

This Week in Torah *Chaye Sarah*

The moment Rebecca saw Isaac, we learned a great deal about her. According to the sages, it was defined in a verb. In one word, Rebecca can be seen as smitten, prophetic, deferential, modest, spiritually attuned, as well as possessing a strong free will to do as she saw fit. The verse that drew this plethora of commentary is this: “Raising her eyes, Rebekah saw Isaac. She alighted from the camel” [Genesis 24:68] The Hebrew verb is *n-f-l* which literally means “fall.” But the sages used it as a metaphor—sort of like Buzz Lightyear in Toy Story who when challenged that he could not fly, professed that he can “fall with style.” How is that for an apercu?

Here are 5 sages’ perspectives on that word that creates depth to Rebecca’s character:

1. The 11th century commentator RaSHI took his sentiment from the *Targum*, an early Aramaic translation of the Torah. He noted that *n-f-l* implied that she slid forward and she lowered herself with grace just as she did as she lowered the pitcher for Eliezer the Servant when he arrived on camel back searching for a bride for Isaac.
2. 12th century scholar ibn Ezra noted that it was a free will response similar to Moses’ response when Korach stood up to him. He *n-f-l* in order to connect to God as he yearned guidance from God. Perhaps Rebecca was *n-f-l* as she consciously sought guidance on what her next steps should be.
3. 13th century scholar RaMBaN weaved his comments with the Bible, mysticism, and rational thought; he wrote that this lowering of herself was an act of modesty. It was ethically proper for her to be on a lower level physically when she met Isaac for the first time.
4. 16th century Italian sage known as Sforno wrote that this was an act of deferential understanding of Isaac’s status. He radiated nobility; just as Na’aman stepped down from his chariot in II Kings in order to converse with the King, Rebecca lowered herself in order to speak to Isaac.
5. Chizkani who lived in the 13th century believed that there was fear present. She *n-f-l* out of fear for how her life was going to change. Thus the translation that many

commentators would suggest as “alighted” would be translated here by this sage as falling out of fear and trepidation.

These interpretations are not a “spin” to transform a stumble into something more spiritually grand. No, each commentator gives a glimpse into her soul. Thus, when a 19th century Rabbi like Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin would see the importance of Rebecca’s act to first lift her eyes and then *n-f-l* as actions taken from a woman of great character. He saw the whole sentence as an act to expose her spiritual awareness. For her to lift her eyes to wonder where her helping was going to come from and the to *n-f-l* which implied all that was listed above.

Rebecca is a woman of a great deal of spiritual/emotional depth, according to the rabbis. She was elegant and classy [RaSHI]; she demonstrated a conscious effort to choose to be present [ibn Ezra]; she was a woman who stood face-to-face with Isaac but did so with modesty [RaMBaN]; she was a woman of class [Sforno] as well as attuned to her own vulnerability [Chizkani].

She can be a spiritual role model for us all!