

Isaac's Mail-Order Bride

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Something that has always bothered me about this week's parasha is: *Why Isaac can't find his own wife?* His father Abraham managed to find not one but two wives and a concubine! Isaac's son Jacob had four wives... Why can't Isaac, all on his own, find even one? The longest chapter in the Book of Genesis, chapter 24, is a protracted story of Abraham hiring a servant, making him swear to go back to the old country to find a bride for Isaac, the servant's own angst about just how he'll identify the perfect partner for the next patriarch of the Jewish people, and then Rebekkah proving herself a kind, generous bride-to-be, followed by intense negotiations with Lavan pertaining to her departure for Eretz Yisrael and betrothal to Isaac. But the one person who has nothing to say, nothing to contribute, no opinion in the matter, and who isn't even in the room when the servant is first dispatched or when the betrothal is being negotiated is the groom himself! Isaac is nowhere to be found in this narrative except at the very end when he is depicted as wandering about in the fields when Rebekkah arrives to meet him. The story dances around him, but never pulls him in. He is spoken about, but never spoken to. He is a distant, almost irrelevant character in his own life story! Explaining Isaac's absence, my seminary professor Burt Visotzky¹ proposes that Isaac was away, he was out of town, visiting his older brother Ishmael while all these nuptial negotiations were going on. This explains, says Vistotzky why we find Isaac and Ishmael together burying their father Abraham at the end of the story. Not a bad theory! On the way home from school the other day I asked my two younger kids what they thought about this question. I thought their answer was just as plausible as the classical commentators': they said that Abraham wanted to give Eliezer, the servant, the opportunity to do a mitzvah--and find a wife for Isaac. Isn't that sweet? You know the tradition says that if you are a matchmaker for three couples in this world, you are guaranteed a place in the next world. So Abraham was helping the servant rack up the points! That's my kids' interpretation.

The truth is our rabbis and sages were also perplexed about Isaac's absence and silence...the 16th Century Portugese/Italian commentator Abarbanel said that Isaac could not leave home to find a wife because he was needed there, in Be'er Sheva, to take care of his elderly father Abraham.

¹ Visotzky, Burton L. *The Genesis of Ethics*, 1996. Page 127

He's like the very first of the so called sandwich generation, simultaneously juggling his own needs with trying to take care of an aging parent. I know that sounds familiar to some folks here today. The 18th Century Chassidic master Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev suggests that since Isaac was brought up to Mount Moriah and for all intents and purposes bound as a sacrificial offering, he was forever more in a state of holiness and purity, and he therefore could never leave the holy land, the land of Israel for any reason.² Since all the eligible brides were back in his father's homeland, someone else had to go in his place. That explanation doesn't exactly scratch my itch. The truth is that I have yet to encounter a reason that fully makes sense to me. What I am left with is what's in my kishkes...what I feel in my gut about our patriarch Isaac...which is that he is an understated, discreet, low-key patriarch whose one moment of fame and fortune was being led to a mountain-top altar to be sacrificed by his father; who's knife is literally over his throat before the angels call the whole thing off. What that must have done to him psychologically, emotionally, is unimaginable. Abraham and Isaac never speak to each other again, including in this parasha when Abraham is arranging a marriage for a son who has no voice in the matter whatsoever. Unfortunately Abraham is playing matchmaker at the very same time Isaac is in the throws of mourning for his beloved mother Sarah, which doesn't exactly put him in the mood to sign up for J-Date. So Abraham takes matters into his own hands and not only registers his son for J-Date, he even pays the membership fee.

What are we supposed to do with a story like this? What's the transcendent meaning or message? I'm still perplexed about Isaac's role in the story, and as I said I don't yet have a satisfying explanation...stay tuned, maybe next year when Jackie and Maia come back to read Torah on the first anniversary of their b'not mitzvah! I did come across the commentary of Ovadia Seforno, a late-Renaissance Italian Torah commentator who wrote that there were three factors that informed Abraham's insistence on finding a wife for Isaac.³ I think the parallels to today's world are striking:

The first reason, according to Seforno, is that Abraham was in the Torah's own words, *zakein ba be'yamim*, very advanced in age,⁴ he's already long outlived his life-insurance policy! And while he was so blessed...he was rich, he had land, he had flocks, he had fame, one thing that he

² *Kedushat Levi* (Eliyahu Munk, Lamba 2009 edition), on Parashat Chayey Sarah, p. 121.

