

Vayetze 11/13/2021, by Daniel Hettleman

Ordinarily, discuss Jacob and this exceptionally rich psychological and familial journey he is undertaking. You all know the story, so I won't take up our time repeating it. Totally coincidentally, I've been reading a book lately, a discourse about the famous and extraordinary Rav Kook, which delved into the character traits of Leah. I've never thought about her much, and yet the more I explored her story, the more I enjoyed getting to know her complexity, generosity, and religiosity. No wonder, despite the somewhat negative outward portrayal of her, she is one of the matriarchs, and we bless our daughters to be like her every Friday night, along with Sarah, Rebecca, and Rachel. I also have an Aunt Leah who is quite a character herself so I enjoy learning about her namesake. And of course we have our own Leah Savin, an incredible young woman who carries this essential name in the Jewish story. Here are some of the interesting things I learned about the biblical Leah. The letters of her name can be rearranged to spell the word *ohel*, which means "tent". She is in the tent, hidden. Leah represents the hidden world of the spirit. She has so much to bring to this rich family story besides her successful womb. The Torah says on page 151 that Leah's eyes were tender. The footnote explains that this was because she cried day and night not to end up with Esav. Apparently this whole family expected that Laban's oldest daughter (Leah) would marry Isaac's oldest son (Esav), and the younger daughter would marry Jacob. Rav Kook adds that in these tears, Leah was begging Hashem, quote "fighting the greatest inner war that a human being ever engaged in." No one heard her except for Hashem. She cried until her eyes lost their beauty and grew dim and tender. She rectified her character traits so she wouldn't end up with Esav. Because she was constantly struggling and beset by these troubles, and working to overcome them, she is the mother of all *baalei teshuvah*, a line that runs through Judah, Moshe, and ultimately King David. By contrast Rachel was externally beautiful but did not have to refine her traits. She was not conflicted but in a state of harmony. She participated in a selfless act by apparently allowing Leah to sleep surreptitiously with Jacob that first night. She and Jacob developed a secret language, and the midrash says Rachel laid beneath the bed making sounds to perpetuate the deception. She was also helping Leah not have to marry Esav, and one commentator I read said that "she herself knew that Leah would be the better wife and mother for her beloved Jacob." This is quite an extraordinary act, but if you read these parshaot carefully, that may be the only heroic act that Rachel participates in. Otherwise, things come easily to her, and she is not highly refined. The philosopher and Jewish commentator Leon Kass says besides her beauty, what else made Rachel more lovable than Leah? Jacob's love for Rachel was instant, erotic and romantic. None of which are necessary traits for being a refined human being, spouse, or mother. Rachel was so jealous of Leah's childrearing she said to Jacob "Give me children or else I die." When Joseph is born, Rachel exults "G-d has taken away my disgrace." The name Joseph means "May Hashem add on for me another son." A bit self-centered, and not exactly the solid character development we might need for our line of matriarchs and patriarchs. By contrast, Leah names each of her first four sons by referring to G-d. Rachel and Leah were not raised Jewish (remember Laban and the stolen idols), but Leah is catching on to the entire project and fully appreciates G-d's participation in her fertility. Kass says that Leah refers to G-d even more than Jacob does. He says Leah is more humble and G-d affirming than any of the other players at this point in the story. Leah, of course, is buried with Jacob in the Cave of Machpelah. The footnote on page 151 says that Rachel was Jacob's intended mate for THIS world; Leah was his intended mate for the higher world of the spirit. Rachel was the wife of Jacob and Leah was the wife of ISRAEL, his more significant spiritual name.