

As we know, sibling rivalry is as old as Cain and Abel, fomenting a tragic litany of disputes throughout the history of humankind. In our biblical stories it usually concerns the men, who after all, are the main protagonists. But here, the loving, troubled relationship of Leah and Rachel takes center stage. According to Midrash Tanchuma Vayeitzei 6, no one was more beautiful than Rachel, and Jakob was eager to marry her. He sent her many gifts, but Laban gave them to Leah, and Rachel remained silent. Jakob gave Rachel signs so that he would be able to recognize her on their wedding night, but taking pity on her sister, Rachel gave them to Leah so that she would not be disgraced. Sisterly love and loyalty notwithstanding, when Leah gives birth to four sons (Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah) while she is unable to conceive, Rachel eventually becomes jealous. Echoing her ancestor Sarah, Rachel gives Jakob her servant Bilhah, who bears him sons Dan and Naftali, whereupon Leah, temporarily barren, gives Jakob her servant Zilpah, from whom come sons Gad and Asher. Their children's names reveal the sisters' emotions as they navigate the turbulent waters of family life. Leah, painfully aware of Jakob's feelings toward her, is at first driven by the desperate hope that bearing his sons will make him love her. She names her firstborn Reuven (רְאוּבֵן – see! + בֵּן – son) “Because the Lord has seen my affliction, for now my husband will love me.” (29:32) She names her second son Shimeon (שִׁמְעוֹן – heard + עֲנָה – humiliation). „Since the Lord has heard that I am hated, He gave me this one too.” (29:33) Her third son is named Levi (לֵוִי – escort, accompany). “This time my husband will be attached to me ...” (29:34). There is an intriguing discrepancy in the text here. Instead of *she named*, we read *he named*, another puzzling anomaly in our scriptures. While pragmatists see simple scribal errors, our sages always find interesting explanations that flesh out these stories. Rashi, citing Midrash Deuteronomy Rabbah, teaches, “... how the Holy One of Blessing sent Gabriel and he brought him (Levi) before Him, and He gave him this name, and he gave him the 24 priestly gifts; and because he (Gabriel) accompanied him with gifts, He named him Levi.” But when her fourth son arrives, she seems to have resigned herself to Jakob's indifference, and grateful for what she has, she names him Jehudah (יְהוּדָה – I will thank) (29:35). According to Talmud Tractate Berakhot 7b, this is a groundbreaking act: “From the day the Holy One of Blessing created the world, no one thanked the Holy One of Blessing until Leah came and thanked Him ...” Rachel names Bilhah's first son Dan, from the word for judgement. “God has judged me, and He has also heard my voice and has given me a son.” (30:6) Bilhah's second son she names Naftali, from the root פתל –twist, distort, devious. “A divine contest (*naftulim*) I have waged against my sister, and I have prevailed.” (30:8) Producing no more children herself, Leah reenters the childbearing contest by giving her maid Zilpah to Jakob. She names the first of Zilpah's sons Gad, which is the source of another anomaly. The Torah scroll reads בגד – betray, but it is pronounced בא גַד –luck has come. Of course, our sages comment, castigating Jakob for accepting Leah's offer when he already had four sons by her and thus should have refused. And in naming Zilpah's second son Asher (happy, fortunate), Leah again wisely chooses to count her blessings. But then, a new source of bitterness arises when Reuven finds *dudaim* – mandrakes, which are known for their magical (including love potions) as well as their medicinal (including cures for infertility) powers and gives them to Leah. Rachel asks for some and is roundly rebuked by Leah. In a spontaneous gesture of appeasement, Rachel relinquishes her night with Jakob, for which Leah in return gives her all of the *dudaim*. The word comes from the root דוד – lover, friend, uncle, and its value to Leah, as well as her initial heated reaction to Rachel's request, is obvious. But Rachel harbors her own fears of losing Jakob's love due to her infertility. Midrash Shir HaShirim Rabbah 7 teaches “... they both lost, and they both gained. Leah lost the *dudaim* but gained two tribes and the burial [in Machpelah]. Rachel gained the *dudaim* but lost the tribes and the burial.” Leah names her fifth son Issachar (from the root שכר – wage, hire), justifying giving Jakob her maid Zilpah (30:18), and also alluding to the *dudaim* transaction. And she names her sixth son Zebulun (from the root זבל, which in addition to fertilizing, also is an obscure word for residing). Gratitude aside, she still cherishes hopes that Jakob will eventually live with her (30:20). She names the daughter she then bears Dinah, which our sages attribute to her reasoning that if she produced another son, Rachel would be diminished, so she passed judgement (דין *din*) on herself and prayed for a girl, although the fetus she was carrying was male. (Another midrash teaches that it was Rachel who prayed that the son Leah was carrying might instead be a daughter.) Finally, Rachel is able to have a child, whom she names Josef (from יסף – add), expressing her desire for another son in a delightful wordplay evoking both ending and beginning: “... and she said, ‘God has taken away (from אסף gather, remove) my humiliation.’ So she named him Josef, saying ‘May the Lord grant me yet another son.’” (30:23-24) Later, after giving birth to her second on the road to Efrat, Rachel dies and is buried there, where her tomb still watches over the comings and goings of our people, offering consolation and compassion. The relationship of Leah and Rachel is full of bitter rivalry, frustration, and pain offset by deep love and fierce loyalty, set against the backdrop of complex family dynamics. It is the quintessential women's story, with profound messages for us all.

Shabbat shalom!