Rebecca: The First Dialogic Philosopher

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Abstract

The following essay is a creative, midrashic excavation of the Genesis of Isaac and Rebecca’s world. The tools used in excavating the narrative are limited to the works and insights of three dialogic philosophers, Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas - complimented with a few citations from Abraham Joshua Heschel and Avivah Zornberg. In fact, the following is the author’s reading of these thinkers into the narrative. In using their thought midrashically, the author takes liberties with their insights and use them out of the context in which they wrote. In doing so, the author’s voice could be easily confused with their voices.

I am reduced to myself in responsibility, outside of the fundamental historicity Merleau-Ponty speaks of.

—Emmanuel Levinas

Isaac was traumatized after the Akedah and his mother’s death. But the bible makes no mention of such trauma. Instead of psychologically investigating Isaac after being bound on Moriah and the death of his mother Sarah, the narrative takes the reader to Isaac’s partner in creating and building a future; Rebecca. Yet, upon meeting Rebecca, the reader is told little about her disposition toward the world. All we see are her actions; but after examining her actions, one may find Rebecca is pregnant with the ethical creativity needed to build a new community. The following essay is a creative, midrashic excavation of the Genesis of Isaac and Rebecca’s world. The tools used in excavating the narrative are limited to the works and insights of three dialogic philosophers, Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas - complimented with a few citations from Abraham Joshua Heschel and Avivah Zornberg. In fact, the following is my reading of these thinkers into this narrative. In using their thought midrashically, I take liberties with their insights and use them out of the context in which they wrote. In doing so, my voice is easily confused with their voice. Thus, when I am not quoting or referring to a specific thinker, it is important that one does not ascribe my use or meaning of their insight to the particular philosopher, even when traces of their philosophies are clearly in my meaning.

In this approach, the biblical narrative of Isaac and Rebecca takes on new meanings while exemplifying many dialogic insights, most notably those of Levinas. In developing modern meanings from Rebecca’s narrative, I am reminded of Moses Maimonides’ approach to the bible: “The sole object of all the trials mentioned in Scripture is to teach [one] what [one] ought to do…so that the event which forms the actual trial is not the end desired; it is but an example for our instruction and guidance.” I turn you now to the biblical narrative.

After Sarah’s death and burial, Abraham instructs a servant to go find Isaac a wife. Upon hearing Abraham’s command, the servant asks if she does not consent to come, should he take Isaac back to the land from which Abraham has come. Abraham responds with:

On no account must you take my son back there! The Lord, the God of heaven, who took me from my father’s house, who promised me an oath, saying, “I will give this land to your offspring” – He will send His angel before you, and you will get a wife

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for my son from there. And if the woman does not consent to follow you, you shall then be clear of this oath to me but do not take my son back there. iii

Isaac is not allowed to return to Abraham’s ancestral land. If he does, Isaac no longer offers something new, a saying that has not been said, so to speak. And Abraham is condemned to being no more than his past; that which has been said. Simply, God’s promise to Sarah and Abraham that many nations will descend from them goes unfulfilled.

Here, perhaps, Isaac is emptied of his Abraham’s former history that sacrificed life to idolatrous traditions. Without the safe haven of his father’s traditions, Isaac stands exposed or vulnerably open to the unknown, unable to move back, unable to move forward. Yet, in his vulnerability, Isaac is open to that which has no historical precedent (in the biblical narrative). In desiring and awaiting the arrival of a stranger whom he does not know and yet will build a new world, Isaac is not present in a way that he can historically locate himself; he is beyond the traditions of his father and mother. He and Rebecca will give birth to Jacob/Israel (Jacob’s name is changed to Israel in the Bible. Israel means one that wrestles or strives with God) whose descendents (the children of Israel, the Israelites) will be chosen by God to usher in God’s moral order. It is in this succession that breathes historical life into Isaac. And although God has promised that many nations will emerge from Abraham’s children, how is it possible for Abraham and Isaac to comprehend what this means any more than one comprehends what it means to promise to live with someone (such as in marriage) through that which is unknown (when making the commitment)? In his openness that resists tradition, Isaac is agreeing to that which he does not yet know and/or understand, just as the Israelites will later agree to a covenant with God that they do not completely understand upon receiving it, but ideally come to understand it through performing it.

