

Putting the Children First

Everyone knows the story of Yaakov's love for Rochel. But did Rochel love Yaakov in return? A close examination of the text reveals a fascinating narrative.

A Wedding for the Entire Jewish People

Good Shabbos!

Several years ago, around this time of year, a family in Israel was traveling one Friday, Rosh Chodesh Kislev, to the Shabbos Kallah (the bridal Shabbos party before a bride's wedding) of their daughter. But when they got near Chevron, a terrorist opened fire on them. The father, only 40 years old, and the oldest son, only 18, were killed on the spot. The rest of the family was spared.

Because of the horrible tragedy, the young lady's wedding was postponed for two weeks. The bride, who was the daughter and sister of the murdered terror victims, told the media that she was inviting all of Israel to the wedding—to show every Jew-hater that “Am Yisrael chai!”, the Jewish nation lives, that despite all the pain and suffering, the Jewish nation continues to build new life in the Land of Israel.

And so, on the 14th of Kislev, the wedding was held in the Binyanei HaUmah convention center in Jerusalem, with thousands—including the Prime Minister's wife—showing up to celebrate with the newlywed couple. Also in attendance were many Jewish communities from around the world, which sent

representatives to the wedding bearing gifts and heartfelt good wishes from their fellow Jews.

Now, the name of the bride's slain father was Yaakov. And so today, in his memory, I'd like to talk about the original Yaakov, our 3rd Patriarch, and his marriage to Rochel and Leah, which is the central topic of the weekly Torah portion in recent weeks.

Love vs. Reality for Yaakov

In the relationships of Yaakov Avinu (our Patriarch Jacob), we find something very odd. It's clear that Yaakov loved Rochel, as the Torah itself tells us explicitly: "And Yaakov loved Rochel..." and again, "And they were in his eyes like just a few days out of his love for her" (Bereishis 29:18-20).

But life brought him down a different path. Yaakov ended up marrying Leah first, before Rochel. Moreover, Leah was the one who gave birth to most of his children: out of 13 children, she bore him seven. For most his married life, Yaakov lived with Leah. He lived with Rochel for only 15 years, and when she gave birth to Binyomin, the youngest, she died.

And it was the same with her burial - Yaakov was buried next to Leah. This was not a coincidence. Yaakov made firm decisions about where Rochel and Leah would be buried. Not only that, but he buried Rochel himself, as he personally attested shortly before his passing in Egypt. And mere moments before he died, Yaakov charged his sons to bury him in the Cave of the Patriarchs, saying that his ancestors were buried there, "and there I buried Leah." So, he clearly chose to bury Rochel on the roadside, and Leah in the Cave of the Patriarchs.

It is strange—he loved Rochel, but actually lived his entire life – and afterlife –with Leah.

Who Loved Who?

Now, there are certain things that are not written explicitly in the Torah, but which are hinted in an oblique way.

For example, the Torah tells us explicitly that Yaakov loved Rochel. But was the feeling mutual? Did Rochel love Yaakov in return? The Torah doesn't say anything of that sort. In fact, from the Torah it seems that it was specifically Leah who very much loved Yaakov.

When Leah's first son was born, she named him Reuven. Why? "For now my husband will love me." She named her second son Shimon, also using it to express her feelings toward her husband, and so too with the third son: "Now this time my husband will be attached to me... therefore, He named him Levi." Practically speaking, when a woman has two kids, she can hold one in each hand—but when it comes to a third kid, then the husband has to literally lend a hand. (He's got no choice!) And so, "my husband will be attached to me."

On the other hand, when Rochel finally gave birth, the name she gave her first baby expressed her innermost wish: "So she named him Joseph, saying, 'May the L-rd grant me yet another son!'" She wanted another child, "yet another son!" Leah gave her children names that were associated with her relationship with her husband, but Rochel had but one desire: children.

There seems to be a stark difference between the sisters. Leah

wanted children to earn love from Yaakov. Rochel, however, wanted Yaakov so that she could have children.

A Central Theme

This theme expresses itself throughout the entire saga. The Torah tells us how one fine day, a young Reuven comes home and brings his mother Leah flowers—dudaim, or mandrakes, according to one translation.

