

This month's study with
Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein



So they called Rebekah and asked her, “Will you go with this man?” “I will go,” she said.

— Genesis 24:58



The second Matriarch in the history of the Jewish people was Rebekah, wife of Isaac and mother to Esau and Jacob. When we first encounter Rebekah, we learn that she was from the family of Abraham (Genesis 24:15), that she was beautiful (v. 16), and that she was kind, as evidenced by her enthusiasm in providing water for Abraham's servant as well as his camels (v. 19). Through our study, we will discover that she was also strong in character, action, and faith.

Every Sabbath eve, Jewish families sing the words of Proverbs 31 to the woman of the home. We begin with the words: *Eishet chayil mi yimtza?* “A woman of valor who can find?” (Proverbs 31:10, Jewish Masoretic Text).

The word *chayil*, generally translated as “valor” or “noble,” is nearly identical to the Hebrew word *chayal*, meaning “soldier.” The woman of valor is, first and foremost, a soldier. She is strong, competent, and loyal to her family, those whom she protects.

She is strict when necessary, unbreakable when tested, and hard working for the sake of her family and community. And yet, the next phrase reads: *vrachok mepeninim michra*, “far beyond pearls is her value” (Proverbs 31:10 Jewish Masoretic text.) As strong as she may be, the woman of valor is also more graceful and beautiful than a delicate pearl.

Mother Rebekah, *Rivka Imenu*, was a prime example of a woman of valor.

After Abraham's servant discovered that Rebekah was the right match for Isaac, he spoke with her family. They agreed that the proposed marriage was “from the LORD” (Genesis 24:50) and gave their approval for Rebekah to go with the servant to Canaan and marry Isaac.

However, when the servant was ready to leave with Rebekah, the family asked him to postpone the trip and let her stay for ten more days. Jewish tradition teaches that the family had planned to keep postponing the trip; they were happy to receive the valuable gifts that the servant gave them on Rebekah's behalf, but had no real intention of allowing her to leave.

When Abraham's servant asked them not to



Rebekah: Our Matriarch of Strength

detain him further, the family suggested that they ask Rebekah what she wanted to do. They were certain that she would be hesitant to go with the stranger on such a long journey to an unknown place. They were certain that she would go along with their plan and postpone the marriage indefinitely. However, they underestimated Rebekah.

When the family asked her: *“Will you go with this man?”* the “real question” was, “You really don't want to go with this strange man all alone, right?” But Rebekah answered without hesitation: *“I will go.”* The sages explained that she meant, “I will go with or without your consent.”

Hundreds of years later, we hear Rebekah's response echoed in the stirring words of a young Moabite woman, Ruth, who told her Israelite mother-in-law, *“Where you will go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God”* (Ruth 1:16).

In the end, Rebekah's family sent her off with a blessing that is still recited at Jewish wedding ceremonies:

“Our sister, may you increase to thousands upon thousands; may your offspring possess the cities of their enemies.” (Genesis 24:60)

At a young age Rebekah was already a strong and determined woman, unafraid to follow Abraham's servant to an unknown land. As we will learn in this month's *Limmud*, this characteristic of strength served Rebekah throughout her life.

Whenever called upon to draw on her inner strength, Rebekah did so with faith. With faith, she turned to God for answers when her pregnancy became difficult. With faith, she acted upon that God-given revelation before her sons were born.

Rebekah serves as an example for us all to tap into reservoirs of strength we never knew we had. We are stronger than we might think and capable of great, wondrous things when we choose, like Rebekah, to go forward in faith.

Rabbi Eckstein



A Rose among the Thorns

"Drink, my lord," she said, and quickly lowered the jar to her hands and gave him a drink.

