

MOTHER OF NATIONS

ויתרצחו הבנים בקרבה ותאמר אם כן למה זה אני ותלך לדרוש את ה'.
"THE CHILDREN MOVED ABOUT AGAINST EACH OTHER WITHIN HER; SHE SAID: 'IF SO, WHY AM I THUS?' — SHE WENT TO INQUIRE OF GOD."

(Genesis 25:22)

The drama of Rivkah's pregnancy, her inquiry of God, and His reply combine to form a prognostication of historic significance, which we must analyze accordingly.

When Rivkah begins to suffer unusual pregnancy pains, she asks, "If so, why am I thus?" The phrase itself is extremely vague, and so is its point. Rashi interprets this question to mean: Why was I so anxious to become pregnant and have children?¹ Ramban, in an interpretation much more related to the text, explains the question as: Why am I alive?² For if Rivkah cannot to bear children, then her life is meaningless and worthless. This explanation appears somewhat simpler, yet it also leaves much of the purpose of the question outside the text itself.

It should further be noted that, before the description of this pregnancy, Rivkah's genealogy is recorded once again. The text relates that she comes from Aram and is the daughter of Bethuel and the sister of Lavan of Aram.³ According to Rashi, this repetition of Rivkah's family tree indicates her character: She retained her righteousness although her sur-

rounding influences were hardly favorable to someone of such personality. One supposes that since this is the beginning of the story of Yitzchak and his family, his wife's character and background could very well deserve repetition.

When Rivkah finally questions the prophet, she receives a fairly long answer: "Two nations are in your womb...and one will be stronger than the other, and the elder will serve the younger."⁴ The explanation for her unusual pains should simply have been that she was carrying twins. Amazingly, this is not even mentioned in the reply. In fact, it may not even have been suggested. For at the time of birth, the text uses the expression "and behold, there were twins,"⁵ which suggests the surprise of novelty. Instead of this simple explanation of Rivkah's pains, she is treated to a rather lengthy description of a historic drama relating to the distant future.

Commenting on the phrase "*shnei goyim* — two nations," Rashi quotes the Midrash, which, on the basis of a strange spelling of the word "nations," suggests that this term alludes to two great men, Antoninus and Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi, who always had radish on their tables.⁶ This somewhat odd translation seems to belittle an otherwise historic phrase.

To capture the flavor of this incident and recognize the full historic proportions of the prophecy, one must reinterpret — in the simplest terms — the fundamental question that moved Rivkah to turn to the prophet for Divine instruction. After all, not every personal problem of the patriarchs was presented in this manner for Divine guidance and a prophetic answer.

Many episodes in the lives of the patriarchs can be understood in a new light if one bears in mind that they all knew of the original covenant between God and Avraham. Though Divine promises of the land and a multitude of children constitute the essence of this covenant, perhaps it was also known prophetically that the family would take the form of twelve tribes, as suggested by Midrashic literature and

classic commentaries.⁷ Many of the patriarchs' actions, observations, and decisions were prompted and guided by Avraham's covenantal legacy — it colored their thinking, directed their reasoning, and influenced them in a variety of ways.

Bearing this in mind, Rivkah's reaction is only natural: As Yitzchak's wife, she is a link in his family's chain, producing offspring who will continue Avraham's lineage in fulfillment of the Divine promise. Thus, when her pregnancy proves unusually difficult and dangerous for her and her offspring, her question becomes very simple: "Why was I chosen?"⁸

Yitzchak must have children as per God's promise. This way, the covenant will begin to unfold upon the stage of history. But why has she been chosen as his wife? What can she contribute? What does she have to offer within the dynamics of the covenant? The most important and elementary contribution she should be making — childbearing — entails such difficulties that she begins to feel perhaps Yitzchak would have done better with another wife. It appears to me that "Why was I chosen?" is by far the simplest translation of Rivkah's query.

A question of this nature, which probes the meaning of a personality within the covenantal framework, deserves some prophetic reply. And that response is particularly fascinating. What is revealed to Rivkah is the substance of the historic drama, with all the interplay that will spell the accomplishment of the covenant. Essentially, the covenant is predicated on two themes: the existence of God and the primacy of *chessed*. These are the two fundamental teachings of Avraham and the two key elements in the spiritual structure of his family.

Rashi's comment about Antoninus and Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi and their tables is neither outlandish nor out of context. A rabbi's table demonstrates his *chessed*. To go to great lengths to provide necessities and even luxuries for guests and the needy at any given time is merely a manifes-

tation of *chessed*. Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi represents Torah and *chessed*: The wisdom of God and the practice of kindness were the two motivating forces in his life.

To actualize the covenant by fulfilling it is not at all simple. It is a process of both triumphs and frustrations, a continual struggle. In a self-centered society, the principle of *chessed* must constantly be defended. In a secular society, the existence of God must be continuously upheld. And with the development of technology and the growing sophistication of society, the struggle becomes all the more difficult.

All of this is presented to Rivkah symbolically in the prophecy of two nations struggling with each other, each seeking dominion, with the final triumph reserved for the younger. She is then told that the historical realization of the covenant involves a struggle for *chessed* and for the acceptance of the existence of God.

Remarkably, this is indeed the proper response to the problem with which Rivkah is grappling. She has been trying to find her own place within this context, to understand her position within this drama, and it is clarified for her in no uncertain terms.

Rivkah herself was apparently a product of this struggle. Her own faith in God and her own *chessed* withstood this contest. She came from a society that was far removed from the principles of *chessed* and the principles of Avraham. Hers was a home of idolatry and self-centered cunning, the antithesis of *chessed*. Her family could hardly have encouraged her faith or her acts of kindness. Young as she was, she must have experienced the very struggle that was to be the major component in the historic mission of Israel. The text deliberately presents Rivkah's genealogy, and Rashi very beautifully notes her struggle against the environmental influences of this family background. Rashi thus underlines the meaning of the Divine response to Rivkah's search for her own identity and place in Avraham's household.

Rivkah's conflicts and triumph over her environment are a projection of the future. For she plants the seeds of meaningful contest and successful struggle for God and *chessed*.

This is the answer to the question "Why have I been chosen?"

1. Rashi, Gen. 25:22.
2. Ramban, Gen. 25:22.
3. Gen. 25:20.
4. Ibid. 25:23.
5. Ibid. 25:24.
6. Rashi, Gen. 25:23.
7. For instance, see Rashi, Gen. 29:34.
8. Sforno, Gen. 25:22, touches on this.