

A Close Reading of a Key Verse in Hayyei Sarah: Isaac Marries Rebekah
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Gen. 24:67 - The Last Verse of the Great Betrothal Story

<p>וַיְבִיאֵהָ יִצְחָק הָאֵהָלָה שָׂרָה אִמּוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת רִבְקָה וַתְּהִי לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה וַיֶּאֱהָבֶהָ וַיִּנְחֶם יִצְחָק אַחֲרֵי אִמּוֹ.</p>	<p>Yitzhak brought her into the tent of Sara his mother; he took Rivka and she became his wife, and he loved her. Thus was Yitzhak comforted after his mother.</p>
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There is so much going on in this verse. **וַיְבִיאֵהָ** -*va-yevi'eha*. And Isaac **brought** her. Sometimes we can interpret a word based on other places where it appears in the Bible. There is only one other place in the entire Bible that this form of the word exists, the story where God creates Eve in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:22):

<p>וַיִּבֶן ה' אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַצֶּלֶע אֲשֶׁר לָקַח מִן הָאָדָם לְאִשָּׁה וַיְבִיאֵהָ אֶל הָאָדָם.</p>	<p>And the Lord God built the rib that he had taken from the human into a woman and brought her to the human.</p>
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Interesting. Let's compare the two "bringing" stories.

וַיְבִיאֵהָ יִצְחָק	וַיִּבֶן ה' אֱלֹהִים... וַיְבִיאֵהָ
Isaac brings Rebekah	God brings Eve
to the tent of Sarah	to Adam
a closed area	an open area
Isaac's reaction:	Adam's reaction:
Love: He loved her. Comfort. He was comforted after his mother.	Exaltation. He names her. This-time, she-is-it! Bone from my bones and flesh from my flesh! She shall be called: Woman/Isha, for from Man/Ish she was taken!

וַיְבִיאֵהָ is deliberately chosen to take us back to the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve are the first couple. God **brings** her to him. In our story, even though Abraham's servant brings Rebekah to Isaac, it's Isaac who **brings** her into the tent. God is not mentioned here. But is the marriage of Rebekah to Isaac a series of fortunate coincidences? After all, even Bethuel and Lavan claim that: **וַיָּצֵא הַדְּבָרִי מֵיְדֵי יְהוָה - This thing comes from the Lord** (Gen. 24:50)! The whole purpose of this gorgeous story is to enable us to sense the invisible hand of God behind all of the human choices that are made. And on top of everything, there is tremendous pathos in this moment. Isaac and Rebekah are alone. Isaac is a bereaved groom. Sarah is dead; Abraham is elsewhere.¹ Rebekah is basically also a bereaved bride. She left her parents are back in Haran and she knows she will never see them again.

¹ Some commentators actually suggest that Abraham has already died, notwithstanding his appearance in the next story. Robert Alter: Many have construed his (Abraham's) charging of the servant at the beginning of the story as a deathbed action: it would not be unreasonable to surmise that he is already deceased when the servant returns (the genealogical notation

Isaac's servant and Rebekah's nurse have left the stage, there is no one else but the two of them. They are alone. All they have is each other. But maybe, the presence of the word **וַיְבִיאֵהָ**, is a reminder that the divine presence is also with them, as it was with Adam and Eve.²

וַיְבִיאֵהָ שָׂרָה אִמּוֹ - *into the tent of Sara his mother*. Rabbi David Kimhi (Provence, 1160-1235) offers this interesting explanation:

