



אבות ובנים

Fathers and Sons

■ Pressure from the Matriarchs

The Torah details at length the conversations between the Patriarchs and the Matriarchs regarding their children. There appears to be a tremendous difference in their approaches: While Sarah, Rivkah and Rachel display very intense longing for offspring, this matter appears to be much less of a major priority for their husbands Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov.

Let us review some of the key discussions between these holy couples on this weighty issue. Our analysis will take note of the use of the keyword אנוכי, *anochi*. This word, meaning “me” in the fullest sense, is like a code-word that is passed down the generations, from Sarah to Rivkah to Rachel.

We begin with Sarah, embittered over the haughty attitude that her maidservant Hagar has taken towards her. Sarah complains sharply to Avraham:

חֲמָסִי עָלֶיךָ! אֲנֹכִי נָתַתִּי שִׁפְחָתִי בְּחִיקָה וַיִּתְּרָא כִּי הָרְתָה וְאֶקֶל בְּעֵינַיִךָ,
יִשְׁפֹּט ה' בֵּינִי וּבֵינֶיךָ.

The injustice done to me is upon you! I (anochi) gave you my maidservant; she saw that she was pregnant, and I became cheapened in her eyes. Let G-d judge between me and you. (B'reshit 16,5)

“I gave up my dignity and my status,” Sarah says. “I agreed to have you take my maid as a wife in order to have children, but I never expected that she would then behave so arrogantly towards me - and with you standing silently by, no less!” Sarah’s sorrow and longing for children is expressed in her use of the word *anochi*, which she uses to mean “my entire being,” as in, “I sacrificed my all in order to give you Hagar.”

A generation later comes her daughter-in-law Rivkah, who uses even stronger language. In Parashat Toldot, we read:

וְתֹאמֶר, אִם כֵּן לָמָּה זֶה אֲנֹכִי?

She said: If so, then why am I (anochi)? (25,22)

The Ramban explains that with these enigmatic words, Rivkah is saying: “What good is my life? What good is my essence? If this pregnancy doesn’t last, given the turbulence I feel inside, what is the purpose of my life?” Again, the word *anochi* indicates that she is talking about her entire being.

This series is concluded by Rachel, who complains bitterly to her husband Yaakov that her entire life is worth nothing, and she is no better than dead, without children:

הֲבֵה לִי בָנִים וְאִם אֵין מֵתָה אֲנֹכִי.

Give me children - and if not, I (anochi) will die. (30,1)

We see how the Matriarchs consistently pressured their husbands on this so-sensitive matter. But we do not see immediate willingness on the parts of the holy Patriarchs to take a pro-active role in praying strongly to Hashem for the fulfillment of His promise for offspring. Avraham, for instance, did not pray at all for children, while Yitzchak prayed only after 20 years of Rivkah’s barrenness. In addition, it is written:

וַיֵּעָתֵר יִצְחָק לָהּ לִנְכַח אִשְׁתּוֹ כִּי עֲקָרָה הוּא...

*Yitzchak turned to G-d alongside [or: for] his wife,
for she was barren... (25,21)*

It appears that Yitzchak only prayed at the request of his wife, and not because he himself wanted to. And the sharpest expression of inaction came from Yaakov, who reacted to Rachel’s demand for children with anger:

וַיַּחַד אֶף יַעֲקֹב בְּרַחֵל וַיֹּאמֶר,

הֲתַחַת אֵי-לֵהִים אֲנֹכִי אֲשֶׁר מְנַע מִמֶּךָ פְּרִי בֶטֶן?

*Yaakov was angered at Rachel, and said: Am I in place of G-d,
Who withheld from you fruit of the womb? (30,2)*

The critical question we must ask is: Why did the Patriarchs not wish to pray for offspring? What was their thinking?

■ A Mission to Accomplish

Time after time, Hashem promised Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov that He would multiply their descendants, which “*would be too many to count*” (B'reshit 32,13). Our Forefathers knew that G-d had designated for them a mission in the world: to bring forth a nation that would bear the Name of G-d and would teach the world His ways.

Since this was the task and mission that G-d had chosen for them, they knew that He would do His part to ensure its fulfillment. They were confident that He would certainly grant them children at the correct time, and they knew that they must not try to rush it up, lest this interfere with the Divine plan.

Let us see how this idea is expressed with each of the Patriarchs, beginning with Avraham Avinu. At the *Brit Bein HaBetarim* (Covenant Between the Pieces), in Parashat Lekh Lekha, we see that G-d makes a promise to Avraham: “*To your descendants I will give this Land.*” (15,18)

G-d most definitely promised him offspring. However, in order for Avraham's son to walk in his spiritual path and be worthy of bearing G-d's Name, he could not be born into the impure atmosphere in which Avraham and Sarah lived. Many years had to pass, during which they increasingly distanced themselves from the unclean atmosphere in their birthplace for the sake of the purity of their future offspring.

