

# The History of Why: Meaning & Relationship in the Book of Genesis

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# Psalmist's Sample of Why

Ps. 2:1            לָמָּה רָגְשׁוּ גּוֹיִם  
וְלֵאמֹים יִהְיוּ-רִיק?

Why do the nations rage,  
and the peoples utter vanity?

Ps. 10:1        לָמָּה יְהוָה תַּעֲמֹד  
בְּרָחוֹק תַּעֲלִים לְעֵתוֹת  
בַּצָּרָה:

Why do You stand far away, God?  
- hiding in trouble times?

Ps. 22:2        אֱלֹהֵי אֱלֹהֵי לָמָּה עָזַבְתָּנִי  
רָחוֹק מִישׁוּעָתִי?

My God! My God! Why did You leave  
me far from my salvation?

Ps. 42:10        אֹמְרָה לְאֵל סִלְעִי  
לָמָּה שָׁכַחְתָּנִי לָמָּה-  
קִדַּר אֵלַיךְ בְּלַחַץ אוֹיֵב:

I will say to God, my rock: "Why did  
You forget me? Why must I be gloomy  
amidst my enemy's oppression?"

Ps. 44:24      עוֹרָה לָמָּה תִישָׁן אֲדֹנָי  
הַקִּיצָה אֶל-תִּזְנַח  
לְנֶצַח:

Arouse! Why do you sleep, my Lord?  
Wake up! Don't cast us off forever.

# Why “Why”?

- Assumes relationship
- Seeks response within relationship
- Goes inside: motivation, explanation, justification
- Always subjective and contextual
- Seeks meaning

# The Big Why

וַיַּעֲתָר יִצְחָק לַיהוָה לְנֹכַח  
אִשְׁתּוֹ כִּי עֲקָרָה הוּא וַיַּעֲתָר  
לוֹ יְהוָה וַתַּהַר רִבְקָה  
אִשְׁתּוֹ: וַיִּתְרַצְצוּ הַבָּנִים  
בְּקֶרְבָּהּ וַתֹּאמֶר אִם־כֵּן לָמָּה  
זֶה אֲנֹכִי וַתֵּלֶךְ לְדָרֵשׁ אֶת  
יְהוָה: וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה לָהּ  
שְׁנֵי גוֹיִם בְּבֶטְנְךָ וּשְׁנֵי  
לְאָמִים מִמֶּעֶיךָ יִפְרְדוּ וְלֵאמֹר  
מִלֵּאם יִאֲמָץ וְרַב יַעֲבֹד  
צָעִיר:

Isaac appealed to YHVH for his wife, for she was barren; YHVH acceded to him and his wife Rivkah conceived. The sons scampered within her; she said, “If so, why am I this”? – she went to ask YHVH.

YHVH said to her, “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples will separate from your bowels. One will be stronger than the other, and the elder will serve the younger.”

– Genesis 25:21-23

# The Spirituality of Why



- Why seeks meaning in relational context
- Core to Jewish tradition
- Four Questions of Passover
  - > “For the one who does not know to ask, we must open...”
- Rivkah’s “why” to God as spiritual model
- Torah needs to prime the “why” pump:  
How “why” grew up

# How Why Grew Up, ep. 1

וְהֵבֵל הֵבִיא גַם-הוּא מִבְּכֹרוֹת  
צֹאנוֹ וּמִחֲלִבָּהוּן וַיִּשַׁע יְהוָה  
אֶל-הֵבֵל וְאֶל-מִנְחָתוֹ: וְאֶל-  
קַיִן וְאֶל-מִנְחָתוֹ לֹא שָׁעָה  
וַיִּחַר לְקַיִן מְאֹד וַיִּפְּלוּ  
פָּנָיו: וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-קַיִן  
לָמָּה חָרָה לָךְ וְלָמָּה נָפְלוּ  
פָּנֶיךָ: הֲלוֹא אִם-תֵּיטִיב שְׂאֵת  
וְאִם לֹא תֵיטִיב לִפְתַּח חַטָּאת  
רֹבֵץ וְאֵלֶיךָ תִּשׁוּקָתוֹ וְאַתָּה  
תִּמְשָׁל-בּוֹ: וַיֹּאמֶר קַיִן אֶל-  
הֵבֵל אָחִיו וַיְהִי בְּהִיּוֹתָם  
בְּשָׂדֵה וַיִּקָּס קַיִן אֶל-הֵבֵל  
אָחִיו וַיַּהַרְגֵהוּ:

And Abel also brought of his flock's firstlings and their fat. YHVH heeded Abel and his offering, but not Cain and his offering. Cain was very angry and his face fell. YHVH said to Cain “Why are you angry, and why is your face fallen? If you do well, won't you be accepted, and if you don't do well, sin lies at the door. Desire may be yours, but you can rule over it.” Cain talked with Abel his brother. When they were in the field, Cain rose up against Abel his brother and murdered him.

— Genesis 4:4-8

# How Why Grew Up, ep. 1

היה הדבור עמו כדי  
לייסרו ולהושיבו למוטב  
וללמדו דרך תשובה לו  
ולדורות הבאים.

