

The Greatest Female Jewish Influencer that you've never heard of (Parshat Vayishlach)

In the same chapter in which the death of Rachel our matriarch is mentioned, *Parshat Vayishlach* records the death of Devorah the former wet nurse of Rivka:

'Devorah, Rivka's wet nurse, died and was buried under the oak tree outside Beit El. And so it was named 'Oak of Weeping' (Alon Bachut)' (Bereishit 35:8).

It is significant that in the verse immediately previous to this we are reminded that Beit El was where Yaakov received a divine revelation. Accordingly, it seems clear that the death of Devorah was a major event. Moreover, the very fact that the place of her burial was named 'Oak of Weeping' clearly indicates that there was an outpouring of grief when Devorah died. But why was this so? And what made Devorah so special?

There is one further reference to Devorah earlier on in the Torah, in Parshat Chayei Sarah, when Eliezer returns from Aram Naharaim with Rivka who has been selected as the prospective wife of his master's son Yitzchak. There we are told that when Rivka departed, she was **'sent on her way, together with her wet nurse [Devorah], and with Avraham's servant [Eliezer] and his men'** (*Bereishit* 24:59). But why is Rivka travelling with her wet nurse, especially as she is now about to start a new chapter of her life?

To answer these and other related questions, I would like to summarise a brilliant essay by Rabbi Moshe Tzvi Neria (found in *Ner LaMaor* on *Bereishit* 24:59) where he helps us understand who Devorah was.

Until now we have identified Devorah as Rivka's wet nurse, and given this, it is important for us to recall the esteem with which our sages held Rivka. For example, when Rivka's father, brother and geographic origin is repeated in *Bereishit* 25:20, our Sages (*Bereishit Rabbah* 63:4 as quoted by Rashi *ibid.*) explain that this is done to, 'tell us of her praise', and that, 'even though Rivka was the daughter of the wicked Betuel, and even though she was the sister of the wicked Lavan, and even though she lived in a society of wicked people, she did not learn from their [wicked] ways'. As the Midrash then proceeds to explain, Rivka is the paradigm of, 'a lily among the thorns' (*Shir HaShirim* 2:2) - meaning that she is the exemplar of someone who is able to spiritually survive and flourish notwithstanding the fact that they are living in a spiritually toxic environment.

Beyond this, when Rivka marries Yitzchak, this is described by the Torah in a way that suggests that she is equivalent in stature and spirituality to Sarah (see *Bereishit* 24:67 & Rashi). The question then is, other than her own inner morality and spirituality, who contributed to the formation of Rivka's spiritual personality, and the answer is: Devorah.

Devorah – from the very moment she started working as Rivka's wet nurse - functions as Rivka's role model, teacher, positive influence and spiritual parent. And this is why, when Rivka left her home in which her only source of positive spiritual guidance was Devorah, she insisted that Devorah come with her.

Throughout the years Devorah was a permanent presence in Yitzchak and Rivka's household, and whatever the challenge, Rivka had Devorah to turn to and to learn from. Later on, when Rivka's son Yaakov was being tricked and deceived by her brother Lavan, who does she send to ensure that Yaakov leaves Lavan's home? Devorah! Devorah had worked for Betuel as Rivka's wet nurse,

and she'd known Lavan in his earlier years. So when Rivka felt that Yaakov may need some help to extricate himself from her brothers household, she sent Devorah as Rashi explains in his commentary to *Bereishit* 35:8: '*When Rivka said to Yaakov, "then I will send and bring you from there" (Bereishit 27:45) she sent Devorah to him to Padan Aram to tell Yaakov to depart from there*'.

Of course, even before this point Yaakov would have certainly known Devorah very well. However, it seems likely that while she was there, Devorah taught, inspired and spiritually strengthened Yaakov which would have further forged his bond with this incredibly holy and wise grandmother-like figure. This then explains why, as the verse seems to imply in our parsha and as the *Kli Yakar* states explicitly, Yaakov not only eulogized Devorah and not only cried extensively when she died, but he actually delivered such an extensive eulogy that he began his words while he was in Beit El, and only completed his eulogy when he arrived just outside of the city.

Given all this the question we must now ask is who was the spiritual guide and influencer who inspired and educated Devorah? To this Rabbi Neria suggests a powerful answer: Avraham and Sarah.

We are told that Avraham and Sarah '*made souls in Haran*' (*Bereishit* 12:5) – meaning that they educated and inspired men and women who were interested in learning about God and morality. Of those, some likely followed Avraham and Sarah on their journey to the land of Israel, while others would have sought local projects where they could teach and be an example of doing '*what is right and just*' (*Bereishit* 18:19). According to Rabbi Neria, Devorah was one of those souls who had been educated and inspired by Sarah and Avraham, and she sought to establish some outreach efforts in the nearby Aram Naharayim. There she encountered the family of Avraham's brother Nachor - whose son was Betuel, whose grandson was Lavan, and whose granddaughter was Rivka.

Due to her feeling of indebtedness to Avraham, Devorah decided to work for the family and to serve as Rivka's wet nurse, and while doing so, she realized that though her efforts could not change the evil ways of Betuel and Lavan, she had a chance to be a positive influence on young Rivka. Accordingly, she dedicated herself to doing just this, while teaching Rivka the wisdom that she'd learnt from Avraham, and specifically from Sarah.

Bringing all this together, we now understand why Rivka keeps Devorah by her side; why Rivka is later described as being comparable to Sarah having been taught Torah even as a baby from Sarah's greatest student Devorah, why Yaakov eulogizes Devorah, and why her death triggered such an outpouring of grief that her place of burial is then called 'Oak of Weeping'.

Devorah was a student of Avraham and Sarah. She was Rivka's teacher, role model and spiritual parent. And she was Yaakov's mentor, guide, coach and source of salvation. Sadly, too few of us know about Devorah. But it seems clear that she was truly **the Greatest Female Jewish Influencer**.

Shabbat Shalom!