

"If so, why do I exist?"

Torah Study for *Parashat Toldot*

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Source Sheet by Nicole Auerbach

Genesis 25:19-28

(19) This is the story of Isaac, son of Abraham. Abraham begot Isaac. (20) Isaac was forty years old when he took to wife Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean. (21) Isaac pleaded with יהוה on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and יהוה responded to his plea, and his wife Rebekah conceived. (22) But the children struggled in her womb, and she said, "If so, why do I exist?" She went to inquire of יהוה, and יהוה answered her,

"Two nations are in your womb,

Two separate peoples shall issue from your body;

One people shall be mightier than the other,

And the older shall serve the younger." (24) When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. (25) The first one emerged red, like a hairy mantle all over; so they named him Esau. (26) Then his brother emerged, holding on to the heel of Esau; so they named him Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when they were born. (27) When the boys grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the outdoors; but Jacob became a mild man, raising livestock.

בראשית כ"ה:ט"ז-כ"ח

(יט) וְאֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדֹת יִצְחָק בֶּן־אַבְרָהָם
אַבְרָהָם הוֹלִיד אֶת־יִצְחָק: (כ) וַיְהִי יִצְחָק
בֶּן־אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה בְּקַחְתּוֹ אֶת־רֵבְקָה
בַּת־בְּתוּאֵל הַאֲרָמִי מִפְּדַן אַרְם אֵחֹת לְבִן
הַאֲרָמִי לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה: (כא) וַיַּעֲמֵר יִצְחָק
לַיהוָה לְנִכְח אִשְׁתּוֹ כִּי עֲקָרָה הָיָה וַיַּעֲתֵר
לוֹ יְהוָה וַתֵּהָר רֵבְקָה אִשְׁתּוֹ: (כב)
וַיִּתְרַצְצוּ הַבָּנִים בְּקֶרְבָּהּ וַתֹּאמֶר אִם־כֵּן
לָמָּה זֶה אֲנִי וַתִּלְדָּה לְדָרֶשׁ אֶת־יְהוָה: (כג)
וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה לָּהּ שְׁנֵי גֵיִים [גוִיִם] בְּבִטְנָהּ
וּשְׁנֵי לְאֻמִּים מִמֶּעַיִן יִפְרְדוּ וְלֹאִם מְלֹאִם
יֵאמְרוּ וְרַב יַעֲבֹד צָעִיר: (כד) וַיִּמְלְאוּ יְמֵיהָ
לְלֹדֶת וַהֲגִיָּה תוֹמֵם בְּבִטְנָהּ: (כה) וַיֵּצֵא
הָרֵאשִׁוֹן אֲדָמוֹנִי כָלוֹ כְּאֲדָרֶת שַׁעַר וַיִּקְרָאוּ
שְׁמוֹ עֵשָׂו: (כו) וְאֶחָר־יָכֹן יֵצֵא אָחִיו וַיִּדּוּ
אֵחֹת בְּעֵקֶב עֵשָׂו וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ יַעֲקֹב
וַיִּצְחָק בֶּן־שָׁשִׁים שָׁנָה בְּלֹדֶת אֲתָם: (כז)
וַיִּגְדְּלוּ הַנְּעָרִים וַיְהִי עֵשָׂו אִישׁ יָדָע צִיד
אִישׁ שֹׁדֵד וַיַּעֲקֹב אִישׁ תָּם יֹשֵׁב אֹהֲלִים:
(כח) וַיִּאָּהֵב יִצְחָק אֶת־עֵשָׂו כִּי־צִיד בְּפִי
וְרֵבְקָה אֶהְבֵּת אֶת־יַעֲקֹב:

(28) Isaac favored Esau because he had a taste for game; but Rebekah favored Jacob.

Rabbi Lisa Grushcow: "Parashat Toldot: Opening the Conversation"

For millennia, interpreters have buffered the directness of this exchange. Rebecca inquired of God, yes, but it must have been through the yeshiva of Shem and Ever, the ancient school of Jewish learning where, the Midrash tells us, Jacob strained to emerge from the womb. Or: she went to ask the prophets (Rashbam). Or: she prayed (Ramban). Or: she went to inquire not of God, but into the nature of God (Kli Yakar). Or, in a move that seems drastic but in fact is the logical conclusion of a patriarchal view that can't really imagine Rebecca addressing God directly, it is Isaac, not Rebecca, who asks God and is answered (Josephus' "Antiquities of the Jews").

