

Rachel and Yaakov

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The Torah relates a painful and perplexing dialogue between Rachel and Yaakov.

Rachel saw that she had not borne children to Yaakov, so Rachel became envious of her sister; she said to Yaakov: "Give me children — otherwise I am dead."

Yaakov's anger flared at Rachel and he said: "Am I instead of G-d, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?" (Bereishit 30:1, 2).

Rachel's remarks are obviously an outburst from a woman deeply troubled and extremely distressed. Her older sister has given birth to four children and yet she remains barren. Her pain compels her to make such an outrageous and irrational request of Yaakov. In fact it is not even a request, but an emotional eruption from the depths of her being. We can understand her, sympathize with her and even empathize with her plight.

On the other hand, Yaakov's sharp and biting reply defies comprehension. How does he permit his "anger to flare" at his beloved wife in her moment of anguish? How does he respond in such an unfeeling, nearly spiteful way?

In fact, the Midrash recorded by the Ramban says that G-d rebuked Yaakov and said to him: כך "עונן את המעקות", "Is this how you answer those who are oppressed?" "Upon your life your sons will stand before her son." The day will come that the sons of Yaakov will stand in fear before Yoseph the son of Rachel.

This conversation and the Divine chastisement still leave us with unanswered questions. Should not G-d instruct Yaakov how one should respond to a woman in distress? Should there not be some good that emerges from this episode? Have we not been taught that "מעשי אבות לבנים"? "The deeds of the fathers are a guide for the children"? What meaning do these two passages hold for the Jewish people?

Let the scene shift over a thousand years later. The destruction of the first Beis Hamikdash is imminent. In heaven the unfolding tragedy brings together the patriarchs Avrohom, Yitzchok and Yaakov, who plead on behalf of their children, Israel. Moshe Rabbeinu and Yirmiyah raise their voices in defense of their people, yet the L-rd is not moved.

The Midrash records in detail the defense presented by each of the great. Avrohom says: "G-d, I brought mankind to know you." Yitzchok reminds G-d of his willingness to be a holy sacrifice before Him. Yaakov describes how he was prepared to fight for his children against Esav. He says: "I raised the like chicks and suffered great pain for their sake. Will You not remember this and have mercy upon my children?" Moshe speaks of the journey through the desert until he

brings them to the Promised Land. Yet the Holy One Blessed Be He remains silent. Until as the Midrash describes: "At that moment Rachel jumped before the Holy One Blessed Be He" and presents her plea on behalf of Israel. She reminds G-d of the fact that she surrendered her greatest love so that her sister Leah not be embarrassed. To her G-d responds with promises of redemption.

I wish to propose that there may be yet another reason why Rachel's plea elicits such a poignant and moving reply from G-d.

Let's try to imagine the scene. Rachel approaches the Heavenly throne and cries on behalf of her children. Yirmiyah paints the powerful portrait of the moment. "A voice is heard on high, wailing, bitter weeping. Rachel weeps for her children, she refuses to be consoled for her children for they are gone."

What is Rachel saying to G-d?

"Give me my children and if not, I am dead." Isn't that what she had said to Yaakov? She refuses to be consoled.

Well, how will G-d respond? Yaakov is standing there waiting to hear G-d's next words. Will he tell Rachel that He is truly sorry but He can't help her because her children Israel have sinned and must be punished? They can no longer continue to transgress with impunity. Will G-d present her with a litany of Israel's crimes for which exile must be their fate?

Can G-d respond as Yaakov did by saying: "Am I instead of G-d Who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?" But you are G-d and you are withholding Rachel's children from her. Would G-d have said that, Yaakov would have cried out: "G-d is that how You answer those who are oppressed?" Is that how You treat a woman in great pain and agony over the suffering of her children? Because G-d had reprimanded Yaakov all those years earlier He is now left with only one response. He can not exhibit anger. He can not deny a woman in distress. He must comfort her. He must console her. He must ease the pain. He must give succor and assuage. The great promise to Rachel that resounds across the centuries.

Thus said Hashem: Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears; for there is reward for your accomplishment — the word of Hashem — and they will return from the land of the enemy. There is hope for your future — the word of Hashem — and your children will return to their border. (Yirmiyahu 31:14-16)

That millions of Jews have returned to Eretz Yisroel in our days is Hashem's fulfillment of the great promise made to Rachel. How a mother takes care of her children.

This all means that from that painful exchange between Rachel and Yaakov, and Hashem's rebuke of Yaakov, ultimately comes the great promise of redemption and return.

Yet there is an epilogue. On that tragic, fateful day in heaven, the day of the Churban, Yaakov did not wait expectantly to challenge G-d's response to Rachel. He knew it all in advance. He was privy to the drama that would unfold in heaven.

When Hashem admonishes Yaakov, He must also instruct him how he should have responded to Rachel.

At the moment of Yaakov's great pain upon the death in childbirth of his beloved Rachel he receives a poignant communication from G-d. the Divine message is the substance of one of the most majestic and moving Rashis in Torah.

We learn of this only many years later toward the end of Yaakov's life when he asks of his son Yoseph: "Do kindness and truth with me. Please do not bury me in Egypt and when I die take me out of Egypt and bury me in the tomb of my fathers" (Bereishit 47:29, 30).

Later, when Yaakov enters into his final illness, he again speaks to Yoseph in order to explain his own conduct at the time of Rachel's death. He says: "And I when I came from Paddan, Rachel died on me in the land of Canaan ??? the seed while there was still a measure of land to go to Efrat and I buried her there on the road to Efrat, which is Beit Lechem (Bereishit 48:7).

Obviously Yaakov wants Yoseph to know he buried her then on the road. Rashi completes the highly charged remarks of Yaakov: "Although I trouble you to take me to be buried in the land of Canaan though I did not do so for your mother ... and do not say that rains prevented me from burying her in Hebron ... it was the dry season ... and I buried her there and I did not even take her to Beth Lechem ... and I knew that you harbored hard feelings in your heart against me." Now comes the great revelation — the reason for it all. "But you should know that by the Word of G-d I buried her there so that she should be of aid to her children when Nebuzaradan would exile them. Rachel would go out onto her grave and weep and seek mercy for them as it says in Yirmyahu 31:14:

Thus said Hashem: A voice is heard on high, wailing, bitter weeping; Rachel weeps for her children; she refuses to be consoled for her children, for they are gone.

Rachel is in fact saying: "Give me my children, otherwise I am dead." Precisely what she had said to Yaakov. But G-d's response to Rachel in distress is the great Divine promise.

Thus said Hashem: Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears; for there is reward for your accomplishment — the word of Hashem — and they will return from the enemy's land. There is hope for your future — the word of Hashem — and your children will return to their border.

Rachel elicits from Hashem an eternal commitment that neither the patriarchs nor Moshe, nor Yeshayah, nor Yirmiyah can.

Yoseph now knows that his mother was buried on the road because of a direct command from G-d. Yaakov, of course, has learned how one must respond to a woman in distress.

Yoseph most probably also understands why his father did not tell him any earlier and thereby remove the thorn in their relationship.

Yaakov does not want to reveal that destruction and exile will befall the Jewish people, until the very last moment. Only when he no longer has any choice does he confide in Yoseph the painful and tragic events to come — and the great promise of consolation to Rachel.

Ultimately, G-d's rebuke of Yaakov sets the stage for the great return of Jews to Eretz Yisroel in our time. We merit to see with our own eyes the fulfillment of: "And they (your children Rachel) will return from the enemy's land — and your children will return to their border.