

Parashat Vayishlach 5781, 2020:

Leah, Rachel, and the Jewish People

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheil, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The beginning of our *parasha* mentions Leah and Rachel, and Ya'akov's strategy to protect them from Eisav and his 400 soldiers:

Ya'akov lifted his eyes and saw, and behold, Eisav was coming, and with him were four hundred men; so, he divided the children with Leah and with Rachel and with the two maidservants. And he placed the maidservants and their children first and Leah and her children after, and Rachel and her Joseph last. (*Sefer Bereishit* 33:1-2, this and all Tanach translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

This is one of the final *pasukim* in *Chamishah Chumshei Torah* wherein we find the names of Leah and Rachel in the same verse. As such, it is a turning point and the proper juncture to ask a crucial question: "In the context of the *masorah* (spiritual tradition) of the Jewish people, who were Leah and Rachel?" My *rebbe* and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as "the Rav" by his students and followers, addressed this question in an extended fashion in his posthumous work, *Vision and Leadership: Reflections on Joseph and Moses*. He responds based upon his conceptualization of the time experience of the "Judaic *masorah* community":

[The Judaic *masorah* community] represents not only a formal succession within the framework of calendaric time but the union of the three grammatical tenses in an all-embracing time experience. The *masorah* community cuts across the centuries, indeed millennia, of calendaric time and unites those who already played their part, delivered their message, acquired fame, and withdrew from the covenantal stage quietly and humbly with those who have not yet been given the opportunity to appear on the covenantal stage and who wait for their turn in the anonymity of the "about to be." Thus, the individual member of the covenantal faith community feels rooted in the past and related

to the future. The “before” and the “after” are interwoven in his time experience. (Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith*, Doubleday Press edition, pages 69-70, underlining and brackets my own)

Given this interpretation of how the covenantal faith community experiences time in an all-embracing manner, rooted in the past and related to the future, we can readily understand why the *Avot* and *Emahot* and other heroes of the spirit found in Tanach are “with us” daily, and are not merely historical figures from an all-but forgotten past to whom we refer when the need may happen to arise. Accordingly, what did Leah and Rachel add to the covenantal faith community? To truly appreciate their contributions, we first need to understand the nature of power and sacrificial action within this community:

The covenantal community that G-d established with Abraham displayed two characteristic moral streaks, two tendencies which *prima facie* are contradictory and mutually exclusive. First, the covenantal community does not shrink from power...Without power one cannot be majestic and dignified. Majesty and dignity are not sinful, they are moral virtues...the covenantal community displays another trait as well: sacrificial action, the ability to give away and to renounce basic inalienable rights for the sake of a great vision, an ideal, or for the benefit of another human being or community...Covenantal man knows when to act like a warrior — majestic, dignified and proud — and when to part with everything he has. (This and the following quotations, *Vision and Leadership: Reflections on Joseph and Moses*, pages 41-44)

In the Rav’s estimation, these two essential qualities of the covenantal community were embodied by Leah and Rachel:

Leah and Rachel were not merely people. Leah was the personification of *middat ha-gevurah*, of dignity and majesty...She symbolized the strength of Jewish character and the unshakable will of the Jew throughout the ages and millennia. It is because of that persistence, that stubbornness and tenacity, that we still remain a living people after thirty-five hundred years of persecution and massacres.

While Leah was the exemplification of dignity and majesty, Rachel's persona epitomized great sacrificial action:

Rachel is the opposite of Leah. She is the tragic heroine who lives for others and not for herself. She gave up her most precious possessions and her elementary rights in order to make it possible for others to find the happiness denied them...She helped her sister take Jacob away from herself. She brushed aside all her own hopes and cherished wishes because her sister was also entitled to the same happiness which Providence had showered upon her, but denied to her sister.

As is his wont, the Rav deploys nearly pure archetypes in his analysis of Leah and Rachel. Within these conceptual constructs, Leah is *gevurah*, and Rachel is *tzimtzum* (contraction) and sacrificial action. Which of these *middot* (behavioral qualities) is to be preferred? According to the Rav, both are necessary, for, as we have seen, "Covenantal man knows when to act like a warrior — majestic, dignified, and proud — and when to part with everything he has." Therefore, Leah's *gevurah* and Rachel's *tzimtzum* are two constitutive elements of the Jewish persona, and are equally responsible for our existence until this historical moment.

May the Master of the Universe help us realize when to act with Leah's *gevurah* and when to reach within our selves to find Rachel's *tzimtzum*, so that we may continue to serve Him for evermore.

V'chane yihi ratzon.

Shabbat Shalom and may Hashem in His infinite mercy remove the *magafah* from *klal Yisrael* and from all the nations of the world.

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria Etengoff and the *parasha's* name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.