

BS"D

Why Am I Alive?

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למה לי חיים :
Why am I alive?

That is the question of all questions!

It is the question Rivka asks rhetorically when telling Yitzhak that she can not bear the thought of Yaakov marrying a local Canaanite woman. Now we all understand the importance of not marrying outside the faith, but “Kill Me Now”?! Isn't that a bit melodramatic (mugzim)?!

Maybe not.

The truth is that this rhetorical question “why” is the last of four such questions in our parsha. Three are made by Rivka and one by Eisav. Let's start with Eisav's question and then better understand those of Rivka.

~ Eisav's Bechora ~

Eisav's “why” comes when he asks of the value of the birthright:

פרשת תולדות
(כח: לב) וַיֹּאמֶר עֵשָׂו הֲנָה אֲנֹכִי הוֹלֵךְ לְמוֹת וְלִמָּוֶה זֶה לִי בְכֹרָה :

Eisav, clearly, is not asking for an answer; he is saying, “Who needs this ridiculous birthright?!” “Of what value is a covenant that talks about the purpose (tachlit) of the creation when there is no purpose?!” Eisav believes there is absolutely no meaning, no purpose, to the world. Existence is what you see before you now. So explains the Malbim on this “why” of Eisav:

מלבי"ם בראשית פרק כח - בעת שאלך למוות למה זה לי בכורה, ר"ל אני איני מאמין בעה"ב כלל, ודעתי שאלך למוות ולא אחיה עוד בעוה"ב, וא"כ למה לי בכורה ...

If I am starving then all that matters is that I get food – WHY would I care about some “greater purpose” (covenant/birthright). This is quite similar to the conclusion that Albert Camus made: there is nothing but this life itself, so enjoy while you can.

~ Rivka's Pregnancy ~

Returning to Rivka, we will see that when she asks “why” she too is expressing her existentialist dilemma. However, she has precisely the opposite outlook on life than Eisav. If Eisav represents the atheist/existentialist who believes there is no point to existence, Rivka represents the great believer in a purposeful creation.

So when she finds that she is having a strange birth she asks, rhetorically:

פרשת תולדות
(כב: כב) וַיִּתְרַצְצוּ הַבְּנִים בְּקֶרְבָּהּ וַתֹּאמֶר אִם כֵּן לָמָּה זֶה אֲנֹכִי וַתִּלְדָּה לְדָרֶשׁ אֶת יִקְוֹק :

If you note here, Rivka is not asking “why is this happening – physically – someone please explain it to me?” If that was the question, she should go to a doctor – why is my pregnancy *physically* difficult?¹ Rather, explains the Ramban, she is saying, Why am I alive?:

רמב"ן בראשית פרק כה פסוק כב
והנכון בעיני כי אמרה אם כן - יהיה לי למה זה אנכי - בעולם, הלואי אינני, שאמות או שלא הייתי, כטעם כאשר לא הייתי אהיה (איוב י ט):

Rivka is a believer in purposeful creation so she wants to know the existential MEANING to her situation. And so she goes to ask of God. Note that the text does not say that she asked God, “Why?” No. She goes to LIDROSH – drasha – explanation. She wants an explanation, she wants to know, “Why” in the deepest sense – that is, how is this strange pregnancy related to my role in the world? This can be understood from Rashi’s comment:

רש"י בראשית פרשת תולדות פרק כה פסוק כב
לדרוש את ה' - שיגיד לה מה תהא בסופה:

God answers her accordingly:

פרשת תולדות
(כג) וַיֹּאמֶר יִקְוֹק לָהּ שְׁנֵי גוֹיִם בְּבֶטְנְךָ וְשְׁנֵי לְאָמִים מִמֶּעֶיךָ יִפְרְדוּ וְלֵאמֹר מְלֵאִם יֵאָמֵר וְרַב יַעֲבֹד צָעִיר :

Indeed, there is a great significance to your strange pregnancy, you are carrying two nations, and one will be the link in the chain of tradition – a tradition that teaches that there is a purpose to creation and a meaning to man’s existence.

