

I am Rebecca

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Even though I am a rabbi, I have spent my life nursing a wound I felt from the Jewish community. It was the hurt of rejection as I watched our community shy away from my younger brother Sam. He has Downs syndrome. Not only were there no accommodations to help him access our faith, but it was obvious to me how uncomfortable people felt around him.

As I grew into adulthood and studied our tradition, I became more puzzled. So many of our ancestors had what I saw as similar issues, not the least of whom was Isaac. Understanding Isaac in this way, begs the question, what was life like for Rebecca, a woman who was tricked into becoming his wife, when what he needed was a mother or sister? Here is my answer:

I am Rebecca. Daughter of Bethuel great-niece of Abraham. I am of Nahor....desert wind and sand. I am patron of the well, answer to servant's prayer, camel thirst and rock and stone. I am Rebecca, womb of battled nations. Host to struggling twins; Jacob and Esau. I am Rebecca.

Often on Rosh Hashanna day, you read about my husband Isaac. You hear Torah, in chant and cadence, spin tales of his love and passion for your God. My husband the hero, the patriarch.

But, today, let **me** tell you about my husband. Let me tell you about the Isaac only hinted at in the text. Let me tell you the truth.

Sometimes I sit here and just watch him. Now that we are older, his eyes are dim. He always forgets to shield them from the brilliant desert sun. They flicker a little...eyelids moving slightly. And I wonder what it is Isaac is thinking about.

When I first saw Isaac, it was obvious to me there was something different about him. I was so shocked I fell off my camel, asking with fear, "who is that man!" My only friend in this strange land I would come to call my home, the servant who accompanied me on my journey, responded with such sadness and guilt, "that...is my master." To hide my tears, I covered my face with my veil. I realized then, I had not come to be a wife, I had come to be a caregiver, a mother, a guide.

On our first night together Isaac brought me into his mother's tent. He knew only this. How much I had to show him! And you venerate him while ignoring his truest self! Do you not see what the text is trying to tell you? Have you forgotten how to look at the spaces in *between* the letters? The spaces where I live. Where my life, an expanse of loneliness and sorrow, stretches before you.

When I explained to Isaac he had to dig wells for water, what did he do? Followed the path of his father before him and re-dug the same ones again and again. And all this work! Then the herdsman of Gerar came along. They knew Isaac would believe anything because they saw him as simple. So they waited until the wells were dug and then explained to Isaac that these wells actually belonged to them. And what did my husband do? He gave them the wells and

moved on to dig yet another. Why do you read this and think of Isaac as a man of peace? Why can't you see how simple he is?

This man who followed his father up a mountain, carried his own instruments of death. Any other human being would have known. Would have rallied, would have fought. A grown man tied to an altar by his aging and frail father? A grown man waiting, trusting, watching his father raise a knife and never once, not once, thinking to protect himself? How do you not see? Yes, I've tricked him. Cajoled him. Pushed him. My survival depends on my husband. I can only live by treating him like my puppet.

And yet, what he has given me! This is a man who relates to others so simply and purely. No tricks or lies or hidden feelings. And this is how he relates to God. Such pure joy radiating from his face when he speaks to Adnai. Such trust and love, such plain and transparent connection.

He has gifted this to me. I know God now in ways which I would never understand without Isaac. Nothing interferes when I connect to God, I have no rational doubt or question. Isaac has no logical filter, no intellectual way of disbelieving what his emotion, his instinct knows is real. He cannot debate against his ethereal awareness of Divine love.

Is the trade off worth it? Silence in the place of where a husband and wife share their tasks and thoughts and fears. Dependence instead of friendship or romance. I don't know.

I sit here and watch this sleeping man; husband in name, child in practice. His unseeing eyes no longer dance beneath his lids. I love him so. You can't care and worry and nourish someone this long, without loving him absolutely.

What hurts most is I will never know what he thinks about just before he falls asleep. I'll never know if he thinks at all, or if he just remembers images from the day. All those years ago, if I had only known to what I was coming.

PAUSE

Just now, I spoke as Rebecca, watching a husband struggle through life with an intellectual disability. But, I do not live as a wife with an intellectually disabled husband. I live as a sister with a brother who has Downs syndrome. I live as a sister who **has** often wondered what Sam thinks just before he falls asleep. I have watched *his* eyes dance beneath closed lids, frustrated I may never know the thoughts contained therein.

Having a brother with Downs syndrome has forced my family to admit we are not perfect. It has *also* forced us to see imperfection exist everywhere in the Jewish community. And, having a brother with Downs syndrome has shown me the discomfort the Jewish community sometimes has with our own imperfections. When reminding a rabbi once my brother had Downs, the rabbi asked quickly (and clearly without thinking), "is he Jewish, too?" I have no idea what this comment meant, but I am afraid I do know where it came from: mentally deficient and Jewish, is this possible?

