Matriarchs and Patriarchs
Exploring the Spiritual World of our Biblical Mothers and Fathers.

Biblical heroes, saints and sinners – role models to reflect upon.

Sarah, Abel Pann
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Elizabeth Young

Etz Hayim Publishing

“It is a Tree of Life to all who hold fast to It” (Prov. 3:18)
Matriarchs and Patriarchs: Exploring the Spiritual World of our Biblical Mothers and Fathers
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Abraham—*the Hasid
a model of perfect love*

The *Hasid*—one who loves God with such a depth of his being so as to “arouse a desire within God to let flow the source of his own soul in such a way that cannot be comprehended by the human mind” (*The Sefat Emet*).
Abraham - from Seeker to Hasid

What motivates a seeker? Some considerations.
Dissatisfaction
Something missing in one’s life
An inner voice or sense

Reflecting on the life of Abraham:
How does God call Abraham
How does Abraham respond
Abraham – an ordinary human person
Abraham – attaining perfection of faith

God’s first call to Abraham is introduced by the declaration, “Go forth...to the land that I will show you”; and His last employs almost identical language, “Go forth...to the land of Moriah...on one of the heights that I will point out to you.” The Hebrew phrase lekh lekha, “go forth,” does not occur again in the Bible, a fact that underscores the deliberate and meaningful nature of its use in these two passages. (Sarna, Genesis, p.146)

Abraham’s story is framed with the words lech lecha.

1. The first lech lecha is a call to go from... Note the graduation – from your land... from your kindred...from your father’s house. Leave everything!
   God requires a total leaving;
   This leaving requires total faith.

Abraham “believed in the LORD; and He counted it to him for righteousness” (Gen 15:6)

This first lech lecha is heard amidst the mess of life—amidst the unsatisfactory, the physical, material and spiritual turmoil of Abraham’s experience. This is why the oral Torah develops the many myths that develop the character and circumstance of Abraham prior to his call to lech lecha.
Abraham is ‘ripe’ for God’s call.

2. The second lech lecha is a call to go to... “Take your son, your favoured one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you.” (Gen 22:2)

This is a different Abraham than the man of Gen 12:1. He has land and wealth, he has sons, and so the promise of heirs. Abraham has influence, not only within his physical world but with God (God consults with him [over the people of Sodom]).
Abraham’s faith has been rewarded.

This Abraham has a lot to loose. All the worldly material and physical things that he lacked at the time of the first lech lecha are now his. This second lecha lecha is the greatest test yet (Midrash says that God tested Abraham 10 times—the Binding of Isaac was the last and tenth test). Out of this final lech lecha emerges an Abraham who has attained the highest perfection of faith.

At the end of his ‘test’ God affirms the depth of Abraham’s love “Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favoured one, from Me.” (Gen 22:12)
LECH LECHA  “Go forth…” בָּּלֶךְ לֶךְ

Gen. 12
1 The LORD said to Abram, “Go forth from your native land and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you.
2 I will make of you a great nation, And I will bless you; I will make your name great, And you shall be a blessing.
3 I will bless those who bless you And curse him that curses you; And all the families of the earth Shall bless themselves by you.”
4 Abram went forth as the LORD had commanded him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran.
5 Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother’s son Lot, and all the wealth that they had amassed, and the persons that they had acquired in Haran; and they set out for the land of Canaan. When they arrived in the land of Canaan,
6 Abram passed through the land as far as the site of Shechem, at the terebinth of Moreh. The Canaanites were then in the land.

NIV Bible
1 The LORD had said to Abram, “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you.

NRSV Bible
1 Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.

בָּּלֶךְ לֶךְ  ... “Go forth…”
lech lecha
lech = Go! (imperative);
lecha a) = Go! (another form of the imperative).
lecha b) = le, (preposition) to or for; cha, you (masculine. singular)
lech lecha might be read as:
    Go! Go…; Go forth…; Go now!...
    Go to yourself…..; Go for yourself…
A God not far above, but deep within.
Abraham is commanded, lech lecha. Midrash understood this to mean more than the imperative: "Go from your father's house!" Rather, lech lecha, go to your self, go into yourself to find the place of God. To truly know the self is to truly know God. And its deepest level of interpretation the core experience of religious encounter is the personal experience of God, the intimate knowledge of God that is found in the full truth of the self.

1. The first lech lecha
Each person is called to be a tzadick (a righteous person). Abraham is called to be something more – a hasid (Hasid: Charity/love, grace) one who serves God with such a depth of one’s being so as to “arouse a desire within God to let flow the source of his own soul in such a way that cannot be comprehended by the human mind.” (the Sefat Emet). The Hasid has the ability to hear and follow even though the human intellect cannot comprehend; to open the inner “well” and allow the soul to spread forth. Such an opening transcends all other meaning in life, even that of the tzadick who has already found a purpose in life.

When we meet Abraham in the biblical text he is a tzadick. When we come to the end of the Abraham story we know he has become a hasid. In between his going out following his first lech lecha and his arriving, his second lech lecha, we meet Abraham the Seeker. As he wanders through the land, settling and moving on, his physical life becomes a metaphor for his spiritual life. As he wanders in the land “that I will show you” he is on a journey led by his heart.

Abraham’s story illustrates for us the true meaning of “Shema Israel...love the LORD your God with all your heart and all your soul” (Deut 6:4-5).

In the human Abraham story we follow his spiritual journey.

The human story: While Abraham does not always show himself as praiseworthy, (at least in the eyes of a different culture, i.e twice he puts Sarah at risk to save his own neck; he abandons his son Ishmael and banishes Hagar etc.) it is apparent that God’s love for Abraham and Abraham’s chosen-ness is not wholly dependent upon Abraham himself—rather upon the love of God for him despite his human failures. It is apparent too that Abraham grows in wisdom as he partakes of his journey. We learn of his concern for the righteous (Sodom). And Abraham is human. He yearns for the fulfilment of the promise of heirs.

The spiritual story: Abraham is obsessed with God—all his human instincts and desires come second. He leaves his home land, kindred and family. He allows Sarah to be taken by a. Pharoah and b. Abimelekh in order to save his own neck. (Is this his way on ensuring God can fulfil the Divine promise of seed?) He sends away Hagar and Ishmael—to almost certain death. He intends to sacrifice Isaac.
“Go forth from your native land [from Haran]...to the land that I will show you... (12:1). "...go forth to the land of Moriah" (Gen 22:2)

“This correspondence between Haran and Moriah encases the biography of Abraham within a framework of unwavering faith. For added emphasis, the two crucial events are cast in a common literary mould so that chapters 12 and 22 share many connecting links. God’s first call to Abraham is introduced by the declaration, “Go forth...to the land that I will show you”; and His last employs almost identical language, “Go forth...to the land of Moriah...on one of the heights that I will point out to you.” The Hebrew phrase lekh lekha, “go forth,” does not occur again in the Bible, a fact that underscores the deliberate and meaningful nature of its use in these two passages. In both instances, the precise ultimate destination of the trek is withheld, and in both the tension of the drama is heightened by the cumulative effect of several Hebrew epithets, the last of which is the most potent: “your land, your homeland, your father’s house”; “your son, your favoured one, Isaac, whom you love.” Both episodes culminate in promises of glorious posterity, the second one containing striking verbal echoes of the first. One blessing was received at the terebinth of Moreh, the other at the similar sounding Moriah; and at both sites, it is stated, Abraham “built an altar there.” Sarna, Genesis, p.146

The three aspects of home that Abraham is supposed to "go away from"--from his land, from his birthplace, from his father's house--are listed in order from the least to the most difficult spiritual connections that he must sever. He is summoned to leave the comfort and safety of his present, actual situation in order to pursue a future, a potential one that promises greatness but is fraught with fears and pitfalls.

Go you from your land, from your birthplace and from your father’s house, to the land which I will show you (12:1)

"From your land" -- from your will (eretz, the Hebrew word for land, is etymologically related to the word ratzon--will). "From your birthplace" -- from your emotional and behavioural self (which is the product of a person's environment). "From your father's house" -- from your intellect (in the terminology of Kabbalah, the intellect is referred to as the father within man, since it is the progenitor of and authority over his feelings and behaviour patterns).

(The Chassidic Masters)
A God not far above, but deep within.
Abraham is commanded, lech lecha. Midrash understood this to mean more than the imperative: "Go from your father's house!" Rather, lech lecha, go to your self, go into yourself to find the place of God. To truly know the self is to truly know God. And its deepest level of interpretation the core experience of religious encounter is the personal experience of God, the intimate knowledge of God that is found in the full truth of the self.

The 2nd LECH LECHA לְךָ לֶךְ

Gen 22
1 Some time afterward, God put Abraham to the test. He said to him, "Abraham," and he answered, "Here I am." 2 And He said, "Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you." 3 So early next morning, Abraham saddled his ass and took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. He split the wood for the burnt offering, and he set out for the place of which God had told him. 4 On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place from afar. 5 Then Abraham said to his servants, "You stay here with the ass. The boy and I will go up there; we will worship and we will return to you."

2. The second lech lecha
Abraham a man of perfect faith.
Q. What is the difference between Abraham’s ‘fear’ of God and Abraham’s ‘believing’ in God?

Yeshayahu Leibowitz says, Abraham “is a man who stands before his God, whom he fears without any regard to the questions of reward and punishment...the concept of fear of God blends into that of love of God”. (Leibowitz, Accepting the Yoke of Heaven, p.25) This is the meaning of the verse “love God with all your heart and with all of your soul” (Deut 6:5).
When God asks Abraham to take is son, the one he loves, his only son, Isaac, it is as though God is taking his soul. Not only is God demanding he sacrifice his son but along with Isaac goes the promise, the covenanted promise—and Abraham is prepared to give it—his soul—this is the ultimate test of Abraham’s commitment to God. In this final test of faith Abraham does not debate the matter but silently obeys. “Midrash regards this silence as the highest level of faith which Abraham attained.” (Accepting the Yoke of Heaven, p.26)
Maimonides (aka RAMBAM, Moses ben Maimon C10) has this to say about loving God.

What is this condition of right love? It is, that one should love God with an excessive, powerful love, till one’s soul is totally involved in love of God, and one is constantly obsessed (shoge, mad) by it, as though ill with love sickness, when there is no place in one’s mind free of the love of that woman with whom one is obsessed—neither when one sits nor stands, eats nor drinks. More than this should be the love of God in the heart of those who love Him and are obsessed by Him. This is the meaning of the command, “You shall love your God with all your heart and with all your soul...” (Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Teshuva 10.3).

Such love is the truest expression of worship. Hosea says, “I desire steadfast love not sacrifice” (Hos 6:6) In Matthew’s gospel Jesus says, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice” (Mt 9:13) drawing on the same verse Hosea. The word translated as mercy/steadfast love is hesed—a condition of love that demands a total and unqualified act of love. As the Sefat Emet says, one who performs hesed is “one who serves God with such a depth of one’s being as to “arouse a desire within God to let flow the source of his own soul in such a way that cannot be comprehended by the human mind.” (The Language of Truth, p.19)

Thus it is that Abraham is reckoned righteous and a friend of God:

“But you, Israel My servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, seed of Abraham My friend.” (Is. 41:8; see 2 Chronicles 20:7)

“Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,” and he was called the friend of God”. (James 2:23)

“Who can be better in religion than one who submits his whole self to God, does good, and follows the way of Abraham the true in faith? For God did take Abraham for a friend.” (Qur’an, Al-Nisa 4:125)

Through the merit of Abraham all generations are blessed. Abraham final act of loving and obedient faithfulness made possible the reality of the third promise — through you all generations will be blessed.

The Torah tells us that when Abraham and Sarah left Haran, they took with them the souls they had acquired there. The midrash asks how could someone “create souls?” The answer is that someone who brings an other person near to God is as though he or she had created that other person.

Paul refers to Abraham: “He believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.” (Gal. 3:6, Gen. 16:6) “Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham; ‘All nations will be blessed through you.’” (Gal. 3:7-8)
Sarah—faithful tzadik

a tzadik—one who is righteous

She girds herself with strength,
And performs her tasks with vigor.
Her lamp never goes out at night.
She gives generously to the poor;
Her hands stretched out to the needy.
Her mouth is full of wisdom,
Her tongue with kindly teaching.
Extol her for the fruit of her hand,
And let her works praise her in the gates.
(Prov. 31)
Session outline – Sarah: A woman of hope

Life is a pendulum between faith, hope and helplessness

Sarah’s experiences

1. She appears to have nothing
   no genealogy
   no children
   she appears to be a ‘victim’; exposed to abuse?

2. Some background from Midrash.
   Sojourn in Egypt – Pharaoh’s harum
   The pain of childlessness
   The experience with Abimelech
   Sarah’s grievances against Abraham, Hagar

3. What kind of a woman is she:
   Co-operates with Abraham and God
   Suffers through childlessness and wants fulfillment
   She is frustrated in her hopes
   Is sometimes doubtful, cynical regarding God’s promises
   As a victim she in turn victimizes
   Struggles to control her life and situation – asserts herself, makes things happen
   Seems to have the ability to see the whole picture more clearly than Abraham
   Has the ability to ‘stand outside of herself’ and look at ‘the big picture’
   Is never secure even in her motherhood
   Has an intuitive knowledge of God’s will

God and Sarah

God is present in her life
God intervenes (ie. Protects her from Pharaoh and Abimelech,)
God ‘sees’ her distress – God responds
God allows her to act
God is compassionate/merciful toward her

Our lives are like pendulums. While we live with faith and hope we contend with doubt and disappointment. When all seems to come together for us in synthesis the joy seems transient as we face again our barrenness and wander once more in our wildernesses.

