

## Parshat Chayei Sarah: Truth on the Mind

Dr. Wendy Zierler

*Advanced Kollel: Executive Ordination Track*

These days, truth is constantly on my mind. The more talk I hear of “Fake News,” “Alternative Facts,” and other such mind-muddling concepts, the more I find myself reaching for some overarching understanding of truth, especially in Jewish sources. It is for this reason that my HUC-JIR colleague, Dr. Joshua Garroway and I have been hard at work for more than a year organizing a two-day Symposium called “These Truths We Hold: Judaism in the Age of Truthiness,” which will take place next week in Los Angeles (November 11-12) at Stephen Wise Temple. Likewise, it is for this reason, that I recently took down my copy of Israeli novelist and Bible enthusiast Meir Shalev’s *Reishit* (Am Oved 2008), a collection of brilliant literary close readings of various biblical “firsts,” to see if Shalev’s book might possibly include a treatment of the first biblical mention of *emet*, the Hebrew word for truth. Alas, no such luck; I would have to compose my own account and analysis of this foundational first.

As it turns out, the first instance of the word “*emet*” in the Bible occurs in this week’s parasha, “Hayei Sarah,” in the somewhat unlikely context of Abraham sending his servant to find a wife for his son Isaac. I refer to this as an unlikely context in part because of the many gaps in knowledge and relation that characterize the servant’s errand. Instead of Abraham carrying out this important task himself, he commits it secondhand to a servant. Not just that: in dispatching his servant, Abraham offers precious little instruction as to whom exactly to select as a wife, other than to say that the bride should hail from his birthplace and must be willing to follow the servant back to Canaan to marry Isaac. With this scant guidance, the servant petitions Abraham’s God to work with him providentially to make things happen (“*hakreh na*”) according to the servant’s seemingly arbitrary design<sup>1</sup>:

**יג** הִנֵּה אֲנִי נֹצֵב, עַל-עֵין הַמַּיִם; וּבָנוֹת אֲנִישֵׁי הָעִיר, יֵצְאוּ לְשָׂאֵב מַיִם. **13** Behold, I stand by the fountain of water; and the daughters of the men of the city come out to draw water.

**יד** וְהָיָה הַנֶּעֱבֵר, אֲשֶׁר אֹמַר אֵלָיָה הֲטִי-נָא כַדָּךְ וְאֶשְׁתָּהּ, וְאֹמְרָה שְׁתֵּהּ, וְגַם-גִּמְלִיךָ אֶשְׁקָה--אֵתְּהָ הַכַּחֲתִי, לְעַבְדְּךָ לְיִצְחָק, וּבָה אֲדַע, כִּי-עָשִׂיתָ חֶסֶד עִם-אֲדֹנָי. **14** So let it come to pass, that the damsel to whom I shall say: Let down thy pitcher, I pray thee, that I may drink; and she shall say: Drink, and I will give thy camels drink also; let the same be she that You have appointed for Your servant, even for Isaac; and thereby shall I know that You have shown kindness to my master.<sup>1</sup>

It is worth noting the centrality of the word *hesed* and its function as an organizing principle or leitmotif in this extremely long biblical chapter.<sup>2</sup> Israeli journalist and scholar Yoel Rappel notes in his essay on *Hayei Sarah* in his book, *Al haparashah; iyyunim vera'ayanot befarshat hashavua*, that the story of the choice of Rebecca as wife for Isaac begins with a request for *hesed* from God and culminates with a request of *hesed* from the young woman’s family,<sup>3</sup> suggesting the importance of acts of lovingkindness in the formation of this founding biblical family and the society meant to ensue from it. It is important to note, however, that when the servant apprehends that God has answered his request, he repeatedly thanks God not just for *hesed* but also for *emet*, thereby furnishing the first occasion of the word *emet* in the Bible:

**כז** וַיֹּאמֶר, בְּרוּךְ ה' אֱלֹקֵי אֲדֹנָי אַבְרָהָם, אֲשֶׁר לֹא-עָזַב חֶסְדּוֹ וְאֱמִתּוֹ, מִעַם אֲדֹנָי; אֲנִי, בַּדֶּרֶךְ נִחַנִּי ה', בֵּית אַחֵי אֲדֹנָי. **27** And he said: 'Blessed be the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who hath not forsaken His mercy and His truth toward my master; as for me, the LORD hath led me in the way to the house of my master's brethren.'

<sup>1</sup> The Rabbis look askance at the servant’s presumptuousness in asking God to bring this all about, enumerating it as part of a list of things that ought not to have been asked for but that God nevertheless agrees to bring about. See Bereishit Rabbah 60:3.

<sup>2</sup> See chapter 24, verses 12, 14, 27, and 49.

