



A TALE OF TWO SISTERS.

BY DINA COOPERSMITH



Rachel and Leah are the last two matriarchs of the Jewish people. They are the ones who, together with their husband Yaakov, represent the cohesive family of which none of the sons were weeded out to become other nations. All their children became the tribes of Israel, the first Jewish family. Although Yaakov was actually married to two other women as well, the two handmaids Zilpah and Bilhah, nevertheless all twelve children are considered the spiritual adopted offspring of Leah and Rachel.

The following two essays will go back and forth from Leah to Rachel in describing their characters, strengths and weaknesses. This is because their lives are so intertwined, as Rachel said regarding the name of Naftali: "Entanglements of God I am entangled with my sister" (Genesis 30:8), and their symbiotic relationship continually affects their growth and development as matriarchs of our nation.



Yaakov – Yisrael: A Multifaceted Man

On a basic level, we know that our forefather Avraham represented the pillar of *chesed* (kindness) and was complemented by Sarah, who represented *gevura* ("strength" or strict justice). Their son, Yitzchak, resembled Sarah in his inner strength and willingness to be sacrificed, and thus needed Rivka with her developed sense of kindness and outward giving. Our third patriarch, Yaakov, the distilled, refined combination of *chesed* and *gevura*, resulted in the character trait of *emet* -- truth and harmonious completion. Truth is the ability to see things from all sides, not just from a perspective of mercy and compassion, and not only from a strict, just and proper view.

Worldly completion is Yaakov's main character trait, and he was able to excel in this with Rachel as his balancing counterpart.

However, there is another mission assigned to Yaakov which came about after his struggle with the angel, the spiritual force of Esav. It is then that Yaakov is given another name, Yisrael. This name represents a spiritual overpowering of the forces of evil, an achievement more associated with the future messianic era -- a world of only good, when evil will be wholly banished. We, the nation of Israel, are named after this goal, as God declares: "You have struggled with gods and have prevailed" (Genesis 32:29). It is this mission which Yaakov is able to pursue only with Leah as his counterpart. (Rabbi E.E. Dessler, in *Michtav M'Eliyahu*, vol. 2, p. 211, discusses these points in greater depth.)

This explains why, on a spiritual level, Yaakov needed two wives, a situation which the Torah does not normally consider ideal. Now, let's move on to meet the women in the story.

Rachel – First Impression

With Esav threatening to kill him, Yaakov -- at the urging of his mother Rivka -- travels to her homeland, Charan, to find a wife. When Yaakov first sees Rachel at the well in Charan, he notices a number of things about her:

Rachel, the daughter of Lavan, his mother's brother... shepherding the sheep of Lavan, his mother's brother... and he gave water to the sheep of Lavan, his mother's brother. (Genesis 29: 10)

Yaakov sees his mother's family in Rachel. She is his kin, his mother's relative, and perhaps he sees the similarity in personality as well. Rachel is a shepherdess, caring for her father's sheep all day. In fact, her name, Rachel, means a small lamb. She is described as "beautiful of form, and beautiful of appearance" (Genesis 29:17).

Here is a woman who is very at home in the outside world. She is outdoors, taking care of animals. She has leadership abilities, along with compassion and care. Her beauty "of form and appearance" implies harmony where the external is an expression of internal perfection. Yaakov sees this two-dimensional beauty and the synchrony between body and soul which it implies, and recognizes her as a match and partner for his mission of bringing wholeness and truth to this world.

In just a few words, Yaakov tries to inform Rachel of his essence, his characteristics and spiritual strengths.

Yaakov told Rachel that he was the brother of her father, and the son of Rivka... (Genesis 29: 12).

In terms of ability to deceive, [he is] the brother of her father. In terms of righteousness, [he is] the son of Rivka. (Midrash - Breishit Rabba 70: 13)



This is who I am; this is my mission and my goal. I can participate in worldly endeavors but I would like to bring morality and holiness to the world. I see in you a potential partner for my life. "And Yaakov loved Rachel" (Genesis 29:18).

There is also a sadness in the midst of the certainty of his love for her:

And Yaakov kissed Rachel and raised his voice and cried" (Genesis 29: 11).

Rashi: "He saw he wouldn't be buried with her."

Yaakov had a sense that this partnership would not last forever, would be fraught with difficulty, and that there would be tears as well as love in this relationship.

