

STUDY GUIDE

The Torah: A Women's Commentary

Parashat Tol'dot

Genesis 25:19–28:9

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Parashat Tol'dot Study Guide Themes

Theme 1: “If This Is So, Why Do I Exist?” Rebekah Asks

Theme 2: “Now, Son, Listen . . . to What I Am Instructing”—Rebekah Acts

Introduction



Parashat *Tol'dot* contains essentially three stories in which a woman, Rebekah, appears as a minor character in one of the stories and the primary actor in two. When the portion begins, Rebekah is a young married woman coping with infertility; when it ends, she is the mother of adult twin sons and the wife of an elderly and feeble husband, Isaac. In these family dramas, mostly located in household settings, Rebekah plays multiple roles: wife, mother, mother-in-law, and woman who petitions God. The parashah portrays Rebekah as forthright and manipulative, but also loving and discriminating. How do we evaluate such a woman, and how should we feel about her? The answers may lie in the lens through which each reader studies these stories, as well as the value we place on women who refuse to leave fate—their own and that of their loved ones—to others, even God.

Before Getting Started



Before turning to the biblical text and the questions presented below, use the introductory material in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* to provide an overview of the parashah as a whole. Draw attention to a few key quotations from the introduction to the Central Commentary on page 133 and/or survey the outline on page 134. This will allow you to highlight some of the main themes in this portion and give participants a context for the sections they will study within the larger parashah. Also, remember that when the study guide asks you to read biblical text, take the time to examine the associate comments in the Central Commentary. This will help you to answer questions and gain a deeper understanding of the biblical text.

Theme 1: “If This Is So, Why Do I Exist?” Rebekah Asks



We first meet Rebekah in the preceding parashah, *Chayei Sarah*, when she encounters Abraham’s servant by the well and then travels to Canaan to become Isaac’s wife. She comes across in *Chayei Sarah* as surprisingly independent and strong-willed, choosing to leave her family and go off to be part of a family she does not know. She articulates her choice in Genesis 24:58, in which she is given the opportunity to go and states that she chooses to do so. Later, when Rebekah is pregnant and deeply unsettled, she takes the extraordinary step of asking God directly to help her understand her fate and the purpose of her pregnancy. She does not appeal through any sort of intermediary; rather she takes matters into her own hands, and God responds just as directly. When Rebekah wants something—from an understanding of a situation to a particular outcome for her children’s future—she goes after it directly and, seemingly, without hesitation. Daring, initiative, and self-confidence characterize this second matriarch, who in a patriarchal world seeks no male help. Rather, she sets out boldly to obtain the information she needs and set in motion the plans that will chart her family’s destiny.

1. Read Genesis 25:19–21.

- a. Faced with Rebekah’s apparent barrenness, how does her husband, Isaac, respond? Read the Central Commentary to Genesis 25:21. According to Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Hara E. Person, what is significant about Isaac’s actions in this story? What does Isaac’s behavior suggest to you about his character?
- b. According to the biblical text, what accounts for Rebekah’s eventual pregnancy? What theological conclusions does verse 21 imply?
- c. How does the text portray Rebekah’s reaction to her childless state? How do you think she feels? Compared to Isaac’s action, what does Rebekah do? What does this suggest about her character? How do you account for her (in)action?
- d. According to the Central Commentary, what actions do other biblical women take in response to their inability to bear children? Do you agree with the Central Commentary’s description of these measures as “extreme”? What measures by a woman unable to conceive would you consider “extreme”?

2. Read Genesis 25:22–23.

- a. According to the Central Commentary on “why do I exist?” in verse 22, how should we understand Rebekah’s question? Eskenazi and Person note that this interpretation contrasts with that of other commentators. How does it compare? Based on your own reading of the text and experience with or understanding of pregnancy, what do you think Rebekah is trying to communicate?
- b. Read the Central Commentary on the word “inquire” in verse 22. Why do you think that “many interpreters both ancient and modern” chose to believe that Rebekah’s contact with God was indirect? How does such a contention affect your understanding of Rebekah’s character as well as the intent of the biblical author(s)?
- c. What are the theological implications of these interpreters asserting that while Rebekah did *not* address her question to God directly, God replied directly to her?