<sup>3</sup> Yoel Rappel, *Al haparashah: iyyunim vera'ayanot befarshat hashavua* (Tel Aviv; Yedi'ot ahronot / Sifrei Hemed, 2006), p. 52.

Later in his recapitulation of this moment for Betuel and family, he also adds the word “*emet*” to his description of his path to their house:

**מח** וְאֶקֶד וְאִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה, לֵה; וְאֶבְרַךְ, **48** And I bowed my head, and prostrated myself before the LORD, and blessed the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, אֶת-ה' אֱלֹקֵי אֲדֹנָי אַבְרָהָם, אֲשֶׁר הִנְחֵנִי בְּדֶרֶךְ אֱמֶת, לְקַחַת אֶת-בֵּית-אָחִי אֲדֹנָי לְבִנוֹ. who had led me in the right way to take my master's brother's daughter for his son.

He then follows this account of his miraculous, divinely guided meeting with Rebecca, with a request that they do him the kindness and truth (*hesed ve'emet*) of telling him outright whether Rebecca will follow him back to Canaan to marry his master's son (24:49) In verse 50, Rebecca's brother and father, Laban and Betuel, answer in a manner both affirmative and non-committal-- the very opposite, as it were, of *emet*. Indeed, following their seeming acquiescence to the servant's plan, both Laban and Rebecca's unnamed mother attempt to stall the servant, pointing to a corrupt desire to accept the gifts proffered to them but not actually to part with Rebecca. In the end, they decide to ask Rebecca whether she'll go with this (strange) man, most likely assuming that there is no way she'll agree to go. Instead, Rebecca compensates for her brother's lack of straightforwardness with a laconic and definitive אֶלךְ -- I shall go. (24:58).

To be sure, the word *emet* occurs in many places in the Bible, as do various other permutations of the root אמן, which classical exegetes and philologists alike believe to be the root of אמת.<sup>4</sup> The first actual appearance of this verb root is in Genesis 15, where God promises progeny to the still childless Abram; Abram counters that he currently has no heir other than Eliezer of Damascus; God responds by showing Abram a vision of the stars as a measure of how many descendants he will eventually have, all of which is followed by the ambiguous line: וְהָאֵמֶן וְהִצְדִּיקָה לוֹ צְדִיקָה -- And he believed in the Eternal; and God/he counted it to him for righteousness. I say ambiguous, because while it is clear from the text who is doing the believing, it is not at all clear who considers or counts all of this as righteousness -- God or Abram. In any case, the mention of Abraham's servant Eliezer in this earlier scene establishes an interesting connection between Genesis 15, an early instance of Abraham yearning for descendants, and Genesis 24, where Abraham sends his servant off to secure these descendants by finding his son a wife. And it frames all of this under the sign of *emet* not as a kind of juridical or empirical fact but as form of faithfulness or steadfastness.

What I mean by this distinction is that the usage of *emet* in Genesis 24, both as a partner term with *hesed*, as in verses 27 and 49, and as a stand-alone modifier (*derekh emet*) in verse 49, is noticeably different than other instances in the Bible, where it often appears together with the modifier נכון and with the noun דבר, to connote a verifiable fact. In Deuteronomy 13, for example, in the case of base leaders influencing the dwellers of a particular to worship idols, the people are enjoined to seek out the facts before they take action against the city<sup>5</sup>:

**טו** וְדַרְשֶׁתָּ וְחִקְרְתָּ וְשָׁאֲלְתָּ, הִיטִב; וְהִנֵּה אָמֶת נִכּוֹן הַדֶּבֶר, **15** then shall you inquire, and research, and ask diligently; וְנִשְׁתֶּה הַתּוֹעֵבָה הַזֹּאת בְּקִרְבְּךָ. and, behold, if it be truth, and the thing certain, that such abomination is wrought in your midst.

Interestingly, this connotation of *emet* as fact rather than faith is indirectly intimated in our chapter, too, in Laban and Betuel's hedging response to the servant's request for a straightforward yes or no on the proposal of a match. On the one hand Laban and Betuel seem to concede the divine provenance of this whole episode -- מֵה' יָצָא הַדֶּבֶר -- and on that basis, instruct the servant take Rebecca and go back to Canaan. On the other hand, they smuggle in a cagey equivocation— רַע אוֹ-טוֹב --“We cannot speak unto you evil or good,” suggesting an unwillingness to draw or speak of any juridical or verifiable conclusion on the basis of the servant's *davar*. Laban and Betuel don't buy into the idea of God's operation in their world, either as a matter of fact or faith, despite the servant's elaborate attempts to stage and recount a proof thereof. The servant, who stands open-mouthed and astounded (*mishta'eh*, verse 21) as God brings Rebecca to him gratefully does, hence his repeated use of *hesed* and *emet* in his prayers and thanks. We don't quite know what Rebecca believes, but her immediate willingness to act kindly to the servant and to follow him back to Canaan, strongly suggests a similar, faithful disposition.

