekah and Isaac: A Marriage Made in Heaven

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**O**N THE LONG JOURNEY BACK TO CANAAN, ABRAHAM'S MESSENGER, HAVING ONCE BEFORE TURNED ELOQUENT, ROUSES HIMSELF TO LIGHTEN TIME FOR REBEKAH. HE RECITES A VERSION OF THE STORY HE TOLD HER family after meeting Rebekah at the well.

"What good luck for you, Rebekah! Your future is assured. Abraham is your wise and powerful father-in-law. He smashed the old idols. True God spoke to him, 'Take your son and sacrifice him on the mountain....'"

But before this part of Eliezer's story can reach Rebekah's hearing, a strong desert wind rises up in the space between his mouth and Rebekah's ear and blows the words away.

When Eliezer realizes what has happened, he sprints to another part of the story. "And what bad luck for you, Rebekah, that you couldn't know Sarah! A woman of valor, a beauty in her day. God also spoke to her. God personally announced to Sarah the birth of Isaac, your husband! Marvelous family. Lucky girl, Rebekah! Watch out for those sinkholes—just nudge your camel a little that way."

Another servant rides alongside. "Here's a story," he says. "There were two brothers. They had a hard life. One was barred from the house. A boy, a bare fourteen, sent into the wilderness. Do you think any human creature came with a drop of water? God did. Miracles. Then the father raised his hand to kill the second son. Don't ask me to explain, but this boy, too, was saved at the last minute. A miracle he's still alive, your..."

As the servant pronounces Isaac's name, all the camels in the caravan set up a loud braying and drown it out. The servant rides quickly away.

Then Rebekah's nurse and maids ride to her side. They try to speak of what they've learned on the way. But Rebekah silences them. Her brother had warned, "Don't chatter on the journey, as women do! Don't pester this man with questions. He's told his story. Remember he comes from God, or at least from Abraham's God. Keep your face veiled, your eyes on your camel, and whatever you do, don't disgrace your family!"

Thus the caravan travels in silence, respectful of the journeying bride, her ignorance, her fear, her longing, her sacred mission. Of that mission she knows only that water, and the simple daily task of drawing from the well, have washed away all that she possessed of home. And so Rebekah remains ignorant of the *Akedah*, the binding of Isaac, the man she is to marry.

THE PASSAGE ABOVE IS AN INVENTION IN THE MANNER OF MIDRASH, A FORM OF Bible commentary developed by rabbis of the first centuries of the Common Era. It asks a question about the Bible story of Rebekah—does no one ever tell her about the *Akedah*, the binding and near-sacrifice of Isaac?—and supplies an imagined text to account for the not-telling. Other aspects of the Rebekah and Isaac story also strike me as prime midrashic moments, spaces in the narrative to be questioned, elucidated, imagined. Yet I do not find them among examples of midrashic literature.

The Bible recounts only the end of Rebekah's journey to meet the husband she has never seen. Eliezer identifies the figure of Isaac in a field. Rebekah descends from the camel. Isaac approaches.

Though much is made of the ceremony of drawing and offering water when Eliezer first meets Rebekah at the well, here at Rebekah's first encounter with Isaac, mention of water is omitted. There is only the messenger's summary to Isaac of "all the things he had done," with their implied confirmation of Rebekah's credentials, and Isaac's precipitous taking of Rebekah into the deceased Sarah's tent, where he is "comforted after his mother" [GENESIS 24:67]. And that is all. No water, no refreshment. "What ceremony else?" one longs to ask, as Hamlet does over Ophelia's grave.

Traditional midrash does not address an ironic absence here, though to me the text cries out for it. Why, when Isaac greets his bride, is there no mention of the element in which the earlier text is drenched?<sup>1</sup> In this lack, this obliviousness to Rebekah's needs, accompanied by Isaac's thirst for instant sexual gratification for himself, shouldn't we understand that for Rebekah a dry, infertile period will follow? In fact, Rebekah is barren for the first twenty years of her marriage to Isaac.

What was the effect on Rebekah of having to suffer years of barrenness in a time when having children (sons, Biblical women always said) was a woman's *raison d'être*? What was the effect on Rebekah of becoming the wife of a man whose father had been willing to kill him as a sacrifice to God? Might not these aspects of Rebekah's married life have contributed to the forging of her astonishing plan to rearrange the order in which her sons, Jacob and Esau, receive their father's blessing, and to her ability to carry out that plan?

The questions concerning the marriage of Rebekah and Isaac that so compel me did not compel the rabbis. However, they left a great body of commentary on what did compel them. I will shortly give a sampling to indicate some directions of their thought.

ERIC AUERBACH'S *MIMESIS* FAMOUSLY NOTES THAT THE HEBREW BIBLE IN ITS terseness expresses moral teaching above all, in contrast to Homer's story-telling mode in the *Odyssey*, where details abound and aesthetics predominates over ethics. In the Bible, a detail-less simplicity and almost unbearable tension: "serving-men, ass, wood, and knife, and nothing else, without an epithet; they are there to serve the end which God has commanded," says Auerbach of the *Akedah*. For Rebekah, the well; for Isaac, the *Akedah*. She was generous and life-giving; he was nearly sacrificed. That is all the background the Bible accords this bride and groom, progenitors of Biblical Jews, mother and father to our sacral selves.

