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Sisters and Sisters-in-Law:
A Midrashic Study of Rachel and Leah

Laurie B. Katz

This purpose of this thesis is to create a comprehensive midrashic profile of Rachel and Leah by examining a broad spectrum of midrashic texts. To develop an overall portrait for each character, the study first looks at the midrashim as a unified whole. A subsequent analysis of each portrait establishes recurring themes and evaluates changes over time. Primary sources include early through late midrashic texts; for example, The Book of Jubilees, Josephus, The Babylonian Talmud, Bereshit Rabbah, Lamentations Rabbah, both versions of Tanhuma, and the Yalkutim.

The thesis is divided into four core chapters, in addition to an introduction, conclusion, and appendix. Chapter 1, "A Biblical View of Marriage," serves as a basis for studying midrashim on this subject. This chapter examines biblical marriage in general, as well as the complex marriage of Jacob and Rachel and Leah, as described in Genesis. In focusing on this marriage in particular, Chapter 1 explores the structure of the narrative, evaluates the significance of biblical names, and offers some critical perspectives on Rachel and Leah in the biblical text.

Chapters 2 and 3,"A Rabbinic Portrait of Rachel" and "A Rabbinic Portrait of Leah," construct elaborate midrashic profiles for Rachel and Leah. Elements of these profiles include name, appearance, roles in relation to others, personal qualities, and examples of how they are remembered through rabbinic texts. Chapter 4, "An Analysis of the Midrashic Understanding of Rachel and Leah," examines the midrashic portraits of the sisters by discussing ongoing themes and variations over time. Instead of viewing the body of midrash as a unified whole, this chapter evaluates midrashim chronologically and in relation to each other, focusing on both change and consistency. The conclusion of the thesis, "Rachel and Leah Redefined," views stereotypes of Rachel and Leah in contrast to well-rounded rabbinic perspectives. This section also establishes the theory that Rachel and Leah's struggle closely mirrors the struggle of Jacob and Esau.

This midrashic study is based on the notion that midrash serves as a vehicle for probing the biblical text, as well as ourselves. When we read between the lines, we discern the details of who the characters of the Torah really are, and by comparison or contrast, of who we are. In this context, I explored the text of Rachel and Leah with several groups of students through workshops in Drama Midrash. In *chevruta*, students created contemporary midrashic dialogues between Rachel and Leah. The appendix to the thesis offers examples of these modern drama midrashim.

From early to contemporary interpretations, the study of midrash provides us with a lens for engaging in dialogue with our ancestors. Especially for our women characters, this process is an essential tool for exploring their personalities, struggles, and relationships. This thesis provides a character study of Rachel and Leah alone and in relationship by analyzing the canon of midrashic interpretation.

SISTERS AND SISTERS-IN-LAW:
A MIDRASHIC STUDY OF RACHEL AND LEAH

LAURIE B. KATZ

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
Graduate Rabbinic Program
New York, New York

March 9, 1998
Advisor: Dr. Norman J. Cohen

Dedicated in Loving Memory of
William and Ellen Auslander
and
Morton and Ruth
Katz,
Zichronam Livracha

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank those teachers in rabbinical school who have affected my life through their teaching, wisdom, and *menschlekite*: Rabbi Lee Bycel, Dr. Norman Cohen, Dr. David Ellenson, Dr. Reuven Firestone, Rabbi Wolli Kaelter, and Dr. Carol Ochs. These gifted teachers have deeply enriched my life by challenging me intellectually and by encouraging me personally. They have treated me not only as a rabbinical student, but also as a whole human being, honoring my diverse interests and encouraging me to grow in all areas of my life.

I am especially grateful to Dr. Norman Cohen, who guided me through a year of midrashic study and exploration as I researched and wrote this thesis. His constant support and focused guidance helped make this year-long process an enjoyable one. He consistently guided me in the right directions, honoring my work and encouraging me to go further in my study. The birth of this thesis was clearly a process of exploration and discovery, never simply a task to be completed. I could not have asked for a more committed advisor.

Throughout my life, my family has given me more love and encouragement than I could ever ask for. My mom, dad, and brother Brian have given me a family life that allows me to explore in limitless directions, and yet always come home. Their love is a constant source of strength. My best friend Kimberly, though not part of my immediately family, has treated me as a sister throughout the years we have known each other. Thank you all for keeping me when thesis stress was most acute!

Most importantly, I am forever grateful to my beloved partner, friend, and soon-to-be husband, Andrew Braun. Through this intense year of work, study, and impending ordination, Andy has offered me unending love and support. The relationship we share is priceless. I look forward to a lifetime of shared experiences, continued growth, and deepening love.

Introduction:

Midrash as Dialogue with our Past and Ourselves

A. Why Midrash?

Last year at this time, fourth year rabbinic students were asked to submit a thesis proposal. To me, the task of choosing a single topic seemed daunting. I had considered this question since my first year of rabbinical school. What topic would I find so meaningful and engaging that I would choose to spend a year of my life researching and writing about it? I toyed with several areas of study, including Jewish education, *tefillah*, and midrash, all subjects of great interest to me. I cared that my thesis be, not some theoretical document, but an engaging study that would have relevance beyond the requirement itself.

After spending many hours on the Long Island Railroad keeping a notebook of possible thesis topics, the choice became obvious. I asked myself what subject had been most meaningful to me during the course of rabbinical school, and the answer was clear: midrash. From my first introduction, the study of midrash was fascinating to me. It was a process of engaging in dialogue with the biblical text itself. Over centuries, I found, rabbis could argue, explicate, expound, and create. This final process of creating is the one that I find most fascinating. In the world of rabbinic text study, which can sometimes seem purely methodological, the rabbis found a tool for creative exploration.

Through the midrash, our rabbis question the very text itself. They look for the blank spaces and give themselves permission to fill them in with their own words. They respect and record alternate readings. They look for links between different texts. They become detectives, finding clues in every corner, piecing together what they know to

create a larger picture that has continuity and meaning. Through rabbinic midrash, biblical characters, once known only through a specific canon of stories, can truly come to life. They assume new dimensions, relate to each other in more profound ways; they become whole people. Characters that exist only in minor roles biblically, become complete human beings through the midrash.

As I studied midrash through traditional line by line translation and analysis, I found I loved the process of midrashic study and the language of rabbinic discourse. But I immediately became aware that midrash could also be applied in a different setting. This type of midrashic discourse, it seemed to me, was a perfect way to introduce lay people to the process of Jewish study, and simultaneously allow them personal access to the biblical text. The process of midrashic study did not have to be only the study of other people's midrashic readings, but could become a lens for personal exploration through encounter with the biblical text.

B. Why Rachel and Leah?

The summer after my first year in Los Angeles, I spent three months living in Jerusalem with a special friend: my adopted Israeli grandmother, whom I met during my year in Israel. It was an extraordinary summer, and at one point, I was asked to teach at a special seminar for Jewish women from around the world. My subject was drama midrash. The coordinators had planned an afternoon for an introduction to midrash, and participants were asked to choose between drama, dance, and art midrash. I eagerly planned my hour of study, and knew I had only a brief time to make the subject

meaningful. After searching for appropriate material, I realized that the story of Rachel and Leah provided a perfect setting for midrashic discourse. Here were two women, two sisters, deceived by their father into marrying the same man. Their lives could never be the same, and yet we hear so little about their personal responses to their own life situation. A myriad of questions came to mind: What was Rachel and Leah's relationship like before they met Jacob? To what extent was Leah involved in her father's deception of Jacob? When did Rachel learn that her sister was marrying Jacob in her place? What conversation did Jacob and Leah have the morning after their wedding? What did Rachel and Leah say to each other during their first encounter after Leah's wedding to Jacob? How did their relationship change after they were both married to Jacob? The story itself is a veritable soap opera of complex questions.

I realized that in order to teach midrash, I needed to first teach the biblical text itself. I began my workshop with a *berachah*, and a small group of women and I sat in a circle and read the text. They posed all the questions I had expected, and more. The stage was set for serious midrashic dialogue. I created a set of "rules" that would become the basis for my future work in teaching drama midrash. After studying the text as a group, students worked in *chevruta* style to create their own midrashic response to text. I handed each pair a single sheet of paper. Students chose one partner to be Rachel, and one to be Leah. They then composed a midrashic dialogue between the two characters by passing the sheet of paper back and forth between them. No verbal dialogue was necessary. Through the written word, students created the most extraordinary dialogues, which they later performed for the students of dance and art midrash. At least one

midrash provoked tears from the audience. (See the Appendix for examples of these and other contemporary drama midrashim.)

I became aware that I had stumbled upon an extraordinary tool. Midrash was a tool that could be taken well beyond the ordinary classroom. As I continued to study rabbinic midrash, the more aware I became of opportunities of reaching others through the midrashic process. I taught more workshops, and learned how to integrate the study of traditional rabbinic midrash with the students' own work. Often, I found, spontaneous creative responses to the biblical text mirrored rabbinic responses. I learned it was important to teach rabbinic texts with contemporary midrashic responses, but only after students had created their own work. The study of traditional midrash becomes much more meaningful once a student has lived the experience of studying a biblical text and responded personally through creative midrash. Suddenly, the text becomes their own; it comes alive in them and through them. And often, for the first time, a student will see the Bible as relevant to his or her life in some significant way.

