

PARSHAS VAYEITZEI - ROMANTICS NEED NOT APPLY

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Romantics Need Not Apply¹

As a love story, it fizzles. It does not end the way such stories usually end. Then again, it has a different Author. He appears to be telling us something.

The story line begins with a familiar cast. A single male is on a journey that has no defined end. Forced to leave his beloved home, he bears his loneliness in solitude. He spots a young woman, and, whatever else he perceives of her spirit and inner qualities, he also takes note of her beauty.

Waiting in the wings is a competitor - less attractive, but somehow better positioned to lay claim to the potential husband. When they are united in marriage, their relationship seems lackluster. The romance we anticipated between the man and the first woman he met at the well does not transfer easily to the relationship between Yaakov and Leah, the less attractive. Her mood is subdued, not vibrant and energetic.

In time - in very little time, as it turns out - the "romantic" pair are also united. But the story does not continue as it does in story books. By the end of the story, Leah, who began her relationship on a subdued note, becomes the principal matriarch of the real founding family of the Jewish people. Rochel, who previously seemed to be headed for the happier role, has far fewer children. The names of the children also point to the inequity in the roles of the wives. The names assigned to Leah's children form a progression, becoming more optimistic and cheerful, as she moves away from her original position as the "hated" one. The names of Rochel's children are darker and more somber. (It must be emphasized that the Torah uses the expression "hated" relatively, rather than absolutely. It does the same in Devarim, when it speaks of a man who has "two wives, one beloved and one hated,"[2] and denies him the right to award the privileges of the first-born to the offspring of his favored wife. The simple meaning of the text is that one wife is more pleasing to him than the other - not that he has any dislike or aversion for one of them. In regard to Rochel and Leah as well, the Torah writes that Yaakov "loved Rochel even more than Leah,"[3] certainly indicating that Leah was not hated.)

How this came about would seem decidedly "unromantic" in contemporary culture, but the explanation is revealing and valuable. It provides insight into the dynamic of the Torah family, the institution that is the focal point of our entire parshah.

Leah, despite her consciousness of being the less-loved wife, never veered from her twin goals of

becoming the best wife and mother she could. She committed her love to her husband from the beginning, and remained undeterred by her role as the less-favored spouse. She pushed on, determined to win her husband's affections and nurturing their relationship, and trusting in the Presence of G-d in her household to help her accomplish her dream.

Her focus and her trust served her well. She called her first son Reuvain, from G-d seeing her affliction. By the time her second son arrived, the disparity between herself and Rochel was no longer obvious and visible, but could only be heard (Shimon). With a third son, she could say that her husband would become completely attached to her (Levi). She would walk side-by-side with him. Moreover, it was Yaakov who assigned the name - further evidence of the mutual love that had developed between them. With her fourth son, she was no longer even thinking of removing impediments to her marital bliss. She could enjoy the child as a pure gift, and give full-throated thanks (Yehudah) to Hashem for the blessing He had bestowed upon her.

Her plan had been clever, if unromantic. The chemistry and energy that she missed as a bride gradually became part of the marriage. She was prepared to work slowly but constantly to achieve it. What she lacked as the less-desired bride, she achieved by becoming the model mother of Yaakov's children.

That simple, elegant formula meant that her children grew up in an environment of love between their parents. It took patience and resolve to get there. The formula that worked in antiquity continues to hold the greatest promise to Jewish families in our times.

Rock Unsolid

Yaakov arose early in the morning and took the stone that he placed around his head and set it up as a memorial stone.[4]

As a locus of serving Hashem, the memorial stone/ matzevah has a fascinating history. It figures prominently in the avodah of the patriarchs, and disappears in a flash. Not only does the matzevah vanish from the avodah scene, but its use becomes prohibited. Moreover, we learn that Hashem now detests it![5] Why this reversal of its fortunes?

In the early stages of Man's encounter with G-d, He made Himself recognizable chiefly through Nature. By peering intently at the world, an Avraham was able to discern purpose and design, and began his discovery of HKBH. Many others were receptive to his message. Presumably, Avraham's message resonated with the footprints of Hashem's presence that he left in Nature for those open-minded enough to see them.

At this point in time, a matzevah was a perfectly proper place to serve Hashem. The matzevah was some outcropping of stone, whose shape struck someone's fancy. The stone was a remnant of Hashem's Creation; it instantly reminded the person who stood beside it of the Designer and Creator responsible for it and everything that surrounded him.

All this changed when Hashem gave us the Torah. From that point on, Hashem's expectation of Man changed. Through the mitzvos of the Torah, Man now possessed the knowledge of how to use the world, how to elevate it. Discovering G-d, singing His praises through recognizing His central place in Nature would no longer be sufficient. Hashem now wished to see what Man would do with the gifts He gave him, beyond simply acknowledging their source. The matzevah now became insufficient. It pointed Man to a form of service to G-d that ignored a gift greater than Nature itself - the divine wisdom that suffuses the Torah. To serve G-d properly, Man would have to take from the materials around him and put them together according to Hashem's instructions in the Torah.

From this point on, the mizbeach - built by human handiwork, combining materials to form a new object - became the preferred and only suitable platform for serving Hashem.

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1. Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Bereishis 29: 31-35
 2. Devarim 21:15
 3. Bereishis 29:30
 4. Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Bereishis 28:18
 5. Devarim 16:22
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