
Exceedingly Beautiful

Haya Sarah, Genesis 23:1-25:18
Haftarah: 1 Kings 1:1-31

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Like most children, I loved hearing stories about myself when I was young. Perhaps that is why I have always been drawn to the narratives in the book of Genesis that feature Rebekah. Though I knew that it wasn't my actual story, I felt a connection to the matriarch with whom I share a name.

We are introduced to our future mother in this week's portion, Chayyei Sarah. Our text points out that Rebekah is exceptionally beautiful, of marriageable age, and has not yet been intimate with a man. All virtues that were prized during ancient times. Interestingly, however, when instructing his servant as to the location where a suitable wife might be found for his son, Isaac, Abraham neglects to mention the type of person he hopes will be found.

It is the servant, most notably, who articulates the core values of a person. It is neither beauty nor youth that he seeks. Rather, in the prayer he offers to God in Genesis 24:12-14, the servant describes a maiden who deals generously and kindly with a stranger. As if sent from Heaven, Rebekah appears, eager to provide water and lodging for this weary traveler and his camels.

As a young girl, I yearned to be like my Biblical counterpart. Beautiful and graceful. My child-like understanding of the text focused on superficial attributes, completely overlooking those characteristics that truly define a person. There is great wisdom in the lack of description of Rebekah's beauty. By not providing physical details, the reader is given a definition that beauty is a reflection of what is on the inside rather than external characteristics. Generosity and hospitality are core values that do not fade with the passage of time.

An important message for our daughters and sons. For how we evaluate genuine beauty in a beauty-obsessed culture directly impacts how our children value themselves. Elementary schools report that children as young as Kindergarten are already focused on the latest fashion trends, their weight, and their social status. And if they are concerned with such matters as children, imagine how they will feel about themselves as they make their way through the treacherous teenage years. Providing young people with a definition of beauty based on values and ethics will do much to counteract the negative messages that are bombarding them from a tender age.

Rebekah offers us with a model that ought to be emulated. To care for the stranger without hesitation. To provide shelter and necessities without resentment. To welcome others with outstretched arms. May we follow Rebekah's example in all our dealings. Then we too shall be exceedingly beautiful.
