

WRJ CENTENNIAL



D'var Torah

Women's Voices Deepen Our Jewish Legacy

Rebekah: The Mitzvah of Kindness and the Adventure of Going Forth
Parashat Chayei Sarah (Genesis 23:1 – 25:18)
Parashat Tol'dot (Genesis 25:19 – 28:9)

In Parashat Chayei Sarah ('the life of Sarah'), we learn that Rebekah welcomed the stranger, bringing water to his thirsty camels. She passed the test created by Eliezer, Abraham's servant, who was assigned to find a woman of chupah-quality for Abraham's son Isaac.

Eliezer prays for God's help with this task: "God of Abraham, please bring me luck today, and do a kindness for my master Abraham. Here I am standing at the water-fount, and the daughters of the townspeople are going forth to draw water; the girl to whom I say, 'Tip your pitcher and let me drink,' and who replies, 'Drink; and let me water your camels, too' – let her be the one You have designated for Your servant Isaac; that is how I shall know that You have done a kindness for my master." (Genesis 24:12-13)

In the following Torah portion, Parashat Tol'dot ('generations'), we read how Rebekah, great niece of Abraham, accepts her divine destiny to leave her homeland to become Isaac's wife, one of our four matriarchs, and the mother of Jacob, one of our three patriarchs.

It appears that God was very busy executing plans! With the marriage of Rebekah to Isaac, "the covenant with God will be renewed." (*The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, commentary by Yairah Amit, p 111) The renewal of Abraham's covenant with God guaranteed a future for the Jewish people far beyond the generation of Rebekah and Isaac.

Rebekah intuitively understood God's plan as it involved her twins Esau and Jacob, who fought with each other even in her womb. The long and the short of the tale is that Jacob prevailed, carrying our Jewish heritage through his line. It is Jacob, not Esau, who sustained Rebekah's and Isaac's legacy. Once again God planned, and so it happened!

Though Rebekah originated from Abraham's family, her new life as Isaac's wife brought challenges. Neither becoming a mother nor motherhood was easy for Rebekah. Her twins were fighters. Isaac favored one son while she favored the other, leading to complicated family dynamics. Her burdens might have been eased if she had found a way to join her new community. Did motherhood help her meet and bond with other women? Did the women of Abraham and

Isaac's community welcome her or did they put a stumbling block in her path? Resonating for us today, how would a sisterhood have welcomed her and helped her navigate her new situation? What can we learn from Rebekah's adventure into this new life?

According to Blair Marks, WRJ First Vice President, the sisterhood that welcomed her when she was a stranger in a strange place made all the difference in her Jewish journey. She wrote: "I knew no one in town when a career move took me to Charleston, SC in the early nineties... but the women of the Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim Sisterhood quickly made me a member of the community. Whether making sure I was invited to a seder, asking me to help with the annual bazaar, or encouraging me to participate in Sisterhood Shabbat by adding the matriarchs to the traditional Avot (a first for KKBE), they made certain that I felt included from the day I arrived on their doorstep. Their caring welcome brought me firmly into the embrace of WRJ, and set me on an extraordinary continuing lifetime journey. What a blessing!"

So much happens in the lives of the women of our sisterhoods! At the watering wells of our sisterhoods, we pray that there are women who show kindness to those who bring their lives into a sisterhood and congregation. The Rebekahs of our sisterhoods can learn the stories of the Rebekahs who are new to the community. Establishing connections that help to sustain the individual and the community is a visionary mitzvah!

And so, it is not just Abraham who went forth in biblical days. It was also Sarah, his wife, followed by Rebekah, his daughter-in-law. Historically, women were expected to leave their parents' homes to live in the homes of their husbands. Perhaps women embraced that challenge as an adventure. Today, many of our members make homes in our communities where they have no family. WRJ sisterhoods can become substitute family, making connections and developing bonds. When women are new to our community, we can help them create roots and provide a spiritual home filled with nurturing and love. As women go forth in the world, sisterhoods can help them adjust and become part of their new community.

And so may we be *Stronger Together* when we follow the vision of women like Rebekah in going forth to do God's work. Amen!

This d'var Torah was written by WRJ executive committee member Cynthia Roosth Wolf for adaptation and use by sisterhoods/women's groups during the 2013 WRJ Centennial year. We are grateful to Cynthia and Michael Wolf and Family for generously sponsoring this Centennial project.