

The Beginning of Desire



Reflections on Genesis



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of connection fuses at the end of his life. In Rashi's words, "He was afraid to bless" (25:11): he comes to his own form of vital anguish, the modality of Isaac enters his soul, brings them together at the moment when Abraham must hold back blessing from his son.

Isaac comforted after his mother

If we follow Isaac into the world after Sarah's death, we can detect the veiled structure of a drama that begins with that death and ends with Isaac's marriage and Abraham's remarriage and death, leaving his son unblest. The whole Parsha (23:1-25:18), a single Torah reading, is titled, "The life of Sarah." The irony of such a naming is only too apparent. For, in reality, the subject of the section is the question of Sarah's life. The statement of the text—the serene, noncommittal numbering of her years—is undermined by the midrashic comment on the cause of her death. Rashi himself reinforces the paradox: on the one hand, all her years were "equal in goodness"; on the other, she dies of "*kime'at shelo*." The question of Sarah's life is Isaac's legacy: only he can unravel it, though he cannot answer it.

Rashi says, on the intense ending of Isaac's marriage quest—"Isaac brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he took Rebecca as his wife. Isaac loved her, and thus found comfort after his mother's death." (24:67)—"It is human nature that as long as a man's mother is still alive [*kayyemet*], he is involved (entangled) with her; when she dies, he comforts himself in his wife."

Rashi is pointing a spotlight here on the issue of Isaac's entanglement with his mother's life, her very *kinyum*, the problem of her existence. The existential anguish of her last moment, which, in one intuition of *kime'at shelo*, retroactively confirms the contingency of a life and emerges in a strangled wail—this is what Isaac is involved with. He is caught up in the vertigo of her being. For Isaac, to be comforted is to free himself of this fascination with his mother's pain, and to turn to his own life. Rashi often explains the word, *nehama*, comfort or regret, as *ma'abava aheret*, "a different thought."⁴⁰ The notion is that comfort and regret both imply a shift in paradigms, allowing new questions, new anomalies, to remove one from old preoccupations. In his reading, therefore, Isaac is freed from his preoccupation with his mother's life; he is freed, essentially, for new thoughts, a new way of thinking his existence.

Isaac turns to his wife, to new dialectical struggles, "after" his mother. In his relation with Rebecca, he finds a way of remembering Sarah; of rearticulating the parts of his knowledge of her. The angst of her death is healed in a relation in which Rebecca is both like and unlike his mother. The Oedipal perception that Rashi clearly states ("It is human nature") gains tragic resonance from the death theme.

According to one midrashic source, at least, Sarah has been dead three years, when Isaac marries Rebecca, and what he needs comfort for is not simply the fact of her death:

Three years Isaac mourned for his mother. Every time he entered her tent, and saw it in darkness [dimmed], he would tear his hair. But when he married Rebecca, and brought her into the tent, the light returned to its place. "And Isaac brought her into the *obel* [the tent]: *obel* means "light," as it is said, "Till the moon will no longer shine" [Job 25:5]. He was comforted and [lit.] saw it as though his mother were still in existence. That is why it says: "Isaac was comforted after his mother."⁴¹

The implicit understanding behind the midrash is that Isaac does, in reality, suffer a kind of death at the Akedah. His mother dies, and with her the light of her tent. In an astonishing fusion of images, the tent of her intimate life becomes the energy that affirms life. Light, claims the midrash, is by definition the meaning of *obel* (tent). To have left one's tent in darkness is to deny the value of being. The anguish of Isaac's reaction, as he enters the condition of his mother's life, expresses a desperate involvement in the wailing of her end. With Rebecca's coming, the energy of hope returns, because he now can see his mother's life as though she really had her Being. Through the prism of his relation with Rebecca, his mother's existence, her *kinyum*, becomes vital again.

The Akedah: the tragic residue

The healing relation with Rebecca, who is and is not Sarah,⁴² contains elements that go much beyond the universal Oedipal model. For she comes to resolve a complex tangle of dilemmas. In an obvious sense, as she runs back and forth at the well, eagerly providing for the needs of the servant and the camels, she resembles Abraham welcoming his angel-guests⁴³—impatient, energetic, overflowing with love (*hesed*). For an Isaac, withdrawn, haunted by the shadows in his mother's tent, she will

re-voke the hopeful involvement of an Abraham, connecting, integrating, generating life. But the need of Abraham's family for Rebecca goes much further than that.

