

There is a tradition in my family that we are descended from the Kotzker Rebbe, the 19th-Century Hasidic master, Menachem Mendel of Kotzk. My great-great-great grandfather was born in Kotzk and named after the Rebbe, and generations later, his *chassidim* would stay at my grandfather's house when visiting their town in eastern Poland.

My father has always reminded me of this possible lineage. And more than the *yichus* (the connection to a great rabbi) — what I have always understood is that my father sees *me*, the granddaughter of a Holocaust survivor, called to take responsibility for the Jewish People.

The Kotzker Rebbe famously taught:

אין דבר יותר שלם מלב שבור.

There is nothing more *whole* than a broken heart.¹

We might ask, isn't wholeness just *the opposite* of brokenness? How is a heart that has been broken even *more whole*?

There is wisdom *that comes from moving through* painful experience. Brokenness can heal, can scar, or stay broken — and can still grow into a new and miraculous *wholeness*.

Broken hearts abound in this week's parsha, *Hayyei Sarah*.

A midrash in *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer* recounts that Sarah herself dies of a broken heart. After hearing that her son *Itzhak* was almost sacrificed at the altar, she weeps and cries three times, corresponding to the three moaning *tekiyah* blasts of the shofar, and then her soul departs from her body.²

¹ Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, 19th Century Poland (well-known saying; cited in *Ohr Chadash*, 5:4:30, with footnotes and annotations by Rabbi Yehoshua D. Hartman, Machon Yerushalyim, 2014) (emphasis added).

² Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 32:8.

The Torah juxtaposes Sarah's death with Avraham's intense emotion:

וַיָּבֹא אַבְרָהָם לְסַפֵּד לְשָׂרָה וּלְבַכָּתָהּ

Avraham came to *mourn* Sarah and to *cry* for her.³

Two different words used to show the depth of Avraham's broken heart!

He then rises up from his sorrow to arrange for her burial, and swiftly moves to finding a wife for Itzhak.

Avraham's trusted servant is given the task, and he devises a character test: The right woman will offer him water, and then will water his camels.⁴

Rivka passes the test, displaying the very same hospitality and generosity attributed to Avraham.⁵

But when I imagine Rivka at the well, I see *more* than Avraham's hospitality. I see a young girl who is acting in the world as girls and women *ever have* and *still are* taught to act: keep your head down, learn what authority figures want, do excellent work according to those standards, and wait to be noticed.

We see right away that Rivka is eager to please, serving water to this visitor from afar.⁶ She then looks for ways to be even better, to do *even more*. She does not walk — she *runs quickly*, וַתָּמַר — to draw water for his camels. And she does not just water them; she waters them *all the way*, until they stop drinking.⁷

There is an intensity and a focus in her orientation towards achievement.

Rivka is familiar to me. The rhythms of my own life have closely tracked ambitious academic and professional goals, and I have *been* Rivka at the well — trying so hard to be good, doing what I'm supposed to do, and waiting to be noticed.

³ Bereshit 23:2.

⁴ Bereshit 24:14.

⁵ Bereshit 18:1-4.

⁶ Bereshit 24:16.

⁷ Bereshit 24:19.

Some time ago, I came across a Joan Didion essay from 1961, entitled “On Self-Respect.”⁸

Didion reflects on her loss-of-innocence moment when she was not elected to Phi Beta Kappa, a first defeat in a life of overwhelming accolades. The pain was so acute because, in her words, “[t]o such doubtful amulets had my self-respect been pinned.”⁹

Despite her myriad achievements, she had not only failed to *earn* the Phi Beta Kappa key; more *crucially*, she had failed to develop a *real* self-respect that could withstand its absence.

“To do *without* self-respect,” she warns, “is to be an unwilling audience of one to an interminable home movie that documents one’s failings, both real and imagined, with fresh footage spliced in for each screening.”

