

the sake of that same God, followed her husband upon his lonely road in the midst of the rest of mankind. Not without good cause do our Sages comment on the Scriptural passage *וַאֲחֵי הַנַּפְשׁ אֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ בְּהָרִן* "and the souls whom they had made in Haran" (Genesis 12,5) that, while Abraham had won souls for God from among the men, Sarah had done the same work among the women. True to God's directive, *לֵךְ לְךָ* "Go for yourself," go on your own, isolated path, Abraham and Sarah moved into the desolate southern region of Palestine, far from the communal life of the cities. The sacrifice this entailed seems implied in the use of the *hiphil* form of the verb in *וַיַּעֲתֵק מִשָּׁם הַהָרָה*, telling how Abraham first set out for the mountains (ibid. 12,8). The form used is not the *kal*, "he moved on," but the *hiphil*, "he gave orders to move on." Abraham had to wield his authority in order to get the members of his household to move from the hospitable locality of Shechem and the grove of Moreh. And when Abraham settled in the mountains, we are told *וַיִּטֵּן אֹהֶלָהּ*, "and he pitched *her* tent," not *אֹהֶלוֹ*, "his tent." The Sages take due note of the fact that Abraham pitched Sarah's tent before pitching his own. His first concern was always for Sarah. But then Sarah's tent was also the tent of Abraham; *אֹהֶלָהּ*, the tent of Abraham was actually the tent of Sarah, *אֹהֶלָהּ*. She was the essential spirit of the home. Such delicate etymological and orthographic nuances are probably found only in the speech and spelling of our Holy Tongue. It is these fine nuances that reflect the spirit of the Hebrew language and of Judaism.

Mother Sarah was beautiful. As our Sages put it in their interpretation of her Scriptural obituary, Sarah was as beautiful at the age of twenty as she had been at the age of seven, and as innocent at the age of one hundred as she had been when she was twenty. We have already pointed out in another essay\* the contrast between the time-honored view of our Sages and the notions of our own modern age on this subject. We usually say of a woman that she is as innocent as a child and as beautiful as a young girl. Our Sages, on the other hand, saw the ideal of beauty not in girlhood but in childhood, before the little one's pure, angelic features could be marred by the cruel paintbrush of passion. They looked for the ideal of womanly virtue in the maiden whose mind had already matured but whose heart was still young enough to be capable of enthusiasm for everything noble, great and sublime. Alas for the era that equates innocence with simplemindedness, and therefore

\* "Beauty and Long Life," p. 137 in this volume. (Ed.)

expects to find innocence only in children and can find no other praise for youth except beauty!

Mother Sarah was beautiful but she did not know it. She did not even think that she was beautiful, as we learn from what Abraham said to her when famine forced them to leave their remote habitation in the mountains and move into Egypt, close to the cities and the camp of Pharaoh's court. "Look," Abraham said to Sarah, הֲנֵה נָא יְדַעְתִּי "but I do know that you are a beautiful woman" (Genesis 12,11).\*

From what we know about the precautions taken by our forefathers during their sojourns in ancient Egypt and Phoenicia, we have reason to believe that virgins were safer from attack in the licentious cultures of those countries than married women. A foreigner who was known to be still a virgin enjoyed more protection from molestation than a married woman visiting from abroad. For this reason Abraham felt that Sarah would be in less danger if he identified her as his unmarried sister rather than as his wife. Sarah, however, was too innocent to be aware of her beauty; she could not believe that her charms might prove dangerous for her, not even when her husband pointed it out to her. She was simply not vain enough to believe that the deception suggested by Abraham was necessary. Only when Abraham explained to her that he himself might be in danger of being killed if it became known that Sarah was his wife did she agree to Abraham's plan. She did so not in order to protect herself but only for the sake of her husband's safety. However, Abraham had forgotten about the moral standards that prevailed among the princes and the mighty of the land. It did not occur to him that they might not respect even the honor of a virgin. As a result, only an act of direct Divine intervention saved Sarah from harm.

Sarah had no children. This was the only respect in which her husband's hopes for their marriage had remained unfulfilled. What if Abraham and Sarah would have to abandon this one hope in their old age? The accomplishment of Abraham's mission depended on whether he would have a son. He had received God's promise that he would become the progenitor of an entire nation that would be a blessing to all the other nations on earth. But now it seemed that his marriage would end without having produced even one child. If Abraham were to die childless, what would have been the purpose of his life? Who would not understand the pain that Sarah felt at this thought? How happy she

\* In his Commentary to this verse, R. Hirsch explains that the word נָא is used to emphasize a statement that is contrary to another's belief. (Ed.)

would have been to bear Abraham a son, and to raise and nurture him for his future calling as heir to Abraham's mission! But now it seemed that, at least judging from human standards, she would no longer be able to fulfill this wish of hers.

