

Remember Uncle Ishmael?

Central Synagogue Text Study for Parashat Toldot

November 18, 2017 / 29 Cheshvan 5778

Source Sheet by Nicole Auerbach

Genesis 26:34-35

(34) When Esau was forty years old, he took to wife Judith daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and Basemath daughter of Elon the Hittite; (35) and they were a source of bitterness to Isaac and Rebekah.

Genesis 27:46-28:9

(46) Rebekah said to Isaac, “I am disgusted with my life because of the Hittite women. If Jacob marries a Hittite woman like these, from among the native women, what good will life be to me?” (1) So Isaac sent for Jacob and blessed him. He instructed him, saying, “You shall not take a wife from among the Canaanite women. (2) Up, go to Paddan-aram, to the house of Bethuel, your mother’s father, and take a wife there from among the daughters of Laban, your mother’s brother, (3) May El Shaddai bless you, make you fertile and numerous, so that you become an assembly of peoples. (4) May He grant the blessing of Abraham to you and your offspring, that you may possess the land where you are sojourning, which God assigned to Abraham.” (5) Then Isaac sent Jacob off, and he went to Paddan-aram, to Laban the son of Bethuel the Aramean, the brother of Rebekah, mother of Jacob and Esau. (6) When Esau saw that Isaac had blessed Jacob and sent him off to Paddan-

בראשית כ"ו:ל"ד-ל"ה

(לד) ויהי עשו בן-ארבעים שנה ויקח אשה את-יהודית בת-ביערי החתי ואת-בשמת בת-אילון החתי: (לה) ותהיינן מרת רוע ליצחק ולרבקה: (ס)

בראשית כ"ז:מ"ו-כ"ח:ט

(מו) ותאמר רבקה אל-יצחק קצתי בחיי מפני בנות חת אם-לקח יעקב אשה מבנות-חת פאלה מבנות הארץ למה לי חיים: (א) ויקרא יצחק אל-יעקב ויברך אותו ויצוהו ויאמר לו לא-תקח אשה מבנות כנען: (ב) קום לך פדגה ארם ביתה בתואל אבי אמך וקח-לך משם אשה מבנות לבן אחי אמך: (ג) ואל שדי יברך אתך ויפרך וירכך והיית לקהל עמים: (ד) ויתו-לך את-ברכת אברהם לך ולזרעך אתה לרשתה את-ארץ מגריד אשר-נתנו אלהים לאברהם: (ה) וישלח יצחק את-יעקב וילך פדגה ארם אל-לבן בן-בתואל הארמי אחי רבקה אם יעקב ועשו: (ו) וירא עשו כיי-ברך יצחק את-יעקב ושלח אתו פדגה ארם לקחת-לו משם אשה בברכו אתו ויצו עליו לאמר לא-תקח אשה מבנות כנען: (ז) וישמע יעקב אל-אביו ואל-אמו וילך פדגה ארם:

aram to take a wife from there, charging him, as he blessed him, "You shall not take a wife from among the Canaanite women," (7) and that Jacob had obeyed his father and mother and gone to Paddan-aram, (8) Esau realized that the Canaanite women displeased his father Isaac. (9) So Esau went to Ishmael and took to wife, in addition to the wives he had, Mahalath the daughter of Ishmael son of Abraham, sister of Nebaioth.

(ח) בִּירָא עֵשָׂו כִּי רָעוֹת בָּנוֹת כָּנָעַן בְּעֵינָיו
יִצְתָּק אָבִיו: (ט) וַיִּלְךָ עֵשָׂו אֶל-יִשְׁמָעֵאל
וַיִּקַּח אֶת-מַחְלַת | בַּת-יִשְׁמָעֵאל בְּרֵאֲבָרְהָם
אֲחֹת נְבִיּוֹת עַל-נִשְׂוֵי לֹו לְאִשָּׁה: (ס)

Rabbi Jill Hammer, "Toldot -- Machalat bat Ishmael,"
www.reclaimingjudaism.org

To save her favorite son, Rebecca goes to Isaac and tells him to send Jacob far away, to her family, to find a wife. Isaac sends Jacob off, reminding him not to marry a Canaanite woman. Esau, knowing that his father is angry about Esau's foreign wives, marries his grandfather's son's daughter, Machalat.

