



**Struggling Ahead:
Torah Reflections on *Parashat Toldot*
Genesis 25:19 – 28:9
2 Kislev 5769 November 29, 2008**

In the unfolding narrative of the first Israelite family, Rebecca and Isaac experience a period of infertility, followed by a difficult pregnancy. In the depths of her pain and fear, Rebecca cries out, voicing profound uncertainty and existential doubt (see Genesis 25:22). She is given to understand that she is carrying twins with vastly different personalities, struggling even in her womb and destined to part ways from their earliest days. Thus is the stage set for a life of conflict and irreconcilable differences between sons Jacob and Esau, which Rebecca will witness and try to manage as a mother.

Where can one turn when in the midst of overwhelming or long-term suffering? When facing a persistent family conflict; a chronic and painful condition; a seemingly bottomless or endless personal trial? Reflect on your experience, or with a conversation partner: In such circumstances, when the pull toward despair may be strong, what allows us to tolerate the pain and fear, to endure with some sense of hope?

Rebecca's prayers to God are answered not with an immediate end to the painful experiences of her pregnancy, but she emerges with some clarity about what is happening (she is carrying twins); with the knowledge that some element of her suffering (the intense internal ferment preceding the boys' birth) is finite; and with the assurance that God is aware of her condition and is in some way accompanying her in this journey (in the promise of the "two nations" that would ultimately flourish from out of her womb). While the text does not state it explicitly, we are left to infer that Rebecca finds a renewed sense of purpose and determination both during the remainder of her pregnancy and beyond.

Whether we cry out in the depths of our hearts, to God, to a trusted confidante, or out into the Universe, we are following in Rebecca's footsteps. And when we have understanding companionship in response, we may be soothed, or strengthened, even as our underlying condition remains deeply challenging. Realizing that we are in motion, if only in our yearning or in the expressions of our grief, can counterbalance a sense of stagnation or being stuck in an interminable state. Similarly, having a sense of direction for "afterward", or having some confidence that aspects of our situation will eventually improve—even having the mental and

spiritual space to allow for that possibility—can similarly bolster us as we “hang in there”.

Take note also: in response to the spiritual dimension of Rebecca’s plea for help and understanding, she connects with a new contextual frame and a part of life that transcends this moment of anguish. Like Hagar and Sarah before her, and like countless generations that follow, Rebecca finds strength in a vision of her place in the flow of life as she reconnects with the Divine and with a larger future.

May we, too, in our times of deepest fear and existential questioning, our wearying seasons of bleak horizons, our moments without apparent comfort, find ways to cry out and to direct our pleas where there might be a compassionate ear, an understanding heart, a spiritual perspective, or a Divine embrace; and may all who wrestle with despair receive the strength and support to endure and reach a place of greater fullness and blessing.

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