A Eulogy for the Uneulogized: Thoughts for Parashat Vayishlah

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Vayishlah

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“And Deborah, Rebecca’s nurse, died and she was buried below Beth-El under the oak; and the name of it was called Allon-bakhuth (the oak of weeping).” (Bereishith 35:8)

The Torah goes out of its way to report the death of Deborah, whose only claim to fame was having been the life-long nurse of Rebecca. The Torah not only tells us where she was buried, but also that her death evoked weeping.

It seems ironic that the Torah would highlight the death and burial of Rebecca’s nurse…but never records the time of death and burial of Rebecca herself. The Torah does report on Jacob’s words shortly before he died, when he requested to be buried in the cave that Abraham had purchased from Efron: “There they buried Abraham and Sarah his wife; there they buried Isaac and Rebecca his wife, and there I buried Leah.” (Bereishith 49:31)

The Torah reports on another woman besides Deborah who died and was buried while in the midst of travels: Rachel, Jacob’s wife. While Rachel was buried and mourned, her sister Leah’s time of death and burial are not mentioned in the Torah. Two women—Deborah and Rachel-- die, are buried and mourned; while the two women closest to them—Rebecca and Leah-- fade from the Torah without mention of burial or weeping.

The Torah teaches by its words…and also by its silence. If Rebecca and Leah are not suitably mourned in the text, a message is being conveyed.

A funeral and burial represent “closure.” Mourners confront the death of loved ones, eulogize them, weep for them…and themselves. When the Torah describes the deaths and burials of Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rachel and Jacob, it marks generational transitions. When it describes the death and burial of Deborah, it notes the passing of a long-time family attendant, the end of an era for the family.

But what about Rebecca and Leah? Why did the Torah omit description of their deaths and burials? Perhaps this was a way of indicating that their deaths did not entail “closure” for the mourners.

Leah was the less loved/unloved wife of Jacob whose clear favorite was Rachel. Leah's first born, Reuven, was passed over by Jacob who gave double portion to Rachel's son, Joseph. Leah always seemed unfulfilled, treated as second best. She died sad and unappreciated.

Rebecca, like Leah, suffered much. After years of being barren, she had a very difficult pregnancy that resulted in twin boys. But family life was not ideal. Her husband Isaac favored Esau, while Rebecca favored Jacob. In seeking to have Isaac's blessing bestowed on Jacob, she arranged for Jacob to trick the blind Isaac by pretending to be Esau. The result was that Jacob had to flee Esau's wrath, so that Rebecca's favorite lived far away. Esau must have resented Rebecca for her plot against him. And Isaac was a blind old man who probably wasn't much of a soul mate for her. Her only companion was her nurse, Deborah.

When Leah and Rebecca died, their families hardly needed "closure." They just buried the women without fanfare. The Torah doesn't mention their funerals because their funerals were pro-forma.

Leah and Rebecca were like so many human beings who pass through life without feeling fulfillment. No one seems to understand them or care about them or tend to their emotional needs. Such people grow old and simply fade away without the recognition and love they had craved throughout their lives.

Perhaps the Torah is teaching us to be attentive to the Leahs and Rebeccas among us. We should be sensitive to their emotional needs, care for them, value them. And perhaps the Torah is teaching the Leahs and Rebeccas among us to be more assertive of their own needs. No one should have to die feeling that their lives had been unfulfilled, second best, unimportant to those among whom they lived.

If the Torah highlights the funeral of Deborah, the nurse of Rebecca, perhaps it is pointing to her virtues, her loyalty to Rebecca, her serving as a model to us. Deborah was a genuine friend to Rebecca, maybe the only real friend that Rebecca had. Deborah seems to have understood what no one else did: Rebecca was a human being craving love, respect, companionship.

Leah and Rebecca: the Torah's silence about your deaths and burials provides a loud message. Through that silence, we learn to empathize with you…and with others like you whose needs and feelings are often overlooked.