

Chayyei Sarah 5779

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Who would you consider the most influential and memorable biblical character?

Most people would opt for Moses, I suspect, but there could be votes for Joshua, Aaron, Miriam, Samuel, Elijah and Kings David and Solomon. You might have other heroes or heroines. What about Deborah? Then there are the matriarchs: Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah. And many people might choose from our patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

In our parasha, we have just heard about Isaac and how a wife was found for him. He's not my personal choice, but I'd like to look at him a bit more closely.

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In the general scheme of Jewish history, Isaac seems to play an insignificant part. He has neither the status of Abraham nor Jacob. In fact, in almost every episode of his life, someone is doing something for him or to him. Yet, through all that happens to him, he emerges with dignity.

One of these events in which Isaac seems to be almost irrelevant is when Abraham, on his deathbed, sends his servant to find a wife for Isaac. The servant is nameless. And, to add more anonymity to this parashah, it is unclear whether Rebekah even knows anything about her future husband since the Torah records nothing about her asking about him until they are actually within sight of one another.

Rebekah seems to be silent. The servant has no name. Rebekah's father, Bethuel, does not even play a part in the betrothal and, in fact, the Torah is not sure if he is even alive! Even the angel who is supposed to lead the servant doesn't seem to be doing much. To top it all off, Isaac is back at home wandering about and meditating. In fact, the only one who really seems to play an active part is Laban and the unnamed servant – and we all know what Laban is really after. All in all, this parashah is a theatre scene with very odd actors whose names are unknown, whose motivations are unclear, and whose actors don't really have any character development!

Yet, in spite of it all, this story is essential to the development of the Jewish people. Without any one of the players doing what they did at that precise moment in history, there would be a very different Jewish people. Isaac is a precious link between Abraham and us; Rebekah is the mother of Jacob, the primary progenitor of the Jewish people: greedy Laban agreed to the terms with the servant and permitted Rebekah to leave, thus giving Isaac a wife; and the unnamed servant was the catalyst that made it all happen.

This parashah, despite its oddness, is really an acknowledgement of some of the most important players in Jewish history. Our history is not just filled with super-prophets who speak to God on mountain tops, who challenge or inspire kings, or who destroy idol-worshippers with God's fire and earthquakes. Rather, the

great majority of Jews, then and now, are nameless ones. They have no power of prophecy. They do not have revelations. Their lives, rather, are lived in the service of their families, God and the Jewish people. They are much like you and me.

Like you and me, these ordinary people doing ordinary things are the ones who perpetuate what is best about Judaism and the Jewish people and who are the “Am” [the people] in “Am Yisrael”. To be the common person in Israel is to be the infinitely precious chain that passes Torah from generation to generation. Most of us may never be famous, but that does not mean that our tradition sees us as anything less than precious.

[slightly adapted from Rabbi Cy Stanway]