

YOU'VE GOT TO BE CAREFULLY TAUGHT

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Rochel was jealous of her sister. She said to Yaakov, "Give me children!"

Be'er Yosef: Rashi cites a midrash that Rochel's jealousy was of Leah's good deeds. She reasoned that only Leah's righteousness could account for Leah's fecundity and her own barrenness, and was jealous of the merit that Leah possessed that she herself lacked.

This interpretation seems to make the rest of the episode unravel. If Rochel decided that her plight stemmed from the insufficiency of her own merit relative to Leah, she seems to have hit on the wrong strategy. She should have focused on Leah's actions, and learned from her sister how to become more righteous! What prompted her to look for short cut through the prayer of her husband? She should have strived to multiply her own merit, and deserve children in her own right.

When we first meet Leah, we are told that her "eyes were tender."^[2] The gemara^[3] offers us the back-story. The talk of the "street" was the *shidduchim*-to-be between the sons of Yitzchok and the daughters of Lavan. Everyone knew what would happen: the older daughter would go to the older son. Naturally, Leah had some interest in this story, and began inquiring about her apparent intended. She quickly learned that his reputation preceded him - but not in a good way. His evil exploits were a matter of record. The more she learned about Esav, the more she was repulsed by him - and took to crying incessantly. When Hashem saw how much Leah hated Esav's lifestyle and misadventures, He had pity upon her, and gave her the gift of the ability to bear children.

Rochel, on the other hand, led a charmed life. She was aware of the blessing of her attractiveness. More importantly, she knew she was destined to marry Yaakov the *tzaddik*. Her demeanor was one of happiness and thankfulness - and hence her dilemma. She understood that her sister had achieved great merit in fully reacting against Esav's deeds with disgust. Because Leah thought she was going to be drawn into his life, she was able to personalize the rejection of his evil. While Rochel certainly rejected Esav's evil, she knew that she could not feel it as intensely as her sister. She could not attain Leah's merit, because she was an entirely a different person. Lacking that merit, she turned to her husband to *daven* for her, hoping that his merit could compensate for what she could not supply.

We know that Yaakov spurned her request - and used some sharp, acerbic language to boot. Essentially he told her that this was her problem, and not his. He had children through Leah. Rochel was the one in trouble.

Rochel was not only rejected, but Yaakov's apparent coldness got her thinking. Perhaps, if I can't provide children to Yaakov, he won't really need me. He will consider divorcing me. If he does, what will happen if Esav then sets his eyes on me? (Rashi, in fact, on *pasuk* 22 writes that even though there was no divorce contemplated, Esav did set his eyes upon Rochel, and desired to make her his!)

The upshot of this nightmare was that Rochel began to react to Esav exactly the way her sister had! In her new position of vulnerability, she was able to look upon Esav with heightened contempt. When that happened, Hashem rewarded her with a pregnancy.

But why should having children hinge on hatred for Esav. We know that both Rochel and Leah were *tzidkoniyyos*. Both achieved prophesy. Did they have no other merits that justified giving them children?

Perhaps this was the reason. Our *meforshim* are troubled that Yitzchok could father an Esav after his experience at the *Akeidah*. There, he had become a pure, elevated *olah*. How did Esav become part of his family?

Some of them pin the birth of Esav on Rivka, Yitzchok's wife. There was an ample font of evil in her familial roots; she had not purged herself entirely from its burden. Some of the unresolved evil in her background took shape in the person of Esav. (These commentators find support for this theory in the verse that predicted the clashing personalities of the two children she would bear. "There are two nations in your womb." Since this was written in response to her question about her difficult pregnancy, why would the Torah emphasize the words, "in your womb?" Rather, the Torah means to localize the source of Esav and his evil. Because he was a product of Rivka's womb - and not of the purity of Yitzchok alone - Esav was well connected to the evil that was a legacy of Rivka's forebears. This is also evidenced by the reactions of his parents when Esav marries women not to their liking. "They were a source of grief to Yitzchok and Rivkah." [4] A midrash [5] sees precision in the word order: they caused more grief to Yitzchok, who had been entirely purged of all evil, than they caused his wife. Because Esav's evil ultimately was sourced in her family roots, Rivkah did not react against it the same way.

Divine Providence had a different plan for Yaakov. His progeny had to be united in their commitment to their father's principles and message. Somehow, the residual evil in the family had to be dealt with. HKBH engineered the context within which their mothers would operate. First Leah, and then Rochel, were placed in situations where they would develop a fierce contempt for Esav and all that he stood for. Only in this way could they become suitable mothers of the *shivtei Kah*; only this way would they merit having children.

[1] Based on Be'er Yosef, Bereishis 30:1

[2] Bereishis 29:17

[3] Bava Basra 123A, cited by Rashi

[4] Bereishis 26:35

[5] Bereishis Rabbah 65:2