³ *Seforno*, Commentary on the Torah (ArtScroll 1996 edition), on Genesis 24:1, page 118

⁴ Genesis 24:1

was lacking was the peace of mind of having a married son. Without a doubt Abraham wanted to make sure that the promises God made to him would continue to the next generation, which means Isaac had to get married and have kids of his own. But because my work involves people sharing with me some of their deepest, most heartfelt dreams and hopes, I know how many aging parents worry about their children finding a life partner. Every parent wants their child to be happy, to be in a loving, caring relationship; to have a family and future of their own. As Abraham reaches the end of his years, he doesn't want to leave this world without knowing that his precious son has found love and happiness and companionship. This is a timeless parental desire that spans every era and every culture. So if you're a single adult and you think you're parents are just trying to give you grief and aggravate you when they ask if you're dating someone or if you go to the mixers at the JCC or if you're on J-Date, know that it comes from a much deeper place of care and concern for you, and your long-term happiness.

Seforno then suggests that Abraham was deeply concerned about Isaac marrying a Canaanite wife. He makes the servant swear on his own procreative organ that he will not allow Isaac to marry an idolater. That act of swearing under the thigh is interpreted to mean that if the servant fails to prevent Isaac from marrying a Canannite then the servant will forfeit his own hopes to have children. That's a pretty serious oath! What would it mean for Isaac to marry a Canaanite; a tribe the Torah considers to be not only idolatrous but morally depraved? Imagine how that would jeopardize the blessings and promises God made to Abraham...Judaism, as it were, may not have lived to see another generation if Isaac had taken a Canaanite wife. In our day, parents desperately want their children to marry someone who shares their moral and cultural world-view. Someone who respects and honors their child, and helps them continue to live in the ways that they were raised. And when you think about it, the characteristics that convince the servant that Rebekkah is the perfect bride for Isaac are—as Maia said in her excellent speech—not so much that she's beautiful (that's a nice perk, but it's not the most important)...rather it's that she is kind, compassionate, and hospitable...just like who? **Just like Abraham and Sarah!** Rebekkah exhibits the same animating features as her future in-laws did! Hence, a perfect match!

Finally, Seforno says that Abraham was worried that because he was so wealthy and so prosperous, that without the assistance and counsel of the servant, someone might seek to marry

Isaac in order to become part of an affluent family, and not for the reasons I described above. I don't know how many of you watch the television series *Modern Family*, but in the show we are introduced to two non-traditional families, one composed of two gay men and an adopted daughter, and the other is Jay and Gloria and their kids. What's unique about Jay (played by Ed O'Neil) and Gloria (played by Sofia Vergara) beyond being an interracial couple, is that Gloria is much younger, and I might add much more attractive than her aged husband. *The Atlantic* magazine, in an article about the show⁵, said that the series rarely explored the obvious age gap between the characters...but in one of the rare episodes when it did, Jay's daughter from his first marriage accuses Gloria of being a gold digger. It's not only when there are conspicuous differences like age, but every parent wants to know that their kids are getting married for the right reasons, and not for fleeting fancies or for other shady agendas. Isaac is the son of a famous, wealthy leader...In fact Lavan himself is dazzled by the jewels and money that the servant brings along with him to the negotiations. Abraham predicted that risk, and tries to prevent it from happening at all costs.

So the bottom line is that Abraham is not all that different from you or from me. I want each of my three kids to marry and find life-long love and partnership. I want each of my children to marry spouses who share the values and commitments Sari and I raised our kids with. And I don't want anyone to marry my children because they think they're going to rake in some of my vast rabbinic fortunes and treasures. All that being said though, Abraham might be described as a bit of a helicopter parent. While I empathize with all his motives, one thing that I think a modern parent might have to do is to listen a little more to our children. Most of us are not going to hire matchmakers, and most of our kids would not quietly accept whoever we think is the best shidduch for them. The ideal scenario is for parents to be able to communicate openly and honestly with their kids about their life choices, and for kids to be respectful and considerate of their parents' views. But we also have to learn to let go, and to trust how we've raised our own children, and hope that the years they spent in our nest will inform their choices in adulthood. Of course, my oldest child is only 13, so I'm sure that in a handful of years I'll need you all to remind me of this profound wisdom, and perhaps I'll save a copy of this sermon to read to myself when the time comes.

⁵ "What's Actually Funny About Older Guy/Younger Bride Marriages," by Eric Randall. *The Atlantic*, December 11, 2013