

**PARSHAT TOLDOT**  
**NOVEMBER 17, 2012**  
**RABBI VERNON KURTZ**

Our Torah reading of this morning details the character development of four individuals: Isaac, Rebecca, Esau and Jacob. To my mind, the most interesting person is Rebecca. The matriarch of our people is chosen in our Torah reading of last week to become Isaac's wife. She becomes the main power behind the throne. While Isaac remains the patriarch and is the one to bestow the blessings upon his sons, it is Rebecca who decides which blessing the sons are to receive. She is enamored with Jacob while Isaac prefers Esau. The story tells us that it is her strong conviction that Jacob should be the next patriarch of the Israelite people and her view prevails.

Yet, as strong a character as she seems to be, she also has moments of vulnerability. Like every human being, she has moments when life seems out of control and she does not know how to handle it. She seems only too human in those moments.

At the beginning of our Torah reading, we are told that Rebecca is barren. Isaac pleads for the cause of his wife and the Lord responds to his plea as Rebecca conceives. The text tells us that the children struggled in her womb," and she said, "If so, why do I exist?" and she went to inquire of the Lord. G-d tells her that she is to have twins and they will represent two separate peoples, one will be mightier than the other and the older shall serve the younger.

This is a very touching moment for her. She has prayed for a child and when she has twins in utero, she is in great pain. She doesn't know how to respond to that pain and in a moment of sheer frustration and pain she cries out to G-d.

The medieval commentators attempted to understand Rebecca's vulnerability at this moment. What was behind that cry for help? Was it frustration? Was it pain? Was it a sense of life spinning out of control? Rashi states that the pain of pregnancy was so great for Rebecca that she cried out to G-d: "Why did I pray for and aspire to pregnancy?" Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra states that Rebecca's cry was of a different cause. She inquired of other women in her community if they had experienced such pains, and they said, "No." Whereupon she said, "If the manner and custom of pregnancy be as they said, why I am beset with an unusual pregnancy?"

The Ramban, Nachmanides, states that Rebecca cried out to G-d: "If it be shall so with me, why am I in the world? Would that I did not exist, that I should die or have never come into existence?" The Ramban suggests that Rebecca called out from her very soul the famous question that has been uttered by many people throughout the ages when they are in travail, pain, suffering and deep depression: "Why me? Why do I deserve this? It is better than I had not lived than to now have experienced this pain."

Ramban's understanding of Rebecca's cry shows the deep vulnerability that was part of our matriarch's make-up. She may seem to have been a strong individual with deep-set views. However, like most individuals, she had her moments. When life seemed to cast its pall over her and she didn't know how to respond, she cried out for help.

Like Rebecca, many people continue to ask those questions. Why me? Why is it that illness has come my way? How could it be that my loved one was taken from me, sometimes quickly and without warning? Why is it that life seems to be so good for others and does not go well for me?

The East Coast continues to suffer from the aftermath of superstorm Sandy. In a recent article describing the continuing affliction there is a description of Mark Kremer, a 67 year old man living in Long Island, who slept with hot water bottles under his armpits. "I talk to G-d," he says, "What did I do to suffer like this?"

These ultimate questions were those that were asked by Rebecca and by Job. The answers we do not have and the best we have learned to do is to cope with the outcome of the events that have occurred. I often say to people who ask me those questions during their time of loss or illness that Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a book that had a huge impact upon people. Kushner's title was *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. It was not, "Why Things Happen to Good People." Kushner's book is helpful because it doesn't deal with the theological aspects of loss, illness and personal travail. It deals with the coping mechanisms that help individuals to survive those moments of difficulty and personal struggle. The question of why very often leads us nowhere; the question how to cope helps us to be able to respond to life's tribulations.

A few months ago, a book was published here in Chicago entitled *The Chain of Miracles: Divine Providence in the Midst of Nazi Persecution*. The author Rabbi Meyer Juzint, was for many years a beloved teacher at the Ida Crown Jewish Academy. Rabbi Juzint lived through a world that had gone insane during WWII and had witnessed with his own eyes the terrible calamity of the Shoah. Before the war, he was a student of Talmud and Mussar, Jewish moral literature. During the war he experienced many horrors. He was encouraged before he passed away in 2001, to write down some of his experiences in the Shoah. The work was originally written in Yiddish and was recently translated into English and published locally by Congregation Kesser Maariv in Skokie under the leadership of my friend, Rabbi Louis Lazovsky.