At a certain point, they were instructed to add a letter from the Name of G-d to their own names: the letter *yud*, with a numerical value of 10. The *yud* was divided into two letters *heh*, equaling 5 each, and these were added to their names. Avram became Avraham, and Sarai became Sarah. In this same prophecy, Hashem again forged a covenant with Avraham, which this time included *Brit Milah*, ritual circumcision. Only from the very day on which Avraham was circumcised was his future son worthy of bearing the name and covenant of G-d.

But Sarah pressured Avraham. She tried to rush up the time of their son's birth by giving her maid Hagar as a wife to Avraham; the attempt failed miserably. It resulted in the expulsion of Hagar and her son Yishmael, who ended up straying far from the path of Avraham – and who also ended up fathering a nation that has displayed bitter hostility towards Israel for many generations.

Let us now consider Yitzchak. We see that the Torah emphasizes his wife's lineage:

וַיְהִי יִצְחָק בֶּן אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה בִּקְהֻתּוֹ אֶת רִבְקָה, בֵּת בְּתוּאֵל הָאֲרָמִי,
מִפְּדַן אֲרָם אֲחוֹת לָבָן הָאֲרָמִי לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה.

Yitzchak was 40 years of age when he took Rivkah, the daughter of Betuel the Aramite from Padan-Aram, the sister of Lavan the Aramite, as a wife. (25,20)

Why is there such an emphasis on Rivkah's background? – To show that the offspring of this marriage is liable to be negatively affected by the Lavan-Betuel side of the family, and that the offspring might not be worthy of bearing G-d's Name. Many years must therefore pass before Rivkah has children, in order to offset and erase this negative influence.

Finally, after twenty years of barrenness, we read that Rivkah pressured, and Yitzchak relented and agreed to pray: *“Yitzchak prayed to Hashem [for] his wife Rivkah [at her request]... and Hashem answered him.”* That is to say, as a direct result of his prayers, which themselves were the result of Rivkah's insistence, not only was Yaakov born, but also the wicked, materialistic Esav.

The Torah alludes to the hidden connection between Rivkah's childhood home and Esav, when it describes what happened after Yaakov received Yitzchak's blessing in place of his brother Esav: *“Yitzchak sent Yaakov and he went toward Padan Aram, to Lavan the son of Betuel the Aramite, brother of Rivkah, mother of Yaakov and Esav”* (28,5). Why does the Torah tell us that Rivkah was the mother of Yaakov and Esav? We certainly know that already, and even Rashi says straight out: “I don't know what these words teach us.”

But according to what we have explained, these words emphasize that because Rivkah rushed the time, the negative lineage of Lavan and Betuel was not sufficiently nullified, and Esav was caught in the trap of the influence of Lavan the Aramean and his household.

Let us conclude this analysis with Yaakov Avinu. When he left Be'er Sheva, trying to escape from his brother Esav, G-d promised him: *“Your seed will be as numerous as the dust of the earth”* (28,14). Later, when his wife Rachel implores him for children – *“Give me children or I will die”* – Yaakov recognizes this situation from his father and grandfather, and refuses to give in. He knows from family experience that such premature pressure for children brings negative results, especially as he has long been in the home of his wicked father-in-law Lavan. He therefore reacts very strongly: *“Yaakov became angered at Rachel.”* He knows that he must wait until Hashem decides that the right time has come.

But when Rachel asks him to take her maid Bilhah in her place, he cannot continue to turn her down. Leah responds by exerting her own pressure on Yaakov to take her handmaiden Zilpah as a wife – and though all of Yaakov's children are blessed and bear G-d's Name, the children born of these latter unions end up playing a significant role in the sale of Yoseph to Egypt:

וְהוּא נָעַר אֶת בְּנֵי בִלְהָה וְאֶת בְּנֵי זִלְפָּה נְשֵׁי אָבִיו
וַיָּבֵא יוֹסֵף אֶת דְּבָרָם רָעָה אֶל אָבִיהֶם.

Yosef, a lad, was with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives, and brought his father a bad report about them. (37,2)

According to the Ramban, as well as the plain meaning of the words, Yosef spent time with the handmaidens' sons, then tattled on them to Yaakov. This caused all the brothers to hate Yosef, resulting in his sale as a slave to Egypt. Once again, premature pressure for Divinely-promised children results in undesirable consequences.

