

# CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



## WHEN YITZCHAK MET RIVKAH

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

Parshat Chayei Sarah is a standard vehicle for rabbinic opinions about *shidduchem*. What should men and women look for when deciding whom to marry? What processes should they use to expand or winnow their field of potential spouses? To what extent should they take the opinions of parents, extended family, and friends into account?

The underlying assumption of many such derashot is that the way in which Yitzchak meets, marries, and lives with Rivkah is a model for emulation. This assumption works well in this week's parshah, which ends with the couple in apparently idyllic romance. It works less well in Parshat Toldot, where Rivkah and Yitzchak seem unwilling and/or unable to communicate about their children. This should at least raise the question of whether something about the way they met created a vulnerability in the marriage. With that caveat, let's move on to the text.

Yitzchak's relationship with Rivkah develops through five distinct stages (Bereishit 24:67):

1. *Yitzchak brought her to the tent (of) Sarah his mother*
2. *He took Rivkah*
3. *She became to him a wife*
4. *He loved her*
5. *He was comforted after his mother.*

וַיְבִיאֶהָ יִצְחָק הָאֵלֶּקְלֵל שָׂרָה אִמּוֹ  
וַיִּקַּח אֶת רִבְקָה  
וַתְהִי-לּוֹ לְאִשָּׁה  
וַיֶּאֱהָבָהּ  
וַיִּנְחָם יִצְחָק אַחֲרֵי אִמּוֹ:

Rivkah's relationship with Yitzchak may or may not follow the same pattern.

Many commentators understand the identity and order of the stages as teaching general lessons about relationship rather than as providing a detailed biography of the specific relationship. This approach is very reasonable, but it should not be adopted uncritically. Not everything the Avot did should be emulated. This is true whether or not one is comfortable following Ramban in identifying specific acts of

the Avot as sinful. Exceptionally/incomprehensibly good and pious people are often poor role models for the spiritual hoi polloi.

Let's start our analysis by identifying the stages. An easy move is to identify *He took Rivkah* with the stage of halakhic marriage known as *eirusin* or *kiddushin*, following *When a man takes a woman* in Devarim 22:13, 24:1, and 24:5. *She became to him a wife* then presumably refers to *nisuin*, and entails consummation. Interestingly, this seems to foreshadow the modern halakhic mode in which no time passes between *eirusin* and *nisuin*, rather than the Talmudic mode in which the gap may be as long as a year.

This identification leaves open the stages that preceded or followed the legal acts of marrying.

Rashi translates the opening stage as "*Yitzchak brought her to the tent (and she became like) Sarah his mother*", meaning that Rivkah's virtues restored the miracles that had enveloped the tent during Sarah's tenure. Chizkuni naturally concludes that Yitzchak was comforted "*because she was similar to his mother in her deeds*".

However, Rashi disassociates Yitzchak's being comforted from Rivkah's similarity to Sarah. Rather, he writes, "it is the way of the land (*derekh eretz*) – so long as a man's mother is alive, he is wrapped up next to her, but when she dies, he comforts himself with his wife". Possibly Rashi thinks that the gap between stage one and stage five is too large to associate one with the other. Chizkuni might respond that the phrase "*after his mother*" in stage five connects to "*Sarah his mother*" in stage one.

Rashi makes no comment at all about "*He loved her*", or about whether the comfort of stage 5 depended on the love in stage 4. Chizkuni is also silent here. However, Ramban makes the connection explicitly. "*This is the meaning of he loved her and he was comforted* – this hints that he was greatly suffering about his mother, and distanced comforters from himself, until he found comfort in his wife, in his love for her. Because for what (other) reason would Scripture mention the love of a man for his wife?!"

One can reasonably argue that Ramban fits well with Chizkuni, as follows: Yitzchak loved Rivkah because she had his mother's virtues, and therefore was comforted. Ramban can also fit well with Rashi if we see Yitzchak's love as grounded in factors other than the virtues Rivkah shared with Sarah. But my question is whether Ramban's argument is comprehensible in his own terms. Why is Yitzchak's being comforted more important than his love for Rivkah, such that we can justify the Torah mentioning the love only because it led to the comfort?