Interpretation is an essential tool when we approach an ancient text. And in fact, we do have other instances in the Bible where "inquiring of God" actually means asking a prophet. One could make the case that it's not at all obvious what it means to inquire of God, and there is great richness in the interpretations that suggest this inquiry takes the form of philosophical musings or prayer. But sometimes, we are so focused on the interpretive meaning that we miss the obvious meaning. And the obvious meaning of this text is that Rebecca approaches God with a question and God answers her.

Even more significant, Rebecca is the first person in the Torah to start a conversation with God. Adam, Eve, Noah – all of them answer God's questions or reply to God's commands, but none of them initiate contact. Even Abraham, who famously responds *hineini* ("here I am!") to God's call, does not start the conversation. Abraham challenges God about the destruction of Sodom and Gemorah, but only after God shares the divine plan with him, opening the door to Abraham's response. It is Rebecca, out of a very embodied and personal struggle, who asks God for an answer and receives one.

Rashi on Genesis 25:22:2

ותאמר אם כן means AND SHE SAID, "IF the pain of pregnancy be so great,

רש"י על בראשית כ"ה:כ"ב:ב'
ותאמר אם כן. גדול צער העבור.

Rashi on Genesis 25:22:3

למה זה אנכי WHY IS IT that I longed and prayed to become pregnant?" (Genesis Rabbah 63:6).

רש"י על בראשית כ"ה:כ"ב:ג'
למה זה אנכי. מתאוה ומתפללת על
הריון:

Rashi on Genesis 25:22:4
AND SHE WENT TO
ENQUIRE at the school of Shem (Genesis
Rabbah 63:6).

רש"י על בראשית כ"ה:כ"ב:ד'
ותלך לדרוש. לְבֵית מְדַרְשׁוֹ שֶׁל שֵׁם:

Rashi on Genesis 25:22:5
TO ENQUIRE OF THE
LORD, that He might tell her what would
happen to her at the end.

רש"י על בראשית כ"ה:כ"ב:ה'
לדרוש את ה'. שְׂגִיד לָהּ מָה תְּהֵא
בְּסוֹפָה:

Rashi on Genesis 25:22:1
AND [THE CHILDREN]
STRUGGLED — You must admit that this
verse calls for a Midrashic interpretation
since it leaves unexplained what this
struggling was about and it states that she
exclaimed “If it be so, wherefore did I desire
this” (i.e. she asked whether this was the
normal course of child-bearing, feeling that
something extraordinary was happening).
Our Rabbis explain that the word ויתרוצצו
has the meaning of running, moving
quickly: whenever she passed by the doors of
the Torah (i. e. the Schools of Shem and
Eber) Jacob moved convulsively in his
efforts to come to birth, but whenever she
passed by the gate of a pagan temple Esau
moved convulsively in his efforts to come to
birth (Genesis Rabbah 63:6). Another
explanation is: they struggled with one
another and quarrelled as to how they
should divide the two worlds as their
inheritance (Yalkut Shimoni on Torah
111:2).

רש"י על בראשית כ"ה:כ"ב:א'
ויתרוצצו. ע"כ המקרא הנה אומר
דְרִשְׁנִי, שְׁסַתֵּם מָה הִיא רְצִיזָה זֹו וְכַתֵּב
אִם כֵּן לְמָה זֶה אָנֹכִי? רְבוּתֵינוּ דְרִשׁוּהוּ
לְשׁוֹן רִיזָה; כְּשֶׁהִיָּתָה עֹבְרַת עַל פְּתַחֵי
תּוֹרָה שֶׁל שֵׁם וְעֵבֶר יַעֲקֹב רָץ וּמְפָרֵס
לְצֵאתָ, עֹבְרַת עַל פְּתַח עֲבוֹדַת אֱלִילִים,
עָשׂוּ מְפָרֵס לְצֵאתָ. דְּבַר אַחֵר
מְתְרוֹצְצִים זֶה עִם זֶה וּמְרִיבִים בְּנַחֲלַת
שְׁנֵי עוֹלָמוֹת.