<p>וַיְבִיאֵהָ: כְּשֶׁבָאוּ לְחִבְרוֹן הַכְּנִיסָה בְּאֵהָל שָׂרָה אִמּוֹ שִׁיחָהּ לָהּ לְאֵהָל כְּמוֹ שֶׁהָיָה לְשָׂרָה בִּי כֵן הָיָה מִנְהַג בְּיָמֵינוּ הָהֵם לְהוֹיֵת אֵהָל לְאִישׁ בְּפָנָיו עֲצָמוֹ וּלְאִשָּׁה בְּפָנָיו עֲצָמָה וּכְשֶׁהָיוּ שׁוֹכְבִים יַחַד בָּא הָאִישׁ אֶל אֵהָל הָאִשָּׁה כְּמוֹ שֶׁאָמְרָה לְאָה "אֵלַי תָּבֹא" כְּלוּמַר אֶל אֵהָלִי וְכֵן מִצָּאֵנוּ כְּשֶׁחָפֵשׂ לְבֹן אֲחֵר הַתְּרַפִּים אָמַר "וַיָּבֹא בְּאֵהָל יִצְחָק" וּבְאֵהָל לְאָה וְגו'.</p>	<p>When they came to Hebron he brought her into the tent of his mother, Sarah, so that it would be her tent in the way it was for Sarah. Because that was the custom in those days. A man had his own tent, and a woman had her own tent, and when they slept together, the man would go to the woman's tent, as when Leah said, "Let him come to me," meaning, "Let him come to my tent." And likewise, we note that when Lavan searched for the Terafim the text says, "he (Lavan) went into Jacob's tent and into Leah's tent."</p>
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Fascinating. But we are still left with so many questions. First of all, where did the first encounter between Rebekah and Isaac take place? Here's the text (Gen. 24:62-64):

<p>וַיִּצְחָק בָּא מִבּוֹא בְּאֵר לַחַי רֹאֵי וְהוּא יוֹשֵׁב בְּאֶרֶץ הַנֶּגֶב. וַיֵּצֵא יִצְחָק לְשׂוּחַ בַּשָּׂדֶה לְפָנֹת עֶרֶב וַיִּשָּׂא עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא וְהִנֵּה גְמָלִים בָּאִים. וַתִּשָּׂא רִבְקָה אֶת עֵינֶיהָ וַתִּרְא אֶת יִצְחָק וַתִּפֹּל מֵעַל הַגָּמֶל.</p>	<p>Now Yitzhak was coming from where you come to the Well of the Living-One Seeing-Me, for he had settled in the Negev. And Yitzhak went out to stroll in the field around the turning of sunset. He lifted up his eyes and saw: here, camels coming! And Rivka lifted up her eyes and saw Yitzhak; she fell from the camel</p>
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Isaac had been living in the Negev, and traveled often to Beer La-hai Roi area (an area associated with Hagar and Ishmael). Most likely, the servant was taking Rebekah to meet him there. Isaac is somewhere in the Negev, in a field, before evening, when she saw him. So much uncertainty.

concerning Abraham in the next chapter would be out of chronological order...) p. 126. Shadal as well.
² It is also fascinating to note that in the Jewish marriage ceremony, all brides and grooms are likened to the first couple in the Garden of Eden. Every marriage has the potential of creating a new world.

An undefined location. An ambiguous time. Why? Because this is a very uncertain moment. Did Isaac know that the servant was on a mission to get him a wife? Unclear. Does



Rebekah know what she is getting into? Not really. Does Isaac know what he is getting into? Not really. While the text makes this seem like it is all happening so fast, when we read it closely it occurs to us quite plausibly that the couple's first encounter takes place well away from Hebron, where Sarah's tent is located.

When Rebekah sees Isaac *in the field* (and what exactly is he doing in the field?)³ and *falls off her camel* at sunset, we jump to conclusions that they were married that very night! But that's not what the text says! What happens after she falls from the camel? ויִסַּפֵּר הַעֶבֶד לְיִצְחָק אֶת כָּל הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה - *And the servant recounted to Yitzhak all the things that he had done.* That must have taken some time. The servant could spin a yarn! By the time he is finished telling the story, it must have already been night. And they are somewhere in the Negev. *Nowhere near Hebron.* What are they going to do? The text doesn't tell us how they spent the night. All we know is that Isaac has just found out that this exceedingly beautiful, kind young woman - a relative no less! - is going to be his wife. He has a lot of decisions to make. Where are they going to live? He may have his own tent in the Negev, but he also has his deceased mother's tent in Hebron, a tent which he never dismantled. Why did he not dismantle it? Because he understood that he was the extension of his father, Abraham,⁴ and he always imagined his future wife to be the extension of his mother, Sarah. Thus, he was preparing it for his future wife. Unlike Rachel and Leah,⁵ Rebekah will live in Sarah's tent.

