LEHRHAUS Over Shabbat

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Amidst the war unfolding in Israel, we have decided to go forward and continue publishing a variety of articles to provide meaningful opportunities for our readership to engage in Torah during these difficult times.

RIVKAH'S EXISTENTIALISM: WHOLENESS AND BROKENNESS

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In the pink, skin-colored morning
every limp blade of grass in this small
but entire city will be dead and I
will walk out alive and well and happy.
— *Anthony G. Sobin*, "Why I Am Sad"

The baton of God's mission passes from generation to generation, narrative to narrative, almost inconspicuously, without much explicit declaration. Avraham and Sarah birth and wed Yitzhak, clearing their outstanding obligations to their futures. Though it feels like the urgency of a last minute's haste, the father and mother of nations prepare the next generation for actualization. The responsibility no longer lies in their hands.

With the departure of the baton from Avraham and Sarah's clutch, the onus comes to rest with Yitzhak and Rivkah. The two now step into the Torah's sole spotlight with the responsibility of progressing God's mission. Avraham and Sarah's journeying brought escapades and adventures, often more treacherous and unnerving than excitedly daring. Now, presumably, the same will come for Yitzhak and Rivkah. Readers, and perhaps the couple themselves, would hope for smooth sailing, a straightened path without humps or cracks. But ease is hardly the framework for God's plots.

Here, we explore the sequel to "parenting" God's future nation. Yitzhak and Rivkah's tales begin fraught with hardship, though in different terms

than their predecessors. The burden of legacy in the context of barrenness—now establishing a precedent in the family—solicits petitions for change, heartfelt hope at the risk of devastation. When Rivkah ultimately conceives, she faces existential concerns at the inner conflict within her, the torrents of pregnancy that she is ill-fated to accept. The fissures from within manifest from without after her birth, and cracks in the family frame begin to widen. What should have been their blank canvas begins stained with life's hardship.

Our focus shall be the self's flickering existence as seen through Rivkah, the bearer of this blunted reality, as life itself comes into question when death appears a more peaceful end. "Why am I?" Rivkah painfully ponders (Bereishit 25:22), in hardship and suffering, for perhaps this life I so desperately sought, so anxiously longed for, is not what I can handle. This question surely faces each person at some point in life. So we turn to its biblical emergence.

I. The Burden of Legacy

"And these are the generations of Yitzhak son of Avraham. Avraham begot Yitzhak" (*ibid.* 25:19). Thus begins a new book in the series. The first clause follows standard biblical language when beginning new sections—"and these are the generations (*toledot*) of so-and-so." The specificity of "Yitzhak son of Avraham" establishes "which" Yitzhak concerns our attention, but the latter portion is superfluous. If Yitzhak is Avraham's son then, presumably, it is Avraham who is his father. The simple addition hints at something more disconcerting about the genealogy.

Rashi, winding the clock back several chapters, explains the addition as a necessary clarification, indicating that Avraham, not Avimelekh—the short-term captor of Sarah—was Yitzhak's father. For that reason, God designed Yitzhak's face similar to Avraham's, an external validation of an internal truth that, otherwise, would remain hopelessly ambiguous.[1] Describing a great feast held by Avraham and Sarah after they finally birthed Yitzhak, the Gemara describes:

> ... and still, [the guests] were gossiping and said, "If Sarah at 90 years old could birth, could Avraham at 100 years old beget?" Immediately, Yitzhak's facial features were transformed, and he resembled Avraham. [The guests] all exclaimed and said, "Avraham begot Yitzhak" (*Bava Metzia* 87a).

Gossip, blabbering words of rumors and suspicions and doubts, swirls around Avraham and Sarah, pointing threatening fingers that jeopardize their familial reputation; how could the mother and father chosen by God not have their own biological children—let alone another man's child—to move their legacy onward? Indeed, at the precise moment of gossip, "immediately" (*miyyad*), Yitzhak's facial features transform to provide empirical proof of his

[1] Rashi to Bereishit 25:19, s.v. "*Avraham holid et Yitzhak*."

lineage. The concern for Yitzhak's identity runs deeper, as even Avraham, according to one *midrash*, faces skepticism:

> Come and observe the power of peace: In the time that Sarah was carried from Pharaoh's hand to Avimelekh's and became pregnant with Yitzhak, the nations of the world [expressed doubts about Avraham's fatherhood]... and there was suspicion in Avraham's heart over these words. What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do? He said to the angel designated to supervise the embryo's formation, "Make all features of [Yitzhak] in the likeness of his father, so that all will attest that he is the son of Avraham."[2]

Why do Yitzhak's genetics warrant such concern? What necessitates this perturbing anxiety? For Seforno, the answer is simple: Yitzhak is Avraham's only true seed.[3] To subjugate Yitzhak's identity to scrutiny is to call into question the foundation built to lend the family a path forward. Before Yitzhak's life even takes off, at least in the Midrash, he is impacted by the implications of gossip, of milling concerns and questions that threaten his role for his family and for God. In God's good graces, the threat is averted.

"And Yitzhak was 40 years old when he took Rivkah, daughter of Betuel the Arami, from Padan Aram, sister of Lavan the Arami, to be his wife" (Bereishit 25:20). This accounting of who Rivkah is—as arbitrary as it is excessive—on its face follows the same mundane expression as the previous *pasuk*: a refresher on who are the key characters in *toledot* Yitzhak. Between the words, however, more is intimated:

> What does "Arami" come to teach?... Rather it comes to teach you that [Rivkah's] father was a deceiver and her brother was a deceiver, and even the people in her place [were deceivers]. So this righteous woman that departs from among them, to what is she comparable? To "a lily among the thorns" (Shir Ha-Shirim 2:2).[4]

There is great achievement in Rivkah and Yitzhak's lives, though not explicitly found in the *pesukim*. In Yitzhak's case, aside from God's benevolence in reconstructing the proof of his features, Radak notes that his character was so pristine, so altruistic and compassionate, that his actions, too, testified to his paternal source.[5] For Rivkah, her very being testifies to her herculean, miraculous state—like a lily among the thorns; planted in desolation, she grew in moral beauty. There is much in the background that fills the space of the

[2] *Midrash Tanhuma*, *Toledot* 1.

[3] Seforno to Bereishit 25:19, s.v. "*Avraham holid et Yitzhak*."

[4] *Bereishit Rabbah* 63:4.

[5] Radak to Bereishit 25:19, s.v. "*Avraham holid et Yitzhak*."

seemingly quiet lives the Torah indicates thus far.

Still, it is in this quiet solitude that God, as it were, is provoked to agitate the equilibrium. *Yevamot* 64a states that God "*mit'aveh*"—He desires, hungers, yearns—for the righteous' prayers. Radak explains that, in the case of Yitzhak and Rivkah, God made them wait 20 years from marriage until Rivkah could conceive,[6] for He sought to leave clear, verifiable evidence of his intervention in their lives, a demonstration of His great goodness.

