

THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, REBEKAH AND JACOB

MOSHE REISS

The Talmud teaches us that "Just as we now say the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob, so we should add 'and the God of Job' if he had not later [after his suffering] hurled charges against God."¹ The Talmud rules that way despite God's proclamation that '*My servant Job spoke correctly*' (Job 42:7). Abraham and Job are the only personalities that the Bible says were tested by God. The intent of this talmudic statement is to gain respect for Job.

The Hebrew Bible and the Siddur repeatedly invoke the blessing "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." Careful review of the text makes one wonder whether, were it not for patriarchal bias, the phrase "the God of Abraham, Rebekah and Jacob" might not be more appropriate. This article aims to empower a statement of respect for Rebekah.² The key to the importance of a Patriarch or Matriarch is his/her relationship with God. Of the personalities in the Pentateuch only Abraham (Gen. 26:24), Jacob (Isa. 41:8) and Moses (Num. 12:7) are called God's servants. We will discuss God's relationship with Abraham and Jacob and then review whether it is Isaac or Rebekah who has the more active relationship with God in their generation.

GOD'S RELATIONSHIP WITH ABRAHAM

Abraham *Avinu* [our father] is the father of the Jewish people. In his first encounter with God, Abraham is told that he himself will be a blessing (Gen. 12:3). This is the first of many encounters between God and Abraham. In the second and third encounters, Abraham is promised the land of Canaan and myriad descendants (13:14-17; 15:5,18). The covenant of circumcision follows and then the prediction of the birth of Isaac (17:1-22). Three men/angels come, apparently to inform Sarah that, despite her being 90 years old, childless and post-menopausal, she will miraculously give birth to a child. She is not told this

Moshe Reiss, a former resident of New Haven, Connecticut., is a rabbi and has a B.A. from Brooklyn College and a Ph.D. in economics from Oxford University. He was a lecturer at Columbia University, and assistant to the rabbi of Yale University. He is now a resident of

Israel, where he writes and lectures, and has written a book *Messengers of God* which appears on his website: www.moshereiss.org. He was recently a visiting professor at the Catholic University of Leuven.

directly, but overhears the momentous annunciation the second time it is delivered to Abraham. In an interior monologue, she scoffs at the absurd idea. God (not the men/angels) intervenes and says to Abraham, not to Sarah, *'Why did Sarah laugh?'* Sarah responds, *'I did not laugh.'* Then, in their only direct interchange, God accuses Sarah of lying (18:9-15). Sarah thus is never the recipient of a prophetic message from God.

God then confides in Abraham in a friendly way, and shares with him His plan to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham pleads on behalf of the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah, asking God *'Shall the Judge of the world not act justly?'* (18:25). After the birth of Isaac, Sarah overcome by jealousy and anxiety for the future, orders Abraham to banish both his son Ishmael and Hagar, Ishmael's mother and Abraham's wife. Abraham is bewildered and distressed by his senior wife who, because she herself was barren, had orchestrated the marriage with Hagar that led to the birth of Ishmael. God reassures him, saying: *'Do not be distressed over the boy . . . ; whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says. As for the son of the slave-woman, I will make a nation of him'* (21:12-13). God indeed saves Ishmael and Hagar and speaks directly to Hagar for a second time (16:7; 21:17-19).

Abraham's final two conversations with God focus on the Akeda. Abraham's faith in God is tested when he is asked to make the ultimate sacrifice, his covenantal son Isaac (22:2). Abraham unflinchingly is prepared to obey and execute the command, when God at the crucial moment stops the sacrifice. God responds to Abraham's total faith and gives him the blessing: *'All nations on the earth shall be blessed by your descendants because you obeyed My command'* (22:18).

GOD'S RELATIONSHIP WITH JACOB

Jacob is the third of the Patriarchs, one of Abraham's twin grandsons from his son Isaac. His independent life begins when he flees his parents' home after having stolen his father's blessing from his older twin brother. When, on his journey, he reaches Beth-el, Jacob has a dream in which angels go from earth to heaven and God reiterates the message He gave to Abraham about

THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, REBEKAH AND JACOB

multiple descendants and the Promised Land (28:14-15). Jacob, over a number of years, marries Leah and Rachel and fathers 13 children. To the dismay of his uncle/father-in-law, he is about to leave Laban's home. Laban agrees that Jacob's wages for his years of work would be all the sheep and goats that were striped, spotted and speckled. Then he hides them, leaving Jacob poverty stricken. God then gives Jacob the ability to breed sturdy, striped, spotted and speckled sheep and goats, thus making him rich and independent of his father-in-law (30:37-43). Jacob then leaves, and God appears to Laban telling him that Jacob is under His protection (31:24).