Nevertheless, Sarah wanted to come as close as possible to the fulfillment of her desire. She wanted to come as close as possible to mothering a son for her husband. If she was no longer physically capable of conceiving and bearing a child for Abraham, she could still help cause a child to be born to her husband and then become the child's nurturer and educator in every respect as if she, Sarah, had been his true mother. Accordingly, she asked Abraham to take her maidservant as his second wife. When this woman would bear Abraham's child, Sarah and Abraham would raise the child as their own.

Only with great difficulty could Sarah persuade Abraham to do what she wished. Here again Scripture uses the word נָא to show how much effort it cost Sarah to overcome Abraham's reluctance: הֲנֵנּוּ נָא עֲצֹרֵי ה' מִלֵּרֶת בָּא נָא אֶל שַׁפְחֹתַי אֲוִלִי אֲבֹנָה מִמֶּנָּה. Look, I am the only one to blame for your having no children. Please come to my maidservant; perhaps I will have a child through her (Genesis 16,2). At last Abraham acceded to Sarah's request, and Sarah gave him her maidservant to be his wife.

Unfortunately, Sarah had miscalculated. Her plan was based on the assumption that, even as Abraham's wife, Hagar would remain her maidservant. Only under such an arrangement could Sarah hope to obtain complete, unimpeded control over any child born of Hagar, remove him completely from Hagar's educational influence and raise him entirely in the spirit of Abraham. But Sarah failed to take into consideration that a woman who had become Abraham's wife and carried his child beneath her heart could not be expected to remain a slave. Her pregnancy with Abraham's child had made Hagar a free woman. As soon as she was aware that she was expecting Abraham's child she was seized with a compelling thirst for freedom and felt she could no longer submit to the authority of a mistress.

Sarah's hopes had been deceived, but then they had been based on self-deception all along. For a nation that was to have entrusted to its care the spiritual and moral future of all the other nations of the world, it would not be enough to have a man such as Abraham as its progenitor. In addition to being sired by Abraham, it would have to be conceived and borne by a woman such as Sarah so that the spirit of Abraham, coupled with the nature of Sarah, might be perpetuated

in that nation. A woman of Egypt would not be a fit mother for a son of Abraham.

The imprint of their origins has survived remarkably well, clear and undiluted, in the character of the Ishmaelites, the progeny of Hagar fathered by Abraham. The monotheism of Abraham, the Hamitic sensuality and thirst for freedom that stamped the personality of Hagar, and the virtual fanatic belief in the providence of Almighty God, drawn, as it were, by Hagar from the “well of the Living One Who sees me”—this mixture of qualities has shaped the traits for which the Arabs are known to this day and with which they have made their own contribution, in the form of poetry and scholarship, to the spiritual symposium of humanity.

Sarah was already ninety years old and still childless when God reconfirmed His promise to Abraham that he would be the progenitor of the nation of God, and this Divine promise was exalted to become an everlasting covenant by virtue of Abraham’s circumcision. But Abraham was only one of the parties in the covenant; the participation of Sarah was essential to its realization. When God reconfirmed His promise to Abraham, Sarah was included in the covenant as a matter of course. A nation of God could be produced only from a union of a man such as Abraham and a woman such as Sarah. Therefore, as a supplement to the covenant marked by his circumcision, Abraham is told by God, “You shall no longer call your wife Sarai but Sarah, and I will bless her and (as part of My covenant with you) I have already appointed for you a son from her. . . she will become nations, leaders of nations shall be descended from her” (Genesis 17,15–16).

From that time on, both Abram and Sarai were to have new names reflecting their Divinely-ordained purpose. Abram became Abraham, from **אבר** **הם**, to express the soaring (**אבר**—wing) spiritual energy of the multitude of nations. The text reads **אב המון גוים**, not **אבי המון גוים**.<sup>\*</sup> Abraham would be the spiritual father of the nations that, without his spirit to guide them, would become a lawless mob, **המון**. Sarai became Sarah. Contrary to popular assumption, **שרי** cannot very well denote “my princess;” if the word had that meaning, what would be the explanation for the plural form and the pronoun? Also, the feminine suffix would be missing. The Hebrew term for “my princess” would not be **שרי**

<sup>\*</sup> One would expect the text to use the construct (**סמיכות**) form **אבי**, indicating specific paternity (e.g., **יום הוא אבי כנען**). The absolute (**נפרד**) form **אב** indicates the generic concept of “fatherhood.” (Ed.)

but שרתי. It therefore seems that the difference in meaning between these two names, שרי (from שרה) and שרה (the feminine form of שר, from שור), lies in the difference between the two roots שרה and שור, both of which seem to denote dominion or rulership. The words שרית in שרית עם אלקים (Genesis 32,29) and למרבה המשרה in המשרה (Isaiah 9,6) are derived from שרה. The word שרים in בני שרים ישורו (Proverbs 8,16) is derived from שור. Both these root words have the connotation of "dominion" and "prince," but each implies a different concept of rulership. שרה, related to שרע and טרה, i.e., "to extend," "to be more than," describes the prince as the one who stands out from among all the others because he is greater and mightier than the rest; thus, it defines the prince as he appears in the sight of the world. שור, the root of משורה, "measure," or more specifically, "periphery," has us see the prince as the moral authority who sets the "measure" of all things under his rule and who, by his personal example and influence, encloses and keeps all the individual and collective endeavors in his nation within the periphery of law and order.

