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THE TWO SISTERS BUILD THE TWELVE TRIBES OF ISRAEL,
AND BEAR A POSITIVE INFLUENCE ON EACH OTHER.

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When we last left off, Rachel was learning a tough lesson in the realities of life as a matriarch:

Why were the matriarchs barren? Because God desires the prayers and conversations of the righteous. He said: "They are beautiful, they are rich; if I give them children, when will I ever hear from them?" (Midrash Tanchuma - Toldot 9)

It's not easy being a matriarch! Of the four, Leah seems to be the only one who "got away" with no fertility problems. But she was also the one best known for regularly involving God in her daily needs and difficulties. She knew best the power of prayer to change destiny. When it comes to "conversations and prayers" with the Almighty, Leah is the expert. This is what she has to teach Rachel, her sister, and us, her descendants, as well.



Bilhah's Children

In any case, Rachel is beginning to learn that in order to receive anything in life, God expects us to ask for it, and to persevere in our efforts to achieve it (as in: "God helps those who help themselves).

Rachel allows Yaakov to marry her handmaid, and when Bilhah conceives and bears two children, Rachel considers them a direct answer to her prayers and efforts. Although in this gift there is a bittersweet sense that she has been judged (not quite loved) by God:

And she said: "God has judged me, and listened to my voice, and has given me a child." And she called him Dan (judged). (Genesis 30:5)

Dan represents Rachel's struggle to be introspective, to change and grow from a purely "compassion" perspective to one where "judgment" plays a role as well.

And the next child she calls Naftali (tied ropes):

"Entanglements of God I am entangled with my sister, and I prevailed." And she called his name Naftali." (Genesis 30:8)

In other words, says Rachel, "God has arranged for these complicated relationships so that I can learn and grow from them, and from my sister in particular." Here Rachel learns from Leah to involve God in her life through the medium of prayer, and to toil to achieve results.

Rachel's Affect on Leah

As soon as things are looking up for Leah, and she has everything she could have hoped for, God sends her another need -- to keep her requesting, praying and growing:

And Leah saw that she stopped bearing children. So she also gave her maidservant, Zilpah, to Yaakov... (Genesis 30:9)

After Rachel's act of sacrifice, allowing Yaakov to marry her handmaid, Leah realized that a woman doesn't have to bear children biologically in order to raise them. And seeing that she was experiencing secondary infertility (even this matriarch didn't avoid infertility altogether), she set about investing more effort to build the community of Israel. And sure enough, Zilpah has two sons, Gad and Asher, good names for the good tidings they represent:

Leah said, "Blessing (Gad) has arrived," and she named him Gad... And Leah said, 'In my happiness (osher)'"... she named him Asher. (Genesis 30: 11, 13)

The Duda'im Episode

Reuven went and found duda'im (mandrake flowers) in the field, and brought them to his mother, Leah. And Rachel said to Leah, "Give me your son's duda'im." [Leah] said to her, "Isn't it enough that you took my husband; now you want my son's duda'im, too?!" Rachel answered, "[Yaakov] will lie with you tonight in return for your son's duda'im." (Genesis 30: 14-16)

Duda'im seem to be a sort of plant which either had fertility properties or perhaps were known as an aphrodisiac. Either way it represented another attempt for Rachel to become pregnant. Leah's response -- "Isn't it enough that you took my husband" -- seems irrational and selfish: Wasn't it the other way around? Wasn't Leah the one who originally took away Rachel's husband? And Rachel's counteraction is odd as well: agreeing to forgo physical intimacy with her husband (which after all is a key ingredient for conception) in order to get these herbs? On what basis did Rachel decide to "sell" Yaakov in return for a plant?

Appreciation Comes From Effort

Leah, having worked so hard to earn Yaakov's love, investing all of her attention, care and spiritual energy in the direction of this relationship, feels that she has a right to own the marriage as well. When she says to Rachel, "Isn't it enough you took my husband, you want my son's duda'im as well?" she is still speaking from her personal pain over the fact that Rachel is the "main" wife, the more beloved,

the one who, after all, was Yaakov's chosen "first love." *If you already have his love over me, thinks Leah, at least let me have the advantage of bearing him children.*

Rachel's response of "Let him lie with you tonight, in return for the *duda'im*," points to her taking Yaakov's love for granted. In her attempt to put more "effort" into the project of conceiving, she neglected to cherish and invest in the loving relationship she shared with her husband and with the Almighty. Maybe as a result, Rachel still had to wait a few more years, all the while witnessing Leah's appreciation of Yaakov -- and the children born as a result.

