

Camels and Consummation (Hayyei Sarah)

By Joy Ladin

Recently I went on my first date. Not just my first date as a woman. My first date ever. I went to an alternative high school, at which dating was considered – well, dated. We preferred hanging out, doing drugs and having sex, a combination we called “relationships.” A few months after graduating, I became involved with the girl I would be with for the next two-and-a-half decades. The closest I’ve come to dating is getting a babysitter so my ex-wife and I could have an evening alone together.

I know so little about the way members of our species find mates that I find the Bronze Age narrative we read today (*Parashat Hayyei Sarah*) educational. After burying his wife Sarah, the aged Abraham summons his servant Eliezer and makes him swear to leave Canaan and return to Abraham’s homeland to find a wife for his son Isaac:

Then the servant took ten camels of his master’s camels and set out with all the bounty of his master in his hand and made his way to *Aram Naharaim* to the city of Nahor. He made the camels kneel down outside the city towards a well of water at evening time, the time when the women who draw come out. And he said, “Hashem, God of my master Abraham, may You so arrange it for me this day that You do kindness with my master Abraham. Behold, I am standing by the spring of water and the daughters of the townsmen come out to draw water. Let it be that the maiden to whom I shall say, ‘Please tip over your jug so I may drink,’ and who replies, ‘Drink, and I will even water your camels,’ her will you have designated for Your servant, for Isaac; and may I know through her that You have done kindness with my master. (Gen. 24:10-14)

Eliezer doesn’t pray for God to send Isaac a wife with good looks, high fertility, or an easy disposition; he makes no request for a non-smoking vegan who loves iguanas, contra dancing and black-and-white movies; and since he knows that the only Jews in the world are in Abraham’s household, there’s no point in praying for a woman who’s Jewish. He asks for a woman whose heart will be so moved by the sight of a thirsty traveler and thirstier animals that she will fill and haul jar after jar of water until they are comfortable.

Eliezer presumably chose camel-watering as a sign of Divine approval of a mate for Isaac because it went so far beyond the code of hospitality that it could be motivated only by *hesed*, loving-kindness to a stranger and to animals. Given how much camels drink after a long journey



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through desert – one commentator estimates that Eliezer’s ten camels would have drunk around 140 gallons – watering a caravan-worth is roughly comparable to filling a swimming pool with a bucket. That not only takes kindness; it takes the strength, determination and independence necessary to turn kindness into action.

Rebecca is there to draw water for her household, an arduous job in itself that entails many long, hot walks between house and well; her responsibilities don’t include watering the camels of every guy with a caravan. Rebecca’s kindness to Eliezer means that her own family has to wait for the water they, too, need. She’s willing to risk her family’s anger in order to fulfill her own ideas about the proper treatment of strangers and animals.

Since Eliezer will soon ask her to leave her family and journey with him to an unknown husband and life, the independence Rebecca shows in watering his camels is a crucial quality. When Abraham charged him with finding a spouse for Isaac, Eliezer “said to [Abraham]: ‘Perhaps the woman shall not wish to follow me to this land...’” (Gen. 24:5) Many young girls – for most women, marriage was a teenage life-passage – wouldn’t want to leave their families, their entire ways of life, for a man they’d never seen and a future they couldn’t imagine. Rebecca did.

Her family tries to slow down the marital process. “Her brother and mother said, ‘Let the maiden remain with us a year or ten [months]; then she will go.’” (Gen. 24:55) Eliezer doesn’t want to wait, and so they turn to Rebecca: “They called Rebecca and said to her, ‘Will you go with this man?’ And she said, ‘I will go.’” (Gen. 24:58) She’s not only willing to go into the unknown; despite the understandable misgivings and sentiments of her family, she’s ready to go right now.

Most of us probably don’t think of the Torah as modeling independence as a female virtue, but Rebecca’s independence of family and cultural norms is an essential aspect of what makes her Matriarch material. The independence that sends her swaying across the desert on camelback with Eliezer will, many years later, enable her to buck not only Isaac’s will but every tenet of cultural morality by encouraging her younger son Jacob to steal the blessing his blind, aged father had reserved for his older brother Esau. A conventional woman, a meek woman, a dependent woman, a family-defined woman, would never have done such a thing – and would have allowed Esau to become the bearer of the Divine blessing that the Torah portrays as the fructifying spark of Jewish peoplehood.

