

RACHEL, A MOTHER OF ISRAEL

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Jacob arrives in Haran, where he meets and falls in love with his cousin Rachel and asks for her hand in marriage. The Midrash fills in the couple's dialog:

It is written: *Jacob told Rachel that he was her father's brother* (Gen. 29:12). Now was he her father's brother? Was he not the son of her father's sister? What it means is this: He said to her, 'Will you marry me?' She replied, 'Yes, but my father is a deceiver, and you will not be able to deal with him [i.e., you will not outwit him].' He replied, 'I am his brother in deceit.' She said to him, 'Is it permitted to the righteous to act deceitfully?' He replied, 'Yes: *With the pure You act in purity, and with the perverse You are wily* (II Sam. 22:27).' He said to her, 'What is his deceit?' She replied: 'I have a sister older than I am, and he will not let me marry before her.' So he gave her certain signs. When night came, she said to herself, 'Now my sister will be put to shame,' so she handed over the signs to her. Hence it is written, *When morning came, there was Leah!* (Gen. 29:25). Are we to infer from this that until then she was not Leah? What it means is that he [Jacob] did not know till then on account of the signs Rachel gave [Leah]. Therefore she was rewarded by having Saul among her descendants . . . (TB *Megillah* 13b).

In reading this, we must keep in mind that the Midrash often has a goal beyond merely explicating the text. It frequently uses a textual ambiguity or incongruity to make a conceptual point, and here the goal of the Midrash is to present the *dramatis personae* of a morality play. Jacob has arrived in Haran because he was escaping the revenge of his brother for his part in the deceitful acquisition of their father's blessings. Deceit is the background of the play and deceit will be its theme. Rachel is not only beautiful; she is street smart and well attuned to the untrustworthy nature of her family. She taunts and

challenges Jacob, "Is it permitted to the righteous to act deceitfully?" He responds with

self-assuredness that he will not be bested by his "brother in deceit." Moreover, he is convinced that he is acting ethically – a perspective no doubt nurtured by his mother, Rachel's aunt.

Although the Midrash explicitly praises Rachel, one point needs explanation. Would it not have been more appropriate to declare that she was rewarded with Joseph rather than Saul? Joseph, her cherished long-sought firstborn, was a successful ruler who saved the nascent Jewish people from starvation; Saul, by contrast, was a rebellious and failed king. Both Rachel and Saul were selected for their good looks. Saul fit the bill quite well in terms of his physical stature, yet his greatest failure was an inability to take responsibility and live up to the historical moment – a failing made all the worse by his inability to take immediate and honest responsibility for his sin. Jacob's proof text from the Book of Samuel in defense of his tactical use of deceit is, ironically, taken from David's thanksgiving song when he was saved from Saul, providing a further negative connotation to the Midrash's choice of "reward"! Is the Midrash hinting that Rachel, too, failed to live up to what was expected of her?

The Midrash clearly notes that Rachel was complicit in the "switch" by providing Leah with the signs that would identify Leah as Rachel. However, we do not need the Midrash to grasp Rachel's complicity. She knows that she and not Leah is betrothed to Jacob. She sees that Leah is being prepared for the canopy. Surely someone who would later successfully negotiate the theft of her father's *terafim* (household idols) could have arranged for a word of warning to be sent to her beloved? Yet she chooses not to act. R. Shimon bar Yohai (*Midrash Tanhuma*, Genesis 30:6) felt that Rachel understood that if Laban's plan was frustrated, her father would prevent her from marrying Jacob. Her only hope of getting Jacob was by allowing the switch to proceed. Had self-interest and realistic expectations displaced or mingled with the pure altruistic *hesed* motivation that she might have had in helping Leah?

What was Jacob's reaction in the morning when he realized that his "brother in deceit" had gotten the better of him? In the Torah text itself, Jacob complains only to Laban:

When morning came, there was Leah! So he said to Laban, 'What have you done to me? I was in your service for Rachel! Why did you deceive me?' Laban said, 'It is not the practice in our place to marry off the younger before the older. Wait until the bridal week of this one is over and we will give you that one too, provided you serve me another seven years' (Gen. 29:25-27).

