YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

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**STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT BY THE ROSHEI YESHIVA**

**PARASHAT VAYETZE**

**SICHA OF HARAV YAAKOV MEDAN SHLIT”A**

Yaakov’s Love for Rachel

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. Questions

“And it was, when Yaakov saw Rachel, daughter of Lavan, his mother’s brother, and the sheep of Lavan, his mother’s brother, then Yaakov went near and rolled the stone from the well’s mouth, and watered the flock of Lavan his mother’s brother. And Yaakov kissed Rachel, and he raised his voice and wept. And Yaakov told Rachel that he was her father’s brother, and that he was Rivka’s son, and she ran and told her father…

And Lavan had two daughters: the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. And Leah’s eyes were weak, but Rachel was beautiful and well favored. And Yaakov loved Rachel, and said, I will serve you seven years for Rachel, your younger daughter… And Yaakov served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days, for the love he had for her.” (*Bereishit* 29:10-20)

The text describes Yaakov’s burning love for Rachel. One of the main reasons mentioned in the text for this love is Rachel’s beauty. Obviously, however, love that is dependent on beauty will be of limited duration. And indeed, Yaakov and Rachel’s life together includes a series of crises. Although they are mostly not great crises and not very numerous, they seem to cloud the great love described during the seven years of labor that preceded the marriage.

The first crisis concerns barrenness:

“And when Rachel saw that she bore Yaakov no children, Rachel envied her sister, and said, Give me children, or else I die. And Yaakov’s anger burned against Rachel, and he said, Am I in place of God, Who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?” (*Bereishit* 30:1-2)

Chazal criticize Yaakov’s response:

“‘And Yaakov’s anger burned against Rachel’ – the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: Is that how one responds to those in distress?! By your life, your sons will stand before her son!” (*Midrash Sekhel Tov*, ad loc.)

On the other hand, there is also criticism of Rachel for her behavior:

“‘And Rachel said to Leah: Give me, I pray you, of your son’s mandrakes. And she said to her, Is it a small matter that you have taken my husband? Would you also take away my son’s mandrakes? And Rachel said, Therefore he shall lie with you tonight for your son’s mandrakes.” (*Bereishit* 30:14-15)

*Chazal* teach:

“Because she scorned [i.e., was ready to relinquish] lying with that righteous one, she did not merit to be buried with him.” (cited by Rashi, ad loc.)

Aside from the issue of childlessness, there are other crises that arise between Yaakov and Rachel. One arises from Yaakov’s harsh words concerning whoever stole the *terafim*, Lavan’s household gods – words which ultimately led to Rachel’s untimely death:

“Anyone with whom you find your gods, let him not live; before our brethren discern for yourself what is yours with me, and take it to you. For Yaakov did not know that Rachel had stolen them.” (*Bereishit* 31:32)

The next crisis, as Rashi forewarns us, is Rachel’s burial by the wayside. Since the purchase of Me’arat ha-Makhpela by Avraham, joint burial had expressed an eternal bond between husband and wife. Now, however, Yaakov commands his sons:

“And he commanded them and said to them: I am to be gathered to my people; bury me with my fathers in the cave that is in the field of Efron the Hittite… There they buried Avraham and Sara his wife; there they buried Yitzchak and Rivka, his wife, and there I buried Leah.” (*Bereishit* 49:29-31)

Leah was buried with Yaakov in Ma’arat ha-Makhpela, but Rachel was buried alone in a grave on the way to Efrat.