3. Read Genesis 25:24–28.
 - a. According to the Central Commentary on verses 24–26, what are the etymologies of the names of Rebekah’s sons? What do their names foreshadow for the reader?
 - b. According to the Central Commentary, Isaac’s favoring of Esau is based on self-gratification. Do you agree? How else might you account for Isaac’s favoritism of Esau? What does this say about Isaac and about the relationship that he will build with his firstborn son?
 - c. The Central Commentary on verse 28 suggests several reasons for Rebekah’s favoring of Jacob. Which do you find most compelling?
 - d. Do you find yourself drawn more to children whose personalities closely mesh with your own? Or to those who are different from you? What accounts for your preference? What are the challenges to forming a relationship in either case?
4. Read Post-biblical Interpretations by Carol Bakhos on pages 150–51, focusing on the commentary related to verses 25:19 and 25:22.
 - a. According to Bakhos’s synthesis of rabbinic commentary on 25:19, what were some of Rebekah’s particularly meritorious qualities? Why do you think that the Rabbis would wish to portray Rebekah in such a favorable light?
 - b. *B’reishit Rabbah* 63:6 and 63:10 add qualities to Rebekah’s character that are not found in the biblical text. What are these traits, and what do they imply about what the Rabbis value? From the rabbinic perspective, how do they help explain Rebekah’s favoritism of her son Jacob? What do they imply about Rebekah herself?
5. Read the Contemporary Reflection by Valerie Lieber on pages 152–53.
 - a. Lieber argues that childlessness remains as much of a social stigma in our contemporary Jewish world as it did in biblical times, although for different reasons today. What are those reasons? Do you agree? Explain your perspective.
 - b. In your view, does “the definition of family in the Jewish world . . . [cling] to a model of parents who have genetic offspring” (p. 153)? What has been your experience with Jews who are adoptive parents or not parents at all?
 - c. What would you do to ensure that all Jews feel welcome and validated by their communities regardless of their parenting status?
 - d. In order to make her point, Lieber takes Genesis 25:22, which was spoken after Rebekah became pregnant, out of its biblical context. When, if ever, is it appropriate to reinterpret biblical text in order to find contemporary meaning?
6. Read “I Know Four” (part III) by Amy Blank in *Voices* on page 154.
 - a. In whose voice is this poem written? When the author writes, “Will our silence be maintained?” to whose silence might she be referring? Why do you think that this silence has been “maintained” until now, and what causes the speaker to wonder if it will continue?
 - b. The narrator expresses ignorance of the cause of her husband Isaac’s nighttime shrieking, although she suggests that something “was done to him.” What might that “something” have been? How might that “something” have had an impact on Isaac’s

relationship with his wife, Rebekah? With his sons, Jacob and Esau?

- c. What does the speaker's lack of understanding of her husband's experience tell the reader about their relationship? What sort of parents does the speaker suggest she and her husband will be? Why does she predict that she will be both mother and father to her children, and why does she forecast that these sons will be "silent before Isaac"?

7. Read "Dear Descartes: Creativity" by Ada Aharoni in *Voices* on page 154.

- a. Imagine Rebekah's voice as that of the speaker in "Dear Descartes: Creativity." In that case, who are "them, this, and you" for Rebekah?
- b. The poet challenges the philosopher Descartes by contending that creativity is an even greater determinant of existence than thinking. How does this view reflect the story in Genesis 25:22–26, on which this poem is based? Do you agree or disagree with the poet's assertion?
- c. The poet offers two ways of determining a person's essence: thinking and creating. What actions do you think best define you? Are they solitary acts or are they done in relationship? Have your means of self-definition changed over the course of your life? If so, what were they previously, and how and why have they evolved?

Theme 2: "Now, Son, Listen . . . to What I Am Instructing"—Rebekah Acts



In this section of the parashah, Rebekah continues a pattern of personal behavior seen first in her direct address to God during her pregnancy (Genesis 25:22). In this story, acting alone, she devises and then executes a daring scheme to ensure that her favored, younger son receives his father's blessing (the usual pattern in biblical times was for the eldest child to assume the dominant family role following the death of the father). In her earlier inquiry to God, Rebekah hears a divine, but somewhat ambiguous message: "Two peoples are in your belly. . . . One people shall prevail over the other; the elder shall serve the younger" (Genesis 25:23). When Rebekah takes action in this episode, does she aim to fulfill God's will or her own wish for her younger son, Jacob, to transcend his birth order and supercede his older brother, Esau? The questions below will explore this complex and artfully crafted story.