The lesson we learn from Sarah is that while we struggle with life drawing upon our own ‘resources’, God is present in our lives

Finding something of our own experience in the life of Sarah:

- Image you are Sarah: Why did you laugh?
- Why do you think that the rabbi’s connect the Akeidah (The Binding of Isaac) with the death of Sarah?
- Life’s difficult decisions and responsibilities – Sarah and Ishmael
- Death is never the ‘last word’—how is Sarah’s life vindicated in her death.
- Without the experience of joylessness can joy have meaning?
SARAH – a Woman of Valor

Gen.11

[26] When Terah had lived seventy years, he became the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran.
[27] Now these are the descendants of Terah. Terah was the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran was the father of Lot.
[28] Haran died before his father Terah in the land of his birth, in Ur of the Chalde'ans.
[29] And Abram and Nahor took wives; the name of Abram’s wife was Sar’ai, and the name of Nahor’s wife, Milcah, the daughter of Haran the father of Milcah and Iscah.
[30] Now Sar’ai was barren; she had no child.

From absence to hope

While the dying generations are marked with fertility the emerging generation is marked by lack of potential. Sar’ai was barren…

Sarah has no history except through Abraham, and here in this “tree of life” she is an obstacle. In a world where a woman’s worth is calculated by her fruitfulness Sarah is empty, without future. The very words “Sar’ai was barren” mask a hidden story of personal pain and suffering.

Gen 11:10 begins with the words “This is the line of Shem…” The Hebrew word used is toledot, a word that is translated to mean “the line of” or “the generations of”. The same wood root appears in the word yeled (child) so when we read with reference to Sarai, “she had no child” —Ein lo valid— we poignancy of the fuller meaning; no generation, no offspring for Sarah and Abraham strikes us.

As we begin the Sarah story we are faced with a kind of death, a dying. The natural rhythm of life is broken…by an absence. Henry Bergson (‘The Idea of Nothing’ in Creative Evolution p.323) says,

“Every human action has its starting point in a dissatisfaction, and thereby in a feeling of absence. We should not act if we did not set before ourselves an end, and we seek a thing only because we feel the lack of it. Our action proceeds thus from “nothing” to “something,” and its very essence is to embroider “something” on the canvas of “nothing.”“.

The experience of absence is exactly the experience that leads us forward. Absence, by highlighting what ‘is not’ leads the human soul and heart yearning, and so, in pursuit of fullness. Absence, or the experience of nothingness, opens a way forward to a promise of future hope.

It is at this point in the biblical story that we meet Sarah. With the hindsight of knowledge the rabbis reflecting on the biblical introduction to the Abraham and Sarah story note that wherever we find the words ein la (she has not) in the Bible, there essentially, is.
Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves." So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. And Abram took Sar'ai his wife.

Lech lecha (Go! Go forth...) - the future is a promise to pursue
Gen 12: 1, 5. “Now the LORD said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you’ … And Abram took Sar’ai his wife…”.

“And Abram took Sar’ai his wife…”
“Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house...” (v.1)
Go, …from all that has nurtured you but now fails to nurture you. Barrenness takes on a new meaning in leaving behind the absence, the emptiness, life takes on new meaning for, “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing” (v.2).
For Sarai this is the path of promise intimated in the Psalms “He sets the childless woman in her household as a happy mother of children” (Ps 113:9)

And Abram journeyed on, still going toward the Negeb. Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land. When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sar’ai his wife, "I know that you are a woman beautiful to behold; and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife'; then they will kill me, but they will let you live. Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared on your account."
Sarah lay prostrate on her face, crying ‘Abraham is without this prison while I am within!’

Gen.16

[1] Now Sar’ai, Abram’s wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian maid whose name was Hagar;

[2] and Sar’ai said to Abram, ”Behold now, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my maid; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.”

THE EGYPTIANS BEHELD THE WOMAN THAT SHE WAS VERY FAIR (ME’OD)– which means, even more beautiful than Eve’s image. AND THE PRINCES OF PHARAOH SAW HER, AND Praised Her (XII, 15). R. Johanan said: They went on outbidding each other for her: one said, ’I give a hundred dinars that I may enter [Pharaoh’s palace] with her,’ whereupon another bid, ‘I give two hundred dinars to enter with her.’

(Midrash Rabbah - Genesis XL:5)

The servants of Pharaoh outbid one another in seeking to obtain possession of her, though they were of opinion that so radiant a beauty ought not to remain the property of a private individual. (Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews, p. 189)

And the whole of that night Sarah lay prostrate on her face, crying, ’Sovereign of the Universe! Abraham went forth [from his land] on Thine assurance, and I went forth with faith; Abraham is without this prison while I am within!’ Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to her: ‘Whatever I do, I do for thy sake, and all will say, ” It is BECAUSE OF SARAI ABRAM’S WIFE.”’

(Midrash Rabbah - Genesis XLI:2)
The Midrash says...

As long as Abraham and Sarah dwelt outside of the Holy Land, they looked upon their childlessness as a punishment for not abiding within it. But when a ten years’ sojourn in Palestine found her barren as before, Sarah perceived that the fault lay with her. Without a trace of jealousy she was ready to give her slave Hagar to Abraham as wife, first making her a freed woman. For Hagar was Sarah’s property, not her husband’s. She had received her from Pharaoh, the father of Hagar.

No sooner had Hagar’s union with Abraham been consummated, and she felt that she was with child, than she began to treat her former mistress contemptuously...Sarah. “My lady Sarah,” she would say, “is not inwardly what she appears to be outwardly. She makes the impression of a righteous, pious woman, but she is not, for if she were, how could her childlessness be explained after so many years of marriage, while I became pregnant at once?”

Sarah scorned to bicker with her slave, yet the rage she felt found vent in these words to Abraham: “It is thou who art doing me wrong. Thou hearest the words of Hagar, and thou sayest naught to oppose them, and I hoped that thou wouldst take my part. For thy sake did I leave my native land and the house of my father, and I followed thee into a strange land with trust in God. In Egypt I pretended to be thy sister, that no harm might befall thee. When I saw that I should bear no children, I took the Egyptian woman, my slave Hagar, and gave her unto thee for wife, contenting myself with the thought that I would rear the children she would bear. Now she treats me disdainfully in thy presence. O that God might look upon the injustice which hath been done unto me, to judge between thee and me, and have mercy upon us, restore peace to our home, and grant us offspring, that we have no need of children from Hagar, the Egyptian bondwoman of the generation of the heathen that cast thee in the fiery furnace!”

(Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews, p. 201)

Then Sar’ai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her.

[5] And Sar’ai said to Abram, “May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my maid to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the LORD judge between you and me!”

[6] But Abram said to Sar’ai, “Behold, your maid is in your power; do to her as you please.” Then Sar’ai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her.
Gen. 17
[1] When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless.
[2] And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly."
[3] Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him,
[4] "Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations.
[5] No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.
[6] I will make you exceedingly fruitful...
[15] And God said to Abraham, "As for Sar'ai your wife, you shall not call her name Sar'ai, but Sarah shall be her name.
[16] I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her; I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."
[17] Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, "Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?"
[18] And Abraham said to God, "O that Ish'mael might live in thy sight!"
[19] God said, "No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him.
[20] As for Ish'mael, I have heard you; behold, I will bless him and make him fruitful and multiply him exceedingly; he shall be the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation.
[21] But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year."

AND SARAI SAID UNTO ABRAM: MY WRONG (HAMASI) BE UPON THEE (XVI, 5). R. Judan explained this in R. Judah's name: Thou wrongest me with words, since thou hearest me insulted yet art silent. R. Berekiah explained it in R. Abba's name: I have a grievance against thee. For imagine two men incarcerated in prison, and as the king passes one of them cries out, "Execute justice for me!" The king orders him to be released, whereupon his fellow-prisoner says to him, 'I have a grievance against you, for had you said, "Execute justice for us," he would have released me just as he has released you; but now that you said, "Execute justice for me," he released you but not me.' Similarly, hadst thou said, 'We go childless,' then as He gave thee a child so would He have given me; since, however, thou saidest, And I go childless (Gen. XV, 2), He gave thee a child but not me. This may [also] be compared to two people who went to borrow seed from the king. One of them asked, 'Lend me seed,' and he ordered, 'Give it to him.' Said his companion to him, 'I have a grievance against you. Had you asked, "Lend us seed," he would have given me just as he gave you; now however that you said, "Lend me seed," he has given you but not me.' Similarly, hadst thou said, 'Behold, to us Thou hast given no seed,' then as He gave thee so had He given me. Now however that thou didst say, 'Behold, to me Thou hast given no seed ' (ib. 3), He gave to thee but not to me.

(Midrash Rabbah - Genesis XLV:5)
And the Lord said unto Abraham: “Am I too old to do wonders? And wherefore doth Sarah laugh, saying, Shall I of a surety bear a child, which am old?” The reproach made by God was directed against Abraham as well as against Sarah. For he, too, had showed himself of little faith when he was told that a son would be born unto him. But God mentioned only Sarah’s incredulity, leaving Abraham to become conscious of his defect himself.

(Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews, p. 205)

Why is Sarah criticized by God? Sarah’s reaction is ostensibly similar to Avraham’s. When Sara overhears the tidings of the messengers/angels that “I will return to you next year, and your wife Sarah shall have a son!” she laughs to herself: “Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment – with my husband so old?” While one is moved to defend her the fact that God chastises her gives one pause. For whatever reason—
perhaps Sarah’s laughter reflects her lack of trust (her laugh, in contrast to Avraham’s vocal laugh, was inward, hidden). Sarah denies that she laughed, and The Holy One, Blessed Be He is ‘forced’ to rule that she lied, and that indeed she did laugh.

There is a Talmudic ruling that one must act with justice and not allow ones natural compassion to condone a wrong. Even though we can understand the reason for Sarah’s laughter that does not remove her guilt. The simple fact is that Sarah is human and makes mistakes.

Gen.20
[1] From there Abraham journeyed toward the territory of the Negev, and dwelt between Kadesh and Shur; and he sojourned in Gerar.
[2] And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, "She is my sister." And Abim’elech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah.
[3] But God came to Abim’elech in a dream by night,...

Abraham separated from Lot, the separation was for all time. AND HE SOJOURNED IN GERAR...AND ABRAHAM SAID OF SARAH HIS WIFE: SHE IS MY SISTER (XX, 2)-without her will or consent.

(Midrash Rabbah - Genesis LII:4)

And the whole of that night Sarah lay prostrate on her face, crying, 'Sovereign of the Universe! Abraham went forth [from his land] on Thine assurance, and I went forth with faith; Abraham is without this prison while I am within!' Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to her: 'Whatever I do, I do for thy sake, and all will say, It is BECAUSE OF SARAH ARRAHAM'S WIFE.' R. Levi said: The whole of that night an angel stood with a whip in his hand; when she ordered, 'Strike,' he struck, and when she bade him, 'Desist,' he ceased. And why such severity? Because she told him [Abimelech], 'I am a married woman,' yet he would not leave her. R. Eleazar said, and it was also taught in the name of R. Liezer b. Jacob: We know that Pharaoh was smitten with leprosy and Abimelech with the closing up [of the orifices]. How do we know that what is said here is to be applied there, and vice versa? Because ‘for the sake of’ occurs in both places, in order that an analogy should be drawn.

(Midrash Rabbah - Genesis LII:13)

[14] ...Then Abim’elech took sheep and oxen, and male and female slaves, and gave them to Abraham, and restored Sarah his wife to him.
[15] And Abim'elech said, "Behold, my land is before you; dwell where it pleases you."
[16] To Sarah he said, 'Behold, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver; it is your vindication in the eyes of all who are with you; and before every one you are righted.'
[17] Then Abraham prayed to God; and God healed Abim'elech, and also healed his wife and female slaves so that they bore children.
[18] For the LORD had closed all the wombs of the house of Abim'elech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife.
The angels raised a loud cry, and spoke to God thus: “O Lord of the world! All these years hath Sarah been barren…"

Abraham prayed thus for Abimelech: “O Lord of the world! Thou hast created man that he may increase and propagate his kind. Grant that Abimelech and his house may multiply and increase!” God fulfilled Abraham’s petition in behalf of Abimelech and his people, and it was the first time it happened in the history of mankind that God fulfilled the prayer of one human being for the benefit of another. Abimelech and his subjects were healed of all their diseases, and so efficacious was the prayer offered by Abraham that the wife of Abimelech, barren hitherto, bore a child.

When the prayer of Abraham for Abimelech was heard, and the king of the Philistines recovered, the angels raised a loud cry, and spoke to God thus: “O Lord of the world! All these years hath Sarah been barren, as the wife of Abimelech was. Now Abraham prayed to Thee, and the wife of Abimelech hath been granted a child. It is just and fair that Sarah should be remembered and granted a child.”

(Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews, p. 217-218)

**Gen.21**

[1] The LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did to Sarah as he had promised.
[2] And Sarah conceived, and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him.
[3] Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore him, Isaac.
[4] And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him.
[5] Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.
[6] And Sarah said, “God has made laughter for me; every one who hears will laugh over me.”
[7] And she said, “Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would suckle children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.”…

“God has made laughter for me; every one who hears will laugh over me.”

The birth of Isaac was a happy event, and not in the house of Abraham alone. The whole world rejoiced, for God remembered all barren women it the same time with Sarah. They all bore children. And all the blind were made to see, all the lame were made whole, the dumb were made to speak, and the mad were restored to reason. And a still greater miracle happened: on the day of Isaac’s birth the sun shone with such splendor as had not been seen since the fall of man, and as he will shine again only in the future world.

(Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews, p. 218)
[9] …But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac.

[10] So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac."

[11] And the thing was very displeasing to Abraham on account of his son.

