

KEEPING SECRETS

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

(29:25) "And it was in the morning, that behold it was Leah!"

Rashi, quoting the Talmud in tractates Megilah and Bava Basra explained, "How is it possible that Yakov did not know that the woman he had married was Leah and not Rachel? Yakov (anticipating Lavan's treachery) arranged with Rachel secret signs for the purpose of knowing whether or not the woman behind the veil was truly Rachel. How then was he fooled? The Medresh answers, "When Rachel saw that Lavan was taking Leah to the Chupah instead of her, she said to herself, 'My sister will be embarrassed!' Rachel immediately gave Leah the secret signs so that she would not be shamed."

Now for the rest of the story...

(Introduction to Medresh Eicha: A brief background)

At the time of the destruction of the first Bais Hamikdash, the Medresh details G-d's conversations with Yirmiyahu (Jerimiah), Avraham, Yitzchak, Yakov, Moshe, and Rachel. The setting for those conversations was their attempts at changing G-d's decision to keep the Jews in exile after having destroyed the Bais Hamikdash. Yirmiyahu, the Navi (prophet) at the time of the Churban (destruction of the 1st Temple), was told to summon the Avos and Moshe so that their tears might move Hashem (G-d) to be forgiving. Yirmiyahu did as he was told and Avraham, Yitzchak, Yakov, and Moshe presented their arguments on behalf of their wayward children.

Avraham argued that mercy was due because of the merits of his readiness to bring Yitzchak as a Korban (sacrifice). Yitzchak argued that mercy was due because of the merits of his willingness to submit to the Akeidah (binding). Yakov argued that mercy was due because of the merits of his lifetime of trial and tribulation in protecting and raising his children to become the Jewish nation.

Moshe argued that mercy was due because of the merits of his tireless commitment and devotion to the Jewish people in shepherding them through 40 years of challenge and rebellion.

Their common theme was, "There are personal merits on record that You (G- d) are not taking into account in making Your decision. If You would take those merits into account You would be merciful and bring the Jews home. In each instance, Hashem listened to their pleas but did not respond. G-d did not counter their arguments, nor did He offer any explanations. He simply did not respond.

In the middle of Moshe's presentation the Medresh records that Rachel interrupted Moshe to make

her plea. Let us pick up the conversation at that point.

"Master of the Universe, You know that Your servant Yakov truly loved me and worked seven years for my father in order to marry me. At the conclusion of those seven years, when it was time for me to marry my husband, my father wanted to switch my sister for me allowing Leah to marry Yakov. I found out my father's intentions and was very pained and bothered. I shared my father's intentions with Yakov and gave him secret signs so that he would know if the person he was to marry was me or someone else. Later I regretted giving Yakov the secret signs. I decided to overcome my personal desires and hopes for marrying Yakov and have mercy on my sister. I gave her the secret signs so that she would not be shamed when it was discovered that she was Leah and not me. More so than that, I secreted myself beneath the conjugal bed so that I could answer any question Yakov may have posed during the night ensuring that the differences in our voices would not give Leah away. In the end, I was merciful and kind to my sister and I was not jealous of her.

Master of the Universe, if I, a mere mortal of flesh and blood, was not jealous of my sister and did not allow her to be shamed and embarrassed, how much more so should it be with You! As the Almighty and Eternal Master of the Universe You should not be jealous of idols just as I was not jealous of Leah! Why did You allow the Bais Hamikdash to be destroyed, my children to be exiled, and the enemy to do with them whatever they wished! Why would You do such a thing?"

Immediately, G-d's mercy was aroused and He said to Rachel, 'Because of you I will return the Jews to their rightful place.' As the verses in Yirmiyah 31:14-15 state, "So did G-d proclaim, 'A voice on high was heard... Rachel cries for her children and refuses to be consoled... Therefore G-d said, stop your cries and dry your tears... your children will return to their boundaries.'"

Why did G-d respond to Rachel's argument? Why did He not respond to Avraham, Yitzchak, Yakov, and Moshe?

On Tisha B' Av (9th of Av) I proposed the following answer. After Moshe accepted to be the Redeemer, he and Aharon confronted Pharaoh. The outcome of that confrontation was disastrous. Instead of granting freedom to the enslaved Jews, Pharaoh made their labor more difficult. Moshe turned to Hashem with the complaint, "Why did You make it worse for the nation, why did You send me?" G-d's response to Moshe contrasted Moshe with the Avos. "How I miss the Avos! They never questioned my actions. They accepted my decrees without reservation or challenge. You on the other hand question my judiciousness and My actions!"

That conversation underscores the unique nature of the Avos (forefathers) and their relationship with G-d. "They never questioned the character and actions of G-d". They always trusted that regardless of their own thoughts and feelings G-d was in charge. Anything He did was by definition for the benefit of the Jews and the universe. Essentially, the Avos never challenged G-d's judiciousness; instead, they trusted Him and attempted to emulate Him in every possible way.