Prior to Jacob's meeting and reconciliation with his brother Esau, he meets and struggles with a man/angel. As God had changed the name of Jacob's grandfather from Abram to Abraham and blessed him (32:27-30), the man/angel gives Jacob the new name of Israel. Jacob fought against God (32:29) and saw Him *face to face* (32:30).³ God then speaks directly to Jacob, and confirms that his name is to be Israel (35:9-10). The final interchange between God and Jacob occurs in his old age, prior to his going down to Egypt to meet his long-lost son Joseph. God confirms that He will continue to protect Jacob (46:2-4). Throughout Jacob's life, God repeatedly intervenes on his behalf, confirming His commitment and ongoing relationship to him. At each event, when Jacob departs on a journey in which he risks his future, God appears to him to empower and protect him. God, however, never speaks to either of Jacob's wives, Leah or Rachel.

THE TRAUMA OF ISAAC

Now, let us turn back to the generation of Isaac and Rebekah. Undoubtedly the most traumatic event in Isaac's life was his father Abraham binding him and laying him on a rock, taking a knife on the verge of sacrificing him. Abraham shows an incredible act of faith by his willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac, who God had told him was his covenantal son. We cannot know the agony of Abraham, or how he reconciled this act with God's promise. But we can surmise the effect on Isaac by the later events in his life. It seems that as a consequence of the Akeda, Isaac suffers a severe emotional trauma, and develops a passive dependent personality. He is thus unable to function and assume the massive responsibilities of being the second-generation chosen one.

Abraham, understanding the extent of the damage to Isaac, takes on the duty of finding him a wife. He sends his loyal servant (identified with Eliezer in Jewish lore) to seek a daughter of Abraham's own kin. He also exacts a vow from his servant, and twice implores him not to let Isaac leave the land (24:5,9).

Eliezer goes on his mission, and finds Rebekah, Abraham's great-niece, described as a very beautiful virgin (24:16). In the Hebrew Masoretic text, she is called "*na'ar*," a term for a young man. But in the Torah, *na'ar* stands for both sexes. She goes home to tell her family that she has met Uncle Abraham's servant (v. 28). Her brother Laban goes out to meet him, and without much delay Abraham's emissary asks for Rebekah's hand in marriage for Isaac. A few days are requested to consider the proposal (v. 55), and Rebekah is asked her feelings about a betrothal (v. 57). In the matter of the marriage, she is asked what her own wishes are, and is not ordered to comply with a decision by her father and brother.

Abraham's servant succeeds in his mission, and brings Rebekah home with him. When Isaac first beholds her, he is returning from Be'er Lahai Ro'i [the Well of the Seeing Life] and is *out walking in the field towards evening* (v. 63). Despite coming from "the well of seeing life," he appears to lead his life under a cloud of dimness, in the gray twilight between day and night, an effect of the Akeda. According to tradition, he sees the camel but not Rebekah. She clearly sees him (vv. 63-64). *He brought her into his mother Sarah's tent, and he took Rebekah as his wife. Isaac loved her and thus found comfort after his mother's death* (v. 67). Why does Isaac, the rich heir, insist on remaining in his mother's tent, instead of setting up a tent of his own? After the Akeda, Abraham went back to Beersheba with his servants where he then dwelt (22:19) but Isaac apparently went to Hebron where Sarah dwelt, and where she died (23:2).

This suggests that he remained in his traumatized state, dependent on his mother who overprotected him; the mother who protected him against his older brother Ishmael (whether he needed it or not), and who undoubtedly would have protected him against his father and prevented the Akeda had she known about it. After her death, her son marries a mother surrogate, one to take care of him. It is not coincidental that we hear of Rebekah's birth immediately after the Akeda and immediately before Sarah's death (22:23).

How does Rebekah react to discovering that Isaac, her husband, is damaged? She came from a home where she was considered an independent woman, in order to marry her rich cousin. Is she shocked, when she learns the truth too late? As an independent woman, far removed from her family, she realizes that Isaac's future now will be in her hands.

We are told that *Isaac prayed to God on behalf of his wife, for she was barren. God heard his prayer and his wife Rebekah conceived* (25:21). One generation before Rebekah, Sarah's barrenness was noted five times (11:30; 15:2; 16:1; 18:11; 21:1). She anguished over it, until she finally gave her maidservant Hagar to Abraham to *have children through her* (16:2). One generation after Rebekah, Rachel was barren for many years, and said to Jacob '*Give me children or I shall die*'. She gave her maidservant Bilhah to her husband, so that '*through her, then I too shall have children*' (30:3). After Leah had four sons, she was for a time barren and gave her maidservant Zilpah to Jacob to produce more heirs. Thus three of the four Matriarchs anguished over their barrenness.