שרי, as derived from שרה (as שרי is derived from שרה), identified Sarah merely as the mistress who stood out from among all the others. שרה, as derived from שור, on the other hand, describes her as the moderating, tone-setting authority. This, in fact, is the true function of motherhood in general and of all true mothers among our people in particular. Gifted with a delicate sense of morality and decency, these mothers bear within their own hearts the fine, sensitive measure of what is good and right, and by their personal example they become the nurturers and guardians of morality and self-control. Crudeness, baseness, licentiousness and immorality will keep their distance, of their own accord, from the place where a true daughter of Sarah reigns as wife and mother. The very presence of such a woman will drive away rudeness and lack of moderation. The soaring spirit of Abraham and the moral standards guarded by Sarah—these are the outstanding individuals whom God has appointed to educate the nations of the world.

Sarah was ninety years old when she learned that she was to bear for her husband, who was one hundred, the son upon whom the promised nation was to be founded. When Abraham was told that Sarah would bear him a son, he laughed and thought to himself, "Shall a child be born to a man of one hundred and shall a woman of ninety indeed give birth?" (Genesis 17,17). And when Sarah heard this promise reconfirmed, she

laughed within herself, "That I should be given vigor again now that I am already worn out, and my lord, too, is an old man!" (ibid. 18,12).

At this point we should note parenthetically that when Sarah addresses Abraham, or speaks of him within the hearing of others, she never refers to him as "my lord." In the close relationship between Jewish husbands and wives there is no room for such expressions of subordination from either partner. Nevertheless, in her thoughts Sarah regards him with deep respect as her lord, whose wishes and endeavors she is happy to serve. Furthermore, let us note that it was probably not an ancient Eastern custom, but merely a custom in the family of Abraham, that the wife did not appear before her husband's guests or participate in their conversation. We can surmise this from the question that the three guests ask Abraham, "Where is Sarah, your wife?" In other words, the guests are surprised that Sarah is not there to serve them their refreshments. Abraham replies (Genesis 18,9), *הנה באהל*, she is inside the tent, of course. It is Sarah's sense of propriety that keeps her from coming out to join her husband and his visitors.

It appeared ridiculous to both Abraham and Sarah that they should have a child at their advanced age. And when their son was born the rest of the world, too, laughed at the sight of the ninety-year-old mother suckling the baby at her breast and at the claims of these two aged parents, with one foot in their graves, that they were raising this child to be the progenitor of a nation that would subdue the other nations.

This element of the ridiculous was of such a basic significance in the birth of Abraham's son that it was only right for Abraham and Sarah to be made aware of it. Therefore, when Sarah was ashamed to admit that she had laughed within herself, God told her not to deny having laughed (Genesis 18,15). As a matter of fact, her laughter was so significant that it was immortalized in the name of the baby. *צחוק* (as distinct from *שחוק*, which is used primarily to denote the laughter of joy) has the connotation of "ridiculous" or "absurd;" it implies a person's reaction to unexpected contrasts between the tiny and the gigantic in phenomena, in actions or in expectations. The idea that a couple in the tenth decade of life, who until then had been childless, should suddenly be capable of producing a son, and that this incredible event should be capped with the preposterous expectation that this son would be the progenitor of a nation that would have an impact on the future of all mankind, seemed ridiculous to all human judgment. And it was entirely proper that it should appear to be so. From the very first stirrings of expectation

until the ultimate realization of its great mission on earth, the nation descended from Abraham and Isaac was to be a nation of God, an indication of the workings of Divine Providence, a proof that loyalty to God and trust in Him will ultimately win the day. The beginnings of this nation, its survival despite all odds, its hopes for the future—all these “ridiculous” visions would come true despite expectations and contrary to the normal course of natural events. This nation should indeed appear ridiculous with its absurd claims and self-assurance, but ultimately יצחק, it will be the one to have the last laugh on earth. While the hopes of all the other nations will come to naught, the hopes of this one nation will be fulfilled. That is why, when this son was born to her, Sarah said, “God has prepared laughter for me; all who hear of this will laugh at me” (Genesis 21,6). But, as she lovingly cuddled the infant to her breast, she exultantly added, מי מלל לאברהם, “who has explained to Abraham even in part the more profound significance of my nursing Isaac?” (היניקה בנים שרה \*מלילות. cf. מלל means to give partial details; cf. מלילות.) “Sarah has nursed *children!*” Of all those who had laughed, none had realized that, with this one infant Isaac, Sarah was nurturing the future of a whole nation at her breast, היניקה בנים שרה.

