

## Representations of Love in Sefer Beraishit

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In a recent column in Yediot Achronot,<sup>1</sup> R. Amnon Bazak, associated with Yeshivat Har Etzion and the Herzog Institute, discussed current dating practices of various Orthodox communities in light of the stories of Yitzchak and Rivka on the one hand, and Yaakov and Rachel on the other. He claimed that practices whereby men and women decide to get married after knowing one another only for a short time were not only justified by all sorts of social and personal considerations,<sup>2</sup> but even by a verse in the Tora describing Yitzchak and Rivka's relationship:

Beraishit 24:67

And Yitzchak brought her (Rivka) to the tent of Sara his mother, and he took Rivka and she was to him a wife, and he loved her.

This verse is paradigmatically cited, according to R. Bazak, as an indication that it is appropriate to first marry someone before there are any feelings of love or other deep emotional connections, and to expect such sensibilities to develop later over time. In contrast to such an approach, R. Bazak asserts that the ideal love that exists between a Chatan and Calla prior to their marriage, "is one of the most exceptional gifts that the Holy One, Blessed be He, has Given to His Creatures," and it is this "extraordinary gift" that is celebrated in the climatic blessing of Sheva Berachot,<sup>3</sup> "...that He Created...the groom and the bride...love, brotherhood, peace and companionship..." The fact that Shir HaShirim is part of the Jewish canon further supports not only the primacy of the role of love, but its also serving as prerequisite to a serious relationship, be it between husband and wife, and/or God and Israel.

It would seem to be entirely appropriate to wonder, despite the above cited verse's assertion that Yitzchak did eventually come to love Rivka after their wedding,<sup>4</sup> whether any other aspect of their

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3983339,00.html>

<sup>2</sup> a) Honoring a Shiduch arranged by the parents of the couple, deferring to their good judgment and social connections.

b) Obviating sexual pressures that grow the longer the relationship does not include a physical component.

c) Avoiding running the risk of falling in love with the "wrong" type of person.

d) The potential problem of being unable to find the "right" person within a reasonable time frame, or perhaps ever.

<sup>3</sup> The blessings that are recited under the Chupa at the close of the marriage ceremony as well as each of the festive meals that are conducted for an entire week following the wedding.

<sup>4</sup> While the verse does not state that Rivka reciprocated by loving Yitzchak in return, then again, at least in Beraishit, women are never depicted as "loving" their husbands (Rivka is described in 25:28 as loving her son Yaakov), even if the text does state that the husbands love some of them. Consequently would the inference with respect to Rivka, or any of the other women in the book, be a statement of fact, i.e., that the emotion of love towards their husbands was simply not experienced by these wives, or does the absence of such descriptions reflect the specific point of view that the text assumes when describing the emotion that underlies marital relationships, i.e., that of the husband?

relationship reflected the existence of love between them. The fact that Yitzchak, like his father Avraham, was prepared to endanger his wife's virtue in order to protect his life (12:13; 20:2; 26:7) would appear to support a view that the emotion, if it did exist, was quick to be set aside in the presence of pragmatic considerations of life and death.<sup>5</sup> With respect to the only other significant interaction, or lack thereof, between Yitzchak and Rivka, i.e., Rivka's devising the deception that led to Yaakov obtaining the blessing meant for Eisav—the entire operation appears to have been based upon a false assumption, when Yitzchak appears to always have planned to give Yaakov the special blessing that Rivka feared he wanted to impart to Eisav, and pronounces upon his younger son a second blessing prior to Yaakov's leaving for Padan Aram (28:1-4)—would hardly appear the type of thing that would indicate that there was proper communication, let alone love, between husband and wife. I remember hearing that one commentator explained that Rivka feared that were Yitzchak to try to give a blessing to the undeserving Eisav, his sense of Ruach HaKodesh (the Holy Spirit) that marked his relationship with HaShem would suddenly be severed,<sup>6</sup> and she therefore wished to protect him from such a trauma, an indication of her deep caring for him. Personally, however, it makes more sense to me that the lack of readiness to discuss with Yitzchak how his perception of Eisav might not be correct, is a continuation of the symbolic action that marks the very beginning of their relationship:

Beraishit 24:64-5

And Rivka raised her eyes and she saw Yitzchak and she fell from atop the camel.

And she said to the servant, "Who is that man who is walking in the field to meet us?"

And the servant said, "He is my master." And she took the veil and covered herself.

Rivka right from the outset was in awe of and intimidated by the man who was to become her husband, and whom she sees for the first time. Furthermore, if the Rabbinic position regarding their relative ages is accepted, i.e., Yitzchak is forty<sup>7</sup> and Rivka is three (!),<sup>8</sup> one further realizes that the possibility of love

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<sup>5</sup> Is it sufficient to invoke the concerns of Pikuach Nefesh (the overarching value of preserving a life, even if it might entail transgressing particular imperatives) to excuse this action on the parts of Avraham and Yitzchak?

