

July 6, 2014 Genesis 24:34–38, 42–49, 58–67, Song of Solomon 2:8–13  
Matthew 11:16–19, 25–30

### **An Ancient Love Story**

The days are counting down to the wedding for my daughter Jessica and her fiancé Micah on August 2<sup>nd</sup>. It is going to be a new experience for my family and friends because it is going to be at Temple Israel, the Reform Synagogue here in Ottawa, presided by Micah's father, Rabbi Steve Garten. If you had asked me ten or fifteen years ago if my daughter was going to marry a Rabbi's son I probably would have laughed out loud like Sarah at the impossibility of such a scenario.

But Jess and Micah are madly in love and all the stars seem to be lined up for a wonderful marriage. At the special blessing given to them at the Shabbat service at the synagogue two weeks ago, there were lots of expressions of 'mazeltov' from the Jewish community and a sense of warm welcome for both of them and to those of us there who were Christians and agnostics. Indeed it almost seems providential that the two of them met, one the daughter of two Christian clergy people, and Micah, the son of a Rabbi. Maybe even they will see it that way too, that God brought them together for the sake of peace in the world.

In the story of Isaac and Rebekah's marriage, providence, or the hand of God is written all over it, from beginning to end, as we are introduced to the matriarch who will step into Sarah's shoes. Isaac is not a young man when he finally meets Rebekah, the love of his life, for he is still a bachelor at 40, which is quite old for those days. Abraham, his father, has insisted that he marry someone from their own religion,

not a Canaanite woman, which has been a problem since their kin are a long way away. Finally a journey is arranged and Abraham's servant, also a man of faith, heads out to find a wife for his master's son, Isaac. There is even talk of angels being sent along with him to bring success.

The servant is truly overwhelmed by the series of coincidence that leads him to Rebekah as he finishing his prayer. What are the odds that when he came to the spring for a drink that the young woman who came out to draw water was none other than Abraham's brother Nahor's, granddaughter. In terms of lineage, Rebekah certainly met all the criteria for a suitable mate.

Rebekah though is no ordinary woman for she presents as a woman who would be an ideal partner for Isaac, through whom Israel is to flourish – remember the promise to Abraham years before when he was an old man and Sarah was also elderly and barren. There have been surprises all the way along in this story.

The picture of Rebekah paints the picture of the ideal woman to continue building the tribe- she is fair to look at, a virgin; she is friendly and generous, for she not only offers the servant water at the well but to his camels as well ( who are known to drink a lot of water!); she is independent and decisive for she does not take long to make her decision to head off across the continent to build a life with a man she has never met before (and this is without the benefit of facebook and internet dating sites!).

Even her brother Laban and her father Bethuel let her go without any fuss for they are portrayed as men of God who

are willing to trust that God's hand is in this thing. She does not travel alone though for her nurse goes along her. She will appear as a strong figure later in the Genesis stories, for her name is Deborah. When asked if she will go with the servant to a new land far away, Rebekah answers, "I will" echoing Abraham's response when God asks him to travel to a new land, guided only by the hand of God. He answered "here I am". It helps Rebekah too that she received a blessing from her community, praying she would become thousands of myriads, that she would help them to possess the land. She is clearly being designated as the new matriarch of the Jewish faith. Later in Genesis we will meet the more shadowy side of Rebekah, but today we meet the idealized Rebekah.

It was interesting to read the commentary of a female Rabbi whose own daughter was being bah mitzfahed recently and how her 14 year old daughter had chosen this text as the Torah reading which she had memorized in Hebrew and comment on. This Rabbi was deeply moved that this was happening to her family, because her own grandparents, who had suffered in Russia during the war abandoned their Jewish traditions as had her parents where she was raised in New York. Like a lot of people of that generation, they were secular and worshipped the gods of psychology and psychoanalysis. Here instead is her daughter, in 2013, finding hope and connection with Rebekah as one of the strong mothers of the faith. The Rabbi reflects:

*It is the poignant truth of this portion that Sarah does not live to see Rebecca's strength and vision. I really wish that my grandmother Goldie, the socialist, could have lived to see Sophie stand in synagogue in front of the congregation*

*and preach about Emma Goldman. But I am deeply grateful that on this [Thanksgiving](#) weekend I have that blessing.  
Amen*

The story of Rebekah and Isaac is written as a love story, the most winsome love story in the bible. When Rebekah is still far off after the long journey, she sees Isaac at a distance and seems to recognize him right away as the man she will marry. As was the custom she put a veil over her face and covered herself so she could not be seen by her groom. I love how the story ends, with Isaac taking Rebekah taking into his mother's tent where he 'took' her as his wife. And Isaac was comforted in his grief at losing his mother. Now that was a simple marriage!

Rashi, the preeminent Torah commentator, explains that while Sarah was alive, a miraculous eternal light burned in her tent. At her death, the beginning of this portion, the light is extinguished. When Rebecca comes into Sarah's tent at the end of the portion, the light is rekindled.

The light is definitely kindled in their relationship, for Isaac remains faithful and in love with Rebecca for their entire marriage, not a normal pattern in that ancient culture where the men usually had several wives. And it is pointed out that this is one of the few relationships in the bible where love is expressed between a man and a woman. The old Book of Common Prayer in the Anglican Church contains an ancient prayer in the marriage service: "As Isaac and Rebekah lived faithfully together, so these persons may surely perform the vow and covenant betwixt them made."

Throughout the month of July we will be getting to know some of the people in the book of Genesis in all their full blown humanity, in their loving and their betrayal, in their struggles to listen for and discern the hand of their God in

their lives. Today we have met Rebekah, portrayed as a strong, courageous, adventurous woman, willing trust the leading of God even into unknown territory – a worthy female counterpart to her father-in-law Abraham. And by her faithfulness, the promises of God to Israel will come to fruition. If this had not happened, Jess and Micah would not be marrying in his Father's synagogue a few weeks from now.

Tradition in marriage change throughout the generations, which itself is an interesting study. We no longer have personal servants that can be sent off to do our personal match making, although dating internet sites are far more sophisticated. Weddings can be as simple as running into a chapel in Vegas with two random witnesses, or in the minister's study, to elaborate celebrity affairs. My former colleague in Kingston presided at a wedding in a hot air balloon and one in the front window of a store ( I guess the couple were window dressers which is where they met and fell in love!) I know I would not likely do either of those two weddings. Now too, we even see mass weddings such as the Moonie weddings in past decades and now the group weddings at Toronto's Pride Week a few weeks ago. I can see why the couples sensed that their joy was magnified in such a setting where so many people are expressing their love for each other and making a sacred commitment.

Irrespective of how marriages come to be, or how couple's find each other, it is clear in our bible that God does take an interest in our love relationships and from the poetic readings from the Song of Solomon, we learn that God is very much in favour of intimacy and sexual joy and delight as an expression of our love. Judaism has seen these songs as having another level of meaning: the love between God and his people; the man and woman are then the Lord and

Israel. Christians have also allegorized mutual love: between Christ and the Church. But the basic meaning is literal: love, including sexual love based on human instincts, is blessed, a part of God's created-ness, to be valued and enjoyed.

Rebekah and Isaac, the stars of our story today because of their faithfulness and trust in God, were truly blessed with love that lasted a lifetime.

It is a wonderful way to begin our summer worship, with the possibility of love in the air, with a story of courage, adventure and openness to God's leading in our hearts. Who knows where God might lead you this summer. ....

May you be richly blessed by the generosity of God's heart, and surprising encounters through welcoming strangers; new relationships that fill your lives with hope and delight, and renewal in those ongoing relationships of love which you cherish and which give you strength. Amen