After she had given him a drink, she said, "I'll draw water for your camels too, until they have had enough to drink." — Genesis 24:18–19

We are introduced to the Matriarch Rebekah shortly after she made her entrance into the world: “Bethuel became the father of Rebekah” (Genesis 22:23). It’s no coincidence that we hear of Rebekah’s birth before we read about Sarah’s death in the opening verses of Genesis 23. In Ecclesiastes 1:5, we read, “The sun rises and the sun sets,” reminding us of life’s continual ebb and flow. However, we can also understand the verse as teaching us that God does not take away one great figure without sending a replacement first. In this case, Rebekah was born in anticipation that she ultimately would fill Sarah’s role.

So, what is it that made Rebekah worthy of being the next “mother” of the nation of Israel?

The Jewish sages referred to Rebekah as “a rose among the thorns,” based on a quote from Song of Songs 2:2, which reads “Like a lily among thorns is my darling among the young women” (the Hebrew word for lily is translated as “rose”). Rebekah grew up in a household full of deceit, greed, and idol worship. For example, her brother Laban would display his true nature later on when he tricked Jacob into marrying Leah instead of Rachel (Genesis 29:15-29).

Yet, like Sarah before her, Rebekah rejected the ways of her family and the society around her. Instead, she chose goodness, truth, and kindness. She had the inner strength to define and defend her own beliefs, and like a delicate, beautiful rose, she stood out from the rest.

Of course, Abraham’s servant charged with finding Isaac a wife – and consequently the next Matriarch – knew nothing about Rebekah’s character when he first saw her. In fact, he was concerned about how he would find the right woman to become Isaac’s wife. So the servant devised a plan. He prayed, “May it be that when I say to a young woman, ‘Please let down your jar that I may have a drink,’ and she says, ‘Drink, and I’ll water your camels too’ – let her be the one you have chosen for your servant Isaac” (Genesis 24:14).

Abraham’s servant was not asking God for a random sign that would indicate the right match for Isaac. Rather, he set up a test – a test of character – and Rebekah passed it beyond his expectations.

The servant was looking for an exceptionally kind woman. Not only did Rebekah happily give the servant water, but also, without being asked, she offered to draw enough water from the well for the servant’s ten camels. This would have been approximately 140 gallons of water

(approximately 1,162 pounds!) – an almost super-human feat for a young woman.

Yet, Rebecca willingly drew the water and did not question why the servant didn’t offer to help her. Unlike the selfish society in which she lived, Rebekah chose to be a selfless and kind person, caring for all people. Like Abraham and Sarah, who were known for their hospitality and kindness, it brought her joy to help others and, no matter how difficult the task at hand might be, she found the strength to do what needed to be done. This “camel test” offered the servant a glimpse into Rebekah’s true greatness.

In performing this ordinary activity, Rebekah demonstrated her extraordinary character. The great rabbi Baal Shem Tov taught that a soul comes into the world with the sole purpose of doing one act of kindness for another person. In the Christian Bible, as well, the apostle Paul wrote about the importance of this characteristic, “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience” (Colossians 3:12).

It was Rebekah’s kindness, strength, and determination to help another person in need that qualified her to become the second Matriarch who would ensure the continuation of Abraham and Sarah’s legacy.

think about it...

1. How do society and those around you influence your values? How would you define your values based on your beliefs, especially when they conflict with popular ideas surrounding you?
2. Why do you think kindness was the litmus test Abraham’s servant used in order to find the right wife for Isaac? What is unique about kindness as opposed to all other virtues?
3. What is important enough to you that you would be willing to risk everything for it?
4. What is the longest you have prayed for something? Did you receive an answer? If not, have you stopped praying for it? Consider revisiting old prayers and engaging in them again.
5. Where in your life might you need more strength and courage? How has Rebekah’s story inspired you?



A Hidden Source of Strength

The babies jostled each other within her, and she said, “Why is this happening to me?” So she went to inquire of the LORD.

— Genesis 25:22

When we next encounter Rebekah in the Bible, it is in the context of becoming pregnant and giving birth to Esau and Jacob. In Genesis 25:21, we read: “*Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was childless. The LORD answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant.*”

At first glance, it appears that this was a straightforward matter – they prayed, and God answered their prayers. Yet when we consider that verse 20 informs us Isaac was 40 when he married Rebekah, and verse 26 tells us that Isaac was 60 when the twins were born, we begin to appreciate that the couple endured being childless for 20 years.