Furthermore, had it not been for God's Interventions protecting Sara (12:17; 20:3)—it would appear that Avimelech's decision to spy on Yitzchak and Avraham was based upon what had happened previously when Avraham and Sara had come to Gerar—then adultery would have been perpetrated (Sara and Rivka were married women and therefore morally off-limits to Pharaoh and Avimelech even from the perspective of the Seven Noachide Commandments) as a result of Avraham and Yitzchak's subterfuge. Had this proved to be the case, then the means for saving first Avraham's and then Yitzchak's lives would have meant for them to have caused Gilui Arayot (sexual immorality) one of the categories of sin that Pikuach Nefesh does not abrogate (see Sanhedrin 74a.)

<sup>6</sup> This would parallel what the Rabbis claim Yaakov experienced when he attempted to reveal to his sons what would happen at the end of days (49:1), and suddenly became unable to do so because God Removed from him prophetic powers—see Pesachim 56a. Due to Yaakov's challenging life and continually dealing with adversity, e.g., Eisav, Lavan, the tragedy of Dina, the disappearance of Yosef, etc., he might not have been as devastatingly affected by such an experience as might have been Yitzchak whose life, apart from the Akeida, was generally Divinely Protected—he is not permitted to go to Egypt when a famine strikes in contrast to Avraham, everything that he plants flourishes, even when his wells are filled by the Philistines, he manages to find new wells, etc.

<sup>7</sup> Beraishit 25:20.

<sup>8</sup> See RaShI on 25:20 op. cit. "Ben".

that typically is experienced by people who are closer to one another in age, becomes even more difficult to assume. So it appears to be appropriate to propose that while Yitzchak initially might experience love for Rivka, perhaps as a result of being comforted for the loss of his mother, to describe the marriage as a whole as one suffused with love is difficult to do.

R. Bazak then turns to the description of the marriage of Yaakov and Rachel, the stark contrast to the relationship between Yaakov's parents, which R. Bazak suggests is epitomized by the following verse, describing how they felt about one another over an extremely long period of time preceding the ritual that solidified their relationship:

Beraishit 29:20

And Yaakov worked for Rachel for **seven years** and they were in his eyes like several days as a result of his love for her.<sup>9</sup>

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Marveling at the image of Rivka being three at the time of her marriage, leads one to wonder how old were Yaakov and Rachel when they fell in love and eventually wed. While there is no information about the ages of Rachel and Leah when Yaakov first came to Padan Aram, there are Rabbinic calculations regarding Yaakov's age. The Rabbis posit that he was 63 at the time that he received Yitzchak's blessing (RaShI on 35:29 op. cit. VaYigva Yitzchak). This age is arrived at by considering the following:

- a. Yishmael was 14 years older than Yitzchak—17:25.
- b. Yitzchak was 60 when Yaakov was born—25:27, which makes Yishmael at that point 74.
- c. Yishmael was 137 at his death—25:17, which makes Yaakov at that point 63.
- d. Based upon RaShI on 27:9 op. cit. Achot Nevayot, since Eisav goes to Yishmael to marry his daughter immediately after the blessing incident when he overhears that Yitzchak and Rivka do not approve of his marrying Canaanite girls, and 28:9 mentioning the name of his bride, Machalat's brother as Navoyot, implies that Yishmael had just died and therefore Eisav has to negotiate for Machalat's hand with his future brother-in-law, Yaakov is 63 when he journeys to Padan Aram, eventually finding Rachel.
- e. Whether or not he was 63 when he actually reaches Padan Aram is a matter of contention since some of the Rabbis (see RaShI on 35:29) in light of years of Yaakov's life that are mentioned towards the end of Beraishit, assume that Yaakov spent 14 years in the Yeshiva of Shem VeEiver during the interim, which then makes him 77 when he first sees Rachel.

<sup>9</sup> While prior to Yaakov's working to win Rachel's hand, at the moment that he first sees his future wife, he performs an amazing feat of strength by single-handedly moving a massive boulder covering a well needed to water multiple herds, Benno Jacob does not see that act as necessarily an expression of the emotion of love:

The scene at the well had been a prelude, but there the motive had only been a feeling of kinship, and the deed had been an isolated act of valor. This labor (Yaakov's working seven years) inspired by love is more sober, but also infinitely harder. Jacob personifies the heroism of prosaic labor; its loyalty and perseverance come from the quiet glow of steady devotion to an ideal. Deep feeling and suppressed poetry come to light in these words.

--The First Book of the Bible—Genesis, interpreted by Benno Jacob, ed. Ernest Jacob, Walter Jacob, Ktav, Jersey City, NJ, 2007.