Once I realized that midrash was my subject, I knew that I would study Rachel and Leah, the two biblical characters who accompanied me on my first drama midrash teaching experience. The realization that this would be my topic suddenly made so much sense to me. This was a subject I loved and these were characters I wanted to explore. It was a match.

C. Methodology

Having decided to study Rachel and Leah midrashically, I had my work cut out for me. I found that across the spectrum of midrash there was extensive material dealing with these two sisters. Hymen's Torah Haketuvah v'Ha-Mesorah,[1] Ginzberg's Legends of the Jews,[2] and a Bar Ilan CD ROM search all revealed that I had extensive material to explore. I found that certain compilations were rich with material, including The Book of Jubilees, Josephus, The Babylonian Talmud, Bereshit Rabbah, Lamentations Rabbah, both versions of Tanhuma, and the Yalkutim. My biggest challenge, I quickly learned, would not be finding material, but finding a way to organize the vast amount of material I would find.

Before exploring this material, I had to go back to the biblical text itself. I read the text again and again in search of details I might have missed in previous readings. I read critical studies on Rachel and Leah in the Bible, studied the nature of marriage in the biblical period, and looked closely at the names of each character in the narrative. After conducting a biblical exploration of the biblical source text, I was eager to access the midrashic material.

Over the course of many months and long hours of research, I created my own midrashic source text. I photocopied texts, and organized all the midrashim I found in chronological order. The twenty-eight chapters of this source text include early through late midrashim. Though not every work of midrash found its way into the final thesis, my

compilation of source texts offered a valuable way to organize a great amount of material during the research process.

As I studied midrashim across the centuries, I focused my efforts on piecing together a midrashic profile for both Rachel and Leah. The more midrashim I studied, the richer their profiles became. Some midrashim complimented each other and others contradicted each other, but each new midrash added something to the overall portrait. In creating an overall portrait for each character, I looked at the midrashim as a unified whole. I then conducted an analysis of each portrait to establish ongoing themes and to evaluate variations over time. At the end of the research process, I composed a detailed outline that served as an integral guide in the writing process.

This thesis is divided into four core chapters. Chapter 1 will present the biblical view of marriage, as basis for studying midrashim on this subject. We will look at biblical marriage in general, as well as the complex marriage of Jacob and Rachel and Leah, as described in Genesis. In focusing on this marriage in particular, we will look at the structure of the narrative, explore the significance of biblical names, and offer some critical perspectives on Rachel and Leah in the biblical text.

Chapters 2 and 3 will construct an elaborate midrashic profile for both Rachel and Leah. In addition to looking at the external qualities of name and appearance, we will closely evaluate their roles in relation to others, their personal qualities, and examples of how they are remembered through rabbinic texts.

Chapter 4 will analyze the midrashic profiles of Rachel and Leah by discussing ongoing themes and variations over time. Instead of viewing the body of midrash as a

unified whole, this chapter evaluates midrashim chronologically and in relation to each other, focusing on both change and consistency.

The conclusion of the thesis will look at stereotypes of Rachel and Leah in contrast with well-rounded midrashic perspectives. We will also explore an unusual hypothesis: that Rachel and Leah's struggle closely mirrors the struggle of Jacob and Esau. Finally, we will discuss areas for further study.

Jewish Philosophy professor David Ellenson asserts that all theology is autobiography. If this is so, then perhaps we can view the Torah as the autobiography of the Jews. It shares the most intimate details of our collectively remembered stories, history, and relationship with God.

In this context, we can view midrash as a vehicle for probing into who we are; it is an analysis of our own life story. When we read between the lines, we discern the details of who the characters of the Torah really are, and by comparison or contrast, of who we are. Especially for our women characters, this process is an essential tool for probing their personalities, struggles, and relationships. From early to contemporary interpretations, the study of midrash provides us with a lens for engaging in dialogue with our ancestors. This thesis will provide a character study of Rachel and Leah alone and in relationship by analyzing the canon of midrashic interpretation.

Chapter 1:

A Biblical View of Marriage

A. Marriage in the Hebrew Bible

Genesis 2:24 states that "a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, so that they become one flesh."[3] If we can interpret this as the original definition of marriage, then we see a great many variations on this theme in the Biblical text. Few narratives in the Bible unfold with such poetic simplicity as the verse in Genesis. In fact, the marriages of the Bible are often complex, messy, and outright difficult. Perhaps Genesis 2:24 describes an abstract ideal. As the narrative unfurls, we learn that this ideal is far from reality of the lives of the men and women in the subsequent texts.

The Anchor Bible Dictionary emphasizes that in lieu of abundant legal material on marriage, the Hebrew Bible provides us with abundant stories. We read story after story of men and women who have entered into this legal contract, and very few possess the idyllic tone of Genesis 2:24. In fact, the Anchor Bible Dictionary makes an appropriate and humorous analogy to the process of gathering Biblical material on the subject of marriage:

> Taking all these marriage stories together, looking for common threads, and on that basis trying to construct an O.T. concept of marriage is like sitting beside our highways and parkways, observing the flow of traffic and the driving patterns of individuals, and on that basis composing a driver's manual. Both in driving and in marriage there is often a considerable difference between prescription and practice.[4]

So, instead of undertaking to create a Biblical marriage manual, we will attempt to evaluate one Biblical marriage as it is presented in the narrative and as it is developed in later sources. The marriage of Jacob and Rachel and Leah provides a colorful example of polygyny in the Hebrew Bible. It also describes two instances of cross-cousin marriage,

the "marriage between the offspring of siblings of opposite sex, in which a man marries the daughter of his mother's brother, despite the close degree of consanguinity."[5] Replete with love, deception, joy, and pain, this tale provides us one window of insight into the nature of marriage in the Hebrew Bible. Before we explore the intricacies of this three-way relationship, it is essential that we explore the nature of marriage in the Bible in general.

1. Arranged Marriages and The Divine Matchmaker

A well-known midrash asks what God has been doing since the creation of the world. The rabbinic response is: God has been arranging marriages. In the biblical narrative, it is not uncommon for parents to arrange marriages, though in almost every narrative, we see evidence that God's will was involved as well. There is no law stipulating that a parent must select a spouse for a child. However, we see numerous examples of this phenomenon, beginning with Hagar, who selects a wife for Ishmael (Genesis 21:21). Other examples include Judah choosing Tamar for his son Er (Genesis 38:6), and Reuel giving his daughter Zipporah to Moses (Exodus 2:16-22). This pattern seems to end around the time of David and Solomon, who chose their own wives.

In the patriarchal and matriarchal narratives, however, we see a distinct absence of parental involvement. Abraham does not choose a wife for Isaac himself. Instead, he sends his servant as his surrogate. The servant makes a bargain with God to aid him in fulfilling his mandate. In his meeting with Rebecca, we see evidence of divine intervention. Further, Isaac does not directly choose wives for Jacob or Esau, though he

and Rebecca do send Jacob away to get married. In fact, he and Rebecca have no control over Esau's marriages, and are disappointed with his exogamous choices. Despite the apparent absence of direct parental involvement in these and other cases, it was still the norm to respect the formality of parental assent. "In such cases [as Jacob, Esau, Boaz, etc.] parental approval was assumed rather than solicited."[6]

The Anchor Bible Dictionary distinguishes between the divinely ordained aspect of marriage and the reality of marriage. In the introduction to the marriage entry, it states, "We will need to distinguish between the divine will in marriages and OT marriages as they are illustrated. The latter may reflect the former, but not necessarily so."[7] In the case of Isaac and Rebecca, we see evidence of God's intervention. Many (but not all) Biblical marriages contain overt evidence of either a divine or parental matchmaker. In the example of Isaac and Rebecca, both divine and human parents are involved. The story of Isaac and Rebecca "highlights the role of divine providence in marriage. Parents supply only the most general guidelines."[8]

2. Endogamy and Exogamy

We see evidence of both types of marriage in the Biblical text, though the patriarchal/matriarchal narratives certainly emphasize endogamy, marrying only within one's own group. Justifications for endogamy include unfriendly relations with a neighboring tribe, and the need for separation from a majority group while living among or adjacent to foreigners. Strict adherence to endogamy can reflect a fear of intermarriage. "Where substantive religious issues are involved, endogamy reflects the practical need to

preserve a certain norm of religious behavior, and also to maintain the ethnic purity of the tribe or family. The smaller the group, and the more entrenched its religious ethos, the greater the threat presented by exogamy to that group."[9]

Despite these threats, we certainly see prolific examples of exogamy, marrying outside one's own group, in the Bible. Famous participants in exogamy include Esau, Joseph, Judah, Moses, Samson, Boaz, David, Ahab, Solomon, Batsheva, and Esther. The Anchor Bible Dictionary lists five possible explanations for exogamous marriages, including: out of spite (Esau), when living in a foreign land for an unusually long period of time (Joseph, Moses, Esther), with divine approval, but parental disapproval, as a means of moving against the enemy (wife of Manoah in Judges 13:3-4), for consolidation of political power (David, Solomon), and in blatant disregard for religious norms (Ahab, Solomon).[10] Though Jacob's marriages adhered to the custom of endogamy, they departed from the ideal of monogamy.