But no one looked with so much derision on these hopes for the little latecomer, and gave such crude expression to his contempt, as did the infant's brother, Ishmael, who was already an adult in the full vigor of young manhood. In connection with the attitude of people in general to the birth of Isaac the text uses the words כל השמע יצחק לי. Of Ishmael, on the other hand, we are told that he was actually מצחק! His attitude of frank contempt proved that Ishmael would never be capable of assuming Abraham's heritage and of preserving it in partnership with his half-brother Isaac. He therefore had to leave Abraham's home, and, in order that he would have nothing more to do with Isaac's future life, his mother, too, was expelled from Abraham's household as a maid-servant (שם על שכמה). Sarah's role as the deciding and controlling authority in this incident shows us, once again, the position of importance enjoyed by the wife in the Jewish home.

By the time Sarah died at the age of one hundred twenty-seven, Isaac was a mature man of thirty-seven; yet he was all but shattered by the loss of his aged mother. He felt a gap in his life that nothing and no one, not even his father Abraham, was able to fill. He remained

\* See Hirsch Commentary, Genesis 21,7. (Ed.)

inconsolable until he brought home Rebecca as his wife and saw in her a spiritual reincarnation, as it were, of Sarah. *ויבאה יצחק האהלה שרה אמו*. She became his wife, he loved her, and only then was Isaac comforted for the loss of his mother.

This account is not only the most beautiful epitaph that could be written for a woman but also a brilliant example of the respect in which Jewish sons hold their mothers. With the death of Sarah the home of Abraham had lost its moving spirit; when Isaac brought Rebecca home as his wife, the spirit of Sarah returned to the home of Abraham.

Our Sages tell us that as long as Sarah was alive, the Presence of God hovered in a cloud above the tent. When Sarah died the cloud departed, but it returned when Rebecca entered there. As long as Sarah was alive, the bread in her home was blessed. When Sarah died that blessing departed, but it was reinstated with the coming of Rebecca. As long as Sarah was alive, the doors of her home were wide open in generosity to all those in need. When Sarah died this generosity ceased, but it was resumed when Rebecca came. As long as Sarah was alive there was light in the home from one Sabbath to the next. When Sarah died the light went out, but it was rekindled when Rebecca took her place. Thus we see that already in the days of Abraham the presence and blessings of God, and the spirit of humanity and serenity in the home, were dependent on the presence and the activities of the woman within.

Abraham's own love and respect for Sarah are evident from his tears and lamentations at the time of her death and from the care with which he made the arrangements for her burial. His mourning was not put on for public display; he withdrew into his tent to weep beside his wife's remains *ויבא אברהם לספר לשרה ולבכתה*. When Abraham finally rises from the presence of his dead, whose loss affects him, as her husband, more than it does anyone else in the family, he does so only to purchase a burial property that will be deeded to him and therefore safe from disturbance by others. (In the days of Abraham, the land on which Sarah was buried was still alien soil.)

Note that the legal formula that eventually came into use for the "acquisition" of a wife in Jewish marriage harks back to *קידה קידה משרה*, the legal formula employed by Abraham in his purchase of the burial property. It is significant that the legal basis for Jewish marriages today should thus recall the first Jewish marriage, Abraham's love for his wife which endured beyond her death. This historic association



should have the following succinct message for every Jewish man and woman as they enter marriage: Look upon Abraham, your father, and upon Sarah, who was to give birth to you, and love and honor one another, as did these two, your original father and mother, until the end of your days.

Of course there are those who point with some irony to this legal formula. "So, you see, Jewish men acquire their wives by purchase," they say. Yes, it is true; the Jew "acquires" his wife. Note, however, that he acquires her not from others but from herself, out of her own free will, and then she remains his own most precious possession, his own most sacred treasure, even beyond death.

#### IV. Rebecca

The most eloquent, complete refutation of claims that Jewish husbands are guilty of "oriental-style" disregard for their wives is the painstaking care with which we see Abraham supervise the choice of a wife for his son Isaac. Only one who is himself thoroughly convinced of the wife's crucial role in the future of the home could exercise such meticulous care in this matter. Abraham has Eliezer, the oldest of his servants, the one who is in charge of his entire household, take a most solemn vow that he will not choose for Abraham's son a daughter of the Canaanite nation in whose midst he dwells but will travel to Abraham's native land, to Aram, in order to secure from there a suitable wife for Isaac.

