Roses and Thorns

While our parasha is named for Sarah – a fitting final tribute to her remarkable life – we are now introduced to the next heroine, Rivka. Her uniqueness and role in Jewish history and her personality type – which is an eternal, integral part of our national DNA – is hard to decipher. Who was she? What special characteristics did she have that affect us all to this day?

We might be tempted to say that Rivka was simply a ‘replacement’ for Sarah, as the pasuk tells us that Yitzchak was “comforted for his mother” when he married Rivka. There is precious little interaction in the text between husband and wife; Rivka even consults Shem when she experiences difficulty with her pregnancy, rather than Yitzchak, who is certainly the greater prophet.

Perhaps a clue to Rivka’s uniqueness is found in the way Chazal characterize her, calling her a “rose among the thorns,” alluding to the pasuk in Shir HaShirim 2:2. At first glance, this would seem to mean that Rivka was a stunning thing of beauty surrounded by “thorns,” (i.e. her idolatrous family), just as Israel is also a handsome nation surrounded by problematic neighbors.

But hold on a second. While we may not like thorns, and certainly don’t appreciate being pricked by them, they actually serve to protect the rose! So how, exactly, was Rivka protected by her family and how are we, today, “protected” by our own “thorny” neighbors?

Perhaps this is why next week’s parasha begins, almost redundantly: “These are the generations of Yitzchak the son of Avraham; Avraham gave birth to Yitzchak.” The one was a copy of the other, in more than just physical appearance.

Rivka was different. She was confident and independent. Growing up in the same house with con-artist Lavan, she had seen it all. She could not be fooled by outward appearances; she could spot a fake or phony a mile away. And she knew how to expertly play the game to win.

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She recognized Ya’akov’s inherent spiritual goodness and was adept in protecting him, securing his future by arranging for him to receive the bechora (birthright). Her tough upbringing, including her determination to forcefully speak up when necessary – as she did vis-a-vis her family when Eliezer visited – served her, and ultimately all of us, in good stead.

In a similar fashion, the nations of the world actually serve to “protect” us. They provide the point-counterpoint that justifies our existence, in a sense. We are meant to reflect the light of G-d as we emulate His ways and positively influence and refine the moral behavior of those around us, bringing a sense of splendor to them, just as every thorn bush takes its glory from the rose within.

At the same time, like Rivka, when the occasion calls for it we have to be tough, resilient and ‘thorny’ in our stubborn determination to protect ourselves and guard our unique way of life. To be holy, but also hard-nosed. If we succeed in doing that, our future will indeed be rosy.