3. Monogamy and Polygamy

For Biblical society monogamy was the ideal, though we certainly see substantial deviation from this ideal. In addition to the Creation narrative, numerous laws highlight the importance of monogamy. The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible cites Exodus 20:17; 21:5; Lev 18:8, 11, 14-16, 20; 20:10; 21:13; Numbers 5:12; Deuteronomy 5:21; 22:22 in this regard. Wisdom Literature also provides numerous texts in support of monogamy. Only one law in Deuteronomy indicates that a man may marry more than one wife. Deuteronomy 21: 15-17 states:

> If a man has two wives, one loved and the other unloved, and both the loved and the unloved have borne him sons, but the first-born is the son of the unloved one--when he wills his property to his sons, he may not treat as first-born the son of the loved one in disregard of the son of the unloved one who is older. Instead, he must accept the first-born, the son of the unloved one, and allot to him a double portion of all he possesses; since he is the first fruit of his vigor, the birthright is his due.

In the Biblical text we find many instances of polygyny but none of polyandry. The Anchor Bible Dictionary lists nine examples of polygyny, including Jacob's marriages to Rachel and Leah. These include: Lamech with two wives, Abraham with Sarah and his concubines Hagar and Keturah, Jacob with Leah and Rachel, Esau with three wives, Gideon with his many wives, Elkanah with Hannah and Peninnah, David with seven named wives and additional unnamed ones, Solomon and his royal harem, Rehoboam with his eighteen wives. The Anchor Bible Dictionary wisely notes that "in most of the above cited instances, polygyny was a major contributor to problems in the household." In this thesis we will specifically explore the problems that polygyny brought to the household of Jacob and Rachel and Leah.

B. The Marriage of Jacob and Rachel and Leah in the Hebrew Bible

1. Structure of the Jacob-Rachel-Leah Narrative

Genesis 25:19-34	The story of Isaac, son of Abraham. Isaac's plea for conception, conception, Rebecca's lament, God's response, birth of twins. Twins as Adults, Soup Incident, Sale of Birthright.
Genesis 26: 1-35	Famine. God's command and blessing: (Do not go down to Egypt; Stay and I will bless you.), Isaac stays. Wife as sister, discovery of deception, Avimelech's response. Blessing/Abundance, Philistine jealousy, wells filled, Isaac sent away. Wadi of Gerar, new wells, confrontation with herdsmen, Beersheva. God Appears, altar, reconciliation with Avimelech, oath, water. Esau's marriages--source of bitterness to Isaac and Rebecca.
Genesis 27: 1-46	Isaac tells Esau to prepare for blessing. Rebecca initiates deception. Jacob protests then agrees. Concealment of identity, interrogation, blessing of Jacob. Return, discovery, hysteria, blessing of Esau, grudge, vow to kill. Rebecca's command to flee to Haran, disgust with Esau's wives.
Genesis 28: 1-22	Isaac blesses Jacob (again), tells Jacob to go to Paddan-Aram to marry one of Laban's Daughters. Esau witnesses these Events, marries daughter of Ishmael.
Genesis 29:1-35	Courtship, engagement, marriage, deception, marriage, servitude, birth.
Genesis 30:1-24	The baby wars: Rachel and Leah compete for children.
Genesis 30:25-43	The animal wars: Laban tries to cheat Jacob out of his wages.
Genesis 31:1-32:3	Flight, theft, pursuit, pact, angels.
Genesis 32:4-33	Preparing to encounter Esau: fear, prayer, gifts, crossing the Jabbok, God-Wrestling.
Genesis 33:1-19	Encountering Esau: division, embrace, introductions, persistent giving, journey to Sukkot, arrival in Shechem, altar to God.
Genesis 34:1-31	The rape of Dinah.
Genesis 35: 1-29	Divine command to go to Bethel, arrival in Bethel, death of Deborah, God's blessing, pillar at Bethel, journey to Ephrat, birth of Benjamin, death of Rachel, burial of Rachel, Reuven with Bilhah, Jacob's twelve sons, arrival at Hevron, death and burial of Isaac.

2. Significance of Biblical Names

a. Esau

In the Bible, we learn that Esau actually has two names, *Esav* and *Edom*. In Genesis 25:25, we read, "The first one emerged red *(admoni)*, like a hairy mantle all over; so they named him Esau *(Esav)*." Five verses later we learn, "And Esau said to Jacob, 'Give me some of that red stuff *(ha'adom ha'adom hazeh)* to gulp down, for I am famished'--which is why he was named Edom." (Gen. 25:30).

Philologically, the root of Esav, *ayin, sin, vav,* means "to make, do work, labour, act, or prepare," according to Alcalay's Complete Hebrew-English Dictionary. Alcalay also notes that Esau's name appears in modern Hebrew in the euphemistic phrase, *Hatzilayni na miyad achi miyad Esav,* " Please help me from this cruel man!" In a note to Genesis 25:25, the new JPS translation notes that Esau is a synonym of "Seir," which is a play on Heb. *se'ar* "hair."

Alkalay translates the word *Edom (aleph, dalet, mem)* as "Edom" or "Rome." An *Adomi* is an Edomite. *Adam* means man, human being, person; mankind, humanity; someone; *Adam* (first man). *Adom* is red, and *adamah* is soil, land, arable land, earth, ground, territory, country. Finally, *admon* means redskin or Esau.

b. Jacob

Biblically, we learn about Jacob's name in the following way: "Then his brother emerged, holding on to the heel of Esau; so they named him Jacob" (Gen. 25:26). The

root of *Ya'akov* is *ayin, kuf, vet*, which philologically has several implications. The new JPS translation notes that *Ya'akov* is a play on the Hebrew *'aqeb,* ' meaning "heel." Alkalay translates *akav* as to follow, track, trace, shadow, sleuth; to deceive, cheat, supplant, 'grip by the heel' or to cancel. *Ikayv* means to stop, hinder, prevent, keep back, hold up, or delay.

The biblical text itself plays with the name *Ya'akov*, in the form of Esau's desperate plea to his father, "Was he, then, named Jacob that he might supplant me these two times? First he took away my birthright and now he has taken away my blessing!...Have you not reserved a blessing for me?"(Gen. 27:36).

c. Rachel

In Genesis we learn, "Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older one was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah had weak eyes; Rachel was shapely and beautiful" (Genesis 29:16-17). According to Alkalay, the root translates *resh, chet, lamed* to mean "ewe" or "sheep."

Alkalay also identifies two phrases based upon Rachel's name. When Jacob asks Laban to marry Rachel, he specifies, "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel." Based on this narrative, Alkalay translates the phrase *b'rachel bitcha hak'tana* as meaning "explicitly; clearly stipulated; to call a spade a spade." In addition, Alkalay cites an Aramaic phrase from B.T. *Ketubot, R'chayla batar r'chayla azla, k'ovday imah kach ovday b'rahtah,* which means "Ewe follows ewe; like mother like daughter. (Literally, like the mother's deeds so are her daughter's)."

d. Leah

The same biblical phrase that first identifies Rachel simultaneously introduces Leah: "Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older one was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah had weak eyes; Rachel was shapely and beautiful." (Gen. 29:16-17).

Philologically, the root *lamed, aleph, hay* translates as tired, wearied, exhausted, fatigued, according to Alkalay. Related words include *lav (lamed, aleph, vav)*, meaning not, 'don't' (as a noun), prohibition, negation; and *lay'ut (lamed, aleph, vav, tet)*, meaning slowness, gradation, gradualness.

e. Laban

While the Bible offers no specific discussion of Laban's name, the root *lamed, vet, nun* appears repeatedly in colloquial Hebrew. Alkalay translates *lavan* as white; whiteness, white of the eyes; silver coin. Similarly, *loven* means white, whiteness, or blankness. In colloquial Hebrew, *lavan ha'arami* means "deceiver" or "scoundrel," based on Genesis 29. *Ha-yidatem et Lavan?* means "Don't you know this deceiver?" And *Im Lavan garti* means "I have had enough experience with scoundrels" or "I had my fill of swindlers."

3. Critical Perspectives on Rachel and Leah in the Biblical Text

The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible entries on Rachel and Leah include summaries of this section of the Genesis narrative. The Rachel entry highlights several key aspects of her role in the narrative, including the fact that she herself named Bilhah's children Dan ("God has vindicated me; indeed, He has heeded my plea and given me a son") and Naphtali ("A fateful contest I waged with my sister; yes, and I have prevailed") to indicate her claim to them (Gen. 30:6-8). The entry also discusses the stolen *teraphim*, and provides an explanation that is not explicitly in the text itself: "As they fled, Rachel stole her father's household gods...which would ensure both success and the family inheritance (vs. 17-35). Lavan's concern in pursuing them was not so much for his lost daughters as for his lost gods."[11] The IDB explanations of both Rachel's action and Laban's response are slightly midrashic in nature.

