



6 Kislev 5784 | November 18, 2023

Toldot: Rivka's Destiny **Rabbi Marianne Novak, Class of 2019**

It's no secret that I love Rivka, Rebecca, our foremother. It's safe to say that she is my most favorite woman in all of Tanakh. She is the OG (original gangster), the GOAT (greatest of all time), and whatever other cool modern acronym you can ascribe to her. And it seems that is the Torah's consensus when we first met her last week in Chayei Sarah.

Avraham charges his servant to go back to Avraham's hometown, the city of Nakhor in Aram Naharaim, and to find someone suitable for Yitzchak to marry. The servant—after asking for God's help—finds Rivka, who exemplifies over-the-top kindness. She not only gives Eliezer water, but also offers water to his many camels. Eliezer sees in Rivka the qualities of Avraham who also ran around quickly, tending to strangers, and he knows she will be the right wife for Yitzchak. She is not only kind, but she seems to innately understand this evolving larger project of Judaism. Rashi cites the following *midrash*:

He brought her into the tent and she became exactly like his mother Sarah—that is to say, the words signify as much as, [And he brought her into the tent] and, behold, she was Sarah, his mother. For while Sarah was living, a light had been burning in the tent from one Sabbath eve to the next, there was always a blessing in the dough (a miraculous increase) and a cloud was always hanging over the tent (as a divine protection), but since her death all these had stopped. However, when Rebecca came, they reappeared. (Rashi, Breishit 24:67, from Breishit Rabbah 60:16)

Rivka assumes Sarah's mantle with her understanding of her role not only in the family but also in the future of this new people and religion. When struggling with the pain of carrying twins, she asks God for help who then gives her this prophecy: "Two nations are in your womb, two separate peoples shall issue from your body; One people shall be mightier than the other, And the older shall serve the younger" (Breishit 25:23). With the future presented to her, Rivka takes on the responsibility to fulfill this divine decree. *The older shall serve the younger.*

But when it comes time for Rivka to put this plan into action—when she is challenged to fulfill her destiny— it seems that all the initial love for Rivka falls away and turns into disgust and disdain with repercussions throughout the generations.

Rivka, like Sarah, understands that one of her husband's sons would be best suited to carry on the covenantal line and she makes that choice—following God's directive, sacrificing Esav for Yaakov. The Torah and traditional commentators should see Rivka as a hero, but they tend instead to focus on her deceptive methods, her subterfuge in dressing Yaakov up as Esav to force Yitzchak to give him the first-born blessing. They see her now as Rivka the trickster, or Rivka the witch.

Rivka's death is not even mentioned directly by the Torah text, only that of her nursemaid Devorah (Breishit 35:8), lest Esav, her wicked son, come back to bury her. (See Rashi, Midrash Tankhuma, Ki Teizei 4.)

Why do our sages, and perhaps even the Torah itself, change their opinions of Rivka so swiftly? Why did the Rivka who embodied Sarah and the path of kindness and compassion resort to trickery? Why didn't she find a more respectable way to do what she knew had to be done?

Perhaps the clue to Rivka's seeming change of character is informed by the incident that happened right beforehand. After Rivka gives birth to the twins and Esav sells his birthright to Yaakov, there is a famine in the land. And Yitzchak, recapitulating the story of his father Avraham, takes Rivka to Gerar, the land of the Philistines under the rule of King Avimelech. Yitzchak tells the local leaders that Rivka is his sister for he worried they might kill him because his wife was so beautiful. When finding out this ruse, Avimelech is incensed, worried that one of his men could have slept with Rivka thereby bringing guilt upon them (Breishit 26:10). The Rivka who had great agency, showing kindness to a stranger and determining her fate when agreeing to marry Yitzchak, is nowhere to be seen in this part of the story. In the Avraham version of the sister/wife narrative, Sarah is at least addressed directly by Avimelech and given parting gifts.



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Rivka's name is not even mentioned. Perhaps Rivka understood quite sharply then that, for her to fulfill the important prophecy that God had given to her directly, she would have to work behind the scenes. If her husband doesn't bother to consult with her on this life-threatening manner, he most likely would not listen to her directly when she saves the covenantal project and the future Jewish people. She knows her plan will be unconventional and she takes full responsibility for it. She says to Jacob, "Your curse, my son, be upon me! Just do as I say and go fetch them for me" (Breishit 27:13).

Yet she realizes that she must work around the literal patriarchal structure to get the job done. In doing so, she inspires many other Jewish women—Shifra and Puah, Yael, Ruth, to name a few—to navigate around established pathways and use their wisdom and insight to perpetuate the Jewish people. Whatever contempt our tradition assigns to Rivka, it comes from those who bristle at women who defy the norms. Yet our tradition and history endures not in spite of, but because of, Rivka-like women, who even today, understand distinctly what is necessary for the continuation of Judaism and the Jewish people.

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