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Empathy and Imagination

by Tammy Jacobowitz

As far as biblical plots go, Rebekah's inability to conceive is hardly out of the ordinary. Her mother-in-law, Sarah, and her daughter-in-law, Rachel, share the same fate. In fact, so many prominent biblical women suffer from barrenness that the rabbis of the Midrash ask, "why are our righteous foremothers akarat?"

What separates Rebekah from the group is the brevity of her condition, her swift transition to motherhood. Or at least that's how the Bible makes it seem. The whole of the account of Rebecca's want of children all the way through the onset of her pregnancy is contained in one short verse, Genesis 25:21. "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." Before we have the chance to absorb the news that Isaac's bride cannot have children, we are confronted with the image of her full belly, and its struggle to keep the peace between warring twins.

How did Rebekah escape the deep, prolonged pain of Sarah, who insisted that Avraham marry her maidservant, Hagar, out of desperate impatience? What transpired in the course of that short verse which spared Rebekah the existential crisis of Rachel, who called out to her husband, "Give me children, or I shall die"? (30.1)

The key to Rebekah's good fortune, it seems, gets lost in the English translation. When the verse says that Isaac "pleaded with the LORD," the Hebrew word is Vayetar. Unlike more common expressions for prayer, this word bears the sense of lengthy, impassioned prayer. This kind of prayer, suggests the Midrash, meets God like a pitchfork, an atar, overturning fossilized decrees.

The power of Isaac's plea is underscored by the appearance of the same root, atar, to describe God's swift response. Vayetar...Vayai'ater lo. As if to say, just as Isaac put down his siddur, God was already setting the wheels of redemption in motion. No time had passed at all; Isaac had penetrated the heart of the matter. The divine response echoes –

literally – Isaac's passion and compassion. And Rebekah was redeemed.

The efficacy of Isaac's prayer is all the more astounding considering his goal, that is, to unleash Rebekah's barrenness. How did he pray on her behalf? How was Isaac able to represent Rebekah's pain, to assume responsibility for her condition, to pray with her voice? To do so would be an outstanding act of empathy, of the deepest, most intimate variety.

We shouldn't be so surprised by Isaac's empathy for Rebekah. By linguistic standards, theirs is the first love story in the Bible. After their dramatic meeting on the road -- when she sees him and he sees camels -- Isaac brings Rebekah into the tent of his mother, Sarah, and marries her. And then, remarkably, the text shares with us Isaac's feelings, "Isaac loved her, and thus found comfort after his mother's death". Against all odds, against the backdrop of Isaac's trauma at the Akedah and their blind entry into marriage, Isaac and Rebekah find love in their union.

Paraphrasing a midrash in Genesis Rabbah, Rashi provides us with a poignant image of this love. When Isaac prayed "on behalf of his wife", he did not pray alone. He stood in one corner and prayed, while Rebekah stood in another corner and prayed. Both prayed for a child to come from their exclusive union. Stationed across the room from each other, they prayed simultaneously, giving voice to their deepest desires and fears, and the imagined feelings of the other.

This type of prayer elicits immediate divine response. A prayer which reflects empathy and human understanding, urgency and tears. A prayer which reaches in and reaches out, that is capable of bridging the divide which separates human beings, and the wide chasm between us and God.

Perhaps this is the most critical lesson we can draw from Genesis 25:21: empathy and imagination are the core of relationships, both human and divine.

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Orthodox Rabbi seeks Pluralistic Partners

by Rabbi Yosef Kanefsky

A window has opened to the Orthodox community inviting us to share in reshaping the social dynamics of the American Jewish community. We in the Orthodox community need to recognize this opportunity for what it is, and then to act with courage and vision to understand the important changes that have occurred over the last decades, and to re-think the way we engage the broader Jewish community.