In the Gemara, R. Yitzhak compares the righteous' prayers to a shovel or pitchfork—"Just as the shovel/pitchfork reverses the grain from place to place, so do the righteous' prayers reverse the traits of the Holy One, blessed be He, from fury to mercy" (*Yevamot* 64a). The longing for relationships with those devoted to Him stirs God to seek their consolation, their appeal, their words. It is that somewhat backhanded desire for desire that motivates God's stalling of Yitzhak and Rivkah's children.

"*Va-yetar* Yitzhak to Hashem on behalf of his wife because she was barren; *va-yei'ater lo* Hashem, and Rivkah his wife became pregnant" (Bereishit 25:21). More than the classic word for "he prayed," *hitpalel*, *va-yetar* refers to an abundant, overwhelming prayer. Rashi cites Yehezkel 35:13 to specify its piling, concentrating, and thickening nature—like smoke flooding a sealed room and hastily spreading to fill every crevice.[7] The urgency of Yitzhak's prayers, that they come with such rapid multiplicity, suggests the quaking fears within him and Rivkah. Indeed, given Sarah's own barrenness, a pattern is finding establishment; his mother's case was not a mere fluke but a divinely crafted condition. Radak notes that Yitzhak could have simply found another wife to be built up from her, as Sarah did, but due to his love for Rivkah, he sought her womb and hers alone.[8] His commitment perhaps attests to the hysteria of *va-yetar*. And yet, with immediacy—still in the same *pasuk* and with no interruption—God allows himself to be entreated, and Rivkah conceives.

The burden of legacy followed Yitzhak and Rivkah in the earlier parts of their lives, but upon their marriage, the odds appear defeated. 20 years later, no future is in sight. The provoked anxiety is unabating, and the legacy's burden weighs greatly. But they find relief soon enough when Rivkah becomes pregnant—until another issue arises, the first of its kind: the soul's inner torrents interlaced with the body's.

II. Fissures Within Me

Pregnancy signals the anticipation before novelty, the waiting period for renewal—when a new human being is inducted into the world. The nature of waiting is characterized by its endurance and uncertainty, for the long, waning months and for the hazard of birth. So some angst is expected, if not guaranteed. Yet Rivkah, upon God's answer to Yitzhak's prayers, feels trouble brewing within her.

[6] Radak to Bereishit 25:26, s.v. "*ve-Yitzhak ben shishim shanah*."

[7] Rashi to Bereishit 25:21, s.v. "*va-yei'ater lo*."

[8] Radak to Bereishit 25:21, s.v. "*le-nokhah ishto*."

"*Va-yitrotzetzu* the children within her, and she said, 'If this is so, why am I?' And she went *li-drosh* God" (Bereishit 25:22). *Va-yitrotzetzu* is baked with intensive definitions—the children oppressed, crushed, chased. Caught by this word, Rashi says it "begs" a midrashic reading.[9] One prominent *midrash* explains:

> "*Va-yitrotzetzu* the children within her." R. Yohanan and Reish Lakish [dispute]. R. Yohanan said: "This one ran to kill that one, and that one ran to kill this one." Reish Lakish said: "This one permitted the commands of that one, and that one permitted the commands of this one." ... Whenever [Rivkah] stood by synagogues and study halls, Ya'akov ran and jerked to leave... and whenever she passed by houses of idolatry, Eisav ran and jerked to leave...[10]

Much is happening within Rivkah. By one account, attempts at assassination, by another, legislative developments of Jewish law, and by a third, blossoming inclinations and desires. Rashi, referencing *Yalkut Shimoni* 111:2, adds another possibility: The children within her are struggling over how to divide their inheritance;[11] this torrent is born within from considerations of legacy. This too-muchness transpiring within Rivkah is confusing, defying easy explanation or understanding, hence why it "begs" for the *midrash*'s expansive word. What is clear, though, is that Rivkah is neither briefed nor prepared for these events. Indeed, the text tells us that "*ha-banim*," the children, thrash within her, but she has yet to be informed that she is carrying twins. A restless, violent movement, *va-yitrotzetzu* manifests as a physiological sensation within Rivkah that sends her to a penetrating question: "If this is so, why am I?"

Rashi and Bekhor Shor suggest more circumstantial meanings, localized in the text. To Rashi: "If this pain of pregnancy is so great, why did I desire to be pregnant?"[12] To Bekhor Shor: "If I will miscarry (as this thrashing indicates to her), why should I be pregnant at all?"[13] There is pragmatism here interlaced with misgivings, but nothing of such extremes. Ramban, though, takes a more striking reading:

> And the correct [reading] in my eyes is that she said, "If this will be so with me, why am I in this world? If only I would not be, that I would

[9] Rashi to Bereishit 25:22, s.v. "*va-yitrotzetzu*."

[10] *Bereishit Rabbah* 63:6.

[11] Rashi to Bereishit 25:22, s.v. "*va-yitrotzetzu*."

[12] Rashi to Bereishit 25:22, s.v. "*va-tomer im kein*"; s.v. "*lamah zeh anokhi*."

[13] *Bekhor Shor* to Bereishit 25:22, s.v. "*va-tomer im kein lamah zeh anokhi*."

> die or I would not have been." The reason is similar to "As when I was not I should be" [meaning, "I should be as when I did not exist"] (Iyov 10:19).[14]

There are existential pains born from Rivkah's inner strife, brought on by her thrashing children. Ramban brazenly likens her to Iyov—the biblical epitome of despair, of theodicy, of the bad wrought against the good. This suffering extends well beyond physiological pains. Rivkah suffers from a now ruminating mind of pungent worries: Why am I? Why am I under such conditions? Why must I endure? Why am I at all? Rivkah becomes a philosopher perturbed by a restlessness of her own, a "*va-yitrotzetzu*" of perilous thoughts.

When we consider Rivkah in her totality thus far—her origins among a deceitful family, her perseverance toward righteousness, her plague of barrenness, and now her rambunctious pregnancy—this conclusion is not far afield. Her life flashes before her eyes ("Why am I in this world?"), and she is dragged to frightening considerations ("If only I would not be, that I would die or I would not have been"). When she goes *lidrosh* God, the too-muchness of it all trails behind.

That movement, *lidrosh*, is to seek, to inquire, to consult, or in Ramban's understanding, to pray.[15] Rivkah accepts that she cannot withstand the current conditions, so she beseeches God's aid—if not of desperation, then of necessity.

"Two nations are in your womb," God says, "and two peoples from your innards will be separated, and one people will be mightier than the other people, and the master will serve the younger" (Bereishit 25:23). There is much material communicated here with little context. "Two nations"—supposedly twins—live within Rivkah, and once she births them (a subtle assurance that she will not suffer a miscarriage), they will separate; perhaps they are not formed to dwell together, thus warring within her, *va-yitrotzetzu*. Further than that, the story unravels beyond birth: "one people will be mightier than the other," with no indication of whom that shall be, yet the "*rav,*" the master, will serve the "*tza'ir*," the younger. Though God's words initially appear to quell Rivkah's concerns, they remain cryptic and, in some sense, tangential.