Did Rachel’s beauty indeed dazzle Yaakov to such a degree that he failed to look into their degree of compatibility? Is it possible that during their years of marriage, it became apparent that his love was less fierce than it had seemed in the beginning? Heaven forefend. The text itself testifies that Yaakov’s love for Rachel did not dim to the very end:

1. Prior to the fateful encounter between Yaakov, with all his household, and Esav, we read: “And Yaakov lifted his eyes and he saw, and behold – Esav was coming, and four hundred men with him. And he divided the children with Leah and with Rachel and with the two handmaids. And he placed the handmaids and their children first, and Leah and her children afterwards, and Rachel and Yosef last of all” (*Bereishit* 33:1-2). The degree of security offered by the last place in line was not very great, but it was certainly safer than the places ahead in line. Yaakov reserves this relatively safe place for Rachel and Yosef.
2. During Yehuda’s account to Yosef of the argument over whether Binyamin will go down to Egypt, he recalls Yaakov’s words: “And your servant, my father, said: You know that my wife bore me two sons” (44:27). This indicates that even after her death, only Rachel occupies absolutely the status of “Yaakov’s wife.” Likewise, in the account of the descent to Egypt (46:19), only Rachel is referred to as “Yaakov’s wife.”
3. Yaakov’s great love for Yosef and Binyamin, too, arises from his love for Rachel.
4. The beauty of the matriarchs

What is the Torah telling us when it records Avraham’s words to Sara, “Behold, I know that you are a fair woman to look upon” (*Bereishit* 12:11), and in its description of Rivka as “very fair to look upon” (24:16), and in its testimony that “Rachel was beautiful and well favored” (29:17)?

The conventional answer to this question is that there was a natural correlation, or reciprocal reflection, between outer and inner presence, between physical beauty and the Divine Presence illuminating from within: “A man’s wisdom causes his face to shine, and the boldness of his face is changed” (*Kohelet* 8:1).

This answer is certainly true, but in the stories of our matriarchs there may also be a specific answer in each individual instance. In Sara’s case, the answer is stated explicitly in the text. Owing to her beauty, she was desired by kings such as Pharaoh and Avimelekh, and this complicated Avraham’s life. Yitzchak, too, came very close to experiencing a severe marital breach in Gerar on account of his beautiful wife Rivka. However, the Torah also speaks about Rivka’s beauty earlier on, when Avraham’s servant brought her to Yitzchak. Rivka’s beauty may be important because of the following reason:

“And Yitzchak brought her into the tent of Sara, his mother, and he took Rivka and she became his wife, and he loved her, and Yitzchak was comforted after his mother’s death.” (*Bereishit* 24:67)

Yitzchak’s love for Rivka flowed from the fact that she reflected the character of his mother, Sara. Sara’s character was reflected in Rivka’s behavior. In the same way that *Chazal* describe the return of the cloud attached to the tent and the light that burned continuously (see Rashi, 24:6), so Rivka’s beauty, too, recalled that of Sara. Yitzchak brought her into his mother’s tent, and in his love for her he was comforted for his mother’s death.

Perhaps the same idea applies in the case of Yaakov and Rachel. In *Parashat Toldot* we read of the special bond between Yaakov and his mother, who loved him. Yaakov left his mother’s house against his will. Rachel was the daughter of his mother’s brother, and in light of Chazal’s teaching that sons usually take after their mother’s brothers (*Bava Batra* 110a), we might suggest that perhaps daughters resemble their father’s sisters – and thus that there was something about Rachel that recalled Rivka. Rachel’s beauty may have reflected something of the character of Rivka, Yaakov’s mother. Yaakov kissed her when he saw her, and felt love for her specifically.

1. Yaakov and Rachel – the crisis of infertility

As noted, the most severe crisis between Yaakov and Rachel is occasioned by Rachel’s frustration over her infertility. It is important to understand the depth of the crisis, which may be deduced from the description of the births of Leah’s children:

“And Leah conceived and she bore a son, and she named him Reuven, for she said, God has seen my affliction, now therefore my husband will love me. And she conceived again, and she bore a son, and she said, Because the Lord has heard that I was hated, He has therefore given me this son also, and she named him Shimon. And she conceived again, and bore a son, and said, Now this time my husband will be joined to me, because I have borne him three sons; therefore he was called Levi. And she conceived again, and bore a son, and she said, Now I will praise the Lord, therefore she named him Yehuda, and she left off bearing.” (29:32-35)

