

Loving Leah

By Rabbi Haim Ovadia

We tend to classify many of the familial conflicts of Genesis under the rubric Sibling Rivalry. The term has become an idiom we feel comfortable with, a nice compact packet which describes a painful phenomenon. It conjures the image of a battle, not weapon-wielding, lethal one, but more a ritual. It is a life-long dance of medieval knights in full regalia or sumo wrestlers, circling each other, searching for weaknesses, seeking honor and glory. This elegant term, however, glosses over the real and very painful problem of parental love, which is directly responsible for the rivalry.

The struggles between siblings in Genesis are struggles for their parents' love. Like smaller trees in the rainforest, where up to ninety five percent of sunlight might be blocked by canopy trees, those siblings who feel deprived of the light and warmth of their parents' love fight to get what little they can of it, or they wither away in agony.

Cain and Abel fought over God's love. Ishmael and Yitzhak had no conflict, but Sarah was unable to love Ishmael who was supposed to be considered her son. I believe that for that reason God intervenes and tells Abraham to send Ishmael away. He is not doing it to alienate the child but rather to save him, because He knows that Ishmael will suffer in a household where he is rejected and hated. Esau and Yaakov became pawns in their parents' struggle to decide who will be their successor, with each one of them granted more love by one of the parents. Joseph and his brothers... well, need I say more?

There is one person, however, whom we neglect to count as a sibling and a child, and rather refer to as a wife, and an adversarial one at that. Leah! The wife of Yaakov. The first wife of Yaakov. The one who was not supposed to be the wife of Yaakov. Leah, who felt hated by her husband and hoped to acquire his love by bearing him more children. Leah, who accused her sister Rachel of stealing her husband's love, though she was the one who tricked her sister out of the status of first wife. Leah, who comes out towards Yaakov when he comes home from the field and declares triumphantly that he is hers for the night, in return to the mandrakes she gave to Rachel.

Yes, we focus so much on the role and life of Leah as a disgruntled wife and a fruitful mother, that we forget that she also was a child, at one stage of her life, and that she also was vying for her parents' love. To understand the nature of the mythical battle between the sisters, one which is later referred to by Rachel with the words "I have wrestled my sister with divine powers and have prevailed" (30:8), we should first address the issue of the strangest wedding night in the Bible. What happened at the wedding hall in the city of Haran the night of Yaakov's and Rachel's wedding? How was Laban able to deceive his future son-in-law into marrying the wrong woman? The narrative clearly indicates a connection to the previous deception, that of Yaakov disguising as his twin brother, but whereas Yitzhak frisked, hugged, and even kissed the

impostor, Yaakov had the most intimate contact with a woman who pretended to be the love of his life, a woman for whom he passionately and impatiently worked seven years. How was Yaakov not able to see that she is Leah and not Rachel?

As kids, we were given a Midrashic answer. Rachel knew that a deception is inevitable and created a code between her and Yaakov to confirm her identity. As the wedding approached and it became clear that her father is going to present Leah as the bride, she felt sorry for her sister and gave her the secret code. Not only that, she hid under the bed and spoke for Leah. Looking at this Midrash with a critical eye, we understand that besides the fact that it was probably impossible to lie under ancient beds, or beddings, and that most men would have known if the love words whispered in their ears come from under the bed, this story has no logical or textual footing. I feel that we should grow out of that interpretation, and find the solution in the parallelism between this story and that of Yaakov and Esau.

Since the deception of Yaakov by Laban is a retaliation for the deception of Yitzhak by Yaakov, it would make sense to assume that like the previous pair of siblings, Rachel and Leah were twins. Not only that, they were identical twins, beautiful identical twins. The one difference between the girls was that Leah had, in the biblical language, soft eyes. This difference could have probably been attributed to a childhood illness which left her with impaired vision and a physical damage to the eyes, which was noticeable only from a short distance. It is hard to imagine Leah's suffering growing up in the shadow of her younger twin's beauty. Not only was she not attractive, she was also compared to her perfect, unblemished replica standing next to her. Rachel was "the beautiful one" while Leah was "the one with the eyes." When people who met the sisters for the first time approached them they would be taken aback, from afar, by their beauty, but when Leah stepped forward, people recoiled, finding it hard to look her in the eye and to open a window to her soul.