Isaac’s exposure, openness, or historical emptiness is not a-historical, nor is it indifferent. Isaac’s return from Mount Moriah emptied him of tradition or history. The bible does not say that Isaac comes down from Mount Moriah with Abraham. In Genesis 22:19, it is written that Abraham returns from Moriah. The text does not say that Isaac returned with him. In this space where Isaac is not mentioned, we may say that Isaac let his father go, no longer hanging on to Abraham’s robes. In other words, “Isaac now became a man who for the first time could let his father go and who would return later, at his own choosing...” iv

In separating from his father, Isaac begins to understand that, for his sake, the world was created. He is responsible for it, not via his father, but independently of his father. This does not mean he may treat the world as a receptacle for all his actions. It means that Isaac is responsible for the world, for the peace of the world. He is to exercise the Mishnaic teaching that pervades Levinas; a single person is created for the sake of peace.1

After Moriah and Sarah’s death, Isaac is in a liminal space – in between past and future, just as one waiting for a beloved’s answer to a marriage proposal is suspended between past and future. It is as if Isaac is empty and waiting to be filled with or identified by that which he does not know, Rebecca’s response. But I am getting ahead of myself. It is important not to confuse historical emptiness with a lack of will or indifference. Isaac’s historical emptiness is no more indifferent than his need to breathe air; it is no more indifferent than the

1 The Talmud’s Mishnah Sanhedrin 4,5 states: “Only a single person was created in the beginning, to teach if any individual causes a single person to perish, Scripture considers as though an entire world has been destroyed, and if any one saves a single person, Scripture considers as if a whole world had been saved. Again, just a single person was created, for the sake of peace.”

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unfulfillable, obsessive, desire of God and Israel’s love for one another. Continually calling out for one another, God and Israel both inspire and are inspired by one another as we find when God’s call for a biblical character is answered with “Here I am,” as if saying, “Here I am for you,” or when the call is heard, but rejected, and one runs away from the call as one finds the Israelites often doing when God calls, and as God does in Isaiah 54:8 when God turns away from Israel: “In slight anger, for a moment, I hid My face from you…”

When called upon, one is awakened out of oneself and finds oneself responding for the other. And from here, we may surmise that whoever calls Isaac out or identifies him is the one who inspires or awakens Isaac into subjectivity in the way that God’s breath breathes life into Adam and Eve. The call from God, and the call he will soon hear from Rebecca (manifest in her arrival with the messenger), breathes self-consciousness into Isaac. Simply, the other, such as Rebecca, signifies Isaac’s subjectivity. But before hearing her call, Isaac is empty. His emptiness reveals a passivity that is receptive to the other. (This use of passivity highlights that he does not choose to hear the call of the other. He hears without choice; one does not choose to hear the call of the other, but one may choose how to respond. “That which must be received in order to make freedom of choice possible cannot have chosen, unless after the fact.” In philosophically illustrating the emptiness of passivity that signifies one’s subjectivity, Levinas writes:

…the emptiness of space would be filled with invisible air, hidden from perception, save in the caress of the wind or the threat of storms, non-perceived but penetrating me even in the retreats of my inwardness, that this invisibility or this emptiness would be breathable or horrible, that this invisibility is non-indifferent and obsesses me before all thematization, that the simple ambiance is imposed as an atmosphere to which the subject gives himself in his lungs, without intentions and aims, that the subject could be a lung at the bottom of its substance – all this signifies a subjectivity that suffers and offers itself before taking a foothold in being. It is a passivity, wholly supporting.

As Isaac remains open, the messenger goes to find him a wife. He is looking for someone who is open to the other, who is concerned for the other, cued by the other. To be cued by the other is to be directed, implicated, demanded, obligated by the other, etc. In other words, the servant is looking for a woman like Isaac: a woman who is open or passive and who is responsible.

Upon finding Rebecca, “The servant runs toward her and says, ‘Please, let me sip a little water from your jar.’ Rebecca replies, ‘Drink, my lord’… and she quickly lowered her jar upon her hand and let him drink. When she had let him drink his fill, she said, ‘I will also draw for your camels, until they finish drinking’…. The man meanwhile stood gazing at her, silently wondering whether the Lord had made his errand successful or not.”