The servant prays for success in his mission, thanks God when success seems imminent. But the motif-word that recurs rather strangely in his prayers is the word, *hesed* (love): "Act in *hesed* with my master, Abraham" (24:12). "Through her, I shall know that You have acted in *hesed* with my master." (24:14). "Blessed be the Lord God of my master, Abraham, who has not abandoned His *hesed* and His truth from my master" (24:27) (my translation).

The importance of what Rebecca will mean to the family is intimated here. For there is, after all, a tragic residue of the Akedah in Abraham's family. The darkening of Sarah's light is one manifestation. But even in Abraham's case—what can it have meant to him to undergo the test, and then simply, silently, to have Isaac restored to him? It is surely significant that the call on Moriah, to refrain from sacrifice, comes from an "angel of God," not from God Himself. God says not a word to Abraham after the command to sacrifice his son. He restores his son, but Abraham never knows the reason for his experience.

This is the inadequacy of *hesed* to human desire. In this mode of *hesed*, in a world where God is silent, the *status quo* is apparently preserved.⁴⁴ Nothing is illuminated by this *hesed*; God's role, His relation to human action, reward, punishment—all the theological mysteries remain intact.⁴⁵

Moreover, the real problem is human recognition of *hesed* as *hesed*. Implicit in the servant's prayers is the need to see a manifest indication of God's *hesed* to Abraham. His main criterion for the rightness of Rebecca's election is that he will sense *in her* the *hesed* that, since the Akedah, has been lacking from his master's experience. He prays to know, by means of her rightness, that *hesed* is being done to his master;⁴⁶ not merely that God should be so kind as to make it happen that the girl he speaks to is the right one. The *hesed* he asks for, in other words, is not a means, but an end in itself.

Rebecca represents that essential *hesed* of which *Midrash Rabbah* says: "'Act in *hesed* to my master': You began something—finish it! Everyone is needy of *hesed*, even Abraham, for whose sake *hesed* charges the world, even he is needy of *hesed*—as it is said, 'Act in *hesed* to my master, Abraham'—You began something—finish it!'"⁴⁷

The paradox of *hesed* is that it is gratuitous, free of necessity. It is given at God's will, so that even Abraham cannot demand it as a right. But without it, everything fails. The servant speaks of neediness; the knowledge of God's love is the energy that empowers even an Abraham to see coherence in his life. "You began something—finish it!" Implicitly, the servant begs, challenges: Do not withdraw that vital vision from my master—though it is Your right, yet *hesed* has a law of its own. To begin a gift commits the giver to a new necessity of giving.

Abandonment and ingathering

Listening intently to the text, one can detect the tone of renewed hope, the undertow of despair confronted, in the servant's gratitude: "Blessed be the Lord God. . . who has not abandoned His *hesed* from my master" (24:27). *Azav* is the word for both "abandonment" and "binding together," "consolidation."⁴⁸ André Neher writes: "Abandonment and ingathering belong together, not because of the compensating healing effect of the passage of time, but through the inner dialectic of their inseparable relationship."⁴⁹

Seeds have been scattered, all seemed fallen apart; but in the disintegration, the servant now recognizes not only the denegation of *lo azav* (He has not abandoned), but the harmonic of affirmation, the promise of a new equilibrium, a new *emet* to be initiated by Rebecca's entry into Abraham's world. It is as though the metabolic balance of the family is now to be readjusted.

Pivoting points

The kabbalah characterizes Jacob, born of the new balance, as *emet*—perfect equilibrium, consolidation of extreme modalities, at a point where the center will hold. In reality, and in terms of the contingencies of the narrative, this *emet* is mediated by intense moments of *kime'at sbelo*, by the "all but" sense of risk and accident that had proved fatal to Sarah.

There are two such moments. The first is when the servant silently observes Rebecca's lavishly enacted *hesed*. On one level, this moment is a full corroboration of God's design, a literal replay of the test-scenario the servant had scripted. Even on this level, however, since Rebecca's words