

# TOL'DOT: INQUIRING OF GOD

## Genesis 25:20-23

20. Isaac was forty years old when he took as a wife Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean.

21. Isaac pleaded with the Eternal regarding his wife, because she was barren. The Eternal responded to him and his wife Rebekah conceived.

22. But the children struggled in her womb, and she said, "If this is so, why do I exist?" She went **to inquire** of the Eternal.

23. The Eternal said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, Two peoples shall issue from within you: one people shall be mightier than the other, and the older shall serve the younger."

וַיְהִי יִצְחָק בֶּן-אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה בִּקְחָתוֹ אֶת רֵבֶקָה  
בַּת-בְּתוּאֵל הָאֲרָמִי מִפָּדָן אָחֹת לְבָן הָאֲרָמִי  
לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה:

וַיַּעֲתֵר יִצְחָק לִיקְוֹק לְנִכְח אִשְׁתּוֹ כִּי עֲקָרָה הִוא  
וַיַּעֲתֵר לוֹ יְקוֹק וַתֵּהָר רֵבֶקָה אִשְׁתּוֹ:

וַיִּתְרַצְצוּ הַבָּנִים בְּקֶרְבָּהּ וַתֹּאמֶר אִם-כֵּן לָמָּה אֵהָא  
אֲנִי וַתֵּלֶךְ לִדְרֹשׁ אֶת יְקוֹק:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְקוֹק לָהּ שְׁנֵי גַיִם [גוֹיִם] בְּבִטְנֶךָ וְשְׁנֵי  
לְאֻמִּים מִמֶּעַיֶן יִפְרְדוּ וְלֵאמֹס מִלְאִם יֵאֱמָר וְרַב  
יַעֲבֹד צָעִיר:

## *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (Dr. Tamara Cohen Eskenazi, Ed. p. 136)

"*Why do I exist?*" Literally, "why am I?" Interpreters often say that Rebekah is bemoaning her physical pain. However, the text mentions only that the pregnancy is unsettling, not that it is painful. Instead, what prompts her question may be the prospect of multiple children, which in the Bible typically signals a special destiny. Far from complaining about her condition, Rebekah is wondering about her role in such destiny. God's answer (v. 23) confirms such a reading, since it refers to the children's future.

*Inquire.* Heb. *lidrosh*, a verb that usually designates a formal consultation, in this case with God. The text pointedly omits any mention of mediated communication, which suggests that Rebekah addresses God directly, and that God responds to her with equal directness (v. 23). The earlier picture of Rebekah as gutsy, independent, and resourceful (Genesis 24) thus continues. Yet many interpreters both ancient and modern have distanced Rebekah from a direct contact with God. One rabbinic commentator claimed, for example, that she went to a house of study. Some modern feminist commentators have speculated that she receives the information in a dream.

*When the Direct Line to God is Blocked* (by Rabbah Arlene Berger, excerpted from the article at [www.washingtonjewishweek.com](http://www.washingtonjewishweek.com))

This week's *parshah* says that Rebecca's children struggled in her womb. Right after that we read, "*Vatelech lidrosh et Hashem / She went to inquire of God*" (Genesis 25:22).

What does "*vatelech*/she went" to inquire of God mean?

Rashi posited that if we interpret the verse to say that Rebecca prayed to God, then the word *vatelech* / she went is inappropriate, because God is everywhere and therefore one needn't go anywhere to pray.

So what does *vatelech* mean? It must mean that Rebecca indeed went somewhere to inquire of God. Rashi decided that she must have gone to speak to a person of God, a wise person.

Nachmanides took the more conventional approach and understood the word *vatelech* to mean that Rebecca appealed directly to God in prayer as she was feeling such anguish about her pregnancy.

I can only imagine that Rebecca's prayer practice vacillated quite a bit over the course of her rather unusual pregnancy as it might with any major life event. Yes, God may be all around us but sometimes we have to seek God out in order to find God. Then we can find God inside us or in those around us. As it says in Psalm 145, "God is near to all who call God, to all who call God with sincerity/earnestness."

### ***Inquiring of the Lord: From Rebekah's Time to Ours*** (Rabbi Shai Held, President & Dean of Hadar)

As Rebekah struggles with the twins who are "crushing one another in her womb," she goes off to "inquire of the Lord" (*lidrosh et Hashem*) (Gen 25:22). This is one of our early models of a Biblical figure going to commune with God, and many scholars are struck that Rebekah seems to go at it alone, without any oracle or diviner.

By the time of the prophet Ezra, the meaning of *lidrosh* shifted significantly: Unlike Rebekah, who seeks God directly, Ezra dedicated himself "to study (*lidrosh*) the Teaching of the Lord" (Ezra 7:10).

The root *d-r-sh* began as an act of seeking out God's will through speaking to God, but over time, it shifts to communicating with God through God's Torah. This transformation is seen in other places: in Psalm 119, the Psalmist begs God "Do not hide Your commandments from me," (119:19) a play on the classic "Do not hide Your face from me" (Deut. 31:17, 32:20, etc.). This wordplay—from God to Torah—continues through the psalm.

In many ways, the Torah serves as an awesome, tangible manifestation of God, and that textual cord uniting heaven and earth can be the most precious thing in the world. The beauty of Judaism's text-centeredness renders our connection to God portable; we can have access to God in every conceivable circumstance. But sometimes, we can become so focused on Torah that we lose any sense of the reality of God, and we run the risk of being text-worshippers rather than God-worshippers.

If we interpret Torah without a sense that we are serving a God of love and kindness, our Torah may become stale at best and cruel at worst. Torah is (supposed to be) a bridge connecting us to a compassionate God, but we can become so focused on the bridge itself that we simply forget about what (or Who) stands on the other side.

The transformation of the word *lidrosh*, from Rebekah's time to Ezra's to ours, speaks to the transformation of communication with God. Rebekah went herself to inquire of God; for our inquiry we go to God's book. What our forefathers heard from God, we hear from the Torah. In both cases, we must remember, it is God's closeness and guidance for which we yearn.