

IT CAN ONLY HURT NOT TO ASK

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

*"And she [Leah] became pregnant again, and gave birth to a boy, and she said, 'this time I will give thanks to G-d;' therefore she called his name Yehudah; and she ceased to have children."
[29:35]*

This verse is explained by Rashi, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, from the Medrash Breishis Rabba: the matriarchs were prophetesses, and they knew that twelve tribes would emerge from Yaakov, and he married four women - thus when Yehudah, her fourth son, was born, Leah gave thanks because she had "taken more than her share."

This week I heard the same Dvar Torah from two different sources - by email from Rabbi Yehoshua Bertram, a teacher in Ohr Somayach whom I visited frequently for Shalosh Seudos when I lived in Jerusalem, and in person from Rabbi Leonard Dickstein, a resident of Silver Spring, MD, who was speaking at the Sheva Brachos (celebratory meal during the week after marriage) of his daughter Miriam and David Zuroff. The coincidence is striking enough that I will repeat the Dvar Torah for you here, and do so in honor of the newlyweds - may they build a Bayis Ne'eman B'Yisrael (a "faithful home" in Israel) and enjoy many happy years together.

The Talmud, Tractate Brachos 7b, says the following: "Rebbe Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai, 'from the day that the Holy One, Blessed be He, created the world, there was no one who offered thanks to Him until Leah came and offered thanks to him, as the verse says, "This time I will offer thanks to G-d."'"

As Rabbi Dickstein pointed out, this is a difficult passage to understand - are we truly to believe that no one thanked HaShem previously? Perhaps the simplest answer is that the Torah itself has no previous record of such thanks. The Torah Temima points out, however, that the Talmud Bava Basra credits Adam HaRishon ("the first") with the original authorship of Psalm 139, which reads, "I will give thanks to You, for in an awesome way was I formed, Your works are wonders, and my soul knows this well." [v. 14] He then resolves this by distinguishing Leah's gratitude for a particular act of kindness bestowed upon her, from the more general thanks for G-d's wonders given by Adam. But in any case, however we set aside or reconcile this problem, another question immediately arises.

If indeed it is true that Leah was the first to give thanks, then one would have expected G-d to amply reward her for her conduct. What we see is just the opposite: that she was then given no more

children for several years. Why was there no reward?

The answer is that gratitude alone is insufficient. It is far too easy to become complacent, to "count one's blessings" and fail to recognize the need for continued help.

Life's many challenges only come to a close when life itself comes to a conclusion ("after 120"). In the meantime, we always need help, and can never sit back and predict smooth sailing ahead. When Rachel finally became pregnant and had a child, she called him "Yosef", which means to add. In the midst of her gratitude, she said "Yosef HaShem li ben acher," "G-d should add another child for me." [30:24]

When praying to G-d, it's not only true that "it never hurts to ask" - it hurts **not** to ask!