Like Sarah before her, Rebekah was also barren. Like Sarah, Rebekah also knew that God had promised her husband heirs to carry on His mission. And like Sarah, she withheld this test of faith. Rebekah’s inner strength would not let her faith crumble or falter. We never hear of her complaining or questioning her situation. She carried on with faith and prayer, without questioning God’s promise.

Ironically, it is once Rebekah was pregnant with her long-awaited child that she was thrown off balance and questioned what was happening to her. “*The babies jostled each other within her, and she said, ‘Why is this happening to me?’ So she went to inquire of the LORD.*”

This was more than just the active stirring of a child in the womb. Jewish tradition teaches that whenever Rebekah passed by a place of learning about God, the baby inside her womb would kick and struggle. However, the same would happen when she passed by a house of idolatry. Her pain increased to the point that it became unbearable. Finally, in despair, Rebekah turned to God for answers and His guidance.

All became clear when God explained to her that she was carrying twins. “*Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated*” (Genesis 25:23). Rebekah would give birth to two very different children and, as she had already experienced, one would be drawn toward holiness and the other toward sin. God also told her, “*the older will serve the younger.*”

God’s plan for Isaac’s heirs is reiterated in the Christian Bible. The apostle Paul wrote in Romans 9:10-13, “*Not only that, but Rebekah’s children were conceived at the same time by our father Isaac. Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad – in order that God’s*

purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls – she was told, ‘The older will serve the younger.’ Just as it is written: ‘Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.’”

Yet, Rebekah never said a word of this to Isaac. Instead, she chose to bear the burden alone. The sages explained that Rebekah understood that if she told Isaac what God had revealed to her about the nature of their sons, he would automatically withdraw from Esau and possibly send him away.

Even with Esau’s disposition, she wanted him to gain everything he possibly could from his holy father who completely believed in him. Rebekah understood that whatever nation emerged from Esau could only gain from having its origins in the home of Isaac. Rebekah can be credited with everything good found in Esau’s offspring.

Sometimes strength is found in speaking up. Other times, true strength is in knowing when to remain quiet. Rebekah understood when to speak up and when to remain quiet. In doing so, she shaped history and brought more goodness into the world.

apply it...

- 1. PRACTICE RADICAL KINDNESS.** Just as Rebekah did when she encountered Abraham’s servant, extend kindness to whomever you encounter throughout the day. (Micah 6:8, ESV; Colossians 3:12)
- 2. THINK BEFORE YOU SPEAK.** Rebekah was extremely mindful of when to speak and when to keep silent. We can all benefit by considering when to speak and when to remain quiet. (Proverbs 21:23; James 1:19)
- 3. ACT ON GOD’S PROMISES.** Like Rebekah, we must be willing to act in accordance with God’s promises in the Bible, even when it might be difficult. (Deuteronomy 10:12; 2 John 6)
- 4. BE COURAGEOUS.** Rebekah was a woman of courage, allowing her to accomplish great things. When we act with conviction and courage, in faith, we, too, can achieve our goals. (Deuteronomy 31:6; 1 Corinthians 16:13)
- 5. PRAY AND PRAY AGAIN.** Rebekah and Isaac prayed repeatedly for a child. After 20 years, their prayer finally was answered. Be encouraged to keep praying and never give up! (1 Samuel 12:23; Colossians 4:2)



Shaping Our Destiny

“Now, my son, listen carefully and do what I tell you . . .”

— Genesis 27:8

Rebekah played a critical – and yes, controversial – role in one of the most dramatic episodes in the Bible. Scripture tells us: “*When Isaac was old and his eyes were so weak that he could no longer see, he called for Esau his older son . . .*” (Genesis 27:1). Isaac called Esau in order to bless him with the abundant blessings that he had reserved for his first-born, which would confer on Esau the mantle of carrying out God’s promise to Abraham.

