

## Shari Potasinski Mertzel's D'var Torah – Nov. 13, 2020

Shabbat Shalom!

The Torah is a document that helps to teach us what it takes to be a good person, with wisdom that is thousands of years old, and is still relevant today. The word for good in Hebrew is *tov* and we see it in the Torah all the time in different laws and different stories. I think it's amazing that we still have the same definition for good that we did thousands of years ago. After so much has changed from when the Torah was written, goodness is a concept that we can still all agree on; that the right way to treat people is with compassion and kindness.

The beginning of the Torah introduces us to our ancestors, the first Jewish people. In Parashat Chayei Sarah we meet Rebekah, one of our matriarchs. Our matriarchs and patriarchs might not have been perfect people, but through these stories of their lives, we can learn what it means to be good.

The word *tov* means good, but the term *Tovat Mareh* in Hebrew means "very beautiful". Something I found interesting was that when many historical rabbis looked at this term over generations they all focused on a person's outer beauty, but I think it could mean more. In the Torah, Rebekah is described as *Tovat Mareh*, which in my opinion fits her very well, because not only might Rebekah be beautiful on the outside, she's beautiful on the inside too. Rebekah was a good person, who cared about others and did good deeds for strangers out of the kindness of her heart.

Abraham sent his slave on a long journey to find a wife for his son Isaac. When Abraham's slave encountered Rebekah at a well, he asked Rebekah for a drink of her water, and she replied, "Drink, and I will water your camels, too." Rebekah had no idea who this man was, but she knew that he and his camels needed water, so she gave them water. This shows that Rebekah was a kind person, she was willing to do a good deed without anything in return and no background information about Abraham's slave. She didn't care who he was, she just cared that he got his water. Rebekah is *Tovat Mareh*.

There are also people in the Torah who are not *Tovat Mareh*. For example, when Sarah died, Abraham wanted to buy the cave Machpelah from a man named Ephron to bury her. At first, Ephron wanted to give Machpelah to Abraham for free. However, Abraham refused to take it. The Torah doesn't clarify exactly why Abraham didn't want to accept this gift. My guess is he either felt it was unfair not to pay, or he didn't want to be in debt to Ephron.

When Abraham refused, Ephron then offered to sell Machpelah to him for 400 shekels. If you didn't know, that's a lot of money. It seems strange, right? That after offering the cave for free, Ephron would decide to sell it for such an unreasonable price.

Seeing that made me think, maybe Ephron had an ulterior motive to want to give Abraham Machpelah. It would make sense, perhaps Ephron wants to give Abraham

Machpelah for free so that he will owe him a favor in the future. When Abraham refuses to take it Ephron decides if he can't have Abraham owing him anything he should charge a huge amount of money. And since Abraham was in such a vulnerable state of mind following Sarah's death, he agreed to pay it. Ephron was taking advantage of Abraham after losing a loved one, and was only doing what he did to benefit himself, and nobody else. Ephron is not Tovat Mareh.

From what we see of Ephron and Rebekah in my Torah portion, we learn about the sort of people that they are. I think we could all learn something from Rebekah. You never know a person's full story, so it's always best to just be kind. Rebekah and Ephron both came across people with strange requests. However, Rebekah responded with kindness, and Ephron responded with greed. We're all likely to be in a similar situation someday. If you find yourself needing a favor, you hope that someone will respond generously.

I think we can all recall a time when someone did a kind thing for us when we needed it. Like when I forgot my bus pass and a bus driver let me on anyway. That bus driver did not know who I was, for all they knew I could be a very short neurosurgeon on my way to surgery and they were saving that patient's life by letting me on. Now I was only a twelve year old on my way home but because of that bus driver's small act of kindness I got home without any trouble even though I had forgotten my bus pass.

I think we should all try to be like that bus driver. You never know how far a small act of kindness for a stranger can go. You could be saving a person's life, or simply making a kid's afternoon a lot easier. Each of us has the opportunity and the choice to be Tovat Mareh, to be like Rebekah, to be generous and kind when we can- and we have no idea just how much that could change the world! Shabbat Shalom!