A first reading understands God to mean: "The torrents within you are because you will birth twins who are already enthralled in power dynamics that will pain their lives." But that's not quite the case. Rivkah senses trouble from the twins "*be-kirbah*," literally meaning "in her innerness," but God speaks to the twins "*be-vitnekh*," in [her] womb (Bereishit 25:22-23). The context of their speech differs: God speaks to a physiological phenomenon, while Rivkah speaks to an existential one. Though the first *pasuk*

[14] Ramban to Bereishit 25:22, s.v. "*va-tomer im kein lamah zeh anokhi*."

[15] Ramban to Bereishit 25:22, s.v. "*va-teilekh lidrosh et Hashem*."

plainly refers to her womb, perhaps its deliberate usage of "*be-kirbah*" indicates the extent of these events, even the reason for their inclusion in the Torah. Rivkah senses that something is amiss; eventually confirmed by God, it prompts her to question life itself.

What, however, might that be? Rashi writes that, after their birth, the twins will split paths—one towards evil, one towards wholeness.[16] Evil and wholeness quarrel within her, and as Bekhor Shor says, the master (whom we later learn to be Eisav) refuses to accept his subjugation to the younger, and so the two live in war.

Further along the pregnancy, "behold—twins [were] in her womb" (Bereishit 25:24). *Bereishit Rabbah* 63:8 eyes the missing *aleph* in "*tomim*," twins, attributing it to the fact that "Ya'akov was righteous and Eisav was evil"; the absence indicates the presence of something obscure. Perhaps, we might say, these fissures are what peck at Rivkah.

Rivkah carries two worlds within her—one of righteousness and wholeness, the other of evil and wretchedness. They violently yank, thrash, and war within her. These will emerge to be two nations, chained to power plays and politics, vying to rule over one another. "Two hated nations are in your womb," *Bereishit Rabbah* 63:7 says, both abhorred by idolators.[17] These torrents within her are frightening: On one plane, for the reality she is birthing. Evil will enter the world from exiting her womb. On another plane, for her ability to produce such repellent forces. "If this is so, why am I in this world?" we recall her crying. "If this is so"—*if*, the word of uncertainty, my senses of myself are true, that indeed there are warring forces within me—"why am I in this world?" How can Rivkah, the righteous woman who escaped the snares of familial influence, "a lily among the thorns," herself produce thorns? What is this to say about her?

The fissures within Rivkah tear into her. The problem, literally, lies *within* her. It is a problem she opts to resolve.

III. Divergences From Me

"And the first one came out ruddy, all of him like a cloak of hair, and they called his name, 'Eisav.' And afterward came his brother, whose hand grasped the heel of Eisav, and he called his name, 'Ya'akov.' And Yitzhak was 60 years old at their birth" (Bereishit 25:25-26).

For all its troubles, the pregnancy eases into a relatively uneventful birth; there are no indications of unusually painful contractions or general complications. But some things are notable. Each twin carries an oddity with him into

[16] Rashi to Bereishit 25:23, s.v. "*mi-mei'ayikh yiparedu*."

[17] It is important to note the overt paradox between this *midrash* and *Bereishit Rabbah* 63:6, cited earlier: Here, Eisav appears scorned by idolators, but earlier, he appears drawn to them. We can suggest that *midrashim* need not coalesce given their fluid, unsystematic style; for our purposes, then, these *midrashim* more importantly emphasize *Hazal*'s primary observation that Rivkah's inner life within her womb is overtaken by conflict, strife, and danger. Aligning the particulars are less important than the underlying sentiment dominating their perspective.

the world, a definitional identity based on the uncanny element of his emergence. For Eisav, it's his physical makeup; for Ya'akov, his clinched grip. Before Rivkah comes the fissures within her, now divergence budding from her.

That Eisav was "*admoni*," here translated as "ruddy," is also understood to refer to a reddish complexion. Rashi, citing *Bereishit Rabbah* 63:8, symbolically reads it as a testament to his future nature: Eisav will always shed blood.[18] It is, we can infer, innate to Eisav, this proclivity to gore, to draw blood, shown by his very being. This follows Rashi's explanation of his being named "Eisav," for he was made, *asui* (spelled with the same Hebrew letters as Eisav), like an older person.[19] Something about his appearance begs onlookers to sense something remiss, a certain deficiency—or perhaps an excess—that lures him to blood.

For Ya'akov, it is his clutching of Eisav's heel that earns him his name. Rashi, citing the same *midrash* as before, says that Ya'akov was the "first drop" of Yitzhak that impregnated Rivkah and, thus, the true firstborn. In due time, he would reclaim his birthright status from Eisav through justice.[20]

One interesting feature of the text is the ambiguity of who, exactly, names Eisav ("and they called his name") and Ya'akov ("and he called his name"). For Eisav, Rashi suggests that the general public milled that name from their sight of him, or perhaps it was Yitzhak and Rivkah themselves. For Ya'akov, Rashi says that it was Hashem or Yitzhak, while Ibn Ezra says it was the latter or a random individual. In any case, there appears a striking vagueness, if not a glaring absence, of Yitzhak and Rivkah's involvement in their children's identities. Why the Torah would exclude their names from the naming if, as one answer goes, they indeed named their children, is unclear. What we do know, however, is that Ya'akov and Eisav face two very different developments through adolescence.

With a removed simplicity, the Torah records: "And the young boys grew up, and it was that Eisav became a man who knew trapping, a man of the field, and Ya'akov was a '*tam*' man, sitting in tents" (25:27). The blurred distinctions of the twins rumbling within Rivkah begin to sharpen; their incongruity materializes beyond the womb. Eisav is, by a simple reading, a hunter who pursues his prey with keen expertise, "*yodei'a tzayid*," a man who "knows trapping." This is meant in contrast to Ya'akov, the man who is "*tam*"—innocent, blameless, whole, as Rashi says:

> *Tam*—He is not experienced in all those things. His mouth was like his heart; one who is not apt to deceive is called "*tam*."[21]

Ya'akov has a lucidity to him that accentuates his words with honesty, for he is not a deceiver, a

[18] Rashi to Bereishit 25:25, s.v. "*admoni*."

[19] Rashi to Bereishit 25:25, s.v. "*va-yikre'u shemo Eisav*."

[20] Rashi to Bereishit 25:26, s.v. "*ve-aharei khein yatza ahiv*, etc."

