

Some Comments on Toldot
Rabbi Eliot Malomet November 26, 2022 2 Kislev 5783

ויַעֲמַר יִצְחָק לְה' לְנִכְחַ אִשְׁתּוֹ כִּי עֲקָרָה הָיָא וַיַּעֲמַר לוֹ ה' וַתִּתֶּר
רִבְקָה אִשְׁתּוֹ:

Yitzhak entreated God on behalf of his wife, for she was barren, and God granted-his-entreaty: Rivka his wife became pregnant. (Gen. 25:21)

The word **ויַעֲמַר** is unusual in the context of prayer. There is a debate on its meaning in the midrash:¹

רבי יוחנן וריש לקיש: רבי יוחנן אמר ששפך תפלות בעשר. ריש לקיש אמר שהפך את הגזרה.
(A debate between) R. Yohanan and Resh Lakish. R. Yohanan said, that he poured out prayers in abundance. Resh Lakish said that he overturned the decree.

Both of them are reaching for explanations. R. Yohanan relates the root **ע.ת.ר.** to the similarly sounding **ע.ש.ר.** (*wealth, abundance*).² He views Isaac's prayer as a non-stop flow of adoration. Resh Lakish connects the root **ע.ת.ר.** to the Hebrew word for *shovel* or *pitchfork*. In his view, Isaac's prayer as an aggressive or forceful act, that overturns the decree of childlessness, the way one pitches hay with a pitchfork. This debate shapes the way we interpret this scene. Is Isaac approaching God out of tenderness and piety? Adoration? Supplication? Or is he approaching God out of a sense of urgency? Consternation? Injustice? Indignation? And what moves God to *grant this entreaty*? To R. Yohanan, God is moved by Isaac's piety. To Resh Lakish, God is moved by Isaac's indignation. When we compare the situation of Isaac and Rivka to that of Abraham and Sarah, we note that nowhere does the Torah indicate that Abraham prayed on Sarah's behalf. In Sarah's moment of despair, she takes matters into her own hands and instructs Abraham to cohabit with her maidservant Hagar which he does quite willingly. Rivka did have at least one maidservant that we know of, but she never tells

¹ Bereishit Rabbah 63:5.

² עתר in Aramaic is *to be rich. Grow rich*. R. Yohanan is also playing on the Aramaic meaning of the word.

³ Rabbi David Kimhi.

⁴ Bereishit Rabbah 63:6, see also Rashi.

ותלך לדרש את ה', וכי בתי כנסיות ובתי מדרשות היו באותן
הימים? והלא לא הלכה אלא למדרש של שם ועבר, אלא ללמדך
שכל מי שהוא מקביל פניו וקומו מקביל פניו שכינה.

Isaac to cohabit with her as a solution to their childlessness, nor does Isaac ever suggest that as a possible solution similar to what his parents did. This prompts one commentator to say, *the reason for his intense prayer was that he did not want to marry anyone else. His prayer did not so much concern his becoming a father as his becoming a father of a child born by his wife Rivka. He prayed in the presence of his wife so that he would be better able to concentrate on her problem.*³ Was Isaac's prayer out of piety, frustration and urgency, or out of love for his wife? Or all of the above? And was it only out of love that he wanted a child with Rivka, or was he also possibly rejecting his father's behavior by not fathering a child with another woman and thereby creating all sorts of conflict?

ותלך לדרש אתיה:
And she went to inquire of God. (Gen. 25:22)

When Rivka becomes pregnant as a result of Isaac's praying, the pregnancy is so difficult that she herself goes to *inquire of God*. Where she goes, how she goes, what she says, is all subject to speculation. The rabbis have Rivka visiting the *yeshiva of Shem and Ever*⁴ but she could have easily gone to another place. What if there was an alternate midrash that played this out? Of all the shrines and altars that Abraham built, where would we imagine her to go *to seek God*? The place where the most important event of her husband's life took place: Moriah. We know that Rivka is a formidable and independent character. She has great curiosity. In the midrash that we would write, we imagine that she would have asked Isaac about his life. *Rivka: Why did you stay back in Canaan? Why did you not travel yourself to find a wife? Isaac: Well Rivka, it's complicated. My parents were quite old when I was born and, when I was a young boy, my father took me Moriah to offer me there as an olah*

She went to inquire of God. Were there synagogues and study halls in those days? Rather, this tells us that she went to the (legendary) study hall of Shem and Ever to teach us that someone who makes entreaties to the elderly is likened to someone who is making an entreaty of God.

