

THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

BY RABBI DR. TZVI HERSH WEINREB
OU Executive Vice President, Emeritus

"Nameless"

There is something special about meeting up with an old friend that one hasn't seen in years. I recently had just such a special experience, when I spent a weekend in a community where a friend I hadn't seen in ten years resides.

Of course, we spent much of the time catching up with each other's lives. He showed me a book he had just written, the product of many years of research on his part. He gave me the book as a gift, and I opened it to find that it was dedicated to a rabbi who had passed away some years ago, who had made *aliyah* to Israel together with the famed *alter*, or old man, of Slobodka, Rabbi Nosson Tzvi Finkel, in the mid-1920s.

I asked him what his connection was to the old rabbi. He told me that this rabbi was one of those anonymous scholars who can be found only in Jerusalem. He was someone with no official position, who lived in poverty, but who would gladly teach any young yeshiva student who would ask for time with him. He was almost nameless, and, in the world's eyes, was insignificant, although my friend attributes all of his considerable Talmudic erudition to him. In gratitude, he dedicated his book to this sad soul, who now has a "name."

Reflecting upon this, I soon realized that I too had similar experiences, and that many people have influenced me who are, in a sense, nameless. I recall, for example, the rabbi, diminutive in stature but superlative in pedagogical skill, who was retained by my parents to teach me Talmud during summer vacations. I studied with him intensely in my early teens and then forgot about him until relatively recently, when I came to realize how much of my modest skill in Talmud I owe to him.

In this week's Torah portion, *Vayishlach*, we encounter just such a person. She unobtrusively walked onto the stage of the drama of the biblical patriarchs and matriarchs in the portion we read three weeks ago, *Chayei Sarah*. There we read (*Genesis* 24:59) "... And they sent away Rebecca, their sister, and her nursemaid, and Abraham's servant..." We learn of this nursemaid's existence, but we are not told her name. Indeed, we do not hear of her at all again.

That is, not until this week's Torah

לעילוי נשמת אבינו וסבא היקר
ישראל בן בצלאל
ויענטא בלומא ז"ל
Dedicated in loving memory of our dear Father and Grandfather
Cyril (Yisrael) Newman z"l
On his 12th Yahrtzeit - כ' כסלו
Judith Berger, Zale Newman, Chaviva Braun, and families

portion. This Shabbat, we will read (*Genesis* 35:8), "And Deborah, Rebecca's nurse, died, and she was buried below Bethel under the oak; and the name of it was called the Oak of Weeping." We learned that her name was Deborah and that Jacob and his family sorely grieved and mourned for her.

It is left to our imagination, and to the *midrash* and commentaries, to speculate about her activities and relationships during the many years from the time she escorted her mistress to the land of Canaan until her sad demise so many years later.

Our rabbis tell us that she was sent by Rebecca to bring Jacob from his long exile in the land of Haran back to the land of Canaan. After all, when Rebecca encouraged Jacob to flee, she promised him that when it was safe, she would "send for you and fetch you." (*Genesis* 27:45). It was Deborah whom she sent to retrieve Jacob, to bring Jacob back.

Deborah then spent much time, probably many years, with Jacob and Rachel and Leah and their growing family. As is evident from the fact that her death occasioned such profound grief that it is memorialized in this week's Torah portion, she must have been much loved. I always imagine that she served as the grandmother figure for all the sons and the daughter of Jacob who grew up without the advantage of a nearby *bubby*.

For me, as for the old friend with whom I was briefly reconnected this past weekend, Deborah is an archetype of the nameless soul who makes a powerful impact upon us, and who is forgotten for a very long time until we finally remember him and "name" him. Rebecca's nursemaid had no name when we first learned of her existence. Only when she passes on, do we finally learn, under the Oak of Weeping, that her name was Deborah.

The name of my summertime teacher from so long ago? We called him "Rabbi Abramchik," and although I remember him fondly, and he clearly was a major influence in my life, I never knew his first name until he passed away several years ago. It was only then that I learned from his obituary that his first name was Yakov.

Perhaps it is of Deborah and of Rabbi Abramchik that the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said in the Name of the Almighty:

"I will give them, in My House
And within My walls,
A monument and a name
Better than sons or daughters.
I will give them an everlasting name
Which shall not perish." (*Isaiah* 56:5) ■