[12] But God said to Abraham, "Be not displeased…

"Ishmael is nor worthy of being heir with my son…"

Sarah, however, insisted that Abraham make over to Isaac all he owned, that no disputes might arise after his death, “for,” she said, “Ishmael is nor worthy of being heir with my son, nor with a man like Isaac, and certainly not with my son Isaac.” Furthermore, Sarah insisted that Abraham divorce himself from Hagar, the mother of Ishmael, and send away the woman and her son, so that there be naught in common between them and her own son, either in this world or in the future world. Of all the trials Abraham had to undergo, none was so hard to bear as this, for it grieved him sorely to separate himself from his son. God appeared to him in the following night, and said to him: “Abraham, knowest thou not that Sarah was appointed to be thy wife from her mother’s womb? She is thy companion and the wife of thy youth, and I named not Hagar as thy wife, nor Sarah as thy bondwoman. What Sarah spoke unto thee was naught but truth, and let it not be grievous in thy sight because of the lad, and because of thy bondwoman.”

(Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews, p. 219-220)

Rabbi Jehudah said: In that night the Holy One, blessed be He, was revealed unto him. He said to him: Abraham! Dost thou not know that Sarah was appointed to thee for a wife from her mother’s womb? She is thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant; Sarah is not called thy handmaid, but thy wife; neither is Hagar called thy wife, but thy handmaid; and all that Sarah has spoken she has uttered truthfully. Let it not be grievous in thine eyes, as it is said, “And God said unto Abraham, Let it not be grievous in thy sight” (ibid. 12).

(Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer, p. 247)

Gen.22

[1] After these things God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here am I."

[2] He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Mori’ah, and offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you."

[3] So Abraham rose early in the morning…
A Midrash...

And Abraham said within himself, “How shall I separate my son Isaac from Sarah his mother?” And he came into the tent, and he sat before Sarah his wife, and he spake these words to her: “My son Isaac is grown up, and he has not yet studied the service of God. Now, tomorrow I will go and bring him to Shem and Eber his son, and there he will learn the ways of the Lord, for they will teach him to know the Lord, and to know how to pray unto the Lord that He may answer him, and to know the way of serving the Lord his God.” And Sarah said, “Thou hast spoken well. Go, my lord, and do unto him as thou hast said, but remove him not far from me, neither let him remain there too long, for my soul is bound within his soul.” And Abraham said unto Sarah, “My daughter, let us pray to the Lord our God that He may do good with us.” And Sarah took her son Isaac, and he abode with her all that night, and she kissed and embraced him, and she laid injunctions upon him till morning, and she said to Abraham: “O my lord, I pray thee, take heed of thy son, and place thine eyes over him, for I have no other son nor daughter but him.

After spending the whole night in weeping on account of Isaac, she got up in the morning and selected a very fine and beautiful garment from those that Abimelech had given to her. And she dressed Isaac therewith, and she put a turban upon his head, and she fastened a precious stone in the top of the turban, and she gave them provisions for the road. And Sarah went out with them, and she accompanied them upon the road to see them off, and they said to her, “Return to the tent.” And when Sarah heard the words of her son Isaac, she wept bitterly, and Abraham wept with her, and their son wept with them, a great weeping, also those of their servants who went with them wept greatly. And Sarah caught hold of Isaac, and she held him in her arms, and she embraced him, and continued to weep with him, and Sarah said, “Who knoweth if I shall ever see thee again after this day?”

(Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews, p. 226)

Gen.23
[1] Sarah lived a hundred and twenty-seven years; these were the years of the life of Sarah.
[2] And Sarah died at Kir’iath-ar’ba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan; and Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her.

And the life of Sarah was one hundred years and twenty years and seven years
The reason that the word “years” was written after every digit is to tell you that every digit is to be expounded upon individually: when she was one hundred years old, she was like a twenty-year-old regarding sin. Just as a twenty-year-old has not sinned, because she is not liable to punishment, so too when she was one hundred years old, she was without sin. And when she was twenty, she was like a seven-year-old as regards to beauty.

(Genesis Rabbah 58:1)
And Sarah died at Kir’iath-ar’ba…
Gen 23:2 And Sarah died at Kir’iath-ar’ba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan; and Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her.

“Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah”
How did Abraham eulogize Sarah? The Biblical text does not tell us. Ancient Jewish wisdom has it that King Solomon recorded Abraham’s eulogy for his beloved wife in the last twenty two verses of the Book of Proverbs beginning with the words, “A women of valor, who can find?” (Prov 31:10-31) [(Midrash Tanchuma on Genesis 24:1)].

If you were to write Sarah’s eulogy what would you write?

The Sages say that Sarah is actually to be more praised than Abraham because he went on the journey knowing that God was with them because he had heard God’s voice, whereas Sarah went because she had unwavering faith in God even though she never heard God’s voice at that point. We are even told that Sarah’s prophetic powers were greater than Abraham’s because the Ruah Ha’Kodesh (Holy Spirit) rested upon her in a special way.
MATRIARCHS AND PATRIARCHS

This was symbolized by the midrash that states that the cloud of the Shekhinah (God’s Divine Presence) hovered at the entrance to Sarah’s tent, just as it was to later hover over and within the Mishkan, the portable Sanctuary in the desert.

Death is never the last word. Sarah’s death does not leave us barren. Rather Sarah lives on as this midrash suggests in our stories today—particularly in the stories of women. Sarah is remembered as a Tzadik—one whose life was devoted to God—and her ‘tent’ is the dwelling place of Sheckinah and the source of light to the nations. ‘And nations will walk by your light’ (Isaiah 60:3).

Gen 24: 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.

AND ISAAC BROUGHT HER INTO HIS MOTHER SARAH’S TENT (XXIV, 67).
You find that as long as Sarah lived, a cloud hung over her tent; when she died, that cloud disappeared; but when Rebekah came, it returned. As long as Sarah lived, her doors were wide open; at her death that liberality ceased; but when Rebekah came, that openhandedness returned. As long as Sarah lived, there was a blessing on her dough, and the lamp used to burn from the evening of the Sabbath until the evening of the following Sabbath; when she died, these ceased, but when Rebekah came, they returned.

(Midrash Rabbah - Genesis LX:16)
Proverbs 31:10-1 - A Woman of Valor

10What a rare find is a capable wife!
Her worth is far beyond that of rubies.
11Her husband puts his confidence in her,
And lacks no good thing.
12She is good to him, never bad,
All the days of her life.
13She looks for wool and flax,
And sets her hand to them with a will.
14She is like a merchant fleet,
Bringing her food from afar.
15She rises while it is still night,
And supplies provisions for her household,
The daily fare of her maids.
16She sets her mind on an estate and acquires it;
She plants a vineyard by her own labors.
17She girds herself with strength,
And performs her tasks with vigor.
18She sees that her business thrives;
Her lamp never goes out at night.
19She sets her hand to the distaff;
Her fingers work the spindle.
20She gives generously to the poor;
Her hands are stretched out to the needy.
21She is not worried for her household
because of snow, for her whole household is dressed in crimson.
22She makes covers for herself;
Her clothing is linen and purple.
23Her husband is prominent in the gates,
As he sits among the elders of the land.
24She makes cloth and sells it,
And offers a girdle to the merchant.
25She is clothed with strength and splendor;
She looks to the future cheerfully.
26Her mouth is full of wisdom,
Her tongue with kindly teaching.
27She oversees the activities of her household
And never eats the bread of idleness.
28Her children declare he r happy;
Her husband praises her,
29"Many women have done well,
But you surpass them all."
30Grace is deceptive,
Beauty is illusory;
It is for her fear of the LORD
That a woman is to be praised.
31Extol her for the fruit of her hand,
And let her works praise her in the gates.
All the blind were made to see, all the lame were made whole, the dumb were made to speak, and the mad were restored to reason.

...and a still greater miracle happened: on the day of Isaac’s birth the sun shone with such splendor as had not been seen since the fall of man, and as he will shine again only in the future world.

(Isinzberg, The Legends of the Jews)
Isaac

*Our life is a journey from ignominy to glory*

Part 1.

IGNOMINY – Isaac’s weaknesses

1. Isaac and his mother
   a. What does the Midrash say about Isaac’s relationship with his mother?
   b. Living with the effects of my own childhood/upbringing.

2. Isaac’s middle life wandering
   a. Reading behind the text what questions do you think the Rabbis might have raised concerning Isaac’s ethical and moral life when living with Abimelech’s people.
   b. Does Isaac’s life parody my own?

3. Isaac’s blindness - Physical or moral?
   a. The biblical text has a religious intent. How then is Isaac’s blindness explained?
   b. Am I also afflicted with ‘blindness’ in my judgements, or in pursuing my desires?

Part 2.

TOWARDS GLORY - Isaac’s strengths

1. Faithfulness and determination to serve God
   How do the rabbi’s develop the notion that Isaac’s faith is exemplary?
   Am I able to commitment myself so totally to service of God?

2. Isaac - A man of prayer
   Isaac’s strength is his prayer life. Discuss

3. Isaac – Seeker of God’s presence (Shekinah)
   a. Isaac draws on ‘Wells of Living Water’. Discuss.
   b. We learn that God is present to those who seek. How do I draw my sustenance.

4. Isaac – a man sensitive to the weak
   a. Does my experience of inadequacy and failure lead me to compassion for others.
   b. What does this midrash say about the relationship of Isaac and God.

THE GLORY

Isaac’s name means “laughter” yet, while his birth brings joy to his parents, his own life appears to be a struggle.

Subject (or victim) of his fathers faith ‘tests’ Isaac seems, in the biblical text, to endure all silently. In fact, his life is marked by his passivity, even to the point that his father chooses his wife for him.

History, however, remembers him as a worthy and honourable patriarch. His greatness lies in his faithful struggle to do what is right, and in God’s response to his faith that ensures that his mistakes are somehow transformed into good.

Isaac is for us an exemplary model. His life is one of transformation. His faith and God’s presence ensure his life is a successful journey from weakness and failure to redemption/glory.
ISAAC – SEEKING THE DIVINE WITHIN

Isaac

Our life is a journey from ignominy to glory

Part 1.

IGNOMINITY – Isaac’s weaknesses
What do the following Biblical texts and their Rabbinic commentaries tells us about Isaac’s character?

1. Isaac and his mother
Abraham was now old, advanced in years, and the LORD had blessed Abraham in all things. And Abraham said to the senior servant of his household, who had charge of all that he owned, “Put your hand under my thigh and I will make you swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and the God of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites among whom I dwell, but will go to the land of my birth and get a wife for my son Isaac.” And the servant said to him, “What if the woman does not consent to follow me to this land, shall I then take your son back to the land from which you came?” Abraham answered him, “On no account must you take my son back there! The LORD, the God of heaven, who took me from my father’s house and from my native land, who promised me on oath, saying, ‘I will assign this land to your offspring’ — He will send His angel before you, and you will get a wife for my son from there. (Gen 24:1-7)

The servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. 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. (Gen 24:66-67)

Midrash develops the idea that Isaac “found comfort after his mother’s death”…

Three years Isaac mourned for his mother. Everytime he entered her tent, and saw it in darkness [dimmed], he would tear his hair. But when he married Rebecca, and brought her into the tent, the light returned to its place. “And Isaac brought her into the ohel [the tent]”, ohel means “light,” as it is said, “Till the moon will no longer shine” [Job 25:5]. He is comforted and [lit.] saw it as though his mother were still in existence. That is why it says: “Isaac was comforted after his mother.”

(Midrash Ha-Gadol 24:67)

For three years Isaac had mourned for his mother, and he could find no consolation in the academy of Shem and Eber, his abiding-place during that period. But Rebekah comforted him after his mother’s death,303 for she was the counterpart of Sarah in person and in spirit. (Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews p. 241)

2. Isaac’s middle life wandering
There was a famine in the land—aside from the previous famine that had occurred in the days of Abraham—and Isaac went to Abimelech, king of the Philistines, in Gerar. The LORD had appeared to him and said, “Do not go down to Egypt; stay in the land which I point out to you. Reside in this land, and I will be with you and bless
you; I will assign all these lands to you and to your heirs, fulfilling the oath that I swore to your father Abraham. I will make your heirs as numerous as the stars of heaven, and assign to your heirs all these lands, so that all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your heirs—inasmuch as Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge: My commandments, My laws, and My teachings.” (Gen 26:1-5)

So Isaac stayed in Gerar. When the men of the place asked him about his wife, he said, “She is my sister,” for he was afraid to say “my wife,” thinking, “The men of the place might kill me on account of Rebekah, for she is beautiful.” (Gen 26:6-7)

What does the above verse say about Isaac’s faith?

When some time had passed, Abimelech king of the Philistines, looking out of the window, saw Isaac fondling his wife Rebekah. Abimelech sent for Isaac and said, “So she is your wife! Why then did you say: ‘She is my sister?’” Isaac said to him, “Because I thought I might lose my life on account of her.” Abimelech said, “What have you done to us! One of the people might have lain with your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us.” Abimelech then charged all the people, saying, “Anyone who molests this man or his wife shall be put to death.” (Gen 26:8-11)

Midrash chastises Isaac for being intimate with Rebecca during the day.

Midrash Rabbah - Genesis LXIV:5
AND IT CAME TO PASS, WHEN HE HAD BEEN THERE A LONG TIME, etc. (XXVI, 8). R. Johanan said: A bad dream, an evil prophecy, and unreasonable mourning are nullified by the lapse of time. How do we know it of a bad dream and an evil prophecy?-The days are prolonged, and every vision faileth (Ezek. XII, 22). Unreasonable mourning is ended by a protracted period: this was exemplified in the case of Abimelech: AND IT CAME TO PASS, WHEN HE HAD BEEN THERE A LONG TIME, etc. R. Huna and R. Jeremiah in the name of R. Hiyya b. Ba said: Because time had brought him healing [from his grief over Abraham’s death], he did this thing! Did not R. Johanan say: To cohabit by day is indecent, even as R. Johanan said: Cohabitation is permitted at night only, as it says, In the evening she went (Est. II, 14).