Is this a good move? We could imagine that Isaac and Rebecca would be pleased that Esau has married a relative, just as Jacob will soon do. Isaac, who saw his brother Ishmael exiled when both men were children, may be delighted to welcome a member of Ishmael's family into his household. There are even midrashim, legends, that Isaac went to visit his brother Ishmael and try to convince him to come home. So maybe this is a sign of repentance for Esau, and some ancient rabbis say that the name Machalat, "forgiveness," means that Esau was forgiven when he married her (Genesis Rabbah 67:13). Or, perhaps, Esau is making a foolish, or even a spiteful, move. Abraham and Sarah rejected Ishmael and his mother Hagar, Abraham's concubine. Esau now brings a daughter of the rejected Ishmael into the house, on top of his already offensive Canaanite wives. Some ancient rabbis argue that if Esau really meant to make his parents happy, he should have divorced his first wives (Genesis Rabbah 67:13).

But while some people do get married to please or spite their parents, it is also possible to choose a life partner because that person gives you something unique. We don't know what Machalat's personality is, but we can speculate. What might Machalat have given Esau that he needed?

One thing we know about Machalat is that she is Ishmael's daughter, and therefore she understands what it is to be rejected. Her father and grandmother were forced into the desert, nearly dying of thirst, because Sarah, Abraham's wife, did not want Ishmael to inherit Abraham's blessing and possessions. Sarah wanted Isaac to inherit. So Machalat knows how Esau feels. She may be able to give him empathy and understanding that no one else can give him. Machalat's empathy may help to heal Esau of his deep bitterness and we know that Esau is healed, because in Parashat Vayishlach, when Jacob and Esau meet again after many years, Esau is no longer angry, he embraces his brother and forgives him.

Machalat also is Hagar's granddaughter. Hagar is one of the only women in Genesis to talk to God, and she is the only person in Genesis to give God a name, she calls God El-Ro'i, God of seeing, when she has a vision near a well that she will give birth to a son. Machalat calls the son she has with Esau Reu'el, "See God!" The similarity between Hagar's name for God and Machalat's name for her son shows that Machalat is spiritually connected to the God of her grandmother. She has successfully inherited a way of speaking to God, one might even say that she has inherited a blessing. So Machalat has spiritual wisdom to offer Esau, and she can also show him how to connect with his family. It must be hard for Esau to trust her after he has been rejected by his mother, father, and brother, but perhaps it is her wisdom and kindness that allow Esau to finally reach out to his brother Jacob.

Genesis 24:62-25:6

(62) Isaac had just come back from the vicinity of Beer-lahai-roi, for he was settled in the region of the Negeb. (63) And Isaac went out walking in the field toward evening and, looking up, he saw camels approaching. (64) Raising her eyes, Rebekah saw Isaac. She alighted from the camel (65) and said to the servant, "Who is that man walking in the field toward us?" And the servant said, "That is my master." So she took her veil and covered herself. (66) The servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. (67) Isaac then brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he took Rebekah as his wife. Isaac loved her, and thus found comfort after his mother's death. (1) Abraham took another wife, whose name was Keturah. (2) She bore him Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah. (3) Jokshan begot Sheba and Dedan. The descendants of Dedan were the Asshurim, the Letushim, and the Leummim. (4) The descendants of Midian were Ephah, Epher, Enoch, Abida, and Eldaah. All these were descendants of Keturah. (5) Abraham willed all that he owned to Isaac; (6) but to Abraham's sons by concubines Abraham gave gifts while he was still living, and he sent them away from his son Isaac eastward, to the land of the East.

בראשית כ"ד:ס"ב-כ"ה:ו'

