

TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Vayetze

November 28, 2020, 12 Kislev 5781

Torah: Genesis 28:10-32:3; **Triennial** 30:14-31:9

Haftorah: Hosea 12:13-14:10 (Ashenazim);
Hosea 11:7-12:12 (Sephardim)

The Morning After **Ilana Kurshan**

Our parsha tells the story of Jacob's marriage to two sisters, Leah and Rachel. A simple reading of the biblical text suggests that Rachel was Jacob's beloved—the woman he fell in love with at first sight when he met her by the well upon his arrival in Haran—whereas Leah was her unloved older sister whom Jacob was tricked into marrying against his will. But the Talmud contains several midrashim that tell a different story – a story that has much to teach about the complexity of love as it unfolds over the course of marriage.

The Torah suggests that Jacob's love for Rachel was related to her extraordinary beauty: "Leah had weak eyes; Rachel was shapely and beautiful. Jacob loved Rachel" (Gen. 29:17-18). In contrast, Leah is described as the "hated" wife: "The Lord saw that Leah was hated" (29:31).

But the Talmud offers a different reading of these verses amidst a discussion of the laws of inheritance in tractate Bava Batra (123a). The rabbis consider the relative status of Reuven, Leah's eldest son, and Joseph, Rachel's eldest. They explain that God had originally ordained for Rachel to give birth to Jacob's firstborn, but then Leah pre-empted Rachel on account of her prayers. While Rachel succeeded in winning over Jacob with her beauty, it was Leah who succeeded in winning over God with her appeals to divine mercy.

The rabbis link Leah's prayers to her "weak eyes," which the Torah contrasts with Rachel's beauty. They explain that Leah's eyes were weak from crying because she feared the fate that awaited her. But contrary to what we might expect, it was not the fate of being Jacob's unloved wife that she feared, but rather the fate of marrying Jacob's twin. The Talmudic sage Rav relates that Leah used to sit by the crossroads and listen to the gossip of passersby. The word on the street was that since Rivka had two sons and Lavan had two daughters, the oldest son was destined to marry the oldest daughter, and the youngest son was intended for the youngest daughter. When Leah heard that she was to be matched with Rivka's oldest son Esau, she inquired about his character, and was told that he was an evil bandit, whereas his younger brother Jacob was a quiet tent-dweller. Leah was so distraught at the prospect of marrying the evil twin that she cried and prayed for divine mercy until her eyelashes fell out. While the prophet Jeremiah immortalized the image of Rachel crying inconsolably by the roadside for her exiled children (Jer. 31:14), in the midrash, Leah sheds her own share of tears at the crossroads.

Leah cried her eyes out until her tears drained her of her beauty, which was presumably one reason that Jacob found Rachel more attractive. Rachel was also the kindred spirit he fell in love with at first sight when he first arrived at the well in Haran; he met Leah only later, in the domestic space of the home of Uncle Lavan, who was eager to marry her off. Even so, according to the rabbis, Leah wasn't truly hated. After all, Leah was one of the matriarchs and so she must have been righteous; how then could the Torah speak negatively of her? The answer, according to Rav, was that when the Torah refers to Leah as "hated," it is not referring to Jacob's hatred for Leah, but rather to Leah's hatred for Esau – a hatred which God regarded as meritorious. It was because Leah hated "Esau's actions" that God opened Leah's womb and gave her children.

Though Leah was unlucky in love, she was favored when it came to fertility. She was the dependable wife who could be counted on to get pregnant with ease, in contrast to her sister who cried out in anguish, "Give me children or give me death" (30:10). A midrash in tractate Berakhot (60a) teaches that when Leah became pregnant for the seventh time, the fetus was originally a boy. Leah knew that twelve sons were destined to be born to Jacob. She had already birthed six sons, and the handmaidens had birthed four sons between them. This left only two more boys, and Rachel was still childless. So Leah prayed to God, who turned the child into a girl – Dinah. Once again, Leah appealed to God's mercy, but this time she asked God to have compassion not on herself, but on the sister she had so long resented for being the more beloved wife.

Did Jacob always love Rachel more than Leah? At the end of his life, Jacob recalls the deaths of his wives in

language that suggests that they each had a unique place in his heart. He recounts to his son Joseph that "Rachel died, to my sorrow, while I was journeying in the land of Canaan... and I buried her there on the road to Efrat" (48:7). The loss of his beloved Rachel was devastating for Jacob, but it is beside Leah that he asks his sons to bury him: "Bury me with my fathers in the cave which is in the field of Efron...there I buried Leah" (49:29-30). While Rachel represented the passion of his youth—a passion that never died—Leah represented the stable relationship that developed and deepened over time.

In a sense we might think of Rachel and Leah not as two separate women, but as two aspects of the same woman. Yehuda Amichai captures this notion beautifully in a short poetic fragment (my translation):

Morning now, and behold you are Leah; you were
Rachel last night.

It wasn't Laban who deceived me in darkness with
spite.

It has always been this way – by darkness, by light--
Now you are Leah. You were Rachel last night.

