The Plight of Rebecca: Thoughts for Parashat Toledot

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Toledot

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

“And Isaac sent away Jacob; and he went to Paddan-aram to Laban, son of Bethuel the Aramean, the brother of Rebeccah, mother of Jacob and Esau” (Bereishith 28:5).

The verse identifies Rebeccah as mother of Jacob and Esau, a fact we already knew. The great commentator, Rashi, is puzzled by the redundancy and writes: “I don’t know what this teaches us.” Many have noted the intellectual honesty and humility of Rashi to publicly record that he didn’t understand a phrase in the Torah. He didn’t have to make any comment at all; after all, he didn’t comment on many passages in the Torah.

It is intriguing to try to come up with an explanation for why the Torah once again reports that Rebeccah is the mother of Jacob and Esau. Rabbi Eliyahu Benamozegh, in his commentary *Eim LeMikra*, (cited by Nehama Leibowitz in her commentary) suggests that this passage is connected to a previous verse in which Rebeccah expresses fear lest Esau murder Jacob, “why should I be bereaved of both of you in one day?” Rabbi Benamozegh explains that she feared that the two brothers would fight, one murdering the other. She then would be bereaved of both: the murdered son is dead, and the murderer son would become hateful in her eyes. The Torah reminds us: she is the mother of both of them, she is concerned about both of them.

Interestingly, the problematic passage refers to Rebeccah as mother of Jacob and Esau…putting Jacob first even though he was the younger son. If we look at the literary structure of the entire Torah portion, we find a poignant circular pattern. Here is part one, at the beginning of the Parasha:

Rebeccah is childless

She gives birth to twins, Esau is first born

Jacob is second born

But in part two, at the end of the Torah portion, the details are reversed:

Jacob is listed first

Esau is listed second

Rebeccah is “childless” again

Rebeccah’s son Jacob leaves home and she has no clear expectation of when, if ever, she will ever see him again. But she not only has lost Jacob’s presence, she also has totally alienated herself from Esau. He certainly realizes that she conspired to get Isaac’s blessing transferred to Jacob rather than to him. Rebeccah’s relationship with Esau is irreparably damaged, exacerbated by the fact that Esau took wives who caused her (and Isaac) much bitterness.

According to this analysis, the Torah reminds us that Rebeccah is mother of both Jacob and Esau, but that she is now “childless” again. She is a mother isolated from her favored son, Jacob, but also from Esau. She is very much alone. Isaac is an old, blind man who had preferred Esau to Jacob and whose wife deceived him into blessing Jacob instead of Esau. Rebeccah fades away; we hear no more about her after this story.

The Torah presents a sad story of a troubled family…parental favoritism, sibling rivalry, marital discord, deception, lack of communication. These negative examples are vivid reminders to us of problematic behaviors that we should avoid.

The Torah often teaches by overt prescription and commandment. But it also teaches by presenting problematic individuals and circumstances. In this week's Parasha, the Torah's literary imagery speaks louder than words.