In his introduction Rabbi Lazovsky writes that, "This book is not merely another firsthand account of the inhuman horrors mankind is capable of perpetrating on innocent victims, although that is certainly one aspect of this work. It is a unique story that chronicles the testimony and reaction of the teenage student of the famed Slobodka Yeshiva to the Nazi horrors."

Chapter-by-chapter, Rabbi Juzint tells his story. He begins in his introduction with the end, wondering why he survived the Nazi horrors while so many others didn't. He suggests that the reason is that he took a vow that if G-d would grant him the merit of living through this most horrific of experiences, he would attempt to immortalize the heroic story of our sacred martyrs who died in the sanctity of G-d's name. As a person of deep religious faith he suggests that this is the reason for his survival. He writes, "I call this book *The Chain of Miracles*, because from the first day that I lost my dear parents, brother and sisters, from the minute that I was

imprisoned in the cruel cage that the murderers built for me, the Almighty forged a 'chain of miracles,' enabling me to come out unscathed from their contemptible, bloody hands.

He tells his story beginning with Sunday, the 2<sup>nd</sup> of June, 1941, when Lithuania was conquered by the Germans and they began marching towards the capital city of Kovno and ends it with his liberation from Camp Bergen-Belsen on the 15<sup>th</sup> of April, 1945, at 4:00 in the afternoon. He outlines how time after time he was miraculously saved from certain death in Lithuania, Latvia, Hamburg and Bergen-Belsen. It is a remarkable story, one that is almost too incredulous to believe. Yet, what is even more remarkable is that Rabbi Juzint believed that the purpose of life after being redeemed was to tell the stories of this dark chapter of his history, to believe in G-d and to have profound gratitude for the many miracles that were done to him. He taught thousands of students during an illustrious career that spanned over five decades.

He could have asked: "Why me?" Instead he attempted to take this dark chapter of his own history and make of it something positive. Now, there are generations of his students who can tell his story and share his teachings with others.

Last Sunday, Elie Wiesel was honored in Chicago with *The Chicago Tribune Literary Prize*. In an interview he stated that while his memories may be painful, the purpose is positive. "My job as a teacher, as a witness," he said, "is to give hope."

All of us have those moments of despair, the true test is how we deal with it. Can we pick ourselves up from those moments and not only go on living, but add meaning to our existence? Rebecca found herself in pain and travail and at the low point of her life. It took G-d to tell her that her pain would be rewarded by the birth of two nation-creating children for her to continue to have faith in the future.

Dr. Erica Brown is the scholar-in-residence of the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington. She has written a number of books on Jewish leadership and Jewish spirituality. Currently, she is working on a book which will be published in April 2013 entitled *Happier Endings: Overcoming the Fear of Death*. In advance articles that she is writing now concerning her findings she has shared a number of poignant messages which speak well of the book and of her understanding of life.

In an article written in October in *Psychology Today* she writes of a friend who buried her father who had been sick for more than a year. Her friend told her that she had tried to write down everything of meaning that her father had said to her in those past difficult months. Brown calls it 'the notebook of her heart.' Brown states that two days before he passed away her friend said to her, "Do you know what he said to me today?" He said, 'You are so beautiful.' "Imagine that? He can hardly say anything, but he said that to me today." Rather than crying out of a sense of the futility of his situation, he offered four simple words. Brown recognizes that her friend would now hold on to those words for the rest of her life. "In darker moments," she writes, "she will know that a childhood hero thought the world of her." Brown states that while nothing can prepare you for a loss of a parent, those words offered by her father will bring more solace and comfort to the daughter than anything anyone else could say. "He left his daughter a legacy of language, even as he moved in and out of coherence," she writes.

The story of our matriarch, Rebecca, represents a real human life drama. As strong as she seemed to have been when she made the decision that Jacob would follow his father as the next patriarch and concocted the ruse which enabled him to do so, she also endured moments of deep travail, uncertainty, and even distress. Fortunately, she had support during those moments, this time by the promise of G-d, and was able to overcome her despair and make a life for herself and, eventually, the Jewish people.

We, like our matriarch, have those moments as well. I pray that we may learn from them or, at least, learn from others who go through them and make of life something meaningful for ourselves, our families and the world at-large. I pray that our lives not be filled with trials and tribulations, but if they should be, we will know how to deal with them through hope, faith and perseverance.