and, at the very last moment, he saw a ram and sacrificed it instead. It was after that that he was blessed to have descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands of the sea. Curious and also desperate for relief, she might have been driven to see the place where the life of her husband was irrevocably altered, and the blessing was bestowed on her father-in-law. But even as we speculate where she went and what she said, the most unusual aspect of this story is that God answers her. When Abraham *calls out to God* he doesn't get an answer. The same is true for Isaac.⁵ What is it about Rebekah that prompts a response from God? Notice that before she goes to inquire of God she is suffering from the turbulence of the pregnancy and says, in anguish, **אִם-כֵּן לָמָּה זֶה אֲנֹכִי - If so, why do I exist?** Could her anguish have been the reason that God answers her immediately? The possibility that she would die in pregnancy or that she would end her own life to spare her further anguish? Is there a parallel here with Isaac? Just as there was an immediate divine response when his life was in danger, so too, there is an immediate divine response when hers is as well.

וַיֹּאמֶר עֵשָׂו אֶל-יַעֲקֹב הֲלֵעִיטְנִי נָא מִן-הָאֲדָם הַזֶּה
Esav said to Yaakov: Pray give me a gulp of the red-stuff, that red-stuff, for I am so weary!
 (Gen. 25:30)

There is no way to adequately convey the nuances of what Esau is saying here. This word **הֲלֵעִיטְנִי** appears nowhere else in the entire bible. Rashi portrays Esau as an animal begging to be fed:
 אָפַתְתָּ פִי וַיִּשְׁפֹךְ הַרְבֵּה לְתוֹכָהּ, כְּמוֹ שֶׁשָּׂנִינִי "אֵין אוֹבְסִין אֶת הַגָּמֶל אֲכָל מִלְעִיטִין אוֹתוֹ."
I will open my mouth and you pour a lot in. Similar to what we learn in the mishna "One may not fatten up a camel on the Sabbath but one may put food (מלעיטיין) into its mouth."⁶ Let us recall that Esau is a hunter. In primitive societies, and in the nose-to-tail movement today, people consume every edible portion of the animal. *Tripe* is a bovine stomach. *Offal* is the term for all the organs that can be consumed, including lungs. Scots have *hagis*. We have *kishke*. Some cultures have a dish made by stuffing the lungs or stomachs of animals with a kind of pilaf or mash. Here is a picture of Tavakul from Azerbaijan (find him on *Wilderness Cooking*

on YouTube) pouring a batter down the trachea of a cow's lungs. He then cooks it, slices it, and eats it as a delicacy. In a similar episode he stuffs a lamb's stomach. The Torah depicts Esau as a wild hairy man. We obviously don't know the details of his diet, but it is reasonable to speculate that Esau sees himself either as an animal that needs to be forcibly fed at this moment (Rashi) or as a hungry hunter who always cooks every bit of the animal, and even stuffs the stomach and lungs. When he says to Jacob **give me a gulp** he is saying most elegantly, **please stuff your red lentil pilaf down my throat and fill me up.**



וַיַּעֲקֹב נָתַן לְעֵשָׂו לֶחֶם וּנְזִיד עֲדָשִׁים
Yaakov gave Esav bread and boiled lentils...
 Gen. 26:34

What do we make of the fact that Esau asked for the **red red stuff** to be **stuffed down his gullet** and that after trading it for his birthright, Jacob gives him **bread and boiled lentils**? There were many levels to Jacob's con game. From a distance, the red stew may have looked to Esau as if it were a meat stew. Carnivores will recognize this feeling of deception if they order a meat dish and receive a similarly looking vegan dish instead. But the presence of bread here is also significant. Bread is the signifier of civilization, it is also the signifier of propriety, manners, and hospitality. In short, it is the sign of a formal meal. To this day, in Judaism, the presence of bread signifies a proper meal requiring the recitation of *Hamotzi* before eating and *Birkat HaMazon* afterwards. By serving Esau bread, the Torah further distinguishes Jacob, the tent dweller, who has manners and propriety, from Esau, the wild hunter, who lives on impulse. And note further, that when Jacob, in disguise, serves his father the meal for the blessing, he brings it to him with **the bread that she (his mother) had made** (27:17). When Esau brings his meal, it is without bread (27:31). The story is baked in the details.

⁵ Gen. 12:8, 13:4, 21:33. Isaac calls to God at 26:25.

⁶ Shabbat 155b. **לֵעֵט** is to swallow. **הֲלֵעִיט** is to feed an animal by putting food into its mouth

שבת שלום!