[21] Rashi to Bereishit 25:27, s.v. "*tam*."

conniver; that, Rashi says, is precisely Eisav's character, a person who was skilled in hunting, namely, in trapping and tricking their father Yitzhak to believe he was righteous.[22] This uncharitable reading, ripe in Midrash and among many commentaries, sees Eisav as someone morally degenerate. Thus, it is Ya'akov, the one of wholeness and genuineness, who sits in tents—of prayer and Torah study, Ha'amek Davar says.[23]

Eisav is a man of the field, Ya'akov of the tents. If Ya'akov is whole and simple and honest, then Eisav is broken and complicated and deceptive. The pair's repelling forces almost by nature push them onto different paths. Rashi says that, until they became 13 years old, their differences were unidentifiable. Come the age of adulthood, and all could see who they were.[24]

This, no doubt, proved challenging for Rivkah and Yitzhak: How are parents to raise two children of such opposite beings, one good and the other bad? Unlike Yitzhak and Yishmael, both Eisav and Ya'akov are full-fledged children of "equal" genealogical standing. Rav Hirsch, in a famous illumination that stretches the text quite creatively, blames Yitzhak and Rivkah for failing to do as much:

> But that is precisely why everyone "on his path" has to be educated in different ways for the one great goal according to the prospective future of life from his disposition. Wanting to teach and educate Ya'akov and Eisav on the same school desk, under the same habits of life, in the same way, for example for a studying, thinking life, would mean: destroying one of them with certainty... If Yitzhak and Rivkah had looked into Eisav and asked themselves early on, how can even an Eisav, how can the strength and the courage and the dexterity that lies dormant in him, be won for activity in the service of God... Ya'akov and Eisav, with their very different dispositions, would have remained twin brothers in spirit and in life, Eisav's sword could have married Ya'akov's spirit early on, and who knows what a different shape then would have taken the course of the times...[25]

These two worlds, once contained within Rivkah, could not be reconciled, brought to thrive under the same roof. The famous Cherokee legend of two wolves describes an elder teaching a young child that two wolves dwell within each person—one good, the other bad. Intrigued, the child asks which wolf will prevail. "Simple," the elder says, "whichever wolf you feed." Perhaps in that light, Rav Hirsch suggests Rivkah and Yitzhak fed the

[22] Rashi to Bereishit 25:27, s.v. "*yodei'a tzayid*."

[23] *Ha'ameik Davar* to Bereishit 25:27, s.v. "*yosheiv ohalim*."

[24] Rashi to Bereishit 25:27, s.v. "*va-yigdelu…va-yehi Eisav*."

[25] Hirsch to Bereishit 25:27, s.v. "*va-yigdelu*."

wrong wolf within Eisav. An apparent neglect, a failure, is what set Eisav on his path, not an innate fate. As Rabbi Elazar says, "A person needs to accompany their child until they are 13 years old."[26] Until age 13, children are more totally the parents' responsibility.

But the parental slip-ups appear to extend further, as we're told: "And Yitzhak loved Eisav for "*tzayid be-fiv*," and Rivkah loved Ya'akov" (Bereishit 25:28). Commentaries are split on a reading. Rashi says that, more plainly, Yitzhak loved Eisav because his "*tzayid*," trappings, were "*be-fiv*," in Yitzhak's mouth; more exegetically, Eisav deceived Yitzhak with his mouth.[27] In other words, not being a "*tam*," Eisav fooled his father into gaining his love. Seforno, though, says Yitzhak *also* loved Eisav, while Rivkah only loved Ya'akov.[28] Yet, *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* makes a remarkable comment:

> "For love is as intense as death" (Shir Ha-Shirim 8:6)—the love that Yitzhak had for Eisav; that is what is written: "Yitzhak loved Eisav."[29]

It is clear that Yitzhak loved Eisav, deeply so. The alliances, so to speak, are laid out; the sides chosen. Yitzhak's favor lies with Eisav, and Rivkah's with Ya'akov. The division and distinction among the children remain pointedly firm.

Many investigate more closely what draws Yitzhak and Rivkah to their respectively favored children, but that is not of our interest now. Instead, what we close with, are the underlying rumblings of this family dynamic, a philosophical whisper that seduces the ear to wonder what this narrative serves in all its details and definitions. I suggest that it turns back to Rivkah.

IV. Why Am I, in a Broken World

Though our story begins with the *toledot* of Yitzhak, it soon becomes the story of Rivkah. Her barrenness, and her restoration through fertility, fall under primary focus. Her and Yitzhak's world begins to splinter, but in divine grace, she conceives. Only then do we find such resonant tones of philosophical inquiry—so intense that Ramban compares them to the likes of Iyov!

"If this is so, why am I in this world?" Rivkah asked. Perhaps we can read her question more fully and, boldly, suggest an answer.

If this is so, Rivkah wonders, if there can exist two feuding forces; a dualism of morality between good and evil; a clash of ethical cultures; a shattering, a breaking, a rupture, in the wholeness of life, that is designed by God, then how can I be in this world? How can human beings be in pursuit of the good life, the whole life, the godly life, when God engenders its counter-opposite? The

[26] *Bereishit Rabbah* 63:10.

[27] Rashi to Bereishit 25:28, s.v. "*be-fiv*."

[28] Seforno to Bereishit 25:28, s.v. "*va-ye'ehav Yitzhak et Eisav*."

[29] *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* 8:6.

fissures within Rivkah, the rumblings of war, are unbearable, and she inquires of God for redress. The war of nations, politics, and power, lives within Rivkah, and soon it will enter into the world.

The immediate "why" of causal reasoning for her pains does not include a future purpose. Instead, she is assured that it will manifest in the world before her, that the fissures within her will birth divergences from her. The splitting was enough for her to contemplate death.

In a world of brokenness, of Ya'akovs and Eisavs, of sheltered solitudes and daring escapades, of good and evil, we can only feel pained by the dualism. And when we recognize that the mirrored reflection lives within us, that we, in fact, can bring about such forces into our world, we can only seek out God. Perhaps what Rivkah saw in Ya'akov, what she loved about him, was that he was an "*ish tam*," a whole man. His mouth spoke what his heart felt, and so he dwelled in the quietude of study and prayer, in God's chambers, divorced from the brokenness and immersed in the wholeness.

This is why Rivkah favors him, for he is whole and good and true, offering no contradiction or troubles. But as the narrative draws on, further than we have examined, Rivkah is the same one who calls upon Ya'akov to be bad, to ease into the snakeskin of deception. For sometimes a broken world is needed, and we may be the breakers, to arrive at a wholeness more cherished and real than before.

Editor's note: The following article was originally published in November 2018.

Team of Rivals: Building Israel Like Rachel and Leah

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This week's Torah portion (Genesis 28:10-32:3) includes the first and most sustained encounter with two of the matriarchs: Rachel and Leah. Given their association with the leading tribes of Israel, these two matriarchs' names resonate through Jewish history. But if we read the text in an effort to identify with and be inspired by these forebears, we face quite a challenge. Who among us can relate to life as one of two sisters married to the same man? In prohibiting such a marriage later in the Torah (Leviticus 18:18), the Torah seems to describe the marriage to the second sister as a way of *tormenting* (*litzror*) the first. Clearly, Rachel and Leah were put in a very difficult position, one that thankfully seems quite alien to us. And if their predicament is so foreign it is hard for us to identify with it, it is even harder for us to be inspired by their response to this predicament.