<sup>4</sup> Ibn Ezra makes this specific point, arguing that נאמנות = אמונה = אמן .  
<sup>5</sup> See also Deut. 17:4.

What does one make of the fact that the first usages of the word “*emet*” in the Bible come in the form of faith rather than fact? In these truth-challenged times, does all of this muddy or clarify the well-waters of truth? Or does it establish a basic ground for all of our truths in the notion of a kind, loving, faithful God who rewards those willing to act faithfully on behalf of the dissemination and generational transmission of God’s truth?

Seizing on the fact that the word *emet* begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet and ends with the last, BT Shabbat 55a teaches:

חותמו של הקדוש ברוך הוא אמת (אמר) רבי שמואל בר נחמני אלו בני אדם שקיימו את התורה כולה מאלף ועד תיו.

God’s seal is truth. R. Samuel Bar Nahmani said, these are human beings who fulfilled the Torah from *aleph* to *tav*.

According to this teaching, what makes truth divine and what allows it to be embodied in human beings is a comprehensive attention and faithful fulfillment of the entire Torah. Transported into the marital and familial context of our chapter, *emet* connotes a faithfulness for the long haul, over spans of time and distance, a posture of attentiveness, care and love. I specifically mention love here, because the long and winding story of Genesis 24 closes with the second appearance of the verb *a.h.v.* in the Bible--the first in the context of marital relations--as the Bible describes Isaac taking Rebecca as wife -- וַיֵּאָהֲבָה --and he loved her. The first appearance of the verb to love in the Bible appears at the very beginning of the Akeidah story with God’s commandment to Abraham to take his son, his only son, the one he loved--an episode that culminates under the sign of fear rather than love, as the word love disappears from the previous description of the son--וְלֹא חִשְׁבָתָ אֶת-בְּנֶךְ, וְעַתָּה יָדַעְתִּי, כִּי-יִרְאֶה אֱלֹהִים אֹתָהּ, וְלֹא חִשְׁבָתָ אֶת-בְּנֶךְ. -- Now I know that you are a God-fearing man, seeing that you did not withhold your son, your only son, from Me.

Our chapter, however, which introduces *emet*, also restores love, all in the framework of seeking out the next mother in the Abrahamic line. Given all of this, it is worth calling attention to the relationship, as scholar Deena Aranoff observes, “between the most common meaning of the Hebrew root ‘amen[אמן]’ faithfulness and constancy, and its less common meaning: to rear or nurse a child.”<sup>6</sup> If the *Akeidah* was a spiritual exercise of detachment from earthly, familial bonds in order to attach to an utterly transcendent inscrutable God, this chapter suggests a countervailing model of divine truth as fidelity and constancy that can be modeled and replicated within the interpersonally attached and committed context of family. As Aranoff argues, the linguistic “link between childcare and faithfulness recovers continuities between household life and the religious imagination and the ways in which maternal activity provided the vocabulary for more abstract theological concepts.”<sup>7</sup> Our first encounter with divine truth occurs, then, in the context of imagining a God as parent and loving partner. It is not an accident, I would argue, that our current American crisis of truth is also accompanied by lurid stories of familial infidelity, with accounts of children being taken away by their parents at the border, and with unspeakable acts of violence. In the Bible, at least, the notion of *emet* begins with constancy and fidelity: to God, our partners, our children, and our communities. From thence, I would argue, spring other notions and epistemologies of truth.



*Dr. Wendy Zierler, is Sigmund Falk Professor of Modern Jewish Literature and Feminist Studies at HUC-JIR in New York. Prior to joining HUC-JIR she was a Research Fellow in the English Department of the University of Hong Kong. She received her Ph.D. and her MA from Princeton University and her BA from Yeshiva University, as well as an MFA in Fiction Writing from Sarah Lawrence College. She is the author of Movies and Midrash: Popular Film and Jewish Religious Conversation (SUNY 2017, Finalist for the National Jewish Book Award in Modern Jewish Thought and Experience, 2017) and of And Rachel Stole the Idols: The Emergence of Hebrew Women’s Writing (Wayne State UP, 2004), in addition to many articles on Jewish literature and the Bible from a feminist / gender Studies perspective.*

<sup>6</sup> Deena Aranoff, “The Biblical Root ‘*mn* : Retrieval of a Term and Its Household Context” in *Mothers in the Jewish Cultural Imagination*, Marjorie Lehman, Jane L. Kanarek and Simon J. Bronner eds (Liverpool; Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2017), p. 327.

<sup>7</sup> Aranoff, p. 328.