Every Rachel in the evening becomes Leah the morning after. The fiery passion of youth is eventually contained inside the steadily-burning hearth. Perhaps for this reason, both women are mentioned in the marriage blessing at the end of the book of Ruth (4:11): "May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, both of whom built up the house of Israel." It takes both a Rachel and a Leah to build up the house of Israel, and in every loving partnership we can learn from their example.

Sisterly...Love? **Vered Hollander-Goldfarb**

Our story picks up when Yaakov's household numbers 10 children, none of them from Rachel.

Text: Bereshit 30:14-15

(14)And Reuben went in the days of wheat harvest, and found mandrakes in the field, and brought them to his mother Leah. And Rachel said to Leah: 'Give me, I pray, of your son's mandrakes.' **(15)***And she said to her: 'Is it a small matter that you have taken my husband? and now you would also take my son's mandrakes?'* ...

- Why do you think that Rachel asked Leah for the mandrakes?
- What do you think that Leah meant when she said 'you have taken my husband'? After all, Rachel was married to Jacob in the full status of a wife.

As you study the commentaries, consider: What aspect of the complex situation between Leah and Rachel is each of them addressing?

Commentary: Radak, Bereshit 30:15

Is it a small matter that you have taken my husband - since Rachel still did not have any children Yaakov slept with her more often than he did with Leah in order to soothe her mind. ***My husband*** - she meant that Yaakov was her husband no less than he was Rachel's husband.

- According to Radak, what aspect of being married to the same man was the source of strife between Leah and Rachel?
- Could Yaakov have done anything to calm things down between them?

Commentary: Ramban (Nachmanides) Bereshit 30:15

Is it a small matter that you have taken my husband - The intent is: Is it a small matter to you that you took my husband, as if you are his wife and I am the handmaid? And now you will also make yourself the mistress to take my mandrakes in whose smell I delight?

What does Ramban see as the source of strife between these two women married simultaneously to the same man?

What earlier story is Ramban hinting to as a comparative story? What is the major difference that made it possible to sort out that story, but makes this one impossible?*

Commentary: Seforno, Bereshit 30:15

Is it a small matter that you took my husband - you should never have consented to become my competitor [as another wife of Yaakov], as it says "you must not have two sisters as wives simultaneously;" (Leviticus 18,18). ***And now you would also take my son's mandrakes*** - in order to add further to his loving you and hating me.

- Whom does Leah blame for the situation? What is the category in which Leah feels threatened?

**The story is in Bereshit 16 – Sarah and Hagar.

Motherhood and Loss

Bex Rosenblatt

"Give me children, or, if not, I am dead," says Rachel in this week's parasha (Genesis 30:1). She has watched her sister bear child after child and yet she has born none. Rashi, quoting Bereshit Rabah, learns from this verse that "he who is childless may be regarded as dead." And indeed, children and death will inevitably be linked to each other. The birth of her second child is difficult to the point of death. As she lays dying, she names him *Ben-Oni*, child of my trouble/inequity/sorrow. Looking back on her life's work, on her drive to fill herself with life, even more so than her sister Leah, Rachel is left with only sorrow and regret. In this moment of the extreme pain of childbirth, combined with her fear of slipping into irrelevance and non-being, Rachel gives her child a name that is almost a curse, a negation of good.

The haftarah doubles down on this theme in a bone-chilling way. The Book of Hosea is obsessed with birth and birth pains, with mothers and names. Hosea famously opens with God's command to marry a harlot, bear children with her, and give those children names symbolic of destruction and abandonment. In all biblical baby-making, it takes three to tango - two parents and God. God causes these children to be born in order to punish and rebuke the mother, the harlot, symbolizing Israel.

As the book continues, God destroys. In Hosea 9:14, God gives the nation "a bereaving womb and dry breasts." God punishes by taking away the nation's ability to bear children, echoing Rachel's desperate cry, making the nation die through lack of ability to keep alive progeny. It is a troubling and horrible image, an upsetting idea.

But God is not just the punisher of mother and child. In our haftarah, God is also a grieving mother himself. The book is rife with retellings of the story of the Exodus, as God "birthed" Israel out of Egypt. And now, God watches his child, the nation, and God cannot provide for it and protect it. The nation has grown up and become rebellious, turning from God. So God becomes as a bereaved mother. Just as Rachel felt dead with lack of progeny, God too loses his continuation, his *raison d'être*.

In Hosea 13:8, God tells us that he will meet the nation like a "bereaved bear and tear up the covering of their heart." From a place of pain, God lashes out. Then, in Hosea 13:13, God wishes this pain upon the nation, saying, "The pains of birthing will come to him. He is not a smart child, for at the time he will not stand at the birthing place of sons." This thing God is feeling, this sense of separation and loss, he makes the experience of those who caused it for him.

Yet, from this place of motherhood, this shared experience we have with God, we can look back and have compassion on God. Birthing is not easy. Rachel and God say terrible things and pass on their pain. But the pain passes. At the end of the haftarah, in Hosea 14:4, we speak of orphans. Only in God will orphans find *reham*, meaning compassion, and bearing the same root as womb. The children, abandoned and misnamed in moments of pain, find the womb, find comfort again once the pain passes. When terrible things happen and we do terrible things, perhaps it is worth recalling God and Rachel. Perhaps we might try having compassion on ourselves and the world, forgiving each other the pain we cause when we are in pain and trying to break the cycle.