Supplying an additional consideration for why the emotion of love is critical for the success of a marriage, R. Bazak points to difficult moments in each of the two relationships under consideration. Just as Rivka found it difficult to confront Yitzchak regarding what she felt was the truth about Eisav, leading to her devising a plot whereby her husband would be deceived (chapt. 27), Rachel sharply and directly voiced her displeasure with Yaakov when she felt he wasn't as supportive as she would have liked while she was experiencing childlessness (30:1). And rather than silently accepting his wife's rebuke, Yaakov proceeds to verbally strike out against her in anger (Ibid. 2). The fact that their passionate relationship continues, even after Rachel's tragic premature death, suggests to R. Bazak that it was their deep love that saw them through, leading to the insight that couples should not only seek love prior to their marriage, but that they should work diligently to preserve that love throughout the years to come.

Even further psychological insight into the relationship characterizing Yaakov and Rachel's marriage, is offered by R. Adin Steinsaltz in the chapter entitled "Love" in his volume, Simple Words.<sup>10</sup> Also referring to 29:20 where we learn how Yaakov felt about having to work seven years before being allowed by Lavan to marry Rachel, the author comments:

At first glance, that seems paradoxical—not just because seven years is a long time, but because when one in love is separated from the beloved, a day seems like a year. Yet here, it says just the opposite: seven years was like several days.

If the love of the other is for one's own satisfaction, then being separated from the object of love causes suffering; the more intense the feeling, the longer, subjectively, time seems. When I truly love the other just because the beloved exists, not because I want anything, then seven years and three days are exactly the same. What I really get from the love is the love itself. What matters is the relationship, not the benefits derived from it. My beloved exists and therefore all is well; I need nothing more, not a smile or a look in return for my love. I do not even need my beloved to notice me. Theoretically, the greater the love, the more it is centered on the object and the less it has to do with the subject. Ideal love is concentrated on the beloved and nowhere else; the lover feels love, and does not require anything in return.

And then, in keeping with the perspective expressed by R. Akiva regarding the importance of Shir HaShirim, i.e., that it describes how God "Feels" about the Jewish people, R. Steinsaltz proceeds to discuss the love that we should have for HaShem:

The loftiest kind of love, the love of God, is described in the book of Iyov (13:15). It says there "Even if He Kills me, I still yearn for Him."<sup>11</sup> When I am aware that You, God, are

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<sup>10</sup> Ed. Elana Schachter, Ditsa Shabtai, Simon and Shuster, NY, 1999, pp. 199-200.

<sup>11</sup> R. Steinsaltz' invocation of the verse in Iyov is reminiscent of another extreme and even paradoxical description of love that appears in Shir HaShirim:

Shir HaShirim 8:6

there, everything is all right—not because the world is perfect, or all is well with my life, or because this makes me richer or happier. Life is all right because You Exist, and that in itself provides all the satisfaction I need. Job’s extreme statement defines the most unconditional kind of love.

Consequently, according to R. Steinsaltz, the Tora’s description of the love between Yaakov and Rachel not only should figure prominently in our thinking about own ideal personal relationships, but it even takes on religious overtones with respect to what to aspire for when contemplating what it means to properly relate to God.

A last thought from R. Steinsaltz on this subject:

Some people are born with a great gift for love, while others have to learn love from the very basics—possibly by expanding self-love into love for others. For others yet, love is a very difficult exercise, and in order to achieve it, even to the smallest degree, they have to make deep structural personality changes. Some people experience love only for a fleeting moment. Only a few—possibly, those who have this gift from birth—are willing, and able, to attain totally unconditional love.

Not only is this comment true in general, i.e., different individuals may have different capacities for love due to nature and nurture, but it raises questions about the personalities we have been considering, Yitchak and Rivka, Yaakov and Rachel. What were their natures like? What were their upbringings like? Were they sufficiently loved as children? What sort of self-esteem did they possess? Did events that happened to them over the course of their lives prior to meeting their respective significant other prepare them to feel and extend love? Once again, whatever may have been the case with our Avot and Emahot, we should aspire to engender love within ourselves and those close to us, not only for everyone’s personal sakes, but also to assure that we are capable of loving God in a meaningful fashion.

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...Because love is as powerful as death...

Not only is this verse cited by the Midrash Tanchuma Yeshana (VaYeishev #19, cited in Tora Shleima, ed. R. Menachem Kasher, p. 1168) in specific association with 29:18 in which Yaakov’s love for Rachel is initially stated, but it is evocatively analyzed by Amos Chacham in his commentary on behalf of the Da’at Mikra series (Chamesh Megillot, Mosad HaRav Kook, Yerushalayim , 1990, p. 69):

(paraphrase):

Included in this expression are multiple meanings:

- a) Both love and death affect all people, and it is impossible to escape either of them.
- b) Just as death is never satiated, the same is true about love.
- c) Just as death, once it has someone in its sight, will not let go until it captures the person, the same is true about love.
- d) Just as death is cruel and has no compassion, so too love is liable to generate cruel revenge (if it is unrequited).