The IDB entry on Rachel's Tomb explicitly discusses the classical midrash regarding Rachel's death, specifically the location of her grave. Two traditions are at odds regarding the Biblical phrase "when they were still some distance from Ephrath" (Gen. 35:16). One interprets Ephrat as the district of Ephrata (where Bethlehem was located), while another claims her grave is in an area north of Jerusalem based on I Samuel 10:2 ("Rachel's tomb in the territory of Benjamin") and Jeremiah 31:15 ("A voice is heard in Ramah...Rachel is weeping for her children"). The entry refers to the midrash (without citing the specific passage), saying "A passage in Midrash Rabbah shows that the two contradictory traditions caused difficulty for Christian exegetes in the early Christian period."[12]

The entries on Rachel and Leah each discuss the possibility of an historical tribe or clan associated with the matriarch. The Rachel tribe totem could have been the ewe, and the Leah tribe could have been a clan of cattle breeders, with the totem of a wild cow.[13] Textually, the connection of Leah with a wild cow is unclear. However, the IDB identifies a linguistic link by translating the name Leah as "wild cow" or "gazelle." This unusual translation is not mentioned either in the notes to the new JPS translation, Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures, or in the Alcalay Dictionary.

While the IDB focuses on the specific details of names and places, Nehama Leibowitz addresses the text thematically. She identifies deceit and divine retribution as key elements of the Jacob-Rachel-Leah narrative. Leibowitz demonstrates that

> the vicissitudes of Jacob's life teach us, at every step, how he was repaid--measure for measure--for taking advantage of his father's blindness. His sons deceived him when they presented him with Joseph's bloodstained coat of many colours. Moreover the recurrence of such key or motif words as "deceit" serve to underline the remorseless workings of Divine retribution...[14]

To underscore this theme of deceit and retribution, she quotes a passage from Tanhuma Buber, *Vayetze* 11. This midrash depicts a late-night conversation between Jacob and Leah following consummation on their wedding night:

> All that night she (Leah) acted the part of Rachel. As soon as he arose in the morning, "and behold it was Leah." Said Jacob to her: Daughter of the deceiver! Wherefore hast thou deceived me? *[Bat ramai! Lama ramit oti?!]* Said she to him: And thou--wherefore didst thou deceive thy father?! *[V'atah lama ramita avicha?!]* When he said to thee: "Art thou my very son Esau?" thou didst say to him: "I am Esau thy firstborn." Yet thou sayest: "Wherefore then hast thou deceived me!?" *[Lama rimitani?!]* Thy father did he not say of thee: "Thy brother came with deceit?" *[Ba ahicha b'mirma?!]*

Leibowitz goes on to highlight other "motif words" in Jacob's life, including: firstborn right *(bechorah)*, blessing *(berachah)*, and name *(shem)*. For the word *bechorah*, Leibowitz highlights Laban's statement to Jacob: "And Laban said: it must not be done so in our country, to give the younger *(ha'tze'irah)* before the firstborn *(ha'bechirah)*" (Gen. 29:26). The text could have used the word *ha-gedolah* to contrast with *ha-tze'irah*. Instead, it says *ha'bechirah*, reminiscent of Esau's complaint that "he has taken my firstborn right." Leibowitz calls this Measure for Measure.

Finally, she highlights the words *bracha* and *shem* in the episode of Jacob wrestling with the *ish* (the man). Her translation appropriately emphasizes the change in name from Jacob to Israel:

> I will not let thee go, except thou bless me.
> And he said unto him, What is thy name?
> And he said, Jacob (supplanter)
> And he said, Thy name shall be no more called Jacob (supplanter), but Israel (a prince of God); For as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed. (Genesis 32: 27-29)

Leibowitz asks a compelling question regarding this text, and finds an answer that harkens back to Jacob's deceitful past:

> Why did the angelic emissary require to ask him his name? Did he not know it? Some explain that the angel's purpose was to make Jacob admit that he had supplanted his brother and that not for nothing had he been dubbed the supplanter (Jacob). After he had made the admission and uttered his name, the messenger announced the removal of the stain on his character symbolized by the adoption of a new name--Israel[15]

Only after Jacob completes this struggle, is he able to continue on his journey to confront his brother Esau.

Though Jacob's struggle is a compelling one, he is not the only character in this narrative who engages in an agonizing conflict. Together, Jacob, Rachel, and Leah struggle through a marriage ridden with deception and competition. This polygamous, cross-cousin marriage of two sisters to a single man sets the stage for painful consequences. The biblical text details the story of two women competing for children and for the attention of their husband. Midrashic texts take the story a step further, developing a portrait of Rachel and Leah as individuals, each endeavoring to form her own identity.

Chapter 2:

A Rabbinic Portrait of Rachel

A. Rachel: A Character Profile

Beyond the biblical portrait of a beautiful Rachel who longs for children and cryptically steals her father's idols, lies a more complex, more complete character. Midrashic texts regarding Rachel paint a much fuller picture of the woman most famed biblically for her beauty. We are suddenly privy to complex dialogues with her husband, secret confidences with her sister, and unwavering challenges to God. The woman who remained silent in the biblical text as her own sister was given in marriage to her husband-to-be, now comes to life as a thoughtful woman, fully engaged in the complex events that create her life story.

B. Name of Rachel

Even Rachel's name takes on new meaning in the midrash, most notably in the interpretation of the phrase, "*V'shem ha-ketanah, Rachel*" (Gen. 29:16). This phrase is usually translated, "and the name of the younger was Rachel." However, the rabbis in Bereshit Rabbah interpret the word *ketanah* literally as "small."[16] Understood in this way, our introduction to the name of Rachel takes on a different meaning. More than simply describing the relative age of the sisters as the Biblical text does, the midrash adds an historical perspective, commenting on Rachel's role in history: "*And the name of the small one was Rachel:* small in her gift, Joseph [having an influential role] for only a time, and Saul for only a time."[17] Here, the younger sister actually becomes the less influential sister, a view that is generally refuted in subsequent midrashim.

Peter Pitzele, a creator of modern midrash, interprets the name Rachel as a convergence of two words: *Ruach* and *El*, which translates as "the spirit of God." Though Pitzele's midrash is based solely on philology, this interpretation of Rachel's name will take on greater significance as we look at her role in relation to God, specifically in the text of Lamentations Rabbah.[18] In this milestone text, Rachel emerges from her place in history to challenge God's decision to destroy the children of Israel. She reminds God of the Divine's own eternal qualities and effectively convinces her creator to have mercy on the children of Israel.

C. Physical Characteristics of Rachel

In addition to elaborating on Rachel's name, midrash provides additional details for Rachel's physical description. The biblical description is succinct: "*V'Rachel haitah yifat-toar vifat mareh*" (Genesis 29:17). Literally meaning, "And Rachel was of beautiful form and beautiful to see," this phrase is often translated as "Rachel was shapely and beautiful."

The biblical text would have us remember Rachel only as the beautiful sister. Midrash provides a slightly more elaborate physical description of Rachel. For example, the Book of Jubilees states, "Leah's eyes were weak, but her form was very handsome; but Rachel had beautiful eyes and a beautiful and very handsome form."[19] In the biblical text we learn only about Leah's eyes and about Rachel's body. Midrashically, we find a more parallel physical description. Leah's eyes are weak compared to Rachel's beautiful ones; Leah's form is very handsome, but Rachel's is beautiful and very handsome.

Suddenly, our visual perception of the sisters is more balanced. We no longer have the model of "weak eyes" versus "beautiful body." Now we meet a pair of sisters who are similar in form, but who bear an important distinction regarding their eyes. Midrashic texts in every age go to great lengths to explain Leah's weak eyes. Generally, the rabbis reinterpret the biblical text to understand "weak eyes" as a sign of Leah's past and a symbol of her merit. We will evaluate these descriptions in great detail when we discuss the rabbinic portrait of Leah.[20]

Later rabbinic texts also emphasize the physical similarities between Rachel and Leah. For example, Tanhuma Buber asserts that Rachel and Leah were equal in their beauty, interpreting the number two *(shtay)* ("And Laban had *two* daughters...") as also meaning equal *(shvt)*. This tradition actively seeks to illustrate that the sisters were equal in their beauty. To support the accuracy of its claim, the midrash even provides this philological evidence (*shtay* and *shvt)*.[21]

Despite these efforts at equalizing the sisters' beauty, we still find in the midrash remnants of Rachel's superior physical beauty. For example, Josephus provides a rather romantic description of Rachel's appearance, noting that her beauty "was so flourishing, as few of the women of that age could vie with."[22] This description unmistakably portrays Rachel as a strikingly beautiful woman.