However, Isaac’s “*eyes were so weak that he could no longer see . . .*” The sages taught that Isaac wasn’t only physically blind, but also blinded to the truth about Esau’s character. As it tells us in Scripture, Isaac favored his elder son, not because of some great character trait or godliness, but because Esau was a hunter, and “*Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau*” (Genesis 25:28).

We see from Esau’s actions that he had rejected his spiritual place in the family. Early on, Esau gave up his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of stew (Genesis 25:29-34). Later, Esau married two Hittite women who “*were a source of grief to Isaac and Rebekah*” (Genesis 26:35). Despite these flaws, Isaac was intent on giving his blessing to Esau.

However, Rebekah, who had grown up in a home filled with family members who were just like Esau, saw his true character. She also had in her heart the prophecy from God regarding her children. She knew that only one of the twins would carry on the legacy of Isaac and that the other would go on a different path. From Isaac’s perspective, it seemed that both twins would work together to carry on the mission begun by their grandfather Abraham. But Rebekah knew that wasn’t God’s plan.

So when Rebekah overhead Isaac’s plan to bless Esau, she knew it was time for action. She knew without any doubt that Esau was not meant to receive Isaac’s blessing. Rather, Jacob was the son who was worthy of carrying the legacy of Abraham and Isaac. Like Sarah before her, Rebekah took matters into her own hands.

Rebekah had to make a very difficult choice. She could have told Isaac about the prophecy, but she understood that he was already blinded by his love for Esau. She had to find a way for Isaac to bless Jacob without him knowing it. And so, she devised the plan we are familiar with. Jacob would dress up as Esau and pretend to be him.

In following this path, Rebekah took many risks. She risked her marriage, knowing that Isaac would eventually learn the truth. She risked Jacob’s life, knowing Esau would most likely seek revenge. She risked Jacob’s future, knowing that if the plan did not succeed, Isaac might curse

Jacob instead of blessing him. When Jacob expressed this very concern, Rebekah replied, “*My son, let the curse fall on me*” (Genesis 27:13). Rebekah would assume full responsibility and bear any consequences.

Rebekah knew what had to be done, and she had the courage to put into action what she believed God had intended. Delicately and quietly, Rebecca dressed her son Jacob as Esau, handed him Isaac’s favorite food, sent him off to his father, and just like that, she changed the course of history. Had Esau received the blessing, it would have been a disaster. With a keen analysis of the situation, Rebekah accomplished what she knew to be God’s plan for her sons.

Isaac’s blessings were, in fact, received by Jacob, the rightful beneficiary. Jacob later also blessed Esau, at his son’s request, and for those actions, Isaac is mentioned in the book of Hebrews in the Christian Bible as a paragon of faith, “*By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future*” (Hebrews 11:20).

Just as Rebekah predicted, Esau planned on killing Jacob in revenge. So, she sent Jacob off to Haran, saving his life, and directing him toward finding a wife from among her family. Isaac did not get angry at Rebekah or Jacob. In the aftermath, he understood that Rebekah had been correct and that his assessment had been wrong all along. Jewish tradition teaches that when the Bible says “*Isaac trembled violently*” after discovering he had been tricked, it was not because he was angry. Rather, it was because he realized that he had been terribly mistaken.

Rebekah’s actions have been the source of much debate for people of faith. Some see her actions as deceitful and manipulative, calling her a conniving, tricky mother, favoring one son over another. Yet, Rebekah’s love for her son was certainly aligned with God’s love for Jacob, as we read in Malachi 1:2-3, “*Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated, and I have turned his hill country into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals.*” God’s plan from the beginning was for the covenant made with Abraham to pass through Jacob.

With courage and fierce determination, Rebekah did what needed to be done for her family, the nation of Israel, and what was clearly God’s will. Her strength and courage are an everlasting legacy teaching us that we need not be victims who stand on the sidelines. Rather, we have the power to intercede and take action when necessary. In so doing, we can help shape our destiny and that of all who come after us.