

BS"D

Why Am I Alive?

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למה לי חיים

Why. Am. I. Alive? That is the ultimate existentialist question. That is the question that Rivka asks towards the end of this week's parsha. And that is the question that ultimately made me religious (שבועקבותה חזרתי בתשובה). Today I am an orthodox rabbi, I learned at Yeshivat Mercaz Harav and got semicha from Rav Zalman Nechemia Goldberg. But I was raised totally secular Jew.

I had a good life (חיים כפיים); but when I was about 7 years old, and I found out that people die. We are not here forever. So I asked myself: "Why am I alive?" I mean, if we are just going to check out, what's the point? Growing up in LA it didn't take me long to get onto the GreecoRoman answer: eat drink and be merry for tomorrow we die (אכול שתי ועשה חיים) כי מחר נמות. But then I thought about it a bit more and I realized that when you are gone, you are so gone, you don't even know you ever existed. So what's the point of "eat drink and be merry"?

אבל אז חשבתי על זה קצת יותר ואמרתי לעצמי, כשאתה מת, אתה כל כך "איננו" שאתה אפילו לא יודע שאי פעם היית - אז מה הטעם של "אכול ושתי ועשה חיים"!!

So, again, "Why am I alive?"

The answer is in this week's parsha.

As we said, Rivka asks this question towards the end of the parsha, but her question "Why?" is really only one of four times in the parsha that we read of the questions "Why?" Three are made by Rivka and one by Eisav – and all, I propose, are motivated by existentialism. Let's start with Eisav's question and then better understand those of Rivka.

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

בראשית פרשת תולדות פרק כה

וַיִּתְרַצְצוּ הַבְּנִים בְּקֶרְבָּהּ וַתֹּאמֶר אִם כֵּן לָמָּה זֶה אֲנֹכִי וַתִּלְדָּה לְדָרֹשׁ אֶת יְקֹוֹק:

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, as a believer in purposeful creation, 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, simply: “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 :

B’sofah – a teleological question – she wants to not the ultimate end, the purpose, the meaning of her situation.

God answers her accordingly:

פרשת תולדות - (כג) וַיֹּאמֶר יְקֹוֹק לָהּ שְׁנֵי גוֹיִם בְּבִטְנֶךָ וְשְׁנֵי לְאֻמִּים מִמֶּעֶינֶךָ יִפְרְדוּ ...

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 מתרוצצים זה עם זה ומריבים בנחלת שני עולמות :

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:

בראשית פרשת תולדות פרק כז - (מה) עד שוב אף אחיך ממך ושכח את אשר עשית לו ושלחתי ולקחתיך משם למה אשכל גם שניכם יום אחד: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. She says, I don't want to lose you both in one day – Yitzhak, the bearer of the bechora, the covenant, the purposeful mission of life, and Yaakov, the next generation, the continuation of the bechora.

~ Rivka's Cry Against Inter-marriage ~

And so we arrive at the last "why?" that we started with:

פרשת תולדות (כו: מו) ותאמר רבקה אל יצחק קצתי בחיי מפני בנות חת אם לקח יעקב אשה מבנות חת כאלה מבנות הארץ למה לי חיים:

Here Rivka makes the most bombastic claim: Why Am I Alive?! Of course she is concerned like any parent that her child marries an appropriate individual. But "Why do I live?" Is this not a bit melodramatic? Is this not a bit over the top? Now that we

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 – 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.

understand that each “why” question is an existential “why” we can understand that it is not over the top at all.

Her question is not merely the cry against an inappropriate marriage, (it is that, of course, but in a very deep way), 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 (חוליה (בשרשרת המסורת) 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. A Jewish Marriage isn’t just about shacking up (לגור ביהד באופן רשמי) – it is about being a link in the chain of purpose. 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 Am I Alive?!

Rivka is all about purpose. She wants to ensure that she fulfills her part in the bechora. So want to ensure that the bechora is continued.

So, to the question, Why Am I Alive?

למה לי חיים

the answer echoes throughout the parsha:

- Because there is a Creator.
- Because there is a goal (tachlit).
- Because there is purpose (mashmaut).

And that is the reason I became religious.

Shabbat Shalom.