

## Parshat Vayetze:

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# Rachel and Leah : Longing and Fulfilment

Our parsha tells the tale of Yaakov in exile. He leaves his "land, his birthplace, his father's house" for a foreign land of trickery and backbreaking labour. In a certain way, this is a real galut. The insecurities, the difficulties and hardships that Yaakov faces certainly reflect a cruel world into which he has been thrust in the wake of his brother's hatred. He is in Aram against his will, and he suffers there.

But there is another dimension to Yaakov's stay in Padan Aram. It is to that place - home of Lavan - that he is sent (by his father 28:1-3) with a positive purpose. He is sent there to find a wife and to build a family. This he does. Our parsha sees the introduction of Lavan's daughters; Rachel and Leah and their handmaids and we read of the birth of 12 children to Yaakov.

We have a journey which resembles the flight of a fugitive on the run, and at the same time, an image of Yaakov building a family. Positive galut and negative galut.

[We might suggest that this Galut is a paradigm of future Galuyot. We DO suffer in Galut - Egypt, Spain, Eastern Europe, ?? - and we are oppressed, enslaved, killed, expelled and given over to pain and hardship. But galut too has seen the development of Judaism in a multiplicity of ways. Egypt saw a physical growth of Am Yisrael. This long galut has seen an explosion of philosophies, Torah learning, modes of Jewish expression. But, it is still exile!]

This week, we shall focus on but one aspect of this story. We will zoom in on Yaakov's wives; Rachel and Leah. Our parsha tells the intriguing tale of how Yaakov plans to marry Rachel but finds himself married to both sisters. It is these two women (and their handmaids) who "build" the House of Israel.

Any basic reading of the story cannot hide the tension and competition between the two sisters, Rachel and Leah. This rivalry reaches immense proportions at times. The Torah is not shy at recording the friction and the pressure, the hatred and the jealousy, which is present in the home of Jacob. In our study this week, we will try to examine the unique character of each of these Matriarchs. What were the

features that made them special? And how did this affect the Jewish people in future times?

### Chavruta

1. The best way to begin would be to read the extensive story that outlines their meetings with Yaakov, the marriages and the children.

See Bereshit 29:1--30:25

\* Try to see how the Torah portrays Rachel and Leah as individuals.

\* Trace the relationship of each of the sisters with Yaakov. Are the relationships positive or negative, smooth or strained? See if you denote a progression (up or down) in the relationship.

2. See the first description of the two. 29:16,17.

See Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Rashbam. Can you explain their differing readings of the pasuk?

3. Expressions of love and hate. See 29:18,20,29,30,31.

\* "Leah was hated" (29:31) See Radak, Ramban.

\* Why does it state (in passuk 30) "He ALSO loved Rachel". What, in your view, is the Torah coming to tell us?

4. Look at the reasons for the names of the first four sons of Leah. Do you note a progression in her feelings? (also pay attention to the fact that here, the mothers name their kids and not the father! as opposed to 25:25,26 and 35:18. And Yoseph's children 41:51,52, Moshe's children Shemot 18:3,4.)

5. See Rachel's reaction to Leah's childbearing: 30:1-5

\* Do you see Rachel's behaviour as acceptable? appropriate? understandable?

\* What of Yaakov's reaction to her? Is he being fair?

\* How would you expect Rachel to react to Yaakov? Does she act in a commendable way?

For some views from the mefarshim, see Ramban (exceptional) and Rashi .

### Shiur

#### FIRST IMPRESSIONS

"When he (Jacob) had stayed with him (Laban) for a month, Laban said to Jacob, Just because you are my kinsman, should you serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be? Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older one was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah had sensitive eyes; Rachel was shapely and beautiful. Jacob loved Rachel; He said

'I will serve you for seven years for your younger daughter Rachel'.... Jacob served seven years for Rachel and they seemed to him but a few days because of his love for her." (29:16-20)

The Torah seems spares no effort in describing to us the depths of Yaakov's love to Rachel. At the start of Chapter 29 - the scene at the well - Yaakov's behaviour could be read without difficulty as "love at first sight." Now, we are told of Rachel's beauty and the Torah gives us a window into Yaakov's emotions as it describes Jacob's love for Rachel. Jacob - a penniless fugitive - is ready to work for seven years to gain her hand in marriage and his deep feelings of love for her eclipse the hardship and trouble that his work gave him. We would not be incorrect if we said that the Torah describes Yaakov as being "in love". Jacob was besotted by Rachel.