It may be because Bible stories are as terse and as given to moral teaching as Auerbach describes that midrash was born. Some traditional midrash comments on Bible stories with narratives, *aggadot*, that elaborate with an

<sup>1</sup> Some midrashic commentary toys with the notion that when Rebekah first saw Isaac in the field he had gone there to urinate (and that the sight caused her to fall from her camel). This variation of the water theme seems almost a cruelty in its underlining of the lack of potable liquid, even a travesty turn (unconscious or not) on the noble and elegant scene between Rebekah and Eliezer at the well.

interweaving of astonishing detail, and do not always express moral teaching. Sometimes detail reinforces the original intention of the Bible story; at other times it pulls the story elsewhere with seemingly absurdist and gratuitous linkings. (Samuel Ha-Nagid said: “Each one explained the verse according to his fancy and according to what came into his mind.” All the same, says another source, if “you wish to get to know Him by whose word the world came into being—study the *aggadah*.”)

In Genesis 24:50, Abraham’s servant Eliezer tells Rebekah’s family that God led him to a wife for Isaac. Her brother and father remark, “The matter has come from the Lord.” From this, the rabbis infer that marriages are made in heaven. These two pieces of information, the story of Rebekah and Eliezer at the well, and the midrash about marriages made in heaven that the rabbis of the early centuries spin from it, have come down to us through the ages with undying resonance, though not necessarily in their original causal connection. This midrashic gloss on marriages made in heaven may be sounding an ironic note, the very kind of note the midrash-writing rabbis loved to seize on, since the marriage of Rebekah and Isaac does not strike the reader as ideal. Or it may be by-passing altogether the idea that the heavenly is the ideal and substituting for it the ordained, the necessary. Isaac, the traumatized, near-sacrificed man, must marry Rebekah, the water-bringer, the life-giver. A perfect solution, from a certain point of view.

In any case, that is one kind of midrash—from the particular to the general. A far more prevalent kind is from the particular to the more particular. Traditional midrash can comment gravely, piously, homiletically, in support of the apparent intentions of the Bible story—but sometimes it does not. A striking feature of the rabbis’ midrashic commentary—aside from learnedness, the imprint of the time in which they lived, and the aspects of the Bible that stirred their attention—is that they seemed to have had no anxiety about putting the most imaginative (more bluntly: far out, scandalous) conjectures to paper.

The rabbis conjectured that the long trip to Canaan that Rebekah, Isaac’s bride-to-be, took in the company of Eliezer the servant was, from Isaac’s point of view, sexually dangerous.<sup>2</sup> No doubt, they said, it was miraculously speeded up to a matter of mere hours for safety’s sake. All the same, midrash

<sup>2</sup> All references to midrash are from Louis Ginzberg’s *The Legends of the Jews*.

shrewdly goes on, Isaac’s past made him distrustful. Perhaps he thought that on the way the servant behaved improperly. Wasn’t Rebekah injured, after all, in some manner? Fell off the camel at the sight of Isaac, but why? And wasn’t there some blood? This in perfect disregard of what the Biblical text is so eager to have us know: that Eliezer is a faithful, steadfast, loyal servant who, at the sight of Rebekah, bows down and praises God! How I envy the tranquility with which the midrash-writing rabbis explained the verse “according to fancy!”

This makes me wonder why it is that someone whose knowledge of Bible begins in the literary, and whose immediate past contains no pious parent or teacher to be troubled or shocked—someone, in other words, like me—feels a certain unease about letting “fancy” play in print on the lives of these Biblical personages, Rebekah and Isaac, while the pious rabbinic midrashists apparently felt no such constraint. Should I conclude that to live in a religious age was more liberating than we can now conceive? If the demonic, or at least the Dionysian (for want of a Hebraic term I’ll use a Greek one), at times rose up on goat legs and capered a while with fancy—that, too, was from God.

Biblical Abraham does not equivocate about sacrificing Isaac; he goes right to it. In midrash, Abraham argues for Isaac’s life as he once did for the lives of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. The rabbis felt the need to fill that gap in Abraham’s nature; the midrash changes him from a stoic to a grieving father. But another midrash offers a nightmare version of the *Akedah*. Far from reluctant, says the midrash, Abraham was so intent on killing Isaac that he kept his son safe in a casket to make sure he would remain unblemished for the sacrifice. One midrash even says there was no ram provided for the sacrifice: Abraham killed Isaac; the angels brought him back to life; Abraham killed him again. A second Isaac then arose to take his place (a kind of mystical precursor to Freud’s murdered Moses who was, according to *Moses and Monotheism*, replaced in the wilderness by another man the Jews also called Moses). Midrash can be tragical-comical or comical-tragical: Of course there was a ram! It was Abraham’s pet and he called it Isaac.

Yet another midrash tells us that Isaac sustained an “unspecified injury” as a result of the *Akedah*. For me, this news reverberates like the note sounded by Henry James: the obscure hurt that biographers speculate foreclosed James’ capacity for marriage. Here, I tell myself, is midrashic support for at least one question about Rebekah’s barrenness, although the rabbis never ask it.

As a writer of fiction, I am struck by the way in which the midrashic

writing of the rabbis resembles the creation of fiction, with one important exception. Midrash, unlike writers' revisions, comes after the final Bible story-version, the one already in the canon. But midrash can sometimes seem like alternative drafts of a Bible story. It still insists on its right to imagine what might have been, as if each character continued to possess countless possibilities beyond its Bible definition.

Q: What did God do after creating the world?

A: After creating the world, God studied Talmud, arranged marriages, and played with Leviathan.

Q: What did Rebekah do in the twenty years of her barrenness?

A: She read novels. By this is meant: she foresaw that one day writings would appear to describe the lives of men and women, and she imagined events in these still-to-be-created works. In this way one says that Rebekah "read" novels. In short, she passed the time creating midrash; she invented the story of her own life.



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