



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Chayei Sarah 5774

By Adina Gerver
October 26, 2013

When read with modern sensibilities, *Bereshit* 24 is a traditional tale about a man who travels to a far-off land to find a woman to marry his master's son. Imagine that you are that woman, going about your daily chores when a strange man approaches you. He gazes at you for a bit,¹ and finding you to be a beautiful virgin,² inquires as to your family lineage.³ Then he meets with your father and brother, who, seeing the many gifts that the servant has bestowed upon you and them, say without hesitation, "Take her and go, and let her be a wife to your master's son."⁴

This is the scene that unfolds in *Bereshit* 24—a traditional story, but with a surprising twist: Rebecca's father, Bethuel, and brother, Laban, recant, and say "Let us call the girl and ask for her reply."⁵ This verse is extraneous to the story and does not change the narrative at all, since Rebecca immediately agrees to go. What is it doing here? The Rabbis might have simply dismissed this as a stalling tactic since this verse appears in the context of the servant's desire to take Rebecca with him immediately and her family's desire that he tarry. Instead, Rashi makes a bold move and writes that from this specific phrase about a specific woman, we learn a general principle: a woman cannot be married against her will in Jewish law.⁶ Thus, Rebecca is carried to a far off land to marry Isaac, but with an express consent that impacts all Jewish women: "I will go."⁷

This story, which seems at first to solely treat women as silent property to be exchanged at will, is made slightly less disturbing by the important inclusion of Rebecca's consent. Her voice matters at this moment, and Rashi amplifies it to make sure it is heard in future generations. He takes this tiny gap in the patriarchy-clad story and opens it up further, making women's voices relevant to *halachah* as a whole.

This incident leaves a small, open space for Rebecca to be an active player in the decisions about her own life, one the Rabbis expanded to create greater change—and we can follow their lead. We must find the places where gender roles are cracking, where women's voices are beginning to be heard, and wedge into those openings to create the chance for a stronger voice with wider resonance. We can find small elements of hope in patriarchal societies and expand upon them to make sustainable, systemic change.

Across the globe, when women in traditional societies are given the chance to be heard—on matters of their own health, the financial well-being of their families, or, more broadly, the democratic process—women, men and children flourish. When women are not allowed to be active decision makers in their own lives and in the lives of their families, they founder.

¹ Bereshit 24:21.

² Bereshit 24:16.

³ Bereshit 24:23.

⁴ Bereshit 24:51.

⁵ Bereshit 24:57.

⁶ Rashi on Bereshit 24:57, based on Bereshit Rabbah 70:12.

⁷ Bereshit 24:58.

Grassroots organizations around the world are working to widen the space for women created by Rebecca. The Afghan Women's Resource Center (AWRC) finds small gaps in patriarchy and, in those gaps, offers courses in literacy, health, women's rights and micro enterprise.⁸ USOFOORAL ESUPAN in Senegal found a gap, and in it runs a sustainable gardening project that will provide income for 60 women and youth.⁹ The Center for Domestic Violence Prevention (CEDOVIP) in Uganda finds space for change at the grassroots level, and in that space, is mobilizing communities to change attitudes and behaviors that perpetuate domestic violence.¹⁰ American Jewish World Service supports each of these projects and many others that try to change the world for the better through women's empowerment.

These organizations give women—if not Rebecca, then Farhat, Ramatulai, and Nabulungi—voices, and provide opportunities through which they can begin to defeat problems that might otherwise be overwhelming. Rather than turning away from an entire society in resignation, they find the places where women can speak and they work to expand those spaces from the inside, much as Rashi did with *Bereshit* 24:57. And so must we each listen for openings and wedge into those cracks the fight for women's empowerment.



Adina Gerver, a freelance writer and editor, is studying at the Advanced Scholars Program of the Pardes Institute in Jerusalem. She has served as assistant director of the Skirball Center for Adult Jewish Learning and program officer at the Covenant Foundation. Adina enjoys writing about Jewish legal texts, mental health and prayer, gender as a lens for exploring religious and ethnic identities, and the intersection between urban living, environmentalism and physical health. She has a B.A. in History and Women's Studies from Harvard University, and has studied at the Drisha Institute, Midreshet Lindenbaum and Yeshivat Hadar. Adina can be reached at adina@adinagerver.com.

This week's Dvar Tzedek was originally published in 2008.

⁸ American Jewish World Service. Accessed October 13, 2008. http://ajws.org/where_we_work/asia/afghanistan/afghan_womens_resource_center_awrc.html.

⁹ American Jewish World Service. Accessed October 13, 2008. http://ajws.org/where_we_work/africa/senegal/usofooral_esupan.html.

¹⁰ American Jewish World Service. Accessed October 13, 2008. http://ajws.org/where_we_work/africa/uganda/center_for_domestic_violence_prevention_cedovip.html.

©2013 American Jewish World Service

To subscribe to this publication, please visit www.ajws.org/dvartzedek.

AJWS is committed to a pluralistic view of Judaism and honors the broadest spectrum of interpretation of our texts and traditions. The statements made and views expressed in this commentary are solely the responsibility of the author.

45 West 36th Street, New York, NY 10018 • t 212.792.2900 • f 212.792.2930 • e ajws@ajws.org • www.ajws.org