■ **Saying Thank You**

We said above that our Patriarchs saw their children as the fulfillment of a Divine mission with which G-d charged them. This idea explains a very difficult question that arises from the following Talmudic passage:

R. Yochanan said in the name of R. Shimon bar Yochai: No one in the world ever thanked G-d before Yaakov's wife Leah came along and thanked Him. It happened when her fourth son was born, and she said, "This time I will thank [odeh] the Lord" (B'reshit 29,35), and she therefore named him Yehuda. (B'rachot 7b)

How could it possibly be that great men such as Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov never thought to thank G-d until Leah came on the scene? The answer is rooted in the fact that the Patriarchs were men of tremendous faith. When they received gifts from G-d, they regarded these not as a reward for their meritorious acts, but rather as tools with which to carry out their important Divine mission. When one receives an important task to fulfill, one does not say, "Thank you so much!" He rather says, "Yes, sir!"

Leah, too, viewed her first three sons as fulfillment of a mission, namely, to connect Yaakov with her. We see this in the way she explained the names she gave them: When Reuven was born, she said, "*Now my husband will love me...*" Upon Shimon's birth, she said, "*G-d has heard that I am unloved [by Yaakov].*" And when Levi was born, she exclaimed, "*Now my husband will be attached to me.*" (29,32-34)

But when son number four, Yehuda, was born, Leah viewed him as a gift – and she accordingly expressed her gratefulness to G-d: *“This time, I will thank G-d”* (verse 35). Why did she see Yehuda as a gift? Because she calculated that if Yaakov had four wives, and he was destined to have twelve tribes, then each mother deserved to have three of them. When her fourth son was born to her, this was more than she felt was her due - and so she viewed him as a special gift.

When her next son, Yisachar, was born, Leah expressed outright her view that his birth was a reward for her deeds:

נָתַן אֱ-לֹהִים שְׂכָרִי אֲשֶׁר נָתַתִּי שְׁפָחָתִי לְאִשִּׁי...

G-d has given me a reward (sachar) for having given my maid to my husband. (30,18)

When one receives a reward or gift, as Leah viewed her fourth and fifth sons, saying “thank you” is certainly indicated – and she did so. But the Patriarchs viewed their “gifts” as a responsibility: not as a reward for a job-well-done, but as a tool with which to *do* the job.

■ Reward or Mission

Avraham passed down this concept to Yitzchak and Yaakov: not to expect reward for their righteous acts, but rather to dedicate themselves and their lives solely to Hashem, as loyal soldiers eager to carry out the mission entrusted to them. This is brought out very clearly in the mistaken way Avraham’s servant Eliezer understood his master’s actions.

When Eliezer was sent to Aram Naharayim to seek out a bride for Yitzchak, he excitedly told Lavan and Betuel about the chain of events that brought him to their home. He began by recounting his own conversation with Avraham that took place before he left on the mission. *“I said to my master: Perhaps the woman will not want to come back with me? Avraham answered me: G-d before Whom I have walked will send his angel with you and will grant you success.”* (24,39-40)

Let us pay careful attention to Avraham’s answer, according to the way his servant heard it. Eliezer understands Avraham as having said that Hashem will reward him for having “walked before Him,” and that that is why Eliezer can expect success. According to Eliezer, Avraham expects to be rewarded for his good deeds.

In fact, however, Avraham’s original words were much different. Perhaps this is even why the Torah uses so many verses to repeat Eliezer’s version of

the story – so that we can see the differences between Eliezer and Avraham Avinu.

When Eliezer asked Avraham what to do if the woman does not want to return with him, this is how Avraham actually reassured him: *“G-d, the Lord of the Heavens, Who took me from my father’s house, and Who spoke to me and swore to me, saying, I will give this Land to your descendants - He will send his angel before you...”* (24,7)

What Avraham was saying was this: “I am just a loyal servant, fulfilling the mission given me by the Creator of the World. He brought me here, He spoke to me, He promised that He would give the Land to my children - He does everything, and He will certainly make sure that your trip succeeds in order that His will is carried out.”

“It is not a matter of reward for my actions,” Avraham told Eliezer, “but rather of giving me the right tools to ensure that I succeed in founding a nation that will walk in G-d’s path and will be able to similarly guide the world. The tools I need for this are a wife for my son, so that he will remain in the Land of Israel and continue boldly along the path that I have begun. Hashem Who sent me on this mission will certainly provide me with the right tools.”

This is the greatness of our holy Patriarchs, who requested not reward for their great deeds, but only empowerment to become loyal, dedicated servants to fulfill the missions which with Hashem charged them. Hashem preserves this merit of theirs for us, their descendants, throughout all the generations.

The Medrash imparts to us this message in its unique style:

If the Patriarchs had requested reward for the mitzvot that they did in This World, how would their merits have remained for their children after them? As is written (Vayikra 26,42), “I will remember My covenant with Yaakov...” (Vayikra Rabba, Bechukotai 36, 1)

