

After 20 long years of prayerful childlessness, the Torah says that Rebekah became pregnant and that: **וַיִּתְרָצְצוּ הַבָּנִים בְּקֶרֶב** *the sons struggled with one another inside of her* (Gen. 25:21). We assume that she knew she was carrying twins, but the text never states how she learns this, let alone that the twins were males. Readers bring their own experiences of pregnancy, personal or vicarious, to this story. For women this would no doubt include the common experience of feeling the baby move in utero. For men, this would be the experience of observing that movement and noting how women react to it. The simple interpretation of this text is that Rebekah experienced frequent and rather intense movement. The boys *wrangled, clashed, moved strongly, pushed, almost crushed one another, collided with each other*. Taking our cue from classic midrashic sources, we modern readers could employ all sorts of metaphors, including - why not - hockey: *they bodychecked each other!* Rebekah's reaction fascinates



us. She says: **אִם כֵּן לָמָּה זֶה אֲנִי** which we will translate word by word:

I-אֲנִי	this-זֶה	why-לָמָּה	so-כֵּן	if-אִם
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If-so-why-this-I makes no sense as an English translation. We need help. Let us turn to the commentaries.

1. Rashi¹: Regret

ותאמר אם כן. גדול צער העבור. למה זה אנכי. מתאנה ומתפללת על הריון:

means AND SHE SAID, "IF the pain of pregnancy be so great, למה זה אנכי WHY IS IT that I longed for and prayed for a pregnancy?"

In other words, *Why did I do this? Why did I get pregnant?* Rashi derives this from a midrash (Gen. Rabbah 63:6) in which Rebekah goes to a number of women and asks them if they had ever experienced such pain and discomfort:

רבי יצחק אמר מלמד שהיתה אמנו רבקה מחזרת על פתחיהן של נשים ואומרת להן: הגיע לכם הצער הזה בימיכם? אם כן הוא צערו של בנים והלואי לא עברתי.

R. Yitzhak said: This teaches us that our mother Rebekah went door to door to homes of women and asked them: 'Did you ever experience such suffering in your days (i.e. when you were pregnant)? If this is the suffering that comes with having children, better that I should not have gotten pregnant!'

Rashi is emphasizing the word **זֶה**-*this* in Rebekah's query. That is, why am I suffering *this* pain, *this* discomfort, *the ordeal of this* pregnancy. It is the pain² of *this* pregnancy that prompts her question. To Rashi Rebekah's overwhelming physical distress in this pregnancy, based on the the tumbling of the twins inside her, is what prompts her regret in getting pregnant. *What was I thinking? If this is what happens, אם כן, if I had only known that this pregnancy would be so difficult, לָמָּה-why, did I-אֲנִי, want this, זֶה-THIS! - so badly? I can't believe that I prayed for THIS! It would have been better if I stayed barren.*

2. Ibn Ezra: Rebekah's Ordeal is Different.

Ibn Ezra, places the emphasis in Rebekah's question on the word, **אֲנִי-I**. He writes:

וְטַעַם וְתַאֲמַר אִם כֵּן. הַדָּבָר וְהַמִּנְהָג, לָמָּה זֶה אֲנִי בְהַרְיוֹן מִשְׁנָה: *The meaning (of the verse), And she said: If so...is that (she said): If pregnancy is commonly so difficult (for all women) then why is it that I am in such a different pregnancy (with so much extra suffering)!*

This is like *Mah Nishtanah: All other women experience their pregnancies with various forms of discomfort. But why is my pregnancy so exceedingly painful?*

3. Ramban: A Question about Her Existence.

Ramban emphasizes the word **לָמָּה-Why?** First he quotes Rashi, then Ibn Ezra, then gives his own comment:

ותאמר אם כן למה זה אנכי אם כן גדול צער העבור למה זה אנכי מתפללת ומתאנה על ההריון, לשון רש"י. ואינו נכון! ורבי אברהם (אבן עזרא) אמר כי שאלה את הנשים אם ארע להם ככה, ותאמרנה לא, ותאמר אם כן הדבר והמנהג למה זה אנכי בהריון משנה. והנה הכתוב חסר ואינו שלם בפרוש הזה. והנכון בעיני כי אמרה אם כן יהיה לי, למה זה אנכי בעולם? הלואי אינני. שאמות או שלא הייתי...

And she said: If so, why this to me? Rashi said: IF the pain of this pregnancy be so great WHY IS IT that I longed for and prayed for a pregnancy. And this (to me) is incorrect! And R. Abraham (Ibn Ezra) said that she asked all the women if they had experienced their pregnancies like her, and they replied, no they did not, and so she replied: If pregnancy is commonly so difficult for all women, then why is it that I am in such a different pregnancy! But the text is too elliptical to warrant such an interpretation.

In my opinion, the correct way to interpret this is that she said, *if this is the way it is going to be for me, why is it that I am in the world. It would be better that I did not exist. Better that I should die or better that I should not be at all...*

In other words, according to Ramban, Rebekah's question is not about the general suffering of pregnancy (Rashi), nor

¹ Rashi: France, 1040-1105. Ibn Ezra: Spain, 1089-1167.

Ramban (Nachmanides): b. Spain, ~1194- d. Israel, ~1270.