*Yaakov came from the field in the evening, and Leah went out to greet him and said, "You will come to me tonight because I have paid for you (hired you!) with my son's *duda'im*..."*

*God listened to Leah and she conceived and had a fifth son... called Yissachar, for she said, "This was my *sachar*." (*sachar* means "reward" and "to hire") (Genesis 30:16-18)*

Leah assertively greets Yaakov and then commemorates the event in the baby's name. This seems to contradict the natural modesty inherent in Jewish women. But the Sages thought differently:

*Whoever invites her husband for the sake of a *mitzvah* (marital intimacy) merits children who are more righteous than even those in the generation of Moses. (Talmud - Eruvin 100b)*

Leah places great value on developing love and closeness with her husband, Yaakov. She tries to pursue that intimacy with whatever means at her disposal -- with pride and assertion, and with no shame.

Rachel, though she now feels there is a lacking in her partnership with Yaakov, it is as a result of her inability to bear his children and share directly and personally in the mission of creating the nation of Israel. What she takes for granted is his love and regard for her as the mainstay of his home.

Besides the natural efforts, Leah is constantly investing spiritual effort: "And God listened to Leah" -- she must have been praying again. There's much for Rachel to gain by being "entangled" with Leah.

But Leah hasn't forgotten Rachel's virtues that enabled her to receive everything she asked for. She has learned from her as well.

Dina and the Change in Destiny (Again!)

And then she bore a daughter and called her Dina (judgment). (Genesis 30:21)

Rashi states:

Leah judged for herself: If this is a male, then Rachel, my sister, won't even be equal to the handmaids. So she prayed regarding [the fetus], and it switched into a female.

Here, although Leah still operates from a perspective of "justice," not compassion, it is out of a sense of other-centeredness and empathy (which she learned from her sister) that she realizes that she must not have a seventh son. Leah knew prophetically that Yaakov was destined to have only 12 male tribes, and since each of the handmaids had two and Leah already had six, that left two to be born from Rachel. Leah understood that it wouldn't be right for Rachel to have fewer tribes than the handmaids.

Leah, once again, uses prayer to change reality. As with her predestined fate to marry Esav -- which was uprooted by her prayers and tears -- here an already formed baby boy was changed into a female. This was achieved through Leah's determination to return to Rachel a bit of the kindness she had extended her, so many years before.

Children for Rachel -- Finally

Many factors combine to bring about this long-awaited event:



God remembered Rachel and opened her womb and she conceived and had a son. She said, "God has gathered (asaf) my humiliation." And she called him Yosef ("will add"), as if to say, "God will add for me another son." (Genesis 30:23-24)

Since she put in effort by bringing another woman into her home, and with the duda'im, God heard her prayer after these two kinds of effort." (Sforno - Genesis 30:22)

Once Rachel invested some hard work in an attempt to conceive, as well as continued requests of God, she is remembered.

The Midrash adds another contributing factor:

Since the righteous Leah stood in judgment before God, God said, "As you have compassion on her, so will I." Immediately -- "God remembered Rachel." (Tanchuma - Vayetzei 8)

Once the circle of kindness is brought to a close between the two sisters, and Leah has learned to use her strengths of prayer and justice to help another person, Rachel can now be repaid for that wonderful kindness which she showed Leah by sharing the "signs" on her wedding day. God responds with kindness; He showers blessings when we behave with kindness and compassion toward each other. It seems like God was waiting for Leah and Rachel to each learn from each other's strength before completing the family which would become the "house of Israel."

Leaving the House of Lavan

As Yosef grows up, Yaakov realizes that he is strong enough to go home and face his brother, Esav, again, with his wives and children. After 20 years of working for Lavan, who has tried to swindle Yaakov on every occasion, he senses that Lavan now begrudges his possessions and wealth (for which he worked so hard) and it's time to get out. He asks his wives to share their opinion.

Rachel and Leah answered: "Do we yet have a portion and inheritance in the house of our father? We are considered strangers to him, since he sold

us and used all our money... Now whatever God told you to do, do."
(Genesis 31:14-16)

The matriarchs are following in the footsteps of Sarah and Rebecca, encouraging Yaakov to take his family and leave all the evil forces behind, weeding out any bad external influences, in order to better build the foundation of Israel.

