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### WHY DOES YITZCHAK PRAY FOR CHILDREN, AND WHY DOES RIVKAH NOT?

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The story of Rivkah's barrenness, and then fruitfulness, is told by the Torah as if she has no agency whatsoever.

Yitzchak prays – no mention of her praying; *l'nokbach* **his wife** because she is barren; Hashem is responsive to **him**; and **Rivkah his wife** became pregnant.

This narrational choice has nothing to do with patriarchy. Sarah and Rachel are also *akarot*, but each acts forcefully in response: Sarah asks Avraham to marry a surrogate, and Rachel demands children and eventually a surrogate of Yaakov. In fact, Rivkah takes the active part as soon as she becomes pregnant. She goes (somewhere) to consult G-d about her experience; and she hears G-d's oracular response, and we aren't told whether she shares it with Yitzchak. Yitzchak next appears as the parent who loves Esav over Yaakov on apparently insufficient or self-interested grounds, but maybe because he has not heard that "the elder shall serve the younger," or maybe because he has.

Midrash Rabbah undoes the narrator by understanding *l'nokbach* as implying that Rivkah was also praying: Yitzchak prayed "May all the children that You give me be from this righteous woman," while Rivkah prayed "May all the children that You give me be from this righteous man." This implies that each believed themselves to be fertile, and their partner infertile. Why would that be? The simplest answer may be that each of them had received a fertility guarantee they deemed sufficient. Yitzchak knew that G-d had told Avraham "for via Yitzchak will be the line of descendants called after you," and Rivkah was blessed by her family "Our sister, may you become thousands of myriads." So the only question in their minds was whether they would have children with each other.

However, there's no way to avoid saying that G-d responded only to Yitzchak. Why, if Rivkah also prayed? Some suggest that the Torah specifically wants to undermine her guarantee; those commentators argue that Rivkah's family blessed her to become thousands of myriads, but she was barren and would have remained so if not for Yitzchak's prayer. But their blessing comes true eventually, and G-d's promise to

Avraham also takes quite a few generations to actualize, so I don't find this reading at all convincing.

Perhaps Rashi didn't either. He also believes that Rivkah praying, but understands *l'nokbach* as implying that they were in physically opposite corners rather than praying converse prayers. Presumably they were simply praying for a child. Why does G-d respond only to Yitzchak? "Because the prayer of the righteous born of the wicked is not comparable to the prayer of the righteous born of the righteous."

Please note that Rashi is not imposing this theological claim on the text. The previous two verses contain peculiarly extended and apparently superfluous accounts of Yitzchak and Rivkah's families. "*These are the descendants of Yitzchak son of Avraham; Avraham sired (holid et) Yitzchak. Yitzchak was forty years old when he took Rivkah, son of Betuel the Aramean, brother of Lavan the Aramean, to himself as wife.*" Rashi understands this as providing context for G-d responding to Yitzchak but not Rivkah.

But – it's not clear why brothers are relevant in this context. And – as mentioned above, the verse seems *davka* not to present Yitzchak and Rivkah as responding to her barrenness in the same way. And finally – doesn't Rabbi Abahu say (Berakhot 34b) that "in the place where *baalei teshuvah* stand, the perfectly righteous cannot stand?"

One might say that Rashi is following the position of Rabbi Chiyya bar Abba in the name of Rabbi Yochanan, which disagrees with Rabbi Abahu and holds that the perfectly righteous are superior; or follow Maharshal (Chullin 7:17), who thinks the prayers of *baalei teshuvah* are superior so long as they are davening for other rather than for themselves; or most simply, point out that even the righteous born of the righteous have almost certainly sinned and repented, and did Rabbi Yochanan necessarily mean that those who repent from great sins are superior to those who lived mostly but not entirely blameless lives, and repented of their small failures?

But even if one finds one of those answers compelling, introducing them into this story is not. A literarily better approach would focus less on why G-d answered Yitzchak over Rivkah and more on why Yitzchak was praying when Rivkah wasn't.

