

Parashah Twenty–Two

Genesis 24:42–67; Isaiah 12:3–14:2; James 4:13–17

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Marriage: the Foundation of Godly Community

In this *parashah* we encounter the beautiful story of the wedding together of Isaac and Rivka. In the early stages of the history of Israel, before the nation was constituted a *bona fide* nation with covenant and possession of the Promised Land, marriage was brought about and overseen entirely by the family or clan. Here, in an abbreviated fashion, we get a glimpse of the very early view of marriage as God had ordained it and given it to mankind as a gift of His grace. Though the text is silent on a number of matters, we can surmise from what the text does say those elements which were considered essential in the eyes of Abraham as he trusted HaShem to carry out the promise of the covenant to the next generation.

The first question which arises is why Abraham thought a spouse for his son Isaac would better be found among his own kindred rather than from the peoples which surrounded him in Canaan. Did not Abraham come from a society and family of idolaters? But in our text we see something very interesting. In v. 50, after hearing the report from Eliezar about how miraculously God had indicated that Rivka was the chosen one, both Laban and Bethuel respond by saying, “The matter has come from HaShem!” Here we see that Abraham’s family, by some means we have not been told, had come also to believe in the one true God, and to view life as controlled by His gracious sovereignty. Furthermore, Rivka is also seen as a woman who had committed herself to doing what the Lord desired, conforming her own wishes and desires to His. For after requesting of Eliezar that there be a waiting period for Rivka to adjust to the idea of leaving her family, Rivka herself is brought into the conversation to give her input on the matter. After the text makes it clear that God was the One who had arranged this marriage (we may presume that Rivka was also aware that her father and brother had made such a declaration), she was ready to go immediately even though it meant leaving her family behind and going, like Abraham, to a new land, living with people with whom she was unacquainted.

Let us not underestimate the quality of Rivka’s faith! Her actions link her with the faith of Abraham in acting upon the revealed will of God aside from the hardship such actions might incur. We see, then, that the earliest descriptions of Godly marriage emphasize the need for marriage within the context of faith. If we have entrusted our lives into the care of the God of Abraham, then we most certainly

can trust Him to bring about the godly marriages of our children. The same is true for each of our sons and daughters. As they rest in the all-controlling hand of God, they too may be personally assured that God has carefully chosen the one in whom their soul delights.

Second, we see, both on the part of Isaac and Rivka, a willingness to submit to their parents in the matter of marriage. We may want to mark this off as simply a cultural matter, for surely in the ancient Hebrew culture marriages were arranged by the parents. “What choice did they have?” one might ask. We know enough about fallen human nature to know that even when cultural morés are well in place, this does not negate rebellion. Yet what we see in both Isaac and Rivka is a willing submission to the choices of their parents. Is it too much to think that, as people of faith, they were willing to believe that God would work through their parents to secure their life mate? Surely they did exercise such a faith in God.

This kind of thinking, however, runs absolutely contrary to the mindset of our current culture. So fractured is the family unit in our times that young people tend to break into a kind of “I-can’t-believe-you’d-mention-it” laughter when the idea of parents arranging marriages comes up. But perhaps the whole issue of “arranged” marriages is misunderstood. In the Jewish perspective on the matter, the arrangement by the parents is done in full concert with their children, not as though the decision is made without their consent. And, further, if either the man or woman is not comfortable with the choice that the parents have made, they have the right to graciously decline—in other words, a marriage is not to be forced against the will of either one of them. But there is a recognition that parents stand in a position to give counsel and advice that the young people, on their own, could never produce. It is a proven fact, even in so-called secular society, that marriages which are blessed by parents have a statistical advantage for success over those that are not.

As parents we need to reconsider this whole issue of how we help our children take that all important step of commitment in marriage. For instance, how regularly and fervently do we pray that the Lord would prepare their future spouse? In the context of our *parashah*, prayer has figured into the success in a major way. Consider as well the whole issue of “dating.” Even a cursory glance at history will reveal that such a practice is only modern, having no basis whatsoever in the pages of the Bible. What does “dating” offer our children in the realm of preparation for marriage? That it is “normal” to dedicate one’s love and companionship in a special way, only to have it end, and start over with someone else? That such a “start” and “stop” in romantic relationship is what they should expect? What

kinds of situations do we allow our young people to be in when we allow or encourage the “dating scene?” Opportunities for intimacy at even “innocent” levels which ought never to progress to the next level? That romantic overtures between a man and woman are normal even out of the scope of commitment to marriage? It is no wonder that our young people are confused and even worse, ill-directed in the whole matter of marriage commitment and relationship. Even though we do not want our children to think that the physical relationship is the primary issue in marriage, our willingness to let them date has subtly but forcefully taught them this very thing.