Isaac sowed in that land and reaped a hundredfold the same year. The LORD blessed him, and the man grew richer and richer until he was very wealthy: he acquired flocks and herds, and a large household, so that the Philistines envied him. And the Philistines stopped up all the wells which his father’s servants had dug in the days of his father Abraham, filling them with earth. And Abimelech said to Isaac, “Go away from us, for you have become far too big for us.” (Gen 26:12-16)
ISAAC – SEEKING THE DIVINE WITHIN

So Isaac departed from there and encamped in the wadi of Gerar, where he settled. Isaac dug anew the wells which had been dug in the days of his father Abraham and which the Philistines had stopped up after Abraham’s death; and he gave them the same names that his father had given them. (Gen 26: 17-18)

The physical/material evidence is that Isaac did well in the territory of Abimelech. How do you think his spiritual life was faring?

3. Isaac’s blindness - Physical or moral?

When the boys grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the outdoors; but Jacob was a mild man who stayed in camp. Isaac favoured Esau because he had a taste for game… (Gen 25:27-28)

In their childhood, both brothers went to school, but when they reached their thirteenth year, and were of age, their ways parted. Jacob continued his studies in the Bet ha-Midrash of Shem and Eber, and Esau abandoned himself to idolatry and an immoral life. Both were hunters of men, Esau tried to capture them in order to turn them away from God, and Jacob, to turn them toward God. In spite of his impious deeds, Esau possessed the art of winning his father’s love. His hypocritical conduct made Isaac believe that his first-born son was extremely pious. “Father,” he would ask Isaac, “what is the tithe on straw and salt?” The question made him appear God-fearing in the eyes of his father, because these two products are the very ones that are exempt from tithing. Isaac failed to notice, too, that his older son gave him forbidden food to eat. What he took for the flesh of young goats was dog’s meat. (Ginzberg The Legends of the Jews, p. 255)

When Isaac was old and his eyes were too dim to see, he called his older son Esau and said to him, “My son.” He answered, “Here I am.” And he said, “I am old now, and I do not know how soon I may die. Take your gear, your quiver and bow, and go out into the open and hunt me some game. Then prepare a dish for me such as I like, and bring it to me to eat, so that I may give you my innermost blessing before I die.” (Gen 27:1-4)

...He asked, “Are you really my son Esau?” And when he said, “I am,” he said, “Serve me and let me eat of my son’s game that I may give you my innermost blessing.” So he served him and he ate, and he brought him wine and he drank. Then his father Isaac said to him, “Come close and kiss me, my son”; and he went up and kissed him. And he smelled his clothes and he blessed him, saying, “Ah, the smell of my son is like the smell of the fields that the LORD has blessed.

“May God give you Of the dew of heaven and the fat of the earth, Abundance of new grain and wine. Let peoples serve you, And nations bow to you; Be master over your brothers, And let your mother’s sons bow to you. Cursed be they who curse you, Blessed they who bless you.” (Gen 27 24-29)
Midrashic comment of Isaac’s blindness:

Midrash Rabbah - Genesis LXV:10
AND HIS EYES WERE DIM FROM SEEING. R. Eleazar b. ‘Azariah said: It means, from seeing the evil of that wicked man [Esau]. The Holy One, blessed be He, said: ‘Shall Isaac go out into the market place and people say, “Here is the father of that scoundrel!” Rather will I make his eyes dim, so that he shall stay at home.’ Thus it is written, When the wicked rise, men hide themselves (Prov. XXVIII, 28). Hence it was said: He who raises a wicked son or a wicked disciple eventually suffers dimness of sight. As for a wicked disciple, that follows from Ahijah the Shilonite, for he raised Jeroboam and his eyes grew dim, as it says, Now Ahijah could not see, for his eyes were set by reason of his old age (I Kings XIV, 4)- because he had raised up Jeroboam, a wicked disciple. As for a wicked son, that follows from Isaac.

Midrash Rabbah - Genesis LXV:10
Another interpretation of FROM SEEING is: as a result of that spectacle*; for when our father Abraham bound his son Isaac, the ministering angels wept, as it says, Behold, their valiant ones cry without, the angels of peace weep bitterly (Isa. XXXIII, 7): tears dropped from their eyes into his, and left their mark upon them, and so when he became old his eyes dimmed, as it is written, AND IT CAME TO PASS, THAT WHEN ISAAC WAS OLD, etc.

Another interpretation of FROM [or, THROUGH] SEEING is: through that spectacle. For when our father Abraham bound Isaac on the altar he lifted up his eyes heavenward and gazed at the Shechinah. This may be illustrated by the case of a king who was taking a stroll by his palace gates, when looking up he saw his friend’s son peering at him through a window. Said he: ‘If I execute him now [for his disrespect] I will make my friend suffer; therefore I will rather order that his windows be sealed up.’ Thus, when our father Abraham bound his son on the altar he looked up and gazed at the Shechinah. Said the Holy One, blessed be He: ‘If I slay him now, I will make Abraham, My friend, suffer; therefore I rather decree that his eyes should be dimmed’; hence it is written, AND IT CAME TO PASS, WHEN ISAAC WAS OLD, etc.

* The Akedah on Mount Moriah.

It has been suggested that the trauma of Isaac’s experience of the Akedah (the Binding on Mount Moriah) left him crippled-as one half dead. That he was unable to function normally because of his experience. Consider Isaac’s blindness as a sign of physical and moral deficiency.
Part 2.

TOWARDS GLORY - Isaac’s strengths

1. Faithfulness and determination to serve God

Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and put it on his son Isaac. He himself took the firestone and the knife; and the two walked off together. Then Isaac said to his father Abraham, “Father!” And he answered, “Yes, my son.” And he said, “Here are the firestone and the wood; but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?” And Abraham said, “God will see to the sheep for His burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them walked on together. (Gen 22:6-8)

And while they were walking along, Isaac spake unto his father, “Behold, the fire and the wood, but where then is the lamb for a burnt offering before the Lord?” And Abraham answered Isaac, saying, “The Lord hath chosen thee, my son, for a perfect burnt offering, instead of the lamb.” And Isaac said unto his father, “I will do all that the Lord hath spoken to thee with joy and cheerfulness of heart.” And Abraham again said unto Isaac his son, “Is there in thy heart any thought or counsel concerning this which is not proper? Tell me, my son, I pray thee! O my son, conceal it not from me.” And Isaac answered, “As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, there is nothing in my heart to cause me to deviate either to the right or the left from the word that He hath spoken unto thee. Neither limb nor muscle hath moved or stirred on account of this, nor is there in my heart any thought or evil counsel concerning this. But I am joyful and cheerful of heart in this matter, and I say, Blessed is the Lord who has this day chosen me to be a burnt offering before Him.”

...Isaac spake hereupon: “Father, make haste, bare thine arm, and bind my hands and feet securely, for I am a young man, but thirty seven years of age, and thou art an old man. When I behold the slaughtering knife in thy hand, I may perchance begin to tremble at the sight and push against thee, for the desire unto life is bold. Also I may do myself an injury and make myself unfit to be sacrificed.”

(Ginzberg The Legends of the Jews, p. 227-229)

“AND Isaac sowed in that land” (Gen. xxvi. 12). Rabbi Eliezer said: Did Isaac sow the seed of corn? Heaven forbid! But he took all his wealth, and sowed it in charity to the needy, as it is said, “Sow to yourselves in righteousness, reap according to love” (Hos. x. 12). Everything which he tithed, the Holy One, blessed be He, sent him (in return) one hundred times (the value) in different kinds of blessings, as it is said, “And he found in the same year an hundredfold: and the Lord blessed him” (Gen. xxvi. 12). (Pirke de rabbi Eliezer)

The first midrash provides the untold story. Isaac is silent about a single question to his father in the way to Mount Moriah “Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” What do these midrashim (plural of midrash) tell us about the other Isaac that the Rabbis find in the biblical text?
2. Isaac - A man of prayer
Isaac had just come back from the vicinity of Be’er-lahai-roi, for he was settled in the region of the Negev. And Isaac went out walking [meditating] in the field toward evening and, looking up, he saw camels approaching. Raising her eyes, Rebekah saw Isaac. (Gen 24:62-64)

Be’er-lahai-roi: “Well of the Living One Who sees”

Isaac was forty years old when he took to wife Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean. Isaac pleaded with the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD responded to his plea, and his wife Rebekah conceived. (Gen 25:20-21)

AND ISAAC CAME FROM COMING, etc. (XXIV, 62): i.e. he came from a mission to fetch someone. And whither had he gone? To BEER-LAHAI-ROI (ib.): he had gone to fetch Hagar, the one who had sat by the well (be’er) and besought Him who is the life (lahai) of all worlds, saying, Look upon (re’eh) my misery. AND ISAAC WENT OUT TO MEDITATE IN THE FIELD AT THE EVENTIDE (ib. 23). By meditation prayer is meant, as it says, A Prayer of the afflicted when he fainteth, and poureth out his meditation [i.e. prayer] before the Lord (PS. CII, 1); and thus too it says, Evening, and morning, and at noonday, will I pray and moan, etc. (ib. LV, 18). (Midrash Rabbah - Genesis LX:14)

Eliezer’s return to Canaan was as wonderful as his going to Haran had been. A seventeen days’ journey he accomplished in three hours. He left Haran at noon, and he arrived at Hebron at three o’clock in the afternoon, the time for the Minniah Prayer, which had been introduced by Isaac. He was in the posture of praying when Rebekah first laid eyes upon him, wherefore she asked Eliezer what man this was. She saw he was not an ordinary individual. She noticed the unusual beauty of Isaac, and also that an angel accompanied him.

(Ginzberg The Legends of the Jews, p. 240)

The place where Isaac used to pray was near paradise, so that its fragrance might reach him, and is identical with the field which Abraham bought from Ephron (cf. Zohar II, 39b.)

3. Isaac – Seeker of God’s presence (Shekinah)
Isaac sowed in that land and reaped a hundredfold the same year. The LORD blessed him, and the man grew richer and richer until he was very wealthy: he acquired flocks and herds, and a large household, so that the Philistines envied him. And the Philistines stopped up all the wells which his father’s servants had dug in the days of his father Abraham, filling them with earth. And Abimelech said to Isaac, “Go away from us, for you have become far too big for us.” So Isaac departed from there and encamped in the wadi of Gerar, where he settled. Isaac Isaac dug anew the wells which had been dug in the days of his father Abraham and which the Philistines had stopped up after Abraham’s death; and he gave them the same names that his father had given them.
But when Isaac’s servants, digging in the wadi, found there a well of spring water, the herdsmen of Gerar quarreled with Isaac’s herdsmen, saying, “The water is ours.” He named that well Esek, [contention] because they contended with him. And when they dug another well, they disputed over that one also; so he named it Sitnah [harassment]. He moved from there and dug yet another well, and they did not quarrel over it; so he called it Rehoboth, saying, “Now at last the LORD has granted us ample space to increase in the land.” From there he went up to Beer-sheba. That night the LORD appeared to him and said, “I am the God of your father Abraham. Fear not, for I am with you, and I will bless you and increase your offspring for the sake of My servant Abraham.” So he built an altar there and invoked the LORD by name. Isaac pitched his tent there and his servants started digging a well.

So he built an altar there and invoked the LORD by name. Isaac pitched his tent there and his servants started digging a well.

The mystical tradition has always associated well of water, and especially wells from springs as metaphors for God’s presence. Typically biblical characters who become associated with wells of water (ie Miriam, Abraham, Rebecca, Rachel and Isaac) are seen/recognised as seekers of the divine presence and somehow close to God. The presence of “living water” in the biblical sense typically refers to the Divine flow within the human soul.

Is it this quality of Isaac’s character that draws Abimelech out of his Philistine territory to seek Isaac?

...And Abimelech came to him from Gerar, with Ahuzzath his councilor and Phicol chief of his troops. Isaac said to them, “Why have you come to me, seeing that you have been hostile to me and have driven me away from you?” And they said, “We now see plainly that the LORD has been with you, and we thought: Let there be a sworn treaty between our two parties, between you and us. Let us make a pact with you that you will not do us harm, just as we have not molested you but have always dealt kindly with you and sent you away in peace. From now on, be you blessed of the LORD!” Then he made for them a feast, and they ate and drank. (Gen 26:17-30)

Early in the morning, they exchanged oaths. Isaac then bade them farewell, and they departed from him in peace. That same day Isaac’s servants came and told him about the well they had dug, and said to him, “We have found water!” He named it Shibah [oath] therefore the name of the city is Beer-sheba to this day. (Gen 26:31-33)

Midrash Rabbah - Genesis LXIV:3

AND THE LORD APPEARED UNTO HIM, AND SAID: GO NOT DOWN INTO EGYPT; DWELL IN THE LAND (ib. 2). Cultivate the land, be a sower, be a planter. Another interpretation of DWELL (SHEKON) IN THE LAND is: cause the Shechinah to dwell in the land.

‘For I will pour out water on the thirsty land, And streams on the dry ground; I will pour out My Spirit on your offspring, And My blessing on your descendants; And they will spring up among the grass like poplars by streams of water.’

(Is. 44:3-4)
4. Isaac – a man sensitive to the weak

Consider this midrash from the Talmud.

R’ Shmuel, the son of Nachmani, said in the name of Rav Yonatan: "What does the verse mean, You are our father, for Abraham did not know us and Israel did not recognize us. You [G-d], our Father, Redeemer, forever is Your Name. [Isaiah 63:16]. In the future, God will say to Abraham, 'Your children have sinned against me.' And Abraham will say in front of Him, 'Master of the Universe, wipe them out for of the sanctification of Your Name.' God will say, 'Perhaps Jacob, who had experienced difficulty raising his children, will ask for mercy for the Jewish people.' G-d will say to him, 'Your children have sinned against Me.' Jacob will say in front of Him, 'Master of the Universe, wipe them out for the sanctification of Your Name.'