In Rebecca’s offering, she does not ask for anything in return. Her desire is to quench the thirst of the messenger. She receives him; she hosts him. His thirsty face elects her or assigns her responsibility for his thirst. This responsibility is assigned to her without choice; she passively absorbs it as a sponge absorbs water. “To hear a voice speaking to you” (or to see one approaching you for something) “is ipso facto to accept obligation toward the one speaking.” Her responsibility here is not because she is a woman and, therefore, biblically subordinate to men. Rebecca’s responsibility arises from the fact that she has water, and the messenger has no water. She responds in compassionate obligation. But there is something else that Rebecca does.
that has not been discussed, and yet, it is as or even more important than her response to the messenger.

Rebecca not only offers the messenger water, she offers and gives water to his camels. This is striking, for the messenger does not ask her to water his camels. Levinas also identifies the importance of her response for the camels. He writes, “She waters the camels who cannot ask to drink.” In her gesture, we find God-like openness. The love of God manifest in creation is gestured by the hands of Rebecca. Just as God created the water that rose for the world, Rebecca lifts the water not merely for a human face but for non-human faces as well. Levinas further expands upon the significance of the water being brought up when he writes:

According to the rabbis who wrote commentary on this passage, as soon as Rebecca came out to meet him, the waters in the deep rose above their natural level. Is this a miracle, or a parable? The waters, which were there on the morning of the first day of creation, before the first light shone, and were still a purely physical element, still part of the first desolate tohu vavohu, finally rose. They rose in the service of mercy…. It is a prefiguration or an enactment of the revelation in the responsibility for the first person to come our way – even if it is a beastly creature, so to speak…

In her gesture towards both the messenger and camels, Rebecca takes responsibility for the other she has passively received. (As said above, this use of ‘passively’ highlights that she does not choose to find the messenger in her horizon; he just comes to her without her choosing.) In discussing this passivity in Levinas’ terms, it is important to note that passivity does not mean one who does not act. Passivity is not helplessness. For example, Rebecca passively receives the messenger in the sense that she sees or hears the messenger without choice. Here I am reminded of John Locke’s epistemology – where secondary qualities enable one’s perception of the primary qualities that one does not choose to perceive, but where perception manifests that one is bound to the world of which one is perceptually conscious. But Locke and Levinas part ways quite quickly, for in Locke’s world one is not sure of what one perceives, one is only sure of one’s perception, representation, or idea of what one perceives; one is not sure that one’s perception matches the perceived object. Locke’s Cartesian-like doubt does not make sense in this biblical framing from Levinas. For example, just as if Rebecca chooses to turn away from the messenger (while seeing that he is a messenger), it follows that she would not have this choice if seeing, hearing and understanding were not happening simultaneously, (or perhaps they are the same in this context,) in her reception of him. In her reception, we find that receptive passivity does not exclude activity. It is crucial to understand that for Levinas, human action does not make sense without this notion of passivity.

Rebecca does not doubt the messenger’s existence or his thirst. Here we turn away from the skepticism of both Cartesian rationalism and empiricism. Rebecca’s interrogation is not driven by doubt or skepticism in which one is trying to know if one knows the object of one’s perception. Before she would or even could doubt, Rebecca first sees that which a modern philosopher later doubts from his or her office; a thirsty man is approaching her. If Rebecca began with this type of philosophical doubt, e.g. doubting that he is a man and that he is thirsty...

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2 Most, if not all, encounters in literature can be interpreted to make this claim against Rene Descartes, which may mean he is wrong to exercise such doubt when it comes to other minds or persons. Note: Descartes’ logic may be sound, but how we live shows that he would be wrong to truly exercise such doubt outside the language-game of logical skepticism. The point here is that Levinas does not exercise or suffer from the epistemic skepticism or doubt of other minds or persons endemic to both modern and analytic philosophy. In addition, Jewish intellectual traditions do not suffer from this type of epistemic skepticism or doubt.
(or her perception of it), what would the proof that he is a man who is thirsty look like? What criterion would she use? Would such proof assure her? When would it assure her? How could she be even sure that he is a person, let alone a thirsty one? In such a possibility, Rebecca needing proof would most likely lead her to conclude that she is beyond assurance. The narrative provides no room for this type of doubt any more than it would make sense to truly doubt that you are reading this. Thus, Rebecca does not ask for a proof, as if it would make sense for her to ask; “What is that or this? Prove it!”