~ Rivka’s Advice to “Run!” ~

The next time Rivka says “why” is when she tells Yaavov that he must run for his life to avoid Eisav’s murderous intents:

פרשת תולדות (כז: מה)

¹ On not wanting a doctor: "[If So, Why Do I Exist?](#)" (Gen. 25:22), Yael Zohar (BIU, Bible Dept.):

“It does not stand to reason that a difficult pregnancy, with the children struggling in the mother's womb, should cause a woman who had been barren for twenty years[3] to have regrets about her pregnancy. Moreover, were it a medical matter of a difficult pregnancy Rebekah would have gone to a doctor or consulted her experienced women friends, but would not have gone "to inquire of the Lord" (v. 22). Her "inquiring of the Lord" attests to theological anxiety, not to medical problems. Rebekah sensed that her pregnancy was not an ordinary one, and apparently perceived the excessive activity within her womb as a sign from G-d which required an explanation.[4]

[4] Rashi senses this difficulty in the verse and says: "The children struggled - this text requires further explanation, for what is the nature of this struggling? Also, Scripture wrote, 'If so, why do I exist?'" The midrashic commentaries of the Sages cited by Rashi focus on religious issues of faith and inheritance."

רש"י בראשית פרשת תולדות פרק כה פסוק כב
(כב) ויתרצצו - על כרחך המקרא הזה אומר דורשני, שסתם מה היא רציצה זו וכתב אם כן למה זה אנכי. רבותינו דרשוהו לשון ריצה, כשהיתה עוברת על פתחי תורה של שם ועבר יעקב רץ ומפרכס לצאת, עוברת על פתחי עבודה זרה עשו מפרכס לצאת. דבר אחר מתרצצים זה עם זה ומריבים בנחלת שני עולמות:

עד שוב אף אחיד מִמֶּדָּה וְשָׂכַח אֶת אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתָ לוֹ וְשָׁלַחְתִּי וּלְקַחְתִּיךָ מִשָּׁם לִמָּה אֲשַׁכַּל גַּם שְׁנִיכֶם יוֹם אֶחָד:²

Note again that this is a rhetorical question – she is not waiting for an answer – she is making her claim by way of an unanswerable question.

Now, of course, she, like any mother, doesn't want to lose her son. But she has a lot more at stake with Yaakov than simply “a son” – he is the inheritor of the legacy, he is the one who will carry on the birthright, he is the one that will make their lives meaningful by fulfilling the will of the Creator.

If this seems forced, the very next verse, in which Rivka once again asks “Why?” when she argues with Yitzhak that he must have Yaakov go get a wife far from home, demonstrates clearly that every question “Why?” is laden with existential import.

~ Rivka's Cry Against Intermarriage ~

And so we return to that last “why?” that we started with:

פרשת תולדות
(כו: מו) וַתֹּאמֶר רַבִּיקָה אֶל יִצְחָק קַצְתִּי בְּחַיֵּי מִפְּנֵי בָנוֹת חַת אִם לִקַּח יַעֲקֹב אִשָּׁה מִבְּנוֹת חַת כְּאֵלֶּה מִבְּנוֹת הָאָרֶץ לִמָּה לִי חַיִּים:

Here Rivka makes the most bombastic claim: WHY DO I LIVE?! But now we understand her question is not merely the cry against an inappropriate marriage, it is about the fulfilling the purpose of creation! Her question here, like all the other “why?”s, is existential: What is the point of my life?! That is, my life has a purpose – to fulfill the covenant, to be part of a chain of tradition that sees a point to creation. If Yaakov marries a Canaanite, in all probability his kids will assimilate into the local culture and that will be the end of our mission. If so, WHY DO I LIVE?!

The great gift of Judaism is the gift of PURPOSE. We believe – above all else – that creation has a purpose, and life a meaning. This is our gift to the world.

So Rivka was not being melodramatic (magzima). For Rivka, it is not a question if there is purpose, but if I cannot fulfill it: WHY DO I LIVE?!

למה לי חיים

That is the question of all questions!

This is the question we should ask ourselves everyday.

Shabbat Shalom.

² רש"י בראשית פרשת תולדות פרק כז פסוק מה

גם שניכם - אם יקום עליך ואתה תהרגנו יעמדו בניו ויהרגוך, ורוח הקדש נזרקה בה ונתנבאה שביום אחד ימותו, כמו שמפורש בפרק המקנא לאשתו (סוטה יג א):

חזקוני בראשית פרק כז פסוק מה

(מה) למה אשכל גם שניכם יום אחד אביך ואתה שהרי עשו אמר יקרבו ימי אבל אבי וגוי נמצא שיצחק מת עשו יהרג את יעקב ואז אהיה שכולה משניהם ביום אחד מבעלי ומבני.