

THE MATRIARCHS RACHEL AND LEAH: TEARS OF THE JEWISH MOTHERS, PART I

by Rebbetzin Leah Kohn

In our last class, we explored the inner meaning and greatness of Leah's tears. This week we look at Rachel's tears.

To begin our inquiry into the unique impact of Rachel's tears on the Jewish people past, present and future, we turn to a Midrash from the beginning of the Book of Lamentations. The Midrash tells us that God sends the prophet Jeremiah to the Patriarchs, Avraham, Isaac and Jacob, and to Moshe - all of whom have left the world - to ask their participation in mourning and pleading for a better future for the Jewish people. Each advocates for Israel, attempting to appease God by asking Him to reciprocate for his past good deeds.

Avraham reminds God of his willingness to have sacrificed, Isaac, his only son. In essence he says to God, "When You told me to sacrifice my son, I became like a cruel person. I did not pay attention to my merciful feelings as a father. I put Isaac on the altar and tied him down in order to sacrifice him. Why will You not reciprocate by having mercy on Your children, Israel?" But God does not respond.

Next, Isaac reminds God of his willingness to have allowed himself to be sacrificed by his father, Avraham. He asks that God reciprocate by having compassion for and saving the Jewish people. Again there is no response. Then Jacob comes forward and essentially says, "When I came out of Laban's house where I had worked for twenty years, I was with my family and we met my brother Esav along the way. Esav intended to kill me, and I was ready to have myself killed, in order to save my children. Please remember my deed and, in return, save Your children the Jews." No answer.

Finally, Moshe speaks. "Wasn't I a loyal shepherd to the Jewish people for forty years? I led them in the desert and, finally, when they were poised to enter Israel, You told me I was to remain in the desert and die there. I was not allowed to enjoy the fruits of my labor and, now, You call upon me to join You in mourning for something I never had? Please remember my efforts and have mercy on Your people." Again, no response.

Each of the Patriarchs, along with Moshe, argues that along with the justice God exacts by exiling the Jews from Israel, He should also show mercy and ultimately save them. But God does not respond.

Back to Rachel. The Midrash tells us that she appears in front of God and reiterates to Him how difficult it was for her to have participated in the plan of replacing herself with her sister, Leah, under

the bridal canopy. Rashi from Megillah 13b, gives us a background to this event: "Living up to his reputation as a deceitful rogue, Laban substituted Leah for Rachel on the wedding night. Jacob and Rachel expected Laban to attempt such a deception, and they prepared against it by arranging a secret signal between them. Seeing that they were about to substitute her sister Leah for her, however, Rachel confided the sign to her sister so that Leah would not be put to shame..." Rachel buries her desire to marry Jacob, and gives the signals to Leah. What's more, Rachel also buries her jealousy, in order to be able to carry out her plan with the purest intentions. Rachel asks God the following: "If I, as a flesh and blood mortal, was able to transcend my jealousy and anger, how much more so should You, an immortal King, find compassion for Your people."

The Midrash tells us that, as soon as she says this, God responds to Rachel's tears. He promises, for her sake, that He will ultimately redeem the Jews from their exile: "Rachel recalled her own magnanimity to her sister, Leah. When Leah was fraudulently married to Jacob in place of Rachel, Rachel did not let jealous resentment lead her to protest. Why then, should God be so zealous in punishing His children for bringing idols into His Temple? God accepted her plea and promised that Israel would be redeemed eventually, in her merit."

As it is written in Jeremiah (31:14), "Thus said Hashem: A voice is heard on high, wailing, bitter weeping, Rachel weeps for her children; she refuses to be consoled for her children, for they are gone. Thus said 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."

Why is it that God responds to Rachel and not to the Patriarchs or to Moshe? Certainly these were men of greatness and inordinate dedication to the Jewish people. Reb Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin proposes that the difference lies in the initiative Rachel takes, without first having to be commanded by God. From this perspective, we can say that the Patriarchs and Moshe perform their acts of self-sacrifice in response to God's command. Rachel, on the other hand, takes it upon herself to mastermind a plan that will save her sister's dignity, without any prior directive from God.

Had Rachel followed through with her own marriage to Jacob, God would not have held her responsible for Leah's embarrassment. This is because Leah's predicament would have been Laban's fault, since the plan was his. Nonetheless, Rachel takes it upon herself to act above and beyond her obligations. Accordingly, Rachel comes to God with a very strong argument for why her own actions should be a model for God in His treatment of the exiled Jewish people. She is able to say to God, "According to 'halacha' (Jewish law) there is no reason why You should save Your people, since they have clearly transgressed. But, inasmuch as I acted with compassion to save my sister, You should do the same." And God accepts.

What we learn from Rachel's tears is that, when a person's actions surpass his or her obligations, God will reciprocate in kind - which is to say, beyond what they deserve according to conventional

justice. Our sages tell us that if we want God's favorable judgement, say, on Rosh Hashanah, we should go an extra mile for someone else, even if we are not obligated to do so by Jewish law. This will enable us to convincingly advocate for ourselves in His presence.

In general, tears have a negative connotation, since we associate them with pain and difficulty. On the contrary, tears are the soul's response to a profound experience. We can now understand why, in order to appreciate Rachel and Leah, we have to examine the source of their tears. Leah cries out of fear that she may not be able to participate in building the Jewish Nation. Rachel cries for Israel her exiled children. Both Matriarchs teach us how tears express the essence of a Jewish woman.

We should always ask ourselves, "What do we have to care about to the extent that we'll cry?" This question will help us to define our values, set our priorities and direct our spiritual growth.

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