

VAYEITZEI (GENESIS 28:10-32:3)

To Dream the Impossible Dream

2000 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

Jacob had a tough life. He was a studious, virtuous individual who only wanted to live a quiet life devoted to the study of Torah and the service of G-d. His desire was to continue spreading the teachings of Abraham and Isaac and to make the world a better place.

But his efforts were frustrated every step of the way. He was the younger brother of a hoodlum who wanted to kill him. (See “Double Trouble”.)

Jacob had received his father’s blessing that was originally intended for his older brother Esau. As a result, he lived in constant fear that he would some day be killed by his jealous brother, or forced to kill Esau in self-defense. His mother Rebecca suggested he go to her family in Aram Naharaim (Iraq) for two reasons: to escape from Esau, and to find a wife.

In Aram Naharaim, Jacob met his cousin Rachel, the beautiful and righteous daughter of his mother’s brother Laban. The next twenty years were times of great difficulty. Laban cheated him every step of the way: Jacob had offered to work for Laban for seven years in order to marry Rachel – Laban placed a heavy veil over the face of his older daughter Leah and tricked him into marrying the wrong woman. Jacob then agreed to work for ANOTHER seven years in order to marry Rachel. After 14 years of working to “pay” for his wives’ hands in marriage, Jacob negotiated a salary for future work – Laban kept changing the terms after the fact. When Jacob and his family finally packed their bags and left, Laban pursued them, hoping to kill Jacob. (See “Watch Out for What Car?”)

Laban wasn’t the only source of Jacob’s headaches. Rachel was unable to have children and there was friction between his two wives. As his children grew, sibling rivalry caused additional grief. He would eventually suffer the anguish and indignity of his daughter’s abduction and violation by a Canaanite. Then he had to deal with the ensuing violence committed by his sons against the hometown of his daughter’s attacker. For twenty years, he thought his beloved son Joseph was dead. And let’s not forget about the angel with whom Jacob would someday engage in hand-to-hand combat! In his later years, Jacob would refer to the years of his life as “*few and bitter.*” (Genesis 47:9)

Where does one find the strength to deal with such adversity? How did he manage to continue his life in the face of such pain?

Another question: Did you ever notice that our Matriarchs had one problem in common – they were all barren?! Abraham and Sarah prayed for a child and only saw their prayers answered in their old age. Isaac and Rebecca were childless for the first twenty years of their marriage. Rachel didn't give birth to Joseph until thirteen years after their wedding. (Even Leah, who conceived on her wedding night, was originally supposed to have been barren. The Midrash tells us Jacob had decided to divorce Leah for participating in her father's bride-switching scheme. In order to save their marriage, G-d allowed her to conceive immediately.)

There are many reasons that a woman can have difficulty becoming pregnant. Medical science has made great advances in treating infertility. Women who would never have dreamed of being able to have children had they lived 50 years ago are giving birth to "miracle babies." But there are certain conditions that even medical science can't cure:

...and Sarah was sterile; she had no "volod" (literally, offspring) (Genesis 11:30) The Talmud (Yevomos 64b) tells us that 'volod' refers to a womb. Sarah was what the Talmud calls an 'aylonis' – a woman who was physically incapable of having children.

Sarah's inability to conceive was not a condition that could be addressed medically or surgically today. She did not have short ovulation cycles or tube blockages or elevated PH. Rather, expecting Sarah to become pregnant would be the approximate equivalent of having a baby after a total hysterectomy! It simply cannot happen.

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob married women who were not able to have children. Yet they never gave up hope; they prayed to G-d and looked forward to good news. It was this type of attitude that gave Jacob the faith to look to the future with confidence despite the tribulations of life.

In our own lives we often encounter situations that seem hopeless. We all know of someone with an incurable disease, (*Hashem Yishmoreinu* – may G-d protect us). We look at the situation in the Middle East and we wonder if it will ever be safe in *Eretz Yisrael*. We should never despair. As G-d said to Abraham while discussing the future birth of Isaac by a woman who lacked the appropriate "equipment": *"Is anything too difficult for G-d? At the designated time I will return, and Sarah will have a son."* (Genesis 18:14)

Our Patriarchs and Matriarchs lived an impossibly miraculous existence. They saw G-d intercede and create supernatural solutions to seemingly unmanageable problems. They learned to anticipate and expect it. So must we.

Have a great Shabbos. Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

