

Vayetzei: Comparing the Two Well Stories of Rebeka and Rachel
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The story of how Abraham's servant met Rebeka at the well is still fresh in our minds when we turn this week to the story of how Jacob met Rachel at the well. This proximity invites a comparison. Here are some differences:

THE REBEKA STORY	THE RACHEL STORY
Gen. 24:10-67	Gen. 29:1-28
<i>The servant took ten camels from his lord's camels and went, all kinds of good-things from his lord in his hand, and arose and went to Aram-naharaim, unto the city of Nahor. (v. 10)</i>	<i>Jacob lifted his feet and went to the land of the Easterners. (v.1)</i>

Abraham's servant is traveling with a whole entourage in order to display his master's tremendous wealth. Jacob is traveling with nothing. The servant's destination is specific. Jacob's destination is vague. Abraham's servant knows exactly what he wants to accomplish and is going to devise a very specific strategy in order to attain his goals. Jacob, on the other hand, has no strategy in mind. He is a fugitive; his primary objective is to find refuge. We know that his father instructed him to find a wife from his mother's clan, but that seems secondary at this juncture.

(The Servant): <i>He had the camels kneel outside the town at the water well at setting time, at the time when the water-drawers go out. (v. 11)</i>	(Jacob): <i>He looked around him, and there: a well in the field. (v. 2)</i>
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The servant is deliberate in his actions. He is not relying on chance. He parks his camels outside the town because he already knows where the well is. He times his arrival to coincide with just before sunset, when there would likely be a large number of water drawers there to get their water supply for the night. He reckons that if it is close to nighttime, he will appear vulnerable and in need of lodging. Thus, he is cleverly taking advantage of the well-entrenched middle eastern custom of hospitality to wayward strangers. He knows exactly what he is doing. Jacob, on the other hand, happens on the well by chance. We learn in a later verse (v.7), that he arrives there not towards evening but sometime in the morning, when all the shepherds in the vicinity are vying for an opportunity to draw water for their flocks to start their day. While Rebeka's well is open and accessible to all, Rachel's well is sealed shut by a heavy stone. Rebeka's well conveys a spirit of welcoming and openness. Rachel's well conveys hostility and suspicion.

(The Servant's prayer): <i>And he said: O God, God of my lord Abraham, pray let it happen today for me, and deal in loyalty with my lord Abraham! (v.12)</i>	(Jacob's query): <i>Now Jacob said to them: Brothers, where are you from? They said: From Harran. (v. 4)</i>
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The servant prays fervently to God to work a miracle for him. Jacob, on the other hand, strikes up a conversation to curry favor with the local shepherds. They are terse and suspicious of him. Jacob never mentions God here.

(The servant): <i>May it be that the maiden to whom I say: Pray lower your pitcher that I may drink, and she says: Drink, and I will also give your camels to drink— let her be the one whom you have decided on for your servant, for Isaac, by means of her may I know that you have dealt in loyalty with my lord. And it was: not yet had he finished speaking, when here, Rebeka came out... (v.14)</i>	(Jacob): <i>He said to them: Is all well with him? They said: It is well—and here comes Rachel his daughter with the sheep! ...While he was still speaking with them, Rachel came with the sheep that were her father's—for she was a shepherdess. (v. 6)</i>
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Rebeka appears on-cue, as it were, at the end of his prayer, a signal that things are playing out correctly as intended. Rachel appears off-cue, in the midst of Jacob's conversation with the local shepherds, a signal that things are happening haphazardly.

(When the Servant sees Rebeka): <i>Now the maiden was exceedingly fair to look at, a nubile-girl—no man had known her. (v. 16)</i>	(When Jacob sees Rachel): <i>Now it was when Jacob saw Rachel, the daughter of Lavan his mother's brother, and the sheep of Lavan his mother's brother... (v. 10).</i>
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When Rebeka appears, she is carrying a jug on her shoulder, an important motif in the story (it occurs nine times), symbolizing her hospitality and also her femininity. When Rachel appears, she is with her sheep, a crucial motif in that story (it occurs eight times), symbolizing her connection to wealth. It is not until much later in the story (v. 17) that we are told about her beauty. Arguably, at first sight, Jacob is more impressed by her wealth than by her beauty.

(The Servant's reaction): <i>It was, when the camels had finished drinking, that the man took a gold nose-ring, a half-coin in weight, and two bracelets for her wrists, ten gold-pieces in weight... (v. 22)</i>	(Jacob's reaction): <i>Now it was when Jacob saw Rachel, the daughter of Lavan his mother's brother, and the sheep of Lavan his mother's brother, that Jacob came close, he rolled the stone from the mouth of the well and gave drink to the sheep of Lavan his mother's brother. Then Jacob kissed Rachel, and lifted up his voice and wept. (v. 10-11)</i>
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As a response to her generosity, the servant lavishes Rebeka with valuable jewelry and precious gifts. He's on a mission and he has learned from the best how to seal the deal. Jacob, on the other hand, demonstrates strength because he has nothing to give. Having just taken the initiative to unseal the well and water Rachel's entire flock, Jacob, resorts to a seemingly audacious gesture that will elicit overwhelming curiosity and maybe controversy: a kiss. Contrary to Louis Armstrong, this kiss is more than *just a kiss*.



Abraham's Servant Encounters Rebeka

These two paintings by the French artist James Tissot (1836-1902), present a visual comparison of the two well stories in Bereishit. We immediately note the two different backdrops: in the Rebekah painting, there is a procession of maidens carrying their water vessels on their heads, keeping them steady with their hands, as they come down a hill to the well. The servant's camels with an attendant are turned away from the viewer, so that we can focus exclusively on the characters in the foreground. The bluish color in the sky informs us that we are late in the day. In the Rachel painting there are several flocks of sheep eagerly waiting to get watered. One can almost hear their braying. There is plenty of daylight. Two shepherds, a younger and an older, are seemingly engaged in some kind of jostling, disclosing a hostile atmosphere of mistrust and suspicion as rival shepherds have to share a common resource that is limited in quantity. Moving to the foreground of both paintings, we note that the servant is presenting himself rather dramatically, perhaps even theatrically - he, is after all, a great storyteller and a rather theatrical character - as someone who is in need of assistance. He is putting on a good show. Jacob in the



Jacob Encounters Rachel

other painting, looking weary and disheveled, is not particularly theatrical, and yet he looks towards her as if he is trying to get her attention but having a difficult time doing so. He is not without some genuine desperation. The most striking feature of both paintings is the depiction of Rebekah and Rachel. They look remarkably the similar to each other, because in fact they are related. Rebekah was Rachel's aunt. Look at the way both of them stand. Rebekah is resolute, standing before the servant with her hands on her hips and the jug perfectly balanced on top of her head. She has broken away from the rest of the maidens, differentiating herself from them in the way she demonstrates curiosity and compassion for this wayward stranger. Rachel also stands with confidence. She is not leaning on her staff but is dangling her arms from it as it rests on her shoulders. This suggests a little frustration as she has to wait while the well is being unsealed. Notice that she is wearing gold bracelets on her forearms and is sporting a very impressive headband. Compare the angles of vision in both paintings. The angle of Jacob's glance is more acute than that of the servant. So is his condition.

Shabbat Shalom!

Today is day 428 of the war and the captivity of the hostages. We pray for them and their families. May God shield Israel and protect the IDF from all harm in Gaza and Lebanon.

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