Never before in the history of Judaism in the United States, has there been openness to Orthodoxy, as sincere and real as the one we see today. I am not referring to the openness of individual Jews to embrace Orthodoxy. For many practical and philosophical reasons, this group will always be relatively small. I am referring rather to the openness of non-Orthodox and inter-denominational institutions to hearing and learning from the experiences and insights of their Orthodox brethren.

To wit, numerous hallmarks of Orthodox life have been adopted by other movements. Conservative and Reform Day schools are growing in number and size. We are seeing broad adoption of the more participatory and Hasidic worship-style. Non-Orthodox women's groups have discovered mikveh use as a form of spirituality, and the new hip name for adult education institute outside of Orthodoxy is Kollel.

This phenomenon presents the Orthodox community with an unprecedented opportunity to engage with and contribute to the wider community in far-reaching and significant ways. But it is one that we can seize only if we can move beyond our traditional parameters regulating inter-denominational contact – parameters that have outlived their purpose and usefulness.

Today, Orthodox rabbis have practically disappeared from inter-denominational boards of rabbis. In some communities, the Orthodox Rabbinical Council actually forbids its members from joining inter-denominational boards. Inter-denominational study groups or even social action groups are practically unheard of. The vast majority of Orthodox synagogues would never consider having a joint Simhat Torah celebration, Shavuot night learning program, or a Tisha B'av ceremony with a non-Orthodox congregation.

The primary reason for the reticence about interdenominational involvements is a 1956 declaration signed by a dozen of outstanding Orthodox luminaries, including Rabbi Moses Feinstein, prohibiting membership in inter-denominational groups. In 1954, even Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik strongly discouraged Orthodox rabbis from pursuing matters of "spiritual religious interest" with non-Orthodox rabbis.

But, it is at the peril of American Judaism, that we ignore the vital and fundamental differences between the 1950's and today. The concern that drove the rulings of 50 years ago is no longer relevant. The 1950's and 60's were years of enormous struggle for American Orthodoxy, as children of Orthodox parents continued to leave Orthodox life in great numbers and the culture militated hard against Orthodox Jews retaining their traditional observance. The attraction of Conservative and Reform Judaism was very great.

An ideological battle (Rabbi Soloveitchik's term) with the future of Orthodoxy at stake, was being waged against non-Orthodox movements. In this context, one can readily understand how any activity or association that implied Orthodoxy's recognition of Conservative or Reform rabbis as colleagues and peers would signal to the Orthodox community that all denominational options are equally acceptable, thus undermining the Orthodox struggle for continuity. In Rabbi Soloveitchik's words, "Too much harmony and peace can cause confusion of the minds, and will erase outwardly the boundaries between Orthodoxy and other movements." Today, however, the Orthodox community has become a stable, indeed growing presence, successfully retaining its youth. The ideological battle is, for all intents and purposes, over.

Additionally, in the 1950's intermarriage was statistically negligible. Today, standing as it does near 50%, intermarriage is the greatest threat to the Jewish community. Indifference toward one's Jewish identity, the frequent precursor of intermarriage, is widespread among America's Jews, as is evidenced in the paltry rates of synagogue affiliation that turn up in study after study.

Thus, even as denominational lines continue to exist within the Jewish community, the only line that is thick and red, is the one that divides those who are ignore rising Jewish apathy and those ready to combat Jewish apathy. Anyone willing to fight for Jewish survival is a de facto ally.

Several years ago, I joined with non-Orthodox colleagues in creating a retreat program for our synagogues' teenagers. One retreat was dedicated to the theme of inter-dating and inter-marriage. The discussions were passionate and serious. The openness to share and listen was breathtaking. The impact of the Orthodox teens on their peers was palpable. All it took was the courage to engage. The window is open. And this invitation may represent our last best chance to effectively counter the trends that have been eroding both the quality and quantity of Jewish religious life in the US.

The only question facing us is whether we help each other through the sharing of resources, ideas, and comradeship, or hobble through withholding spiritual capital in the name of an ideological battle that effectively ended a generation ago.

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