Leah views her first two sons, Reuven and Shimon, as God’s compensation for her affliction. In naming her third child, Levi, she addresses her husband, rather than God, expressing the hope that from now he will be joined to her. A husband is joined to his wife out of love for her, or out of the need for joint care by both parents of young children born one after the other. While Leah expresses her hope, it is not she who names her son Levi, but rather Yaakov[[1]](#footnote-1) – suggesting that Yaakov acknowledges the justification for her hopes. With the birth of Levi, Leah expresses a hope. However, the birth of her fourth son, Yehuda, would seem to indicate the realization of the hope that she had pinned on Levi: it appears that Yaakov did indeed join himself to her, perhaps even moving his couch to her tent permanently. Her fourth son is therefore named not as an allusion to her tribulations and hopes, as were the first three, but rather out of gratitude to God for His kindness.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In the wake of the birth of these four children, Rachel understands that her world is crumbling:

“And when Rachel saw that she bore Yaakov no children, Rachel envied her sister, and said, Give me children, or else I die. And Yakov’s anger burned against Rachel, and he said, Am I in the place of God, Who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?” (30:1-2)

Rachel has not merited to bear children, but she seeks to comfort herself with her husband, who loves her more than he does her sister. Now, however, it turns out that the many children with whom Leah is blessed are drawing Yaakov increasingly in the direction of Leah’s tent, and Rachel may lose her husband’s love, too.

In her despair and distress Rachel begins to suspect that during their times of intimacy it is Yaakov’s intention that she should not conceive, in order that she will remain beautiful. This was a well-established phenomenon in the ancient world:

“And why would Er [the son of Yehuda] have spilled his seed? In order that she would not conceive and her beauty [thereby] be marred.” (Rashi, 38:7)

This suspicion is unfounded, and it is this that leads Yaakov to be angry with Rachel.

1. The maidservants

Rachel then makes the following suggestion:

“And she said, Behold, my handmaid Bilha; go to her, and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her. And she gave him Bilha her handmaid as a wife, and Yaakov went to her.” (30:3-4)

Rachel’s words reveal her longing for a child, who will be born “upon her knees” and whom she can raise. In addition, this new reality might have some positive hormonal effect and cause her to be able to bear children. However, it may be that Rachel also has another purpose in mind: the needs of the children who will be born from Bilha might draw Yaakov back towards Rachel’s tent, so he can help her raise them. Is Rachel’s hope justified? Perhaps it is, as suggested by the name given to Bilha’s second child, testifying to Rachel’s victory in her struggle against Leah:

“And Bilha, Rachel’s maidservant, conceived again, and bore Yaakov a second son. And Rachel said, With great wrestlings have I wrestled with my sister, and I have prevailed; and she named him Naftali.” (30:7-8)

But Leah fights back: “And when Leah saw that she had stopped bearing, she took Zilpa, her maidservant, and gave her to Yaakov as a wife” (v. 9). Indeed, Zilpa bears a child: “And Leah said, Fortune comes (*ba gad*), and she named him Gad” (v. 11). Based on the form in which the name is written, Rashi and the midrash interpret the name in the sense of “betrayal” (*begida*). According to Rashi, the “betrayal” here is Yaakov’s marriage to Zilpa. Admittedly, the idea had been Leah’s, but the problem that follows recalls Sara’s words to Avraham after his marriage to Hagar, which was likewise her idea.

However, in light of the above, we might suggest a different interpretation: perhaps the problem was not Yaakov’s marriage to Zilpa, but rather his return to Rachel’s tent. Leah’s anger towards Rachel is expressed also in the incident of Reuven’s mandrakes: “And she said to her, Is it a small matter that you have taken my husband? Would you then take away my son’s mandrakes, too?” (v. 15). Rachel’s relinquishing of Yaakov that night expresses her strong desire for the mandrakes. At the same time, it may offer support for the claim that Leah, her sister, voices concerning Rachel’s actions, as attested to in the name Naftali and its allusion to “mighty wrestlings.”