1. Read Genesis 27:1–12.

- a. Read the Central Commentary's introduction to 27:1–28:9 (p. 142). According to Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Hara E. Person, what is the relationship between authority and subterfuge, and how does Rebekah employ each to achieve her goals?
- b. What sort of power do Isaac and Rebekah each possess in this story? How are they similar and how do they differ? What factors account for each character's ability to control events or the other characters?
- c. The Central Commentary explains Adrien Bledstein's "alternate reading" of Isaac and Rebekah's relationship. How does this reading compare with or shape your view of Isaac? What about your perception of Rebekah?
- d. Read the Central Commentary on verse 6, "your father," which contends that there was a much stronger relationship between Rebekah and her son Jacob than between Rebekah and her husband, Isaac. How would this difference in Rebekah's loyalties

impact her choices and actions? How does this interpretation relate to the prophecy in Genesis 25:23? What other reasons might account for her behavior?

- e. Read the Central Commentary on 27:8. According to Carol Meyers, what is the difference between authority and power? What means does Rebekah employ in order to exert power over Jacob?
- f. Have you ever been in a situation in which you had either authority or power, but not both? What was the situation and how did you exert control in it? How would the circumstances have been different had you had both qualities?

2. Read Genesis 27:13–18..

- a. In the Central Commentary on verse 13, Eskenazi and Person assert that Rebekah's willingness to take responsibility for her plot demonstrates that her plan is a selfless one. Do you agree? If you were writing a commentary on this verse, how would you interpret and explain Rebekah's willingness to take the blame?
- b. The Central Commentary on verses 15 and 17 notes Rebekah's resourcefulness in using everyday household items to carry out her deception. Imagine that you are Rebekah. Can you think of other ways that Rebekah might have achieved her goals and made sure Jacob received his father's blessing?
- c. In this story, Rebekah provides both emotional suasion and practical tools, weaving them together to accomplish her objective. That is, she both convinces her son Jacob to go along with her plan and gives him the means to do so. What do you think this reflects about Rebekah's character and intelligence? About her assessment of Isaac and of Jacob?

3. Read Another View by Diane M. Sharon on page 150.

- a. According to Sharon, how might Rebekah have "misinterpret[ed] the prophecy"? What are the "proofs" in the story—the "dire consequences"—that Sharon uses to demonstrate that Rebekah was mistaken in her understanding of God's intentions?
- b. Sharon suggests that Rebekah lacked certain character traits that would have served her better. What are they?
- c. Do you agree with Sharon's view? How differently might the story have ended if Rebekah had "the wisdom and patience to let divine intention blossom in its own time"? What might have been the consequences, both long- and short-term?
- d. Think of a time when you were torn between action and nonaction. What were the circumstances? What factors influenced your subsequent decisions, and what was the outcome? Thinking back, if you were in a similar situation again, would you make different choices?

4. Read Post-biblical Interpretations by Carol Bakhos on page 151.

- a. Read the commentary on 25:22, "YHVH said to her, 'Two peoples are in your belly.'" Bakhos explains that the Rabbis considered Rebekah to be a prophet. They believed that Rebekah received two divine communications, and therefore, her subsequent actions were justified.
- b. How does this opinion contrast with that expressed by Diane M. Sharon in her

Another View? Which of these two positions do you find more convincing and why? Can you suggest a third view?

5. Read *Post-biblical Interpretations* by Carol Bakhos on page 151.
 - a. What kind of mood does Kaufman create for the narrator, Rebecca? What feelings does she suggest that Rebecca is experiencing?
 - b. How does Kaufman's portrayal of Rebecca compare to your view of her from the biblical text? How does her portrayal of Jacob match or differ from your own?
 - c. How does the poem read between the lines of the biblical text? That is, how does the poem expand and add depth to the story and the portrayal of its principal characters?
 - d. In the last section of the poem, the speaker responds to the biblical verse "Let people serve and nations bow to thee" (Genesis 27:29). Whom does the speaker address? What are the speaker's feelings about her listener?
 - e. If you were going to write a poem about Rebekah, what kinds of imagery would you use? What specific moment or moments would you use as a way to reveal something about Rebekah? Why would you choose those details?

Overarching Questions

As you study these parts of the *parashah*, keep in mind the following overarching questions. If time permits, conclude the class with these broader questions:

1. Think of some women whom you consider to be bold and assertive like Rebekah. As compared to biblical times, how do you think contemporary American society views such women?
2. Would you characterize yourself as a “bold and assertive” person? Why or why not? If you would not, would you like to inhabit this description more fully? What prevents you from doing so?
3. Think of a time in your life when you were faced with a potentially life-altering decision. What was the situation? What personal characteristics did you bring to the situation? Did you act like Rebekah? Or did you employ other qualities? Looking back now, which traits would have best served you then? Would you make different choices today?

Closing Questions

1. What new insight into the Torah did you gain from today’s study?
2. What other new insights did you gain from this study?
3. What questions remain?



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