Idolatry, that spiritual aberration of mankind, was no less prevalent in Aram than it was in Canaan. However, it did not produce as much moral corruption in Aram as it did among the Canaanites. We know from the Book of Leviticus that the most outrageous orgies of Hamite licentiousness took place in Canaan and Mitzrayim. There is always the possibility that mental aberrations can be corrected by the proper education, but moral corruption produced by inherited disposition and by the personal example of others can become so deep-seated in an individual that it is difficult, if not impossible, to effect a complete change in him. The tent of Abraham was well protected from the influences of Aramite idolatry, but every effort had to be made to keep Canaanite immorality from its threshold.

The dowry required of the first bride in Jewish history was purity of character, a fact reflected also in the manner in which Eliezer sought

to accomplish his mission. The text reads **ויקח העבד עשרה גמלים מגמלי אדניו וילך וכל טוב אדניו בידו, ויקם וילך אל ארם נהרים אל עיר נחור** (Genesis 24,10). The words **ויקם וילך** that come only after the reference to the paraphernalia he takes with him show that the first **וילך** in the passage does not allude to Eliezer's departure but to his preparations for his journey, to the manner in which he sets out on his mission. When he comes to his master's native land he does not want to appear as a wealthy gentleman but as a servant, a slave. He wanted to be received and accepted not for his appearance but for himself, for the person he was. He took ten camels from among his master's camels, choosing those that looked every bit like the camels of a wealthy man, but he himself traveled on foot, leading the camels. Moreover, the camels did not bear the precious gifts intended for the bride; Eliezer had taken them only for the transportation of the future bride and retinue (Genesis 24,61; cf. Ecclesiastes 10,7). The gifts for the bride were carried by Eliezer himself.

Both the master and his servant were convinced that Divine Providence was especially concerned that Isaac should get the wife best suited for him. Both Abraham and Eliezer raised their eyes heavenward, praying that God might send them His angel to show them the right path to the right wife "for His servant, for Isaac," for the one whose whole life was consecrated to the service of God and who, in seeking a wife, sought only **כלה**, the completion of his own place in life so that he might be able to serve God as a "whole" human being.

But how would Eliezer, that servant of the house of Abraham, go about seeking the maiden capable of filling the gap left in the home of Abraham when Sarah died, a maiden who, in partnership with Isaac, would be able to carry on the great heritage of Abraham and Sarah? He would recognize her not by her wealth, nor by her physical charms, nor by her intellectual accomplishments, but only by her character, by the humanity and morality of her heart, by her readiness to help others—in short, by her **גמילות חסד**, that character trait which has remained the most distinct identifying mark of the sons and daughters of Abraham to this day. The maiden whom Eliezer would recognize as the wife sent by God for Isaac, His servant, would be one who, when Eliezer would ask her to let him drink from her pitcher of water, would offer water not only to him but also to his ten camels that were waiting some distance away (the text reads **אל הבאר**, not **על הבאר**). And by the way, let it be noted that a camel is capable of drinking quite a large quantity of

water at one time so that enough water is stored up in his body to last him a week if necessary. (One camel raised in Paris is known to have regularly drunk four buckets of water at a time.)

The maiden whom Eliezer would identify as the Divinely-chosen wife for Isaac would be one that would have compassion not only for human beings but also for tired, thirsty animals, and would know how to express her compassion not in idle, sentimental phrases but by prompt, vigorous action taken on her own accord, without first being asked to do so. In short, she would be a maiden within whom there was the same spark of practical loving-kindness that burned so brightly within the hearts of Abraham and Sarah and upon the altar of their tent. It seems that even in those days this Abrahamite character trait was not generally found among other people but primarily in the clan of Abraham. Consequently, this was the one character trait by which Eliezer felt he would be able to recognize the proper bride for Abraham's son.

Had such purity of character not been the primary object of Eliezer's concern, and had it not been such a rare phenomenon in his day, it would have been quite easy for Eliezer to find a maiden from the land of Aram to marry the only son of a wealthy man such as Abraham. However, the task at hand was to find the right wife for a man such as Isaac, the servant of God. It was therefore essential that Eliezer put the maiden to the test, trusting that, with God's guidance and providence, he would be able to accomplish his mission.

He had hardly uttered these thoughts to himself when Rebecca appeared at the well. She turned out to be Rebecca, daughter of Bethuel, the son of Milcah, wife of Abraham's own brother. If, as tradition has it, Yiskah of Genesis 11,29 was identical with Sarah, Rebecca was closely related to Isaac by double family ties. Her grandfather was the brother of Abraham and her grandmother the sister of Sarah. At any rate, if both the Biblical narrative and the information volunteered by Rebecca put more stress on Bethuel's mother than on his father, then Milcah must have been a most praiseworthy, distinguished woman, sufficiently outstanding to make her granddaughter still proudly identify herself to a stranger as the granddaughter of Milcah. This little detail, too, shows that these "Oriental" women must have been regarded as something more than the insignificant, nameless figures portrayed by common prejudice.