1. Marrying two sisters

Thus far we have presented a gloomy picture of tension and competition between Rachel and Leah. Following the principle, “the actions of the forefathers are an example for their children,” this might be the background to the Torah’s prohibition against marrying two sisters. A review of the laws of forbidden sexual relations shows that the sister of one’s wife is not categorically forbidden – as is evidenced in the fact that if a man’s wife dies, he may marry her sister. This is not the case in the other situations of “*arayot*,” where the woman in question is forbidden even after the death of the relative who renders that relationship forbidden.

The basis for the prohibition against marrying sisters is explained as follows: “Neither shall you take a wife to her sister, as her rival, and uncover her nakedness towards her during her lifetime” (*Vayikra* 18:18). It seems that the problem is the transformation of two sisters, who should love and help one another, into wives who resent and compete with one another. The troubling reality of Yaakov’s marriage to two sisters, whose jealousy of one another culminates in the sons of one wife hating the son of the other enough to sell him, explains the sweeping prohibition against marrying two sisters.

1. Leah

We have discussed aspects of Yaakov’s love for Rachel, but we cannot conclude our discussion without at least some brief words about Yaakov’s feelings for Leah: “And when the Lord saw that Leah was hated, He opened her womb…” (29:31). What is the nature and meaning of this “hatred” in Yaakov’s household? Radak explains:

“‘When the Lord saw that Leah was hated’ – Yaakov did not [actually] hate her; he loved her, but because he loved Rachel more than he did Leah, Leah is described as being ‘hated.’ In other words, *in comparison with the love for Rachel*, she was hated. Similarly we find [in *parashat Ki Tetze*, ‘If a man should have two wives,] one who is loved and the other hated.’”

In contrast to Radak, Ramban explains that Yaakov actually did feel hatred towards Leah owing to her deception of him, which forced him to serve Lavan for an extra seven years and to end up in the complicated position of being married to two sisters. Even according to Ramban, however, this hatred was clearly limited in its scope and intensity, since Yaakov did engage in intimacy with Leah, fathered seven children with her (six sons and a daughter), agreed to her request that he marry Zilpa, too, and eventually commanded his sons to bury him at her side in Me’arat ha-Makhpela.

The Torah appears to view Leah’s deception of Yaakov during the consummation of their marriage in a very severe light. A child born of intercourse conducted in such conditions is considered spiritually defective. (A similar situation arises in the episode of Reuven and Bilha, as I understand it, and it is for this reason that Reuven loses his birthright, the priesthood, and the monarchy.)

A situation in which a husband feels hatred towards his wife is imaginable in the Torah only in one situation: where the husband suspects that his wife has committed adultery. This suspicion draws hatred into the home, and therefore the Torah stipulates, within the framework of the procedure to be followed in such a case, that God’s Name may be blotted out in order to restore domestic peace and to dissipate the hatred. An example of the hatred aroused by the suspicion of adultery is to be found in with regard to the *motzi shem ra*, the slanderous husband:

“If a man takes a wife and he goes to her and he hates her; and he lays accusing words against her, and gives her a bad name, saying, ‘I took this woman, and when I came to her I found her not to be a virgin…’” (*Devarim* 22:13-14)

A husband can justify hatred towards his wife only on the basis of a claim of unfaithfulness. Similarly, in the unit on divorce we find:

“If a man takes a wife and marries her and it comes to pass that she does not find favor in his eyes, because he has found some unseemliness in her, then let him write her a bill of divorce, and give it in her hand, and send her out of his house… And if the latter husband hates her and writes her a bill of divorce, and gives it in her hand, and sends her out of his house…” (*Devarim* 24:1-3)

Here, too, there is a connection between the husband’s hatred and some “unseemliness.”

As noted above, Leah’s deception, carried out at her father’s command, is considered an act bordering on sexual immorality – a sexual relationship that is conducted under a false identity. Hence the bitter result: hatred.

Nevertheless, in conclusion, let us note Ramban’s attempt to mitigate Leah’s act: “God knew that she did so in order to marry this righteous man, and He was compassionate towards her” (Ramban, *Bereishit* 29:31).

1. See Rashbam ad loc. This contrasts with Rashi’s view. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The essence of the above paragraph, as well as some details below, are drawn from the teachings of my honored friend, Rav Aharon Friedman. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)