God will say, 'The old man has no reason, and the young one has no advice." God will then say to Isaac, 'Your children have sinned against me.' He will say in front of Him, 'Master of the Universe, my children? My children, and not Your children? When the Jews said, We will do and we will listen, You called them my first-born son, and now You call them my children, and not Your children? Besides, how much did they sin? How many years are the years of a man's life, seventy? Subtract [the first] 20, for which a person is not punished, you are left with 50. Subtract 25, which are evenings, and you are left with 25. Subtract 12-1/2 which a person uses to pray, to eat, and answer nature's call, and you are left with 12-1/2. If You can tolerate all of this, good; if not, then let us split it, half on You and half on me. If you will say that all of the years of their sins are on me, remember that I sacrificed my soul in front of you (for you)."

[B.T. Shabbat 89b]

The Glory

Isaac is an archetype of ourselves. He is a very ordinary person. His story is not one to make great headlines. In the biblical text he does not stand out as his father and mother, he is not a pro-active character with a purpose like his wife Rebekah, and his life is eclipsed by the lives of his sons, particularly Jacob. Isaac is remembered as one who maintains the status-quo.

We can see in Isaac’s life a pattern that is repeated in the story of Israel, and in our own experience. That pattern is a journey from ignominy to glory, from suffering to redemption. This journey traverses life – through barren and dry times, confusion, suffering, all our experiences of wilderness. On our journey God intervenes, shapes the terrain, smoothes the path, challenges, rescues and gives hope. This is Isaac’s life and this, too, is our life. We can find in Isaac one whose life speaks to our own human experience. Isaac suffers, Isaac makes mistakes, Isaac seeks to remain faithful of God, and God intervenes in his life in ‘saving’ ways.

God saves Isaac from his mistakes.

- God intervenes when he lies about Rebekah to the Philistines (Isaac is chastised).
- When Isaac become wealthy in material things he is thrown out of Abimelech’s territory.
- In the wilderness once more Isaac set sets about the same business as his father – this is associated with the digging of wells.
- Isaac fully intends to give his blessing to his favoured son Esau. His plan is thwarted. Eventually the blessing that matters is given to Jacob anyway.
Rebekah

A woman attentive to God’s presence

“Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to her:

‘Thou hast provided a token for thy descendants: as the water ascended immediately it saw thee, so will it be for thy descendants: as soon as the well sees them, it will immediately rise’”

(Midrash Rabbah - Genesis LX:5)
Rebecca – one who seeks the Divine within.

1. Rebecca in Haran – Woman at the well
   “I will go” (Gen 24:58) – textual parallels with Abraham
   “the well” connection – in touch with Shechinah (BR 60:5)
   The “well within” and God’s presence – the Divine Point

2. Rebecca in Canaan – A woman encountering life changing challenges
   Confronting something bigger (and outside) her experience?

3. Inquiring of God, “Why am I?”
   Inquire: l’drosh = inquire, challenge, struggle.
   Rebecca’s crisis of faith. ‘Im ken, lamah zeh ‘anokhi (Genesis 25:22).
   Seeking/inquiring of God. Ramban’s interpretation, “If it be so, why do I live?”
   (Ramban - Moses Ben Nachman. C11.)
   Rebecca’s life is shaped/informed by “inquiring of God”.

4. The complexity of existence and playing one’s part.
   The reality of life – one is immersed in it; one must ‘deal’ with life in all its
   richness and complexity, both good and bad.
   How does Rebecca encounter the “other side” of her life/personality. Do you
   think there is a difference between her and Isaac in this respect?
   What was the nature of the Jacob and Esau’s in utero struggle? Is this a
   metaphor for the inner conflict of our personalities?
   And The Children Struggled Together Within Her. They sought to run within
   her. When she [Rebecca] stood near synagogues or schools, Jacob struggled to
   come out; hence it is written, Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee
   (Jeremiah 1:5). While when she passed idolatrous temples, Esau eagerly
   struggled to come out; hence it is written, The wicked are estranged from the
   womb (Psalm 58:4). (Genesis Rabbah 63:6)

5. Dwelling by the “wells” of my life.
   Drawing on “living water”
   Bringing about God’s will.
   Acting justly? Does the biblical story really intend that we should judge
   Rebecca by her deception or by her ultimate intention?
   If we see the characterization of Isaac and Esau as the interplay of good and
   bad within our own selves what then do Rebecca’s actions indicate of her interior
   state.
   God dwells within me. I have but to seek God’s presence for the well of living
   water within me to rise up.
   Paying attention to the divine within (my Divine Spark) will guide my actions
   and ensure that God’s will is done—I can/will become “living water”.
1. Rebecca in Haran – Woman at the well

Eliezer’s prayer
Consider the world of Abraham and Isaac after the Akedah (The Binding). After Mt Moriah we do not hear Isaac speak again. The Abraham that we knew previously as a model of hesed (one who loves [God] without limit—whose love is gracious and totally complete), is, we are left now to imagine, as one sunk within a deep hole of confused existence. What is his relationship with God following the Akedah?—even at the altar of sacrifice it is not God who communicates with him directly but an angel of God.

There is a universal need to understand the human experience of abandonment by God. Confronted with what appears to be a total insensitively (and carelessness) of God of human suffering and anguish (even the “good” suffer in this respect) we are left with nothing but our naked fears and doubts.

Abraham, champion of hesed-ness, is now facing the fears of disillusion, and failure. At such times one can become inarticulate. This pain, and the struggle and need for Divine affirmation, is voiced in the prayer of Abraham’s servant, Eliezer, when he stands before the well of the city of Nahor and prays on behalf of Abraham, “Act with hesed…” Eliezer’s prayer articulates the depth of the ‘hole’ that is left in the wake of the Akedah and the death of Sarah.

He made the camels kneel down by the well outside the city, at evening time, the time when women come out to draw water. And he said, “O LORD, God of my master Abraham, grant me good fortune this day, and deal graciously with my master Abraham: Here I stand by the spring as the daughters of the townsmen come out to draw water; let the maiden to whom I say, ‘Please, lower your jar that I may drink,’ and who replies, ‘Drink, and I will also water your camels’—let her be the one whom You have decreed for Your servant Isaac. Thereby shall I know that You have dealt graciously with my master.”  

( Gen 24:11-14)

deal graciously, steadfast faithfulness: the word Eliezer uses is hesed. — As Abraham has dealt with You (with hesed), so, now, deal with Abraham.

He had scarcely finished speaking, when Rebekah, who was born to Bethuel, the son of Milcah the wife of Abraham’s brother Nahor, came out with her jar on her shoulder. The maiden was very beautiful, a virgin whom no man had known. She went down to the spring, filled her jar, and came up. The servant ran toward her and said, “Please, let me sip a little water from your jar.” “Drink, my lord,” she said, and she quickly lowered her jar upon her hand and let him drink. When she had let him drink his fill, she said, “I will also draw for your camels, until they finish drinking.” Quickly emptying her jar into the trough, she ran back to the well to draw, and she drew for all his camels. (Gen 24:15-20)

...The man bowed low in homage to the LORD and said, “Blessed be the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who has not withheld His steadfast faithfulness from my master. ( Gen 24:26-27)
**God chooses Rebecca.**

In the light of Abraham’s mission through his servant, and the response Eliezer receives to his prayer, it is apparent that **God chooses** Rebecca.

*Midrash suggests that Rebecca is aware that God’s has a special role in the Divine plan…*

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**Midrash Rabbah - Genesis LX:5**

AND SHE WENT DOWN TO THE FOUNTAIN, AND FILLED HER PITCHER (ib.). All women went down and drew water from the well, whereas for her the water ascended as soon as it saw her. Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to her: ‘Thou hast provided a token for thy descendants: as the water ascended immediately it saw thee, so will it be for thy descendants: as soon as the well sees them, it will immediately rise’; thus it is written, *Then sang Israel this song: Spring up, O well— sing ye unto it* (Num. XXI, 17).

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“The Well” is understood, in the Jewish mystical tradition, as being the source of God’s presence, and the source of Torah (i.e. the Law/teaching revealed by God). The midrash above presents us with an insight into the character of Rebecca by suggesting that she has a particular relationship with God. Biblical women are often associated with the presence of wells. For example, Hagar and Miriam. When we meet Rebecca ‘at the spring’ we meet a person who is in touch with her Divine source—her “inner point”.

**In Jewish tradition each person has a divine soul.**

The notion that the soul is an actual portion of God and that a ‘spark of the divine’ is contained within each individual soul often underlies the understanding that the Torah—the Word—is within the human person. It is when one turns to the Divine presence within that one truly becomes a source of “living water”. This innermost part of each person, that part of us that is eternally of God, is often referred to in mystical writing as the inner point, the Divine point, or the Divine spark—*nekudah*.

According to modern mystic, Arthur Green,

“Spiritual discipline is all about training the heart [to respond to God], a way of enabling ourselves to live with our inner doorways just a bit more open, able to respond more freely when we hear ‘the sound of my Beloved knocking’”. Rebecca’s character, her relationship with God (see Midrash Rabbah LX:5 above), and her response to Eliezer suggest she is one who is in touch with her “Divine spark”.

They called Rebekah and said to her, “Will you go with this man?” And she said, “I will.” (Gen 24:58)

*Rebecca is seen as a parallel of Abraham. Like Abraham she responds to God’s call.*

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53
2. Rebecca in Canaan – A woman encountering life changing challenges

And Isaac went out walking in the field toward evening and, looking up, he saw camels approaching. Raising her eyes, Rebekah saw Isaac. She alighted from the camel 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. (Gen 24:63-65)

Isaac “raised his eyes and saw” (v. 63) and Rebecca “raised his eyes and she saw Isaac” (v.64). [Compare, Abraham’s theophany at Mamre... “Raising his eyes [looking up], he saw three men standing near... him.”(Gen 18:2).] The text hints of something more than the simple meaning—that Isaac and Rebecca’s “seeing” is something beyond the literal sense of the report—their “seeing” is revelation.

He was out walking (the verb can also be translated “meditating” or “praying”). She alighted from the camel. The verb is from the root “to fall” and so is often literally translated “she fell from the camel” when she saw Isaac. The Jewish sage, Rashi, says that Rebecca fell because, “She saw that he was resplendent, and she was astounded by him.”

Avivah Zorberg suggests, “What Rebecca sees in Isaac is the vital anguish at the heart of his prayers, a remoteness from the sunlit world of hesed that she inhabits. ... A fatal seepage of doubt and dread affects her, so that she can no longer meet him in the full energy of her difference. She veils herself, obscures her light. (The Beginnings of Desire: Reflections on Genesis (Doubleday, 1996), p. 142)

He [Isaac] was in the posture of praying when Rebekah first laid eyes upon him, wherefore she asked Eliezer what man this was. She saw he was not an ordinary individual. She noticed the unusual beauty of Isaac, and also that an angel accompanied him. Thus her question was not dictated by mere curiosity. At this moment she learnt through the holy spirit, that she was destined to be the mother of the godless Esau. Terror seized her at the knowledge, and, trembling, she fell from the camel and inflicted an injury upon herself. (Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews, p.240)
Rebecca, in following the call of God; of her own “lech lecha”, finds herself indeed far from her country, her kindred and her family. Here in Canaan she is confronted with the contrariness and unpredictability of life in ways that will test faith.

Rebecca is a woman who has left behind her “simple” life and is about to embark upon her own testing challenges. Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin in Ha’amek Davar (1880) writes, “And Rebecca lifted her eyes etc. and she saw Isaac – while he was still praying, and he was then like an angel of God, very awesome. The Midrash explains that she saw his hands extended in prayer. Therefore she became frightened and fell off her camel from fear and awe . . . Therefore, when she heard that he was her designated husband, she took her veil and covered herself out of fear and shame, as if to say she understood that she did not deserve to be his wife.”

Yet, Rebecca has a role to play in this story of God’s intervention in human history, and she begins, as it were, where Sarah left off. Rebecca plays a vital role in shaping the story of Isaac and Israel that unfolds.

The following midrash suggests that Isaac finds more than physical comfort after the loss of his mother. Rebecca has a deeper spiritual quality which is associated with his mother, Sarah.

**Midrash Rabbah - Genesis LX:16**

AND ISAAC BROUGHT HER INTO HIS MOTHER SARAH’S TENT (XXIV, 67).
You find that as long as Sarah lived, a cloud hung over her tent; when she died, that cloud disappeared; but when Rebekah came, it returned. As long as Sarah lived, her doors were wide open; at her death that liberality ceased; but when Rebekah came, that open-handedness returned. As long as Sarah lived, there was a blessing on her dough, and the lamp used to burn from the evening of the Sabbath until the evening of the following Sabbath; when she died, these ceased, but when Rebekah came, they returned. And so when he saw her following in his mother’s footsteps, separating her hallah in cleanness and handling her dough in cleanness, straightway, AND ISAAC BROUGHT HER INTO THE TENT.

3. Inquiring of God, “Why am I?”

Isaac pleaded with the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD responded to his plea, and his wife Rebekah conceived.
But the children struggled in her womb, and she said, “If so, why do I exist?” “She went to inquire of the LORD” (Gen 25:21-22)

Rebecca went “to inquire” of the LORD (25:22). The Hebrew word is l’drosh, the root of which means to inquire, to challenge, to struggle. Her question, “If so, why do I exist?” and her action, “she went to inquire/challenge/struggle...” immediately reveal to us one who is facing deep questions within herself. Ramban (Nachmanides, C11) translates her statement as “If it be so, why do I live?”. 55
Q. How do you think this revelation might have shaped Rebecca’s life?

4. The complexity of existence and playing one’s part.

The inner struggle that Rebecca feels, (played out in the struggle of her twins) reflects the struggle of our own experience that is played out in our conflicting desires. The struggle between the twins can be seen, too, as a metaphor for the struggle of humanity—of ‘good’ verses ‘evil’. The Midrash, Tanhuma, suggests that as the boys grew up, one went the way of life, and the other the way of death.