Consider the delicate brushstrokes with which the Word of God

depicts the splendid character and behavior of this maiden. והנער טבת מראה מאר בחולה ואיש לא ידעה (Genesis 24,16). She was very beautiful, a virgin, ואיש לא ידעה! This phrase could not have been intended simply to identify her status as a virgin, for that is already indicated earlier by the term בחולה. Also, elsewhere in Scripture the description of a virgin is לא ידעה איש (cf. Judges 11,39); in this narrative, however, the text reads איש לא ידעה. The usual way of describing a virgin is simply to state that she had never had intimate relations with a man. In the story of Rebecca, however, the purpose apparently is to emphasize her chaste personality, which was such that no man had ever dared make any advances to her. The pure, virtuous personality of a truly modest woman has a magic power that drives away everything base and ignoble from her immediate sphere; no eye would dare cast a lewd glance upon the majesty of a truly pure woman: איש לא ידעה.

Rebecca went down to the well, filled her pitcher and came up again. Eliezer, the servant, ran to meet her. "Let me drink a little water from your pitcher," he begged her. "Drink, my lord," she replied, quickly lowering the pitcher onto her palm and giving him to drink. After having let Eliezer drink his fill, she said to him, "I will draw water also for your camels until they have finished drinking." Saying this, she quickly emptied the contents of her pitcher into the trough, ran back to the well to draw more water, and drew enough water for all his camels. This brief Biblical sketch portrays her as a wonderful person. She is kind and courteous, even addressing a mere servant as "my lord." She moves swiftly if there is anything she can do to help another person. She is not garrulous; she does not waste many words to explain what she is about to do. She first allows Eliezer to drink; only thereafter does she inform him that she also wishes to attend to the needs of the camels. She does not pour the rest of the water from her pitcher to the ground but pours it into the trough. Though she may have to run back and forth from the well eighty times, she accomplishes this arduous work for the thirsty animals with cheerful speed and vigor, and she is generous with her time and effort. At the same time she is careful not to waste any of the little water that is still left in the pitcher. Is this not a portrait of a truly splendid woman? She does not spare any labor, no matter how difficult, to promote the comfort and well-being of others. At the same time she attaches due importance even to the smallest result of her work lest it be wasted for no good reason. See, too, how exuberantly happy Rebecca is at the thought that she has been able to refresh Eliezer's camels with

cool water from the well. When Eliezer asks her, "Would there be room in your father's house for us to stay overnight?" she quickly replies, "There is also plenty of straw and fodder with us, and also a place to stay overnight." She first thinks of the food the animals need in addition to the drink, and only thereafter of the lodging for the man.

This was indeed the proper wife for the son of Abraham, the right wife for Isaac, the servant of God!

Note how the rest of the story, too, refutes the fanciful notions of Eastern culture. Contrary to popular notion, the girl is not "bought" from her parents with a "bride price." Only when Rebecca's family realizes that the meeting of Eliezer and Rebecca was an act of Divine Providence, so that they cannot do anything else but give their consent to the proposed marriage, does Rebecca receive gold and silver jewelry and fine garments. Her family receives only gifts of secondary importance, *מגדנות*, literally "fine fruits," perhaps preserves. Also, no arrangements are made against Rebecca's will. "We will ask the girl," the family says, and only after Rebecca has readily agreed to the marriage does her family hand her over to Eliezer.

It is significant that the one person whose wishes should have been regarded as decisive in this arrangement has nothing to say in the matter. Isaac, whose wishes should have mattered the most, remains silent throughout. While Rebecca is asked for her approval before any arrangements are made in her behalf, Isaac permits his father and his father's faithful servant complete freedom to act for him in a matter which, more than anything else, will be decisive for his personal happiness. Does this story not reflect a character trait in the family of Abraham that still predominates within the families of Abraham's true spiritual heirs today, promoting their true happiness throughout life? How much ridicule has been wasted on the fact that until very recent times Jewish marriages were made not by the well-known blind deity with his quiver of arrows but solely on the basis of thorough, rational consideration by the parents and families of both parties!

Here again we see a time-honored Jewish custom, with its good common sense, that has proven more effective than any other approach in the promotion of personal happiness. In other societies marriages are made by emotions as blind as their god of love. Passion acts as the matchmaker, thus excluding, from the very outset, the role of calm reflection in a matter where dispassionate consideration would seem to be of the essence. Partners whose emotions are blinded by passion

never get to know one another before marriage; as a result, they enter marriage with notions and expectations that have no relation to reality. But very soon reality brings disillusionment, chilling the passions and estranging the partners from one another. Jewish marriages, on the other hand, are made on the basis of calm deliberation and careful reflection, testing whether the prospective partners are mutually compatible in their emotions, character, personality and all the other factors that determine marital happiness. These are considerations and reflections of which neither the young man nor the young woman are capable but which are within the capability of the parents, relatives and friends of both parties. Only when good common sense would approve of the union are the couple's feelings toward one another taken into account. That is why statistics show a disproportionately higher percentage of happy marriages among Jews than among members of other societies. Therefore, too, in Jewish marriages the wedding\* is not the climax but only the highly promising seeding of love that unfolds more and more with every passing day of the marriage. This is a love that, as the partners pass through life's days of sunshine and tempest, becomes ever more firmly rooted and bursts into ever more glorious flower as the two hearts grow into one another and the two souls, deeply involved in the serious business of life, become aware of what they mean to one another and realize what a treasure each has in the other. An Isaac who chooses his Rebecca on his own may well make a mistake, but an Isaac who permits his father Abraham to bring him his Rebecca will rarely be disillusioned.