Much of the material I used in this sermon today is from rabbinic literature. The rabbis struggle with Isaac's diminished senses from our earliest Midrash written before 400 BCE to modern text. They might not say it as explicitly as I just did, but the midrash is riddled with references to Isaac's diminished intelligence. However, this does not stop the sages Z"L, from honoring Isaac. He is one of our great patriarchs. According to Shabbat 89b, Isaac, not Abraham or Jacob, will redeem us from Gehenna, the underworld. Isaac is both a celebrated father of Judaism AND characterized as develop mentally delayed.

Our tradition is rich with embracing the diversity of the human condition. Jacob, with his hip wrenched by a divine being, leaving him disabled for the rest of his life, Moses, so severely speech impaired he had to have Aaron speak for him. Sarah, so anxious after giving birth she had another woman and her child banished from her sight. Aaron, his failure of faith so great it nearly killed the Israelites standing in prayer before the golden calf. And the majority of our matriarchs were actually barren before they gave birth to our patriarchs.

Look at heroes! *Their* imperfections did not tarnish their greatness. In fact, it is through their imperfect human condition we are given a heritage honest and full and beautiful, one that speaks to who we REALLY are as human beings. But, somewhere along the way, as a people tossed about homeless and oppressed, as a people fighting for survival in each generation, we seem to have become afraid of our flaws. "We are intelligent!", we tell the world, strong, mentally healthy, able bodied, well off.

We are Jews, so desperate to be recognized by the world as equal human beings, yet, sometimes unwilling to accept that which makes us human. We are deaf, yet I wonder how many synagogues have sign interpreters. We are blind, yet how many prayer books are written in braille. We have physical handicaps, mental ones. We suffer from cancer and AIDS and turrets syndrome. We are healthy and at times we are not. Mental illness is part of having a mind that functions in a physical form...just like any other part of our body, things can happen. But, the stigma has become so great! We get married, often times forever, but just as often, not. Sometimes, we are successful, but we cannot be successful all of the time; we lose our jobs, we fail at school. It is mandated by the fact of our humanity that we must experience these things within our communities. These normal, human things, marginalized **only** by our great desire to be perfect.

We struggle with alcoholism, drugs...domestic violence.

In my time as a rabbi, I have seen much progress. Many synagogues host 12 step meetings, have mental health support groups, speak publicly about domestic violence and child abuse.

We've made progress in celebrating beautiful things in our community, as well. Men falling in love with men and two women creating a family together. It is now rare to find a Reform rabbi who does NOT officiate at same-sex weddings. When I was first ordained, only few of us would.

And yet... And yet. We have so far to go to de-cloak natural issues from shame and stigma. To not just pay lip service to inclusiveness, but to realize we NEED diversity, we need humanity in our community.

My family members and my life are richer for having a brother with Downs. My time as a congregational rabbi and my current consulting work would not be so successful had I not grown up with Sam. My experience with him trained me to profoundly listen and respond and intuit others. Those who turned away from him because he looked different or scary lost this experience, lost this opportunity to enrich themselves.

So, too, with mental health. During my time as a congregational rabbi in Oakland, CA I watched as those who regularly attended Torah Study spoke more and more honestly and emotionally open to each other. Their inspiration? One adult learner, with bi-polar and years of counseling always spoke bluntly, candidly about her feelings regarding not just the text, but the other students in the room with her. It created a closeness and trust in the class.

At Fairmont and CTC, whenever someone faces a health crisis in the synagogue, those in their auxiliary group (religious school, brotherhood, same committee) draw closer to each other, more involved with not only the life of the patient, but the lives of each other.

And my own home synagogue? When we moved to Boston, MA and were embraced as a family, others shared with us how their own joy on holidays was increased watching Sam interacting with our friends, the rabbis, and God.

What do we do to ourselves when we ignore the rich diverse offerings of the human condition? What do we lose? And more than that, what pain do we inflict on people when we ask, “is he Jewish, too?”

Yes, he is. Sam is Jewish. Isaac was Jewish. Rebecca was in pain, I’ve been in pain. Rebecca knew the great gift of having Isaac in her life. I know the great gift of having Sam in mine.

For all of us, who happen to be created in God’s image, to be created imperfect or in a way not yet recognized as normal by our society, the pain of isolation does NOT need to compound the pain of being human. And it is in OUR power, our ability to honor and cherish these differences. To make accommodations necessary so everyone can feel full, complete, just-as-good members of our community. This is the only for us as a Jewish people to be full and complete. And then maybe, we’ll realize we are good enough. Nothing to prove.

When we can fully embrace all of ourselves, we become whole. When we honor every individual in our community, we develop skill and emotional depth otherwise inaccessible.

Let us join to ensure no other family gets lost. Let us ensure we don’t lose out as a people.

May each soul, each element of the divine in us, find its place in our community. And through them, may we find the highest of ourselves.