It’s almost tempting to to revise my listing on LDate to read, “Transwoman seeks partner for mutual camel-watering...” Though camel-watering is not a very romantic an activity, I suspect some of us would be willing to trade “chemistry” for a sign from God that the person sending us a wink across the internet or sipping cappuccino across the table is the life-partner we’ve been praying for. And though I’m not advocating updated versions of the prayer that Eliezer offers –



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“Please God, may the person who says, ‘Can I buy you a drink, and buy drinks for all your friends, and fill up your SUV with gas,’ be the one for me” – I do believe that prayer can clarify confusing passages in our lives. Lives are shaped by what we look for in them, and prayer can help us see through the flurry of longings and despairs and recognize and articulate what we truly want and need. Eliezer’s prayer is so potent because it articulates what he really wants – not success in itself, or praise for doing such a good job, or a speedy conclusion to a lonely and tedious chore, but God’s “kindness for my master Abraham.” Actually, Eliezer probably did want success and praise and to get back home, but as he spoke to God, he saw through those superficial desires to the pure impulse behind them. What he wanted – what he really wanted – was to be a vessel of God’s “kindness,” a link in the chain that tethers the always-drifting Earth to purposes rooted in Heaven. And because Eliezer purified his intention through the articulation of his desire, not only were the practical aspects of his prayer granted – he found the right wife for Isaac – but Rebecca’s kindness to his camels was transfigured into a visible, public sign of God’s kindness toward, and involvement with, humanity.

Whether or not we pray for Divine intervention, every successful long-term relationship represents a miracle, a fact that our tradition recognizes in a *midrash* that answers the question, “What has God been doing since creating Heaven and Earth?” by saying, “Making marriages.” According to this story, bringing the right people together across all the barriers of sentiment and circumstance is a full-time job, even for God. If you think about how hard it is to hook up a single friend or relative – not to mention ourselves – with an ideal partner, and multiply that by the four billion or so human beings who now occupy this planet, you can imagine the logistical headache this would pose for God. It’s not just a matter of setting up people who are attracted to or are even in love with each other. As someone who literally grew up with my partner – I was 17 when we got together, and 45 when I began transitioning – I know that the person you fall in love with is not the person you are living with five, ten, fifteen, twenty years down the road. My wife and I both grew and changed over the years – and so the element of chance that makes arranged marriage seem, from a modern perspective, like a bizarre gamble, surfaced in our relationship too. We had to keep re-meeting, re-choosing, re-committing to each other. My wife and I weren’t strangers when we married, but there were many times when we became strangers to one another. Our relationship only survived because our hearts were willing to beat in sympathy with one another across the distance that had opened between us.

Rebecca’s kindness to a stranger and his ten thirsty camels, her willingness to feel for and with those utterly different from herself, is the seed from which such miracles grow.

One of the obstacles to reading Torah – even the juicy narrative parts – from a twenty-first century perspective is that the Torah radically diminishes the significance of individual human life. Characters appear and disappear in a sentence or a paragraph; even the most prominent,



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like Abraham, tend to be gone after a couple of chapters. And those sentences and paragraphs and chapters omit most of what we think of as the essence of an individual life, the constellation of sufferings, struggles, rages, failures, loves, and so on that define us. This *parshah*, for example, is named “Hayyei Sarah,” the life of Sarah. But all the *parshah* says about that life is how many years it contained (127) and where it ended (“*Kiriat-arba*, now Hebron”). Even Eliezer, who is the subject of almost an entire chapter, comes out of nowhere and vanishes the moment his errand is completed. His life, and Sarah’s, and even Abraham’s and Isaac’s, are not portrayed as important in themselves; they are means to an end: making God visible in and through the human world. No one life, no one generation, is sufficient for this process; in the Torah, God becomes visible through accretion, and the narrative strips away every aspect of life that doesn’t contribute to this visibility.

But as depressing as the Torah’s God’s-eye perspective on human life can be, the very silences that perspective entails suggest what was then a radical notion: that individual lives are determined neither by culture, nor by clan, nor by destiny, but by individual choice and action. The narrative terseness that pares individuals lives down to nearly nothing also gives individuals a radical freedom to transform themselves – and it is in that freedom that God becomes visible.

In the five books of Moses, no one – not Abraham, not even Moses himself – is identified from birth as being destined for a particular role. Abraham one day hears God’s voice telling him to leave everything he knows and go to a land he’s never seen – and he goes. Moses, a prince-turned-fugitive who is now an eighty-year-old shepherd in the boondocks of Moab, enters into conversation with a burning bush and walks away a prophet and savior. Rebecca is moved by the sight of a thirsty stranger and ten thirsty camels, and turns herself into one of the mothers of the Jewish people. The Torah doesn’t tell us that God softened Rebecca’s heart, or told her to water those camels; the prayer is fulfilled, the Jewish future established, and God is made visible, because Rebecca has the strength of heart and hand to be true to her kindness, and the courage and independence to turn her back, as Abraham does, on her old life and head into the unknown. And while Abraham at least had the voice of God – albeit a God no one had heard of before – telling him what he should do and offering him rewards if he did it, Rebecca was lead into the loneliness and danger of an unknown future by nothing but her own determination to live. That makes her not only a mother of the Jewish people, but a mother of all of us whose insistence on being who we are leads us into lives that may baffle and enrage those around us. And it makes the Torah a book that, despite its archaism, sexism, and trans-, homo- and xenophobia, summons us, each of us, to make God visible in the world by doing whatever it takes to become who we are. And this week’s *parshah* even seems to suggest that by journeying through the desert of becoming, we will can find the love and companionship we need to fulfill the purposes for which we are created.



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