By contrast, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch asserts that conveying Yitzchak's love for Rivkah is the point of the entire extended narrative:

*"This too is a trait, thank G-d, that has not been lost from the descendants of Avraham and Sarah, Yitzchak and Rivkah! The more she became his wife, so too his love grew. On the analogy of this marriage of the first Jewish son, so are founded the marriages – most of the marriages – in Israel, not on the basis of sexual desire, but rather on the basis of discerning calculation. Parents and relatives take counsel among themselves as to whether the youngsters are a fit with each other; because of this the love grows the more they get to know each other. Most of the non-Jewish marriages in the world are concluded on the basis of what they call "love", and a person need do no more than glimpse the descriptions in the novels which are taken from life, in order to have proven to them how great an abyss exists between the "love" that exists before marriage and the love that exists after, how everything (from before marriage) seems bland and tasteless, how reality differs from imagination, etc. This sort of "love" was blind, and leads to constant disappointment in the future. Not so marriage in Israel, about which it is said: He took Rivkah and she became his wife! Here the wedding is not the ultimate flowering, but rather the root of love!*

*And now four more words, than which nothing is more beautiful or uplifting, from the time that Hashem brought Chavah to Adam, until the end of days! Yitzchak was comforted after his mother. A man forty years old, who has not found comfort over the death of his aged mother – he finds comfort in his wife!"*

For Rav Hirsch, it is vital that stage four follows rather than precedes the marriage ritual, and stage five is an intensification of stage four rather than a wholly separate emotion.

I think statements that contrast Jews and non-Jews en bloc are generally unwise. There are non-Jewish cultures that follow the model Rav Hirsch identifies as Jewish, and Jewish

cultures that do not. But it is nonetheless important to ask whether Rav Hirsch's interpretation of how this relationship developed is compelling in the text and as a model for Jewish communal policy.

One caveat up front: Rav Hirsch is fully aware that Yaakov "loves" Rachel before they are married, He takes pains to argue that Yaakov kissed Rachel and cried because she reminded him of his mother, not in the heat of desire. Moreover, his parents sent him to Lavan with explicit encouragement to marry a daughter of the house. None of this conceals the fact that Yaakov and Yitzchak chose their spouses in very different ways. This may be why he is careful to say that the Yitzchak/Rivkah model fits only "most of the marriages in Israel".

Another caveat: Rivkah is not actually vetted by Yitzchak's family, but rather by a trusted household servant, who checks his choice only against his own perception of G-d's reaction. And Rivkah's family never meets Yitzchak!

Finally, other commentators note that *He loved her* is a far from inevitable outcome of *she became his wife*. One popular reading in fact models the initial stages of Yitzchak and Rivkah's marriage after Devarim 22:13-14: *When a man takes a woman-as-wife, and has sex with her, and hates her, and places a false complaint against her, and defames her publicly, and says: "I took this woman, and I was intimate with her, and I did not find her a virgin".* So too Yitzchak finds Rivkah hymenless, and accuses her of having slept with Eliezer, willingly or unwillingly. Rivkah salvages the situation by claiming that her hymen broke when she fell off the camel. They search for the spot and find her blood miraculously preserved and still liquid, having been fanned continually by the wings of a dove. Thus the Torah mentions Yitzchak's love for Rivkah after the marriage to emphasize that there was a gap – love developed only after near-divorce. Surely this is not a paradigm for beginning Jewish marriages!

In sum, there is no evidence from our text that G-d opposes dating apps, or even Tinder-for-marriage. Rav Hirsch is reading his biases in.

Those biases may nonetheless be correct, at least in part. I'm hoping that my openness that this is about Rav Hirsch's biases, and mine, and not about Yitzchak and Rivkah, will encourage you to let your own defenses down and consider the next point as broadly as you are able.

An anthropologist from Mars reading an objective account of the mental health outcomes surrounding sexuality and sexual relationships in our society would be desperately unlikely to see us as a model to be emulated, or as overall trending in the right direction.

That is not a diagnosis, much less a prescription. It in no way denies the complexities glossed over by a one-variable evaluation. But it is a call for a conversation in which both liberal and conservative assumptions can be questioned.

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