In fact, the *zeitgeist* (spirit of the times) of our culture has made divorce not only a viable option, but almost an expected outcome in marriage. For the first time in the history of our nation, previous statistics have indicated that over 50% of the children attending public school (the venue where the survey was taken) live in homes in which one of the adults is not their physical parent. If this statistic is correct, we must face the fact that a majority of families in America are dealing with the effects of a divorce. How can we curb this trend? How can we build within our children that which is necessary to swim against the current of our times and not only commit themselves to life-long marriages, but formulate within them the character and principles to make their marriages last? We surely may start by rethinking this whole matter of how we prepare our teens for companionship with the opposite sex. My suggestion is that we help them see that the dating method of finding a spouse has a great many problems attached to it. If, as a community, we commit ourselves to a better way, we will lay a foundation for our children to be far better prepared for marriage in the context in which God has prescribed it.

But we must also take a difficult but important stand on the whole issue of divorce. Some, seeing the terrible trend of our times, have taken the unbiblical position that God never sanctions divorce, but this is wrong. Yeshua Himself teaches that divorce is valid in one case—where a spouse has defiled the marriage through sexual infidelity (Mt 19:9). Paul indicates a second grounds for divorce (1Cor 7) in the case where an unbeliever divorces his or her believing spouse. In this case, the believer is “no longer bound.” But apart from these two cases, the Scriptures give no clear evidence that divorce for other reasons is divinely sanctioned. Even though the courts of our land may grant a divorce for any reason, God does not. It is on this basis that Yeshua teaches that a man who marries a woman who has been divorced but not on biblical grounds commits adultery (Mt 5:32). I must hasten to say that invalid divorce, and even marriage to someone not biblically divorced, does not

constitute some kind of “unforgivable sin.” God is both able and willing to forgive sin and rebuild and restore us as we return to Him in repentance. But this is the key: the strength of marriages for our youth depends, in some measure, upon us as a community holding to a biblical perspective of marriage. When the community witnesses true repentance by those who have transgressed God’s commands, His ways are reinforced within the context of forgiveness and acceptance. When, on the other hand, blatant disregard for His ways in marriage are accepted, our young people come to the conclusion that His ways are not really valid for us, and they are all the more willing to accept the norms of society which confront and invite them continually to live their lives by their own standards rather than God’s. I hope that the principles demonstrated in the *parashah* before us today stimulate us to think and rethink this issue as we strive to regain Godly community life, something few of us knew as we were growing into adulthood.

The Torah text before us, however, is not simply a teaching on the sanctity of marriage, nor only the story of how the covenant of Abraham is to be passed on to the family of Isaac. As wonderful as these themes are, the *parashah* is full of romance, and the wonder of a Godly relationship between a young man and his bride-to-be.

The first important thing our text emphasizes is the value of a wife. A young woman who has matured and prepared herself for the role of wife and mother is a treasure beyond value. Our tradition of blessing our wives on erev Shabbat by pronouncing the words of Proverbs, “A woman of valor, who can find? Her worth is far above jewels,” constantly reminds us that a godly wife is a treasure prepared by God Himself. Eliezar hints at this when he “unwraps” all of the gifts he has carried for Rivka (v. 53): silver, gold, and garments. Is this where the tradition began that a wife deserves jewelry and clothes! But these are only a token of her value—who could match the value of a life seasoned with feminine beauty and dedicated to the Lord?

Note also that Eliezar gives gifts to Rivka’s brother and mother. It is recognized that when a young woman leaves her family to be joined to her husband, there is a temporal loss to the family. Her life has been woven together with her family, and her absence will leave a vacancy—she will be greatly missed. Of course, it is presumed that she will enhance the family with the addition of her husband and with the children the Lord may grant to that union. Still, her high value within the family is recognized: a gift of immeasurable value is given when a daughter is betrothed to a man.