D. Roles in Relation to Others

More important than the external qualities of name and physical form are the human qualities that Rachel acquires through the complex vehicle of midrash. We now see Rachel not just as the object of Jacob's love and the subject of Laban's scheme, but we learn about Rachel as a complete person, who takes on, as every person does, a wide variety of roles. Here, we will look at Rachel not only as daughter and love interest, but also as sister, wife, barren woman, child bearer, mother, and child of God.

1. As Daughter

After reading this complex biblical narrative of sisters forced to marry the same man by their wily father, we are left with a nagging and logical question: Where was their mother? The rabbis ask the same question and come up with a rather indisputable response: Their mother was dead.

The question arises in the context of two similar type-scenes: Rebecca's betrothal at the well and Rachel's betrothal at the well. The rabbis note that while Rebecca runs to tell her mother of her encounter, Rachel runs to tell her father. In Bereshit Rabbah, the rabbis respond to the words of Genesis 24:27, "And the young woman [Rebecca] ran and told these things to her mother's house," by engaging in a brief debate with a clear conclusion:

> R. Johanan said: A woman is accustomed to repair only to her mother's house. They objected: But it is written, "And she [Rachel] ran and told her father" (Gen. 29:12). Her mother had died, replied he; whom then could she tell but her father?[23]

The rabbis offer this reasoning to explain a perceived inconsistency in the Biblical text. They ask, 'Why does Rebecca run to her mother's house while Rachel runs to her father's?' They respond, 'Rachel's mother must have been dead.' The rabbis' effort to explain a biblical inconsistency gives us greater insight into the text as a whole: Why did Rachel and Leah not turn to their mother in their time of crisis? Did Laban have no mate who could potentially mitigate his deceit? Did Rachel and Leah's relationship with their mother affect their roles later in life? Now the sisters' predicament seems even more dire: They grew up with no mother, a deceitful father, and share the same husband.

As for Rachel's relationship with her father, we see two contrasting images. In the first, we find the good and obedient daughter, loyal in all respects, as described by Josephus:

> And when Rachel had saluted Jacob, she said that Jacob 'brought the most desirable and greatest pleasures to her father Laban...who was always mentioning Jacob's mother Rebecca, and always thinking of her, and her alone; and that this will make Jacob equal in her father's eyes to any advantageous circumstances whatsoever.' Then Rachel bid Jacob go to her father Laban, and follow her while she conducted him to him; and not to deprive Laban of such a pleasure, by staying any longer away from him.[24]

In the second, we recognize a strikingly astute daughter, who actively recognizes her father's devious nature. As early as the Talmud, but also in subsequent texts, we hear Rachel warn Jacob of her father's deceitful nature. With slight variations, the dialogue always involves a strong warning from Rachel and a clear response from Jacob.

For example, Rachel asserts, "My father is deceitful, and you will not be able to stand up to him." Jacob responds, "I am his brother in deceit."[25] It is this astute Rachel, not the naive child, whose character resonates throughout subsequent midrashic texts.

2. As sister

Rachel's role as sister is central to the Biblical narrative, but we learn few details about the exact nature of her relationship with Leah. In fact, only two Biblical incidents give us real insight into their relationship. The first is an ongoing one, namely the sisters' battle in childbearing, and the subsequent naming of their children. The second surfaces with the exchange of the mandrakes. Aside from these examples, we know virtually nothing about their relationship. We certainly find no details at all about their lives prior to Jacob's arrival. And, significantly, the biblical text leaves out any information about the sisters' roles in the deceptive marriage of Leah and Jacob. Without these details, our understanding of these two characters is minimal, and perhaps even flawed.

The midrash attempts to fill in some of these blatant gaps. Even the sisters' exact status as sisters is brought into question in the midrash. Sefer HaYashar, a late rabbinic text, identifies Rachel and Leah as twin sisters, and even identifies the name of their mother as Adinah:

> Rebecca received the joyful news that her sister-in-law Adinah, the wife of Laban, who, like all the women of his house, had been childless until then, had given birth to twin daughters, Leah and Rachel. [26]

And in Bereshit Rabbah, the rabbis actually identify Bilhah and Zilpah as daughters of Laban, by concubines.[27] This significant tidbit of information changes our entire reading

of the text, for it has one undeniable consequence: If Bilhah and Zilpah are Laban's daughters, then Rachel and Leah are the half-sisters of their own handmaids. Suddenly, this midrashic detail renders the family dynamic even more complex. Now four sisters, not two, are married to the same man, and all bear children with that man.

Even without this complicated element, Rachel and Leah undoubtedly share a relationship of great complexity. Whether or not they are twins, the fact of their birthing order plays a major role in their lives. In fact, our first introduction to Rachel and Leah as sisters involves their birth order: "The name of the older one (*Ha-Gedolah)* was Leah, and the name of the younger one *(Ha-Ketanah)* was Rachel" (Genesis 29:16). These two adjectives, and their juxtaposition, provide the substance for the central conflict in the Rachel/Leah narrative. As frequently occurs in the biblical text, the younger sibling (here, Rachel) supplants the older (here, by intending to marry before her older sister.) But in this text, it is consistently unclear which sister lays claim to higher status. Rachel surpasses her sister in beauty; Leah surpasses Rachel by marrying her intended. Rachel than supersedes Leah as the cherished wife; Leah, in turn, supersedes her sister by bearing children.

The midrash as a whole wavers in how it deals with this tension. In some cases, it favors Rachel; in some, it favors Leah. And most interestingly, sometimes the midrash attempts to resolve this tension by illustrating the sisters' love for each other. We will look closely at examples of the sisters' commitment to each other when we analyze their personal qualities.[28]

As we mentioned above, Bereshit Rabbah interprets the words *gedolah* (bigger) and *ketanah* (smaller) literally. In this interpretation, Leah's gifts to the world (in the form of her descendants) are greater than Rachel's.[29] Here, Leah surpasses Rachel in terms of her historical significance. This interpretation is repeated in later texts, including Yalkut Shimoni.[30] But in at least two texts, the midrash attempts to place Rachel first in the sibling hierarchy. Instead of viewing Rachel's barrenness as a symbol of inadequacy, Bereshit Rabbah and Ruth Rabbah reinterpret the word for barren, *`akara*. Keeping the root unchanged, these midrashim manipulate the word to read *`ikara*, meaning chief. Now Rachel, instead of being the barren sister, is the "chief" of the house.[31]

These texts even provide explanations for this reversal, saying that because Leah had so many children, Rachel was considered the chief to provide balance in their relationship. Ruth Rabbah also suggests an additional reading, saying that since Rachel was the subject of gossip (because she was barren), all Jacob's descendants were ascribed to her. The text quotes several verses as proof-texts:

> R. Simeon b. Yohai taught: Since they spake against Rachel [because she was barren], therefore all Jacob's descendants are ascribed to her, as it is written, *Rachel weeping for her children* (Jeremiah 31:15).
> And not only to her, but even to her son, as it is said,
> *It may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious unto the remnant of Joseph* (Amos 5:15)
> And not only to her son, but even to her grandson, as it is said,
> *Is Ephraim a darling son unto Me? Is he a child that is dandled?* (Jeremiah 31:20)[32]

Here, the midrash seems especially concerned with creating justice and balance. If Leah bears fruit, Rachel should have some reward, as well. If Rachel is slandered, history will compensate for her humiliation.

What is most interesting is that a single text, in this case Bereshit Rabbah, can simultaneously elevate Leah above Rachel and elevate Rachel above Leah. That is, in one place Bereshit Rabbah sees Leah as *Ha-Gedolah*, the great one, and in another it sees Rachel as *'ikara*, the chief. This multiplicity of meanings is by no means unusual in midrashic texts, and in fact increases the possibility for creative speculation.

3. As Object of Love

In treating Rachel as a love interest, The Bible describes Jacob's love for Rachel, but leaves Rachel's response conspicuously absent. Even the midrash neglects to tell us of Rachel's feelings for Jacob. Only Josephus gives us a hint of this love story from Rachel's perspective, saying:

> She, as pleased, after the custom of children, with Jacob's coming, asked him who he was, and whence he came to them, and what it was he lacked that he came thither. She also wished it might be in their power to supply the wants he came about." [33]

Despite this single hint of youthful enthusiasm (and perhaps an allusion to Rachel's future with Jacob), the midrash as a whole teaches us little about their courtship and engagement. Rabbinic texts, reflecting their authors' understanding of marriage, offer slightly more insight into the couples' relationship after they are husband and wife.

