

Our parashah unfolds a veritable family drama worth a Netflix series at least. If we sometimes consider current patchwork family situations complicated, that is nothing compared to the relation of Jacob and his wives. The story involves four mothers who give birth to Jacob's sons, Leah, the older sister giving birth to the first four sons, Bilhah, the maid of Rachel, giving birth to two sons, Zilpah, the maid of Leah, giving birth to another two sons and again Leah, who gave birth to sons no 9 and 10, not to forget Dinah the only daughter of Jacob mentioned in the Torah. And finally, Rachel herself gives birth to Benjamin. In the following parashah she will give birth to Joseph and sadly pass away in childbed. If that wasn't complicated enough with two rivalling and very resourceful sisters, competing with one another, fighting with one another, negotiating over Jacob, the story also involves the proverbial father-in-law Laban, cunning and always determined to enlarge his personal wealth. He exploited Jacob and his affection for Rachel as best he could and would almost have robbed Jacob of all of his possessions – the story could be a field day for the author of a Netflix drama. Konstanty Gebert draws our attention to a verse that can be easily overlooked in the unfolding family drama: “But she (Leah) said to her (Rachel), ‘Was it not enough for you to take away my husband, that you would also take my son’s *duda'im*?’ Rachel replied, ‘I promise, he shall lie with you tonight, in return for your son’s *duda'im*.’” What for heaven’s sake are *duda'im*? (Genesis 30:15) Obviously the first readers of the text knew all that there was to know about *duda'im* and no further explanation was necessary. We however know nothing. As Gebert observes, “The translations, explanations and interpretations are as plentiful as they are sometimes even contradictory. For some of them *duda'im* simply denote jasmine, for others, violets, mandrakes, love apples, or even a basket of figs. Every suggestion has its reasons, but none is truly convincing. A sixteenth-century commentator, Rabbi Obadiah Sforno of Rome, concentrated not on what *duda'im* really were, but what made them precious and desirable. He concluded that they affected woman’s fertility, and Reuben clearly knew very well that his mother Leah still wished to have (more) children. Another Italian commentator, Rabbi Hayyim Ben Attar of Livorno (18th cent.) added later that Reuben’s consideration – and he was but a boy then – reflects well on his character. So many words, such multitude of interpretations springing from just one mystery.” Knowledgeable commentators, who for centuries have been studying every message and every single word of the Torah, still have not uncovered everything. Gebert concludes: What can be surprising, though, is that this reminder of God’s mystery has been comprised in an earthly story of two women’s rivalry for the affection of their husband, and of the filial devotion of a son. But it is just there: in the sphere of human experience, and not in that of the movement of galaxies, that the God of Israel decided to reveal himself to Humanity. As if He wished to remind them, that in the final account, only this matters.” I’m very fascinated by Konstanty Gebert, who by all means is not the Jewish commentator in the classical sense. He is a Polish journalist and Jewish activist, who started writing commentaries on the parashiyot for the Polish-Jewish monthly Midrasz. He considers himself (in my humble opinion a bit too) modestly as *am-ha-aretz*, unlearned in the Torah. Before the Shoah, there were plentiful commentaries on the Torah in Poland, but written only in Hebrew or in Yiddish. Interested readers who could only read Polish simply did not exist. But the Shoah destroyed the readers and burned their books. Half a century later, the children and grandchildren of those who stayed in Poland nonetheless, had lost not only whatever Torah learning which might have been passed on, but indeed the very knowledge of Hebrew which would make it possible. Gebert wrote his commentaries with those in mind; and writing them was as much a learning experience as a teaching one. The horrible impact of the Shoah on Polish Jewry as described by Gebert is true for German Jewry as well. Where does that leave us today with the mystery of the *duda'im*? Gebert, who faithfully obeys the commandment, *legadil Torah ulehadir*, to make the Torah grand and glorious, motivates me to dive into the mysteries of Torah. Torah is a boundless source of understanding and insight into our life and wisdom how to live it. There is not THE interpretation or understanding, which can be ultimately found by us. All opinions and answers can be and have to be debated. It is no accident, say the commentators, that the middle letter of the Torah, dividing it in two equal parts, happens to fall half-way through a debate between Moses and Aaron, concerning carrying out a sacrificial rite. (Leviticus 10:16) Debate is at the heart of the Torah. The Talmud states that the Lord created the world with the Torah in His hand. That’s why it is not only worthwhile to study Torah every week. In a manner of speaking, it is mandatory. It is our *korban*, our personal way to approach God.

Shabbat shalom!

For further reference see:

Konstanty Gebert, 54 commentaries on the Torah, translated by Małgozata Tomal, Austeria, Kraków 2005