The Torah provides unusually detailed insight into the two sisters' motives as they compete for primacy. Leah's rationales for the names of her first three sons include prayers that the birth of these sons should help her — the"hated" wife (Genesis 29:30-31) win Jacob's love. After Leah gives birth to her fourth son, Rachel is described

as "jealous" of Leah and she insists to Jacob that he must "give [her] sons" or she might as well die (Genesis 30:1). She then offers her maidservant, Bilhah as a concubine to Jacob and a surrogate mother for herself, and she dedicates the name of the second of Bilhah's sons to "triumph over my sister" (Genesis 30:8). But Leah counters Rachel by also offering her maidservant as a concubine/surrogate, and Zilpah has two sons on Leah's behalf. There is then an unusual twist in the rivalry: they consummate an unusual deal whereby Leah trades the *duda'im* (flowers or weeds, which evoke "love" via the root *dud*) she was given by her firstborn son Reuben to Rachel in return for a night in Jacob's bed. This leads to three more children for Leah—two sons and a daughter. At this point, God (who had tipped the balance to Leah at the outset, having sympathized with her plight as the "hated" sister/wife) finally grants Rachel a son too. In naming him Joseph (*Yosef*), Rachel credits God with "gathering (*asaf)* in her disgrace." But her rivalrous tendencies are apparently yet to be quieted; she also prays that God should "add (*osef*) another son for me (Genesis 30:23-24)."

At first glance, there is little in this bitter rivalry to excite our admiration. But an enigmatic verse at the climax of the book of Ruth suggests we take a deeper look. This verse stands out as it is the only reference to Leah and the only joint reference to the two sisters outside of Genesis.[1] As such, it would seem to offer rare ancient commentary on the sisters' relationship. What we find is startling. In particular, at the very end of the story, when Boaz has risen to the occasion and redeemed Ruth through the rite of *yibbum* (levirate marriage), "the people and the elders at the (Bethlehem city) gate respond" to the request to affirm the rite as follows (Ruth 4:11):

> "'Witnesses (we are). May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and like Leah, the two who built up the House of Israel! Prosper in Ephrathah and perpetuate your name in Bethlehem!'"

On the simple reading of Rachel and Leah's story, this blessing to Boaz—that God should make Ruth a "builder of the house of Israel (i.e., Jacob), just as Rachel and as Leah were"— is hard to understand. Who would want their wife to be like these two bitter rivals?

But maybe there is more to their rivalry than meets the eye. In the following, I will show that this enigmatic verse in Ruth is a thread that if pulled, unravels the tapestry of bitter rivalry we see at the surface, and thereby reveals a Rachel and Leah with whom we can identify and be inspired.

The Two (Female) of Them (Masculine)

Let us begin by considering how Rashi (France, 1040-1105) draws upon Ruth 4:11 to illuminate Genesis 31:4: "And Jacob called Rachel and Leah to the field, where his flock was." The scene described in the latter verse transpires after Jacob

[1] There are two other references to Rachel: I Samuel 10:2 and Jeremiah 31:15. R. David Fohrman's analysis of the latter verse in "Tisha B'Av and the Story of Rachel's Tears" shows how it too is an inner biblical allusion that illuminates the story of Rachel and Leah.

has worked for an additional six years beyond the fourteen initial years he worked in return for the right to marry the sisters. Jacob prospered in the preceding six years, as he had taken advantage of revised terms whereby Jacob could keep some of Laban's flocks if he met certain onerous conditions, Laban seems to resent Jacob's success however. God then appears to Jacob and instructs him to return home to Canaan. At this point, Jacob does not do what he did the first time he decided to return to Canaan—turn to Laban and ask his father-in-law to "give [his] wives and children that [he] worked for (Genesis 30:26)." This time, he calls Rachel and Leah to the field and asks them to accompany him to Canaan. As do many commentators, Rashi notices that Jacob calls to Rachel before Leah. Rashi draws on Ruth (4:11) to explain:

> "'And he called to Rachel (and to Leah)'—(to her) first and then to Leah, because she is the principal of the household, because it was for her that Jacob married into Laban's family. And even her descendants recognize this, as we see that Boaz and his court from the tribe of Judah say, "Like Rachel and like Leah who both built, etc."

Rashi is suggesting that it is especially notable that the people of "Bethlehem, Judah" (Ruth 1:1) would give Rachel primacy, since their tribe descended from Leah's fourth son. This deference by Leah to Rachel presumably begins in the sisters' response to Jacob, where Leah appears to follow Rachel's lead (Genesis 31:14): "And Rachel answered with Leah, and they said to him (Jacob)."[2]

But beyond calling our attention to Leah's deference to Rachel, Rashi's commentary is also noteworthy because his quotation from Ruth (4:11) includes a mistake.[3] In particular, he uses the word "*shteihen*" rather than "*shteihem*" for "the two (of them) who."[4] This deviation from the original text in Ruth is understandable, since *shteihen* is grammatically correct. It means roughly "the two of them—the females." But that is not the word used in the text of Ruth 4:11. Strangely, the word used in Ruth, *shteihem*, is is an ungrammatical mix of female ("the two—feminine") and male ("of them-masculine").

To be sure, there are various times in the biblical text that male forms are used for females and vice versa. But the mix of female and male in the same word is striking, especially since the word is extraneous: if the word had been left out, it would

[2] Later (Genesis 44:27; 49:31), Jacob would refer to Rachel and Leah in terms that suggest that only Rachel was "his wife."

[3] This mistake also appears in a midrash (Tanhuma) from which Rashi may have been drawing.

[4] Dr. Yael Ziegler, *Ruth: From Alienation to Monarchy* (New Milford, CT and Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2015), 435-38, also highlights the importance of the word *shteihem* in her excellent review of commentary on this verse. Her approach is complementary to the approach I develop here in that she argues that the text is emphasizing the unification: the descendants of Lot (Ruth) and Abraham (Boaz) are unifying just as Rachel and Leah had united. Ziegler does not remark on the ungrammatical nature of the word though, nor on the intertextual triangle that forms the heart of my suggested approach.

have read straightforwardly as "like Rachel and like Leah who built up the house of Israel." The text seems to be going out of its way to add a word that is grammatically incorrect! What is more, there is only one other time in the entire Hebrew Bible where this ungrammatical word appears, and it is just a few chapters earlier, during one of the most dramatic moments in all of biblical literature: when Naomi finally relents and allows Ruth to accompany her on her return journey from Moab (Ruth's homeland) to Judah (Naomi's homeland). The phrase there (Ruth 1:19) is "and the two (female) of them (masculine) walked (together)."

We seem to have uncovered an intertextual triangle. The construction of "the two of them (masculine/feminine) like Rachel and like Leah" in Ruth 4:11 seems to be pointing to two other locations in the bible:

(1) The pivotal moment when Ruth and Naomi cemented their partnership (Ruth 1:19), leading to Ruth's union with Boaz and the siring of the Davidic line (that climaxes in the only other verse in the Hebrew Bible (Ruth 4:11) with an ungrammatical masculine/feminine "the two of them"); and

(2) The scene discussed above (Genesis 31:4-14) when Jacob called to Rachel and Leah and asked them to go with him to Canaan, and Rachel and Leah answered in the affirmative (here Jacob's speech is surrounded on either side by a phrase marked by a "Rachel… Leah" refrain).

Put differently, Ruth 4:11 seems to be hinting that the pivotal scene between Naomi and Ruth sheds light on the earlier encounter between Jacob and Rachel and Leah in the field. It may also be hinting that this encounter is more important than we might have thought.