Rebecca’s experience is our own. The reality of life is that one is immersed in it; one must deal with life in all its richness, all it’s complexity—with the good and the bad as it is presented in ourselves and in others.

Midrash Rabbah - Genesis LXIII:6

• AND THE CHILDREN STRUGGLED TOGETHER WITHIN HER (XXV, 22). R. Johanan and Resh Lakish discussed this. R. Johanan said: Each ran to slay the other Resh Lakish said: Each annulled the laws of the other. R. Berekiah observed in R. Levi’s name: Do not think that only after issuing into the light of the world was he [Esau] antagonistic to him, but even while still in his mother’s womb his fist was stretched out against him: thus it is written, ‘The wicked stretch out their fists from the womb’ (Ps. LVIIX 4).

• AND THE CHILDREN STRUGGLED TOGETHER WITH IN HER. They sought to run within her. When she stood near synagogues or schools, Jacob struggled to come out; hence it is written, ‘Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee’ (Jer. I, 5). While when she passed idolatrous temples, Esau eagerly struggled to come out; hence it is written, ‘The wicked are estranged from the womb’ (Ps. LVIII, 4)

• AND SHE SAID: IF IT BE SO, WHEREFORE AM I THUS? R. Haggai said in R. Isaac’s name: This teaches that our mother Rebekah went about to women’s houses and asked them: ‘Did you suffer so much in your time? If the pain of children is so great, would that I had not become pregnant!’ R. Huna said: [She exclaimed]: ‘If I am to produce the twelve tribes only with such suffering, would that I had not conceived!’

Q. How does Rebecca encounter the “other side” of her life/personality. Do you think there is a difference between her and Isaac in this respect?
Both Rebecca and Isaac have a ‘dark side’, just as is portrayed of their sons. Consider the following statement from the Torah: “When the boys grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the outdoors; but Jacob was a mild man (tani) who stayed in camp. Isaac favored Esau because he had a taste for game; but Rebekah favoured Jacob.” (Gen 25:27-28)

What does this tell us about Rebecca and Isaac? Is there a parallel between their inner struggle as individuals and their joint struggle as parents of an emerging nation. Is their ‘favoring’ of their sons a reflection of the inner struggle that is also faced by the emerging nation Israel, indeed, of any community—a struggle for discernment of wills, the kind of constant conflict that all human communities face. Is this “good” vs “bad” conflict a reflection of the inner struggle between the human desire for self fulfillment that is in opposition to the designs of God?

In the face of Isaac’s ‘blindness’ we find Rebecca taking action. The action she takes insures that Jacob becomes the patriarch of Israel. Midrash does not enonrate her for her deception but it never condemns her completely either. There remains always the fact that the action she initiated changed what is seen as the potential ‘error’ that Isaac all but made.

Q. Do you find this interpretation of the essence of the Jacob and Esau's *in utero* struggle helpful? (As a metaphor for the inner conflict of our personalities?).

5. Dwelling by the “wells” of my life.

*Food for thought*

**Living my life in touch with my divine point:**
- Bringing about God’s will—how can I be sure I am right?
- Acting justly? Does the biblical story really intend that we should judge Rebecca by her deception or by her ultimate intention?
- If we see the characterization of Isaac and Esau as the interplay of good and bad within our own selves what then do Rebecca’s actions indicate of her interior state?
- God dwells within me. I have but to seek God’s presence for the well of living water within me to rise up. What strategies can I use to draw on the “living water” that is within my own self?
- Paying attention to the divine within (my Divine Spark) will guide my actions and ensure that God’s will is done—I can/will become “living water”.

58
Jacob
Searching for Identity

“Surely the LORD is present in this place, and I did not know it!

How awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of God, and that is the gateway to heaven.”

(Gen 28:16-17)
Jacob – Pathways towards Teshuvah (repentance)

We might say that in many ways Jacob’s life is a journey towards reconciliation. For Jacob the reconciling is between himself and his brother—his other side—Esau. The two children Jacob and Esau are twins—two children of one womb who are from the beginning estranged. They are one (i.e. from a single pregnancy), but two, they are inexplicably different but from the one source. Jacob’s estrangement with his brother increases to the point where he can no longer live with Esau and results in his flight to Haran. [Such a teaching from the life of Jacob is, of course, an allegorical one.]

Jacob’s life can be seen as a journey through, and out of, estrangement. His complicated story is resolved through his ‘finding’ of his true self in his relationship with God and his [Jacob’s] humanity and results in a ‘return’ to a form of unity (though not a perfect one, as history has shown – reconciliation is an ongoing process) with his brother.

Part 1  
Jacob – early years and the struggle for the blessing  
Our inner struggle

Part 2  
The journey away - to Haran  
Encounters with God

Q. How do you feel about this statement? The consequence of sin is alienation and flight. The solution to spiritual crisis is letting go of one’s own will and allowing God ‘in’.

Part 3  
God intervenes/breaks through when we are at our lowest.

Q. Can you share an experience of your own when, “Surely the LORD is present in this place, and I did not know it!”

Part 4  
Encountering God: Part of the process of ‘Return’

Q. Jacob spent 20 years in Haran. He married, raised children, became wealthy, experienced no major confrontations. What do you thing is happening to him during this period. Can you share any personal experiences of similar periods in your life? What happened to you before, during and after your “20 years in Haran”?

Q. Can you pin point the moments of change in Jacob’s life? Where is he spiritually, emotionally and physically in his life when he encounters major changes in himself and his relationships?

Part 5  
Teshuvah (Return)  
Jacob’s reconciliation with Esau occurs before he can complete his journey ‘back’. The reconciliation becomes necessary so that he can return.

Part 6  
New relationship with God

Q. How does Jacob’s story become a paradigm of hope for us.
Jacob – Pathways towards Teshuvah (return and repentance)

Part 1
Jacob – early years and the struggle for the blessing

Jacob’s early years are marked by struggle. He is born clutching the heel of his brother and his very naming marked his unremarkable personal character.

When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. The first one emerged red, like a hairy mantle all over; so they named him Esau. 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. (Gen 25:24-26)

c  Synonym of ‘Seir,’ play on Heb. se’ar ‘hair.’
d  Play on Heb. ‘aqev ‘heel.’

Jacob’s name means “heel”. He was born pursuing/following his brother. While Esau has a quite remarkable character (he is hairy, and his name means hairy) all we have of Jacob is the report that he followed.

When the boys grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the outdoors; but Jacob was a mild man who stayed in camp. Isaac favored Esau because he had a taste for game; but Rebekah favored Jacob. (Gen 25:27-28)

The story of Jacob’s life thereafter reveals his struggle for his own self image. He is very conscious of what he lacks and seeks it. Avivah Zornberg suggests, “There is a neutral quality about him; he defines himself as Esau’s shadow; he follows in his wake, his perspective filled with his brother’s legs.” (The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis, p 165)

“Jacob was a mild man who stayed in camp” The literal Hebrew is tam, meaning ‘simple’. Jacob was a simple/plain/undeveloped character. He “Stayed in camp” or “sat in tents”, the Hebrew allows both translations, suggests to some the notion that while Esau actively engaged with life, Jacob remained passive.

The Zohar says: Jacob “sits in tents” refers to the tents of Abraham and Isaac. There is a suggestion that he was born without a strong personal bent of his own. The story of his life is this search for his own identity.

While Esau is engaged with the world it seems that Jacob himself is very aware of his lack of completeness. He himself expresses his lack when his mother suggests that he present a meal to his father and claim for himself the blessing Isaac intends to give Esau for himself. His words underline the start contrast between himself and his brother. “But my brother Esau is a hairy man and I am smooth-skinned.” (Gen 27:11)

Midrash Rabbah (BR 65:15) infers that to be hairy is to become entangled with the world, in all its ways—to become contaminated with the sinful ways of the world. Hairiness makes it impossible to wipe sin away completely. Jacob, on the other hand
is smooth, symbolically his condition suggests a level of goodness, purity and detachment that can only be achieved by the innocent or one who does not contend with the world.

**Our inner struggle**

The story of Jacob and Esau can be seen as a metaphor for the struggle of good and evil in the world, and in particular the struggle of the inner self for balance.

Rabbi Tanchuma said: The two lads grew up; the one went by the way of life, and the other went by the way of death, as it is said, “And the boys grew, and Esau was a cunning hunter” (Gen. xxv. 27). Jacob went on the way of life, for he was dwelling in tents, and he studied the Torah all his days. Esau went on the way of death, because he slew Nimrod and his son Chavir, and he almost sought to kill Jacob his brother, as it is said, “The days of mourning for my father are at hand, and I will slay my brother Jacob”

43 According to the Targumim, in loc., the “tents” are the “academies.” See Jalkut, Gen., loc. cit.

44 The first editions read: “And Esau the wicked was going the way of death to slay our father Jacob, as it is said: ‘The days of mourning for my father are at hand; then will I slay...”

This struggle might be better understood if we were to see ourselves in all our complexity as humans created in the image and likeness of God. One way of understanding this notion that we are made “in the image and likeness” of God is to see in ourselves an ‘actual portion of God’. What makes us human and not God is the ‘human difference’. We humans are born with two inclinations – one that is good (called Yetzer HaTov) and its opposite (the Yetzer HaRah). While our task is to enlarge/develop our ‘God portion’, at the same time we have to pay attention to our human portion by paying attention to our two inclinations. This is the inner struggle that we know (we acknowledge it when we speak of our ‘freewill’). We can choose our human behaviour.

When we study the story of Jacob and Esau from this perspective we can see that the struggle (which they both have) is between the two human inclinations that they experience—the Yetzer HaTov (lit. the good) and the Yetzer HaRah (lit. the bad). Traditionally, Esau is depicted as one who allows the Yetzer HaRah to dominate while Jacob is afraid to live life because of the threat of it. Jacob’s problem might be seen as his struggle with evil. He cannot escape evil but he is afraid of it. The result is that he cannot engage with life completely. He is a half person.

"Yetzer hara is not necessarily evil, It has been called the selfish inclination, and yetzer hatov the selfless piece of us." (Jeffrey Salkin, “Being God’s Partner”) "If not for the evil impulse," says the midrash, "no one would build a house, marry, have children, nor engage in trade."

Hillel (a contemporary of Jesus) said, *If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But, if I am only for myself, what am I?* (Pirke Avot 1:14).
Part 2  

The journey away - to Haran

Spiritually, Jacob’s struggle with his brother leads him on the difficult path to self-knowledge. It is not an easy path. On the way he has to let go of his fears and become a little like Esau (while remaining Jacob) since his completeness can only be in the complex fullness of his human condition. At stake is his identity as tam (simple/sincere) against the more complex and risky identity that is less integrated within him but at the same time utterly essential.

How well does he achieve this?

There is no escaping the fact that Jacob’s struggle with his brother leads him into a deceitful and shameful mess. His story must be read as a moral as well as a spiritual one. Jacob sins in deceiving both his brother and his father. The consequences of his sin are that he has to distance himself from his brother, from his own self and his family.

Q. The consequence of sin is alienation and flight. The solution to spiritual crisis is letting go of one’s own will and allowing God ‘in’. How do you feel about this statement?

Part 3  

God intervenes/breaks through when we are at our lowest.

Jacob’s story becomes one of encounter with God. The biblical story is marked with Divine encounters from the point of his [Jacob’s] departure from his old life in Canaan. The first occurs almost immediately…

1st encounter:

10 Jacob left Beer-sheva, and set out for Haran. 11 He came upon a certain place and stopped there for the night, for the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of that place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. 12 He had a dream; a stairway was set on the ground and its top reached to the sky, and angels of God were going up and down on it. 13 And the LORD was standing beside him and He said, “I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac: the ground on which you are lying I will assign to you and to your offspring. 14 Your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you and your descendants. 15 Remember, I am with you: I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” 16 Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, ‘Surely the LORD is present in this place, and I did not know it!’ 17 Shaken, he said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of God, and that is the gateway to heaven.” (Gen 28:10-17)
The Midrash suggests that God deliberately ‘set Jacob up’ for this visitation. That Jacob himself did not initiate it.

Q. Can you share an experience of your own when, “Surely the LORD is present in this place, and I did not know it!”

The stone on the mouth of the well
Jacob resumed his journey and came to the land of the Easterners. 2There before his eyes was a well in the open. Three flocks of sheep were lying there beside it, for the flocks were watered from that well. The stone on the mouth of the well was large. 3When all the flocks were gathered there, the stone would be rolled from the mouth of the well and the sheep watered; then the stone would be put back in its place on the mouth of the well...Rachel came with her father’s flock; for she was a shepherdess. 10And when Jacob saw Rachel, the daughter of his uncle Laban, and the flock of his uncle Laban, Jacob went up and rolled the stone off the mouth of the well, and watered the flock of his uncle Laban. 11Then Jacob kissed Rachel, and broke into tears. (Gen 29:1-3, 10-11)

The stone on the mouth of the well was large.
The Sefat Emet sees the large stone as a stumbling stone. Our evil urge, our Yetzer haRah is to be found everywhere, even on the mouth of the well (the source of the divine presence and the Law). This stone prevents one from doing as the Yetzer HaTov, the inclination towards good, wants—for example: praying. Our Yetzer HaRah is the stone, a stumbling block.

There are times when our stumbling blocks are insurmountable and we need the intervention of Divine help to enable us to remove them. Thus is was that Jacob, when he saw Rachel approaching was able to remove the stone. “Then he kissed Rachel and burst into tears.”

