



Answers to Our Prayers: Torah Reflections on *Parashat Toldot*

Genesis 25:19-28:9

In anguish, our matriarch Rebecca clutches her hugely enlarged belly and cries out, "If it's to continue like this, what is to become of me?" (Genesis 25:22) She is pregnant with very active twins; within her body a physical struggle rages that foreshadows a troubled relationship between Esau and Jacob.

The prayed-for pregnancy leads to this moment of crisis, and so Rebecca turns again to God seeking an answer or some kind of guidance.

How many times a day do people across the globe cry out to God in moments of suffering? Seeking help, answers, hope, some kind of change, healing. Or just crying out. Sometimes we genuinely desire a response, a gift, a sense of God's presence, a reassuring sign that things are going according to plan. Sometimes God's intangibility gives us a safe address to open our hearts and give voice to our pain and confusion and vulnerability.

Of course help rarely comes in the form of supernatural relief. Jewish tradition encourages our appreciation of the miraculous and awesome aspects of our lives and our world—thunder and lightning, birth and human development, breathing, the renewal of relationships—more so than appeals for changes in the natural order. Our heritage seeks hopeful yet realistic prayer. Thus when we feel acutely small and alone, powerless, vulnerable, or uncertain, sometimes the seeking itself, the internal effort to align with the Holy One of Being, is what lends us a sense of comfort, connection, or direction.

The "answers" that come our way, if they come at all, are not always so pleasing or straightforward. We may be challenged by silence, by the need for patience and sustained effort, by further human or divine demands. In Rebecca's case, she is given the understanding that "two great peoples are within you; two nations will depart from your womb; one will exert itself over the other..." (Gen. 25:23). Indeed the Talmudic tradition sees Esau as the father of the ancient Edomites and eventually of the Roman Empire, a source for generations of conflict and strife for Jacob's line and the Israelite nation.

The explanation (diagnosis? revelation?) given to Rebecca brings her enough comfort or at least enough direction to bear the remainder of the pregnancy. It also spurs her to act, once the twins are born, with a sense of prophetic clarity and far-reaching impact throughout the sometimes troubling years of child-raising and preparing Jacob, especially, for his unique future role.

Even so, Rebecca, like most of our Biblical ancestors, lives out her life amid serious unresolved family conflicts. While the text describes how she prayed to God and was answered, the challenges she faced were not diminished—and one might argue were

only heightened—by the sense that God was with her and she was playing an important part in the unfolding drama of Israel's origins. Her task remained to do her best and to move forward in her very human way.

The adage, "Be careful what you ask for" is most often recalled in retrospect. We often need to ask, to cry out for help, to give voice to our pain or our confusion and yearning. It may be difficult to discern a response to our cry, or we may not need or want one. And part of the best response to heartfelt prayer is our own – in our determination to move forward and act, cognizant of the sacred obligations and opportunities of our lives.

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