This defense is in the best tradition of a con man. Laban is lying; Jacob knows that he is lying; Laban knows that Jacob knows that he is lying. But it is all framed in terms of a polite misunderstanding, leaving Jacob with no civil response to Laban beyond immediate and uncomplaining obedience to his demands and revised terms. For the time being, he has been bested and must suffer in silence. He cannot answer angrily, as he will do twenty years later when Laban charges him with theft of his *terafim*, although it is apparent, at least from Jacob's perspective, that Laban has been continually deceitful in his relationship with Jacob throughout all the years of their interaction:

'These twenty years I have spent in your service, your ewes and she-goats never miscarried, nor did I feast on rams from your flock. That which was torn by beasts I never brought to you; I myself made good the loss; you exacted it of me, whether snatched by day or snatched by night. Often, scorching heat ravaged me by day and frost by night; and sleep fled from my eyes. Of the twenty years that I spent in your household, I served you fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for your flocks; and you changed my wages time and again' (Gen 31: 38-41).

True, at that later time he spoke from a position of strength (being sure of God's protection) and here he spoke from weakness (having not yet married Rachel). But more significant is the fact that after twenty years he spoke with the strength of a person who is secure in his personal integrity and who confronts a corrupt person, while here he was still "a brother in deceit" bested by his antagonist. The *midrash* makes the latter more obvious in its depiction of his exchange with Leah:

The whole of that [unlighted] night he called her "Rachel" and she answered him. In the morning, however, "there was Leah!" He said to her, "You are a deceiver and the daughter of a deceiver!" "Is there a teacher without pupils," she retorted; "did not your

father call you 'Esau,' and you answered him! So did you call me and I answered you!" (*Genesis Rabbah* 70:19)

Perhaps this confrontation with his past, exacerbated by Laban's taunt, pushed Jacob to move away from the brotherhood of deceit. There is no indication, however, that this episode had a transformative effect on Rachel. Indeed, while Jacob responded to Laban at that later time with righteous indignation, Rachel, having stolen her father's *terafim* and hidden them in a camel's saddle, responds as a well-tutored student of deceit – albeit one committed to the principle of "With the pure You act in purity, and with the perverse You are wily." R. Michael Hattin paints a vivid scene:

Now, having roughly rummaged the tents of Ya'acov and of his wives in a fruitless search for his gods, Lavan unexpectedly encounters his daughter Rachel as she perplexingly sits [in the tent], a sardonic smile on her lips. Standing before her, the saddle bag slightly bulging beneath her seat, Lavan suddenly realizes where the *terafim* must be hiding. In the final act of the drama, Rachel offers a polite explanation for her inability to rise, a proper and civil response that must have caused her father to gnash his teeth in indignation, for he himself has rehearsed a similar script innumerable times! How often has Lavan himself secretly stolen from patient Ya'acov, all the while explaining his motives...with the most sugared of words and phrases? But can he now ask Rachel to dismount, as the curious onlookers from both sides gather around them, in light of her gracious and eminently civil explanations?

By facing down her father and offering polite explanations in courteous tones, even as he knows (and she knows that he knows!) the true whereabouts of the *terafim*, Rachel administers the *coup de grace*: Lavan has finally been defeated at his own game! . . . And it is none other than Rachel his own daughter who has turned the tables against him, matching his lethal spars blow for vicious blow.¹

Returning to our discussion of the morning after the switch, we note that neither text nor *midrash* suggests whether Jacob was understanding of or angry at Rachel as a result of her complicit involvement in the conjugal

switch. We are not even explicitly told that he loved Rachel afterwards, but rather that he loved her *more than* Leah (29:30) – only to be told immediately afterwards (29:31) that Leah was *senu'ah* (hated or unloved). Was Jacob's antipathy to Leah due only to the stratagem by which she was married to him, or was it because that deceitful act reminded him of his own act of deception? In any event, we are told that God gave children to Leah because she was *senu'ah*, but "Rachel remained barren." No explanation is given for Rachel's infertility. Surely being the preferred wife is no reason to be inflicted with barrenness.