### LEAH'S EYES

What of Leah? The text tells us only of her eyes. In this respect, she is contrasted with Rachel: Rachel's beautiful looks and Leah's soft, sensitive or weak eyes. The Hebrew adjective used to describe Leah's eyes is the word "*rakhot*." It is interpreted in multiple ways by the classic commentators.

The RASHBAM reads it as "beautiful and refined". Apparently Rachel is beautiful in every way whereas Leah has only one feature of stunning beauty: her eyes. Of course, this can be read as an underhand insult. Instead of saying that she was not particularly good looking, the Torah mentions her pretty eyes, the redeeming side of her appearance (Hirsch).

The RALBAG suggests that she had a problem with her eyes; an eye disease which affected her otherwise good looks. But, in the final analysis, the clear conclusion here is of Leah's mediocre looks as opposed to those of her younger sister.

RASHI brings the most interesting interpretation. He suggests that Leah's eyes are red and weepy from constant crying. The tradition in the family was that Rachel will be matched with Jacob whereas the elder daughter would marry the elder son. Leah being the eldest is set to marry Esau - the other eldest. Leah is a pious girl. She cannot think of anything worse than marrying Esau - a hunting man who does not fear God. She longs to marry Jacob - the God-fearing one - and she has spent her life in tears bemoaning her personal fate. Her tears have made her eyes red and soft.

In Rashi's reading, we see a difference between the two sisters but not a contrast. Both statements are complements to these young women: Rachel is beautiful but Leah's tearful eyes testify to her piety.

### SISTERS AND WIVES.

We read how, on the wedding day, unbeknown to Jacob, Laban replaces Rachel with Leah. "And in the morning, behold it was Leah!" (29:25). Within a week, Jacob marries again. He weds his rightful bride, Rachel and commits himself to another seven years of work. Rachel and Leah are now not just sisters but rival wives.

We are never told explicitly how Leah was switched for Rachel and we wonder what went on behind the scenes. What human emotions were involved? Did Leah comply with Lavan or was she somewhat forced? Did Rachel cover up for Leah? (the midrashim suggest both options.) We can but imagine the enormous frustrations felt on all sides:

"Jacob waited out the bridal week of the one, and then he (Laban) gave him his daughter Rachel as his wife.... And Jacob cohabited with Rachel also; indeed, he loved Rachel more than Leah" (29:28,30)

Jacob and Rachel are now married but it is all very different from the way that we had expected. The powerful love between Jacob and Rachel has been consummated but not in the way that they had anticipated -

"Jacob cohabited with Rachel ALSO".

She is the second (Ramban, Hizkuni). Their special moment together has been tarnished. Instead of the climactic culmination of their love, their togetherness contains elements of frustration and disappointment. Leah on the other hand is thrust into a marriage where she is unwanted and unloved. Her place in her own home would seem to be something resembling a guest who has overstayed her welcome.

### CHILDREN AND TENSION

These tensions are demonstrated in the women's' desire to produce children for Jacob.

"God saw that Leah was unloved and he opened her womb; but Rachel was barren. Leah conceived and bore a son and named him Reuven; for it means: 'the Lord has seen my affliction' She said, 'maybe now my husband will love me'. She conceived again and bore a son and declared, 'This is because God heard that I was unloved'.... Again she conceived and bore a son and declared 'This time my husband will become attached to me for I have born three sons'.... She conceived again and bore a son and

declared 'This time I will praise God' therefore she named him Judah. Then she stopped having children." (29:31-35)

Leah is unloved. The commentators vary in their understanding of the Hebrew "Senuah". In a literal translation it means that she was "hated." Most commentators see her as being "unloved" in comparison to Rachel rather than "hated". After all, we are told earlier that Jacob "loved Rachel more than Leah" (29:30) indicative of a certain degree of love between Jacob and Leah.

The RAMBAN does not accept this reading. He says:

"Leah was hated: After all, she lied to, and betrayed both Jacob and her sister. Even if she could not have defied her father when he brought her to the wedding, could she not have told Jacob or signalled to him that she was Leah? And she hid her identity from him the entire night! .... That is why Jacob hated her." He adds that " God knew that Leah did it all so that she could marry the righteous Jacob. That is why He had pity on her."

The Torah describes with great skill, the image of Leah as a woman, lonely and unloved. Every child that she bears is accompanied by a heartfelt wish for companionship and love from her husband. It is clear from the text that for years Leah experiences palpable disdain and coldness from Jacob. One wonders how Rachel felt towards her. Only on the birth of her fourth child do we sense relief in Leah's feeling of estrangement. Her naming of Judah is a song of praise rather than her usual plea, her desperate prayer. Apparently things are changing for the better. Does Jacob love her now?

