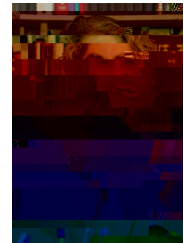




Jews have always been a community drawn together by virtue of Torah. No matter where you may be, we welcome you to the Ziegler community through Today's Torah e-mail.

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Among the several themes that wend their ways through the book of Genesis, one of the most obvious is infertility. Each of the matriarchs – yes, including Leah (Gen. 30:9) – experiences being unable to become pregnant for much of, or at least at some point during her life. In the ancient world, the inability to bear children was a terrible stigma for a woman; down to this day, the experience of infertility for those who wish to bear children and raise a family can be a source of great pain and even sometimes feelings of shame and failure.

With this, and more besides, in mind as I read the particular parashah for this week, I found myself struck by a simple, single verse – in fact, the first half of a verse. It is right at the beginning of the parashah, a statement that could otherwise easily pass by quickly and barely noticed before we get to the real heart of the parashah this week, the conflict between the twin brothers Jacob and Esau:

Isaac pleaded with the Lord on behalf of his wife, because she was barren... (Gen. 25:21)

I believe the subtle significance of this verse emerges when we compare Isaac's response here to those of both his father Abraham and his son Jacob when faced with similar situations, the infertility experienced by Sarah and Rachel.

In Abraham's case, the issue comes up in two incidents that I want to highlight here. The first of these appears in Gen. 15. Abraham (still named Abram at the time) receives a vision of God, in which God opens by reiterating a promise of abundant reward for Abraham's faithfulness. However, Abraham expresses doubts, or at least concerns:

"O Lord God, what can You give me, seeing that I shall die childless...Abram said further, "Since You have granted me no offspring..." (Gen. 15:2-3)

What stands out to me here (and which I have emphasized in the citation) is Abraham's focus on himself, on his own childlessness; he makes no mention of Sarah. The second arises when we look closely at the introduction of Hagar and Ishmael into Abraham and Sarah's family life, and more particularly Abraham's role – or rather, his pronounced lack of an active role. The initiative comes from Sarah (Sarai) and Abraham (Abram) follows her lead; "Abram heeded Sarai's request" (Gen. 16:2). He does not (at least according to the biblical text) ask any questions, anticipate any consequences positive (other than fathering a child) or negative, express any resistance, offer any

power of mandrakes to overcome her infertility?" (40). She then goes on to provide several possible answers (in the names of various women of biblical and rabbinic history, and of Jewish legend, including Rebecca herself), but I want to suggest – at least this week – that the question might not be the right one, or rather, might not be the only and best possible one to ask at this moment.

The fundamental question I want to pose this week is one of empathy. As I have already hinted

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