Rachel remains infertile, but Leah gives birth to four children. At this point, *When Rachel saw that she had borne Jacob no children, she became envious of her sister; and Rachel said to Jacob, 'Give me children, or I shall die'* (30:1). Jacob responds in anger to Rachel: *'Can I take the place of God, who has denied you fruit of the womb?'* (30:2).

What shall we make of Jacob's rage-filled response to Rachel's *cri de coeur*? Should he have become furious with Rachel and rebuked her? Could he not have responded as Elkanah did to Hannah: *Why are you so sad? Am I not better for you than ten sons?* (I Sam. 1:8)? *Genesis Rabbah* (71:7) is unforgiving of Jacob's response. "Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to him: 'Is that a way to answer a woman in distress? By your life, your children will one day stand before her son [Joseph], who will answer them [with your words], *Can I take the place of God* (Gen. 50:19).'"

A rage-filled response usually relates to the present issue as well as to the built-up and as-yet-unexpressed resentments of the past – later poignantly evidenced by Jacob's rant when Laban cannot prove his charges of theft against him. What then of Jacob's response to Rachel's complaint? Rashi understands her as saying, "Pray for me, for a childless person may be regarded as dead." Ramban, however, finds this unconvincing, for such a request would hardly merit Jacob's rage-filled response. Rather, he sees the exchange as follows:

It is impossible that Jacob did not pray for his beloved wife, for she was barren. (Surely he prayed,) but his prayer was not accepted (by God). Rachel then came (to him) to complain against him, saying that, in any case, he should get her children through his prayer, for he was (surely) no less holy than his father (Isaac, who

did so for his wife Rebecca). And (then) Jacob became angry and told her that the matter (of whose prayer was accepted and whose wasn't) was in God's hands and not in his hands – and his father's prayer was accepted because he was righteous and (furthermore because) it was foreordained that he would have children. However, (in this case) it was from her that the fruit of the womb had been withheld (and not from him). [Artsroll translation and interpolations]

In Ramban's reading, Jacob admits that he does not live up to the righteousness of his grandfather – a sure sign of religious growth – and chides Rachel for the self-absorption that allows her to simply demand everything she wants.

R. Adin Steinsaltz sees her self-absorption as the reason Jacob did not respond to Rachel as Elkanah did to Hannah:

[Elkanah] told Hannah that he was better for her than ten sons. Jacob, on the other hand, never went so far; he never indicated that he was willing to risk Leah, or to cancel his commitment and obligations to her, or to say explicitly and brutally that he preferred either sister. The reason was not that he did not love Rachel . . . The source of the difference lies in the fact that Rachel did not recognize limitations; she lived in a sphere where love justified everything. Unlike Hannah, whose sorrow and longing were turned inward on herself, Rachel beguiled herself with the assurance that her bond with Jacob would never be severed, that she could, therefore, do as she liked. But a love that is liberated from restraint, that sees only its rights and not its duties, brings about a crisis.²

Was this sense that she could have everything the motivation for Rachel deciding originally that she could be complicit in the conjugal switch without risking her relationship with Jacob – and was the resentment Jacob felt at the time only now emerging? In any event, Rachel realized that Jacob could not give her what she wanted. So, like Sarah, she gave her maid to her husband as a surrogate – although Sarah did it to satisfy her husband's needs and Rachel did it to satisfy her own, as the names she provided suggest: Rachel named Bilhah's first son Dan, for she said, *'God has vindicated (dan) me! He*

has heeded my plea and given me a son' (30:6). Rachel named the second son Naphtali, for she said, '*A fateful contest I waged (niftalti) with my sister; yes, and I have prevailed'* (30:8).

Leah, too, gives her maid to Jacob so that he can be presented with more children. Then, one day during the wheat harvest, Leah's oldest son finds some mandrakes growing in a field and brings them to his mother. Rachel asks Leah for them. R. Steinsaltz notes:

The sages have indicated that although mandrakes were considered an aphrodisiac, this belief was connected only with the root of the plant, and never with its fruit, which was regarded as a plaything, an amusement, because of its pleasant smell and appearance. That is to say, Rachel desired a toy of some kind; and although mandrakes were fairly common, she was willing to renounce Jacob for one night in exchange for this toy.³

The exchange is made, but not before Leah expresses her anger at the request: '*Was it not enough for you to take away my husband, that you would also take my son's mandrakes?'* (30:15). Must you get everything that you desire?!

