

Leaning In:

Complicated Biblical Women Who Changed History...And the Lessons We Learn

Global Day of Learning with Rabbi Rachel Ain, Sutton Place Synagogue

November 16, 2014

Reading Rebecca

Genesis 24-27

The servant responded, "What if the woman is not willing to come back to this land? Shall I then take your son back to the country you came from?" Beware that you do not bring my son back there," Abraham answered. "Yah, Elohim of Heaven, who took me from my father's house and from the country where I was born, who spoke to me and who swore to me saying, "I will give this land to your seed," will send an angel ahead of you so that you can find a wife from there, for my son. If the woman is unwilling to follow, you will be released from this vow. No matter what, you are not to bring my son back to the country from which I came

Question: What is at stake?

The servant placed his hand under Abraham's thigh, and swore...Toward evening, at the time the women came to draw water, the servant had the camels kneel down by the well outside of town. Then he said, Elohim of my master Abraham, give me success today. Show tenderness for Abraham. While I stand by the well, as the women of the town go to draw water, may a girl come who I will ask to lower her jug so that I may drink. Let her say "Drink and let me water your camels also." Let her be the one unveiled for Isaac. Through her may I see the tenderness you show to my lord. Before he had even finished praying from his heart, Rebecca appeared with a jug on her shoulder." The girl was exceedingly beautiful, virginal, untouched. She went down to the spring, filled her jug, and came up...And Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah for his wife...And Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife, because she was barren; and the Lord granted his prayer, and Rebekah his wife conceived. And the children struggled together inside her; and she said, If it be so, why am I thus? And she went to inquire of the Lord. And the Lord said to her, Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples shall be separated from your bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger...And Isaac loved Esau, because he ate of his venison; but Rebekah loved Jacob...And Rebekah heard when Isaac spoke to Esau his son... And Rebekah spoke to Jacob her son, saying, Behold, I heard your father speak to Esau your brother, saying, Bring me venison, and make me savory food, that I may eat, and bless you before the Lord before my death. Now therefore, my son, obey my voice according to that which I command you. Go now to the flock, and fetch me from there two good kids of the goats; and I will make them into savory food for your father, such as he loves...

QUESTIONS: What is the force of Rebekah's actions here? How are we supposed to reconcile them with our desire to love our children equally?

AND THE CHILDREN STRUGGLED TOGETHER WITH IN HER. They sought to run within her.⁸ When she stood near synagogues or schools,⁹ Jacob struggled to come out; hence it is written, Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee (Jer. I, 5). While when she passed idolatrous temples, Esau eagerly struggled to come out; hence it is written, 'The wicked are estranged from the womb' (Ps. LVIII, 4).¹

Why did the Rabbis have the need to say this?

Reading Shifra and Puah

Exodus 1:15-21

The king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shifra and the other Puah, saying, "When you deliver the Hebrew women, look at the birthstool: if it is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live." The midwives, fearing God, did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this thing, letting the boys live?" The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women: they are vigorous. Before the midwife can come to them, they have given birth." And God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and increased greatly. And because the midwives feared God, God established households for them.

Questions to focus on: Who were these women? What does it mean to fear God?

Exodus Rabbah 1:13

13. When he [Pharaoh] saw that they increased abundantly, he then decreed concerning the male children, as it is written: AND THE KING OF EGYPT SPOKE TO THE HEBREW MIDWIVES (I, 15)- Who were these midwives? Rab said it was a daughter-in-law and her mother-in-law, namely, Jochebed and Elisheba, the daughter of Aminadab; R. Samuel b. Nahman said: It was a woman and her daughter, namely Jochebed and Miriam. Miriam was then only five years old, for Aaron was the senior of Moses by three years.

Explaining Shiphra and Puah:

1. An explanation of **Shiphrah** is because Israel multiplied (she-paru) exceedingly, thanks to her; and **Puah**, because she used to revive (mefi'ah) the infant when people said it was dead.
2. Another explanation of **Shiphrah**: because she made her acts pleasing (shafrah) before God. Another explanation of **Puah**: because she (Miriam) lifted (hoifi'ah) Israel up to God.

Sotah 11b

And it came to pass, because the midwives feared God, that He made them houses. Rab and Samuel [differ in their interpretation]; one said they are the priestly and Levitical houses, and the other said they are the royal houses. One who says they are the priestly and Levitical houses: Aaron and Moses; and one who says they are the royal houses.

Reading Vashti

9. Also Vashti the queen made a banquet for the women in the royal palace which belonged to king Ahasuerus. 10. On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded the seven eunuchs who served in the presence of Ahasuerus the king, 11. To bring Vashti the queen before the king with the royal crown, to show the people and the princes her beauty; for she was beautiful to look on. 12. But the queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command by his eunuchs; and the king was very angry, and his anger burned in him. 13. And the king said to the wise men... 15. What shall we do to the queen Vashti according to law, because she has not performed the command of the king Ahasuerus by the eunuchs? 16. (K) And Memucan answered in the presence of the king and the princes, Vashti, the queen, has wronged not only the king, but also all the princes, and all the people who are in all the provinces of the king Ahasuerus. 17. For this deed of the queen shall be known to all women, so that they shall despise their husbands in their eyes, when it shall be reported that the king Ahasuerus commanded Vashti the queen to be brought to his presence, but she came not.

How do we understand Vashti's Influence?

3:9. Another comment on ALSO QUEEN VASHTI MADE A FEAST FOR THE WOMEN. For what reason did Scripture record the feast of Vashti? R. Joshua b. Karhah said: Why all this about her? To show how great was the affluence into which Esther stepped. Said R. Meir: If God does so much for those that provoke Him, how much more for those that perform His will!

3:14. BUT THE QUEEN VASHTI REFUSED (1, 12). She remonstrated with him very forcibly, saying: If they consider me beautiful, they will want to enjoy me themselves and kill you; and if they consider me plain, I shall bring disgrace on you.'

Reading Esther

2:8-11, 17

8. So it came to pass, when the king's command and his decree were heard, and when many girls were gathered together in Shushan the capital, to the custody of Hegai, that Esther was brought also to the king's palace, to the custody of Hegai, guardian of the women. 9. And the girl pleased him, and she won his favor; and he quickly gave her her ointments, and her appointed portions, and seven maids, chosen to be to given her, from the king's palace; and he advanced her and her maids to the best place in the harem. 10. Esther had not declared her people nor her country; for Mordecai had charged her that she should not tell. 17. And the king loved Esther above all the other women, and she found grace and favor in his sight more than all the virgins; so that he set the royal crown upon her head, and made her queen instead of Vashti.

Midrash Rabbah-Esther VI:11

11. AND THE KING LOVED ESTHER ABOVE ALL THE WOMEN, AND SHE OBTAINED GRACE AND FAVOUR IN HIS SIGHT MORE THAN ALL THE VIRGINS (II, 17). R. Helbo said: This teaches that married women were also brought before him; that is why it says, ABOVE ALL THE WOMEN and also MORE THAN ALL THE VIRGINS. SO THAT HE SET THE ROYAL CROWN UPON HER HEAD, AND MADE HER QUEEN INSTEAD OF VASHTI. Until Esther became queen, the portrait of Vashti remained in its place. When he married Esther and found her well born and of noble descent, he said, ' Let Vashti come down and Esther go up; that is why it says, AND MADE HER QUEEN INSTEAD OF VASHTI.