

A Muse: Chayei Sarah

“Then Rebecca arose with her maidens; they rode upon the camels and proceeded after the man; the servant took Rebecca and went. Now Isaac came from having gone to Beer-lahai-roi, for he dwelt in the south of the country. Isaac went out to supplicate in the fields towards evening and he raised his eyes and saw, and behold! Camels were coming. And Rebecca raised her eyes and saw Isaac; she fell while on the camel and she said to the servant who is that man walking in the field toward us? And the servant said ‘he is my master’. She took the veil and covered herself. The servant told Isaac all the things he had done. And Isaac brought her in to the tent of Sarah his mother; he married Rebecca, she became his wife and he loved her...” (Genesis 24:61-67)

This narrative while providing some information leaves out a lot of the detail, thus presenting a sketchy picture which begs to be filled in and texturized. The Torah doesn’t elaborate on Rebecca’s journey back to Isaac, or the dynamics between Rebecca and Eliezer, Isaac’s servant during the course of the journey. It appears as though the narrative was holding back some of the details. The text provides some vague information about Isaac going out to the field to “supplicate”, and later the text even relates that Eliezer informs Isaac of everything that happened on the journey. What did happen? This, the text doesn’t reveal.

Some of the language employed in the text is problematic as well. The Hebrew text says that Rebecca “fell off” the camel (*vatipol maal hagamal*); traditional commentators as well as the translation of the text reads that she “alighted”, or “leaned”. And what is the significance of Rebecca “veiling” herself. Why is that detail offered, while leaving out so many other details?

These aren’t new questions. Over the centuries various sages these and other questions. The Yalkut Shimoni too raised this question and offered some interesting insights into these queries. According to the this medrashic source, Rebecca actually became a “moocatx eitz”, the status of a non-virgin resulting from an accident, such as falling, and not as a result of sexual intercourse. Isaac, however, suspected that perhaps something had gone on between him and Rebecca on the road, so Isaac asked Rebecca what

happened to her virginity. According to the medrash she claimed that she fell off of the camel apparently breaking her hymen and becoming a “moocatz eitz”. At first Isaac accused her of lying suggesting that Eliezer had cuckolded him. She swore that it happened as she said, took Isaac to the site of the accident with the hope of finding evidence and thus vindicating herself; and lo and behold there was still the blood stains on a piece of wood. Perhaps this is the reason why our text (Genesis 24:15) stresses, and perhaps over emphasizes the fact that not only was she a virgin, but that no man “knew her”.

Regarding the significance of Rebecca veiling herself, Medrash Rabbah states that there is only one other time when our text refers to “veiling” and that is with the incident of Tamar disguising herself as a prostitute. In both episodes, Tamar and Rebecca give birth to twins.

There are other questions regarding the circumstances surrounding the marriage of Isaac and Rebecca, such as the type of Jewelry given to Rebecca. The name of her father Bethuel (related to the word “betula” – virgin) ought to give rise to wonderment as well. The meeting place at the well of water coupled with the above queries ought to give pause, and wonder what did happen between Rebecca and Eliezer on their way back to Beer-lahai-roi in the Negev.