

Torah Thoughts Vayishlakh

5779:

Details matter. It is often in the smallest details that we find the most meaning, and that is no less true in how the Torah's describes our ancestors' lives, including their death announcements.

The deaths of three prominent figures occur in this week's parshah, all three of whom are immediate relatives of Jacob. His wife Rachel dies giving birth to Benjamin, her second son and the last of Jacob's children. Isaac, Jacob's father, also dies, at a good old age. The third death mentioned is that of Deborah, the nursemaid of Jacob's mother Rebecca. It is unusual that the Torah mentions Deborah's death, since we know nothing else about her in the Torah. Moreover, while Jacob's father's and wife's deaths appear here, the death of Jacob's mother Rebecca does not, here or anywhere. Why would the Torah mention the end of the nursemaid Deborah's life but not the woman she cared for, Rebecca?

The answer may well have to do with the episode from last week's parshah in which Rebecca colluded with Jacob to fool Isaac, tricking him into giving Esau's blessing as firstborn to Jacob. By omitting details of her death, but including details about her nursemaid's death, the Torah might be providing a subtle censure of Rebecca. Tricking Isaac might have been the right thing to do, fulfilling the prophecy that God had given Rebecca years before about her younger son ruling over her older son, but even so that end did not justify the means Rebecca used. The Torah mentions the death of Deborah but, pointedly, not that of Rebecca, to suggest to us that Rebecca also died, without giving her the honor of being mentioned by name.

One motivation for righteous behavior is to be well remembered by others. When we live in a way that creates a positive memory, we invest in good relationships during our lifetimes and continue to earn 'interest' on them after we are gone. Unlike Rebecca, we hope that our deaths will merit mention because of the lives we led.