Rebecca’s interrogation is not driven by modern philosophical skepticism or doubt in need of a proof providing certainty that what she perceives is there or real. It is driven by wonder. Abraham Joshua Heschel writes that, “Wonder rather than doubt is the root of knowledge.” Rebecca’s wonder is interrogating the messenger by asking, “Who are you? Why are you here?” Her wondrous question is not necessarily said; it may be postured or gestured towards the messenger who she has already found, seen, or heard in her horizon. Perhaps the messenger sees her hospitable wonder and answers with a request for water.

Rebecca’s wonder shows that she cannot deny whom she has received. She is not asking, “What is it?” And she cannot ask, “Who are you?” to the messenger if the messenger has not appeared in her horizon and is, thus, passively received without her choosing. Asking “who” is a social question implying a dynamic relationship, whereas asking “what” in the philosophical sense of a traditional skeptic is a question that removes one from the social, divorcing one from the other, whom one perceives. The question of “what is it” takes one into abstraction by asking for a fixed or essential definition that is beyond the fluidity of human dynamics.

Imagine walking into a room, or approaching a stranger in need of water and being asked: “What are you?” How would you answer that question? It would be odd to say the least. For example, would it suffice to respond with, “I’m a person, not a phantom, in need of water?” Rebecca reflexively sees who the messenger is, and therefore, understands how to act towards him. In seeing who the messenger is Rebecca sees that he is thirsty. There is no room for doubt to mediate between her perception of the messenger and the messenger. Simply, this dynamic is not an issue of knowing that he is a human being in need of water, but one of knowing how to address one who is thirsty. Rebecca lifts the water to his lips. In bringing the messenger water, Rebecca shows that she is hospitable and kind.

In Rebecca’s response for the messenger, she draws herself into the biblical world. Levinas, in discussing this Biblical passage highlighting Rebecca, writes that, “One must bring oneself into the world.” If Rebecca turns away from those whose thirst she is able to quench, she has turned away from the (biblical) world. But by going towards those who thirst and receiving them, Rebecca brings herself into the biblical world. The biblical world calls out for Rebecca’s help, a call from which she does not turn away. Good thing. Without her, this world is a world without kindness and, therefore, a world without community.

Rebecca’s biblical arrival or introduction creates a new community. In her hospitality, we find the passivity of resistance to traditional philosophical subject centered selfishness. In other words, the resistance I ascribe to her passivity is not for her, but for us in the subject centered tradition of philosophy. Hospitality appears to be irrelevant for traditional, skeptical philosophy.

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3 My use of “what is it” is in a strict modern and analytic philosophical sense, not in the ordinary sense of everyday life in which one can easily imagine a circumstance in which such a question is asked responsively in the sense of my discussion of “who are you?” The problem is that many philosophers apply the question (“what is it?”) to ordinary life in the hopes that it will be answered with an essential definition.
Hospitality is specific, always given to and for someone. Philosophy is too abstract to be specifically for someone. On this matter, Levinas writes that Hellenic philosophy “designates the manner in which the universality of the West is expressed, or tries to express itself – rising above the local particularism of the quaint, traditional, poetic or religious.”xvii Rebecca does not rise to heights above the particulars of the moment. Instead, she lifts water to the mouth of the one in front of her, right now, who thirsts. In her light, we see that a philosophy solely concerning itself with teleodogma, like Hegel’s Spirit directed dialectic, systematically drowns the particular person, the other, and is unable to quench the messenger’s and camels’ thirst. In other words, philosophy (whether it is the flood like systems of thinkers like Hegel or the skeptic exiling the other from philosophical thought) is inspired by ideas and teleodogma (the dogma of philosophical teleology), whereas Rebecca is inspired by the other.