Now, dudaim (whatever flowers they actually were) were considered to be good for infertility, so Rochel asks Leah for some. But Leah responded: “You’ve taken my husband, and now also my son’s dudaim?” Rochel was scheduled to spend the night with her husband, but seeing Leah’s reticence, she gave the night to her in exchange for the dudaim.

This rivalry is also expressed in the exchange of strong words between Rochel and Yaakov on the subject of children. In our Parshah, the Torah says that Rochel envied her sister’s many children, and she said to Yaakov, “Give me children, and if not, I am dead!” Yaakov became angry and sharply retorted, “Am I G-d Who has withheld children from you?”

Later in Tanach, Chana said the same thing to her husband Elkana, and he responded in a more humane way: “Am I not better to you than ten sons?” Why didn’t Yaakov respond the same way? Wouldn’t it have been a bit more sensitive?

The reason for Yaakov’s response is simple: Rochel wanted children more than anything else. Yaakov would not have been able to console her with Elkana’s answer.

Wife vs. Mother

The unique attitude of Rochel and Leah had long term impacts:

Leah put her husband first. Therefore, she merited to live with him throughout her life and to be buried by his side.

Rochel put her children first. Therefore, she merited to be forever known as “Rochel Imeinu,” our Mother Rochel, despite being the mother of only two of the Twelve Tribes. Her entire goal in life was children—to the extent that she literally sacrificed her life and died giving birth to her son Binyomin—so she became the mother of us all. She was mother figure weeping over her children going into exile, and she elicited G-d’s promise that they would return.

Are You a Rochel?

What lesson can we take from this story?

The relationship between G-d and the Jewish Nation is like the relationship between husband and wife—with G-d being the husband and we, the Jewish Nation, being the wife. But within the Jewish Nation, there are two types of wives: There are Leahs and Rochels.

Some Jews are primarily concerned with the “Mitzvos Between Man and G-d”— the ritualistic mitzvos. To them, the relationship with G-d is most important: they pray every day, put on tefillin, eat only kosher, keep Shabbos and so on. They are very careful about keeping the mitzvos between Man and G-d, the mitzvos that bind “wife” with “husband.” G-d is very important to them.

But they are less concerned about the “Mitzvos Between Man and His Fellow”, the ethical and interpersonal mitzvos. G-d’s children aren’t as important. You don’t find them running to visit the sick, or hosting guests, or really embracing every other Jew—the relationship with the kids is less important. Such Jews are in the “Leah Category.”

On the other hand, some Jews are always happy to help another Jew. They are always the first to give and donate and contribute when it comes to helping someone—whether someone needs help to move between apartments or help with a serious situation, G-d forbid. If someone’s house burns down, G-d forbid, they will be the first to chip in and help out—the suffering of another Jew touches them to the depths of their souls. But they don’t exactly connect with the “Mitzvos Between Man and G-d.” They fall into the “Rochel Category”; for them, the kids come first and foremost.

The truth is that it really doesn’t need to be one way or the other. In a good marriage, you can be both. A person needs to keep both the ritual mitzvos and the ethical mitzvos. As the Rebbe said many times, the proper combination will elevate both relationships. When a person keeps the ritual Mitzvos, if he doesn’t exactly like a certain person, he’ll still help him out. Why? Because he doesn’t do mitzvos because he loves doing favors but because G-d commanded so in the Torah. He’ll do it even when he has no personal interest in it.

G-d’s True Love

Now, even though Leah loved Yaakov all his life, Yaakov loved Rochel all his life—even years after her passing. As he testified

close to 50 years later, just days before his own passing: “Rochel died on me.” He was still haunted by it. the Midrash (Rus Rabbah) interprets that as: “Rochel’s death was harder on me than all the previous troubles that befell me” (also see Hisvaaduyos 5748, Vol. II, pg. 591.)

In the analogy, Yaakov is G-d. Ultimately, G-d loves Rochel. He loves those whose first concern is the children.

Let us put the “children,” our fellow Jews, first, and let us hope and pray that G-d responds in kind by putting His Children first in the ultimate way, with the coming of Moshiach, speedily in our days, amen!

Good Shabbos!