[God] spoke with [Cain] to discipline him and return him to goodness, and teach *teshuvah*'s path to him and future generations

— Radak, Genesis 4:6  
(R. David Kimḥi: France, 13th cy.)

Who asks? \_\_\_\_\_

Answer? \_\_\_\_\_

# How Why Grew Up, ep. 2

וַיִּנְגַע יְהוָה אֶת-פַּרְעֹה  
נְגָעִים גְּדֹלִים וְאֶת-בֵּיתוֹ עַל-  
דְּבַר שָׂרֵי אִשְׁתֵּי אַבְרָם: וַיִּקְרָא  
פַּרְעֹה לְאַבְרָם וַיֹּאמֶר מַה-  
זֹּאת עָשִׂיתָ לִּי לָמָּה לֹא-הִגַּדְתָּ  
לִּי כִּי אִשְׁתְּךָ הוּא: לָמָּה  
אָמַרְתָּ אַחֲתִי הוּא וְאֶסַח  
אֹתָהּ לִי לְאִשָּׁה וְעַתָּה הִנֵּה  
אִשְׁתְּךָ קֹחַ וְלֹד:

YHVH plagued Pharaoh and his house with great plagues due to the matter of Sarai, Avram's wife. Pharaoh called to Avram and said, "What did you do to me? Why didn't you tell me that she is your wife? Why did you say, 'She is my sister' so that I took her as my wife? Now here is your wife — take her and go!"

— Genesis 12:17-19



# How Why Grew Up, ep. 2

למה לא הגדת לי? -- שגם  
אם היית חושד את ההמון  
לא היה לך לחשוד את המלך  
אשר במשפט יעמיד ארץ:

*Why didn't you tell me?* – Even if you are suspicious of others, you shouldn't have been suspicious of the king who in justice upholds the world!”

– Sforno, Genesis 12:18  
(R. Ovadia ben Yosef, 1475-1550)

Who asks?

Answer?

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# How Why Grew Up, ep. 3

וּתְצַחֵק שָׂרָה בְּקִרְבָּהּ  
לֵאמֹר אַחֲרַי בְּלִתִּי הִיְתָה-  
לִי עֵדֻנָּה וְאֵדְנִי זָקֵן:  
וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-אַבְרָהָם  
לָמָּה זֶה צָחָקָה שָׂרָה לֵאמֹר  
הֲאֵף אֶמְנָם אֵלֶּד וְאֲנִי  
זָקֵנָתִי: הֲיִפְלֵא מִיְהוָה  
דָּבָר לְמוֹעֵד אָשׁוּב אֵלֶיךָ  
כָּעֵת חַיָּה וְלִשְׂרָה בֵן:

Sarah laughed to herself saying, “Now that I am withered, will I have pleasure – my lord also being old?” YHVH said to Avraham, “Why did Sarah laugh saying, ‘How can I bear a child, now that I’m old?’ What is too wondrous for YHVH? At the appointed time, I will return to you, at this season, and Sarah will have a son.”

— Genesis 18:12-14

Who asks?  
Answer?

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# How Why Grew Up, ep. 4

וּלְרַבְקָה אָח וּשְׁמוֹ לָבָן וַיֵּרָץ  
לָבָן אֶל־הָאִישׁ הַחוּצָה אֶל־  
הָעַיִן: וַיְהִי כִּרְאֵת אֶת־הַנֶּזֶם  
וְאֶת־הַצְּמַדִּים עַל־יָדֵי אָחִיתוֹ  
וּכְשָׁמְעוֹ אֶת־דְּבַרֵי רַבְקָה  
אָחִיתוֹ לֵאמֹר כֹּה־דָבַר אֵלַי  
הָאִישׁ וַיָּבֵא אֶל־הָאִישׁ וְהִנֵּה  
עֹמֵד עַל־הַגְּמָלִים עַל־הָעַיִן:  
וַיֹּאמֶר בּוֹא בְרוּךְ יְהוָה לָמָּה  
תַּעֲמֵד בַּחוּץ וְאָנֹכִי פְּנִיתִי  
הַבַּיִת וּמְקוֹם לְגַמְלִים: וַיָּבֵא  
הָאִישׁ הַבַּיְתָה....

Rivkah had a brother named Lavan, and Lavan ran to [Avraham's servant] out at the well. When he saw the ear ring and bracelets on his sister's hands, and heard the words of Rivkah his sister about what the man said to [her], he came to the man as he stood by the camels at the well. [Laban] said, "Come in, you blessed of YHVH. Why do you stand outside? I have prepared the house and room for the camels." The man came into the house....

— Genesis 24:29-32

# Episode Recap

## *God & Cain*

Who asks: God  
Answer: None

## *Pharaoh & Avram*

Who asks: God-Man (man pretending divinity)  
Answer: None (abrupt end)

## *God & Avraham*

Who asks: God  
Answer: None (rhetorical, assurance)

## *Lavan & Elazar*

Who asks: Lavan, brother of Rivkah  
Answer: None with words...