After the messenger converses with Rebecca and her family, the family decides that Rebecca will go to Isaac, but that is only after her family asks her of her desire. “They [her family] called Rebecca and said to her, ‘Will you go with this man?’ And she said, ‘I will.’”xv Rebecca independently goes to Isaac in the same way she independently decides when to go to him. Her family wants her to stay with them for ten more days. Yet, Rebecca decides to go to Isaac now. Rebecca’s decision to go to Isaac comes down to her desire, which is independent from her family.

Since Sarah’s death, the house of Abraham is dark and depressing. It is without kindness and, therefore, responsibility. Saying it was without responsibility highlights that Abraham behaved irresponsibly towards Isaac and, therefore, Sarah. Sarah’s witnessing signifies that – for her – the binding was irresponsible. Rebecca’s kindness re-ignites the Biblical narrative. Without her presence, the narrative comes to an end. Biblically speaking, without kindness, creation is stunted. There is no creation without it. In Hebrew, kindness is hesed. Avivah Zornberg writes that hesed “is gratuitous, free of necessity. It is given at God’s will, so that even Abraham cannot demand it as a right. But without it, everything fails.”xvi

In this narrative, to be irresponsible towards another is to be unkind. For example, it would have been unkind for Rebecca to deny the messenger and camels the water that she lifted and gave to them. This Atlas-like ability illustrates that Rebecca’s hands create the biblical responsibility that was lost for Abraham and Isaac when Sarah died. Her death brings about biblical incoherence. As Sarah’s departure and death witnesses and creates the possibility of a return to a male dominated household, Rebecca’s arrival disrupts this.

In this new community, Rebecca finds herself creating or building. This creativity resists isolation. To create means she already has something to work with; this something to work with is received passively, such as the message that Isaac waits for her. The cornerstone of Rebecca’s (and for that matter Isaac’s) individuality or subjectivity is not what each intends, but whom each receives; the cornerstone of their subjectivity is their passivity. To focus on their intent would continually take us away from whom they are intending towards. And before we can focus on what they intend, we must first recognize what they receive: one another. Through this focus, we find that when we focus on the intent of Rebecca or Isaac, their intent not only shows their reception of the other, but their intent is also a response for the other. It is for one another. In other words, their intent is in virtue of the other. This disclosure shows that Rebecca’s intent for Isaac is a response for him and vice versa.

Until Rebecca returns with the messenger, Isaac and his father’s world is a world without kindness. Her interruption of their world is unhistorical; she has never happened in that world. Rebecca is the binding that weaves the narrative together. She is the creative catalyst for building
a new community and a new history. *Hesed* is an act of God, a gift from God. Thus, as Rebecca showed kindness to the messenger and the camels, we find her gesture revealing God-like kindness. Whereas the binding of Isaac may be understood as the unbinding of Abraham’s community, Rebecca’s kindness is the binding consummating the binding of Isaac.

As Isaac was taken from the violence of his father’s memory so that Isaac may live his own life, we find in the above that Rebecca leaves her family freely. In her departure from her family, she takes Isaac beyond the violence of his father’s binding. Her touch is liberating, just as the comforting touch from another liberates one from isolation. Rebecca not only liberates Isaac; her touch gives him a sense of belonging that ushers in the commencement of (God’s desired) community. Taking Isaac beyond the binding is highlighted by the fact that when she and Isaac marry, she does not move into Abraham’s house but into Sarah’s. It is important to note that Sarah is a witness to what went wrong with Abraham. What went wrong is historical; the history of sacrificing one’s child for one’s God. Thus, the consequence of moving into Sarah’s tent is that Rebecca does not subordinate herself to Abraham’s (sacrificial tradition or violent) history. Rebecca moves into the house or tent without such violent history, Sarah’s house, where Sarah’s ghost like presence haunts the history from which Rebecca helps Isaac transcend, freeing them – as Levinas might say – “from traditionalisms. Let us no longer attempt to save it [tradition] through patriarchal virtues of the group.”