In attempting to evoke G-d's mercy, Avraham, Yitzchak, Yakov, and Moshe challenged His

judiciousness. In presenting their reasons as why G-d should be merciful, they argued that there were merits that Hashem had possibly not taken into account. Because G-d is the "Truthful Judge," because Hashem is "All Knowing," it is impossible for G-d to have not taken all things into account; therefore, G-d did not respond to their arguments. Simply put, it was obvious that everything had been taken into account and therefore there were no new findings that could have swayed G-d's decision. There was no reason for G-d to respond to their arguments. A note about arguing with G-d.

Humans cannot argue with G-d. G-d does not change His mind; in fact, has never changed His mind. G-d knows all that was is and will be and does not make mistakes. All things are considered and the magnitude of the divine, judicial, processing is beyond human ability and comprehension. All we can do is marvel at His power and accept the limitations of our intellect.

The Torah's presentations of mortals arguing with G-d, for example, Avraham regarding Sodom, Moshe at the Burning Bush, and Moshe defending the nation in the aftermath of the Golden Calf, were to teach us the limits of our own comprehension and provide insight into G-d's judiciousness.

Avraham defending Sodom is a good example of this. G-d knew from the start that He would destroy Sodom; yet, He insisted on first informing Avraham and allowing him to argue in their defense. In the end, G-d did exactly as He originally intended. He saved Lot and his two daughters and He destroyed the rest of Sodom. However, in the course of Avraham's argument it became clear that eradicating evil is ethical, moral, and judicious when there is no hope for rehabilitation.

Moshe's reluctance to assume the position of Redeemer and G-d's response to him advanced Moshe's natural humility to the level of "the most humble of all men." In the process, Moshe was given to understand why the Jews had been enslaved and why they deserved to be redeemed.

Moshe's defense of the Jewish people in the aftermath of the Golden Calf taught us to understand the concept of Teshuvah without which no human can sustain a relationship with G-d.

Regarding the arguments of the Avos, Moshe, and Rachel in the aftermath of the destruction of the first Bais Hamikdash (Temple in Jerusalem), the same is true. The Medresh intentionally challenges our understanding of the Avos so that by contrast we can better appreciate Rachel's argument and why it was effective.

Contrasting Rachel's' argument with the others reveals a significant difference. Avraham, Yitzchak, Yakov, and Moshe were challenged by design and circumstance to accept or not accept G-d's tests. Theoretically, they could have either listened to G-d or not listened to G-d. Avraham could have decided not to sacrifice Yitzchak. Yitzchak could have decided not to allow his father to bind him and offer him as a sacrifice. Yakov could have allowed circumstances to dictate his fate and not take-on Eisav or Lavan. The circumstances of the tests were not of their own making or choice. They either accepted the challenge or not.

Rachel situation was different. Rachel could easily have justified not giving the secret signs to Leah

and allowing Leah to be shamed and embarrassed. She could have argued that it was divinely ordained that she marry Yakov and that Leah marry Eisav. She could have argued that Lavan's intent to switch Leah was Leah's challenge and not her own. Maybe Leah was destined to marry Eisav no different than Milkah (daughter of Haran, sister of Sarah and Lot) had been destined to marry Nachor (Avraham's evil brother). Granted, the shiduch was not pleasing to Milkah but how else would the likes of Rivkah (her granddaughter) and Rachel and Leah (her great-grand- daughters) be born? The same may have been with Leah and Eisav. As evil as Eisav was he was still a son of Rivkah and Yitzchak. There may have been components of Eisav that were necessary to make their way back into the body of the Jewish nation. Through joining with Leah those components of Eisav would be refined enough to eventually be acceptable. Rachel did not have to reveal the secret signs. Let destiny take its course and let Leah be shamed. Let destiny take its course and Yakov would marry Rachel while Eisav would marry Leah!

Instead, Rachel deliberately created the circumstances that would force her to sacrifice her own potential destiny. By revealing to Leah the secret signs, something she could have easily justified not doing, she guaranteed that Yakov would marry Leah, without any guarantee that she too would end up marrying him.

Rachel's argument to Hashem was that she had not questioned His ways of doing things. She had not questioned His character and judiciousness. In fact she had done the very opposite. Rather than question G-d's actions and decrees Rachel emulated His actions and character. Just as G-d is always merciful so too Rachel was merciful. Just as G-d has no reason to ever be jealous of idols so too she would not be jealous of her sister. Therefore, Rachel argued that Hashem had no choice but to be consistent and be merciful.

Rachel understood that the job of the Jews, the job of humanity, and her job was to study G-d's manifest actions and emulate them to the best of her comprehension and ability. In doing so she expressed her absolute faith in G-d that "make G-d's will your own so that G-d will make your will His." So long as we do as Hashem wants Hashem does as we want. The reality is that if we make His will our own then automatically we are in concert with G-d's will. The only thing we should want is what Hashem wants. There is no conflict or contradiction between our wants and desires and G-d's wishes and commands.

Rachel argued that her deliberate decision to emulate G-d and be merciful with Leah demanded that G-d do the same, be merciful on her children and bring them home - and G-d agreed. "So did G-d proclaim, Stop your cries and dry your tears... your children will return to their boundaries."
(Yirmiyah 31:14-15)

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