One way to accomplish this is by saying that only Yitzchak faces a choice. Only he has the halakhic obligation to reproduce, or if you prefer, the mandate to fulfill Hashem's promise to Avraham of an ongoing line of descendants; and only he has the legal right to marry a second woman. This is surely the approach that Midrash Rabbah was trying to preempt by making their prayers exactly parallel. But Radak leans into the asymmetry: "He multiplied prayers for his wife to give birth because he loved her with an excessive love, as we have explained, and out of his love for her he did not wish to take a wife in addition to her, nor one of her maidservants. Therefore he multiplied his prayers greatly until the Divine shifted for him. "*lenokhach* his wife" – opposite his wife, meaning for her sake . . . or else the interpretation of "*lenokhach* his wife" is that during the time of prayer he would stand opposite her so as to direct his heart to be focused on her."

Radak's second explanation seems to me the best interpretation of *lenokhach*, as I can't find another example in Tanakh in which it refers to logical or conceptual opposition. Even when *nokhach* is used with regard to G-d, the sense is less "opposed to" than "in plain view of," as in Eikhah 2:19: "Pour your heart like water *nokhach* the countenance of Hashem." *Lenokhach* appears only two other times. In Bereshit 30:38, Yaakov places his speckled sticks where "the flocks come to drink *lenokhach* the flocks," and in Mishlei 4:25 "Your eyes will look *lenokhach*," which in context seems to mean that you will exercise proper caution, i.e. see what is in front of you.

But – Radak's overall interpretation depends on halakhicizing a narrative by introducing elements that are not mentioned anywhere in the text. Also, it seems to me that even if only Yitzchak had a choice, Rivkah should have been praying for him to make the choice she preferred.

So – it seems to me that the most straightforward way to understand the text is to say that Yitzchak was praying for Rivkah to have children, but Rivkah was not praying to have children. This ties in with her less-than-ecstatic reaction to the pregnancy. The question is why she is so ambivalent. And also – shouldn't she want children for Yitzchak's sake, even if not for her own? The most likely answer to that is

that she thought Yitzchak did not want children, and so she did not pray.

Many years ago, I heard Dr. Joshua Berman suggest that Yitzchak spends the years before marriage **בא מבא באר לחי' רא**, never really able to psychologically leave the place where Yishmael almost died after his father expelled him. Perhaps that's why he can't consider responding to Rivkah's barrenness by taking a second wife, which would risk repeating his father's Haggar and Yishmael situation. Yitzchak succeeds in leaving B'er Lachai Roi for good once Rivkah enters the picture. But that still left him the trauma of Moriah to deal with.

Listen to Yalkut Shim'oni Toldot 210:

Rabbi Yehudah said: Rivkah was a barren woman for twenty years. After twenty years, (Yitzchak) took Rivkah and went to Mount Moriah, to the place where he had been bound (on the altar), and prayed for her to become fertile, and the Holy Blessed One responded to him.

Maybe this midrash is just about Yitzchak pulling out his ultimate reward card. I think a better reading is that Rivkah was not certain that Yitzchak had overcome the trauma of the Akeidah sufficiently to want children, or sufficiently to handle having children. Could he trust himself as a father, after his own father had been willing to kill him? Could he allow his religion to require anything that made his child unhappy, even momentarily? Perhaps G-d was not (k'b'yakhol) certain, either. But when Yitzchak courageously went back to the place of trauma, Rivkah agreed to go with him, and G-d was convinced.

Deborah Klapper often suggests that Yitzchak wanted only one child, so that he would never have to make the kind of choice that faced Avraham. I argue [here](#) that Yitzchak was in fact unable to make that choice, which is why he allowed Rivkah to 'fool' him into blessing Yaakov. But so far as G-d was concerned, it was two or none. Maybe Rivkah knew that twins ran in her family.

Maybe G-d *davka* wanted Avraham's successor to be a father who could not make that choice. We need both kinds of role models – people like Avraham who can do the right thing regardless of whom it hurts, and people like Yitzchak who can't do even the most obviously right thing if it will hurt family or friends. In a healthy society, and marriage, we find ways to let each other lead in the spaces that maximize our strengths, and to step in to cover each other's weaknesses.