

A Yiddishe Mame

When Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau witnessed the touching scene of a mother calming her son after a traumatic war injury, he finally understood why the Prophet compares G-d's consolation to that of a mother. Why is Rochel Imeinu known as our mother? Why is she the source of consolation? Because she was the one who held it all together.

Only A Mother

Good Yom Tov!

Do you remember the Yom Kippur War?

It was Yom Kippur of 1973, in the very middle of the day itself, that Israeli reservists in synagogues all over the country found themselves being called up in the middle of prayers. War had broken out.

Former Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau, then a rabbi in Tel Aviv, remembers soldiers being called up from his synagogue. But despite not being personally called up to serve as an active chaplain, Rabbi Lau just couldn't sit at home and not contribute to the war effort.

Rabbi Lau shortly learned that Ichilov Hospital in Tel Aviv had been turned into a military hospital. Civilian patients in stable condition were sent home, and the rest of the patients were transferred to other hospitals. Rabbi Lau felt that Ichilov was the place he'd be able to contribute most to Israel's soldiers.

So Rabbi Lau approached Ichilov and informed them that he was ready to assist the injured with anything they'd need. Ichilov's staff was very happy at Rabbi Lau's offer and immediately appointed him as the hospital's rabbi. For the next three months, Rabbi Lau was on site day and night.

In the course of the war, 475 of the most severely injured Israeli soldiers from the Egyptian front were brought to Ichilov. Most of them had suffered the worst sort of injuries: burns sustained inside tanks.

In one room at Ichilov lay four soldiers who had been almost completely burned from head to toe. One of them was in very critical condition—all of his skin had literally been burned. That soldier's mother sat at his bedside all day and most of the night. Only when someone would temporarily take her place, would she allow herself to go home to rest a bit and change.

One night, this soldier burst out in frightful groans that were just unbearable. The other injured patients couldn't sleep. All the other patients trying to snooze a bit and at least forget their pain for a bit could not do so.

The nurses tried giving him more morphine but it didn't help. They tried telling him to calm down. The doctors got sick of him. But he kept screaming for hours. Everyone wondered where he got the strength to scream for so long.

But then, at 4:00 in the morning, his mother came back to the hospital. While she was still on the hospital's ground floor, she could already hear and recognize her son's screams. She ran up the stairs, went into his room, and within a few minutes, he

calmed down and fell asleep.

What had happened was that his mother had immediately located one part of his body, one tiny little patch of skin, that had not been burned. His mother repeatedly stroked that one patch of skin, all while saying over and over again, “Mommy’s here! Relax, sweetheart, relax!”

Rabbi Lau would later say that it was at that moment that he understood a famous verse in the last chapter of Yeshayahu (Isaiah). The Navi (Prophet) Yeshayahu is the Navi who gave us the most chapters of prophecy. He is called the “Navi HaNechamah,” the Prophet of Consolation. He was the one who consoled the Jewish Nation after the Destruction of the First Temple.

So the Navi (Yeshayahu 66:13) says: “Like a man whose mother consoles him, so shall I console you, and in Jerusalem you shall be consoled.”

Of all the analogies in the world, the Navi specifically chose the analogy of “a man whose mother consoles him,” and not his father.

So with that unfortunate soldier, the vials of morphine that they threw at him didn’t help him. The kind words of the nurses didn’t help him. The reprimands of the doctors didn’t help him. It was only when his mother came, with the love that only a mother can give, that they succeeded in calming him down. (From “Al Tishlach Yadchah El HaNa’ar,” pg. 236.)

The Mother of the Jewish Nation

Now the Jewish Nation has three Avos (Patriarchs), but also four Imahos (Matriarchs). But what's most interesting is that of those four, the only one formally referred to as "Imeinu" (Our Matriarch) is Rochel (Rachel), wife of Yaakov (Jacob).

Everyone's heard of "Mama Rochel," and of the resting places of all four Imahos, Keiver Rochel (Rachel's Tomb) is visited the most, with thousands of Jews going there to pray throughout the year. But why is Rochel specifically called "Imeinu"? Biologically speaking, out of the Twelve Tribes, she was mother to only two: Yosef (Joseph) and Binyomin (Benjamin). So how did she become mother of an entire nation?

So the Rebbe explains that the answer to that can be found in the Haftarah that we read on the second day of Rosh Hashanah.

We are told by Rashi and the Midrash that when the Jewish Nation was exiled after the Destruction of the First Temple, they passed Keiver Rochel on their way to Bavel (Babylon). And then, we are told, "Rochel came out over her grave, crying and asking [G-d] for mercy for them."