Both women are absent from the world inhabited by Abraham and up until now by Isaac. In fact, Sarah’s absence contributes to Rebecca and Isaac’s intimacy. Sarah has left her home, which now welcomes a new beginning. Her home is both familiar and other to familiarity. The home is filled with memories for Isaac that would naturally be recollected upon moving in, but the emptiness of the home creates a space in which Rebecca is not lost to such recollections, but is able to introduce Isaac to new possibilities. Here, it “is not long historical tradition that counts. It is the personal nature of persons that count.” Both women are absent, albeit differently. Sarah is literally absent and Rebecca is absent from Isaac’s past. But each of their respective absences brings about hospitality, a necessary condition for intimacy. We find a frame for this in Levinas:

> And the other whose presence is discreetly an absence, with which is Accomplished the primary hospitable welcome which describes the field of Intimacy, is the Woman. The woman is the condition for recollection, the Interiority of the Home, and inhabitation.

There is a void in the history in Sarah’s tent, for she not only made an exodus from her idolatrous ancestry, she also made an exodus from the alleged historical violence manifest in Abraham’s gestures towards their son and, therefore, towards Sarah. Sarah’s tent thus offers a beginning, which has not begun. Since both Rebecca and Isaac are beyond the other’s history, their meeting is unhistorical; thus upon moving into Sarah’s tent, Rebecca and Isaac can begin.

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4 This is shown after *The Binding of Isaac* when Isaac does not seemingly come down from Moriah with his father.

5 Here, I am suggesting that Rebecca initiates the move into Sarah’s tent. Since she is the family decision maker, and Isaac is presented as passive, I suggest that it was Rebecca’s idea to move into Sarah’s tent. In addition, the text allows for this move, in so far as the text does not tell us how the decision was made to move into Sarah’s tent.

6 In using Levinas to frame this passage, I am not suggesting that this is a truth about women, nor is it true for every circumstance. But my use of Levinas gives new possibilities for interpreting Isaac and Rebecca while also breathing circumstantial understanding of Levinas’ explanation.
In their beginning, we find that they will not be harmed by the violent past (of idolatry). Their history is not the issue. This insight can be gleaned from the narrative, which does not focus on what they bring to the marriage, but what they create out of the marriage. The issue here is twofold; first, we have the notion of reception, which we have already discussed. Second, we have the production of community; that which reception discloses. Levinas writes: “With the dwelling the latent birth of the world is produced.”

The community begins with Rebecca’s arrival. After moving into Sarah’s tent, the Biblical narrative jumps twenty years. Isaac marries Rebecca at forty. The next thing we know is that Rebecca is pregnant, and she gives birth when Isaac is sixty years old. Here we find that their community or house is not merely for themselves but for others. Their house is not the house for Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, or Rebecca. Their house, as we later find out in the Biblical narrative, is for their children, Esau and Jacob or Israel. It is the house for and of Israel. But creating Esau and Jacob was difficult. Rebecca had a difficult pregnancy, full of great pain. From her pain emerges a philosophical question. “Why do I exist?” Rebecca then goes “to inquire of the Lord.”

It is here that Rebecca’s role as a philosopher is spotlighted. She asks “Why Life? Why am I in the world?” Instead of sitting passively with the pain she finds in her horizon, Rebecca interrogates life. The sixteenth and early seventeenth Jewish commentator, Rabbi Judah Loew, The Maharal of Prague, writes that Rebecca asks herself before going to God for an answer, “‘Why then am I sitting passively, why do I not investigate? It is my task to seek out explanations.’ And she went to seek God.” In explaining this passage, Avivah Zornberg writes:

In Maharal’s reading, Rebecca confronts the despair of the self, and discovers that the question of meaning has a dynamic force. Her despair is not to circle hollowly upon itself, but to launch searchings and researchings, inquiries for God…. For Maharal, the questioning itself is a mode of quest. The self – the sense of “I am” – is threatened by lassitude, by vacancy, by the dearth of given meanings. Rebecca’s search is unaccepting of historically given meanings. She is not subordinated to history. Her posture passively resists that history by seeking out the unhistorical she finds in her horizon: God. And in her passivity that both resists and rejects historically given meanings, we find an interrogating posture. Zornberg sums up her stature by commenting, “Rebecca is a philosopher who interrogates life, harshly, skeptically – puts life to the question.”