With Rebekah, there is simply a single verse that states she was barren, with nothing on any anguish she may have suffered because of it. She did not resort to using a maidservant as a surrogate. Neither, it seems, did she speak to Isaac about the problem. She had faith and chose to wait for God. Isaac's prayer (of which she apparently was unaware) is effective and she conceives.

Her pregnancy is difficult and she inquires of God as to the difficulty. In response, she is told that she will bear twin sons, and the promised blessing of Abraham is to be bestowed on the younger of them. She is not told how to arrange this; she is simply informed that this is to be the end result of God's command. However, Rebekah never shares this information with her husband Isaac. Is it because he is so traumatized that this communication seems to her pointless? The far-reaching consequences of Isaac's dysfunctionality will be seen.

Shortly after the children are born, we are told that Rebekah prefers Jacob (perhaps because she knew God's wishes) (5:23) and refers to him as *my son* and to Esau as *Jacob's brother* (27:5-6, 8,13). Isaac, who lived in his own world, prefers Esau, who lives out in the wild, and refers to him as *my son* (27:1,21, 25). Esau is a "man's man," unlike his father. As the sons mature, Isaac prepares to give the blessing to Esau; the son who feeds his father wild

game (27:7). Unbeknownst to him, Isaac – not informed by his wife of the message from God – chooses the wrong son. God gives the message on the blessing to Rebekah, not to Isaac, and she takes this as a mission that she must carry out by deceiving her husband and her older son. In this, she is successful.

God speaks to Sarah only in an aside, to tell her that she lied (18:15). He never speaks to Leah or Rachel. Rebekah is thus unique amongst the Matriarchs in being presented with a prophetic mission by God. This mission is the most important task of the second generation: to ensure that the blessing of the third generation is bestowed on the right heir.

Abraham is given the blessing several times by God; Isaac, only once (26:1-4). Rebekah receives, in the name of her family, the blessing to have descendants by the *thousands and tens of thousands . . . to gain possession of the gates of their enemies* (24:60). That is a repetition of a blessing God gave to Abraham at the end of the Akeda: *'Your descendants will gain possession of the gates of their enemies'* (22:17). Thus Rebekah, not Isaac, receives the blessing for posterity.

Rebekah promises to protect her son Jacob from his father and any consequences of her plan of deception. Esau is enraged at Jacob for having stolen his blessing and thinks to kill him. Just as she discovers that Isaac is about to give the blessing to the wrong son, she discovers that Esau (despite the statement being in an interior monologue) intends to kill Jacob. To protect the younger son from his brother, she sends him away to her brother Laban. She pretends to Isaac that Jacob is going to seek a wife. She does not inform him of her own role in the deception on the blessing, or Esau's anger. Isaac then gives Jacob a blessing beyond what the one surreptitiously taken: *'May God bless you . . . May He grant you the blessing of Abraham'* (28:4). Rebekah does not know that she will never see Jacob again.

God speaks to Isaac twice. The first time, He tells him not to go down into Egypt as his father had done and as his son will do (26:2). This is a striking repetition of Abraham's instruction to his servant that Isaac must not go out of the land. Isaac follows his father's footsteps when he meets King Abimelech of Gerar. Like Abraham, he pretends that his beautiful wife is his sister, lest the King slay the husband so he can marry the widow.

THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, REBEKAH AND JACOB

When Isaac's servants open the wells his father Abraham had dug, God then appears to Isaac a second time and says to him '*I shall bless you . . . for My servant Abraham's sake*' (26:24). Thus, he receives the blessing for his father's sake, not his own.

Abraham's descendants are blessed as a result of his willingness to sacrifice Isaac, but Isaac himself is not specifically noted; he is simply the first descendant. Abraham never explicitly gives him a blessing. Isaac never leaves the land. He never sees clearly, never laughs (despite his name) does not find himself a wife nor choose the right son. Isaac's role is less to be a father or a husband than to be Abraham's son. He is the weak son of a powerful father and the weak father of two powerful sons. His passivity is in striking comparison to his aggressive wife. Abraham, who had agreed to sacrifice his son Isaac, survives with his promise intact and becomes the Prince of Faith. Jacob/Israel, while wounded in his conflict with God, survives – a unique experience.

Given that Rebekah, not Isaac, is the recipient of the blessing of Abraham, given the mission of ensuring bestowal of the blessing on the "right" son, despite needing to deceive her husband and of favoring one son over the other and given that she saved Jacob's life, should we not say "The God of Abraham, Rebekah and Jacob"?

NOTES

1. Stated by Rabbi Hanina bar Papa, BT Bava Batra 16a.
2. It is intriguing that despite having accomplished her God-given task, Rebekah is, in Jewish tradition, less respected than the Matriarchs Sarah and Rachel.
3. Moses is noted as speaking to God *face to face*.

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