YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

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**PARASHAT VAYETZE**

**SICHA OF HARAV YEHUDA AMITAL ZT”L**

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This weeks shiurim are dedicated in memory of Henry Lehmann z”l

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**“And Yaakov Loved Rachel”**

Translated by Kaeren Fish

In the Torah's description of the meeting between Yaakov and Rachel, we find an emphasis on the powerful human emotions that Yaakov experienced:

“And Yaakov loved Rachel, and he said, 'I will serve you for seven years for Rachel, your younger daughter'… And Yaakov served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days, for his love for her.” (*Bereishit* 29:18-20)

This image of Yaakov serving seven long years of hard labor and experiencing this time as “but a few days,” is one of the most beautiful descriptions of love ever committed to writing. At the same time, the romance of it makes many people wonder whether such feelings are appropriate to the saintliness and fear of Heaven of this "choicest of the forefathers," who communes the upper worlds and regularly has Divine angels appearing to him?

When I was a child in *cheder*, the *melamed* (teacher) taught us that in the meeting between Yaakov and Rachel, Yaakov’s great emotion is revealed in the fact that he kissed her – “And Yaakov kissed Rachel” (*Bereishit* 29:11). How could it be, the *melamed* asked, that the righteous Yaakov kissed Rachel? He replied that the Torah notes immediately afterwards, “And he lifted his voice and wept.” In other words, Yaakov immediately “caught” himself – “What in the world was I thinking?!” – and he therefore wept out of regret, asking God for forgiveness for this slip.

The *melamed* believed that Yaakov's expression of human sentiment was out of place, and therefore he had to find some way to explain it. However, I believe that it is specifically through the emphasis on Yaakov’s human emotions that the Torah wants to teach us that there is no contradiction between the revelations of angels experienced by Yaakov and his great love for Rachel. The Gemara (*Berakhot* 61b) tells us that Rabbi Akiva reached such a supreme level of love of God that when his flesh was being torn with metal combs, “he stretched the word ‘*echad*’ until his soul left him with that ‘*echad’.*” And yet, the Gemara tells us that the same Rabbi Akiva fell in love with and married the daughter of Kalba Savu’a, and also that he was dazzled by the beauty of the wife of Turnus Rufus:

“There was an official named Rufus, who used to debate matters of Torah with Rabbi Akiva, and Rabbi Akiva defeated him every time. This man was humiliated and he told it to his wife. She said to him, ‘I will tempt him and cause him to stumble’ – because she was extremely beautiful.

She came to him and exposed her leg to him. Rabbi Akiva spat, and laughed, and wept. She said to him, ‘Why did you do that?’

He answered, ‘I will explain two [of my reactions]. I spat because you originated with a putrid drop. I wept because your beauty is destined to rot in the ground.’

He did not wish to tell her why he had laughed. But she pleaded with him, until he told her that it was because she was destined to convert and marry him. She asked him, ‘Is repentance possible?’ He told her, ‘Yes’ – and she converted. After her husband died, she married him, bringing him great wealth.” (Rashi, *Nedarim* 50b)

These accounts tell us that *Chazal*, following the example of the Torah, saw no contradiction between human emotions and spiritual and religious greatness. The Rebbe of Kotzk addressed this point in his interpretation of the verse, “You shall be holy people unto Me” (*Shemot* 22:30): God is telling Israel, as it were, “I have enough angels; what I ask of you is that you be holy *people*.” The Torah does not seek to suppress human impulses; on the contrary, it demands that we live as human beings, and use our human qualities and emotions in our service of God.

Unfortunately, with time, this view of natural human qualities changed. Rav Kook explains that, prior to the annulment of the evil inclination for idolatry, when a strong love of the Divine was a universal phenomenon, there was no problem with a man feeling powerful love for a woman. Removal of the lust for idolatry had the effect of lowering and weakening the love of God, and at that point the attitude towards natural human impulses had to change. Indeed, it is only after the annulment of the evil inclination for idolatry, during the Second Temple Period, that we find the phenomenon of cults (such as, for example, the Essenes and the early Christians) who practiced asceticism and absention. During this period, love of a man and a woman was no longer perceived as something natural and human, but rather became associated with sin.

Unfortunately, Judaism was influenced by such approaches. This is an unnatural situation – as attested to by Yaakov’s behavior in our parasha. *Chazal* were well aware of this “secret,” and in Midrash Tanchuma on our *parasha* they view Yaakov’s “romantic” response in a positive light:

“One who sees beautiful people and beautiful trees recites [the blessing], ‘Blessed … Who has such things in His world.’ There was no one more beautiful than Rachel, and it was for her grace that Yaakov sought to marry her.”

The approach that negates natural human feelings arises from the excessive self-importance that some people attach to themselves, and a lack of understanding of their place in the world. Some people think that their accumulated learning and observance of *mitzvot* gives them the right to say, “My place is higher than that of most people; regular humanity is not for me.” This is especially problematic because someone who is unable to communicate with others, and is unable to identify with their feelings and desires, will be – to that same extent – unable to connect with God’s will. To people who do not understand their place in the world and view themselves as somehow “above” human emotions, God says, “I and he [the prideful person] cannot live together in the world.” (*Sota* 5a)

In this context, one of the things that hurts me personally is when yeshiva students use their status as such to belittle others or view them in an inappropriate way. Why do they put on airs? Is one permitted to ignore the feelings of others just because he is a yeshiva student?

In the same context, even though I know that not everyone is at the stage where this is relevant to him, permit me to offer some advice when it comes to how to behave when seeking a future spouse – someone who will be not just a partner but an important part of your life:

* Don’t focus only on your own needs and desires; think of hers, too.
* Phone often.
* Don’t blame her for your mistakes.
* When things aren’t going well, don’t just carry on as usual; seek the reasons within yourself.
* My wife tells me to add: don’t ever end a relationship by telephone. Even if it requires another date, the mitzva that you will be doing makes it worthwhile.

Only when we invest some thought in our human side, and the human side of others, can we all be worthy of the title, “children of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov.”