Note, finally, the striking contrast between the Aramite family on the one hand and the family of Abraham on the other. See Isaac permitting his father to act for him in the most serious decision of his life. On the other hand, see Rebecca's brother, Laban, rudely pushing his aged father, Bethuel, aside when this most important family concern is discussed, impudently lording it over the family and shoving the "old man" into a corner like so much castoff household refuse. Even when the family is called upon to give its formal sanction to the proposed marriage, Laban does not allow his father to speak before him. The "old man" does not get any of the delicacies that Eliezer has brought for Rebecca's family. It is the son and his mother that do all the talking (with the son speaking before his mother, which was considered proper), and when the bride

\* R. Hirsch alludes to the German term for "wedding," *Hochzeit*, literally "high time" or "climax." (Ed.)

receives the family's blessing as she leaves her home to go with Eliezer, it is not her father but her brother who blesses the departing daughter.

In view of the foregoing, it certainly was all the better for the future of the House of Abraham that Rebecca, its second matriarch, was able to depart at an early age from a home environment which seems to have been marked by rudeness and vulgarity, and in which she, with her pure and kindly heart, had grown up like a rose among thorns. It was a good thing, too, that Isaac had already reached the mature age of forty when he took as his wife the daughter of Bethuel the Aramite and the sister of Laban the Aramite.

And so Rebecca came to Isaac. He led her into Sarah's tent as the reincarnation of his mother. She became his wife, he loved her, and only through this beloved wife did he find comfort for the loss of his mother.

Even as Sarah was to Abraham, so we see Rebecca, too, as a steadfast, loyal companion to her husband, Isaac, in all his trial-filled wanderings through life. Indeed, this daughter of Aram had entered into the spirit of the household and mission of Abraham so completely that, long before Isaac himself could do so, she was able to judge, from the Abrahamite viewpoint, the worthiness and unworthiness of her two dissimilar sons to be the heirs of Abraham and Isaac, and to open her husband's eyes to these realities.

An unprejudiced, sober examination of the much-maligned story of Isaac's blessing will show that Rebecca's ruse, which resulted in Jacob's receiving his father's blessing instead of Esau, was simply an attempt by a discerning wife to help her husband attain better understanding in a question crucial to the future of their family and its mission. If Rebecca's act had been nothing but a ruse that could be and was, of course, quickly discovered, how could she have expected it to yield the true results she desired? Above all, how could anyone imagine that a woman of Rebecca's character would care for, much less build her hopes upon, a blessing obtained by trickery and deliberate deceit?

Whether we interpret Isaac's blessing as a father's testamentary disposition to establish the future leadership of his family, or whether we construe it as a promise made under Divine inspiration, to be fulfilled as part of Divine Providence, in either case this blessing would have lost all meaning if it had involved an act of deceit on the part of Rebecca. A testamentary disposition based on false presumptions is null and void, and the God of heaven and earth, Who had chosen Abraham for the

sole purpose that Abraham should bequeathe to his descendants the legacy to practice צדקה ומשפט, and Who had made the fulfillment of all His own promises dependent upon the accomplishment of this purpose, cannot be deceived, nor could He have allowed this legacy and His promises to stand on a foundation of deceit. Not even a heathen would consider one of his fetishes ready to enter into such a scheme. And certainly no one could have been farther removed from such behavior than Rebecca, the successor of Sarah in the household of Abraham. But Esau, that “hunter with his mouth,” understood how to deceive and capture his father’s heart and had succeeded so well in hoodwinking the prematurely aged and nearly blind Isaac that the latter truly believed that Esau was the proper inheritor of the moral and spiritual legacy of Abraham. This despite the fact that Esau had so little understanding for the Abrahamite vocation that, for instance, he believed he had satisfied the requirements of his Divinely-ordained calling by adding one wife of Abrahamite descent to his Canaanite wives who had caused his parents so much grief by their conduct and their lack of all sense for morality.

At this point Rebecca, the sensible wife who surely must have tried often, without success, to disillusion Isaac, finally devised a drastic plan to make her husband realize how gullible he was and how, in his blindness, he could be deceived even by so obvious a disguise as that of Jacob pretending to be Esau. She deceived her husband in order to cure him of his illusions. That is why Isaac was seized with such terror when he realized that he had been tricked. Immediately, the blindfold fell from his eyes. Quickly composing himself, he added, deliberately and of his own free will, the words that confirmed his blessing: גם ברוך יהי.