Ramban on Genesis 25:22:1
AND SHE SAID: IF IT BE SO, ‘LAMA
ZEH ANOCHI?’ “If the pain of pregnancy
is so great, *lamah zeh anochi* (why did I
pray for and aspire to pregnancy?” Thus
Rashi. But it is not correct. Rabbi Abraham
ibn Ezra says that she asked the women if
they had experienced such pains, and they

רמב"ן על בראשית כ"ה:כ"ב:א'
ותאמר אם כן למה זה אנכי אם כן
גדול צער העבור למה זה אנכי מתפללת
ומתאוה על ההריון לשון רש"י (רש"י על
בראשית כ"ה:כ"ב) ואיננו נכון ורבי
אברהם אמר (אבן עזרא על בראשית

said, "No," whereupon she said, "If the matter and custom of pregnancy be as they said, *lamah zeh anochi*, why am I beset with an unusual pregnancy?" Now according to this exposition, the verse is missing and not complete.

The correct interpretation in my opinion is that she said, "If it shall be so with me, *lamah zeh anochi*, [why am I in the world]? Would that I did not exist, that I should die or never have come into existence." This is similar to the verse, *I should have been as though I had not been*.

Ramban on Genesis 25:22:2

AND SHE WENT 'LIDROSH' (TO INQUIRE) OF THE ETERNAL. Rashi comments: "To tell what her outcome will be." Now I have not discovered the word *drishah* [*lidrosh*, to inquire] in relation to G-d except in the context of prayer, as in the verses: *I sought ('darashti') the Eternal and He answered me; seek ye Me, ('dirshuni') and live; As I live, saith G-d the Eternal, I will not be inquired of ('edareish') by you.*

Rashbam on Genesis 25:22:2

'לדרוש את ה', an inquiry directed at the prophets that were around in her time. We have a verse in Kings I 22,8 as well as in Exodus 18,15 where this expression describes questions addressed by the common people to the prophet.

Onkelos Genesis 25:22

She went to inquire of the Law before God.

Kli Yakar on Genesis 25:22:1

"The children agitated within her..." This agitation happened when she would pass by the entrance of the Beit ha-Midrash of Shem

כ"ה:כ"ב) כי שאלה את הנשים אם אירע להם ככה ותאמרנה לא ותאמר אם כן הדבר והמנהג למה זה אנכי בהריון משונה והנה הכתוב חסר ואיננו שלם בפירוש הזה והנכון בעיני כי אמרה אם כן יהיה לי למה זה אנכי בעולם הלואי אינני שאמות או שלא הייתי כטעם כאשר לא הייתי אהיה (איוב י ט):

רמב"ן על בראשית כ"ה:כ"ב:ב' ותלך לדרוש את ה' לשון רש"י (רש"י על בראשית כ"ה:כ"ב) להגיד מה יהא בסופה ולא מצאתי דרישה אצל ה' רק להתפלל כטעם דרשתי את ה' וענני (תהלים לד ה) דרשוני וחיו (עמוס ה ד) חי אני אם אדרש לכם (יחזקאל כ ג):

רשב"ם על בראשית כ"ה:כ"ב:ב' לדרוש את ה' - אל הנביאים שבאותן הימים, כדכתיב: לדרוש את ה' מאתו. וכתיב: כי יבא אלי העם לדרוש את ה'.

תרגום אונקלוס על בראשית כ"ה:כ"ב:ב' וְאִזְלַת לְמַתְבַּע אִוְלָפִן מִן קֶדֶם ה'

כלי יקר על בראשית כ"ה:כ"ב:א' ויתרוצצו הבנים בקרבה וגו'. רציצה זו היה שבעברה על פתח ביהמ"ד של שם

and Ever. Yaakov struggled to come out, and Esav grasped his hand. And when she would pass by the entrance of the house of idols, Esav struggled to come out, and Yaakov grasped his hand. But she did not reason out the matter this way, but rather that she had only one fetus in her belly, that wanted to come out whether for a beit midrash or for a house of idols. If true, chas v'shalom, perhaps there are two authorities in existence! Therefore she said, "why am I thus?", if I am just like all the other women who worship idols? What advantage do I have over them if, chas v'shalom, there are two authorities in existence? Therefore, "she went to inquire of ha-Shem", meaning, to inquire after the existence of God and God's essence.