4. As wife

Interestingly, much of what we know about Rachel as wife involves her status as a barren woman. The only extensive midrashic dialogue between Rachel and Jacob relates

to her statement about herself as a barren wife: "Give me children or I shall die!" (Genesis 30:1). We witness an angry dialogue between Rachel and Jacob, which results in Rachel offering Jacob her handmaid (and perhaps half-sister), Bilhah:

> **Jacob:** It would be better to address your petition to God, and not to me. Am I in God's place, who has withheld children from you?
> **God:** Is this how you comfort a grief-stricken heart? As you live, the day will come when your children will stand before the son of Rachel, and he will use the same words you have now used, saying, 'Am I in the place of the Lord?'
> **Rachel:** Didn't your father also entreat God for your mother with earnest words, imploring God to remove her barrenness?
> **Jacob:** It is true, but Isaac had no children, and I have several.
> **Rachel:** Remember your grandfather, Abraham. You can't deny that he had children when he supplicated God on behalf of Sarah!
> **Jacob:** Would you do for me what Sarah did for my grandfather?
> **Rachel:** What did she do?
> **Jacob:** She herself brought a rival into her house.
> **Rachel:** If that is all that is necessary, I am ready to follow the example of Sarah, and I pray that as she was granted a child for having invited a rival, so I may be blessed, too. [34]

As the childless wife, Rachel not only experiences frustration with her husband, but also expresses fear of her father. She is afraid that if she remains childless, Laban can prevent her from being with her husband. She tells herself that:

> Jacob has a mind to return to the land of his birth, and my father will not be able to hinder his daughters who have borne him children from following their husband with their children. But he will not let me, the childless wife, go, too, and he will keep me here and marry me to one of the uncircumcised.[35]

Afraid that her husband will leave without her, Rachel also fears his love for her is waning. From Rachel's childless perspective, her status depends upon Jacob's love. According to Josephus, Rachel attempts to prevent a change in her husband's affections by offering him her handmaid: "But Rachel, fearing lest the fruitfulness of her sister

should make herself enjoy a lesser share of Jacob's affections, put to bed to him her handmaid Bilhah."[36]

In the final analysis, Rachel's fears may be unfounded. Bereshit Rabbah notes that the only woman who is ever literally called "Jacob's wife" is Rachel. The text compares Genesis 35:23-26, where we hear of "the children of Leah," "the children of Zilpah," and "the children of Bilhah," with Genesis 46:19, where we read, "the children of Rachel, Jacob's wife." The same midrash looks at a passage in Psalms regarding God's "faithfulness toward the house of Israel" (Psalms 98:3). The rabbis conclude that Israel means Israel, the patriarch (Jacob), and that Rachel herself is the "house of Israel."[37]

5. As barren woman

We have witnessed Rachel's fears as a barren wife regarding her father and husband. But how does her barrenness affect her as an individual? The Bible clearly describes Rachel's jealousy of her sister's fertility; The midrash explains the dire nature of this jealousy by elaborating on Rachel's statement, "Give me children or I shall die." In midrashic lore, four categories of people are regarded as dead: the leper, the blind, the impoverished, and the barren.[38] The rabbis understand the desperate nature of Rachel's plea in the context of others who suffer greatly.

One minor midrash takes Rachel's exclamation literally. *Aggadat Bereshit* explains that Rachel was anxious to have a child because she had a presentiment of her own death![39] The irony inherent in this midrash is that Rachel actually dies in childbirth.

Finally, midrash makes us aware that Rachel is not alone in her suffering. The other matriarchs witness her plight and pray together for Rachel to be remembered! "R. Hanina said: All the matriarchs assembled and prayed: 'We have sufficient (*dayyenu*) males; let her [Rachel] be remembered.'"[40] In a rabbinic tradition where dialogue between women is all but absent, this statement of a matriarchal community uniting in prayer is a profound one.

6. As childbearer

The prayers of the matriarchs are answered when God finally remembers Rachel. We learn in midrashim across the ages, from the Talmud to Midrash Ha-Gadol, that God remembered Rachel on the very first day of the year, Rosh HaShanah.[41] For example, in the Babylonian Talmud, *Rosh HaShanah* 11a we read:

> On the New Year, Sarah, Rachel and Hanna were visited. Whence do we know this? R. Eliezer said: We learn it from the two occurrences of the word 'visiting,' and the two occurrences of the word 'remembering.' It is written concerning Rachel, *And God remembered Rachel* (Gen.30:22), and it is written concerning Hannah, *And the Lord remembered her* (I Sam. 1:19), and there is an analogous mention of 'remembering' in connection with [the] New Year, as it is written, *a solemn rest, a remembering of the blast of the trumpet* (Lev. 23:24). The double mention of visiting [is as follows]. It is written concerning Hannah, *For the Lord had visited Hannah* (I Sam. 2:21), and it is written concerning Sarah, *And the Lord visited Sarah* (Gen. 21:1).[42]

For Rachel, a woman who describes herself as near death for lack of children, this divine visit marks a significant beginning to the year.

The rabbis offer a wide variety of reasons to explain why God remembers Rachel. Early explanations include: for her own sake, for her sister's sake, for Jacob's sake, for the

matriarchs' sake, for her silence, and for bringing Bilhah into her home.[43] Later texts explain Rachel's fruitfulness as a reward for having compassion for her sister on Leah's wedding night. According to this tradition, Jacob gives Rachel secret signs so she can identify herself on their wedding night, preventing any plans of deception that Laban might have. However, Rachel ultimately realizes that she does not want Leah to be shamed, and, contrary to her plan with Jacob, gives the signs to Leah.[44]

After yearning for a child for so long, Rachel chooses a name for a son that reflects her desire for more children. She calls him Joseph, meaning "increase" or "addition," in an explicit prayer for another son. The midrash notes a variety of implications of her choice in names. Bereshit Rabbah suggests that "addition" means "different from Joseph," explaining technical differences between the tribes of Israel. [45] An earlier midrash from the same text notes that an addition granted by God exceeds the original.[46] Benjamin, 'the addition,' has ten sons, while Joseph, 'the original,' only has two. In a contrasting reading, Midrash Ha-Gadol reads Rachel's naming of her son as a curse. If she had not said the words "God give me another son" (meaning only one son), she herself would have had twelve tribes (sons) with Jacob.[47]

The midrash does not comment on Rachel's choice of names for her second son: *Ben Oni*, "son of my sorrow." It is interesting to note that Rachel's name for her second child is not the name that remains with him. It is Jacob who names Rachel's second son, Benjamin.

7. As mother

Rachel overtly expresses her burning desire for children; She considers her life to be no life without them. In spite of her sincerity, a question remains: Is she longing for children (and the status that brings in the eyes of the community and her husband) or is she longing to be a mother? In fact, we hear very little biblically or midrashically about Rachel's behavior as a mother. We do learn that her two children take after her. Joseph takes after her beauty, and Benjamin is accused of taking after her thievery:

> Because it is written, *But Rachel was beautiful of form* (Gen. 29:17), therefore, we read, *And Joseph was of beautiful form* (Gen. 39:6).[48]

> *And the goblet was found in Benjamin's sack.* (Gen. 44:12) When it was found, the brothers exclaimed to Benjamin, 'What! You are the thief and the son of a thief [referring to Rachel stealing her father's *teraphim*]! To which Benjamin retorted, 'Have we a he-goat here [referring to the goat in whose blood the brothers had dipped Joseph's coat]? Have we here brothers who sold their brother?[49]

While the rabbis strive to find similarities between Rachel and her children, they also describe the parallel experiences of her offspring. Bereshit Rabbah details the similarities between Rachel's son Joseph and Rachel's descendant Mordecai (a descendant of Benjamin), showing that they both underwent trials and both achieved greatness.[50] Despite these connections, we know little about the role Rachel actually plays as mother to her children.

We do, however, learn about Rachel as mother to an entire nation. We see her in the roles of mother and grandmother of Israel. Both Bereshit Rabbah and Ruth Rabbah quote Jeremiah and Amos to demonstrate that Rachel is the mother of Israel.[51] We also

learn about the future of Rachel's descendants, including the ongoing tradition that Esau will fall at the hands of Rachel's descendants:

> R. Phinehas said in the name of R. Samuel b. Nahman: It is a tradition that Esau will fall at the hands of none other than Rachel's descendants, as it is written, *Surely the youngest of the flock shall drag them away* (Jer. 49:20). And why does he call them *'The youngest of the flock?'* Because they were the youngest of the tribes.[52]

And in a debate about Elijah's lineage, Elijah himself appears to settle the score, confirming that he is a descendant of Rachel. A midrash in Bereshit Rabbah describes the scene:

> On one occasion, our Rabbis were debating about him [Elijah], some maintaining that he belonged to the tribe of Gad, others, to the tribe of Benjamin. Whereupon he came and stood before them and said, 'Sirs, why do you debate about me? I am a descendant of Rachel.'[53]

8. In relation to God

In the biblical text, with a single exception, Rachel never converses directly with God. Instead, she directs her frustration toward her husband. Jacob recognizes this misplaced anger, and tells her to take up her plea with God, saying, "Can I take the place of God, who has denied you the fruit of the womb?" (Genesis 30:2). Rachel finally addresses God indirectly when she names her handmaid's first child Dan, and then directly when she names her own first child Joseph. Rachel names Dan after saying, "God has vindicated me. He has heeded my plea and given me a son" (Genesis 30:6). And her naming of Joseph marks her only real discourse with God: "God, give me another son" (Genesis 30:24). We see a progression in Rachel's own development, from her desperate

plea to Jacob, "Give me children or I shall die" (Genesis 30:1), to her simple prayer to God for another son twenty-four verses later.