Just one other important observation: Up to this point we have never been given a word of conversation between Jacob and his wives. The only words that we hear from Leah are between herself and God. She seems to pray quietly to herself. She does not appeal to her husband directly for his attention and love. She appeals to God and she sits and waits. As for Rachel, in the Biblical narrative, she has not uttered a word at all.

#### **RACHEL'S OUTBURST**

"When Rachel saw that she had borne Jacob no children, she became envious of her sister; and Rachel said to Jacob, 'Give me children, or I shall die.' Jacob was incensed at Rachel and said, 'Can I take the place of God, who has denied you fruit of the womb?' She said, 'Here is my handmaid Bilhah. Consort with her, that she may bear on my knees

and that through her I too may have children.'" (30:1-3)

This is the only recorded dialogue between Jacob and Rachel. At last the Torah gives us access to Rachel's feelings and we are told of Rachel's jealousy of her sister. One might note that Leah is not mentioned by name here. This literary method serves to highlight the primary fact of her identity as sister and the obvious older-younger tension which would seem to be a familiar theme by now.

Rachel is jealous of her sister's children. Maybe it is not the children per se but rather the effect her children are having on Jacob. Jacob is clearly moving closer to Leah. There are strong competitive emotions at work here. Rachel's statement is extreme. It is something of an outburst. "Give me children or I shall die". Rachel demands not just a child, not one son, but sons, children. Her language is emotive, aggressive, and hysterical. She DEMANDS that Jacob give her children.

Jacob's response is stern and possibly a little over-harsh. Jacob accuses her as being the source of her own barrenness. God "has denied you the fruit of the womb". Jacob's language is unusual. Rather than talking of children, he speaks of the "fruit of the womb". Maybe he is stressing the connection between womb and baby. Children are dependent on the womb, they are the fruit of their mother. Why are you turning to me? Look at yourself.

#### **PRAY FOR ME**

Most commentators understand Rachel's plea to Jacob as a request for him to pray for her to have children. RASHIÆ's commentary :

"GIVE ME CHILDREN: Is this how your father and mother acted. Did your father not pray for your mother?

OR I SHALL DIE: From here is the notion that those who have no children are considered as dead.

GOD HAS WITHHELD FROM YOU: You are telling me to act like my father. I am not in his situation. My father had no children at all. I have children. God has prevented YOU from having children."

Or in the interpretation of the IBN EZRA:

"AM I IN THE PLACE OF GOD?: Am I the one who decides these things? It is possible that Jacob prayed but he had not yet been answered."

These commentators see Jacob's response as denying his

ability to change the situation; either because he does not control these events, or because his prayers HAVE been answered. He has children. It is Rachel who must pray now!

Indeed when Rachel eventually has a child, the Torah stresses the role of her prayer:

“ God remembered Rachel AND GOD LISTENED TO HER and opened her womb” (30:32).

### **RACHEL HYSTERICAL**

The Ramban expresses surprise at Jacob’s insensitivity :

“Why did Jacob get angry? Why did he say ‘Am I in the place of God.’ Does God not listen to the righteous?... Don’t the righteous customarily pray on the behalf of others?... In the Midrash they express disapproval : ‘Is this how one responds to those who suffer?’”

But he adds a different perspective.

"In truth, she thought that out of his love for her, he would clothe himself in sackcloth and ashes and would pray for her ... Jacob got angry because she spoke in the way of the hysterical, trying to frighten him with threats of death."

In the biblical text, Rachel does not comment on Jacob’s rebuke. Instead she resorts to a practical solution. She offers her maidservant Bilhah as a concubine to Jacob so that her children "will be born on Rachel’s knees".

This short episode highlights Rachel’s desperation. She feels that her life will be meaningless without children. To her mind, if Jacob really loves her, he should dedicate his entire being to the realisation of this intense need. Maybe Jacob’s anger is aroused by the underlying personal insult contained in her outburst. You - Jacob - your love is not enough. I need more. If I don’t have children, I might as well die. And in the end, Rachel prefers to introduce a third woman into the marriage as long as she can somehow give fulfilment to this passionate need.

### **DESIRE AND FULFILLMENT**

The motifs that we have highlighted here continue to run through the story of Rachel and Leah. Rachel, despite the special status that she occupies in Jacob's life, seems to be continually yearning for something else. She is restless. She feels that there is certain something that she lacks. The story of the mandrakes (see 30:14-16) and her ongoing desire for

children highlight this tendency. Even when she does give birth to a son, he becomes an expression of her ongoing desire. She names him Yoseph to express the plea: “May God add to me another child.” And sadly, at her potential moment of fulfilment - with the granting of that prayer and the birth of a second son - she dies. She dies at the moment of her ultimate fulfilment, still empty, unfulfilled. And she calls her second son Ben-Oni; the son of my affliction.