Leah – First Impression

The Torah narrative does not describe Leah anywhere in relation to Yaakov. He doesn't see her, doesn't get to know her or anything about her. Even though she is the older of the two sisters, she isn't outside caring for her father's property. We, the readers, only hear about her through a terse statement:

And Leah's eyes were weak (soft). (Genesis 29: 17)

She had weak eyes from crying, since people would say, "Lavan has two daughters, and Rivka has two sons. The elder will marry the elder, and the younger will marry the younger." [Leah] cried and said: "May it be Your will that I not fall to the fate of the evil Esav." (Midrash - Breishit Rabba 70: 16)

The name Leah means tired and exhausted. The implication is that she is "sick and tired of life." Our first impression of Leah, therefore, is of a woman who is

not particularly adaptable and accepting of life and her situation. She cries her eyes out, literally, about the potential match between her and Esav, and her name denotes a basic dissatisfaction and weariness with life.

It's easy to see that a woman with these characteristics would not appeal to Yaakov, a man of wholeness and truth, looking to understand the world from all angles, in order to infuse it with holiness and the message of God. Building a family that would become the Jewish nation would be difficult, if not impossible, with a woman who had such disdain for the physical world and the evil it contains. Or so Yaakov might have imagined.

Yet the information that Leah was "destined" for Esav, reveals a clue to her greatness: Her destiny was to overpower the evil in Esav and transform him, as his wife, into a bastion of goodness.

Marriage and the Switch

And Yaakov loved Rachel... and said to Lavan: "I will work for you for seven years for your younger daughter, Rachel." (Genesis 29: 18)

Yaakov asked Rachel: "Will you marry me?" Rachel said: "Yes, but my father is a trickster and will try to switch Leah in my place. So Yaakov gave her signs... When the night of the wedding arrived, Lavan brought Leah to the chuppah. Rachel said to herself, "Now, my sister will be humiliated," and she gave over the signs to Leah. (Talmud - Megillah 13b)

Yaakov and Rachel anticipated this trick of Lavan and prepared for it. Yaakov gave Rachel a code or password, which she was to give over to him at the wedding to confirm that she was the real bride. In a bizarre twist, Rachel, seeing the ruse about to be carried out, cannot allow her sister to be humiliated. It's as if she is so overwhelmed by compassion at the pain of another, that she has no choice but to give over the password. Rachel absolutely cannot stand by and

witness another person's suffering, even if it were at the expense of her love, her future, her destiny! The only calculation that seemed to enter her mind was: I cannot allow my sister to be humiliated. That's it.

And in the morning, behold, it was Leah! (Genesis 29:25)

Only the next morning did Yaakov figure out he had been tricked. (What a difference electricity would have made!)

He said to Leah: "Why did you deceive me?" Leah answered, "Didn't you deceive your father as well, saying, 'I am Esav, your oldest'?" (Midrash - Breishit Rabba 70:19)

What is going on here? Is Leah the conniving selfish woman she is described as being in the text? How could she have gone through with the wedding, knowing that Yaakov loved her sister?! And to be balanced, how could Rachel have betrayed Yaakov in this way? If I were the man in this picture, I'd feel like both sisters were conspiring against me.

Rachel, it seems, was unable to make a rational decision when faced with the pain of another individual, in this case her sister. Yaakov must have known and loved this about her -- compassion and other-centeredness to the extreme. He therefore doesn't seem to fault her at all, and proceeds to cut another "deal" with her father, whereby after one week he marries Rachel, promising to stay and work an additional seven years in the house of Lavan.

But what about Leah?

Leah, Matriarch of Prayer

As we know, Leah had been crying about her perceived destiny as the wife of the evil Esav. This crying wasn't just a passive misery, but an active channeling of her pain to God, the Controller of all destinies.

*Leah prayed: "May it be Your will that I not share in the fate of Esav."
(Midrash - Breishit Rabba 70: 16)*

When the opportunity arose to marry Yaakov, even in this roundabout deceitful way, she saw it as a lifeline that God was throwing her in response to her prayers. Leah couldn't afford *not* to take it. What she meant by her words to Yaakov, when he realized he'd been tricked, may have been: Just like you felt it necessary to deceive your father in order to get the firstborn rights to the blessing, because you knew it was the right way to secure your future, destiny and purpose, so too I, knowing I must be part of the Jewish nation and mission, felt it the only possible way to accomplish this goal.

It must not have been easy for Leah. As much as she desired this outcome, she was still marrying someone without his knowledge, who didn't love her, and who'd worked for seven years to marry her sister! Leah, whose name connotes weariness and exhaustion, had to overcome with aggressive strength all the obstacles that stood in her way:

And God saw that Leah was hated, and He opened her womb. And Rachel was barren. (Genesis 29: 31)

Leah feels that she is less loved (no wonder!) and, as a result of this pain, God allows her to conceive first. Interestingly, she names her child for her marital struggles:

Leah had a son and she called him Reuven, saying: "God has seen (ra'ah) my pain (b'on'yee)." (Genesis 29:32)

The second child:

And she named him Shimon: "For God has heard (shama) my suffering (b'an'yee)." (Genesis 29:33)

The third:

*She said: "Now my husband will accompany me (yila'veh)," and **he** called him Levi. (Genesis 29:34)*

The fourth:

"Now I will be grateful (odeh) to God for I have given birth to four sons," and she called him Yehuda. (Genesis 29:35)

Leah is actively working on getting her husband to accept and love her. It must fill her mind and her prayers every waking moment, as she consistently cries out to God and involves Him in her predicament. Imagine calling your child by a name which brings to mind all your painful marital disharmony! But to Leah, these names are a reminder of her hard work and of God's response to her prayers.