Her philosophical question is not abstract. She is not asking, what is life. Her question of why is really a question of how, how to live, or how to justify such pain or life filled with pain. Her interrogating posture emerges from the loss of history and tradition, the emptiness of no history. She longs for meaning. Thus, she is not asking, “What is life?” That question would be too abstract, and Rebecca is not abstract. She is asking, “Why are you doing this to me?” She feels persecuted by God; perhaps because she is persecuted by God. We can see this in her asking for an answer from God. She does not try to answer the question alone. If she were asking, “What is life,” she could have answered the question by herself, just as most philosophers try to anticipate and answer the other’s question before speaking to the other. This is why Franz Rosenzweig writes that traditional philosophers really do not need the other; that traditional Philosophy is a “solitary business, even when it is done in common by several who philosophize together. For even then, the other is only raising the objections I should raise myself, and this is

7 God changes Jacob’s name to Israel. Israel means one who wrestles or strives with God.
the reason why the great majority of philosophic dialogues – including most of Plato’s – are so tedious. In actual conversation, something happens.\textsuperscript{xxix}

Rebecca’s question is not for her but for the other she finds imposing this life upon her. Another way of phrasing her question is, “Why me?” or “How can you do this to me?” Her asking \textit{how} presupposes that she stands before who she is not. She does not ask how to live in a vacuum. Her asking “How” presupposes a response to whom she stands before. The question of \textit{how} arises in response to hearing a call that comes to her. Simply, “Who are you?” “How come you’re here?” “What do you want from me?” The question arises from the dynamics of response to and for the other. Her question presupposes that she has received the other, or in this case, she is asking God. In other words, Rebecca’s philosophical posture is not abstract. She begins with the other, or God in this case, who inspires life. Her question shows that she has received more than herself. If not, then who is she responding to? I say it this way to show that her question is a response not merely to herself but for other than herself.

Rebecca’s question manifests the themes discussed above. In brief review, her question arises from being inspired by the other. Such inspiration precedes choice, showing that one receives the other before one chooses to face the other or turn away from the other. Here we find the passivity of response that Levinas describes. To receive the other without choice is to be identified by the other before one identifies oneself. To be identified and, thus, to receive the other before one chooses, shows one is vulnerable to the other. For example, let us say when walking to your office you suddenly hear your name called from afar. You do not choose to be called out, but still you find yourself called out or identified. The question is not whether you are going to respond, but how you are going to respond. What response are you going to give? To be awakened out of yourself by such a call is often a place of vulnerability, where one is exposed to the other, so to speak. This vulnerability is passive.

Sustaining such vulnerability is to resist egology. Thus, it is in passivity that we find the resistance to the self-creating, egological self of philosophy, the self that asks, “What am I?” Rebecca does not ask \textit{what am I here for} in a self-enclosed world of self. She asks this in response to and for the other. Again, this is not abstract. Rebecca is not questioning life. She is interrogating the other who stands before her in a posture that reveals that her passivity is not indifferent, but obsessive or prejudicial. It is as obsessive as her breath for air.

Philosophizing from her response shows that Rebecca is not philosophically marveling at \textit{being} but is wondering about what the other is doing to her and why she should accept the other’s persecuting posture. Here we philosophically find, as Levinas writes, “being divesting itself, emptying itself of its being, turning itself inside out, and if it can be put thus, the fact of “otherwise than being.”\textsuperscript{xxx} To wonder about \textit{being} is abstract, taking one away from the life one is abstracting from. Such abstraction follows life and is self-centered from the perspective of the other who is not abstract. Rebecca’s philosophy is otherwise than being. Her philosophical response is not a wondering about \textit{being}, but doing. To wonder about \textit{doing} is other centered. By taking her question to God, the other, she is asking, “Why am I here?” or “Why are you doing this to me?” or “Who am I for you?” or “What am I to you?” or “Why should I be \textit{doing} this for you?” She is not asking this in solitude but in relation to whom she finds herself living. Abraham Joshua Heschel writes, \textit{“the wonder of doing}, is no less amazing than the marvel of \textit{being}.’’\textsuperscript{xxxI} He proclaims, “IT IS NOT ENOUGH for me to be able to say “I am;” I want to know \textit{who I am}, and in relation to whom do I live. It is not enough for me to ask questions; I want to know how to answer the one question that seems to encompass everything I face: what \textit{who} am I here for?’’\textsuperscript{xxxII} In addition to doing something about her pain – going to God – remember that when we
first met Rebecca, we do not find her thinking, but doing. We first meet Rebecca offering the thirsty messenger water. And philosophizing about this follows her activity. Here, her act precedes our philosophical ideas about her act.