However, the midrash tells a different story. Here, Rachel's relationship with God is a highly developed one. Sefer HaYashar records Rachel's complete prayer to God:

> And Rachel prayed to God at that time, saying: 'Adonai my God, please remember me and please think of me, for now my husband has driven me away [literally, divorced me] because I have not borne him children. Now God please hear my request before You and see my suffering and give me children like one of the handmaids so I will not hear my disgrace anymore.'[54]

God responds by opening her womb and giving her her first son. Rachel's reply is the same as in the Biblical text: "'God has taken away my disgrace.' And she called him Joseph, saying, 'God, give me another son.'"

An earlier text comments on this simple prayer for another son. Through this prayer, states Bereshit Rabbah, the gender of Leah's unborn baby changes from male to female. In the midrash, Rabbi Hanina ben Pazzi notes that the matriarchs are prophets. As a prophet, then, Rachel knows that Jacob is destined to bear only one more son. Her prayer is that this last son will come from her own womb.[55] Other texts, including the Babylonian Talmud, offer an alternative reading, stating that Dinah was born a girl through Leah's prayers for Rachel. We will look at a tradition found in Tractate *Berachot* in greater detail when we examine Leah's relationship with God.[56]

Finally, in the most compelling midrashic text regarding Rachel, Rachel defends the people of Israel to God. Lamentations Rabbah paints a picture of a matriarchal hero replete with wisdom, courage, and compassion. The text begins with the statement of R. Samuel bar Nahman, "When the Temple was destroyed, Abraham came before the Holy

One, blessed be He, weeping..." We witness Abraham begging God to have mercy on Israel. God, however, commands the Torah itself to come and give testimony against the Israel. In response, Abraham rebukes the Torah, and the Torah does not testify. The same series of events occurs with the *Aleph*, the *Bet*, the *Gimel*, and all the remaining letters of alphabet. Abraham then pleads with God again, citing his own faith as evidence that God should be merciful. Isaac, Jacob, and Moses each subsequently appear before God, urging God to remember their deeds. But when Moses witnesses the destruction with his own eyes, he rebukes God for remaining silent amid such despair. In the midst of this rebuke, Rachel suddenly appears and addresses God herself:

> Lord of the world! It is perfectly self-evident to you that your servant, Jacob, loved me with a mighty love, and worked for me for father for seven years, but when those seven years were fulfilled, and the time came for my wedding to my husband, father planned to substitute my sister for me in the marriage to my husband. Now that matter was very hard for me, for I knew the deceit, and I told my husband and gave him a sign by which he would know the difference between me and my sister, so that my father would not be able to trade me off. But then I regretted it and I bore my passion, and I had mercy for my sister, that she should not be shamed. So, in the evening for my husband they substituted my sister for me, and I gave my sister all the signs that I had given to my husband, so that he would think that she was Rachel.
>
> And not only so, but I crawled under the bed on which he was lying with my sister, while she remained silent, and I made all the replies so that he would not discern the voice of my sister.
>
> I paid my sister only kindness, and I was not jealous of her, and I did not allow her to be shamed, and I am a mere mortal, dust and ashes. Now I had no envy of my rival, and I did not place her at risk for shame and humiliation. But you are the King, living and enduring and merciful. How come then you are jealous of idolatry, which is nothing, and so have sent my children into exile, allowed them to be killed by the sword, permitted the enemy to do whatever they wanted to them?!
>
> Forthwith, the mercy of the Holy One, blessed be He, welled up, and he said, 'For Rachel I am going to bring the Israelites back to their land.'"[57]

In this midrash, we witness that God saves the people of Israel for Rachel's sake alone. This text provides us with more insight into Rachel's character, struggle, and perseverance than any other. We find here a Rachel who has the courage to address God with candor, to recount her struggle without pretense, and to challenge God's command with dignity.

E. Personal Qualities

The text of Lamentations Rabbah gives us unique insight into Rachel's personality, and no other midrash is more complete in its description. However, by examining the broad spectrum of midrashim, we are able to gradually piece together a portrait of Rachel's personal qualities. Looking at midrashic texts as a whole, we find several qualities that surface repeatedly, including jealousy, resourcefulness, compassion, modesty, and deceit.

1. Youthful

Josephus is alone in his detailed description of the initial meeting between Jacob and Rachel. In his account, he describes Rachel's youthful enthusiasm when she first meets Jacob:

> Upon this [hearing that Jacob was the son of Rebecca] the damsel [Rachel], at the mention of Rebecca, as usually happens to young persons, wept, and that out of the kindness she had for her father, and embraced Jacob, she having learned an account of Rebecca from her father, and knew that her parents loved to hear her named.[58]

Here, Josephus describes Rachel rather stereotypically as an emotional young woman.

According to Josephus, Rachel goes on to address Jacob with great youthful enthusiasm, saying that Jacob

> brought the most desirable and greatest pleasures to her father, with all their family, who was always mentioning his mother [Rebecca], and always thinking of her, and her alone; and that this will make thee equal in his eyes to any advantageous circumstances whatsoever.[59]

In this description, we meet a Rachel who appears to be a chatty, over-eager youngster. But later texts will paint her as an intelligent woman who struggles to deal with the complexity of her life situation.

2. Jealous

From the Biblical text we know that Rachel envies Leah's fertility: "Rachel envied her sister" (Genesis 30:1). We also know that Rachel's jealousy of Leah and her desire for children of her own bring her to a state of despair, as she exclaims, "Give me children or I shall die!" (Gen. 30:1). Midrashic literature attempts to put a positive spin on this negative trait. The rabbis are aware of the hazards of envy, quoting Proverbs 23:17, "Let not your heart envy sinners." But, they reply, Rachel's envy is not standard jealousy; it is a righteous form of envy. In their reading, Rachel is only jealous of her sister's good deeds, believing that Leah's fertility was proof of her righteousness.[60]

Another midrash erases this trait from Rachel's character altogether. Lamentations Rabbah views Rachel's lack of jealousy as her greatest quality: "I paid my sister only

kindness, and I was not jealous of her, and I did not allow her to be shamed, and I am a mere mortal, dust and ashes."[61]

Yet, in the biblical text itself we are directly told that Rachel is jealous of her sister. We also find another example of Rachel's jealousy in her desire for Leah's mandrakes. Josephus refers to the mandrakes as "apples," saying, "When Rachel saw them, she desired that she would give her the apples, for she longed to eat them...."[62] Perhaps these apples represent fertility and Rachel's need for children. However we define the word *dudaim*, this fruit certainly arouses Rachel's jealousy of her sister.

So, here, we confront a dichotomy between the Biblical view of Rachel's jealousy and the rabbinic view. The Bible tells us Rachel was jealous; the rabbis find ways to spin this into a positive quality or to negate it altogether. Inherent in this dialectic is a deep respect for this matriarchal figure and a desire to turn her human frailty into a model of righteousness.

3. Resourceful

In the mandrakes incident, we find a resourceful Rachel who uses her resources to get what she wants. Here, too, the tradition manipulates the biblical account to find merit in Rachel's actions. Josephus sees this act as one of appeasement, saying "Rachel, in order to mitigate her sister's anger, said she would yield her husband to her; and he should lie with her that evening."[63]

In the Testament of Issachar, Leah's son finds both punishment and reward in Rachel's action. He recounts, "Then Leah bore me, and I was called Issachar, on account

of the reward Rachel had given to my mother. At that time, an angel of the Lord appeared to Jacob, and he spoke: 'Rachel will bear only two children, because she rejected the company of her husband, and chose continence.'"[64] But even Issachar seeks to find merit in Rachel's action. Ultimately, he says that "Rachel's prayer also was fulfilled, on account of the *dudaim*, for although she desired to eat of the apples, she did not touch them, but put them in the house of the Lord, and gave them to the priest of the Most High that was in those days."[65] Here, our resourceful Rachel succumbs to guilt, and turns the object of her desire back to God.

4. Compassionate

As jealous as Rachel may be of her sister's success in childbearing, she also possesses a great deal of sisterly love. As early as the Babylonian Talmud, we learn of her compassion toward Leah on her wedding night. In Tractate *Megillah*, Rachel tells Jacob,

> 'I have an older sister, and he will not marry me off before her.' He gave her signs [to identify herself to him on the wedding night]. When the [wedding] night came, she said: Now my sister will be disgraced. She gave her the signs.[66]

In this tradition, Rachel gives the very signs that were meant to protect her from deceit to her sister Leah, to prevent her from humiliation.

In Lamentations Rabbah, Rachel not only gives the secret signs to Leah, but she also crawls under the bed to give verbal responses to protect Leah from shame. This is no ordinary act of sisterly love. Here, under her fiancé's bed, lies a woman who endures personal pain in order to treat her sister with compassion.

5. Modest

The rabbis view Rachel's choice to share the secret signs with her sister as an act of modesty. Two Talmudic texts value modesty as Rachel's greatest quality. Again in B.T. *Megillah* 13a, the rabbis assert that Rachel merited having Saul as her descendant as a reward for her modesty. In what way was she modest? they ask. She demonstrated her modesty, they answer, by giving her sister the signs.

