

An Ancient Love Story

How do you choose a spouse in marriage? What qualities do you seek? What virtues do you hope and pray for your children to find in their husband or wife?

One source of wisdom on this matter is chapter 24 of Genesis. This may come as a surprise to many Catholic parishioners. But it is no surprise to our Jewish counterparts who are familiar with interpretative traditions that have been milking the Hebrew Scriptures for spiritual insight even before Christianity came to be. Let's explore a little of this traditional wisdom passed down through millennia of biblical reflection.

In Genesis 24 we have the story of Abraham's quest to find a wife for his son Isaac. With heartfelt instructions Abraham sends his most trusted servant to the land of his birth. There, at a well, the servant approaches his match-making task with a surprising strategy. Surveying the scene where women gather at the well, he prays:

"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" (Genesis 24:14).

Are you uncomfortable with this match-making strategy? Some rabbinic commentators also harbour reservations! Yet others draw positive lessons from this ancient text. The servant's prayer (the first instance of spontaneous, personal prayer that appears in the Bible) gives rise to a character test. His search for Isaac's wife prioritizes not external beauty and good family connections, but inner qualities of virtue. Really, he is testing for the prized virtue of hospitality to strangers, a quality boldly celebrated by the Talmud where it says, "Hospitality to wayfarers is greater than welcoming the Divine Presence" [Shab.127a].

How does Rebekah fare in this test of character? Look closely at the text. The sages

ponder the details that describe Rebekah's actions. She has to 'lower' her jar (presumably a heavy jar sitting on her shoulder). She responds 'quickly' to his request and runs to the well after offering (without needing to be asked) to draw water for his camels. The text tells us that she 'went down' and 'came up' from the spring, so presumably it was some distance. She does this multiple times in order to slake the thirst of 'all his camels'—and verse 10 tells us there are ten of them! Further, the text explicitly states that she draws water until the camels have finished drinking. Have you ever watered a camel after a desert trek? I am told it takes 25 gallons (94 litres)! Why all this detail? Through a spirited, creative process of reflection, the sages conclude that Rebekah is exceedingly energetic in deeds of loving kindness, hospitable to strangers and compassionate to all living creatures. Are not these attractive qualities in a potential spouse?

Of course, there is more to the story of Rebekah and Isaac's love story. Genesis 24 begins shortly after the death of Sarah (Isaac's mother) and closes with Rebekah entering Sarah's tent to be with Isaac. In reading this ancient narrative I find myself remembering the day my grandfather died. That same day his twentieth great-grandchild was born into our family. The circle of life... it is beautiful, natural, insistent, and the ordinary way by which God speaks to us. The Hebrew scriptures are full of 'earthy' accounts of life and death, courtship and marriage, pregnancy and birth, family loving and feuding... Through stories like these, God's word addresses us in the depths of our humanity, in our familial joys and struggles. •

Bibliography: Frankl, *The Five Books of Miriam* (New York, 1998); JPS *Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia, 1989); Leibowitz, *Studies in Bereshit* (New York: Lambda); Schorsch, *Canon Without Closure* (New York, 2007). Scripture: JPS.

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