

Toldot: When Life Feels Too Heavy — Learning to Seek, to Struggle, and to Stay

A Derasha in the Spirit of Rabbi Shlomo Farhi

Prepared as a written version of a live Torah shiur, preserving its warmth, depth, and emotional honesty for study, reflection, and Shabbat table discussion.

When Life Feels Too Heavy

There are certain pesukim in the Torah that don't simply describe a moment in someone else's life; they expose the private moments we have all lived ourselves. They speak from inside the raw places we don't like to show anyone—not our friends, not our family, not even ourselves.

In Parashat Toldot, Rivkah Imeinu reaches one of those moments.

For twenty years, she waited to have a child. Twenty years. Ten years of silence, and ten years of heartfelt prayer. And then, finally, HaShem grants her the miracle she longs for. She becomes pregnant. But instead of joy and comfort after years of waiting, the pregnancy is violent. Painful. Turbulent. Something inside her feels wrong, almost unbearable.

She doesn't know she's carrying twins. All she knows is that something is shaking her to the core.

And from that place of physical pain and emotional overwhelm, she says a single line that the Torah captures with exquisite honesty:

“Lamah zeh anochi?” — “If this is what life is... why am I even here?”

Those words are not a passing comment. They are a scream. A confession. A moment of collapse.

And the Torah preserves it—so we can recognize ourselves in her.

Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Ramban — Three Windows Into Human Pain

The mefarshim read Rivkah's cry in three profoundly different ways, and each one mirrors a psychological state we've all stepped into.

1. Rashi — Regretting the Life We Asked For

Rashi explains Rivkah's words as a kind of horrible clarity:

“If this is so painful, why did I ever pray for this? Why did I even want this?”

It's the moment a person regrets the dream they begged for.

Someone wants to get married desperately... and then the marriage turns into a battle. Someone wants children... but the reality is nothing like the fantasy. Someone chooses religious life... and then discovers the community can be harsh, judgmental, exclusionary. Someone gives to tzedakah, opens their home, invests in people... and feels used.

Suddenly, they look at their own choices and say:

“What was I thinking? Why did I choose this path? Why did I want this life?”

That's Rashi's Rivkah. She is not questioning existence. She is questioning the very choices she thought would bring joy.

2. Ibn Ezra — The Pain of Feeling Uniquely Broken

Ibn Ezra imagines something else entirely.

He sees Rivkah asking not, "Why did I want this?" but rather, "Is this normal?"

Like she posts in the ancient "pregnancy WhatsApp group": "Is anyone else feeling this? Anyone else going through this? Why is this happening to me and no one else?"

This is the pain of comparison. The pain of being convinced that everyone else's life is easier, smoother, more blessed.

In the rabbinate, you hear this constantly:

"Rabbi, do you know anyone else dealing with what I'm dealing with?" "Have you ever heard of a case like mine?" "No one else has this problem. Only me."

According to Ibn Ezra, Rivkah is not regretting her choices; she is drowning in the loneliness of feeling abnormal. This is a different kind of suffering. When pain isolates, it becomes twice as heavy.

3. Ramban — The Pain That Makes You Question Existence Itself

And then there is Ramban, who reads Rivkah's cry in the darkest, rawest way imaginable.

He says Rivkah is saying:

"If this is my life, why am I alive? I wish I didn't exist. I wish I were dead."

Ramban is not romanticizing this. He is acknowledging a human reality: there are moments in life when the pain is so deep that a person doesn't just regret their choices or feel alone in their struggle. They question their entire being. Their worth. Their place in the world.

Many people—more than we realize—have stood at the edge of that emotional cliff.

There are many ways for a person to "commit suicide" without dying. A person can stay alive but destroy everything good in their life. A person can remain breathing but check out emotionally, mentally, spiritually. A person can blow up their marriage, sabotage their friendships, abandon their dreams—not because they don't care, but because they are drowning.

Sometimes, a person is so hurt in a marriage that they will do something that destroys themselves—just to show their spouse how much they are hurting. Sometimes, a lifelong friendship ends because of one wound, one mistake—and suddenly a person says, "A real friend would never do this," as if friendship means being an angel.

Human beings are not angels. We make mistakes. From the beginning of time we have made mistakes. Adam and Chava had one mitzvah—don't eat from that tree. Out of all the trees in Gan Eden, which one did they choose? The one that was forbidden.

We have always done the one thing we weren't supposed to do. So why do we expect perfection from our children, our spouse, our friends... when God Himself did not expect perfection from humanity?

Ramban sees Rivkah in that moment of existential overwhelm—the moment a person feels they cannot continue. The Torah is not afraid to show us that place. It places Rivkah's raw cry right in front of us so that we don't feel crazy when we feel the same.

The Turning Point — "Vatelekh Lidrosh Et Hashem"

And then comes the most powerful part of the story.

Regardless of how we interpret Rivkah's pain—whether through Rashi, Ibn Ezra, or Ramban—the Torah tells us what Rivkah does next:

She goes to seek God.

Not to collapse. Not to surrender. Not to give up or withdraw or destroy herself or question her worth. She seeks.

