



Parashat Chayei Sarah

When Gender Varies: A Curious Case of Kree and Kteev

by Rachel Brodie on Friday November 02, 2007

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Genesis 23.1-25.18, Shabbat

“In the Bible, women are rarely born, they almost never die and when they give birth it is usually to a boy.” With that caveat, Dr. Yair Zakovitch, legendary Bible professor at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, began a series of provocative lectures on women in the Bible that continues to influence my thinking about the subject ten years later.

Technically, Rebecca (*Rivka* in Hebrew) qualifies: we do not learn of her existence until she is old enough to accept a marriage proposal, her ultimate demise goes unrecorded, and when she gives birth it’s to two boys at once. However, in the interim, the scenes that make up her narrative distinguish her as one of the stronger Biblical characters and — for a 21st century, queer, feminist reader — one of the most compelling.

The Rebecca that emerges from a close reading of the narrative in Genesis 24 is a complex amalgam of traits. As seen from the perspective of the servant, Rebecca is physically very attractive (verse 16), strong and muscular (capable of drawing hundreds of gallons of water — for all those camels — in a short time, verse 20); and socially capable of acting forward and independent (talking to a stranger, accepting his gifts and issuing invitations). In addition, the servant’s test seems designed to reveal certain character traits: Rebecca proves to be hospitable and sensitive to the needs of animals but her behavior also indicates a willingness to be servile and to put the needs of others, even complete strangers, first.

From the servant’s perspective, this is a miraculous combination, one only God could have created (verse 27). Physically and socially, the person he has encountered at the well seems a perfect match for his master’s frail son. Isaac — like an animal almost sacrificed, and grieving the recent loss of his mother — could benefit from Rebecca’s sensitivity and servility, as well as her physical strength and confidence.

Of course, Rebecca is not a typical woman of the Bible, partly because of her “masculine” traits (physical strength, stamina, bold social behavior and independence). Through the eyes of the servant, the Biblical text itself seems to approve of the blending of stereotypically masculine and feminine traits. Might the character of Rebecca afford a more nuanced view of gender —



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one that extends beyond biological and social conventions? Perhaps. Though a far more radical view of Rebecca and gender emerges from a close reading of Genesis 24, not in the narrative per se but on the page itself.

Five times in this chapter, the text refers to Rebecca using a word made up of three Hebrew letters: *nun-ayin-reysh* (verses 14, 16, 28, 55, 57). *Na'ar* (the unvocalized three-letter word) refers to a young man. In printed versions of the Hebrew Bible, that word is printed in a smaller font and without vowels. Next to it, in the margins, is a “correction” — those same three letters but with the letter hay added at the end. The significance? Add a *hay*, to make it *na'ar'ah*, and you get a young woman.

A point of background: From approximately the 7th to the 10th century C.E. a group of men who came to be known as the Masoretes engaged in a process of standardizing the Biblical text (from the different versions and oral traditions that were known to them). They added letters (primarily vowels) and systematic notes for vocalization to the otherwise vowel-less, punctuation-less text. In some cases they made marginal notes indicating either their discomfort with a scribal tradition or the existence of competing traditions. One type of marginal note is called the “*kree u'ketiv*” (literally, “read and written”) — it is a note that means “the text says A but when you read it aloud, read it as (substitute) B.”

This particular case of *kree u'ketiv* involves substituting the term for a young woman (*na'ar'ah*) for the word that is actually written in the text: *na'ar* (young man). The vast majority of people who have heard this story (from ancient times until the present) or read it (since few editions indicate the existence of textual variants) have never had occasion to wonder about the oddity of this particular *kree u'ketiv*. Besides, there are some perfectly reasonable explanations offered for its existence, such as: it's not so much a *kree u'ketiv* as a spelling convention, and no *hay* was required, since the context made it obvious that it was referring to a female.

Were the Masoretes correcting a scribal error? If so, why does it appear five times in a row, all in reference to Rebecca? Why were they so concerned, when the Biblical text itself seems not to be, that future readers be clear about Rebecca's place within a rigid gender divide? Before trying to make sense of the Masoretic tradition, we need to unpack what it means to be considered a *na'ar'ah*. The term is used to refer to a girl who is pubescent, still living under her father's care but eligible for marriage. In this liminal state, she is especially vulnerable to unwanted sexual attention and should therefore remain close to home.

Given these norms, Rebecca's circumstances are ripe for tragedy: she is very attractive, out of bounds (away from home), takes candy from strangers and her difficult brother is left in charge of the household because her father isn't around. Dina, the other character who is referred to with this exact same *kree u'ketiv*, (see Genesis 34: 3,12), facing similar circumstances, is abducted and raped. But not Rebecca, Rebecca's un-*na'ar'ah*-like behavior is actually rewarded.



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As a result of being out and about, taking risks, transgressing social conventions, and defying rigid gender identification she is even treated in a manner that befits a person with agency (she gets to decide when to leave her home to journey to meet Isaac, verses 57-59) and her future is blessed (verse 60).

Is that why she's referred to as *na'ar*, a young man? If it were only a question of pointing out her non-stereotypical female behavior, we wouldn't have needed this additional proof. That much we had already gleaned from the narrative itself. What does the "*na'ar/ah*" correction add?

Perhaps the fact that the word is made into a *kree u'ketiv* given the very good reasons for having called Rebecca a *na'ar* in the first place reflects an ambiguity inherent in the word itself, one that embodies a deeper truth about the emergence of gender identity. Could it be that a *nun-ayin-reish* (whether *na'ar* or *na'ar'ah*) is a "youth" — recently pubescent, whose gender resists categorization and whose identity has yet to be forced into a rigid binary system? If so, then by preserving the Masoretic tradition have we unintentionally lost a significant insight preserved by the Bible itself?

There is also a long tradition of deriving additional meaning from a "*kree u'ketiv*." The Malbim (19th century, Russian Bible scholar) understood the *kree* to be the interpretation (*drash*) on the word and the *ketiv* as its literal meaning (*pshat*). Using the "*na'ar/ah*" example, this might mean that an individual's physiology (the literal/*pshat*) might point to one end of the gender continuum, but that person's lived experience (the interpretive/*drash*) is elsewhere on it. The assertion (only radical when applied to gender?) that the way people appear and the way they are inside might not be aligned is directly reflected in Rav Soleveitchik's (20th century, American Orthodox talmudist) understanding of *kree u'ketiv*. He associates the *kree* with a person's exterior, public self, while the *ketiv* is more the interior, emotional life.

Combining these two perspectives Rebecca may have been physiologically and emotionally more of a *na'ar*, while presenting to the world the image of (making people "read" her as) a *na'ar'ah*. Indeed, that seems to be how the servant sees her and exactly what he is looking for in an ideal partner for Isaac: a human manifestation of the divine gift of gender that is given to each of us in full spectrum.



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