

## D'VAR TORAH PARSHAT VA'YETZE (SHABBAT AHERET, ZURICH, 2007)

Jacob is the only one of the patriarchs whose entire life story, from birth to death, is recorded in the Book of Genesis. We know more details about his individual development and family relations than about those of Abraham and Isaac.

The present parsha relates a number of notable incidents in his life, beginning with his flight from home for fear of his brother's revenge, via the vision of the ladder of angels to his arrival in Haran, his meeting with Rachel, his fourteen years of servitude for Rachel, Laban's deception, Jacob's counter deception, Leah's fecundity, Rachel's barrenness (and Jacob's harsh response to her complaints), the rivalry between the two sisters, the birth of sons and so on.

This rivalry indeed becomes the focal point of a pathetic incident in which the unloved Leah consents to give Rachel the mandrakes that her son Reuben had found in return for having the privilege of Jacob's lying with her that night. Thus, when Jacob returns from the field that evening Leah greets him with the humiliating words: "You must come in to me; for indeed I have *hired* thee with my son's mandrakes." Thus confronted, Jacob acquiesces. How extraordinary that this resourceful man of action should become a "hired" man, by whom Leah again conceives.

In fact, the topic of fecundity versus barrenness is a major element in the parsha; the pressure of bearing sons becomes so great that both Rachel and Leah (once she temporarily ceases bearing children) adopt the same measure as Sarah before them – they give their respective handmaidens (i.e. slaves) to Jacob, to serve as surrogates. But while in the earlier story an entire drama develops between Sarah and Hagar (as well as Abraham and even Ishmael), here the handmaidens are silent. Although each gives birth twice (i.e. they bear one third of Jacob's twelve sons), they are never named as being among the mothers of the Jewish people. When we bless our daughters, we refer only to Sarah, Rivka, Rachel and Leah (in that order). Thus the time has surely come to give these two women – Bilha and Zilpah – a voice and this I have done in the following midrash, based on Genesis 30: 2-13.

### **The Other Mothers**

**Zilpah speaks:** I loved my lord, envied my mistress, who had been blessed with his manhood only because her father betrayed him. I knew he merely pitied her and that, whenever he came to her, it was only because he remembered how she had suffered during the long years in which he served her father in order to win the hand of Rachel, whom he really loved. He recalled how he'd called her by the wrong name during their first night of love and how, even later on, when they'd long been married, he sometimes let slip the wrong name in the rare passionate moments of their feeble love-making. He came to her only in the

dark and, finally, only because Rachel, in return for the love apples Reuven had brought from the fields, let him sleep with her again.

But before that, when she thought she could never again bear children, she called me in and bade me lie with him. I was her slave, she could do what she liked with me. I obeyed, concealing my glee, pretending this was a burden, an unseemly duty that I, a virgin, would be forced to endure - to lie with a man who loved only his other wife.

But in reality I lusted after him. I made that night one of incredible pleasure for him, indulging him with love-making such as he had never before known and that I had conjured up in my fancies, having heard the lascivious tales told by the girls in Aram. He was delirious - and so was I. Ours was a night of passion and it was **I** who proposed the name of the son I bore - Gad, Fortune, the child of our first night of bliss.

The gratification of that night brought him to my bed again. Again, we spent a night of passion together, trying to protract the pleasure, knowing we might never meet again. I gazed my fill at his beautiful, strong body, ensuring that every limb, every muscle, was imprinted in my memory. Again, I bore a son. I watch him now and rejoice to see in him his father replicated. He is my happiness, my Asher, the living embodiment of the joy I felt when he was conceived - a joy I shall never again experience, for now my mistress - fertile once more - has no more need of me.

**Bilhah speaks:** I loathed Ya'akov, the cheater the thief. I gloated that first night, as I thought of how he'd been betrayed, of how he in his turn was being cheated, of how he thought he was lying with his beloved Rachel when really it was the despised Leah who lay under him. I thought it served him right that Rachel was barren, while Leah conceived whenever they lay together.

I hated him when he flared up at her when my mistress, filled with pain and grief at her own barrenness, begged him to give her children. How dared he reproach her? How unfeeling, self-centered and lacking in sympathy were his words!

But my anger was as nothing compared to my horror as I heard her say “Here is my slave-girl, here is Bilhah, come in to her.” What right had she to offer me in her stead, just as her father had offered Leah instead of herself? Had there not been enough bargaining, enough betrayal of feelings, enough riding rough-shod over the desires of others? I wanted to shout, to hit out, to run away - anything to escape this man I so abhorred. But I am a slave - my will is my own, but not my fate.

And so I lay with him, I lay stiff and unyielding as he pierced my virgin body, I gave him no gratification. He must have felt my loathing, for as soon as he had filled me with his seed he rose and left, in the dark, before the light of dawn could reveal my tears of anger and of pain at being ravished.

They called him Dan --He - Has - Done Justice-- but for me there was no justice. He, their God - did not hear **my** voice! Yes, I gave birth on Rachel’s knees but I gave birth in agony, it was a long labour, as long - it seemed to me as I groaned - as the fourteen years of Jacob’s labour for Rachel. And what was my reward? It was not **I** who dandled the child. It was Rachel who took him as her own.

And having succeeded in surrogacy, she gave me again, again without asking me; again I could not refuse the command. Again, I lay with him, my body scarcely recovered from childbirth. Again I bore a son and again it was **she** who named the child - Naftali "A struggle of God have I struggled with my sister; yes, I have prevailed." That was what she said. She meant Leah - or did she? For I too was her sister, another woman - she should have felt for me, understood me, recognized my reluctance. Instead, she asserted her power, subordinated my will to hers. She wanted sons - and she got them, not from her womb, but from mine. My rape was her fulfilment. Yes, she struggled and she prevailed - just as Jacob struggled with angels, so she wrestled with me. And I was defeated. I bled in her stead.

When she died in childbirth, I felt no grief. I knew that this was God's retribution. If I had had another son, I would have called him Vengeance.