# Lavan's "Why"



- First Torah record of a human asking “why”
- First Torah record of a “why” getting any kind of response at all (albeit non-verbal)
- Context:
  - > Lineage of Rivkah
  - > Sets up the start of Jewish legacy

# How Why Grew Up, ep. 5

וַיַּעֲתָר יִצְחָק לַיהוָה  
לְנִכְחַ אִשְׁתּוֹ כִּי עֲקָרָה הִוא  
וַיַּעֲתָר לוֹ יְהוָה וַתִּהְיֶה  
רִבְקָה אִשְׁתּוֹ: וַיִּתְרַצְצוּ  
הַבָּנִים בְּקִרְבָּהּ וַתֹּאמֶר  
אִם־כֵּן לָמָּה זֶה אֲנִי וַתֵּלֶךְ  
לְדַרֵּשׁ אֶת יְהוָה: וַיֹּאמֶר  
יְהוָה לָהּ שְׁנֵי גוֹיִם בְּבֶטְנְךָ  
וּשְׁנֵי לְאֻמִּים מִמֶּעֶיךָ יִפְרְדּוּ  
וּלְאִם מְלֹאִם יֶאֱמָץ וְרַב  
יַעֲבֹד צָעִיר:

Isaac appealed to YHVH for his wife, for she was barren; YHVH acceded to him and his wife Rivkah conceived. The sons scampered within her; she said, “If so, why am I this”? – she went to ask YHVH.

YHVH said to her, “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples will separate from your bowels. One will be stronger than the other, and the elder will serve the younger.”

– Genesis 25:21-23

# Rivkah's "Why"



- First Torah record of a woman asking “why”
- First Torah record of human asking God “why”
- First Torah record of human purpose to ask God
- First Torah record of a direct response.

# Rivkah's "Why"

To seek meaning, we must reach beyond self to encounter the Other beyond ourselves.

Rivkah's "why" was the first of these to fulfill its potential in Torah's spiritual trajectory

Only then did "Why" ripen into the fullness of relationship and divine response that is Torah's call for humanity's relationship with God.



# “What” is “Why”?

בְּרֵאשִׁית - רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר פָּתַח,  
 (ישׁוּ מ:כו) שָׂאוּ מְרוֹם  
 עֵינֵיכֶם, וּרְאוּ מִי בָרָא אֱלֹהִים,  
 שָׂאוּ מְרוֹם עֵינֵיכֶם לְאֵן אֶתֶר,  
 לְאֶתֶר דְּכָל עֵינִין תְּלִיאן  
 לֵיהּ, וּמֵאן אִיהוּ, פָּתַח  
 עֵינִים.. מ"י, הֵהוּא דְאֶקְרִי  
 מְקַצָּה הַשָּׁמַיִם לְעֵילָא, דְּכָלָא  
 קְיִימָא בְּרִשׁוּתֵיהּ, וְעַל  
 דְּקְיִימָא לְשִׂאָלָה וְאִיהוּ  
 בְּאַרְח סְתִים וְלֹא אֶתְגַּלִּיא.

*In the beginning* - Rabbi Elazar opened (Isaiah 40:26), “Raise your eyes above and see Who created this.” Raise your eyes? To what place? To the place where all eyes depend on Him. And who is He? He is Who opens eyes: ... “Mi” [is the Name]. He is called from heaven's edge above where all is Him ... along a concealed path: [He] does not reveal Himself.

— Zohar 1:1b

# “What” is “Why”?

וְאֵית אַחֲרָא לְתַתָּא וְאַקְרִי  
מ"ה... קְדָמָא סְתִימָא  
דְאַקְרִי מ"י קְיִימָא לְשִׂאָלָה,  
כִּיּוֹן דְשִׂאֵל בְּרִנָּשׁ, וּמְפִשְׁפִּשׁ  
לְאַסְתִּכְלָא וּלְמַנְדַּע מִדְרָגָא  
לְדְרָגָא, עַד סוּף כָּל דְרָגִין,  
כִּיּוֹן דְמָטִי תַמּוֹן, מ"ה.  
מַה יְדַעְתָּ, מַה אֲסִתְכַלְתָּא  
מַה פִּשְׁפִּשְׁתָּא

Another is below, called *Mah*.... The first, called *Mi*, is concealed. There is a question in humanity: one asks, searches, looks and sees from level to level until the end of all levels. After one arrives, one is asked: *Mah*? What did you learn? What did you see? What did you investigate?....

– Zohar 1:1b

# “What” is “Why”?

מִי “Who” opens eyes  
(*mi*) (concealed)

מַה “What” of search  
(*mah*) (revealed)

# “What” is “Why”?

מה Shekhinah / God

ל - מה To God

למה Why

# How Why Grew Up

*God & Cain*

To-God are you angry?

Teshuvah path

*Pharaoh & Avram*

To-God you didn't tell me?

Pharaoh 'gets' God

*God & Avraham*

To-God did Sarah laugh?

Receive miracle

*Lavan & Elazar*

To-God do you stand outside?

Set up relationship

*Rivkah & God*

To-God am I this?

Identity, future