Moreover, the idea that the book of Ruth is asking us to consider the link between the two scenes is greatly bolstered once we notice how the two scenes fit into the larger arcs of two parallel narratives:[5]

a. A man (Jacob, Elimelekh) migrates to the east due to difficulties in Canaan.

[5] There are several additional broad themes that transcend these stages and are common to the two narratives, but do not necessarily fit into a sequence. One is the central role played by fields in each narrative. Another is that the key protagonist women are referred to as "foreigner" (*nokhriah*). A third is that the roles of parent and grandparent are contested or blurry in each story. In particular, Rachel and Leah insist that the children belong to them, while Laban insists they are stolen from him. By contrast, Naomi regrets not being able to give her daughters-in-law a child. (Later, Naomi nurses Ruth's child as if it is her own, but she obviously does not claim 'ownership'.)

b. Two eastern women are wed by the migrant (Jacob) or his sons (Mahlon, Chilion).

c. Two wives must consider whether to leave their homeland/parents' house and god to accompany a migrant (Jacob, Naomi) back to Canaan. The dilemma is whether to leave close family in the east for God and unknown, distant kin in the west.

d. Women take initiative to induce men to act according to their advantage, at the time of the wheat harvest (*ketzir hitim*);[6] in each case, there is reference to a transaction with the root s-k-r: *sakhor-sekhartikha*/*maskurtekh*.[7]

e. Dispossession of land and legacy is a key turning point in each narrative.[8]

f. Witnesses reinforce rites that settle relationships and inheritance for the future.[9]

[6] See Ruth (2:23) and Genesis (30:14). Each reference stands out: in Genesis it is odd because it has no importance in the story and the household were shepherds, not farmers. In Ruth, it is puzzling because the rest of the narrative refers to the barley harvest. This link may be the basis for the midrashic idea (*Bereishit Rabbah* 72:2) that Reuben—like Ruth—picked *duda'im* because he was taking care to avoid taking from the choice parts of the wheat field. Indeed, quite remarkably, the very same midrash includes the suggestion that the *duda'im* were barley kernels, based on the reasoning that "barley at the time of the wheat harvest is *hefker* (i.e., of no value)." While not explicit, it is hard to believe this midrash is not based on a reading of Ruth 2:23 in light of the surrounding context, which seems to be the end of the barley harvest (cf. *Lekah Tov* on Ruth II, 23). Note finally that there is another biblical narrative in which the wheat harvest is the occasion of a proposed switch of a "hated" daughter and a "loved" daughter (see Judges 15), and two other stories referencing wheat harvest are occasions of monumental significance for the future of Israel (restoration of the tabernacle in I Samuel 6:13 and acceptance of monarchy in I Samuel 12:17). The only other reference to the wheat harvest in the Hebrew Bible is used to mark the time of the holiday of Shavuot (Exodus 34:22), which is understood to mark the monumental event of Sinai.

[7] This word (*maskoret*) appears in the Hebrew Bible only in these two stories—three times in Genesis 29-31 (referring to deals between Laban and Jacob) and once in Ruth. We have already noted how the trade of the *duda'im* seems to be a reversal of Jacob-Laban deal when the sisters were treated as objects. Ruth (2:12) also affirms female agency. In particular, Boaz wishes Ruth that she (as agent) will be given "full recompense from the Lord the God of Israel for having come and sought refuge under his wings." This is her first encounter with Boaz, which she soon (with Naomi's help and in the name of God) will parlay to her (and Boaz's) advantage.

[8] Rachel and Leah's response to Jacob— "Have we still a plot (*helek*) and inheritance (*nahalah*) in our father's household?" (Genesis 31:14)—is their rationale for following him to Canaan. And Ploni Almoni cedes the role of levir to Boaz because he is interested in "the field plot" (*helkat ha-sadeh*) (Ruth 4:3) but does not want to devalue "my inheritance" (*nahalati*) (4:6).

[9] In Genesis, witnesses mark the separation between the eastern wives and their parents (there are seven references to witnesses [including in the word *Gal'ed*] in Gen. 31), whereas in Ruth, witnesses (3 mentions in 4:9-11) mark the attachment of the eastern wives to the family of the migrant.

g. The return-migration party is finalized in roughly the same location: in Gilead, at the edge of the plains/fields of Moab.[10]

h. By the time they reach their final destination, one of the wives (Rachel, Orpah) is gone (dead, returned home).

i. Bethlehem is the setting for a birth (Benjamin, Oved) that marks the climax of both stories.

Gaining Agency and Female Power Like Men

Beyond their importance in their respective narratives, what does the scene when Ruth "cleaves" to Naomi teach us about the scene when Rachel and Leah stuck by Jacob? And how does the masculine/feminine "*shteihem*" shed light?

One possibility may be derived from R. Moshe Alshech (1506-1600, Safed), who suggests (Ruth 4:11, *ad loc.*) that in traveling over a long and dangerous road without male protectors, Ruth and Naomi had to act like — and perhaps even assume the guise of — two men. He further offers that this is why the remainder of the verse describes how the Bethlehem townsfolk were astonished when they saw the two women (referring them to them once again in the feminine form). "This is Naomi?" This woman who (together with another) is acting like a man? This interpretation is attractive because the theme of collective female agency and power runs through the book of Ruth. Examples include not only how Naomi and her daughter(s)-in-law rebuild the family and initiate a return migration to Canaan, but also (a) how the townsfolk of Bethlehem are represented by women (Ruth 1:19; 4:14); (b) how Naomi eloquently articulates her bitter life experience in a way that evokes the patriarch Jacob (compare Ruth 1:20-21 with Genesis 47:9); (c) how Ruth takes the initiative to gather food (Ruth 2:2-3); (d) how well Ruth the foreigner acquits herself in dialogue with the nobleman Boaz (2:10-17); (e) how Ruth and Naomi work together to induce Boaz to take up his role as levir (2:20-3:5); and (f) how well Ruth executes this sensitive plan (3:9-3:15). Note finally how the Book of Ruth closes with a remarkable event that echoes the story of Rachel and Leah: Ruth's son Oved is named collectively by the womenfolk of Bethlehem (Ruth 4:14-15). The book of Ruth resounds with (collective) female agency in the service of God and legacy.

Now observe this very same theme in the story of Rachel and Leah. Just as Naomi and her daughters-in-law begin their story as mere accompaniments of their husbands but later emerge as the agents who move the narrative forward, Rachel and Leah make no decisions of their own at the beginning of the story but later become full-color individuals whose choices shape the unfolding story. As in the book of Ruth,

[10] In Genesis 31:23-54, the location is explicit—the Mountain of Gilead—and it is made symbolically meaningful via a play on the name for the monument used to symbolize the treaty: *Gal'ed*. That Gilead is located between the plains/fields of Moab and the Jordan (i.e., precisely where Ruth and her daughters-of-law were in Ruth 1:7-18) can be derived straightforwardly from the discussions of Gilead in Numbers 26 and in various passages in Deuteronomy.

this may be symbolized by the fact that they are responsible for naming children.[11] Only after Rachel dies in childbirth does Jacob get the chance to name a son (offering "Benjamin" instead of Rachel's "Ben-Oni"; Genesis 35:18). Otherwise, it is the sisters who name their children — a role that throughout Genesis is a sign of agency and authority.[12] Consider also how the trade of *duda'im* for Jacob illustrates the sisters' transformation from objects to subjects. Once Rachel was offered as payment (*maskurtekha*; Genesis 29:15) to Jacob, and Jacob was surprised to find that Leah was the actual recipient of his love. Now, Jacob learns that *he* has been offered as payment (*sakhor sekhartikha*; Genesis 30:16) to Leah so that Rachel can enjoy a (filial) symbol of love meant for Leah.[13] He is now the object and they are the subjects.

