

VAYEITZEI (GENESIS 28:10-32:3)

Are You My Bride? ... Are You SURE??

2006 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

Jacob came to Haran (in Iraq) in search of a bride. Soon after arriving in town he met his cousin Rachel, the daughter of his mother's brother Laban. *Rachel was beautiful ...* (Genesis, 28:15) She had an older sister, Leah, who, in contrast to Rachel, had "*weak eyes.*" (Ibid)

Rachel was the one. Jacob offered to work for his Uncle Laban for seven years in exchange for Rachel's hand in marriage. Laban agreed.

But, as was the case with many events in Jacob's life, it wasn't so simple. The seven years passed and the wedding was scheduled. A wedding feast took place and Jacob took his veiled bride home to his tent. It wasn't until the next morning that Jacob discovered that he had married the wrong woman! It was Leah! He had been had! His uncle had cheated him!

Laban defended his treachery by claiming that it was not customary to marry off the younger sister before the older one. However, Laban was "gracious" enough to allow Jacob to marry Rachel as well, if Jacob was prepared to commit himself to another seven years of work. It was a deal:

He also married Rachel. He also loved Rachel more than Leah... G-d saw that Leah was hated, so He opened her womb; Rachel remained barren. Leah became pregnant and bore a son... she said... "Now my husband will love me." (Verses 30-32)

How did all of this happen? How did an intelligent man like Jacob allow himself to be hoodwinked by his uncle? How did Laban pull it off? And how could Leah participate in this fraud? And where was Rachel? Why didn't she step in and put a stop to this farce?

There is obviously much more to the story than initially meets the eye.

When Rachel and Jacob met, it appears to have been love at first sight. He seems to have instantly determined that this young lady was destined to be his wife. The reality is that it wasn't Jacob's idea. The notion of Jacob's marriage to Rachel was a forgone assumption to many.

That's how the Talmud (Bava Basra 123a) explains Leah's "*weak eyes.*" It was known that Laban had two daughters, and that his sister Rebecca had two sons. Everyone assumed that Rachel's older son would marry Laban's older daughter, and that the younger son would marry the younger daughter. Leah

asked around about Esau and learned that he was an evil man. The cause of her “weak”, unattractive eyes was due to the constant crying over her lot to end up as Mrs. Esau.

This explains (somewhat) Leah’s willingness to pretend to be her sister. It was an act of self-preservation. Laban’s actions need no explanation. He was a swindler; by switching daughters he was tricking Jacob into providing another seven years of free work. But didn’t Rachel know what was going on? Couldn’t she have stopped this?

The Talmud (Megillah 13b) explains that Rachel was really the key to this whole event. Jacob recognized his uncle for what he was. He didn’t trust Laban as far as he could throw him. He knew that Laban might try to switch brides on him. Therefore, he and Rachel worked out a secret non-verbal code that would enable her to communicate to him from under the heavy veil that she was, in fact, Rachel. However, once Rachel saw that they were preparing none other than her beloved sister Leah for the ruse, she was faced with a terrible dilemma. How could she allow her sister to go to the wedding under these circumstances? Leah obviously didn’t know about the secret signals. She would stand under the Chuppah in front of all those guests, and Jacob would refuse to go through with the marriage. How embarrassing! She would be devastated! Rachel told Leah the secret sign.

Rachel’s actions are considered to be an act of great self-sacrifice. This was a life-altering decision. Did she know that she would still get to marry Jacob a week later? Even if Laban would still allow Jacob to marry her, would Jacob be willing to marry her after her participation in this deceit? Would SHE, instead of Leah, end up being forced to marry her wicked cousin Esau? And even if she would still end up as Mrs. Jacob, she now had a fellow Mrs. Jacob to contend with! (See “How to Say ‘You’re Wrong’”.) In spite of these concerns, she helped her sister avoid the awkward situation that awaited her.

