

Rachel's Sacrifice and Reward

For Parshas Vayishlach
By Rabbi Menachem Rokeach

The life of our Matriarch Rachel is closely intertwined with Eretz Yisroel and the future destiny of the Jewish people. Though only two of the twelve tribes actually descended from her, nevertheless all of Klal Yisroel are considered her children. They are, furthermore, identified by the name of her son, Joseph (Tehilim 77:16), and by the name of her grandson, Ephraim (Jeremiah 31:19). The very promise of a Jewish return to their homeland is made to Rachel: "So saith the L-rd: Refrain thy voice from weeping and thy eyes from tears, for there is a reward for thy deed ... and they shall return from the land of the enemy. And there is hope for thy future ... and thy children shall return to their own borders" (Jeremiah 31:15, 16). Rachel earned this special role by her sacrifice.

When Rachel died, she was buried on the road to Efroth, Beth Lechem (Vayishlach 35:19). Why was she not buried in the Cave of Machpaila? Comments the Midrash (Rabba ch. 82:10 and quoted in Rashi Vayechi 48:7 and in Radak Jeremiah ibid.) that this was in order to evoke G-d's compassion at the time when the Israelites would be driven out of the Holy Land (as Yaakov foresaw with prophetic vision) and would pass Rachel's grave, she would weep and pray for her children. It is in response to this weeping and prayer that the Al-mighty gives her the above quoted promise that they will return to the Land. It should be pondered, however, why Rachel was chosen for this role more than any of the other matriarchs.

Rachel's path in her marriage to Yaakov was strewn with much agony and distress. One can easily imagine her excruciating anguish when Leah instead of her married Yaakov, through Lovon's trickery. When she later married Yaakov, her earlier initial childlessness was sad. Her misery was interrupted when Joseph was born, but when her second son Benjamin was born she died from childbirth. Most tormenting was the doubt surrounding the legality of her marriage. According to the Torah one is not allowed to marry a wife's sister while the wife is alive (Vayikro 18:18). True, this took place before the Torah had been given; but Yaakov already followed the Torah laws even before they were given (see Rashi Braishis 26:5; 18:19). There is a basic distinction, according to the RaMBaN (26:5). While the covenant of Sinai is equally binding inside and outside of Eretz Yisroel, the covenant of the ancestors was binding only in Eretz Yisroel (see 28:21). Yaakov was thus faced with a serious dilemma. He can stay married to both Leah and Rachel as long as they are outside of the Holy Land. Once they return, their staying together is cast

into doubt. According to RaMBaN (Vayikro 18:25) the death of Rachel just about her entry to Eretz Yisroel was caused in order to prevent a marriage forbidden in the Land, (see also Meshech Chochmah Braishis 48:7)

When the Al-mighty revealed Himself to Yaakov and enjoined him to go back to the Holy Land, Yaakov consults with his wives, telling them about the revelation. While both Leah and Rachel agreed to go up to Eretz Yisroel, Rachel seems to have been the spokeswoman, “And Rachel answered and Leah ... VATAAN” in the singular. One conjectures that Rachel more than Leah sensed the danger which this journey augured for her, being the second wife to her sister’s husband, and the possible implications in the Holy Land where the laws of the Torah become binding for Yaakov. Yet, she spoke up with determination and insisted to go up to the Holy Land, be what may.

Rachel, thus symbolized the highest form of idealism for the Land of Israel, to the point of self-sacrifice. At this time of exile, when the children of Israel passed her grave, she justifiably wept and could not accept consolation. “This is the Holy Land,” she complained, “for which I sacrificed my life. Now my children are driven out.” She kept weeping until the Al-mighty Himself pledged to her that “the children will return to their boundaries.”

In connection with this pledge, the Al-mighty tells her “YAISH SOCHOR, there is a reward for thy deed” (loc.cit.) What deed is here referred to? Surely her weeping and her supplications on behalf of her children could not be considered a “deed.” Also the fact that she consented to come to the Holy Land is not a deed. The deed seemingly refers to Rachel arranging for Yaakov to dwell in the tent of Leah, which resulted in the birth of Yisoschor, the tribe from which emanated the great Torah scholars (Divrei Hayomim 1:12:33), more than from any other tribe (Zohar 156b and see Yuma 26a).

The birth of Yisoschor was the result of a union that contained not even the slightest stigma of discontent on the part of Rachel. On the contrary, Rachel fully agreed, for the first time, that Yaakov stay in Leah’s tent. In a sense Rachel can receive credit for bringing about the birth of this holy tribe. This was done, however, with great self-sacrifice. As long as Yaakov on his own chose to live with both, Rachel on her part was able to retain her claim of being the FIRST to be married to him. For his original intent was to marry Rachel; it is also for her that he labored for seven years. (Leah on her part equally was able to claim being the First, for factually she was the first). But now that Rachel actively arranged for Yaakov to dwell in Leah’s tent, she willingly relinquished that claim, relegating herself to the status of a second wife, a sister to the first, with all the legal problems this entails. She did this voluntarily, in order to allow Yisoschor, the tribe of Torah scholars, to come into the world.

She knew that Eretz Yisroel cannot survive without that Torah of the Bnai Yisoschor. Her sacrifice, thus, consisted of two aspects. One, her role in bringing Yisoschor into the world, demoting herself to second status. And second, her insistence to nevertheless journey back to Eretz Yisroel where her new status may spell danger to her life. It is, thus, in the context of this divine promise to Rachel, of Israel returning to the Land, that she is told “there is a reward for your deed.” The “deed” refers to her abdication of the status of first and main AKERETH HABAYITH, lady of the house, yielding it to Leah, an apparent requisite to bring into the world the Neshama of Yisoschor. It is also in this context that Rachel is told Yaish Sochor (there is reward), interpreting the meaning of the name YISOSCHOR, spelled with the same letters. Her role in the birth of Yisoschor was a major turning point in the assurance of Torah, and thus survival, in Eretz Yisroel. The divine reassurance to her at the time of Jewish exile is given with the perspicuous reference to that magnanimous deed of Rachel.

Interestingly, the Yalkut on Thilim, ch. 873, cites among several references of AKERETH HABAYITH (113:9) one that it refers to Rachel, and another that it refers to Leah. This is not necessarily a contradiction, since this title was at first Rachel’s and then renounced to Leah. Most remarkably, the Yalkut states that the following phrase “the happy mother of children” (113:9) refers to children who grow up to become Torah scholars. The emergence of these Yisoschors was the very purpose for which Rachel relinquished her former status to Leah.

When Yisoschor was born, Leah referred to him as a reward for having given her handmaid to her husband. Indicative in this is the new status which Rachel has bestowed upon her. For only to an AKERETH HABAYITH is it befitting to bring in the handmaid in marriage to her husband.

On the second day of Rosh Hashana, the Scriptural reading is the portion of the AKAIDA, and the HAFTORAH is from Jeremiah 31, relating the divine promise to Rachel of returning to the Land. The relevance is now obvious. The AKAIDA, symbol of readiness to sacrifice was reenacted by Rachel and her sacrifice. The reward in both cases is a promise to inherit Eretz Yisroel. To Abraham comes the divine pledge “and thy seed will possess the gate of his enemies (Braishis 22:17). To Rachel the promise is an absolute assurance of a return to those gates.