If at least her parents showed her some love! But no! Leah was for them a toxic asset. They knew she had slim chances to find a good husband, and more than that, they were afraid that she will spoil Rachel's chances as well. That is why Rachel, the younger twin, was sent to the water-well with the flocks. The well was the meet-market, where matchmakers would make and break marriage deals, and the presence of an unbecoming girl such as Leah would have ruined the family's reputation. No wonder that Leah became less confident and had low self-esteem when her own parents did not care for her, and when she was rejected by society for being different.

How else can we understand Leah's willingness to play along with her father's plot and to become Yaakov's first wife. From a practical point of view the plan was flawless. The identical twin with the soft eyes dances the night away under a veil, and at the darkness of his private chambers, Yaakov cannot see the eyes which betray Leah's identity. But let us think of the scenario from an emotional angle. How low was Leah willing to stoop to get married? Did she imagine, for even a moment, that when Yaakov finds out that she is not Rachel he will just blurt nonchalantly "OK then, no big deal, I got me a reasonably beautiful wife instead of the one I

worked seven years for”? How miserable she must have felt, always pushed to the corner, always told to hide her “ugly eyes”, thinking that she will ever remain lonely. She agreed to her father’s proposal not because she loved and respected him, but because she hated him with a passion and because she saw a way out of her misery. She was willing to pay the price, not realizing perhaps how heavy this price will be.

Try to visualize the scene which unfolded on the morning after the wedding: the loving husband stands at the door, carrying a tray. “Good morning honey,” he calls out gently, “breakfast is ready.” As she slowly turns around to face him and her sleepy eyes open, she can see the tray, in slow motion, dropping to the ground. Clay shatters, food splatters, and Yaakov remains speechless, his face frozen in an expression of shock and disbelief. He then raises his voice and shouts “seven years, seven whole years, I have worked so I could marry Rachel! I worked day and night, in sweltering heat and freezing cold, gritting my teeth and dreaming of the day I would hold her in my arms! Why Leah, why?” He storms out of the room, door slamming, and Leah is left alone, crying uncontrollably, feeling helpless and ashamed, fervently repeating her mantra “I had no choice, I had no choice!”

Ehud Manor, a sensitive and prolific Israeli poet, was probably the only one who understood Leah’s pain. His song “I love you, Leah!” imagines a world where Yaakov understands and loves Leah. It opens with these words:

את אותו הבקר לא אשכח
 כשטמנת ראשך בתוך הכר
 אור השמש על האהל נח
 וראשי היום שכר

כשלקחתי באזנה את שמך
 את ידי אספתי בידי קרה
 ודמעה אחת חמה
 אל כפות ידי נשרה

*I will never forget that morning
 You, hiding your face in the pillow
 Sunlight resting on the rent
 My head heavy with wine*

*In your ear I whispered her name
 You took my hand in your cold hand
 And one boiling tear
 Rolled into my palms*

Unfortunately, this is not what happened in that tumultuous household. Relationships always remained strained between the twin sisters, their maid-servants who became surrogate mothers, their children, and of course Yaakov. After Rachel died, Yaakov focused intensely on Yosef and deprived his other children of his fatherly love and attention. Since then, for thousands of years, civil and religious wars, expulsions, and exiles have plagued the Jewish People. Many of them can be attributed to the painful divide between the Children of Leah and the Children of Rachel, the result of one father's inability of loving also his different daughter.

What children most need and want of their parents is love, unconditional love. Not love which allows irresponsibility and carelessness but love which accepts each child as he or she is, without trying to make them a replica of the parent, fulfill a dream the parent was not able to fulfill himself, or pursue a goal the parents deem important without listening to their child. Lawyers, doctors, and businessmen want their kids to follow in their footsteps and think that art and music are lazy and frivolous pursuits, while artists and musicians want their kids to be like them and not engage in a profession which in they believe squashes creativity. We must understand that each child is special in his or her unique way and no one would be exactly like their mother or father. If parents find it difficult to love a child who has different goals and ambitions, imagine how painful it is for a child to be different socially, mentally, or physically, and to feel that his parents are embarrassed, and may even want to alienate and disassociate themselves from him.

Love your child, unconditionally. Love Leah! Love the "other" child, the one who is not exactly what you expected or planned, the one who is different then you and then many others. Remember that certain attributes, abilities, or character traits might never change, but the power of genuine love of a parent, the love which is so easy and joyful to receive but for some reason so hard for many to freely give, can make a huge difference in a child's life.

Leah would have told us the same thing, had we only asked.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi Haim Ovadia