

RACHEL AND LEAH: THE APPEARANCE VS. REALITY OF HATRED, JEALOUSY AND DECEIT PART I

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This two-part essay explores Rachel and Leah's devotion to God, as expressed through three experiences that seem to the contrary. These are:

1. Leah's decision to go ahead with her father, Laban's deceitful plan for her marriage to Jacob (Genesis 29: 21-25)
2. Leah being referred to in the Torah as "hated" (Genesis 29:31)
3. Rachel's jealousy when Leah has children (Genesis 30:1)

A cursory look at Rachel and Leah may leave the impression that their story is one of hatred, jealousy and deceit. This assumption is called into question, however, when we consider everything else the Torah tells us about their roles as wholly righteous women and founders of the Jewish nation. In addition, if we consider aspects of grammar, detail and nuance in the Torah text, itself, we come to understand Rachel and Leah's story on a deeper, more truthful level.

By way of reintroduction to Rachel and Leah - originally Rachel was supposed to marry Jacob, Leah was supposed to marry Esav, and together the four were to establish the Jewish Nation. Being that Esav was not interested in participating in this task, Jacob assumed his responsibilities and, ultimately, Esav's intended partner, Leah. (For more on this subject, please see [class 44](#) "Tears of the Jewish Mothers").

In terms of the paths Rachel and Leah take to marrying Jacob, Rachel has an easier time. Her relationship with Jacob is natural, given it has been divinely decreed. Jacob loves Rachel upon meeting her, and works for her father-in-law for a total of fourteen years (seven in the beginning and another seven after Laban deceives him) in order to earn the privilege of marriage. The Torah tells us that the first seven years seemed to Jacob "a few days because of his love for her (Genesis 29:20)." Jacob sees in Rachel the right partner for building the Jewish people, and the couple's deep connection reflects this understanding. This is a true match made in heaven.

By contrast, the circumstances behind Leah's marriage to Jacob are far more complex. Leah implores God through tears and prayer to change a heavenly decree that she marry Jacob's brother Esav. She does not know how, when or if God will give her another opportunity to contribute to the fledgling nation. Within this context, if we re-examine Leah's passivity in allowing Laban to substitute

her for Rachel, her decision takes on a more purposeful, goal-oriented tone.

>From Laban's point of view, he can easily assume that once Jacob discovers his ruse, he may either divorce Leah or make her life miserable in an unhappy marriage. While neither of these scenarios would be acceptable to any normal father, Laban is more concerned with his own agenda, and he in fact threatens to kill Leah if she refuses to walk down the aisle. Leah's decision to go along with Laban is not a response to his threat - given her caliber, she is not afraid to give her life for the right reason. She agrees because she senses Divine intervention in Laban's irrational scheme, precisely because it is so out of the ordinary. She feels obligated not to resist his plot and to let God work through Laban according to His will.

Jacob - himself a prophet who ultimately recognizes Leah's future as a Jewish Matriarch - remains married to Leah (and works another seven years for Laban in order to marry Rachel). The early twentieth century commentator, Michtav MeEliyahu reinforces the idea that Jacob comes to understand Leah's role as one of his partners in God's plan:

"Because [Jacob's] destiny was to become Israel, he had to marry Leah, and God arranged for him to do so contrary to his perceptions at that moment."

On a practical level, Leah's decision is not easy. As a righteous woman, she does not want to replace her sister as Jacob's wife (even though Rachel has given her the secret signals and agrees to the exchange). In addition, Leah knows that Laban's plan is no basis for marriage - above all a marriage that is responsible for the birth of the Jewish people. Leah's decision not to resist is grounded on her own prophetic knowledge that she is intended to be a matriarch. Her decision is inextricably tied to her sense that it is God's will she join Jacob in his nation-building. (To restate: Leah's prophecy is at the heart of her choice to be passive and to let the course of events carry her. Today in the absence of prophecy, we cannot be this passive, nor can we presume to know what God wants for us).

Once Jacob is married to both wives, the Torah tells us that he, "loved Rachel even more than Leah (Genesis 29:30)" and that, "Hashem saw that Leah was hated (Genesis 29:31)." The first verse does not imply Jacob hated Leah, but that he had a deeper, natural connection to Rachel because, as explained above, their match was divinely ordained from the start. Another interpretation of the verse, from the commentator Kli Yakar, is based on the Hebrew letter "mem." "Mem" can mean "more than," or it can mean, "through," which would make the sentence, "Jacob loved Rachel more through Leah." The Kli Yakar tells us this implies that Jacob loved Rachel even more "through" understanding the great sacrifice Rachel made for her sister by giving her to Jacob.

There are various interpretations of the verse, "Hashem saw that Leah was hated." One of the most compelling, from the midrash, is based on the fact that the text does not say Jacob hated Leah, but says simply that Leah was hated. Within this context, the obvious question is, "who then hated Leah?" The midrash draws a connection between Leah's being hated and her initial association as Esav's intended. The Torah refers to Esav as, "the one who was hated," due to his undesirable

behavior and his unwillingness to participate in spawning the Jews. In the Torah, the wife is often associated with her husband and his deeds. Being that the Torah sets forth Esav as "the one who was hated," Leah is also referred to this way, to indicate that she was originally destined for Esav.

Another implication behind the fact that only Hashem saw that Leah was hated is that there was no difference between the way Jacob treated Leah and Rachel. There was no sense of inferiority or superiority in their relationships. Given this absence of favoritism, and based on our understanding about the nature of Leah's being hated, it seems strange that the Torah then tells us that because Leah was hated, Hashem gives her children as soon as she is married (Genesis 29:31). If Leah did not have the experience of being hated, why did Hashem find it necessary to compensate her with children?

In addition, the births of Leah's children cause Rachel - a wholly righteous woman - to become jealous of Leah, given that Rachel is still barren at this point in the story: "Rachel saw that she had not borne children to Jacob, so Rachel became envious of her sister (Genesis 30:1)." This statement seems to contradict what the Torah has already told us about Rachel's selfless decision to give Leah her own husband. Again, we must take into account additional factors in determining the precise nature of Rachel's jealousy.

Next week, we will resolve the questions of why Hashem gave Leah children and why Rachel was jealous.

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