The Navi Yirmiyahu (Jeremiah), who lived during that period, relates an event that no one else could have heard. He relates that Rochel Imeinu, who had lived some 1,500 years earlier, wept and cried for the Jewish Nation now being exiled—asking that G-d bring them back from exile.

As the Navi (Yirmiyahu 31:14-16) puts it: "A voice on high is

heard; Rochel cries for her children.” But, as the Navi continues, “She refuses to be consoled” until G-d promises her, “And [your] children shall return to their borders.”

Now the expression in the verse, “Rochel cries for her children” tells us that Rochel wept for the entire Jewish Nation, not just her biological children of Yosef and Binyomin. And the Rebbe says that since she was the one crying and worrying about the entire Jewish Nation, not just for her biological descendants, she is therefore considered the mother of all of them. (Toras Menachem Vol. III, pg. 61.)

The One Who Held It All Together

But perhaps we can say that there is another reason why Rochel merited the title of Mother of the Jewish Nation.

Today, after we recite the Avodah section of the Musaf prayers, we recite the piyut (poem or hymn) “Eileh Ezkerah” (“These I Remember”), which is about the Ten Martyrs.

“Eileh Ezkerah” tells us about a certain Roman Emperor who summoned ten of the greatest Jewish Sages of the time and asked them what the Jewish law is for someone who sells his own brother as a slave. So they immediately ruled that such a person is sentenced to death, quoting the Torah itself: “And a man who kidnaps a man and sells him, and he is found in his hand, he shall surely die.”

So the Emperor then asked them, “Well, where are your forefathers who sold their brother to a company of Ishmaelites?” (He was referring to the sale of Yosef into slavery

by his own brothers.) In other words, how can it be that your ancestors, ten of the Twelve Tribes, sold their own brother? And then he added, “If they were alive today, I would try them before you!”

He then decided to punish these ten Sages in the place of Yosef’s ten brothers.

So to digress briefly to the story of the sale of Yosef, the whole saga doesn’t really make sense at all. How can it be in the first place that the relationship among the Twelve Tribes, the very sons of our holy Yaakov Avinu (Our Patriarch Jacob) got to such a low point of anger and hatred that ten of them literally sold the 11th one as a slave?

And perhaps we can answer that it all began after the passing of Rochel.

As long as Rochel Imeinu was alive in the lives of her sons, even though ten of the 12 were not her biological sons, she held the fort down, as they say. She kept the house together. She supported her husband Yaakov and by extension, the entire household.

Indeed, this is alluded to in the Midrash (Bereishis Rabbah 71:3), where Rabbi Yitzchak interprets the adjective “akarah,” used to describe Rochel, to mean not just “infertile” (which is its plain meaning) but also related to the word “ikar,” or “essence.” In other words, according to Rabbi Yitzchak in the Midrash, when we are told that Rochel was an akarah, it doesn’t just mean that she was infertile—it means that she was

essential. And according to Rabbi Shimon

Bar Yochai quoted by the same Midrash, that's why Rochel is considered the mother of all Jews—and that's why the Navi says, "Rochel cries for *her* children."

Now Yaakov Avinu, the "Bechir She'b'Avos" (the "Prime Patriarch) who established the Twelve Tribes and from whom come the entire Jewish Nation, relied entirely on the "Akeres HaBayis," the Home's Essence, his wife Rochel.

As long as she was alive, she was the glue that held everyone together. She guarded the family from breaking up. And the moment she passed away, the whole family broke up into camps: Leah's children against the maidservants' children, and everyone against everyone.

And so when the Navi chose an analogy with which to convey consolation to the Jewish Nation, he specifically chose that of a mother.

As a general rule, the most common analogy used for G-d is that of a father, in which He is our Father and we are His children. But here, the Navi Yeshayahu compares G-d to a mother, not a father. Why? Because a mother is the one who consoles us. It is she who is the glue that keeps the family bonded together. As long as Mom is alive, the entire family gets together for holiday meals; as long as Mom is around, the siblings are forced to talk to each other. Mom makes the "mishpachah."

And that, my friends, brings us to Yizkor.

Standing just before the Yizkor prayer as we are, now is the right time to remember the Jewish mother, “di Yiddishe Mame,” who is always worried over every family member and sees to it that everyone gets together, talks to each other and doesn’t fight.

So as we say our Yizkor prayers, let us remember and appreciate what our Jewish mothers did for us and for our entire families. And now that they are not with us, let us ask ourselves, “Who will be our Yiddishe Mames if not us?”

Good Yom Tov!