The Idols and Rachel's Death

And Rachel stole the idols of her father. (Genesis 31:19)

Yaakov and his wives stealthily leave the house of Lavan with all their possessions. Rachel takes Lavan's idols and hides them under her seat on the camel. Perhaps she didn't want Lavan to use these to harm Yaakov and his family, as they seemed to have some future-telling or witchcraft abilities (maybe voodoo dolls of some sort). In any case, Lavan returns, discovers that Yaakov and family have all left, and that his idols are missing. He catches up with them and in a rage demands the idols back:

"Why did you steal my gods?"... Yaakov answered: "With whomever you find your gods, he shall not live..." because Yaakov did not know that Rachel had stolen them. (Genesis 31:30, 32)

When a righteous person claims someone will not live, that is a powerful statement which has repercussions, even if unintentional. (It seems that this unfortunate curse led, unknowingly, to Rachel's untimely death, not long thereafter).

They traveled from Beit El and there was some distance to Efrat, when Rachel gave birth and was struggling in her labor. As she was having difficulty, the midwife said, "Do not fear, this too is a son." As she was dying, she called him "the son of my suffering" (ben Oni), and his father called him Binyamin ("the son of my right hand").

Rachel died and was buried on the way to Efrat, which is Beit Lechem. And Yaakov placed a tombstone on her grave. This is the mark of the grave of Rachel until this day. (Genesis 35:16-20)

Binyamin is the only one of the 12 sons of Yaakov who is considered to have been born in the Land of Israel:

Why did the presence of God dwell in the portion of Binyamin (the Temple was built in his part of the land)? Because all the tribes were born outside of Israel, and he was born in Israel. (Midrash - Yalkut Shimoni 1:957)

This sad ending to the life of Rachel, even as it reached completion with the birth of her second son, the 12th tribe, is sensed even at that very first meeting between Yaakov and Rachel at the well. A premonition of sorts causes him to cry as he kisses her:

Yaakov kissed Rachel and wept aloud. (Genesis 29:11)

Since he saw that she wouldn't be buried with him. (Midrash - Breishit Rabba 70:12)

Rachel, the Unifying Force

Only many years later, before Yaakov's own death in Egypt, we receive an inkling as to why Yaakov buried Rachel "along the way," and didn't bring her to burial at the Cave of Machpela in Hebron where the other matriarchs and patriarchs were buried. Rachel remained Yaakov's first love and mainstay of his family, and yet, as he apologizes later to her son, Yosef, he was commanded to bury her there:

"And when I came from Padan Aram, Rachel died on me... when I was a short distance from Beit Lechem." (Genesis 48:7)

Rashi states:

"I know you were upset at me for not taking her to the Cave of Machpela, but know that God told me to bury her on the way, since He knew that in the future the Temple would be destroyed. The Jewish people will be going into exile and will pass by Rachel's grave, and she will stand before Him and beg for mercy that they be returned." (P'sikta Rabati 83)

Rachel remains, to the end, the quintessential mother of the Jewish people. Even though Leah had more children, lived longer, and was buried eternally beside Yaakov, Rachel alone is the one who has the power to awaken God's mercy for His children and "twists His arm" (like any good mom) into promising to eventually gather them back from exile and return them to their rightful borders:

At that hour (the destruction of the Temple and exile), our mother Rachel jumped up before God and said: "Master of the universe, it is known to you that Yaakov loved me greatly and worked for me... and when it was time for me to marry, my father decided to put my sister in my stead, and I didn't envy her and did not allow her to be humiliated. If I, who am but mere flesh and blood, dust and ashes, didn't begrudge my competition, You, Who are the immortal eternal King, how could you be jealous of idolatry, which is meaningless, and exile my children?" Immediately God's mercy was awakened and He said: "For you, Rachel, I will bring Israel back to their place." (Midrash - Eicha Rabba, Introduction)

Through Rachel's compassion and utter selflessness, she is able to "convince" God to mirror that same trait and redeem the Jewish people. Rachel, the young sheep, who can see another's need to the exclusion of her own, can storm the heavens for her children. God then rains down His blessing of compassion and swears:

"There will be reward for your actions, so says the Lord, and your children will return to their borders." (Jeremiah 31:11)

Rachel and Leah: Chesed and Gevurah

In Kabbalistic terminology, the way God's "traits" express themselves in our world and in human relations, are called *sefirot*.