The Talmud tells us that generations later, when the various Parents and leaders of Israel in Heaven pleaded with G-d to have compassion on His wayward children, it was Rachel who saved the day. “I willingly brought a competitor into my home. Why are You jealous of some worthless idols?” As a reward for her sacrifice, G-d promised Rachel that He would eventually return her children to their Land. (See “Mama’s Tears”.)

I have always been troubled by this effusive praise for Rachel’s actions. To be sure, Rachel saved Leah from being embarrassed at her wedding, at great personal risk to her own future. But how could she do that to Jacob? What right did she have, in spite of concerns about her sister’s feelings, to help to snare the man she loved into the exact trap that she had agreed to help him avoid?

There are other questions as well. We read above the quote from the Torah that states, “... *G-d saw that Leah was hated...*” It is hard to understand why Jacob stayed with Leah. It is wrong to stay married to a woman whom you hate. Such a situation, in addition to being bad for the marriage itself, is terrible for the children.

And then there’s the quote from the previous verse: “... *He also loved Rachel more than Leah...*” This clearly implies that Jacob LOVED Leah. Did he love her or did he hate her? Also, what is meant by “... *He ALSO loved Rachel more than Leah*”? What does “ALSO” mean?

I came across a quote from the *Yismach Moshe*, by the first Rebbe of Satmar, that brings this all together. He asks what is meant by “... *He also loved Rachel more than Leah...*” and responds by giving a more literal translation of the text. The words “*more than*” in the standard translation are not written; they are only implied. The verse actually says, “... *he also loved Rachel **FROM** Leah.*” The *Yismach Moshe* reads the verse as follows: “*He also loved Rachel BECAUSE OF Leah.*” Jacob now had two reasons to love Rachel. He already loved Rachel seven years earlier, when he asked her father for her hand. Now that he saw what Rachel was willing to do for her sister, he loved her all the more!

(Many commentaries provide alternate interpretations to the other verse that says “...*Leah was hated.*” Compared with Rachel, Leah felt less loved, i.e., hated. Others point to the fact that she hated the thought of being married to a scoundrel like Esau.)

Rabbi Yehoshua Leib Diskin offers an additional insight. He takes the same approach as the *Yismach Moshe*, reading the verse as explaining that Jacob loved Rachel even more because of what she did for her sister. He points out that there are two ways to view Rachel’s actions. On the one hand, Rachel helped her father trick him. On the other hand, Jacob chose to interpret Rachel’s actions honorably, seeing that she had acted for the sake of Heaven, taking pains to avoid causing humiliation to her sister.

There is so much that we can learn from the actions of our ancestors. (THERE IS ALSO MUCH WE SHOULD MAKE SURE NOT TO MISINTERPRET FROM THE ACTIONS OF OUR ANCESTORS. We should not assume from their decisions to appear to compromise on matters of honesty that we may do it too. It is important to remember that these were prophets. Rebecca, Jacob, Rachel and Leah, all possessed a profound understanding of the importance of their actions. They knew the future – at times that G-d WANTED them to – and acted in ways that we non-prophets don’t always fully comprehend. As the saying goes, don’t try this at home!)

How often do we see people act in a way that APPEARS to be inappropriate? Do we look for ways to find a positive interpretation to their actions? Or do we automatically assume the worst? Jacob could easily have been furious with both Rachel and Leah. He could have said, “You’re a couple of liars! You’re no better than your old man! I’m out of here!” Had he done that, you and I would not be here today to talk about it!

Jacob saw Leah, a righteous woman who was desperately afraid of being married to a wicked man. He saw Rachel, a paragon of virtue who was willing to risk everything to spare the feelings of her sister. Jacob was able to see past the negative and found the true goodness in the two of them. Rachel and Leah saw in Jacob a man whom they could trust to have the faith in G-d to recognize that nothing happens without a good reason. They had faith that Jacob would judge their actions favorably.

Is there any wonder that he chose them to be our mothers? Is there any wonder that they chose him to be our father?

The Talmud says that we are supposed to always ask ourselves when our actions will reach the lofty levels of our ancestors. The truth is that they never will. But we certainly have to try.

We have a lot to learn.

Have a great Shabbos. Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

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