

Rebecca: Woman of Faith Part 5

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The Question

In the last lesson, we spoke about the phrase: *שְׁנֵי גוֹיִם בְּיִטְבְּהָ* – *Two nations are in your womb* – from the prophecy that Lord gave to Rebecca when she was still pregnant. I mentioned that this phrase has been used repeatedly in our history to define the relationship of the people of Israel to the nations around them. Israel Yuval, a Professor from Hebrew University wrote a book titled: “**Two nations are in your womb**”, about the perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages – and I highly recommend this very interesting book.

We already know that, even among the patriarchs, Isaac’s and Rebecca’s family seems to stand out: Isaac was the only monogamous patriarch, we are told that he loved his wife and prayed for her; moreover, this is the only case from all the three barren wives where Scripture informs us that Rebecca conceived because the Lord answered Isaac’s prayer, so they seemed to be a very tender and loving couple, especially during the first part of their marriage.

However, we all know the story about Jacob’s conflict with his brother Esau – and we also know that the whole story of Jacob’s life was greatly affected, maybe even defined and determined by this conflict. Moreover, even though the two brother’s pattern runs throughout the whole book of Genesis, Jacob and Esau—unlike Isaac and Ishmael, for instance, or Joseph and his brothers—had the same parents (and loving parents, as we have seen). So, how did this terrible split between the brothers happen?

The Torah doesn’t provide any judgment or explanation of this conflict. It doesn’t justify, doesn’t excuse, doesn’t provide any comments at all; it just states the facts: *Isaac loved Esau ... but Rebecca loved Jacob*^[1] – and we are left to wonder whether this parental favoritism was the original source of the conflict or whether the brothers had not been getting along well even before it became obvious. It is clear, however, that parental favoritism played a very significant role in the conflict of the brothers – otherwise the Scripture would not tell us about it. Let us try to answer the question then: why did this favoritism happen, and how did it start? Why did Isaac love Esau? Why did Rebecca love Jacob?

The Different Backgrounds

I've already mentioned a wonderful book by Israel Yuval. Among the other things, his answers to these questions and his analysis of Isaac and Rebecca's personalities are very non-traditional and for me personally, have become really eye-opening. I will use some of his analysis here in this article.

In order to understand the background for the twins, let us speak for a moment about the background of the parents—of Isaac and Rebecca. First of all, Isaac is “sabra”, as we would say today: he was born in the Land, and he is the only one of the patriarchs who has never been outside of the land (has never been *bahul*, as we would say in Hebrew today). He wanders little, and following God's commandment doesn't even leave the land in time of famine.^[2] He belongs to this Land – and in that, he differs a lot from his mother and his father: as we know, they both came to the Land in obedience to God's call, which means they both were immigrants.

Not only was Isaac born in the Land and is completely connected to the Land, he also works the land! He tries something that his father hadn't tried, and becomes the first farmer in his family: he sows and reaps and is extremely blessed in that. “*Then Isaac sowed in that land, and reaped in the same year a hundredfold; and the LORD blessed him.*”^[3] Isaac has been always “the man of the Land” – but after that, he actually becomes “**the man of the field**”.

Rebecca, on the other hand, is an immigrant in this Land, coming from a completely different culture and background. Moreover, the very same verse that informs us of Isaac's love for Rebecca, also says that “*Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent*”.^[4] From that time on, Rebecca's place has been **in the tent** of her late mother-in-law.

As Israel Yuval writes, this tension between Isaac, the man of the field, and Rebecca, hidden in the tent, is a metaphor for the dualism between two characters and two symbols. “The field is arena of one who lives and acts in nature, in the open, while the tent is a symbol of quietness and enclosure. Thus, “the difference between the parents sets the scene for the difference between the children, the twins who struggle with one another.”^[5]

In order to proceed, we will need some Hebrew here. While most English translations call Esau “*a man of the outdoors*,” The Hebrew text calls him “*a man of the field*”: “*Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field,*”^[6] That's why Isaac loved Esau: even though they probably did not have very similar characters, they were both “*men of the field*”: they both loved being in nature and it's very likely that they spent a lot of time together outdoors. “*Oh, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field which the LORD has blessed.*”^[7]

On the other hand, the mother, who was sitting in the tent, probably spent a lot of time with Jacob who was “*a mild man, dwelling in tents*”[\[8\]](#). Thus, Isaac had this special bond with Esau, while Rebecca was much more connected with Jacob. “*Isaac loved Esau ... but Rebecca loved Jacob.*”[\[9\]](#) Scripture refers to Esau as the “older son” of Isaac,[\[10\]](#) while Jacob is simply called “the son” of Rebecca.[\[11\]](#)

Next time, we will discuss the famous story of Rebecca’s plot and “the stolen blessing”, and thus will conclude this series.

Questions:

What does it do to your heart that Isaac was the only monogamous patriarch?
What does it teach us about marriage today?

What did you learn about the difference between Isaac and Rebecca and how it would shape their affinity for each son? Do you favor one son or daughter more than the other?

Did your parents treat you equally with your siblings? How did that make you feel? How does it motivate you to treat others?