

# YAAKOV'S TEARS

*by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom*

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"and Ya'akov kissed Rachel, and raised his voice and wept...and Rachel died, and was buried on the route to Efrat..."

These two verses bookend Rachel's life; a life that was filled with pain, jealousy, rootlessness and family disunity. Although the verses represent a span of years and tears, they are beautifully bound together in the Midrash:

"Why did [Ya'akov] weep? He saw that [Rachel] would not join him in burial..." (Beresheet Rabbah 70:11)

Following the tone of this Midrash, from the moment that Ya'akov met Rachel, the fantasy of eternal oneness that is the legacy of every lover was blemished. A prophet can not fantasize; precognition scoffs at the dreamer. When Ya'akov fell in love with Rachel, he was already aware that the specter of failure shadowed their love. For what is love, if not an attempt to timelessly transcend loneliness? We reach out to forever; forever is a haze, a glimpse of tomorrow through today's sunset; yet forever is love's handmaiden. Forever dresses our ambitions and adorns our aspirations. We don't plan "ten-year marriages" and we don't plant fruit trees that one day their wood might reach the hearth. It is that dream of surpassing our own mortality that causes us to sow and reap, plant and build, raise children and dance at their weddings. All of this was withheld from Ya'akov; as tragic the reality of separate burial, worse yet was Ya'akov's foreknowledge which cut like a knife through his passion and love.

There is a deeper story going on in this Midrash. Although the previous paragraph illustrates why Ya'akov cried, actually applying this emotional reaction to Ya'akov might be somewhat cavalier; if we can ascribe a less personal, more deliberate reason for the weeping of one of our Avot, perhaps we should.

YAAKOV'S MISSION: THE FINAL EXILE

Rabbi Yosef Soloveitchik, zt"l, offers this insight into Ya'akov's sojourn in Aram:

Avraham was promised that his seed would be "a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and they will be servants and oppressed for four hundred years. And the nation which they serve will I judge, and after they will leave with great possessions...and the fourth generation will return here... (Beresheet 15:13-16)

Upon examination of the terms of this promise, we find that they all fit with Ya'akov's exile in Aram. He was: 1) a stranger in a foreign land (Aram);

2) he was worked and oppressed for a long time (Beresheet 31:6-8; 38-41), which is Biblically expressed as four hundred years (see Sarna: Understanding Genesis, p. 83, note 17; even in the eventual realization of this promise, the four-hundred-years oppression was not realized);.

3) Ya'akov returned with great wealth, as is evidenced by the gift he sent to Esav (Beresheet 32:14-15), and

4) the return of the fourth generation is eerily mirrored by Ya'akov's response to the birth of Yosef: And when Rachel gave birth to Yosef, Ya'akov said to Lavan: "Send me, that I may go to my place and my land." (Beresheet 30:25)

Ya'akov's reaction indicates that he thought that his mission in Aram was achieved with the birth of a son to Rachel, his beloved; and that son was the fourth generation to Avraham. Following Rabbi Solovetichik's explanation, Ya'akov would have thought that the exile/return condition of the covenant had been fulfilled; now the dread of Rachel's separate burial takes on historical and national significance.

"Why did our father Ya'akov choose to bury Rachel on the road to Efrat? He foresaw that the exiles were destined to pass by there; therefore he buried her there, that she should beg God's mercy for them, as it says: A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping, Rachel is weeping for her children (Yirmiyahu 31:14). (Beresheet Rabbah 82:20)

Rachel's separate burial is not effected in order to be away from Ya'akov; she is buried on the road as a unifying symbol of mercy through the cycles of exile and return (see also Maharal's Be'er haGolah). Following this Midrash, and adopting the earlier Midrash, Ya'akov's weeping takes on a new dimension. Ya'akov saw that Rachel would not be buried with him, because she would be needed on the road to Efrat, as a beacon of mercy for the future exiles. Ya'akov's efforts to fulfill the terms of the covenant were all to be for naught, for the return would not be permanent. Ya'akov's tears were not for his own eternal isolation, but for the alienation of his sons and daughters from the Land. Metaphorically, this can be expressed as separate burial; Ya'akov representing the Land and Rachel, the children. Unlike their eternal separation, the children will, indeed "return to their border." We are witness to the fulfillment of that promise in our day, God willing, we will live to see its total realization.

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