

IT'S NOT EASY TO HAVE A JEWISH CHILD!

Category: Bereishis, Vayishlach

Why were all the matriarchs barren, and why was Yaakov so sharp when his wife complained about it?

Where Are All the Jewish Grandchildren

The natural order of things is that the world population is constantly growing. A family with two kids will have four grandchildren, eight great-grandchildren, etc. But what's happening today in the American Jewish community is the exact opposite. In every family that I know, there is one sibling who, for whatever reason, hasn't gotten married, or if they got married, it's not necessarily to a Jew. And if, by some miracle, he or she married a Jew, they won't necessarily be having kids. And sometimes even when they plan on having children, they are not blessed with any, G-d forbid.

Why is it so difficult to see Jewish grandchildren? What's going on here?

When we look at the story of the beginning of the Jewish people we see a very curious thing. The very first time that the concept of being barren is mentioned in the Torah, it's talking about the first of the matriarchs, Sarah, the first Jewish wife. For the first two thousand years of the world's existence there is no mention in the Torah of any other barren woman. They all had children with no problems. But at the end of Parshat Noach, when the Torah introduces us to Avram and his wife Sarai, the very first detail given is that Sarai was barren. And it was only after many years, and many tears, only after much prayer and many miracles did Sarah finally give birth to Yitzchak, her only son.

And this strangeness didn't stop with Sarah. The second generation of the Jewish nation was Yitzchak and Rivkah, where we see that "Yitzchak prayed for his wife, because she was barren," and only after twenty years of marriage did she give birth to her twin babies, Yaakov and Eisav, and then had no more children.

And along this road we continue to the third generation.

We also see that only those who were to continue the Jewish nation were afflicted with this problem. Yishmael had no problems having many children. Eisav too, had many children and grandchildren with no difficulty.

But Yaakov, the father of the twelve tribes of Israel, suffered terribly. At the age of 84, after many obstacles, he finally married Leah and Rachel, and lo and behold, they were both barren, like the Torah says, “And G-d saw that Leah was hated, and G-d opened her womb,” which means that until then, she was barren.

Then of course we have Rachel, the most famous of them. She had no children for 14 years, then had Yosef, enjoyed being a mother for a few short years, and died giving birth to her second son, Binyomin.

Another barren woman we read about in the Tanach is Chana, whom we read about in the Haftara on the first day of Rosh Hashana. Chana was a prophetess who was married to Elkana, a man who was also married to a woman named Pnina. Chana terribly wanted a child, and went up to Shilo to pray at the Mishkan, and was finally blessed with a saintly son named Shmuel Hanavi.

And we’re all familiar with the story of Samson and Delilah, of how Samson was the Philistines greatest enemy, the man whose secret nobody knew. His parents were also childless for many years.

So we have now on our list six famous women from Jewish history who were childless for a significant amount of time; the four matriarchs, Chana and Manoach’s wife (Samson’s mother).

Why is it that all of the above were barren? Why was it that these women had to go through so much before they bore even just one child?

Yaakov’s Response

We see a very interesting exchange by Yaakov and Rachel when she saw that she was not bearing children. “Rachel became jealous of her sister, and she said to Yaakov, ‘Give me children; if not I’ll die.’” Rashi explains that Rachel was asking Yaakov “Did your father act this way to your mother? Did he not pray for her?” Rachel is begging Yaakov to please pray for her, to perform a miracle. She wanted a blessing for children.

How does Yaakov respond? “And Yaakov became angry with Rachel, and he said ‘Am I in G-d’s place, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb? “I have children. It is from you the He has withheld [children], not from me.” (Rashi)

What kind of response is that really? His wife comes to implore him to pray for her, and he tells her that it’s her problem, not his? And as the Midrash puts it ‘That’s how you respond to barren women?!’ Can you imagine if today, a husband would thus respond to his heartbroken childless wife?

The Midrash offers a few reasons why the matriarchs were barren. One of them is because “G-d desires the prayers of righteous people.”

What’s really going on here? G-d is trying to tell us something.

According to nature, parents have children, but Jewish continuity is not something that can be taken for granted; it’s not just a natural occurrence. We need miracles in order that the next generation will be Jewish. In other words, the message for us is, maybe we were blessed with children, thank G-d. But the fact that they will continue the tradition, and their children will be Jewish, this is not something that happens by itself. This is something that we need to work hard for, and pray hard for.

So in addition to all the things we need to do for our children - Jewish education, etc. — we also must pray. We must take a lesson from the forefathers. We need to pray to G-d that all of the effort that we put into raising our children as Jews should be successful, and our children should continue on, and carry the torch forward, to more and more generations of Jews living as Jews.

On a personal note, I myself grew up in a Chassidic home, in a Chassidic environment, and despite all that my father told me that all his life he is praying from the depths of his heart that all his children should continue in the ways of the Torah.

And now, perhaps we can understand the exchange between Rachel and Yaakov. Rachel asked Yaakov to pray for her, to which he answered that for the blessing of children, you need to be the one to pray. Your tears will reach higher than mine. You, as a Jewish mother, have more power up in heaven, and your prayers are heard faster, and accomplish more.

A mother's prayer is especially potent. She prays with every fiber of her being, and it is her prayers, "Rachel cries for her children," that will accomplish what they have to accomplish, "And the children will return to their borders."