

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Parshat Vayetzei

Although each of the Matriarchs was barren for years until finally conceiving, the Torah emphasizes Rachel's sorrow as a result of this void in her life more than it describes the pain of the other Matriarchs. Sarah laughs at the idea of having a child late in life, and Isaac's name even refers to this laughter, but the Torah does not tell us about her praying for a child. Rivka indeed prays for a child along with Isaac (see Rashi 25:21), but she does not name either of her sons with a name that references G-d answering her prayers. However, Rachel not only pleads desperately for children, but even names each of her children and her maidservant Bilha's children in a way that reminds us forever of her desperation.

First, in naming Dan, she says (30:6) "G-d has judged me and also listened to my voice and given me a son." Then, in naming Naftoli, she says (see Rashi 30:8) that she persistently prayed to Hashem to give her children and her prayer has been accepted. When she merits her own child, she names him Yosef with a prayer for another son, "May Hashem add on for me another son." When she gives birth to her second son (35:18), she calls him "the son of my affliction," and suddenly dies immediately thereafter. In sum, all of the four sons associated with Rachel are born amidst emotional hardship and intense prayer.

Not coincidentally, the parsha that introduces us to Rachel and her prayer starts with the famous prayer of Jacob. The Talmud (Berachos 26b) says Abraham instituted the morning prayer, Isaac the afternoon prayer, and Jacob the evening prayer. The source for Jacob praying the evening prayer is the very beginning of our parsha, where the Torah says he happened upon the Temple Mount on his way to Charan and stopped there to pray.

Maharsha (16th Century) asks, since the Talmud (Yoma 28b) says Abraham kept the entire Torah before it was given including the Rabbinic mitzvot, why does Berachot 26b say he only prayed in the morning? Surely he prayed the two other daily prayers as well, as we know the Rabbis later instituted all three prayers! He answers since in the Torah we find verses referring to Abraham praying in the morning and Jacob at night, we associate the morning prayer to Abraham and the evening prayer to Isaac. He also suggests each of the Patriarchs was particularly vigilant about "his" prayer based on his personality makeup. Abraham, who excelled in the trait of lovingkindness, connected deeply to the burst of kindness G-d shows in the morning with the start of a fresh, new day. Isaac had the strength of character to connect to G-d in the afternoon, the part of the day when man tends to be either too tired or too engrossed in work to stop and communicate with G-d. Jacob prayed at night, the time representing darkness and suffering,



JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

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when man is prone to despair and to giving up his aspirations for success. Although he needs to flee from a brother who wants to kill him and to work for a father-in-law who cheats him, Jacob does not question G-d because he relates to His attribute of truth (emet). While Abraham and Isaac pray during the daylight hours of hope and optimism, Jacob's prays in the evening hours of doubt and despair and trusts G-d will help him through the darkest times.

When people pray to G-d in the most difficult moments, they experience a special closeness with Him. The Talmud (Taanit 2a) says there are three blessings whose "keys" Hashem does not give over to any angel but rather He himself bestows. They are the keys to having children, the keys to rain, and the keys to resurrection. The common denominator of these three things is they relate to life-and-death, whether through the gift of life at birth or resurrection, or the gift of rain which enables growth of vegetation that in turn enables man to survive. The Talmud says the source that G-d does not appoint an angel to grant children is from G-d's reaction to Rachel's prayers. "G-d remembered Rachel, G-d listened to her and He opened her womb."(30:22) G-d himself blessed Rachel and gave her a child, not using any messenger. Sarah and Rebecca also had tremendous difficulty in conceiving, yet the Torah only reveals to us Hashem's direct Hand in the blessing of a child through the birth of Rachel's child. Since Rachel was so distraught by her childlessness and was constantly begging Hashem for a child, she merited a closeness to Hashem that others did not.

R' Tzadok of Lublin (1823-1900) uses this idea to explain a grammatical inconsistency in Psalms Chapter 23. It says, "On pleasant meadows He will lie me down, on peaceful waters He will let me relax... Also when I walk in the valley of death, I fear not of evil because You are with me. Your rod and staff comfort me." Why does David change from third person to second person? When everything is smooth and peaceful, one is not forced to find a close connection to G-d. But when one feels that his very life is in danger, he depends on the Source of life itself and cries out to Hashem. Then he connects to G-d in a more profound way. Rachel similarly says to Jacob that if she cannot have children, she will die (30:1), and Rashi says that one who does not have children is like dead. It is this feeling of dependency which produces the deepest prayer and enables Rachel to merit the Hand of Hashem directly and not through a messenger.

Shabbat Shalom!

