**THOUGHTS ON THE PARASHAH**

Rabbi Evan Hoffman – Congregation Anshe Sholom

evanhoffman@gmail.com

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**Insufferable Pain**

Rebekah experienced a very painful pregnancy as twin fetuses struggled in her womb.  Before seeking oracular guidance, in exasperation she cried outאם כן למה זה אנכי  (Genesis 25:22).  Robert Alter’s translation is “Then why me?”  Alternatively, he suggests that Rebekah’s utterance is a broken-off sentence meaning, “Then why am I…?”

In contrast, JPS renders “If so, why do I exist?”  Nahum Sarna takes her statement to be incomplete, possibly indicating a deficient text.  It literally reads, “If so, why then am/do I…?”  The Targumim, Talmudic sages, and medieval rabbinic commentators were free to speculate about what might have been the meaning of Rebekah’s elliptical remark.

The Midrash says that Rebekah asked many neighboring mothers whether they, too, during pregnancy, had felt the insufferable pain she was experiencing.  Rebekah thought that if her level of discomfort was standard for pregnant women then she regretted ever having conceived (Genesis Rabbah 63; see also Pseudo-Jonathan).  Another Aggadic passage claims that Rebekah knew that God’s chosen people would descend from twelve tribes.  Assuming she was supposed to be the mother of those twelve boys, she bemoaned her fate.  If carrying two fetuses was so excruciatingly painful, she could not fathom having to carry, and give birth to, so many more (Genesis Rabbah 97).  In this vein, Rashi explains that Rebekah was incredulously wondering why she ever desired or prayed for a child.

Another recension of this Aggadah has Rebekah asking her neighbors about the rigors of pregnancy and learning that her intense level of pain was atypical.  Rebekah then questioned why God caused her to experience inordinate suffering (Midrash Lekach Tov Genesis 25).  Ibn Ezra adopts this approach, which better accounts for the word אנכי.  That is, it was not the state of pregnancy that troubled Rebekah, but only that she seemed to be having a far more uncomfortable experience than other women.

Rabbi Pinchas Halevi Horowitz (1730-1805), in his commentary Panim Yafot, suggested that Rebekah was verbalizing her fear that the travails of pregnancy would be for nought were she to miscarry or die in childbirth.  Her desperate cry is similar to the Shunamite woman’s plea to Elisha: “Please, my lord, man of God, do not delude your maidservant (II Kings 4:16).”

Ramban explains that Rebekah was saying that she would rather die than continue living in unbearable agony.  Rebekah may have been in the habit of questioning the worth of continued existence in the face of unfavorable developments in life.  Commenting on why Jacob needed to travel to Haran to find a wife instead of marrying a local girl, Rebekah said: “I am disgusted with my life because of the Hittite women.  If Jacob marries a Hittite woman like these, from among the natives, what good will life be to me (Genesis 27:46)?”  This remark seems uncomfortably close to a 20th century American Jewish mother’s declaring that “If my son marries a shiksa, I will put my head in the oven.”

Rebekah was not the only Biblical hero or heroine to beseech God for an early release, through death, from this-worldly troubles.  Wearied by the Israelites’ rebellious ways, and not wishing to witness the punishment God sought to impose upon them, Moses shockingly said to Him: “Kill me now if I have found favor in Your eyes (Numbers 11:15).”  Job, who suffered devastating losses because of “testing” in the celestial court -- instigated by the Satan but, undeniably, acquiesced in by God -- cursed the day he was born (Job 3:1).  Elijah, on the run from King Ahab and feeling hunger and thirst in time of drought and famine, asked God to hasten his death:  “Enough.  Now, O Lord, take my life (I Kings 19:4).”  Jonah, disgruntled over having to carry out his prophetic mission to the heathens, preferred death over seeing God spare a repentant Nineveh.  He repeated his preference for death after the comforting shade of the gourd was replaced by the oppressive heat of the desert sun (Jonah 4:3, 8).

The sages regarded physical suffering to be a blessing from God and an act of love.  By experiencing discomfort in this world, and thereby atoning for sin, one is assured a more comfortable and glorious portion in the hereafter.  Accepting these theological beliefs wholeheartedly, Rabbi Akiba relished physical pain (Sanhedrin 101a).  Upon his martyrdom, Akiba had an opportunity to display his convictions by taking joy in his unimaginable suffering, much to the shock of his Roman executioners.

Most people, however, do not wish to endure physical pain.  Even many of the great rabbis, aware of the spiritual benefits of earthly pain, preferred not to suffer and prayed for quick recovery from illness (Berakhot 5b).

Halakhah categorically forbids suicide, whether physician-assisted or otherwise.  It is not up to man to determine when his soul returns to its Maker.  Ethics of the Father teaches: “Let not your evil inclination promise you that the grave will be an escape for you.  For against your will you were created; against your will you were born; against your will you live; against your will you die (Avot 4:29).”  The one Biblical counter-example is the death of Saul.  With no hope of surviving a losing battle against the Philistines, and in fear of being tortured by a savage enemy, Saul fell on his own sword (I Samuel 31:4).  During his agonizingly slow death throes, Saul requested a passing Amalekite lad to smite him and end his suffering (II Samuel 1:9).  Besamim Rosh (initially believed to be the halakhic writings of Rabbenu Asher (14th century) but actually a forgery by the renegade scholar Saul Berlin in 1793) adduced support from the Saul episode to relax the laws against suicide in the case of a terminally ill patient.  Mainstream halakhic literature rejects that line of reasoning.

While it is forbidden to take proactive measures that will definitely hasten death, hoping or praying for death and the concomitant end of physical pain is permitted and might even be virtuous under certain conditions.  Honi the Circle Maker, the Rip Van Winkle of Judaism, prayed for his own death upon realizing that he had outlived his contemporaries (Ta’anit 23a).  The maidservant of Rabbi Judah the Patriarch prayed for her master’s death because she witnessed his  suffering the painful and embarrassing effects of long-term gastrointestinal illness (Ketuboth 104a).  Nissin of Gerona (14th century), who in addition to his rabbinical office was also a practicing physician, ruled that it is necessary to pray for God’s mercy that the patient should die in circumstances where the patient’s suffering is acute and there is no hope of recovery (Nedarim 40a).

Rebekah’s incomplete question, which she directed Heavenward, is repeated every day by thousands of people suffering from life-threatening diseases.  The responsibility of the rabbi as chaplain – and this is also so for the layman performing the mitzvah of bikkur cholim – is to offer the patient comfort and the hope of a full and speedy recovery.  It is usually appropriate to contradict the patient’s negativity and gloomy attitude.  But sometimes it is entirely appropriate to listen quietly to the patient’s recounting of his or her tale of woe, and also to listen to his or her questioning of the fairness of God’s plan.  And then to join the patient in a short petition for a swift release from earthly suffering.