



20 Kislev 5784 | December 2, 2023

Vayishlach: When God Blesses Mourners **Zan Alhadeff, Class of 2027**

As Ya'akov journeys from the house of Lavan (in Paddam-Aram), God commands him to return to Beit El, the site of his dream of the ladder reaching towards the heavens. "Arise, go up to Beit El and remain there; and build an altar there to the God who appeared to you when you were fleeing from your brother Esav" (Bereshit 35:1).

Ya'akov follows instructions, arrives at Beit El, and builds the altar. And then, something strange happens in the middle of the narrative. They stop to bury a woman named Devorah:

Devorah, Rivka's nurse, died, and was buried under the oak below Bethel; so it was named "Alon-Bakot" (Bereshit 35:8).

Devorah is named as "Rivka's nurse," and the place she was buried, beneath the mountain of Beit El, is called "Alon-Bakot," which can be translated as the Oak Tree of Weeping. This passage raises several questions: who was Devorah, and why does the Torah mention her death and burial? The death of Rivka, Ya'akov's mother, is never mentioned in the text.

Kohelet Rabba explains (also referenced in Bereishit Rabba) that when Ya'akov buried Devorah, he was also mourning the deeper loss of Rivka. In this moment, grief piles upon grief. The *midrash* imagines Ya'akov experiencing a double loss, both of the nurse (one wonders if she had nursed him as a child), and of his beloved mother, who set him on his path literally and figuratively. It is also interesting that she is buried at the foot of Beit El, evoking a connection between the place of God and his maternal "roots."

Immediately afterwards, God appears:

God appeared again to Ya'akov on his arrival from Paddan-Aram. God blessed him. (Bereishit 35:9)

This verse is curious, and several commentators puzzled over the chronology—from burial to divine blessing. Why does God appear just then? What is God’s blessing to Ya'akov, and how does it connect to the grief and burial? The text does not share the content of this blessing.

According to several *midrashim*, God comes to comfort Ya'akov in his mourning, and the blessing that he gives is *birkat avelim*, the “mourner’s blessing.” The *midrash* also places this act in the context of many other examples of God performing acts of *gemilut hasadim* (lovingkindness):

It is written: “The Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skin, and clothed them” (Bereishit 3:21). We have found that the Holy One blessed be He performs acts of kindness: He adorns brides, blesses grooms, visits the ill, buries the dead, and comforts the mourners.

...

He comforts the mourners, as it is written: “He called its name Alon Bakhut” (Bereishit 35:8). Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahman said: What is Alon Bakhut? While he was observing the mourning for Deborah, his nursemaid, tidings reached him that his mother Rebecca had died, and he wept two weepings [*bekhiyot*]; that is why it is stated [that Ya'akov called that place] Alon Bakhut. And [the verse] states regarding Ya'akov: “[And God appeared to Ya'akov again...] and blessed [him]” (Bereishit 35:9)—He blessed him with the blessing of the mourners (Kohelet Rabba 7:2:3).

This is a powerful image. God appears to comfort the *Avot* and gives Ya'akov a blessing of comfort. It also weaves together this gap in the text between burial and divine visitation.

But what is this “mourner’s blessing?” *Birkat Avelim* is mentioned in multiple rabbinic sources (Megillah, Pesachim, Ketubot, Berakhot) and is no longer practiced today. According to Barternura’s commentary on Mishnah Megillah (4:3), *birkat avelim* was a blessing given in the open air after the mourners returned from the funeral, and the *minyán* (who forms a line at the funeral to comfort the mourners) would give a blessing

for the mourners and those who comfort the mourners. The three-part mourner's blessing has some similarities to the wedding *sheva berakhot* (it was also said for seven days in the presence of *panim hadashot*, see Miller)¹. According to Saul Lieberman's analysis (quoted in Miller), the words of consolation from this blessing were later inserted into the *Birkat haMazon* for mourners.

The *Tosefta* in Berakhot (3) illustrates:

Where it is the practice to recite the mourner's blessing, if the custom is to say three blessings, they say three...If the custom is to say three blessings, the first one should be on *techiyat ha'metim* (resurrection of the dead), the second one on the subject of *tanchumei avelim* (comforting mourners), and the third on *gemilut hasadim* (deeds of lovingkindness) (*Tosefta Berakhot* 3:23-24).

Within the *midrashim*, the Rabbis imagined God affirming their practice of *birkat avelim*, pronouncing public blessings for both the mourners and the comforters. And in turn, the rabbinic practice of *birkat avelim* focused on praising God, the one who resurrects, comforts, and bestows *hesed* to all people.

This practice lives on in the words of consolation that people give to mourners, as well as within the special *Birkat haMazon* in a house of mourning. According to the *Shulchan Arukh*, there is a practice to add in the third blessing:

Some add in the third blessing, "Comfort, O Lord our God, the mourners of Jerusalem and the mourners who are observing this mourning. Comfort them from this mourning and make them rejoice from their sorrow, as it is said, *Like one whom a mother comforts. So I will comfort you: You shall find comfort in Jerusalem* (Isaiah 66:13). Blessed art Thou, O God, who comforts Zion in the rebuilding of Jerusalem" (*Shulchan Arukh*, *Yoreh Deah* 379).

"Like one whom a mother comforts," Ya'akov was also comforted by God after the death of his own mother. When God appears after the death of *meneket Rivka*, perhaps

¹ Stuart S. Miller, "Why Sheva Berakhot?", *Tradition* 50:3 (2017): 8-34.



20 Kislev 5784 | December 2, 2023

God appears as a Mother, providing comfort and blessing in the midst of his grief. And as it says in Sotah 13b, just as God comforts mourners, so too should we *walk in God's ways*, showing up as a comforting presence when we find ourselves at a Tree of Weeping.

Shabbat Shalom.

Alexandra "Zan" Alhadeff is a member of the Core Semikha Class of 2027. Before she began full-time learning, Zan had a successful career as a transportation planning consultant in Seattle, WA and Silver Spring, MD. Zan has learned at Yeshivat Hadar, the Drisha Summer Kollel and the Beit Midrash Program (2019, 2022-2023).