The next romantic flavor we see in the text are the words of

Rivka herself when confronted with the quick departure from her family. Her mother and brother request at least ten days for her to remain, so that a longer “goodbye” could be arranged. Yet when Rivka herself is questioned, she answers with the simple “I will go.” You might question my calling this “romantic”—it appears very cut and dried. But consider what must have gone on in her soul. She had come, at some moment, to the point of decision: would she remain in the comforts and familiarity of her own family, or would she go to meet this man whom, it was apparent, God had chosen to be her husband? The text presents this decision as no struggle for her—she quickly and succinctly makes the choice. That’s why I’m calling it “romantic.” Her heart had been won over by the very thought of marriage with Isaac, though she had never seen him. Like any young lady, she no doubt had dreamed of what her chosen one would be like: his outward appearance, his demeanor, his voice, his abilities, and all the rest. But she apparently was well accustomed to trusting God for her dreams—His leading was what she leaned upon. So, having ascertained that this was His will, her heart was eager and ready to meet the one she had always loved.

So Rivka, along with her maids (those who had no doubt been entrusted with caring for her within the family setting), leave and follow Eliezar on the journey to Abraham and his family. When they arrive, Isaac is out in the fields. The text tells us he went out “to meditate” (לְשׁוּחַ, *lasuach*), but the exact meaning of the word is debated. It is only used here in the Tanach, so there are no cross-references to help. The Lxx took it to mean “gossip,” as though he was out in the field talking to his friends. The Vulgate understood it as “meditate” which most modern English translations follow. The Targum translated the word “to pray”—Isaac went out into the field at evening time to pray, according to the Sages (b.*Berachot* 26a; Mid. Rab. *Genesis* 60:14). There is an Arabic root *sacha*, “to take a stroll” that some have suggested informs the Hebrew word here. It seems most likely, however, that Isaac went to the field alone and that if he was talking, it was to God, or else he was, as the Vulgate understood it, having a personal time of thought and meditation.

One can only speculate what comprised his thoughts, but the text might hint at it by noting that he was still grieving the death of his mother, for after marrying Rivka, we are alerted that he was comforted after his mother’s death (v. 67). Regardless, this small matter gives us some insight into Isaac. He was a man of thoughts, and of feelings. To the measure that a man contemplates the deeper issues of life, to this same measure he is enabled more fully to enjoy the moments of pleasure available in relationships with those

he loves. Could we not also read between the lines and suggest that Isaac was contemplating the trip of Eliezar? Surely he was made aware of the chief steward's mission! Abraham had sent for his wife! What would she be like? Would she possess both inner and outer beauty? Would she appreciate the things that he held most dear? Could she be his companion—a friend with whom he could share both life's joys and sorrows? It's hard not to consider that Isaac too was preparing his heart for the arrival of the one for whom he longed. It seems very romantic.

And then the moment comes where the two see each other from afar. Both "lift up their eyes" (a Hebrew idiom for gazing into the distance) and see each other. Isaac wonders at the caravan coming over the horizon. Rivka, upon seeing a man in the field, stops and dismounts. After all, she's been traveling! Clothing and adornments need to be straightened. She asks Eliezar who the man is, and his answer is interesting. He identifies Isaac as "his master." But is not Abraham his master? Yet in this case, though he went at the command of Abraham, his mission was pointed toward Isaac. He had gone primarily to serve him.

Rivka understands Eliezar's words. She took her veil and covered herself. This was an act of piety as well as presenting herself as a bride. In the culture of the Israelites, it was not common for women to go about veiled. But in the Ancient Near East, at least in some of the cultures, a bride would put on a veil for the wedding ceremony. Indeed, in some of the languages of the Ancient Near East, a bride is called "the veiled one." Rivka was thus letting Isaac know that she was his bride. But the veil also spoke of her piety. Though she was promised to Isaac, and he to her, there were measures of purity that must remain until the marriage was finalized. She would present herself to Isaac as the chaste woman she was. Her high moral character enhances her attractiveness, for she would demonstrate to Isaac by her veil that she had kept herself for him.

In a short sentence, the narrative tells us that Eliezar related the whole story to Isaac. The obvious hand of God had been displayed throughout the process, and thus Isaac could be assured that this one, Rivka, was the wife God had chosen.

