

## Rebekah: Too Much or Not Enough?

### *Shabbat Tol'dot 5781*

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Rebekah is the main character in *Parashat Tol'dot*, our portion this week. Described as “barren” in the opening verses, Rebekah nevertheless soon becomes pregnant with twins. Enduring a painful pregnancy, Rebekah seeks comfort from God, Who responds by offering Rebekah prophecy: God tells her that the second-born of the twins will be dominant. Later, Rebekah assures that the prophecy becomes reality. Rebekah learns that Isaac is about to offer his choicest blessing to the elder son, Esau, as soon as he hunts game and returns with a tasty dish for his dad. Rebekah springs into action. She disguises the younger Jacob as Esau, prepares a dish to mimic the one that Esau is supposed to bring, and emboldens her younger son to deceive his father into bestowing on him the blessing intended for Esau. Finally, as Esau threatens to murder Jacob for stealing his paternal blessing, Rebekah again takes control. She convinces Isaac and Jacob that the younger son must flee to save his life—not incidentally, to her hometown, where he may find a suitable wife.

Even though virtually all the action throughout the portion is initiated by Rebekah, the reading begins, “This is the legacy of Isaac, son of Abraham,”<sup>i</sup> leaving out not only Rebekah but Isaac’s own beloved late mother, Sarah. Are we to learn the story of a patriarchal line, with women’s roles thrust aside?

Soon, Isaac “pleads with the Eternal on behalf of his wife, for she was childless.”<sup>ii</sup> Now, briefly, Isaac is the actor, or so it seems. The ancient rabbis are not so sure. Why, after all, would only the husband pray when the couple is unable to conceive? In midrash, we learn that, rather than praying “on behalf of his wife,” Isaac prays “facing” Rebekah, who is equally beseeching God that they may be blessed with offspring.<sup>iii</sup> Wow! The ancient rabbis seem give voice to a woman at a moment when she seems to be silent in the Torah—rather remarkable for a group of men, writing nearly 2000 years ago.

Unfortunately, it doesn’t last. In the very next verse, suffering a painful pregnancy, Rebekah, “went to inquire of the Eternal,”<sup>iv</sup> Who responds to her with a revelation about her children.<sup>v</sup> The rabbis, though, are not prepared to imagine a direct encounter between God and a woman. They say, for example, that she seeks divine guidance at “the tent of Ever,” a distant ancestor of the family who is imagined to be operating a Torah study academy.<sup>vi</sup> Rebekah is demoted to receiving the critical divine guidance from men, even though Torah explicitly introduces the prophecy with the words, “The Eternal One said to her.”<sup>vii</sup>

My conclusion, developed thirty years ago when I wrote my rabbinic thesis about midrash on Rebekah, is that the sages could not imagine this matriarch to be silent; but at the same time, they could not stand for a woman to be in direct communication with God. Rebekah, as the prime actor in this story, can't just be sitting there while Isaac prays for a child. Still, for a group of exclusively men, interpreting God's will for the Jewish people, the notion that a woman might have direct access to God is unacceptable.

What the rabbis do to Rebekah is not all that different from what we now understand as "mansplaining." This group of men "explains" that Rebekah cannot have had the encounter she experienced with God, but must have learned from men.

I do see the irony in the fact that I, a man, am about to describe, denounce and suggest remedies to mansplaining, so let me explain in the words of a woman, reporter Lara Rutherford-Morrison: "When a man 'mansplains' something to a woman, he interrupts or speaks over her to explain something she already knows—indeed, something in which she may already be an expert—on the assumption that he must know more than she does...When men interrupt or presume to correct a woman who is speaking of her own experience or expertise, they are implying that she is ignorant, that she is incapable of having authoritative knowledge. They are saying, essentially, 'Shh. I know best.'"<sup>viii</sup>

A *Cosmopolitan* reporter, Gina Mei, asked women for infuriating examples of mansplaining. The responses flowed freely: "I once had a friend mansplain to my roommate how to—correctly—pronounce her own name because he thought she was doing it wrong...At the racetrack—where I've worked for fourteen years—men regularly try to explain to me how gambling works as I take their bets...Obstetrician disagreed that my baby was about to come. Mansplained and left for soda. Three minutes later: Baby born, no doc in room."<sup>ix</sup>

The last example may seem problematic. After all, the man is a physician trained in his specialty; the woman in labor is not a doctor. Mansplaining to women about their own bodies, though, is on every list that women provide when they describe their frustrations. Moreover, it's relevant to our biblical example. It's as if the rabbinic sages are telling Rebekah: The prophecy about the fetuses in your womb can't have come to you directly; men must have communicated it!

The good news is that we can do something about mansplaining. Rutherford-Morrison agrees "that the vast majority of men don't wake up and think, 'Gosh! I wonder how I can devalue women's experiences today!'" I have been guilty. We men do need to be more mindful.

A well-known example from our tradition may help us elevate women's voices. When we discuss the Song at the Sea, *Mi Chamocha*, praising God's saving power, we often recall that Miriam lifted up her voice and led the Israelites in that song. That description doesn't fully reflect the Torah's, where the Song is introduced, "Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Eternal."<sup>x</sup> Only after the nineteen-verse song is complete do we read, "Then Miriam the prophet...picked up a hand-drum, and all the women went out after her in dance...And Miriam chanted for them."<sup>xi</sup> I do not know why I always thought Miriam to be the leader, long before I started reading the Torah seriously, but that was years before Debbie Friedman wrote the song that reinforces Miriam's leading role. Now, that song has popularized Miriam's primary place in the narrative and her designation as a prophet across generations.

In reading *Parashat Tol'dot*, our sages offer us two models, raising up the voices of women when they are implausibly absent and degrading women's voices when they are deemed out of place. Let us affirm one of these examples and resolutely reject the other. When we do not hear women's voices, let us listen harder. Then, let us celebrate every voice that is raised—pleading with Rebekah and rejoicing with Miriam.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Genesis 25:19.

<sup>ii</sup> Genesis 25:21.

<sup>iii</sup> Midrash Aggadah, Genesis 25:21:2 *inter alia*.

<sup>iv</sup> Genesis 25:22.

<sup>v</sup> Genesis 25:23

<sup>vi</sup> Bartenura on Genesis 25:22, *inter alia*. See also W. Gunther Plaut, General Editor, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, Revised Edition, David E.S. Stern, General Editor, New York: Union for Reform Judaism, 2005, p. 173. Note that Chizkuni to Genesis 25:23 claims that Abraham delivered the revelation to her, even though Abraham had died and was buried in Genesis 25:7-11.

<sup>vii</sup> Genesis 25:23.

<sup>viii</sup> Laura Rutherford-Morrison, "6 Subtle Mansplanations Women Encounter Every Day," *Bustle*, January 19, 2016.

<sup>ix</sup> Gina Mei, "17 Absolutely Infuriating Examples of Mansplaining," *Cosmopolitan*, March 24, 2017.

<sup>x</sup> Exodus 15:1.

<sup>xi</sup> Exodus 15:20-21.