ועבר יעקב מפרכס לצאת ועשו מעכב ע"י, ובעברה על פתח ע"ג עשו מפרכס לצאת ויעקב מעכב על ידו, והיא סברה שאין הדבר כן אלא ולד אחד בבטנה ורוצה לצאת בין לפתחי בתי מדרשות בין לפתח ע"ג וא"כ ה"ו שמא שתי רשויות יש, לפיכך אמרה למה זה אנכי כי כמוני כשאר נשים עובדי ע"ג ומה יתרון יש לי עליהם אם ה"ו שתי רשויות יש, לפיכך ותלך לדרוש את ה' ר"ל לדרוש אחר מציאת ה' ממש מהו.

Exodus 18:14-16

(14) But when Moses' father-in-law saw how much he had to do for the people, he said, "What is this thing that you are doing to the people? Why do you act alone, while all the people stand about you from morning until evening?" (15) Moses replied to his father-in-law, "It is because the people come to me to D.R.S.H. of God. (16) When they have a dispute, it comes before me, and I decide between one person and another, and I make known the laws and teachings of God."

שמות י"ח:ד-ט"ז
(יד) וַיֵּרָא חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה אֶת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־הוּא עֹשֶׂה לְעַם וַיֹּאמֶר מֶה־הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עֹשֶׂה לְעַם מִדּוּעַ אַתָּה יּוֹשֵׁב לְבַדְּךָ וְכָל־הָעָם נֹצֵב עֲלֶיךָ מִן־בֹּקֶר עַד־עָרֶב:
(טו) וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה לְחֹתְנֹו כִּי־יָבֹא אֵלַי הָעָם לְדָרֹשׁ אֱלֹקִים: (טז) כִּי־יִהְיֶה לָהֶם דְּבָר בָּא אֵלַי וְשִׁפְטֹתַי בֵּין אִישׁ וּבֵין רֵעֵהוּ וְהוֹדַעְתִּי אֶת־חֻקֵי הָאֱלֹקִים וְאֶת־תּוֹרֹתָיו:

Deuteronomy 22:2

(2) If your fellow does not live near you or you do not know who he is, you shall bring it home and it shall remain with you until your fellow D.R.S.H. for it; then you shall give it back to him.

דברים כ"ב:ב'
(ב) וְאִם־לֹא קָרֹב אֲחִיךָ אֵלֶיךָ וְלֹא יָדַעְתָּו וְאִסְפָּתוּ אֶל־תּוֹךְ בֵּיתְךָ וְהָיָה עִמָּךְ עַד דָּרֹשׁ אֲחִיךָ אֹתוֹ וְהִשְׁבַּתוֹ לּוֹ:

Jeremiah 30:12-15

(12) For thus said the LORD: Your injury is incurable, your wound severe; (13) No one

ירמיהו ל':י"ב-ט"ו

pleads for the healing of your sickness, there is no remedy, no recovery for you. (14) All your lovers have forgotten you, they do not D.R.S.H. you; for I have struck you as an enemy strikes, with cruel chastisement, because your iniquity was so great and your sins so many. (15) Why cry out over your injury, that your wound is incurable? I did these things to you because your iniquity was so great and your sins so many.

(יב) כִּי כֹה אָמַר ה' אֲנוֹשׁ לְשִׁבְרִי נִחְלָה
מִכְּתָבִי: (יג) אֵינֶנּוּ דִינִי לְמִזֹּר רַפְאוֹת
תְּעַלָּה אֵין לִי: (יד) כָּל־מְאַהֲבָיִךְ שָׁכַחוּךְ
אוֹתָךְ לֹא יִדְרָשׁוּ כִּי מִפֶּת אוֹיֵב הִכִּיתִיךְ
מוֹסֵר אֶכְזָרִי עַל רַב עֲוֹנֶיךָ עֲצָמוֹ חֲטֹאתֶיךָ:
(טו) מֵה־תִּזְעַק עַל־שִׁבְרֶךָ אֲנוֹשׁ מִכְּאֲבֶךָ
עַל | רַב עֲוֹנֶיךָ עֲצָמוֹ חֲטֹאתֶיךָ עֲשִׂיתִי
אֵלֶּה לְךָ:

