Rebekah's prayer

"She went to inquire of the LORD, and the LORD answered her…" (Genesis 25:22-23, JPS).

Pregnant with two sons who are already warring within her womb, Rebekah goes "to inquire of the Lord", regarding her distressing pregnancy.

There is something about her inquiry that catches our attention and causes us to pause, to question and to 'dig deeper' into the sacred text. In one sense Rebekah's inquiry is consistent with her story and personality; and yet there is something else about it that appears inconsistent or odd. Can you pick it? (Read the verse in the context of 25:19-26, and bring to bear your wider knowledge of Genesis, too.)

First, the consistency. Rebekah approaches the Lord in manner that is direct, confident and forthright. She is not a timid woman. This fits with the initial picture we have of her, when Abraham's servant first encounters her at the well in Chapter 24. There, Rebekah is physically and socially proactive, reaching out hospitably and moving "quickly" (24:18,20) to draw water for her visitor and his camels. Likewise, she seems to have no hesitation in being proactive in approaching the Lord to seek answers regarding her difficult pregnancy.

And the inconsistency? This arises when we read verse 21: "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" (Genesis 25:21).

Why did Rebekah not approach the Lord directly when she was in the distressing situation of not being able to conceive? Instead, we are told that it was Isaac who approached the Lord "on behalf of his wife" (suggesting that she was present at the time). Why did Rebekah not pray herself? Especially about something of such direct and intimate concern to herself? Think about this question. Ponder the sacred text (Genesis 25:19-26), before reading on.

One reply could be to argue that in fact Rebekah *was* praying along with Isaac. After all, the text does not specify that she did *not* plead with the Lord; it simply doesn't say that she did. Still, we are left with the question: why is Isaac the only one mentioned here?

Step back two verses, to a clue found in verse 19:

> "This is the story of Isaac, son of Abraham. Abraham begot Isaac" (25:19)

The Jewish sages are quick to point out what appears to be a superfluous repetition. We are told that Isaac is the son of Abraham, so why the addition of "Abraham begot Isaac"? Repetition in the text is a signal to delve more deeply, according to Jewish interpretative methods.

Notice the sequence here: the emphasis on Abraham's paternity in relation to Isaac (v.19), followed by reference to Isaac's marriage to Rebekah (v.20), followed by Isaac pleading with the Lord that his wife might conceive (v.21).

It makes sense when we remember that the story of Genesis is not simply about a human family, but a family called to live in a special relationship, "covenant", with God, and that God's promise to Abraham is to be passed down through his descendants, from parent to child. Verses 19-21 highlight this, through the emphasis on Abraham begetting Isaac (v.19), through the expectation raised as Isaac takes Rebekah as his wife (v.20), and then by depicting Isaac's concern that the Abrahamic covenant be passed on through his own children via his ardent prayer ('pleading' with the Lord) that his wife will conceive (v.21).

In this light, we can hear Rebekah's exclamation ("Why do I exist?") and her subsequent inquiry to God (v.22) as the next step in the sequence about covenantal relations. Rebekah is aware of her own active role in the covenant. She is a pregnant woman experiencing pain, yes, but she is also a woman who is searching out the depths of her role, now that she has married into this unusual, extraordinary family that believes itself to be called by the Creator of the universe into a unique relationship with a purpose: to bear God's name to the world so as to be a blessing for all the families of the earth. Note how the Lord recognises her awareness by answering in a similar tone (v.23), offering an explanation regarding the future relations between two sons, "two nations", whose lives will profoundly impact the world into which they are born.

What can we take from all this? Perhaps a deeper appreciation of our own capacity to be history-makers and meaning-makers, especially through the sacred task of being co-creators with God in bringing children into the world.

Think about it: Each time a child is conceived and born, the world is never quite the same ever again. Something shifts forever, certainly in the lives of the child's parents and siblings, but also in the wider human story, so enmeshed are each of us in a web of social relations. Every newborn child alters history, simply by being born! History shifts, too, in view of the immense possibilities that lie ahead for a newborn child, the potential to leave their mark on the world. In this sense, every parent is profoundly engaged in history and meaning-making.

Today's Torah portion draws us to reflect on these deeply human vocational realities. In a special way, it holds meaning for those parents who are consciously aware of being part of a people in covenant with God, where each child is a sign of the continuation of that covenant. They are partners with God in shaping not only history, but salvation history. They are bearers of hope in the redemptive presence and action of God in our midst.

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Bibliography: Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss, eds., *The Torah. A Women's Commentary* (New York: URJ Press and WRJ, 2008); *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989); Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation* (Maggid Books and The Orthodox Union, 2009); Scripture: JPS