² There is a rather large array of discomforts that vary from woman to woman and pregnancy to pregnancy including

fatigue, nausea, mood swings, food aversions, digestive problems, swellings, infections, headaches, backaches, cramping, edema, and so much more.

is it about the distinctiveness of her particular suffering (Ibn Ezra). **It is about her very existence altogether.** She is asking: **Why do I even exist? Why am I even alive?** Both Rashi and Ibn Ezra have plausible and defensible positions, even if they involve a not-too-farfetched imaginative leap in placing Rebekah in the proximity of other women who counsel her and give her advice. Nevertheless, we always get a wry smile when Ramban smacks down his older eminences. Reading their opinions on Rebekah's question invites us to weigh in on the debate as well. To Ramban we would say:

We can acknowledge that suffering makes people ask ultimate questions, like why do I even exist, but why take Rebekah there? Perhaps she is simply asking what many people ask when they go through debilitating pain. Why me? Why is this happening to me?

With just a tiny leap of empathy into her life we can see how understandable it would be for her to ask this. Here is a woman who was literally plucked away from her family. Beautiful, kind, generous and resolute, she agreed to leave her land, her birthplace, and her father's household to marry her lonesome relative on the basis of a charismatic and ostentatious emissary's proposal. Laden with wealth, he clasped her with gold and invoked a divine plan about which she knew nothing. She travels hundreds of miles, meets the man who will soon become her husband. He offers her the position of successor to his deceased mother. He wants her to be the new matriarch who will bring God's nation into existence. She agrees, or at the very least, she does not decline. He loves her and they marry. They pass the early years of their new marriage ready for children, anticipating that at any time a child will be conceived because that is what God has promised them. But despite Isaac's constant prayer on her behalf, two painful decades will pass before she conceives. Now, after all these years of years of disappointment, soul-crushing monthly letdowns and anguish, she conceives and endures a debilitating pregnancy. **Dear Ramban: With all due respect, Rebekah is not asking 'why do I exist'? She is simply asking, 'Why me? Why is this happening to me? What did I do to deserve this? Why was I chosen for this? How am I going to manage this? Twins? I have twins inside of me?! If this is what my pregnancy is like, imagine what will be when they are born!'** There is no way to encapsulate all of her anguish, so the Torah resorts to a terse open-ended

enigmatic question: **אִם כֵּן לָמָּה זֶה אֲנִי** - which like **Why me?** is really a question that is made up of so many other questions. **Why am I here? Why did I come into this situation? Why did I leave my mother? I have no family here, why did I do this? For what? And why is my husband like that? He prays for me, that's very nice, but why this? And why is he silent sometimes? And why does he not understand what I am going through here? And it may very well be that I was chosen to become the matriarch of this nation, but we are already twenty years into this marriage, twenty years of trying to have a child, and I don't understand why any of this is happening in the way that it is happening? If I have to endure all of this, why this, to me?**³ What does Rebekah do with all of this anguish?

וַתֵּלֶךְ לִדְרֹשׁ אֶת ה' - **She went to inquire of God.** There is something quite heartening about that. She understands that she is perplexed. She recognizes that she is in distress, and rather than being immobilized by her anguish, she seeks a solution. From God no less. And God responds to her. And that in itself says something profound because in the Bible, a divine response is huge. Perhaps the hugest thing there is: **God heard me! God is attentive to me!** One can endure a great deal of suffering knowing that God is with them. And that is the case here. Despite the fact that God deflects the question and doesn't explain the reasons for her suffering or the underlying rationale of how everything has transpired up until now. God simply says to Rebekah: **There are two nations in your womb. Two people from your loins shall issue. People over people shall prevail, the elder, the younger's slave.** In other words, **I am not going to tell you why. I am simply going to tell you what is coming. You are not giving birth to a whole set of tribal chieftains from which the nation will descend. That's not going to happen. Instead, you are giving birth to two sons who will in the end become two fathers of two nations. I have taken note of your suffering, and I have confidence that you will channel that suffering into your role as a great matriarch.** It's interesting that even God doesn't answer the **Why**. Instead he answers the **What, When, How and Who**. And that will have to do for now. **Shabbat Shalom!**

We are remembering Dror Or. Sudthisak Rinthalak. Ran Gvili. Hostages whose bodies remain held in Gaza.

³ I'm taking a cue here from Robert Alter's translation and commentary: **And the children clashed together within her, and she said, "Then why me?" - Alter's Comment: Rebekah's cry of perplexity and anguish over this difficult pregnancy is terse to the point of being elliptical. Her words might even be construed as a broken-off sentence: Then why am I...?**

Alter may be thinking about many elliptical passages in the Bible. But it may be worthwhile to cite one of the most widely anthologized Holocaust poems that relies precisely on this kind of literary device, the broken-off sentence. Dan Pagis, *Written in Pencil in the Sealed Freight Car*.

כָּאֵן בַּמְשֻׁלִּית הַזֶּה אֲנִי תוֹה עִם הַבֵּל בְּנִי אִם תֵּרְאוּ אֶת בְּנֵי הַגְּדוֹל קִוּוּ כֵּן אֲדָם תִּגִּידוּ לוֹ שְׂאֵנִי	Here, in this carload, I, Eve, with my son Abel. If you see my older boy, Cain, the son of Adam tell him that I
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Pagis' Eve anticipates Rebekah. The Matriarch of all humanity and the matriarch of Israel are filled with unanswerable questions emanating from their anguish and aimlessness.