

Dear Chavraya,

A thematic thread of barrenness weaves through the book of B'reishit, of women unable to conceive. It is so for three of our mothers, Sarah, Rebecca, and Rachel. Children do not come easily, but for each of them only over time and through struggle. Barrenness can also become a metaphor in our reading of these narratives, emptiness in the womb of each of our lives. Particularly from Rebecca, we learn what it means to actively pursue meaning, not to passively wait, dwelling on what isn't, but to go out and seek, to birth meaning into our lives.

Rebecca is feisty, acting in relation to reality, making her mark in the unfolding of events. She is asked of her readiness to leave home to marry Yitzchak, who himself had notably remained at home while a wife was sought for him. We are told that when she saw Yitzchak from afar, not waiting for him to reach her, she slipped down from the camel she was riding. Much later, whether for good or ill, it is she, not Yitzchak, who maneuvers to insure that Jacob will succeed his father in the continuity of Israel's coming to be.

In this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Toldot/Generations*, poignant expression is given even to Rebecca's initiative in relation to God. It is here that her activism, if you will, becomes a paradigm for each of us to draw from in our own active engagement with life. Of this ancestral couple yearning for children, we are told, *And Yitzchak entreated God concerning his wife, for she was barren. Clearly underscoring this sense of Rivka as one not to stand to the side, the rabbis emphasize that it was not only Yitzchak who was praying in that moment, but both of them. In a touchingly sensitive midrash, the rabbis say, this one stood in this corner and prayed, and this one stood in this corner and prayed.*

Their prayers indeed answered, Rivka endures a very difficult pregnancy. She cries out, *lamah zeh anochi/why is this happening to me?* In another *midrash*, the rabbis appear to smile on Rivka's rich and earthy relationship with God, *Rivka said before the Holy One, Master of the Universe, You have not created anything in a person vainly, eyes to see, ears to hear, a mouth to speak, a heart to understand, hands to touch, legs to walk; and these breasts/hadadin halalu, for what, if not to give suck surely they are in vain.* The Torah then says, *va'taylech lidrosh et Ha'shem/and she went to inquire of God.*

*Lidrosh*, to inquire, to search, to seek, this is the key word on which everything else turns, for Rivka and for us. It is a word that bursts with meaning, more than a word, an invitation to engage life if we would find meaning. Its root, *DaRaSh*, forms the root of *midrash*, that weaving of tales that comes of searching out the blank spaces between the letters, the words, the lines of Torah. It is at the root of our sharing words of Torah that rise from our heart, as in a *d'rasha*. Blandly translated so often as sermon, a *d'rasha* is the sharing of one's search for meaning through engagement with Torah, with life. One cannot give a *d'rasha* without engaging, without, seeking. A *beit midrash*, one of the terms for synagogue, is generally translated as a "house of study." I prefer to think of it as a "house of seeking." When Rebecca went to "inquire of God," *lidrosh et Hashem*, the rabbis

say that indeed she went to a *beit midrash*, and that was long before women were counted in their number.

We learn of engagement with life from Rivka *imenu*, Rebecca our mother. When life seems barren, meaning ephemeral and hard to grasp, she tells us to get up, to go out, search out the landscape, of soul and psyche, of people and place. The nature of our seeking shapes the path and the purpose of our lives. If we don't seek, we will not find. Our task is to become the *d'rasha*, the search that is shared, each one's life a sacred telling.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor