

'I Will'

By Erica Brown

I once tasked a group of leaders to come up with a six-word mission statement in the spirit of Ernest Hemingway's famous six-word short story. A person in the back of the room shared, in six words, a life lesson he carried with him from his father: "Always do the right thing. Period." These six simple words continue to give him moral clarity. Rebecca, in Parashat Chaye Sarah, has her own two words of clarity: "I will."

Rebecca had a moment when a complex decision suddenly became abundantly clear. Eliezer, Abraham's servant, was tasked with finding Isaac a wife. He traveled to relatives of the family and devised a test of kindness. This, above all other qualities, was essential for a member of Abraham and Sarah's household. Rebecca's kindness, we are told, took the form of watering Eliezer's many camels. Camels consume great amounts of water; the offer to provide them with water was a sure sign that Eliezer had identified Isaac's future soulmate. Later, Rebecca rode one of those camels to meet Isaac. She was kind to the camels, and one of those camels, it seems, reciprocated. Rebecca was so taken with Isaac upon first sight that she actually fell off her camel!

But enough about camels. Focusing on Eliezer's camels minimizes other important and overlooked details in this romantic story. Rebecca's kindness was evident before this famous gesture. When Eliezer encountered her at the well, he asked for a little water for himself. Then she gave him water. Then she watered his camels. Then Eliezer checked if Rebecca was a relative of Abraham's. Then he asked if there was room in her father's house for guests. With each request, Eliezer asked more of Rebecca. This, too, may have been part of Eliezer's test.

Rebecca's reply was full of self-assurance: "'I am (anokhi) the daughter of Bethuel the son of Milcah, whom she bore to Nahor.' And she went on, 'There is plenty of straw

and feed at home, and also room to spend the night'" (Gen. 24:24-25). Rebecca invited Eliezer to join her family of her own accord. She did not wait for her father's permission. It is this that Eliezer noticed immediately. He suddenly bowed and thanked God for making his job so easy: "Blessed be the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who has not withheld His steadfast faithfulness from my master. For I have been guided on my errand by the Lord to the house of my master's kinsmen" (Gen. 24:28).

Later, after negotiating with the family, Eliezer wanted to take Rebecca back to his people. The group sought out Rebecca's opinion, and with that same confidence and clarity she displayed earlier, Rebecca responded. "'Will you go with this man?' and she said, 'I will'" (Gen. 24:58).

Rashi explains Rebecca's assertion; she would go of her own accord even if her family did not consent. Rebecca knew her own mind. Rashi's grandson, Rabbi Samuel ben Meir, adds that it was common courtesy to ask the bride if she wanted to spend her engagement period with her family or go to her new family. In saying "I will," Rebecca was confirming her desire to make her future happen rather than waiting for it.

Rebecca looked forward. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks advises us to always do the right thing. Period. "Don't wait for the world to get better. Take the initiative yourself. The world is waiting for you" (Covenant and Conversation, "The World is Waiting for You"). When you have lucidity on the course of action before you, don't wait another minute. And Rebecca didn't.

In these two scenes, Rebecca took charge of her destiny. It is only in Genesis 25, when her pregnancy proved painful and mysterious, that she questioned her existence. When twins struggled in her womb, she said, "If so, why do I (anokhi) exist? (Gen. 25: 22). So, she marched up to God with her characteristic curiosity and directness, and God answered her. There is an authenticity to Rebecca because of her I-awareness that is both profound and disarming.

Rebecca's strong sense of self was suddenly altered by her pregnancy. The first biblical character who acknowledged a personal identity had to negotiate, with twins in her belly, the transformation within from one to three. Children shifted her from an 'I' to a 'we'; it is a joyful transition but one that can also be untethering. Dr. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, in her book The Murmuring Deep: Reflections on the Biblical Unconscious, contends that Rebecca "...was the first biblical character to speak the

word anokhi as a term of identity...With total assurance she had initiated the construction of the human subject as anokhi...What has eroded her confident subjectivity?"

In their 2011 Harvard Business Review article "Managing Yourself: Stop Holding Yourself Back," Anne Morriss, Robin J. Ely and Frances X. Frei speak to the personal identity of leaders. Those who construct a false identity for the public may find themselves tottering: a "common impediment to leadership is being overly distracted by your image — that ideal self you've created in your mind. Sticking to the script that goes along with that image takes a lot of energy, leaving little left over for the real work of leadership." Maintaining an inauthentic identity has genuine psychic costs, the authors write: "Once you've crafted your persona and determined not to veer from it, your effectiveness often suffers. The need to be seen as intelligent can inhibit learning and risk-taking, for instance. The need to be seen as likable can keep you from asking tough questions or challenging existing norms. The need to be seen as decisive can cause you to shut down critical feedback loops."

These authors argue that the difference between image and impact, between looking powerful and empowering others, forces a terrible choice "between impersonating a leader and being one." Rebecca offers us a model of authenticity. She impersonated no one. She was determined to help, determined to chart her future and determined to understand why she suffered. All of this came out of her I-awareness. God honored this in her by responding to her directness. God made her the mother of not one nation but two.

Reading about Rebecca's fierce courage prompts us to ask our own identity questions. In leadership and in life, when has betraying who you are led to loss and shame? When has honoring and articulating who you are helped you have greater impact?

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