



ICJW Bea Zucker Online Bible Study Program

“The Five Books of Moses: Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

Session 6: Parshat Toldot - Fertile Prayer

בראשית כה:

יֵשׁ וְאֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדֹת יִצְחָק בֶּן-אַבְרָהָם, אֲבִרְהֵם הוֹלִיד אֶת-יִצְחָק. כ וַיְהִי יִצְחָק בֶּן-אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה בְּקִרְיַת אֶת-רִבְקָה בַּת-בְּתוּאֵל הָאֲרָמִי מִפְּדַן אָרָם אַחוֹת לְבֵן הָאֲרָמִי לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה. כ א וַיַּעֲתֵר יִצְחָק לַיהוָה לֵבֶן כַּח אִשְׁתּוֹ כִּי עֲקָרָה הוּא וַיַּעֲתֵר לוֹ יְהוָה וַתְּהַר רִבְקָה אִשְׁתּוֹ. כ ב וַיִּתֵּר צְרוּ הַבָּנִים בְּקִרְבָּהּ וַתֹּאמֶר אִם-כֵּן לָמָּה זֶה אֲנִי וַתֵּלֶךְ לְדַרְשׁ אֶת-יְהוָה. כ ג וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה לָהּ שְׁנֵי גֵ'יִם בְּבֶטְנְךָ וְשְׁנֵי לְאֻמִּים מִמֶּעֶיךָ יִפְרְדוּ וְלֹא אֶם מְלֹא אֶם יֶאֱמָץ וְרַב יַעֲבֹד צְעִיר. כ ד וַיִּמְלְאוּ יְמִיהָ לְלֵדָת וְהִנֵּה תוֹמֵם בְּבֶטְנָה. כ ה וַיֵּצֵא הָרִאשׁוֹן אֲדָמוּנִי כְּלוֹ כְּאֵדָרֶת שַׁעַר וַיִּקְרְאוּ שְׁמוֹ עֵשָׂו. כ ו וְאַחֲרֵי-כֵן יֵצֵא אַחִיו יַדְוֹ אֶחָזֶת בְּעֵקֶב עֵשָׂו וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ יַעֲקֹב

Genesis 25

¹⁹ This is the story of Yitzchak, son of Avraham. Avraham begot Yitzchak. ²⁰ Yitzchak was forty years old when he took to wife Rivka, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean. ²¹ Yitzchak pleaded with the Lord on behalf of his spouse, because she was barren; and the Lord responded to his plea, and his spouse Rivka conceived. ²² But the children struggled in her womb, and she said, "If so, why do I exist?" She went to inquire of the Lord, ²³ and the Lord answered her:

"Two nations are in your womb,
Two separate peoples shall issue from your body;
One people shall be mightier than the other,
And the older the younger shall serve."

²⁴ When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. ²⁵ The first one emerged red, like a hairy mantle all over; so they named him Esau. ²⁶ Then his brother emerged, holding on to the heel of Esau; so they named him Yakov.

Context

God answers Yitzchak and Rivka's prayer for a child. Rivka gives birth to twins—Esau and Yakov are competitors from the outset. One day, when Esau returns exhausted from a hunt, he trades his firstborn birthright for a bowl of Yakov's red lentil stew.

When a drought makes their lives difficult, God instructs Yitzchak to stay in the land rather than flee to Egypt as Avraham had done. Yitzchak repeats the same deception as Avraham, and presents Rivka as his sister to Avimelekh, King of the Philistines. When Avimelekh discovers the ruse, he responds graciously, and protects the couple.

Yitzchak manages to resolve disputes about wells that have been dug and filled.



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When Yitzchak has grown old, he calls his favorite son Esau to prepare to receive his firstborn blessing. Rivka intercepts the blessing and arranges for Yakov to take it ahead of Esau by deceiving Yitzchak. Yakov runs away with the blessing to Rivka's relatives where he will seek to marry, leaving his brother behind as an enemy.

Explorations

Infertility is a common theme in the lives of our biblical ancestors. The experience of the intense unfulfilled desire for children influences their relationships with each other and with God. In spite of the divine promise and covenant that her offspring will be numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand in the sea (Bereishit 15:4; 22:17), Sarah does not conceive a child with Avraham until she is 90 years old! Yitzchak and Rivka are troubled by the same difficulty. The Torah alludes to the problem in the first verses of our parasha.

Usually, when the text begins to tell of a lineage, it lists a number of generations; here, there is only one generation because Yitzchak and Rivka have not yet given birth. Impotence and barrenness trigger feelings of lack of control, a deep sense of emptiness, powerlessness, inadequacy, and even desperation. Yitzchak and Rivka channel their longing into prayer. The text thereby suggests to us that God is the cause, or at least can bring forth the solution to their anguish.