Now, what retort would we expect from a strong-willed, somewhat self-centered Rachel to such a charge? Could she not simply have reminded Leah that far from taking her husband from her, she had been complicit in getting Leah the husband who had been expecting Rachel? Yet she remains silent.

We are told that *God remembered Rachel* (30:22). Rashi comments that God remembered Rachel's giving the signs to Leah so as to avoid humiliating her. Would it not be enough to say that God remembered Rachel's barrenness, as the plain meaning of the text suggests? What bothers Rashi seems to be the question of what exactly it was that God remembered. Indeed, the narrative would seem to suggest that Rashi is explaining why it was specifically at this point that God decided to address Rachel's infertility.

Why was it not until that point that Rachel's behavior reached a level meriting reward? Her complicity in the switch on what was supposed to be her wedding night might have had a *hesed* component, but it was surely not a full-hearted one. There was self-interest which, intermingled with her *hesed*, diluted the power of her actions. But the moment Rachel could hold back her not unjustified but potentially hurtful response to what Leah had said in pain,

when she could put aside her jealousy of Leah's continued fecundity – at that precise moment Rachel merited being remembered by God. Unlike Sarah, who had come to regret her altruistic act, Rachel grew into appreciating the possibility of a fully altruistic act – and thereby earned God's blessing.

There is, of course, no contradiction between *hesed* and self-interest. "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if for myself alone, what am I?" (*Avot* 1:14). As David Shatz notes,

In Judaism's view, human nature is both egoistic and altruistic.... As a matter of logic, it must be legitimate [to have self-interested motives and to act in a self-interested, non-altruistic way]. If everyone who receives some good feels disposed to give that good to another, or simply to refuse the offer, altruism isn't possible. We'll have givers but no receivers . . . Judaism is full of antimony, dialectic, balance, and paradox. It is both realistic and aspirational. It recognizes the reality of self interest, but affirms the capacity of human beings to escape its grip.⁴

Rachel did not have to deny her self-interested motivation to merit God's attention and become a Mother of Israel. But she had to be able to incorporate a purely *hesed*-oriented perspective in her Weltanschauung, thereby retroactively enhancing – even redeeming – her initial actions.

Rachel's growth is perhaps illustrated by the alternating use of the term for God used in the narrative describing the births of Jacob's children. There are various distinctions proffered regarding the "general" name *Elokim* and *Hashem* (God's "personal" name, the Tetragrammaton). One of the best known is that the former reflects *din*, justice, God's cosmic impersonal manifestation; the latter reflects *rahamim*, mercy, God's personal expression. *Elokim* metes out what is coming "naturally"; *Hashem* reflects *hesed*, what one might not have earned.

R. Joseph D. Soloveitchik comments: "The name *Hashem* tells us that God communicates with man directly, not via the cosmos . . . The image of *Hashem* is reflected in human longing for the beautiful and noble, in love, in motherly tenderness and fatherly concern, in everything that is great, noble and fascinating in man."⁵ Frank H. Polak points out that "sociolinguistic study of the pragmatic implications of various address forms amply confirms the connotation of distance, power and authority of the term [*Elokim*], as

against the overtones of solidarity, close personal contact, involvement and Israelite identity associated with the special name [*Hashem*]."⁶

With this in mind, let us examine the birth narratives.

Hashem saw that Leah was senu'ah, and He opened her womb (29:31). This was an act of *hesed*, and Leah responds with appropriate recognition: Reuben is named in recognition of *Hashem* seeing (*ra'ah*) her suffering; Simeon is so named because *Hashem* heard (*shama*) her cries; Judah because she thanks (*odeh*) *Hashem* (29: 32, 33, 35). However, when Jacob reacts in anger to Rachel's demand for children, he says: '*Can I take the place of Elokim, who has denied you fruit of the womb*' (30:2). Jacob's use of *Elokim* reflects Rachel's mindset; she was not begging for *hesed*, but claiming that which – to her mind – was due her as a matter of *din*. He in effect reprimands Rachel as not having earned children absent a *hesed*-based grant.