There is a positive outcome to this talking to God. Slowly but surely, Yaakov is coming around. By the sheer force of Leah's desires, prayers, and by demonstrating this yearning, there is a positive development in their relationship. Going from an obviously strained relationship when son #1 is born, so that anyone could "see my suffering," by son #2 only people who were close and sensitive to the nuances and subtle differences could "*hear* my pain." By son #3, Levi, it was Yaakov who admitted -- by his participation in the naming

process -- that he would, in fact, be "accompanying" his wife more often. And son #4, Yehuda, is an expression of the full circle that Leah has traveled with her husband and family life, to the point where she is full of gratitude -- no more complaints!

Leah is the matriarch of prayer -- she harnesses all the power of her feelings of sadness, despair and loneliness, and channels them directly into her relationship with the Almighty. "God, You put me into this situation, and only You have the power to get me out of it. You see my pain. You're with me every step of the way. You've helped me in the worst stage of this relationship, and You've brought me to a level where I am left with only thanks and appreciation."

Leah doesn't sit back and wait for good things to happen. Against her nature and her name ("weary"), she is always willing to work hard to reach the destiny for which she so desperately longs.

Rachel, the Small Sheep

What about Rachel during this period of Leah's fruitfulness and productivity?

And Rachel saw that she didn't conceive and she envied her sister, and said to Yaakov: "Give me children, or else I will die." Yaakov was angry at Rachel and said: "Am I instead of God, Who has prevented from you fruit of the womb?" She said: "Here then, is my maidservant, Bilhah... she will have children on my knees, and I will be also built through her." (Genesis 30: 1-3)

Imagine Rachel, who in a moment of selflessness and sacrifice, "gave away" her betrothed to her sister, now becoming the secondary wife in her own home. Leah and Yaakov are building a family together, the start of the Jewish nation, and building their personal relationship in the process.

It is understandable that Rachel is upset, but the interchange between her and Yaakov is baffling for a couple of such obvious greatness. What does Rachel expect of Yaakov by demanding children from him? And, assuming that Yaakov is a righteous man of sensitivity and kindness, why does he answer in such a harsh manner, "Am I instead of God Who prevented *you* from having children," as if to say: I have children; it's you who has the problem!

According to the simple text, Rachel told Yaakov to give her children, meaning that he should pray to God until He gives her children, for otherwise she would die of sorrow. [Rachel] spoke inappropriately in her envy, and thought that because [Yaakov] loved her so much he would fast and pray and wear sackcloth until God would answer...

But the prayer of righteous people is not in their control to be answered no matter what. And because she spoke like the whining of beloved women to threaten him with her death, [Yaakov] was angry with her. (Ramban, Genesis 30: 1-2)

Rachel is a beloved woman. She always has been beloved, popular, beautiful, used to giving and receiving good things. Like her namesake, the little lamb, she is used to being cared for and cradled. Perhaps, as a result, there is a slight passivity and lack of appreciation for that which she hasn't worked hard to attain. Other people work hard for her, because they love her.

Yaakov realized (especially in comparison to Leah) that Rachel, although she was righteous, compassionate and kind, was being prevented by God from bearing children, for perhaps she needed to develop a characteristic that Leah had in abundance: introspection, the willingness to do hard spiritual work, and perseverance to achieve a goal.

Rachel, who truly was a righteous woman (how many of us would take that sort of husbandly criticism in stride?!), responded immediately with what she

considered repentance for her jealousy of Leah on one hand, and her lack of effort on the other: "Here is my maidservant Bilhah..."

Rachel was in effect saying: I will learn from your self-sacrificing grandmother, Sarah, who presented Avraham with another wife whose children she hoped to raise, and I too will invest effort into this project. Not only will I overcome my jealousy of Leah, but I will humble myself even further and allow another woman to be married and have children with you... "And I will be built through her."

Perhaps Rachel is referring not only to the children which may be a product of this union, but also to her own character which will be built and strengthened through this challenging ordeal.

Does Bilhah have children right away? Does Rachel maintain her status of beloved wife despite her lack of children? What is the significance of the matriarchs' struggle with infertility? Is there a happy ending to the story? These and other questions will be answered in the next essay: Rachel and Leah - Part Two.