He [Jacob] had been divinely endowed with supernatural strength on leaving the Holy Land. God had caused the dew of the resurrection to drop down upon him, and his physical strength was so great that even in a combat with the angels he was victorious. The fifth and last wonder of the day was that the water rose from the depths of the well to the very top, there was no need to draw it up, and there it remained all the twenty years that Jacob abode in Haran. (The Book of Legends)

The Midrash tells us:
Jacob’s journey of self discovery is littered with evidence that “Surely the LORD is present in this place, and I did not know it!” (Gen 28:17).
the field. The field, formerly associated with Esau as the man of the field, is now revealed as a place of the Divine presence.

Part 4

Encountering God: Part of the process of ‘Return’

Jacob’s 2nd Encounter

After years of exile in Haran, Jacob hears God’s voice: “Then the LORD said to Jacob, “Return to the land of your fathers where you were born, and I will be with you.” (Gen 31:3)

Q. Jacob spent 20 years in Haran. He married, raised children, became wealthy, experienced no major confrontations. What do you think is happening to him during this period. Can you share any personal experiences of similar periods in your life? What happened to you before, during and after your “20 years in Haran”?

3rd Encounter

Wrestling with God

23That same night he arose, and taking his two wives, his two maidservants, and his eleven children, he crossed the ford of the Jabbok. 24After taking them across the stream, he sent across all his possessions. 25Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. 26When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he wrenched Jacob’s hip at its socket, so that the socket of his hip was strained as he wrestled with him. 27Then he said, “Let me go, for dawn is breaking.” But he answered, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.” 28Said the other, “What is your name?” He replied, “Jacob.” 29Said he, “Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed.” 30Jacob asked, “Pray tell me your name.” But he said, “You must not ask my name!” And he took leave of him there. 31So Jacob named the place Peniel meaning, “I have seen a divine being face to face, yet my life has been preserved.” (Gen 32:23-31)

Jacob does not prevail against his adversary in this encounter but he leaves it a new person – he is given a new name, Israel.

Coming to terms with oneself

The Jacob story teaches us that when we are at our lowest, God is there. In fact, sometimes it seems we have to reach rock bottom before we become open to God’s presence.

The Jacob story also teaches us that sometimes we need to put a distance between ourselves and others before we are ready or able to meet in reconciliation, and that when we “return” God is present with us.
Q. Can you pin point the moments of change in Jacob’s life? Where is he spiritually, emotionally and physically in his life when he encounters major changes in himself and his relationships?

Part 5

Teshuvah (literally ‘return’). [The Hebrew word means to do repentance and reconciliation.]

Jacob’s return began the moment he left Canaan for Haran. The process was slow – many years passed before he could return to Canaan. The process demanded encounters with his past – i.e. reconciliation with his brother, Esau. Jacob’s night encounter/wrestle is sometimes seen as a struggle with Esau. ‘Return’ often requires that we encounter our dark side or that we pass through difficult steps. Darkness, however, is not necessarily a bad thing. [Many of Jacob’s encounters with God occur in the dark.]

For Jacob reconciliation with Esau is painful. First, he must overcome his fear; secondly, Jacob finds it necessary to bow down before his brother.

Looking up, Jacob saw Esau coming, accompanied by four hundred men. He divided the children among Leah, Rachel, and the two maids, putting the maids and their children first, Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph last. He himself went on ahead and bowed low to the ground seven times until he was near his brother. Esau ran to greet him. He embraced him and, falling on his neck, he kissed him; and they wept. (Gen 33:1-4)

Jacob’s reconciliation with Esau occurs before he can complete his journey ‘back’. Reconciliation becomes necessary so that he can return.

The Jewish holy season (The Days of Awe), that begins on Rosh Hashanah and culminates ten days later on Yom Kippur (The Day of Atonement), is marked with efforts to seek reconciliation with people one has sinned against. This is a time of open and honest self examination and acknowledgement of wrong-doing. The process is not completed without one doing everything possible to put right one’s relationship with one’s brother of sister. Only then can one stand before God on Yom Kippur.

The service of Yom Kippur repeatedly emphasises that God gives pardon for those sins committed between the person and God and not for those committed against others. The wrong doer must first seek to be reconciled and with others before standing before God. Therefore one should also offer forgiveness whole heartedly to those who beg forgiveness of you.

Jesus says:

22 But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. 23 So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister
has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. (Mt. 5:22-24)

Part 6

**New relationship with God**

After reconciliation comes a new beginning. Significantly, after the mysterious night encounter at the River Jabbok we have the emergence of **day**: “And a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn.” (Gen 32:25)

While God is present in darkness, and necessarily so since this often a time of deep personal encounter, God is also ‘enabled’, as it were, because of that darkness. Our growth toward spiritual maturity depends upon those deep personal encounters that result from our broken relationships and internal struggles—those dark periods of our lives.

Q. How does Jacob’s story become a paradigm of hope for us.
Rachel

Rachel was shapely and beautiful. Jacob loved Rachel

When Rachel saw that she had borne Jacob no children, she became envious of her sister; and Rachel said to Jacob, “Give me children, or I shall die.”

Leah

Leah had weak eyes

When Leah grew to maidenhood, and inquired about her future husband, all her tidings spoke of his villainous character, and she wept over her fate until her eyelashes dropped from their lids.

(Ginzberg, The Book of Legends)
Rachel and Leah – Searching for Meaning in My Life

Part 1.
Rachel and Leah – sisters
These sisters are an image of myself.
I am beautiful; I have weak eyes. Seeing myself as others see me.
Q. Does another’s image of me shape my life? How do I respond?

Part 2
Barrenness
My self image affects the way I relate to others and to God.
The difference between ‘life’ and ‘death’.
Q. My barrenness cripples me. Discuss this statement with reference to Rachel’s life and your own.

Part 3
Turning Points
Rejection
Desperation.
Submission.

Part 4
God’s faithfulness and my doubt
A telling story: Leah and Rachel name their children.
Q. Discuss. The way we react to God’s blessing is shaped by our own experience.

Part 5
Redemption
God’s mercy saves me.

Part 6
Thoughts to take away.
Rachel and Leah – Searching for Meaning in My Life

The Story of Rachel and Leah is both a human one and a spiritual one. On one level it is the tale of human suffering according to the circumstances of life as we find it, or it ‘happens’ to us, and on the other it is the story of our interior relationship with God.

In many ways the story of Jacob and Esau is be taken up again in the lives of Jacob’s wives – sisters, Leah and Rachel. This biblical ‘repetition’ is necessary because it underlines the important fact that in every generation, in every person, there is a struggle for self-understanding. What is my relationship with others, with my human circumstances and the world. What is my relationship with that which is beyond, and so often unknowable, to which I am drawn. What is my relationship with God; what draws me to God; how do I satisfy my spiritual thirst?

Living with the life we are given is not always an easy path.

*Our lives are defined by others:*
Rachel – Jacob’s chosen one; the one he loved
Leah – the one imposed upon Jacob; the unloved one.

*Our lives are defined by our human condition:*
Rachel was barren – her lack of fertility was her greatest sorrow.
Leah was fertile – her loveless life her burden.

*Our lives are defined by our own self-perception:*
Rachel: She has ‘all of the world’ (husband, love, beauty), but she is *barren*
Leah: She has ‘none of this world’s gifts’ (she is unloved, she is not a notable beauty, has a reluctant husband) but she is *fruitful*.

God chooses/calls us to a life not always of our own choosing. With the benefit of hindsight the tradition sees Leah and Rachel as destined to be the mothers of the twelve tribes. Their lives are seen as part of God’s plan for the whole world. But, that is the analysis of hindsight. For the sisters themselves their lives are lived in all the realities that human life presents – its joys, its sorrows, its fullness and its emptiness. With the benefit of hindsight the tradition raises both Rachel and Leah on high – despite the imbalance of their lives they are vindicated. God’s purpose is achieved.

*In Rabbinical Literature:* Rachel and Leah were twin sisters, fourteen years old when Jacob came to their father’s house; consequently they were twenty-one years old at the time of their marriage to Jacob (Seder ‘Olam Rabbah ii.). The terms “elder” and “younger,” applied respectively to Leah and Rachel (Gen. xxix. 16), are explained by the Rabbis as referring to the divine gifts bestowed upon their descendants; for while royalty and the priesthood remained permanently with Leah’s descendants, they were held only temporarily by Rachel’s—royalty with Joseph and Saul, and the priesthood with the tabernacle of Shiloh (Gen. R. lxx. 15). In other respects the two sisters were alike, both being ancestresses of kings, heroes, prophets, judges, and conquerors (*ib.* lxx. 14; Tan., Vayetze, 13).
Part 1.

Rachel and Leah – sisters

Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older one was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah had weak eyes; Rachel was shapely and beautiful. Jacob loved Rachel; so he answered, “I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.” Laban said, “Better that I give her to you than that I should give her to an outsider. Stay with me.” So Jacob served seven years for Rachel and they seemed to him but a few days because of his love for her. (Gen 29:16-20)

These sisters are an image of myself.

Rachel says: People tell me I am ‘beautiful’ but inside I know the truth.

Leah says: People see that my life is fulfilled in many ways but they never know the inner pain.

Q. Does another’s image of me shape my life? How do I respond?
If I am Rachel this midrash (below) will lift me up – if I am Leah I am crushed.

**Midrash Rabbah - Genesis LXX:17**

BUT RACHEL WAS OF BEAUTIFUL FORM. AND JACOB LOVED RACHEL, etc. (XXIX, 18). Said he to him: ‘Knowing that the people of your town are deceivers, I make my demands absolutely clear.’ Thus: AND HE SAID: I WILL SERVE THEE SEVEN YEARS FOR RACHEL THY YOUNGER DAUGHTER (ib.). FOR RACHEL, not for Leah; THY DAUGHTER-thou art not to bring some other woman from the market place named Rachel; YOUNGER-thou art not to exchange their names. But even if you fix a wicked man in a carpenter's vice, it will avail you nought. AND LABAN SAID: IT IS BETTER THAT I GIVE HER TO THEE... AND JACOB SERVED SEVEN YEARS FOR RACHEL; AND THEY SEEMED UNTO HIM BUT A FEW DAYS

We are told she is beautiful and Jacob loved her. “Rachel was shapely and beautiful. Jacob loved Rachel.” (29:17-18)

Yet she declares her life is not worth living. ‘When Rachel saw that she had borne Jacob no children, she became envious of her sister; and Rachel said to Jacob, “Give me children, or I shall die.”’ (30:1)

**Part 2**

**Barrenness**

**Rachel:**

Rachel’s struggle with her sister is not over Jacob but her jealousy of her sister. When Rachel saw that she had borne Jacob no children, she became envious of her sister; and Rachel said to Jacob, “Give me children, or I shall die.” Jacob was incensed at Rachel, and said, “Can I take the place of God, who has denied you fruit of the womb?” (30:1-2)

Most of the Rabbis … declare that Rachel was not envious of her sister’s fertility, but of her righteousness; she thought that if Leah had not been a better woman than she, she would not have had children. (J.E.)

**Jacob was incensed at Rachel, and said, “Can I take the place of God, who has denied you fruit of the womb?”** (30:2)

Commentators have long been puzzled by Jacob’s reaction – his anger towards Rachel. Rashi (C11) suggests the plain sense of the text is that although Rachel asked Jacob to give her children, in reality she is asking him to pray on her behalf, otherwise she would kill herself from suffering. When Jacob chastised her she learned to approach God herself.

Another view: It is inconceivable that Jacob could not have prayed on behalf of his beloved wife. Therefore, we must conclude that his prayers had not been answered. When Rebecca upbraided him for not praying for her as his father prayed for Rebecca he concluded that God had heeded Isaac’s prayer because Isaac was a righteous man and God had promised him seed. In the case of Rebecca he was angry because it was the seed of her womb that had been withheld and not his Jacob’s. The
implication is that Rachel was not righteous; her barrenness was her own fault, and her attitude to prayer is wrong. One cannot force God to do what one wants. Rachel’s approach to prayer shows that she miss-comprehends the real situation between herself and God. One cannot force God to do anything. Indeed, one must thank God for misfortune as well as the good.

Ramban (Nachmanides C11) says Rachel was wrong to desire to mould the will of God through prayer (or that she should try to force a righteous man to pray for her, and so cause God to do her will).

Radok has this to say:
Jacob was angry with her for attributing powers to him rather than to God to whom alone is the power and the might, even that “the barren might give birth to seven.” She had said, “Give me children”. But if she had merely asked him to intercede for her she would have been justified and he would not have become angry.

The difference between ‘life’ and ‘death’.
The following midrash from Akedat Yitzhak helps to clarify Rachel’s “barrenness”.

"The two names 'woman' (isha) and 'Eve' indicate two purposes. The first teaches that woman was taken from man, stressing that like him a woman may understand and advance in the intellectual and moral field just as did the matriarchs and many righteous women and prophetesses and as the literal meaning of Proverbs 31 about “the woman of worth” (eshet chayil) indicates. The second is indicated by the name Eve - the mother of all living. A woman deprived of the power of childbearing and rearing children will be deprived of the secondary purpose and be left with the ability to do evil and good like the man who is barren. Of both the barren man and the barren woman Isaiah (56:5) states: “I have given them in my house and in My walls a name that is better than sons and daughters,” since the offspring of the righteous is certainly good deeds (see Rashi on Gen 6:9). Jacob was therefore angry with Rachel when she said, “Give me children or else I will die” in order to reprimand her and make her understand this all-important principle that she is not dead as far as their joint purpose in life because she is childless, just the same as it would be, in his case, if he would have been childless."

Jacob’s anger is here explained as being directed at Rachel’s forgetting the true and chief purpose of her existence which is no different from that of her partner, the man’s. By seeing her whole world transcribed by her “secondary purpose” for living, without which he life is not worth living, i.e. “I will die”, Rachel’s preoccupation with her childlessness is “a repudiation of her function, a flight from her destiny and purpose, shirking the duties imposed on her, not in virtue of her being a woman, but in virtue of her being a human being.” (Nehama Leibowitz, Studies in Bereshit, [Genesis])

Q. My barrenness cripples me. Discuss this statement with reference to Rachel’s life and your own.
Leah
Compared to Rachel, Leah has a different approach to her problems. She is more self possessed; the tradition sees her as in touch with her spiritual side. She has learned, because she is not blessed with the “riches” of this world, to turn to God.