In Rebecca, we find the philosopher who philosophizes in deed, but not doing or acting, as Levinas notes, “as if the rest of the universe were there only to receive the action…” Throughout her Biblical life, Rebecca resists the violence of acting as if the universe is there to only receive her actions. We find this in her interrogating posture. If the universe were there merely for her, she would not interrogate the other. She could ask herself her question as if there is no other. However, she is too receptive to fall into her own ego.

In Rebecca, we find a person whose way of life shows us resistance to the philosophical conduct of thinking only in teleodogmatic abstractions and speaking to only ears, all the while narcissistically forgetting that the ears the traditional philosopher speaks for has a mouth and a tongue. Rebecca hears; she does not only speak. To speak as if the world is there only for her thoughts is violent. Rebecca’s life resists such violence. Her resistance to violence is also a resistance to histories of violent idolatry, just as Moses’ mother and sister resist the violent idolatry of Pharaoh, the epitome of a Biblical character who conducts himself as if the world is there merely for him to do as he pleases. The idolatry of that time is Biblically characterized as narcissistic. Rebecca’s resistance is found in her “other” centered gestures.

To philosophize merely for thought is problematic in dialogic philosophy. Martin Buber writes, “He who studies with an intent other than to act, says the Talmud, it would have been more fitting for him never to have been created.” Buber goes on to say: “It is bad to have teaching without the deed… the simple man who acts is given preference over the scholar whose knowledge is not expressed in deeds.” Rebecca is certainly not simple, but her philosophizing is about doing. The answer God gives to her question of, “What am I here for?” is not to think in the abstract but to be responsible to and for others. In her womb are two lives that will create the world that follows her. She is responsible for those lives. As a philosopher, her behavior instructs us; in her deed, we do not find her asking “to be or not to be?” Rather Rebecca is asking how to be. Buber writes, “He whose deeds exceed his wisdom, his wisdom shall endure; but he whose wisdom exceeds his deed, his wisdom shall not endure.” In contrast to the scholar whose knowledge exceeds his deeds, Rebecca’s philosophy translates into how to live.

In Rebecca’s horizon, to let the other philosophize without her - or for her to philosophize without the other - is destructive. It lends itself to thinking in unreal possibilities, which are no more than mischaracterizations. One can think of all types of possibilities that the other may be doing to oneself, but Rebecca does not fall into that trap. She interrogates the other. This shows that she does not trust herself to think alone and also that she does not trust the other to think without her. Rebecca’s orientation resists the Hobbesian (Thomas Hobbes) state of nature and the epistemic distrust found in both Cartesian rationalism and the empiricism of John Locke. Rebecca is an example of a philosopher who is not thinking by herself but with the other. She shows us in philosophy how to resist the selficating nature of what Levinas calls egology, and, thus, how to epistemically disrupt the selficating roots of doubt underwriting the traditional Western philosophical journey. From her, we have an opportunity to philosophically learn how to interrogate others, not just those in philosophy, but outside philosophy. Only then will we in philosophy be in a position to expose, flush out, and therefore, resist mischaracterization: the idolatry of ideas and teleodogma. In saying this, I am not saying we need to completely throw out our obsession with the appearance and reality of ideas that privileges representations or ideas of
the other over the actual other. I am saying that in the spirit of Rebecca, we need to resist it so that this form of philosophy does not own the philosophical conversation.

Until such resistance is the norm, Rebecca remains other to traditional, Western philosophy. Her (un)philosophical kindness may be heard as both a call and a response for philosophy, the other. And as other to traditional philosophy, Rebecca is a woman of hospitable action, whose action calls upon philosophy to stop its theoretical exile from life, and to stop running away from the approach of the stranger. Simply, Rebecca lifts a cup filled with ethical living to our lips.

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\(^{v}\) The Jewish Study Bible, Oxford University Press, 2004, 893.


\(^{x}\) Ibid.

\(^{xi}\) Ibid., 96.


\(^{xiii}\) Ibid., 134.


Rebecca: The First Dialogic Philosopher

Ibid.

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xxix Ibid., 4.


xxxi Ibid.


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