

This Week in Torah *Toldot*

Let me preface my comments by stating that I don't believe in a personal deity. That doesn't mean that I don't believe in God—on the contrary, my belief in God is quite real and ever present in my daily life. But when I pray, I don't expect God to “hear” me and then respond to my request because I am a nice guy! No, prayer for me is a pep rally for my soul. I need it—it won't shape the destiny of my life but it will foster my conviction and confidence as I go about living. Thus, the words of Genesis 25:21 present an interesting theological dilemma – does prayer change one's fate? Does God hear our prayers and decide whether to affirm or negate our petitions?

The verse reads: “Isaac pleaded with the Eternal on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and God responded to his plea, and his wife Rebekah conceived.” But I would argue with that translation—and so do some of the Rabbis thru-out the centuries.

First off, lost in translation is the verb *ayin-tav-resh.... A-t-r*. It appears in the sentence twice but it gets a different translation each time. The first time it is translated as “beseech” as in prayed; the second time it appears in a passive form, meaning “heard.” RaSHI taught that it is similar in usage to when the same verb appears in Ezekiel; there the implication is marked with intensity and multiplying the intensity as the verb is applied. Then there is another word—*l'nochach*—which is translated ‘on her behalf,’ but it also can mean “in front of her.” Perhaps the intensity of Isaac's prayer was for Rebecca's benefit as with such intensity she was reassured of her merit and worthiness. She was loved. She was not alone. Thus, when she conceived, she was able to transcend her sense of self to understand a greater destiny, which was revealed to her a few verses later when she was having difficulties in her pregnancy.

The second challenge that emerges from this translation was about Isaac's faith. If Isaac inherited his father's covenantal relationship, then his prayer was one of doubt. He beseeched God in a way that expressed that he did not trust the Eternal promise of building Abraham's descendants as a great nation. Some of the sages saw this too—12th century scholar Joseph ben Isaac Bekhor Shor believed that Isaac was so worried about Rebecca's well being that he prayed this in front of her. The sage asserted that Isaac trusted in God, but was helping Rebecca voice her anxiety. 16th century Italian scholar

Sforno believed that Isaac's prayer was not for a desire for conception but to plead that the offspring would be worthy of Rebecca's merit and inherit her virtues and sense of righteousness. Interesting—the usual translation has an implication of “cause and effect”; Isaac prayed, God heard, Rebecca conceived. But now, we can understand that the prayer was for comfort and her waning faith in God was restored by her pregnancy.

Finally, the author of a Chasidic anthology known as *Degel Machane Efraim*, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Ephraim of Sudilkov, wrote that thru this ordeal Rebecca's suffering morphed into a sense of altruism. And prayer was the vehicle for that transformation!

What do all these citations mean for our understanding of this verse? It can imply that when we pray and offer emotional/spiritual support for another, we can help create a catalyst that turns grief into a commitment to serve others as it helps heal the self.

Isaac's prayer was not petitionary in nature, but reframing of anxiety; giving voice to pain and fear and a sense of being alone. Reassured, Rebecca found her prayers answered—her suffering became a commitment to reengage in the prophecy found in the covenantal promise.