(סב) וַיֵּצֵק בָּא מִבְּוֹא בְּאֵר לַחַי רֹאִי וְהוּא יוֹשֵׁב בְּאֶרֶץ הַנֶּגֶב: (סג) וַיֵּצֵא יִצְחָק לְשׂוּחַ בִּשְׂדֵה לַפְּנוֹת עָרֵב וַיֵּשֶׂא עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא וְהִנֵּה גַמְלִים בָּאִים: (סד) וַתֵּשֶׂא רִבְקָה אֶת-עֵינֶיהָ וַתֵּרָא אֶת-יִצְחָק וַתִּפֹּל מֵעַל הַגָּמֶל: (סה) וַתֵּאמֶר אֶל-הַעֲבָד מִי-הָאִישׁ הַלֹּזֵה הַהֶלֶךְ בִּשְׂדֵה לַקְּרֹאֲתָנוּ וַיֵּאמֶר הַעֲבָד הוּא אֲדֹנָי וַתִּקַּח הַצֵּעִיף וַתִּתְּכֶס: (סו) וַיִּסְפֹּר הַעֲבָד לְיִצְחָק אֵת כָּל-הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה: (סז) וַיְבֹאֶה יִצְחָק הָאֵהֱלֵה שָׂרָה אִמּוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת-רִבְקָה וַתְּהִי-לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה וַיֵּאֱהָבֶהּ וַיִּנָּחֶם יִצְחָק אֶת-רֵי אִמּוֹ: (פ) (פא) וַיִּסֹּף אֶבְרָהָם וַיִּקַּח אִשָּׁה וַיִּשְׁמָה קִטּוּרָה: (ב) וַתֵּלֶד לוֹ אֶת-זִמְרָן וְאֶת-יֻקְשָׁן וְאֶת-מִדְּיָן וְאֶת-מִדְּוָן וְאֶת-יִשְׁבָּק וְאֶת-שׁוּחַ: (ג) וַיִּקְשָׁן יָלֵד אֶת-שֵׁבָא וְאֶת-דִּדָן וַיְבַנֵּי דָדָן הֵנּוּ אֲשׁוּרִים וְלִטּוּשִׁים וְלִאֲמִים: (ד) וַיְבַנֵּי מִדְּוָן עֵיפָה וְעַפְרָי וְחִנֹּךְ וְאַבְדָּע וְאַלְדֵּעָה כָּל-אֵלֶּה בְנֵי קִטּוּרָה: (ה) וַיִּתֵּן אֶבְרָהָם אֶת-כָּל-אֲשֶׁר-לוֹ לְיִצְחָק: (ו) וְלִבְנֵי הַפְּיִלְגָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר לְאֶבְרָהָם נָתַן אֶבְרָהָם מִתְּנֻת וַיִּשְׁלַחֵם מֵעַל יִצְחָק בְּנוֹ בְּעוֹדָנָם חַי קְדָמָה אֶל-אֶרֶץ קְדָם:

Midrash Tanchuma, Chayei Sara 8

(1) **And Abraham took another wife (Gen. 25:1).** Isaac said to himself: “I have taken a wife, but my father is without a wife.” What did Isaac do? He went and bought him (Abraham) a wife. Rabbi said: Hagar and Keturah were one and the same person. Why then was she called Keturah? Because she had been bound up (*keshurah*) like a water bag.⁸ *Indicating that she was a virgin.*

(2) Our sages, however, maintained that she was actually a different wife. Rabbi insisted: Hagar and Keturah were one and the same person, since it is written about Isaac: *And Isaac came from the way of Beer-lahai-roi* (Gen. 24:62); that is, from the well of which it is written: *And she called the name of the Lord that spoke to her; Thou art a God of seeing* (ibid. 16:13). From this you learn that she must have been Hagar.²

מדרש תנחומא, חיי שרה ח'

(א) . . . אמר יצחק, אני לקחתי אשה ואבי עומד בלא אשה. מה עשה? הלה והביא לו אשה. רבי אומר, היא הגר, היא קטורה. ולמה נקרא שמה קטורה? שהיתה קשורה כנוד.

(ב) ורבותינו אומרים: אשה אחרת לקח. ומה טעם של רבי שאומר, הגר היא קטורה. שכתוב ביצחק, ויצחק בא מבוא באר לחי ראי. אותה שכתוב בה, ותקרא שם ה' הדבר אליה אלה אל ראי (בראשית טז, יג). מכאן אלה למד, שהיא הגר,

Tamar Kedari, "Keturah: Midrash and Aggadah," Jewish Women's Archive Encyclopedia

In the midrashic depiction, after Abraham divorces Hagar and sends her into the wilderness she sits by the well and cries to God: “See my shame!” Hagar’s demand for justice was accepted by God, who revealed Himself to Abraham after Sarah’s death and commanded him to take back his divorcée, Hagar-Keturah (Gen. Rabbah 61:4).

A different story has Isaac initiating his father’s marriage. When Isaac married Rebekah, he said to himself: I have taken a wife, while my father is without a spouse! What did he do? He went and brought him Keturah. This tradition is based on Gen. 24:62: “Isaac had just come back from the vicinity of Be’er-la-hai-ro’i”—he brought back with him Hagar, who had been at “Be’er-la-hai-ro’i,” and had also given this place its name, as is related in Gen. 16:14 (Tanhuma, Hayyei Sarah 8).