וַיִּקַּח אֶת רִבְקָה וַתְּהִי לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה - *And he took Rebekah and she became his wife.* This is how the Torah recounts their marriage. And even when we put this under a magnifying glass, and compare it to other biblical marriages, we discover something interesting: the marriage of Isaac to Rebekah is the only marriage in the Torah that adds the

word, וַתְּהִי - *and she became.*⁶ The rabbis suggest that Rebekah may have still been very young at this point, so there was a gap between the actual marriage and the actual *becoming his wife.* But given what we already know of her, especially that she was the one who made the decision to travel to a distant land and marry a man she never met, she is not totally passive in these events. She *became his wife* because she *agreed to become his wife.* In all the other instances, the account of marriage refers to the man; here it refers to the woman.

וַיֵּאָהֱבָהּ - *And he loved her.* This is perhaps the defining feature of this marriage. He marries her and then *he loved her.* As opposed to Jacob who first falls in love with Rachel, וַיֵּאָהֱבֶהּ יַעֲקֹב אֶת רָחֵל (Gen. 29:18) and then marries her. The other thing that we can't resist is that there is a lovely word-play between וַיִּבְרָאָהּ - *vayevi'eha* at the beginning of the verse and וַיֵּאָהֱבָהּ - *vaye'ehaveha* at the end of the verse. This only suggests to us that it is the *bringing* of Rebekah into the tent of his mother that sparks *his love* for her. The text signals to us that Rebekah is the natural continuity of Sarah as Isaac is the natural continuity of Abraham. The midrash expresses this quite poetically. See below.

וַיִּנְחָם וַיִּצְחָק אַחֲרַי אִמּוֹ - *and Isaac was comforted after his mother.* It's so very tempting to interpret this as an example of Isaac's Oedipal relationship with his mother. But set that aside. Rebekah did not become Sarah to Isaac. That diminishes both of them. Rebekah enabled Isaac to transition from his bereavement to the rest of his life. Let's not forget, that both of them are "orphaned adults." The two of them are both alone in the world. He is comforted by her, and she, we presume, was also comforted by him.

And Isaac brought her into the tent of Sarah his mother. As long as Sarah lived, a cloud would appear above the entrance of her tent. At her death the cloud ceased, but when Rebecca came, the cloud returned. As long as Sarah lived, her doors were wide open. At her death that open-handedness ceased; But when Rebecca came, it returned. As long as Sarah lived, there was a blessing on her dough, and the lamp used to burn from the evening of the Sabbath until the evening of the following Sabbath. When she died, these ceased. But when Rebecca came, they returned.

Comment: the cloud, openness, dough, light. They are all Temple symbols. Rebekah's arrival resuscitates the Temple-like presence. in the land.

עם ישראל חי! שבת שלום.

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Rebekah becomes the sole heir to Sarah. In having their own tents, Rachel and Leah become the principal matriarchs of their own line of children.

⁶ Take these examples: Abram and Nachor take wives **for themselves**, Yishmael takes Mahlat as a **wife for himself**, Amram takes Yoheved **as a wife for himself**, Aaron takes Elisheva **as a wife for himself**.

וַיִּקַּח אַבְרָם וְנָחוֹר לָהֶם נָשִׁים, וַיִּקַּח אֶת מַחְלַת בַּת יִשְׁמָעֵאל... לֹא לְאִשָּׁה, וַיִּקַּח עַמְרָם אֶת יוֹכְבֵד דָּוְתוֹ לֹא לְאִשָּׁה, וַיִּקַּח אֶהְרֹן אֶת אֵלִישֶׁבַע בַּת עֲמִינָדָב... לֹא לְאִשָּׁה.

³ The rabbis say he was praying or meditating. Others think that he was simply attending to his personal needs. See Gary Rendsburg, *lasuah* in Gen. 24:63, Vetus Testamentum (Oct. 1995) 45:4 p. 558.

⁴ Presumably Abraham relayed this to Isaac, because God told him, וְיִצְחָק כִּי בְרִיָּתְךָ יִקְרָא לְךָ זֶרַע, *through Isaac that your offspring shall be continued.* (Gen. 21:12)

⁵ Why do they each have their own tents? Because they each marry Jacob in Haran, not Canaan. Therefore, they each have to have their own tent. This takes the potential of fight over who inherits Sarah's tent off the table. By living in Sarah's tent,