Rachel responds not with a prayer for mercy but rather with a plan of action: She gives her maid Bilhah to Jacob as a wife. As noted above, Rachel's names for these children indicate that she offers her maid to satisfy her own wants. Furthermore, her use of the term *Elokim* indicates her sense of entitlement. She names one child Dan because '*Elokim has vindicated (dan) me*' (30:6) – and presumably gave me what I deserved. The name of Bilhah's second son (Naphtali) reflects Rachel's self-assurance and self-reliance: '*A fate-ful contest [literally, a contest of Elokim] I have waged (niftalti) with my sister; yes, and I have prevailed*' (30:8).

Leah responds by giving her maid Zilpah to Jacob as a wife so that he may have more children, and her choice of names reflects in a subtle way a rebuke to Rachel: Gad, because she said, '*What luck (gad)!*' (30:11), and Asher, because '*women will deem me fortunate (ishruni)*' (30:13). Children are blessings to be celebrated, not pawns in a wrestling contest! Soon afterwards, in response to Rachel's request for Reuben's mandrakes, Leah's anger over all she has had to endure from her sister surfaces explicitly: '*Was it not enough for you to take away my husband, that you would also take my son's mandrakes?*' (30:15).

It is interesting to note that the births of Zilpah's sons came after a period of personal infertility for Leah, and that Leah's choice of a name for Gad and Asher did not explicitly recognize God's role. She remained infertile until she was ready to turn to God. *Elokim heeded Leah, and she conceived and bore*

him a fifth son. And Leah said, 'Elokim has given me my reward (sakhav) for having given my maid to my husband.' So she named him Issachar. When Leah conceived again and bore Jacob a sixth son, Leah said, 'Elokim has given me a choice gift (zevadani); this time my husband will exalt me, for I have borne him six sons.' So she named him Zebulun. Last, she bore him a daughter and named her Dinah (Gen 30:17-21).

Rachel remains silent, surprisingly so, in face of Leah's taunt through three more births, something that must have further pained her. With that awareness of the possibility for undiluted *hesed*, she earned God's response. It was Hashem who had opened Leah's womb (29:31) as an act of *hesed*. But it was Elokim who remembered Rachel (30:22) with His positive judgment of her growth.

Rachel at first responds to the birth of her son with a sense of entitlement: *Elokim has taken away (asaf) my disgrace (30:23)*. Yet she quickly overcomes this (perhaps instinctual) egotistical feeling and names her son Joseph with the prayer, '*May Hashem add (yosef) another son for me (30:24)*'. With that awareness of Hashem's *hesed* for which she was hoping, Rachel indeed became a Mother of Israel. *A cry is heard in Ramah – wailing, bitter weeping – Rachel weeping for her children (Jeremiah 31:15)*.

NOTES

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1. Michael Hattin, *Passages: Text and Transformation in the Parasha* (Jerusalem: Urim, 2008) pp. 58f.
2. Adin Steinsaltz, *Biblical Images: Men and Women of the Book*, trans. Yehudah Hanegbi and Yehudit Keshet (Jerusalem: Magid Books, 1994) p. 42.
3. Steinsaltz, pp. 47f.
4. David Shatz, "Ego, Love, and Self-Sacrifice: Altruism in Jewish Thought and Law," in Michael J. Harris, Daniel Rynhold, and Tamra Wright, eds., *Radical Responsibility: Celebrating the Thought of Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks* (Jerusalem: Magid Books, 2012) pp. 20, 22, 37.
5. Joseph Dov Soloveitchik, *Family Redeemed: Essays on Family Relationships*, eds. David Shatz and Joel B. Wolowelsky (New York: MeOtzar HoRav, 2000) p. 9.
6. Frank H. Polak, "Divine Names, Sociolinguistics and Pragmatics of Pentateuchal Narrative," in Athalya Brenner and Frank H. Polak, eds., *Words, Ideas, Worlds: Biblical Essays in Honour of Yairah Amit* (Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2012) p. 174.