The word *lidrosh* is loaded with meaning. It does not only mean “to ask.” It also means: to interpret, to investigate, to demand, to challenge, to struggle. It is a word of movement, of engagement, of relationship.

This is not a quiet, passive prayer. This is a soul rising from the floor and grabbing onto God with trembling hands saying: “I refuse to walk away from You. But I need to understand.”

And HaShem answers her. Because HaShem always answers someone who seeks Him.

Prayer as Battle — The Courage to Struggle With God

We often think of prayer as gentle, as pleading. But Chazal tell us that Pinchas was called “vayefallel,” and they interpret this as: he entered into battle.

The Zohar says prayer is a kind of war—not because we are fighting against God, but because we are fighting for the world God wants, even when the current reality looks different.

Moshe Rabbeinu, after the sin of the golden calf, stands before HaShem and says, “Forgive them,” as if HaShem “owes” him forgiveness. As if he is entitled to demand it.

But that is exactly what HaShem wants: a leader who will argue on behalf of the Jewish people, even when their case seems indefensible.

That's why Moshe—who argued with HaShem for seven days when he was first appointed—was chosen. HaShem needed someone who would confront Him later and fight for the people.

Contrast that with Aharon, Moshe's brother, who—when his sons die—responds with absolute silence, acceptance, and submission. Aharon couldn't be the one to lead the people during a rebellion. Moshe could, because Moshe knew how to push back.

This is what Rivkah is doing. According to Ramban, she's saying: "Ribbono shel Olam, this cannot be Your plan. Explain it to me." She is not disrespectful and she is not rebellious; she is in pain. And HaShem wants us to seek Him with pain—not turn away, not shut down, not numb ourselves, but to seek.

Noach and the Mistake of Waiting Too Long

The Zohar gives a stinging critique of Noach. After the Flood, Noach comes out of the ark, looks at the devastation, and says: "Ribbono shel Olam, You are called Rachum—Merciful. Where was Your mercy?"

And HaShem answers him: "Foolish shepherd! Now you ask? If you would have prayed one prayer before the Flood, you could have saved the world."

This is not HaShem mocking Noach. This is HaShem saying: "I built a world where you can awaken My mercy. Don't wait until it's too late."

Your tefillah matters. Your tears matter. Your searching matters. Your questioning matters.

Rivkah teaches us that when life becomes unbearable, the Jewish response is not collapse—it is seeking. Even if the seeking feels like struggling, demanding, or a battle we are destined to lose, HaShem wants the engagement, the closeness, the relationship. And He answers Rivkah—not by removing her pain, but by giving it context, meaning, and purpose. Sometimes the answer itself is the healing.

What Do We Do Without a Navi?

Rivkah went to Shem, who was a prophet. We don't have prophets today. So what do we do?

We seek guidance. We talk to wise people. We open the books that carry our heritage of struggle and survival. We ask ourselves difficult questions:

What is HaShem asking of me? How should I grow from this? What part of me is being refined, softened, expanded by this challenge? What is the message hidden inside this hardship?

This is not easy work—but it is holy work. When a Jew goes through hardship with curiosity rather than bitterness, they emerge not broken, but expanded. They emerge not angry, but deeper. They emerge not lonely, but closer to HaShem.

The Secret of the Jewish Soul

The pasuk says: “Vatelekh lidrosh et Hashem” — “And she went to seek God.”

There is a going, a movement, a decision. She chooses to not remain where she is. She chooses to not collapse into her pain. She chooses to not lock herself inside despair. She goes.

This is the Jewish soul. This is who we are. We question. We struggle. We confront. We analyze. We cry. We pray. We demand. We break down. We get back up. And then we go.

The Blessing of the Challenge

At the end of all this, HaShem gives Rivkah the answer: “You are carrying two nations. This struggle inside you is not a flaw—it is a future. It is destiny unfolding.”

Sometimes, the thing we think is destroying us is actually building something inside us that we cannot yet see.

The challenge shrinks before the person who grows larger than it. That is the ultimate blessing—that the difficulty inside our life becomes the catalyst for the deepest, holiest growth of our soul.

Key Discussion Questions for the Shabbat Table

- 1 Which interpretation of “Lamah zeh anochi?” do you relate to most at different points in your life—Rashi, Ibn Ezra, or Ramban?
- 2 Why do you think the Torah chooses to reveal Rivkah’s moment of emotional collapse? What does this teach us about the Torah’s honesty regarding human pain?
- 3 What does it mean to “seek God” in moments of difficulty? What practical things can a person do to embody lidrosh?
- 4 Why does HaShem desire a relationship in which we challenge Him, struggle with Him, and even “fight” through tefillah?
- 5 How does giving meaning to suffering change the suffering itself?

Shabbat Table Topics

- The emotional intelligence of the Imahot.
- When faith means questioning, not merely accepting.
- Prayer as battle versus prayer as surrender.
- Human imperfection and the expectations we place on others.
- The difference between pain that isolates and pain that connects.
- What it means to find God inside the challenge.