Didion further advises not to rely on external approval or people-pleasing — that *real* self-respect will “free us from the expectations of others, to give us *back* to ourselves.”¹⁰

If women could speak to each other across time — and I do believe that they can somehow! — I can hear Didion urge Rivka at the well to look within *herself*, to develop what Didion calls “a certain *toughness*, a kind of moral nerve,” a “willingness to accept responsibility for one’s own life.”¹¹

And in my magical story, Rivka hears Didion, looks down at her hands, worn from drawing water for others, and realizes she’s waited too long to be chosen, so she stands up and *she chooses* to leave.

⁸ Joan Didion, “On Self-Respect,” <https://www.vogue.com/article/joan-didion-self-respect-essay-1961>, reprinted in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 142-148.

⁹ *Id.* (emphasis added).

¹⁰ *Id.* (emphasis added).

¹¹ *Id.* (emphasis added).

Back in the Torah's narrative, there is an extended negotiation for Rivka's betrothal. After the men all agree, they still need her consent. She understands that this means long travel in the desert and marriage to a man she has never met.

She answers: אֶלְךָ - "I will go."¹² We can hear this language as submissive, or we can hear her as *brave!* She is *choosing* the next stage of her *own* life.

Dr. Amy Kalmanofsky teaches that Rivka's voice here in "אֶלְךָ" can be heard as an echo of the language that God used previously to call Avraham to service: *Lekh Lekha*.¹³ Just as Avraham is tested, so too is Rivka tested at the well. And just as Avraham before her trudged through that desert path to Canaan, Rivka makes the same arduous journey.¹⁴

I see striking growth in Rivka. Recall that Avraham's answer to *Lekh Lekha* is that he essentially does what he is told, whereas Rivka speaks "אֶלְךָ" in her *own voice*: "I will go"!

I wonder, when she arrives in Canaan, how might she have *changed*? Is she sunburned, scars on her feet from the hot desert sand? Is she less innocent, less obedient? Is she more tough, more resilient? Is she more *herself*?

Peeking into the next chapter of her life, we know that Rivka will remain brave, and resolute, and *gutsy* enough to take control of her family's destiny.

But her brokenness is still a part of her; it grows into strength and wisdom.

And her husband Itzhak, who has endured such trauma, we know is *differently* brokenhearted too. His experience of the *Akedah* cracked open his soul and cemented his devotion to God.

¹² Bereshit 24:58.

¹³ Dr. Amy Kalmanofsky, Lecture 11/7/19.

¹⁴ Dr. Amy Kalmanofsky, Lecture 11/5/19.

He needs no test of faith, nor great journey, nor further sacrifice. He has already displayed the ultimate obedience to God that day on the altar, when according to Rashi (the medieval commentator), he kept walking alongside his father, אָרַךְ עַל פִּי שְׂהַבִּין יִצְחָק, שְׂהוּא הוֹלֵךְ לְהַשְׁחֵט [himself].¹⁵

Also mourning his mother's sudden death, his heart is already in a doubly vulnerable place. We might imagine that he, more than any of our Biblical ancestors, is open and tuned-in to the brokenness of the world.

אין דבר יותר שלם מלב שבור.

“There is nothing more *whole* than a broken heart.”¹⁶

Painful experiences transform us. If we didn't know this yet *in our bones* before the pandemic, we certainly know it *now* — now that we are *all* struggling, now that we are *all* more brokenhearted.

We are each walking through this in our own way, moving through stress, anxiety, isolation, and other heightened emotions. Maybe we can even feel ourselves changing.

How will we respond to this historic upending of time, place, of life?

Will we be like Sarah, as the midrash imagines her death — bereft, speechless, paralyzed by our grief? Or will we wait to be called like Avraham?

We all have grief and we all need guidance, and we all have scars on our feet from this journey.

Please God, please God, as we rebuild ourselves, may we grow like Rivka and Itzhak to be more *shaleim*, more *whole*, *through* our brokenheartedness — ultimately not needing to impress anyone, nor to prove ourselves — but emerging in strength and resilience, hope and survivorship, together. Amen.

¹⁵ Rashi's commentary on Bereshit 22:8.

¹⁶ Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, 19th Century Poland (well-known saying; cited in *Ohr Chadash*, 5:4:30, with footnotes and annotations by Rabbi Yehoshua D. Hartman, Machon Yerushalyim, 2014).