

Shabbat Parashat Hayyei Sarah
Biblical Intertextuality as a Key to Deeper Meaning

In this week's *parasha*, we come across one of the most well-known literary motifs in the Torah: meeting a future bride at the communal water well. At the beginning of the *parasha*, we learn that Sarah has died and Abraham arranges to purchase *ma'arat ha'makh'peila* as a burial place for her. This piece of land later becomes the family's inherited burial place. Some time later, Abraham decides that it is time to arrange Isaac's marriage and it is in this section of the narrative that we find our motif. He charges his servant with the task of journeying back to Abraham's native land to find a kinswoman to become Isaac's bride, it being forbidden to marry a woman from among the surrounding Canaanite people. After swearing an oath to his master, the servant – who we later come to know as Eliezer – travels to Aram-Naharayim, the home of Abraham's brother Nahor. There, Eliezer finds the village's communal water well and waits there for the "water girls" to come fetching water for their herds. It is there that Eliezer first meets Rebecca, Abraham's grand-niece, who later becomes, as we know, Isaac's wife. As an event on its own, there is seemingly nothing special or unique about this meeting. However, this motif has echoes in later stories, a phenomenon that cannot be ignored. As we will read in two weeks in *parashat VaYeitzei*, Jacob arrives at his uncle Lavan's village and stops at the communal water well to rest and drink. There, he encounters his first cousin Rachel and falls instantly in love. As the story goes, Rachel and Jacob eventually become husband and wife. Even further on, after Moses has fled from Egypt and arrived in Midian toward the beginning of the Book of Exodus, he too meets his future bride Tziporah at the communal water well. The commonalities between these events are not a mere coincidence, for tradition teaches that nothing in the Torah can be seen as such. They form a literary unit that cries out to be interpreted for deeper meanings. If this were not the case, then why would they mirror each other so closely? Individual characteristics of this motif have the potential to be quite revealing.

One can begin his or her examination by looking at the public nature of the encounters. At a location which has so many passers-by, the probability of the proper two people coming together at an exact time is extremely unlikely. Yet, Eliezer meets Rebecca, Jacob meets Rachel, and Moses meets Tziporah. One could interpret this to mean that there is something greater than "chance" guiding these events. It could be said that God is bringing these individuals together in order to take the next step toward the fulfillment of the covenant and to perpetuate it into the next generation of God's people. In a way, this could be the first evidence for the belief in the idea of "*beshert*," two people being somehow destined for one another.

The presence of water could also be seen as a significant characteristic in the motif. The ancestral narrative is a constant struggle between fertility and infertility for the forefathers and foremothers. However, water is a symbol of fertility and birth. Therefore, although these couples struggle in their own efforts to conceive and bear children, God had provided them with an early sign that God would be there to help with this process when the time was right. This was not so for Moses and Tziporah, but there was another "birth" through which it was their destiny to struggle: the rebirth of the Israelites as an independent people out of the bondage of Egypt. It is no coincidence either that the people pass through water in order to take their last steps away from their oppressors.

Intertextuality is one of the tools that modern biblical scholars use when they work to understand the biblical text. They look for recurring type-scenes like the one found in this week's *parasha* or even more rare words that seem to echo back to an earlier story or foreshadow an event later in the text. As we are taught, "There are seventy faces to the Torah." This means that the text of the Torah is filled with layers of meanings just waiting to be uncovered by its readers. Intertextuality is yet another key that allows us to unlock the door to these yet undiscovered meanings. So, when you encounter the text of our sacred *Tanakh* (Hebrew Bible) and are reminded of something you read elsewhere, do not overlook that intertextual echo. Sit with it for a while and see if you can uncover a new layer of meaning in the text of which you had not before thought. You will then experience the true wonder and glory that is Torah study.

Shabbat Shalom,