

## Torah Talk – מאמרי תורה



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Parashat Vayishlach  
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פרשת וישלח  
י"ד בכסלו תשע"ח

Torah Reading: *Bereshit* (Genesis) 32:4-36:43

In this *parasha*, Yaakov confronts Esav, wrestles with a “man” who blesses him by changing his name to Yisrael, loses his wife Rachel in childbirth, and experiences the trauma of the incident with his daughter Deena.

There is an event in this week’s *parasha* that often goes overlooked. In Chapter 35, verse 8, we read: “ וַתָּמָת דְּבָרָה מִיִּנְיַת רַבֵּקָה, וַתִּקְבֹּר מִתַּחַת לְבַיַּת-אֵל תַּחַת הָאֵלוֹן; ” – Devorah, Rivka's nurse, died, and she was buried below Bet-el under the oak; and he called its name Allon-bachut.”

This verse is striking for many reasons. First, this is the first and only time that this person is mentioned in the Torah, and her name comes up only to record her death. Second, Rivka’s death is *not* mentioned in the Torah; she is the only one of the matriarchs and patriarchs whose death is not recorded. Why would the Torah mention Devorah’s death and burial, but not Rivka’s? Third, Yaakov had already arrived in Bet-el in the previous verse, and was still in Bet-el immediately after this verse when God speaks to him again, as we know from verse 15: “ וַיִּקְרָא יַעֲקֹב אֶת-” – Yaakov called the name of the place where God had spoken to him Bet-el.” Therefore, the record of Devorah’s death is chronologically out of place.

The rabbinic commentaries on this verse help us appreciate the many layers through which we can understand the Torah.

Rashi’s grandson, Rashbam, offers the simplest explanation. He writes that this verse’s only purpose was to teach us that Yaakov had named this city and to explain the origins of the name, in the same way that we learn the names of all of the cities that Yaakov named on his return trip, such as Penuel, Sukkot, Shechem, Luz, Bet-

lechem, Efrat, etc. Thus, Devorah's death is recorded only as a side note to the true meaning, which is to teach us the origin of the name that Yaakov had given the city.

According to Rashi (11<sup>th</sup> century Franco-Germany), this verse comes to teach us that Rivka had fulfilled her promise to her son Yaakov that she would send for him when it was once again safe for him to return home (*Bereshit* 27:45). That is, she sent Devorah with this message, and Devorah, being elderly, passed away when she reached Yaakov.

Ramban (13<sup>th</sup> century Spain/Palestine) writes that he has no idea why this verse is here, as it does not logically fit in the text. Therefore, he suggests, we should look to the rabbinic *midrash*, which provides a very different understanding of this story:

According to the *Midrash* in *Pesikta D'Rav Kahana* 3, the twelve tribes were originally supposed to have come from Rivka, not Yaakov. According to this reading of the text, we can count up the twelve tribes from when Rivka pleads to God after the twins are fighting in her womb (*Bereshit* 25: 22-26). God responds to Rivka by telling her that "two nations are in your womb" (2 tribes); "two separate peoples shall issue from your body" (2 more tribes); "one people shall be mightier than the other" (2 more tribes); and "the older shall serve the younger" (2 more tribes). And "when her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb" (2 more tribes). Then the Torah records the births of Yaakov (1 more) and Esav (1 more), for a total of twelve, equal to the number of tribes.

So, if this was God's original plan, why didn't Rivka merit the twelve tribes? Because when she pleaded to God about her difficult pregnancy, she asked, "אִם-כֵּן, לָמָּה זֶה אֲנִי – If so, why do I exist?" The word *zeh* (so) is made up of two letters: *zayin*, which has a numerical value of 7, and *hey*, which has a numerical value of 5. According to the *midrash*, Rivka was not really entreating God about the pain, but about the idea of having 12 children. God hears her complaint and she is not given the 12 tribes. However, because of her complaint, the rabbis explain, she also did not merit to have her death recorded directly in the Torah, but only through a veiled reference when her nurse Devorah dies. The verse recording the death of Devorah is placed where it is, according to the *Midrash*, because it was while making the arrangements for Devorah's burial that Yaakov learns of his mother's death, and it is his mother that he truly mourns for.

These three different explanations offer us great insight into the different ways we can understand Torah. Rashbam explains that this verse is just like all the other

verses that explain place names and that we should not read anything deeper into it. Rashi tells us that this verse comes to show us that when a promise is made in the Torah, it is fulfilled. Ramban tells us there is no logical understanding of this verse, but that we can learn a complex lesson from the Rabbinic *midrash*.

Shabbat Shalom.

For discussion:

- Do you think Yaakov was sad when Devorah died? Why or why not?
- Why do you think the story of Devorah is in the Torah? Is there one commentary you agree with more than the others? Do you have your own explanation?
- Why do you think the Torah is written in a way that so little or so much can be read into it, as in the case above?