It is not without a strong sense of irony, that the wife whose relationship with Yaakov seems so idyllic - their romantic love so evident - and who herself gave over an image of perfection, lives and dies with such a tragic sense of longing, desire and yearning. The beautiful Rachel who romantically appears with her sheep and who Jacob loves at first sight remains forever expectant, awaiting fulfilment. In the words of Rav Adin Steinsaltz, "She is perhaps one of the most poignant expressions of the person who has everything - and yet remains lacking."

It is indeed ironic that Rachel is eternalised in the picture described by the prophet Jeremiah (31:16-17) as a woman in tears.

"Kol BeRamah Nishma: A voice is heard on high, wailing, bitter weeping, Rachel weeps for her children; she refuses to be consoled, for they are gone (into exile.) Thus says Hashem: Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears; for there is reward for your accomplishment - the word of Hashem - and they will return from the enemy's land. There is hope for your future - the word of Hashem - and your children will return to their border." Jeremiah (31:14)

In the Midrash quoted earlier Leah's tender eyes are seen as a result of her tears, her weeping. In the initial state of things, Leah is weeping. However at the end of the story it is not Leah who cries, but Rachel. She cries for the children of Israel as they are lead into exile. Why does Rachel have this task? Why is she the crying mother of the exile? - Because she comprehends the pain of non-fulfilment. She knows what it is to live a dislocated fractured dream. She reflects the yearnings of exile. She understands.

Leah, on the other hand, begins as the unhappiest of the matriarchs. She is lonely and unloved. But it is Leah who becomes the mother of six of Jacob's sons. It is Leah who is buried in the Cave of Machpela together with Jacob. In a sense, Leah's quiet desire, her prayers for companionship with Jacob find their fruition. Leah, through her children and her silent dedication achieves a life of togetherness and fulfilment with Jacob.

This difference between the sisters is brought home by their different responses to child bearing. It is also highlighted by Rachel's longing and Leah's calm commitment for Jacob in the story of the Mandrakes.

## TWO LOVES

Rav Adin Steinsaltz, in his wonderful book, *Biblical Images*, summarises the differences between the two relationships:

“Fundamentally, we have here two kinds of love in all their complexity: A romantic love that draws its sustenance from longing, from separation and distance, from premature death- a love full of expectation, dreams and memories. On the other hand we have the love of a faithful woman, the woman who remains beside her husband, works and struggles in the daily round with him, bears him most of his children, and whose love and is constant, stable, and real. Leah’s relationship was without the drama, the elation, and the dejection that characterised his love for Rachel. In a sense, she was the romantic...; Leah, the mature and faithful wife.”

## THE FUTURE

There is a powerful epilogue to this story with all its tension and rivalry. Whereas this story is simply a tale of two sisters, two wives, the Bible tends to weave larger patterns with wider historical implications. The tension between Leah and Rachel continues through their children and the tribes that they found.

Be it the tension between Joseph (Rachel’s firstborn) and Judah (the leader of Leah’s tribes) when they face each other over the fate of Benjamin. Or later in the Bible, when the kingdom of Judah splits from the Kingdom of Ephraim. The tension and rivalry is always there.

Interestingly, Rachel characters are always known for their good looks but are often ephemeral, transient figures. Be it Joseph, Joshua bin Nun, or King Saul, they are figures with great charisma but no continuation. Leah’s descendants are more stable, with lasting effect. Leah's line lead us in a direct line to David, the man who put the Nation of Israel on its feet, who established the monarchy and made Israel into a viable nation state.

“The elder (lit. greater) one was Leah’ - Greater in her contribution: The priesthood for posterity, the monarchy for posterity, as it states ‘And Yehuda will

dwel for ever’. ‘And the younger (lit. lesser) was Rachel’ - Of lesser contributions: Joseph, a passing phenomenon; Shaul, temporary; Shiloh, temporary (as a place for the mishkan)... as it states ‘... He rejected the tent of Joseph ...’” (Bereshit Rabba 70:15)

Indeed, in the end of days, we are told of two messiahs. The Messiah of the son of Joseph is the herald of the redemption who will bring the volatile birth pangs of the Redemption. He will activate the process but will not give it stability. That is left to the Messiah - son of David. It is he - descendant of Leah - who will establish the permanent Kingdom of God.

Shabbat Shalom.