Yitzchak entreated God *lenokhach*--in the presence of his spouse because she was barren, and God responded to his entreaty and Rivka, his spouse, conceived. (Bereishit 25:21)

In this verse, the prayer flows remarkably to its fulfillment; there is no gap between the human request and the divine response. Here, God answers prayer. Many interpreters ask why the prayer is so perfectly effective; they look closely at the verse itself for hints. One special word in the verse—*lenokhach* suggests possible solutions to the mystery of how prayer works in this context. The [Rashbam](#), Rashi's grandson, explains that Yitzchak prays for Rivka, implying that she probably did not pray on her own behalf. A midrash explains differently:

He prostrated himself (before God) here, and she prostrated herself (before God) here. He said, “Sovereign of the Universe, all of the children you will give to me will be from this righteous woman.” And she said, “All of the children you will give to me will be from this righteous man.” (Bereishit Rabbah)

This midrash envisions Rivka praying actively as Yitzchak does. In the scene, man and



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woman bow down fully and pray with full intention alongside one another, without distraction. The midrash explains “presence” not only in physical terms, but also in terms of the tremendous love and respect that each feels for the other. Neither claims her or his worthiness before the Creator; each presents the worthiness of the other as the reason for deserving a child. The midrash considers this mutuality to be so important that it even defies the biblical grammar in the second part of the verse that God answers *his* (Yitzchak’s) prayer. The reason that God answers the prayer, claims the midrash, is because they both prayed in each other’s full presence. Such a petition is both humble and loving, man and woman each expressing her and his desire for the other, intermingling their prayers with one another. Such spiritual intimacy appeals specially to the Creator who enables the couple to conceive immediately.

Our biblical ancestors show a range of responses to infertility. Life-threatening jealousies, rivalries, and anger develop from Sarah and Rachel’s struggles with infertility. Fertility substitutes for love in Leah’s relationship with Yaakov, strains Rachel’s relationship with Leah, and sparks antagonism between Rachel and Yaakov over the cause of their infertility. By contrast, the infertility experienced by Yitzchak and Rivka (according to this midrash) gives rise to the expression of mutual love and prayer. They do not contemplate adopting a child, or finding a surrogate mother. Indeed, Yitzchak and Rivka are the only monogamous couple among the patriarchs and matriarchs, lovers true to each other. They model a supportive and collaborative relationship whose joint action achieves its desired outcome.

Today, as well, a range of options exists for responding to infertility. Current practices often involve medical interventions, mostly in women’s bodies. These interventions include drugs, hormone injections, and surgeries. The methods work with some level of statistical effectiveness to address childlessness mainly for the wealthy, for most health insurance plans do not cover fertility treatment. Israel is one exception among nations; government funds provide for fertility treatment for all Israeli women—partly because of the national priority to “replace” Jewish lives lost in the holocaust. Often the medical methods do not address the anguish, even when they “work”. The reproductive technologies aim for human control over the creation of life, and women’s role in it. They also earn tremendous profits, mainly for men. While many of the medical techniques enable motherhood, we must still face the question about how to relate to the *production* of families and nations more humanely, relieving the excess burden for fertility placed on women. One critic suggests, “even very successful and compassionate clinicians may create the impression that women’s bodies are objects to be monitored and regulated, not aspects of one’s self” (Baroness Deech of Cumnor, see link below.)

Often we view infertility as a completely scientific and medical issue, and lose perspective on vulnerability and miracles. Yitzchak and Rivka invoke God and ritual in this process, acknowledging their lack of control, and awe for the blessing and sanctity of life.



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Questions for Discussion

- What is the significance of the innovation of the midrash—portraying both members of the couple praying to God for a child, each claiming to deserve the child on account of the merit of his/her partner? How does this scene affect your understanding of prayer, private and public?
- Examine your past or current desire to have or not to have children, your expectations and fears. What motivates your desire? How does it affect your relationships with (past, current or potential) partners, families, and with God?
- Consider your beliefs about God's role in your personal life—under what conditions do you seek divine help, and do you believe that prayer is effective? Why or why not?
- Notice how often synagogue and Jewish life in general assume that people have or can have children. For instance, we jokingly encourage newlyweds to have children. How can we bring more sensitivity to infertility and partner-lessness in our communities? How do you relate to adoption as an alternative to medical infertility treatment?
- What are the implications of these two approaches to infertility—prayer and medical technology, and how do they interact? To what extent do you consider procreation to be awesome, sacred or miraculous, and why? Consider how these views you hold are affected by your experiences as a woman, or man. Does your experience bear witness to a divine aspect of procreation? Explain.

Study Links

See [this](#) interpretation of Sara's infertility on a website dedicated to Torah study, with an eye to women's concerns.

In a provocative take on “Fertility and Feminism”, Baroness Deech of Cumnor claims, “It is almost too simple to point out that most of the users of reproductive medicine are women, and the providers men.... I heard a respected doctor comment that he had made 1000 women pregnant!” For the transcript, click [here](#).

[“For all of feminism's focus on women's choices, its failure to treat motherhood as a legitimate choice did women no favours.”](#) [Here](#) is a critical look at feminist attitudes to fertility.

The New York Times published this [guide to infertility](#).

An Orthodox rabbi considers the positive sides of childlessness—click [here](#).



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Summary of Issues

Yitzchak and Rivka pray for help with their childlessness—a condition that exposes helplessness and vulnerability, evokes deep spiritual longing, and desire for scientific mastery over Creation—over women's procreative lives in particular.

Methods & Observations

The Torah raises issues that are strikingly similar to contemporary concerns. Often the assumptions and world-view in the text contrast starkly with contemporary approaches to the same difficulties. Infertility is one important example of this similarity and contrast—prayer and technology. We have the choice to view the text as ancient and outmoded, or to let the biblical ideas challenge our ideas and practices, and to seek to integrate our perspectives.

Contact

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