According to legend Laban’s two daughters were destined to be married to the twin sons of Rebecca. Leah prayed to God that she would not have to live with an evil man.

When Leah grew to maidenhood, and inquired about her future husband, all her tidings spoke of his villainous character, and she wept over her fate until her eyelashes dropped from their lids. (Ginzberg, The Book of Legends p.283)

The Midrash comments:
While Rachel, the favoured one of Jacob, seems to receive all the sympathy and “good press” in the bible and tradition, Leah is presented as a deceiver and usurper of her sister’s place and happiness. There is another side to her story.

Midrash Rabbah - Genesis LXXI:2
Thus it is written, AND THE LORD SAW THAT LEAH WAS HATED, etc. AND THE LORD SAW THAT LEAH WAS HATED. She was bespoken for an enemy, for such was the arrangement, that the elder son [Esau] should marry the elder daughter [Leah], and the younger son [Jacob] the younger daughter [Rachel], but she wept and prayed, ‘May it be Thy will that I do not fall to the lot of the wicked Esau.’ R. Huna said: Great is prayer, that it annulled the decree; moreover she took precedence of her sister. [Another interpretation]: All hated [i.e. abused] her: sea-travellers abused her, land-travellers abused her, and even the women behind the beams abused her, saying: ‘This Leah leads a double life: she pretends to be righteous, yet is not so, for if she were righteous, would she have deceived her sister!’ R. Judah b. R. Simon and R. Hanan said in the name of R. Samuel b. R. Isaac: When the Patriarch Jacob saw how Leah deceived him by pretending to be her sister, he determined to divorce her. But as soon as the Holy One, blessed be He, visited her with children he exclaimed, ‘Shall I divorce the mother of these children! Eventually he gave thanks for her, as it says, And Israel bowed down [in thanksgiving] for the bed’s head (Gen. XLVII, 31): who was the head of our father Jacob’s bed? surely Leah.4

Let Leah speak for herself against Jacob’s accusation of deceit:

When the bride was led into the nuptial chamber, the guests extinguished all the candles, much to Jacob’s amazement. But their explanation satisfied him. “Thinkest thou,” they said, “we have as little sense of decency as thy countrymen?” Jacob therefore did not discover the deception practiced upon him until morning. During the night Leah responded whenever he called Rachel, for which he reproached her bitterly when daylight came. “O thou deceiver, daughter of a deceiver, why didst thou answer me when I called Rachel’s name?” “Is there a teacher without a pupil?” asked Leah, in return. “I but profited by thy instruction. When thy father called thee Esau, didst thou not say, Here am I?” (Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews, p.284)
Leah’s life is not easy – she bears physical scars as a witness to her suffering. She survives because of God’s compassion.

**Midrash Rabbah - Genesis LXX:16**

AND LEAH’S EYES WERE WEAK-RAKKOTH (XXIX, 17). R. Johanan’s amora translated this before him: And Leah’s eyes were [naturally] weak. Said he to him: Your mother’s eyes were weak! But what does ‘rakkoth’ mean? That they had grown weak through weeping, for [people used to say]: This was the arrangement; the elder daughter [Leah] is for the elder son [Esau], and the younger daughter [Rachel] for the younger son [Jacob],’ while she used to weep and pray, ‘May it be Thy will that I do not fall to the lot of that wicked man.’ R. Huna said: Great is prayer, that it annulled the decree.\(^5\) and she even took precedence of her sister.

(5) i.e. her natural destiny.

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**Part 3**

**Turning Points**

**Rejection**

The turning point for Rachel comes when she is rejected (in her plea/demand for understanding) by Jacob.

When Rachel saw that she had borne Jacob no children, she became envious of her sister; and Rachel said to Jacob, “Give me children, or I shall die.” Jacob was incensed at Rachel, and said, “Can I take the place of God, who has denied you fruit of the womb?” She said, “Here is my maid Bilhah. Consort with her, that she may bear on my knees and that through her I too may have children.” So she gave him her maid Bilhah as concubine, and Jacob cohabited with her. Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a son.

Now God remembered Rachel; God heeded her and opened her womb. She conceived and bore a son, and said, “God has taken away my disgrace.” So she named him Joseph, which is to say, “May the LORD add another son for me.” (Gen 30:1-5,22-24)

Rachel insisted that Jacob pray to God for children, arguing that his father, Isaac, had done so (comp. Gen. xxv. 21). Jacob objecting on the ground that his father had one wife only, while he himself had two, and that though one of them was childless, he had children by the other. She urged him to follow Abraham’s example, and to take her handmaid for a wife. According to the “Sefer ha-Yashar”, Rachel herself prayed God to give her children, and God finally answered her prayer. (J.E.)

**Desperation**

Rachel resorts to surrogacy like Sarah before her before she finally bears children of her own. [A child by her maid is seen as a child of her own.]

She said, “Here is my maid Bilhah. Consort with her, that she may bear on my knees and that through her I too may have children.” So she gave him her maid Bilhah as concubine, and Jacob cohabited with her. Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a son.
Submission

Rachel’s situation is as difficult as her sister’s. While she is the love of Jacob’s life she cannot be fulfilled in it. She is Jacob’s chosen one but all she feels is despair. The loved sister is not so loved in her own eyes. Her father cheats her; she is barren. She must bargain with her sister for aphrodisiacs. (Mandrakes) This is a story of submission – out of it comes redemption:

Now God remembered Rachel; God heeded her and opened her womb. She conceived and bore a son, and said, “God has taken away my disgrace.” So she named him Joseph, which is to say, “May the LORD add another son for me.” (Gen 30:22-24)

Part 4

God’s faithfulness and my doubt

In the naming of their children Rachel and Leah reflect their relationship with God.

Being Leah is not easy. Her life is fruitful but each successive birth seems but a struggle to attain/earn the status of a loved wife. Her children’s names reflect her hope.

Rabbi Levi said: The Holy One, blessed be He, saw the sorrow of Leah, and He gave her power to conceive, (bringing) consolation to her soul; and she bare a male child, goodly in appearance, and wise; and she said: See ye a son which the Holy One, blessed be He, has given me, as it is said, “And Leah conceived, and bare a son, and she called his name Reuben; for she said, Because the Lord hath looked upon my affliction” (ibid. 32). Therefore he [she] called his name Reuben.

Rachel perspective is quite different to that of her sister. Is there a change in her ‘attitude’ between the births of her sons? (Ben Oni is often translated to mean Son of my suffering. Oni can also mean ‘poor’. - Unleavened bread is called Lechem Oni – ie bread of Affliction or poverty – physical poverty is a metaphor for spiritual poverty).

Now God remembered Rachel; God heeded her and opened her womb. She conceived and bore a son, and said, “God has taken away my disgrace.” So she named him Joseph, which is to say, “May the LORD add another son for me.” (Gen 30:22-24)

Rachel was in childbirth, and she had hard labor. When her labor was at its hardest, the midwife said to her, “Have no fear, for it is another boy for you.” But as she breathed her last—for she was dying—she named him Ben-oni but his father called him Benjamin. (Gen 35:16-18)

Q. Discuss. The way we react to God’s blessing is shaped by our own experience.
God’s mercy saves me.

Despite her struggles Rachel triumphs in religious history. She is considered a “soul mother” of the Jewish people. From a barren woman she is the one who “weeps for her children” in exile. She has become a sign of hope for “her children” —both Leah’s and her own.

Thus said the LORD:
A cry is heard in Ramah—
Wailing, bitter weeping—
Rachel weeping for her children.
She refuses to be comforted
For her children, who are gone.
Thus said the LORD:
Restrain your voice from weeping,
Your eyes from shedding tears;
For there is a reward for your labor
—declares the LORD:
They shall return from the enemy’s land.
And there is hope for your future
—declares the LORD:
Your children shall return to their country. (Jer 31:15)

Leah rises above the confines of her anonymity to become not only a mother of many tribes but one who becomes an interceder for her sister. Unloved herself, she loves.

A delightful Medieval Midrash presents the compassionate side of the family of Jacob:

Now all the wives of Jacob, Leah, Rachel, Zilpah, and Bilhah, united their prayers with the prayer of Jacob, and together they besought God to remove the curse of Barreness from Rachel. On New Year’s Day, the day when God sits in judgement upon the inhabitants of the earth, God remembered Rachel and granted her a son. (Midrash HaGadol)

Reconciling lives
Rachel and Leah each have what the other wants. Each must live in the same household. There is not “going away” or “distancing” from conflict for these two. They must and do resolve their differences—they become reconciled. Leah, recognizing her sister’s poverty trades her mandrakes for a night with Jacob. The result is pregnancy for Rachel.

Once, at the time of the wheat harvest, Reuben came upon some mandrakes in the field and brought them to his mother Leah. Rachel said to Leah, “Please give me some of your son’s mandrakes.” But she said to her, “Was it not
enough for you to take away my husband, that you would also take my son’s
mandrakes?” Rachel replied, “I promise, he shall lie with you tonight, in return
for your son’s mandrakes.” When Jacob came home from the field in the
evening, Leah went out to meet him and said, “You are to sleep with me, for I
have hired you with my son’s mandrakes.” And he lay with her that night.
(30:14-16)

Now God remembered Rachel; God heeded her and opened her womb. She
conceived and bore a son, and said, “God has taken away my disgrace.” So she
named him Joseph, which is to say, “May the LORD add another son for me.”
(30:22-24)

Part 6

Thoughts to take away.

Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso suggests that what Rachel sees “reflected in Leah’s soul
are the unloved parts of herself. We don’t read of Rachel as the unloved one. Yet her
father offers her older sister to her beloved Jacob, callous to the feelings of his
youngest daughter. God has presumably blessed Rachel with beauty. She was ‘of
beautiful form and fair to look upon’ (Gen 20:17). Yet God does not bless her with
the children for whom she yearns. She can claim neither her father’s love nor God’s.
Her anger, her jealousy of Leah, is self hatred for the love she cannot find in herself.
And Leah is fearful of recognising that the barren Rachel is not only her sister, but
indeed herself. The fullness of her womb does not compensate for the emptiness of
her life.” (‘Wrestling on the Other Side of the River’ in The Woman’s Torah
Commentary, [Jewish Lights: Vermont: 2000])

The two sisters reconcile their differences.
The children of Esau and Jacob are enemies – the children of Rachel and Leah are not.
Each of the sisters has a place in the matriarchal line of Israel. It is Rachel who prays
to God for the return of the children of Israel from exile—a prayer she continues to
pray today.

Rachel’s prayer
If I, a creature of flesh and blood, formed of dust and ashes, was not envious of
my rival and did not expose her to shame and contempt, why should you,
Ruler who lives eternally and are merciful, be jealous of idolatry and exile my
children? Forthwith the mercy of the holy one, was stirred, and God said, “For
your sake, Rachel, I will restore Israel to their place. (Midrash Rabbah)
In the naming of their children Leah and Rachel reflect their inner relationship with God and the world

**Leah**

**Reuben.** “Her first son she named, “Reuben” ["look a son"], for she said, ‘It is because the Lord has seen my misery. Surely my husband will love me now”’. (Gen 29:32)

**Simeon.** “Her second son she named Simeon ["hearing"], because the LORD heard that I am not loved, he gave me this one too” (Gen 29:33).

**Levi.** Her third son she named Levi ["attachment"]; "Again she conceived, and when she gave birth to a son she said, 'Now at last my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons'" (Gen 29:34).

**Judah.** Leah bore a forth son, Judah ["praise"] as she turned towards the Lord

**Rachel**

**Dan.** Bilhah conceived, (Gen 30:4-7) - she bore a son, whom Rachel named Dan ["justice"] (Gen 30:6). "Then Rachel said, 'God has vindicated me; He has listened to my plea and given me a son".

**Naphtali.** She bore another son, whom Rachel named Naphtali ["wrestling"] (Gen 30:7,8). Then Rachel said, 'I have had a great struggle with my sister, and I have won.'

**Leah**

**Gad.** Leah's maid, Zilpah, bore children to Leah: Zilpah conceived (Gen 30:9-13) "Leah's servant Zilpah bore Jacob a son. Then Leah said, 'What good fortune! So she named him Gad.'” (Gen 30:10,11).

**Asher.** “Leah's servant Zilpah bore Jacob a second son. Then Leah said, 'How happy I am! The women will call me happy.' So she named him Asher.”

**Issachar.** Leah resumed bearing: ( Gen 30:17-21). "God listened to Leah, and she became pregnant and bore Jacob a fifth son. Then Leah said, 'God has rewarded me for giving my maidservant to my husband.' So she named him Issachar."

**Zebulun.** "Leah conceived again and bore Jacob a sixth son. Then Leah said, 'God has presented me with a precious gift. This time my husband will treat me with honor, because I have borne him six sons.' So she named him Zebulun."

**Dinah.** "Some time later she gave birth to a daughter and named her Dinah." GEN 30:22-24

**Rachel**

**Joseph.** "Then God remembered Rachel; he listened to her and opened her womb. She became pregnant and gave birth to a son and said, 'God has taken away my disgrace.' She named him Joseph, and said, 'May the LORD add to me another son.'" (Gen 30:22-24)

**Ben-oni (Benjamin).** “Rachel was in childbirth, and she had hard labor. When her labor was at its hardest, the midwife said to her, ‘Have no fear, for it is another boy for you.’ But as she breathed her last—for she was dying—she named him Ben-oni but his father called him Benjamin.” (Gen 35:16-18)
“It is a Tree of Life to all who hold fast to It” (Prov. 3:18)
“It is a Tree of Life to all who hold fast to It” (Prov. 3:18)