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Parshat Toldot 2018/5779: At the Edge of a Cliff with God

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Advanced Kollel: Executive Ordination Track Class of 2020

Recently, we returned from horseback riding in the Smoky Mountains with our family. Our 6 year old daughter, Ravi, had many concerns as she mounted her horse for the first time. She worried about what would happen if her horse needed to stop. What would happen if her horse got stuck as they moved up the steep mountain? What would happen if her horse went off the trail? These questions swirled as we began up the trail. "Why do I have to do this?" Ravi cried. "I don't think I *can* do this." *She felt scared and no longer ready for the task before her.*

In our parsha this week, Yitzchak pleads with God for a child on behalf of his wife, Rivkah (and, according to some commentators, for himself). God answers the prayer in what could be a moment of great happiness because Rivkah would finally bear children but something else happens:

The children struggled in her womb, and [Rivkah] asks, "If so, why do I exist?" וַיִּתְרַצְצוּ הַבָּנִים בְּקֶרְבָּהּ וַתֹּאמֶר אִם-יֵכֵן לְמָה זֶה אֲנִי...:

Why was I chosen for this? Seforno, the 16th century Italian biblical exegete, explains this verse as follows:

אחרי שהדבר כן שמתרוצצים ויש לחוש שימות אחד מהם ואסתכן אני בלידה

Seforno proposes that Rivkah's question was motivated by fear that one of her babies might die or that her life was in danger. What happens if something goes wrong? Ultimately, explains Seforno, Rivkah is reflecting on an earlier blessing bestowed upon her by her family.

Why did my relatives want me to conceive, saying 'You should become a multitude'? למה זה התאוה קרובי שאהיה אני עם הזרע כאמרם את היי לאלפי רבבה

"Why me?" Rivkah asks. Why would my family have blessed me with a blessing so vast and so cumbersome? A blessing and a burden. It is precisely this blessing and burden that every Maharat graduate walks under as she receives her smikha. Perhaps Rivkah is daunted by the breadth of the blessing or maybe the responsibility she took on in thinking about what it might look like fulfilled. This is similar to Moshe's perception as he takes on the leadership of the Israelites. He, too, wonders, *איכה אשא לבדי*, How will I *alone* carry the burden of leading this burgeoning nation... and what if I fail? At the edges of new leadership, of charting uncharted territory, both Moshe and Rivkah bravely encounter self-discovery. And in this encounter, they seek and find a connection with God.

As Ravi continued to climb up with her horse, a sweet calm came over her...slowly. She marveled at seeing the world from a vantage point she had never seen before. She noticed the turning of the fall leaves, the trail marked by those who had been before her, and the hills, cliffs and mountains below and above her. She wondered about the tremendous sky and was humbly awed by her horse's love

and care for her. She continued to dig into the world around her with her luminous eyes and her trademark smile.

וַתֵּלֶךְ לְדַרְשׁ אֶת־יְהוָה: Rivkah, goes to seek out God. She intuitively knows that to embrace the struggle within her and without her, she must not stand alone, neither in her fear nor in her questioning.

That day, on the mountain, Ravi engaged in a spiritual journey, one of self-reflection. She was presented with her burden and her blessing and she persisted. And so too, we are presented with burdens and blessings every day. אֶת־הַיּוֹם לְאֵלֶיךָ רַבְּבָה Ravi did not let fear take over her ability to complete her task. She engaged in painful questions, and fearful thoughts and rode bravely to the top of that trail. וַתֵּלֶךְ לְדַרְשׁ אֶת־יְהוָה And in this commitment, she connected to that which was bigger than herself. It is no coincidence that this banner stands above every Maharat graduate as she crosses the path from study for the sake of learning to study for the sake of leading. Every leader must ask, אִם־כֵּן לְמַה זֶה אֲנִי for it is precisely these moments that provide us with deeper understandings of who we are. אֶת־הַיּוֹם לְאֵלֶיךָ רַבְּבָה Moving from ideas to actions, from individuals to multitudes is indeed a burden and a blessing. It is the type of journey that we only take *al kiddush Hashem*, for the sanctification of God's name.

As Ravi dismounted her horse, I knew it was a moment that I would always remember with great reverence for the beauty of our Universe. I didn't hear or see God. I didn't speak with God. I *felt* God. May we all have the blessing of becoming a multitude and may we all support each others' burdens in our journeys of self-discovery.



Rabba Daniella Pressner is Head of School at the Akiva School in Nashville, TN. She received an AB in Dance and Religion from Barnard College and an MA from Vanderbilt University. She has studied at Drisha, Pardes, and the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Rabba Daniella is a past-president of JFS and serves on the Board of the Jewish Middle School of Nashville. Rabba Daniella was awarded a DSLTI fellowship and has been published in the PEJE, Avi Chai, RAVSAK and JOFA journals. Rabba Daniella has taught nationally on curricular design and on children and spirituality. She is married to Rabbi Saul Strosberg of Congregation Sherith Israel and has four children.