But the Rachel-Leah story is not just one of increasing agency but of increasing *power*. In the terms of modern social science, power is a function of relative dependence:[14] An individual is powerful when she has many alternative exchange partners from whom she can obtain what she needs (so she is not dependent on anyone) and those exchange partners have no alternatives to the individual (so they are dependent on her).

Thus consider Laban when Jacob arrives in Haran. He has flocks, access to pastoral land, and daughters, as well as political influence. By contrast, all Jacob has to offer is a young man's strong back and fertility. Since Jacob is presumably not unique in this regard, Laban is able to strike a very hard bargain: seven years of labor as Laban's shepherd in return for Rachel's hand in marriage. And after replacing Rachel with Leah, Laban is then able to use his political influence to force Jacob to accept an even worse deal than the original bargain: , he must work another seven years if he wants Rachel as his second wife. Eventually, however, Jacob gains some degree of power relative to Laban. It turns out he is an excellent shepherd; thus, once his fourteen years of bondage are over, he has some leverage to strike a better deal with Laban than he had before. Moreover, just as Laban was originally more cunning and resourceful than Jacob anticipated, Jacob turns out to be more cunning and skilled (in animal husbandry, with apparent divine help) than Laban anticipates, allowing him to craft a deal he can work to his advantage. This by no means exhausts Laban's power, however. When Jacob flees with Rachel and Leah and their children, Laban and his entourage catch them easily and are apparently in position to force the house of Jacob to return to Haran.

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[11] Naomi even renames herself "Mara (Ruth 1:20)," reflecting a degree of agency found nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible.

[12] This is exemplified by cases when God chooses (new) names for characters much as a master might name a slave.

[13] See Rabbi David Fohrman's analysis (*op cit.)* for insightful analysis of the link between the trade of the *dudai'im* and Laban's switch of Leah and Rachel.

[14] The classic reference in the sociology literature is Richard M. Emerson, "Power-Dependence Relations," *American Sociological Review* 27 (1962):31-41. See also Ray E. Reagans and Ezra W. Zuckerman, "Why Knowledge Does Not Equal Power: The Network Redundancy Tradeoff," *Industrial & Corporate Change* 17 (2008): 903-944.

Yet now consider the sisters' rise in power and how they use it help the house of Jacob overcome Laban. It goes without saying that Rachel and Leah begin the story with little power. But this soon begins to change. The first stage is marked by success in enlisting their fathers' maidservants as surrogate mothers who bear children on their behalf. As the story of Sarah and Hagar indicates, this tactic can backfire, with the surrogate defying her mistress; but Rachel and Leah succeed in mobilizing Bilhah and Zilpah as loyal foot soldiers for their causes.[15] The second stage is the story of the *duda'im* . Here they begin to gain *collective* power. While on the surface the trade reflects their rivalry, at a deeper level it reflects the fact that if they act together, they are in position to dictate terms to Jacob. Collectively, they control access to all four women as well as what is becoming the most valuable resource in the household: the fealty of the sons (represented by the *duda'im*). As a result, it is no surprise that Jacob turns to *the two of them* when he wants to return to Canaan. Our intertextual triangle points to a moment when two women control the household and national destiny.

Moreover, not only dothe sisters decide use their power on Jacob's behalf, they also use it to thwart Laban. Laban's first explanation for why he does not force Jacob's household to return to Haran is that God has warned him against "attempting anything with Jacob, from bad to good" (Genesis: 31:29; cf. 31:24). But after failing to recover the idols that Rachel had stolen from him and hidden beneath herself in a camel saddle, he adds a second explanation: "What can I do about my daughters or the sons they have borne?"(Genesis 31:43). This is a remarkable statement of concession, in part because it is a non sequitur: his prior remark was a complete denial of Jacob's claim: "The daughters are mine, and the sons are mine, and the flocks are mine—everything you see here, is mine."[16] While Laban declares rightful ownership of Jacob's household in the first half of the statement, he concedes in the second half that effective control now belongs to his daughters. It can be no accident that his final encounter with them was with the defiant words of Rachel that end Laban's search for the idols: "I cannot rise before you because the way of women is mine" (Genesis 31:35).[17] Laban here concedes that the daughters have a source of power he cannot master.[18] The final stage of the story is also telling: Laban strikes a treaty whose effect is to

[15] To recall, Sarah had tried but failed to be "built up" via the maidservant and would-be Hagar, but had lost control over her (Genesis 16:1-15). Tellingly, it was Hagar who named Ishmael, while Sarah saw Ishmael as a threatening her status rather than enhancing it (Genesis 21:9-10). On the other hand, Rachel saw the children of the maidservants as enhancements rather than threats.

[16] Various commentators struggle with why Laban pulls back from pressing his claim here. Some suggest Laban was overcome by mercy (e.g., Nahmanides, *ad loc.*) while others (e.g., *R David Zvi Hoffmann,* ad loc.) suggest Laban knew his argument was weak. I believe that there is more textual evidence for my proffered interpretation.

[17] This line is generally understood as a reference to menstruation. But if so, it remains unclear why she could not get up. And it is important that this is not literally what she says. She could have made a more direct reference to menstruation (they are both adults, after all). What she literally says is more general and perhaps hints at a more general power that women have over men because of their role in the reproduction process, including a special relationship with their sons.

[18] Arguably, it is just Rachel who is here demonstrating power over Laban. Her words (see above) and his response to Jacob suggest she is representing both sisters however. It

cement the daughters' power relative to Jacob: Jacob may take no more wives (who might compete with the sisters and thereby reduce his dependence upon them). Whereas the sisters were once instruments to further Laban's power, they are now able to overcome him on behalf of Jacob's household and they are even able to turn him into an instrument for reinforcing their own power.

Power for What?

To this point, we have seen how Ruth seems to be indicating that Rachel and Leah were more effective and powerful agents in "building of the house of Israel" than we might have imagined. Moreover, it seems admirable that they were able to transcend their rivalry and work together as a team. But to what end? Surely, empowerment for its own sake is no virtue. And if they were working to promote the "household of Israel," how and why?