We have dwelt upon this episode in the life of our matriarch not in order to find an apology for her act, nor because of any feeling on our part that we must not allow any shadows to attach to the biographical pictures of our great forebears. We completely disagree with that view. Our ancestors were never presented to us as angelic models to emulate in every respect; indeed, had they been presented to us as angelic creatures, their example for us to follow in our own lives would have been far less ideal and instructive than it actually is. If we were to discover no shortcomings in their personalities, they would appear to us like higher beings who, free of all human passions and weaknesses, never had to struggle against sin and were never in need of an incentive to virtue. We would conclude that, given our own human imperfections,



any effort on our part to emulate their saintly qualities would be doomed to failure. Precisely by not concealing their shortcomings from us, the Word of God has brought our patriarchs and matriarchs closer to us as human beings, human like ourselves and exposed to the same struggles and temptations. And if, nevertheless, they attained that high sense of morality and loyalty to their calling that made them worthy of God's nearness, they thereby demonstrated to us the heights that are within our own power to attain, despite our weaknesses and imperfections.

Also, our Sages never turn a blind eye to the shortcomings of our forefathers; on the contrary, they demonstrate how each error of our great ancestors had its own unhappy consequences. The commentators on the Word of God, including, for instance, the רמב"ן,\* follow our Sages also in this respect.

Still, we believe that the lives of our forefathers should be understood in terms of pragmatic historical research, which seeks to explain the individual features of their lives as part of the total picture of their personalities and aspirations. In so doing, this approach seeks to trace the delicate allusions that should not escape the attention of the reader. We have presented our own interpretation of the story of Isaac's blessing because that incident can be meaningful to us when seen in this light. A step by step analysis of the narrative confirms our view.

Now let us consider the true nobility shown by Rebecca and Jacob following this incident. It is quite common among baser characters that, once the damage has been done, it is the aggressor, even more than the victim, that works himself into a rage of hostility and hatred, as if seeking to justify his action, persuading himself that the victim had fully deserved what had been done to him, and more. But in this case, even after Isaac had reconfirmed his blessing in favor of Jacob, Esau remains Rebecca's "eldest son," Jacob her "younger son," and Esau the brother of Jacob (Genesis 27,42). Esau's mother sympathizes with Esau in his anger, but both her sons, Esau and Jacob, remain close to her heart. She fears that even as she bore both her sons on the same day, she will now lose them on the same day, the one, Jacob, physically as the murder victim and the other, Esau, morally as the murderer of his own brother.

One can imagine how a lesser woman might have exploited Esau's wish to murder Jacob, telling it to Isaac to justify her own conduct

\* Cf. רמב"ן to Genesis 12,10. (Ed.)

and as proof that the foolish Isaac had loved, and even had intended to bless, a son who was in fact a second Cain. But Rebecca did not do so. In an effort to shield her husband, she spares him this sad discovery, giving him other, innocuous explanations for Jacob's sudden departure from home.

Also note how Rebecca and Jacob anxiously avoid giving the appearance that their striving after Isaac's blessing and the privileges of a first-born son had been motivated by material considerations. What does Jacob have to gain from obtaining the rights of a first-born son and his father's blessing? Esau, his twin brother, has already acquired two wives since the age of forty and has been living in grand style at his father's home, at his father's table and from his father's wealth. Jacob, on the other hand, is still unmarried, and when he finally leaves his parental home to establish a home of his own, he leaves as a poor man, taking with him nothing except his staff, lest Esau miss so much as a pin after Jacob's departure. After that, he must perform slave labor to acquire a wife and to provide for his family: **ויעבד ישראל באשה ובאשה שמר** (Hosea 12,13). All this documents the nobility of character for which Rebecca and Jacob are remembered.

### V. Rachel and Leah

We will now address ourselves to the two women who, in fact, were the founding mothers of the tribes of the Jewish people. Jacob acquired these two wives by toiling as a slave for fourteen years. No ardent wooing from the age of chivalry can compare to this man's toil to win his wife. Jacob performed fourteen years of slave labor for a scheming, vexatious master, all for the latter's two daughters, who would not receive any dowry when they married. Since Jacob received no wages, he was still as poor after fourteen years of loyal, hard slave labor as he had been when he first entered Laban's service. He had become richer only in wives and offspring and in worries about them, without so much as a penny to set up a household of his own. Has any other man ever made such enormous sacrifices in order to win a wife?

Jacob's fourteen years of slave labor laid the foundations for the spirit of all subsequent Jewish marriages. The example set by Jacob is eloquent proof of what the Jewish wife means to her husband, reminding the Jewish man that in choosing a wife he should not seek to win a dowry but should regard his wife herself as his most priceless treasure.