The combination of *chesed* (kindness, openness and compassion) with *gevurah* (restraint, inner strength and justice), produces *tifferet* -- "truth."

As we look back at these two matriarchs who built the house of Israel, we see clearly how the third patriarch, Yaakov -- who encapsulated the trait of truth or

tifferet -- was complemented in two different ways by his two wives, who embodied *chesed* and *gevurah*.

Rachel represented and perfected *chesed* to the extreme. To a certain degree she resembles Rivka who was the complement to Yitzchak's trait of *gevurah* -- self restraint and strength.

Leah, on the other hand, bypassed the exhaustion and weariness inherent in her name, and toiled her whole life to attain the goals she set out for herself: marriage to Yaakov, taking a role in the building of the Jewish nation, and perfecting a relationship with the Almighty through prayer. Eventually, with strength and courage, she takes hold of her destiny.

In this, Leah seems to follow in the footsteps of Sarah, who acted with strength and determination, with a keen eye for justice, in her complementary partnership with Avraham -- the pillar of kindness.

Both women, Rachel and Leah, perfected their unique traits, influenced each other to develop more synthesis and wholeness within themselves, and complemented Yaakov -- helping him to become the ultimate "man of truth," and the father of the illustrious Twelve Tribes of Israel.

In Summary: The Matriarchs Today

At the beginning of this series, we quoted Nachmanides: "The actions of the ancestors are a sign for their descendants." Specifically, when we look back at the matriarchs' lives, experiences and characters, women in particular can hope to glean many lessons to guide us in our own lives today:

From Sarah we can learn the trait of "inner strength" -- the ability to accept life's challenges with equanimity and with a willingness to grow in the way that God intends for us. We can remember that it's not our agenda that matters; rather, it's our mission to acclimate ourselves to the life circumstances in which we find ourselves.

Sarah is also a role model in taking an active part in fulfilling the mission God had in mind for the first Jewish couple: spreading monotheism throughout the

world. Partnership in life goals is the foundation of a strong marriage. When choosing a spouse (or when married already), make sure that you have life goals in common to provide a substantial meaningful basis for your joint life's journey.

From Rivka, our second matriarch, we can learn the trait of giving -- loving kindness to the point where we extend ourselves naturally for the other person, spiritually, emotionally and physically. Being an enabler is a noble cause which we can appreciate by looking at Rivka's life. Sometimes we may find ourselves annoyed that we are giving and not receiving much appreciation in return, either to our children, our spouse, our friends or community. Realize that this is what G-d does for us every day: He gives us life, every moment, our ability to walk, talk, see, hear and function in every way. We not only take it for granted, but sometimes even use these facilities to go against God's Will! We may speak badly of others, walk to places which distance us from God, etc. -- yet He continues to allow us to thrive! Take note of this next time you feel you are giving too much, and realize you are learning from Rivka, our matriarch, how to emulate God, and that you will merit more continuous giving as a result.

Rachel and Leah teach us more about interpersonal relationships -- how to work on our *middot* (character traits) when we are in close contact with other people. We must realize that people with whom we are involved on a daily basis are in our lives for a reason. They are there to teach us something, to help us (perhaps in a challenging way) to develop and become great.

Rachel shows us the trait of compassion -- loving other people and caring so much about their well-being that we do not begrudge them the good they have. We are willing to forego our own benefit to avoid causing hurt to others. Realize that when you behave mercifully towards others, God in turn rains down compassion on you and the world. In our morning prayers, we say in the Amidah: "Bestow peace, good and blessing on us and on all of Your nation... bless us all *as one* in the light of Your countenance..." When we appreciate that we are one family, one person really, and we don't feel envy and competition, that one person's success is another's failure, only then can we ask God to brighten His countenance on us all. Otherwise, God may withhold blessing from one person because He knows it will make another one jealous. Something to think about...

And Leah, of course, teaches us the power of prayer. If at first you don't succeed, pray, pray again. Involve God in your life. Talk to Him on a regular basis. Nothing is too mundane or boring to God. He is just waiting to hear from you. He wants the relationship more than anything. You can change your destiny, even cause miracles to happen, by connecting to the Source of all existence and blessing with an honest and open heart. You have a direct line to the President. No wall of secretaries, no appointments necessary. Use it now and you'll be shocked: He'll actually pick up the phone. Hello!