

## On the Perils of Pregnancy: A Letter to Rivkah

Rabbi Annie Lewis, Director of Recruitment and Admissions for Religious and Educational Leadership and Assistant Dean of First Year Rabbinical Students, JTS



Dear Rivkah—

This season, as I encounter the story of your pregnancy, I feel your fear in my chest.

Before you bravely took leave of your family, they blessed you that through your line would come thousands upon thousands of descendants. When you struggled to conceive, Yitzhak pleaded with God for you to bear children.

The Torah records how the boys thrashed about in your womb: וַיִּתְרַצְצוּ הַבָּנִים בְּקִרְבָּהּ. You cried out, אִם־כֵּן לָמָּה זֶה אֲנִי, “If this is how it is, why do I exist?” (Gen. 25:22).

You must have been so scared. Something did not feel right in your body. You were separated from your mother and your family of origin. Your mother-in-law, Sarah, was no longer alive. To whom could you turn to understand what was happening inside you? Midrash Bereishit Rabbah describes how in your suffering, you circled the entrances of the tents of the women, asking, “Was it like this for you, too?”

Rashi comments that in your distress, you regretted longing for the pregnancy in the first place. Ramban believes that, overcome with pain, you questioned why you were alive at all. Sforno says that you sank with dread that one of the twins would take the life of the other in utero, causing you to succumb to the perils of childbirth. Even before the boys emerged, you carried the terror in your belly that one might kill the other.

Never one to simply let life happen to you, you got up and sought out answers. Some of your learned descendants say that you found your way to the ancient Beit Midrash of

Shem and Ever, reaching for wisdom, wrestling for meaning. Others, like Ramban, insist that you cried out to God, longing for a prophecy of how the future would unfold.

When I was pregnant with my first child, I remember the day my center of gravity shifted. During a music rehearsal at the congregation where I was serving as a rabbi, I attempted to hoist myself backwards to sit on the edge of the bimah. It was a move I had done dozens of times without thinking, and that afternoon, the laws of physics no longer permitted it. I was shocked to learn that during pregnancy, organs shift, stretch, and shrink to accommodate the growing fetus. For nine months, I drank chocolate milk, craved rice and beans, and struggled to sleep. After two days of labor, my body feverish, my blood pressure high, there was a birth complication I hadn't even known to worry about. Before I could process my fear, the care team had called a code. Nurses and doctors flooded the room. A midwife pushed on my belly, set my daughter free, and placed her hot on my chest.

When I recall your story, Mother Rivkah, I relive my own birthing experience, and I am awestruck. I ask with the intonation of wonder, “If this is so, how is it possible that I even exist?” If this is what it means to bring new life into the world, what are the odds that each cell would understand its assignment, that the myriad openings and closings would work according to plan?

Pregnancy is perilous to begin with and pregnant people and their medical teams need every tool and resource available to care for them. In recent years in this country, legal protections have been stripped away from women. We have been denied reproductive healthcare at the expense of our lives, bouncing between emergency rooms and crossing

state lines to seek out medical assistance, the way you went from tent to tent looking for anyone who could help you.

Rivkah, for your sake, I pray for the courage to ask and to act so that pregnant people receive the healthcare they need to live. May we feel safe enough to bring every question to our care providers and our communities, to give voice to each hope and each doubt. May we share the stories of what it means to live in our own bodies, each one of us, a singular soul.

*Elohei Rivkah*, God of Rivkah,

*Harahaman*, God of Compassion,

Choreographer of Wombs,

Be with us as we birth a new world into being.

Hold us when we are floored by your wonders.

See us when we sit in darkness,

afraid for what may come.