To address this question, let us return to the link between the scene when Ruth refused to abandon Naomi and the scene when Rachel and Leah pledged not to abandon Jacob. Consider the counterfactuals pertaining to each moment. In the case of Ruth, the alternative is explicit in the text. She could have heeded Naomi's warning that Ruth had no prospects for a husband and children in Judea and she should therefore return to her parents and homeland in Moab, just as Orpah had. Moreover, since Naomi's family had brought her such bad luck in the past and her God had apparently done little for her, why should Ruth remain loyal to Naomi? It is thus remarkable that Ruth is as attached to Naomi as a loving wife is to her husband and she is so eloquent about her connection with her God (Ruth 1:16-17):

> "Wherever you will go, I will go; wherever you will lodge, I will lodge; your God is my God; Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus and more may the LORD do to me if anything but death parts me from you."

The text does not dwell on what the alternative would have been for Rachel and Leah. But there are at least two salient counterfactuals. First, they too could have stayed in Haran; after all, this is exactly what Laban demanded that they do. He insists that, perhaps because Jacob arrived penniless and therefore without a dowry, none of his possessions really belongs to him. To be sure, if we read the story through a traditional lens, it seems obvious that Rachel and Leah should reject the evil Laban and side with their beloved husband. But there is in fact nothing in the text to indicate that they love Jacob[19] and there is to this point no indication they blame Laban for having tricked Jacob. And what would have happened had Rachel and Leah told Jacob that they were not willing to go to Canaan with him? Presumably, their sons would have sided with them, and their grandfather would have supported and encouraged this. Moreover, this might have

remains unclear to this author what motivated Rachel and why she acted alone.

[19] Jacob is described as loving Rachel (Genesis 29:18; 29:30). Leah is also described as wanting Jacob to love her (29:32). But nowhere is either described as loving *him*.

reinforced their growing power over their father, and they might have negotiated better terms for themselves.

Now consider a second counterfactual: only one of them could have stayed. Most likely, this would have been Leah. Her oldest son was already thirteen; and by calling Rachel before he called Leah, Jacob is essentially declaring that he will continue to treat her as the secondary wife. It would thus have been quite reasonable for Leah to refuse to accompany Jacob and keep her nine children (including the two boys born to Zilpah) at home. On her own, she would have had quite a bit of power in Haran. Leah's decision to stay would have been devastating to Jacob, who clearly wanted to keep his entire family intact. But to accompany Jacob, she would have had to transcend her feelings of slight by Jacob and rivalry with her younger sister and to take her chances on an unknown land. Thus, just as it would have been natural for Ruth to stay in Moab, it would have made eminent sense for Rachel and (perhaps especially for) Leah to say in Haran.

But they do not follow the natural, easy course. Like Ruth, they issue a remarkable declaration of fealty to their husband and his foreign God (Genesis 31:14-16):

> "Have we still a share in the inheritance of our father? Surely, he regards us as foreigners, now that he has used up our purchase price. Truly, all the wealth that God has taken away from our father belongs to us and to our children. Now then, do just as God has told you."

On the surface, this is not as uplifting a pronouncement as Ruth's declaration to Naomi. Rather, this is an expression of rejection of their father and what he stands for, as well as a declaration of their own rights relative to Jacob: Jacob recounts to Rachel and Leah that God told him that what he earned was rightfully his and not Laban's; they are insisting instead that it is theirs. Clearly, they are deeply resentful of their father for dispossessing them. It is also possible that they are not happy with the role Jacob played, though they do not blame him; perhaps they recognize that he was as powerless as they were. In this key respect, Rachel and Leah resemble Ruth: they are able to see beyond their partner's surface limitations. This is especially the case for Leah.
Just as it is remarkable that the young and fertile Ruth is willing to follow the lead of the elderly Naomi, it is impressive that the older and the seemingly more powerful sister (she with many more and older sons) is willing to defer to the younger sister by embracing the role of secondary wife. To do this after having suffered as the "hated" wife/sister for so long is so striking as to defy explanation.

It is possible that the key lies in their Ruth-like devotion to Jacob's God. Throughout Genesis, recognition of God, especially with the four-level Tetragrammaton, is a sign of moral righteousness. The key test facing the various characters is whether they will recognize authority that is greater than themselves (see Genesis 14:19-22; 20:11). Leah certainly meets this standard from

the very beginning. In naming her first, second, and fourth sons she effectively "calls out in God's name" (Genesis 12:8; 13:4; 21:33; 26:25); the fourth son's name, Judah, derives from "I will thank the Lord" (Genesis 29:35). And while Leah and Rachel then reference the secondary name of God, *Elohim*, in naming most of the next seven children (biological and surrogate), Rachel invokes the Tetragrammaton in providing the second rationale for the name of Joseph (the eleventh; Genesis 30:23-24). Finally, while each of these testimonies to their relationship with God reflect their individual needs and desires, their response to Jacob describes a *joint* relationship between God and "us and our children." It seems then that their ability to see beyond their immediate circumstances and to avoid becoming intoxicated with their own power may derive from their success at forming a (Ruth and Naomi like) partnership rooted in a shared recognition that there is a source of justice and authority beyond themselves, one associated with Jacob/Israel.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have discussed an intriguing link between the book of Ruth and the Rachel-Leah narrative and presented the case that Ruth is hinting at an image of Rachel and Leah that is quite different and more inspiring than what appears on the surface. Rather than two rivals caught in a tortured version of an alien, ancient institution, what emerges instead is something more relatable and admirable: two women who overcome extremely challenging circmustances to achieve something significant for themselves and for their families. Like Ruth, Leah and Rachel did not take the easiest, most natural course of action. But without this willingness to cut against the grain, it is hard to see how the "household of Israel" would have been "built."[20]

Perhaps more importantly, when we see Rachel

and Leah through the eyes of Ruth, they come across as exemplars to emulate. They adopt a new faith brought to them from a foreign land by migrants who have also brought them a great deal of trouble. But they somehow succeed in looking beyond the migrants' faults and embracing a God who transcends place. They begin the story as mere powerless objects, but take initiative to become effective and powerful. Key to that transformation is the formation of an alliance with another woman who would have been powerless without the alliance. And for both Leah and Ruth, the women achieved great names for themselves via their descendants, even while taking actions that, in the short term, required them to abase themselves. Thus, while the ancient rites that defined these women—polygamy and *yibbum*—seem foreign to us today, a close reading of the biblical text furnishes compelling reasons to identify with them and be

[20] As I noted in my recent *Lehrhaus* essay "The King's Great Cover-Up and Great Confession," while the institution of *yibbum* is ostensibly meant to promote the legacy of the dead husband, a review of the *yibbum* stories in the Hebrew Bible reveals that *yibbum* actually tended to promote the legacy of the bereft women (and their lineage) who had to take matters into their own hands in order to induce powerful men to do the right thing. It is accordingly no surprise that after likening Ruth to Rachel and Leah, the Bethlehemites go on to reference Peretz and her mother Tamar (with Judah in a seemingly secondary role; Ruth 4:12).

inspired by their example.

This essay is dedicated in loving memory of the author's maternal aunt Helyn (Brenner) Reich, whose yahrzeit is observed on the 8th of Kislev, and who was an exemplar of a strong Jewish woman in the mold of Rachel and Leah, and of her namesake Hannah. May her memory continue to serve as a blessing.