We're not given the details of their first meeting each other, but one could well speculate that it was most likely a formal introduction. After all, there were a lot of people standing around watching! But the formal introductions gave way to the weaving of two lives together. The text goes on (v. 67) to give us the basic outline of how the romantic story ended, and the order of events is instructive.

First, Isaac brings Rivka to his mother's tent. In other words, she is introduced to the women of the family, and takes up her residence with them. Cohabitation before marriage is out of the question. During the period of betrothal (though the text gives us no information how long this was), Rivka and Isaac remained apart from each other in terms of physical relations. This likewise enhanced the romantic flavor of the relationship. They now had seen each other, and would grow in their friendship together, but the wedding would mark the beginning of their relationship as husband and wife.

Second, then, the text tells us Isaac took Rivka for his wife. This is the typical phraseology of the Torah for denoting the formal ceremony of marriage. It no doubt included the participation of Abraham and his family. Before the two could come together as husband and wife, the community at large would be witness to their covenant together.

Then the text makes the direct statement: "and he loved her." This is now only the second time that the verb "love" (אָהַב, *'ahav*) is found in the Torah. The first related to Abraham's love for Isaac (22:2), the second of Isaac's love for Rivka. The two relationships, parent to child, and spouse to spouse, form the essential building blocks of Godly community.

Finally, Isaac is comforted. Here we see the results of God's way of marriage: not strife, trouble, loss of personal freedom, or selfish fulfillment, but comfort in the midst of a fallen world. Marriage should be God's oasis in the deserts of life in which we sometimes must travel.

We might wonder why the Sages chose our particular *haftarah* to accompany such a beautiful and romantic scene as our Torah *parashah*. This prophetic oracle of Isaiah describes the final day of the Lord when He takes vengeance upon the nations that have sought to destroy His people Israel. As *El Gibor* (God is a warrior), Adonai comes with the strength of a mighty warrior to rescue His bride and demolish her enemies. Here we see, in the stark language of prophetic vision, the final fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham: "I will bless those who bless you, and curse the one who curses you" (Gen 12:3). Thus, the prophetic oracle of Babylon's destruction is a picture of how Adonai, as the husband of Israel, will fight for her, protect her, banish her enemies, and bring her into His dwelling place of safety. In typical fashion, the Sages attach a *haftarah* reading to the Torah *parashah* which pictures the eschatological conclusion of which the *parashah* is the beginning. Just as the covenant made with Abraham is passed on to Isaac through his

marriage to Rivka, so the faithfulness of God in maintaining His covenant promises is seen in the way that He overcomes Israel's enemies at the end of days and restores her to Himself.

Note as well that in the final verses of the *haftarah* section, many from the nations (גּוֹיִם) will be “joined” (לְיִשְׂרָאֵל) to Israel and “attach” (תְּפַח) themselves to the covenant nation (14:1). This tells us how the final blessing of the Abrahamic covenant is realized: “and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed” (Gen 12:3). In this final eschatological picture given to us by the prophet Isaiah, there is only one safe place—only one *locus* of salvation—to be numbered with the chosen people of Israel through faith in the Messiah of Israel. It is this message of the prophets that informs Paul's teaching of the Olive Tree and the ingrafting of Gentiles (Rom 11).

The Apostolic reading for this week is from James 4, and the connection to our *parashah* is obvious: we are to live in the reality that God's will govern all of life's decisions. Even as Abraham, Eliezar, Bethuel, Laban, Isaac and Rivka all recognized the sovereign hand of God in the events of their lives, so we too walk by faith not by sight. As we schedule out our days and weeks, we do so with the constant recognition that our times are in the hands of the Almighty, and we plan for the future with this always in mind: “if the Lord will.” What a blessed reality to live knowing that God has prepared our way before us!

Since all the downward tracks of time
God's watchful eye surveys,
Oh! who so wise to choose our lot,
And regulate our ways?

Good, when He gives, supremely good!
Nor less when He denies:
E'en crosses from His sovereign hand
Are blessings in disguise.

Since none can doubt His equal love,
Immeasurably kind,
To His unerring, gracious will
Be every wish resigned.

(James Hervey, 1745)