In another Talmudic tradition, the rabbis discuss the birthright that Jacob gave to Joseph instead of Reuben. They begin by asserting that the birthright should have emanated from Rachel, because it is written, "These are the generations of Jacob: Joseph..." (Genesis 37:2). But, they continue, Leah then acquired the birthright for herself when she prayed for mercy. (This probably refers to the midrash in which Leah learns she has been promised in marriage to Esau, and subsequently weeps in despair. Leah, of course, does not marry Esau, but marries Jacob before her sister.) However, on account of Rachel's modesty, God restores the birthright to her. In what way was she modest? the rabbis again ask. They answer, Rachel feared Leah would be disgraced, so she gave her sister the signs. Clearly the rabbis value modesty highly, naming it as the quality that earns Rachel the birthright over her older sister.

6. Deceitful

Accompanying this modesty we find deceit. What the rabbis describe as modest behavior (not wanting to shame her sister on her wedding night) also involves extensive

deception. Rachel and Jacob make an arrangement to insure that the marriage agreement will be followed through honestly. They invent a plan to foil the deceitful Laban. Instead, Rachel becomes party to the very deception she had sought to prevent, deceiving Jacob just as Laban deceives him. Jacob entrusts Rachel with confidential signs; Rachel willingly shares them with her sister. But, as the texts above verify, Rachel participates in the deception of Jacob in order to show compassion and respect for Leah.

This decision to deceive her own husband-to-be does not come easily for Rachel. She experiences an internal struggle as she wrestles with her sister and her decision. In Bereshit Rabbah, the rabbis comment on the verse, "And Rachel said: With mighty wrestlings have I wrestled with my sister" (Gen. 30:8), saying that Rachel considered telling Jacob of the deception. However, according to the midrash, Rachel concludes that if the world is not going to be built up through her, then it should be built up through her sister.[67]

This act of deception, then, is based on righteous motives. But Rachel's second act of deception, the theft of her father's *teraphim* [household idols], has no clearly defined motive. Midrashic texts offer two divergent explanations, both of which excuse the theft as having justifiable motivations.

Josephus claims Rachel took the idols in case her father chose to pursue Jacob's camp as they left Laban's domain. Josephus goes to great lengths to explain Rachel's act, saying that "the reason why Rachel took the images of the gods, although Jacob had taught her to despise such worship of those gods, was this, That in case they were pursued and taken by her father, she might have recourse to these images in order to obtain his

pardon."[68] However, this explanation seems inconsistent with the biblical text. If Rachel originally took them to bribe Laban for his pardon, then why does she hide them from him when he pursues?

The second explanation is slightly more credible, though once again we see the rabbis actively transforming vice into virtue. According to Bereshit Rabbah, Rachel steals the *teraphim* to discourage her father's idolatry, saying to herself, 'Will we go and leave this old man in his erroneous ways?' It is for this reason, the rabbis conclude, that Scripture tells us, "And Rachel stole the teraphim that were her father's."[69] The rabbis go to such great lengths to defend Rachel's righteousness that one account even has the *teraphim* magically turn into drinking glasses to preserve Rachel's honor. This text is more than slightly nonsensical, but its message is clear: Rachel was a righteous woman.[70]

7. Rachel's Motto is Silence.

One midrash attempts to summarize Rachel's personal characteristics with a single quality: silence. According to Bereshit Rabbah, silence is Rachel's motto because she did not reveal Laban's proposed deception to Jacob:

> Rachel made silence her *métier*, and so all her children practised [sic] concealment. [Thus the stone representing] Benjamin [in the High Priest's breastplate was the] *yashpeh*, signifying *yesh peh* (has he a mouth)! He knew of Joseph's sale, yet did not reveal it. Saul: *But concerning the matter of the kingdom...he told him not* (I Sam. 10:16). Esther: *Esther had not made known her people or her kindred* (Esther 2:10).[71]

It is this silence that propels the entire Rachel-Leah-Jacob narrative into action. As a result of Rachel's silence, Leah and Rachel are forever bound in two complicated roles; They suddenly become both sisters and sisters-in-law.

F. Rachel Remembered

In a great irony of fate, Rachel dies while giving birth to Benjamin, the child for whom she had prayed. Rachel is buried alone, though her sister will eventually be buried with Jacob. Josephus notes that Rachel "was the only one of Jacob's kindred that had not the honour of burial at Hebron."[72] The rabbis search for answers to explain why Rachel is denied this honor.

Bereshit Rabbah recognizes an allusion to Rachel's death in the mandrakes incident. In taking the mandrakes from her sister, Rachel asserts, "Therefore, he will lie with you tonight" (Gen. 30:15). The rabbis interpret this statement as having eternal significance, meaning, 'he will sleep his last sleep with you, but not with me.'[73] Louis Ginzberg interprets this consequence as Rachel's punishment for bartering her husband.[74]

Others interpret that Jacob played a role in Rachel's premature death.. On his journey to Haran, Jacob makes a vow to God, saying 'If God remains with me, if He protects me on this journey that I am making, and gives me bread to eat and clothing to wear, and if I return safe to my father's house--the Lord shall be my God' (Gen. 28:20-21). The rabbis speculate that this vow had negative consequences, resulting in loss, perhaps in the death of Rachel or in the rape of Dinah.[75]

Another midrash asks, "Why did Rachel die first?" and provides two answers that relate to the words of Jacob.[76] First, when Jacob asks the sisters what they think of his plan to leave Haran, Rachel responds first. The second rabbinic response blames Jacob fully for Rachel's death, by speaking an unknowing curse. Jacob, not knowing that Rachel has taken her father's idols, tells Laban that whoever possesses his idols will be put to death.

Whatever the explanation for her premature death, the rabbis assert that "Jacob foresaw that she [Rachel] would not be buried together with him."[77] This is the reason he cries on their first meeting: "And when Jacob saw Rachel, the daughter of his uncle Laban, and the flock of his uncle Laban, Jacob went up and rolled the stone off the mouth of the well, and watered the flock of his uncle Laban. Then Jacob kissed Rachel, and broke into tears" (Gen. 29:10-11).

Though their lives take different turns, Rachel and Leah are both remembered in rabbinic literature as builders of Israel and role models for future generations. Many texts from early to late interpret the word *banot*, daughters (in Genesis 29:16, "Now Laban had two daughters"), as *bonot*, builders.[78] Rachel and Leah are the builders of Israel and take their place among the matriarchs of Israel. The Book of Ruth confirms their significance as role models for the women of Israel, with the blessing of Ruth that is addressed to Boaz: "The Lord make the woman that has come into your house like Rachel and like Leah."[79]

Chapter 3:

A Rabbinic Portrait of Leah

A. Leah: A Character Profile

Clearly, the rabbinic tradition values both Rachel and Leah as significant matriarchal figures. However, when read independently of the midrash, the biblical text seems to value the qualities of Rachel over those of Leah. Rabbinic texts do their part in attempting to balance this perception. Even the stereotypical views of Rachel as the beautiful daughter and Leah as the "weak-eyed" one come into question.

B. Name of Leah

Bereshit Rabbah even seems to value Leah's contributions to the world over Rachel's. The biblical text introduces Leah with the phrase, *V'shem ha-gedolah Leah.* (Gen. 29:16) Leah is *ha-gedolah*, literally 'the big one.' This phrase is generally translated as meaning 'the older one.'" However, as we saw in our profile of Rachel, Bereshit Rabbah interprets the phrase literally: The name of the great one was Leah. [80] She was great in her gifts, the text says, receiving the priesthood for all time and royalty for all time. Rachel, however, was 'small' in her gifts, because both Joseph and Saul, her progeny, had influence for only a limited period of time. This reading reinterprets the traditional roles of the sisters relative to each other.

C. Physical Characteristics of Leah

In a broad reading, we tend to think of Rachel as 'the beautiful sister,' in response to the biblical text itself. The verse, *V'aynay Leah rakot, V'Rachel haeita yefat-to'ar vifat*

mareh hardly offers a parallel description of the sisters. Here, Leah's "weak eyes" are compared with Rachel's overall form and beauty. An initial reading of this phrase implies that "weak eyes" are a euphemism for an unseemly countenance. However, the rabbinic interpretation of Leah's physical qualities promptly turns this Biblical reading on its head.

In the Book of Jubilees, as in the Bible, Leah's physical form is described in comparison to Rachel's. But here she is provided with an enhanced physical appearance. Leah is also beautiful, and it is only in comparison to the strikingly beautiful Rachel that her beauty dwindles. The text reads, "Leah's eyes were weak, but her form was very handsome; but Rachel had beautiful eyes and a beautiful and very handsome form."[81] Tanhuma Buber even goes a step farther, painting a picture of the sisters that renders them equal in their beauty.[82]

Only Josephus interprets the Biblical text in its euphemistic sense: that Leah's "weak eyes" mean she was unpleasant to look at. He describes the scene of the first marriage, saying that Laban "put his other daughter into bed to him, who was both elder than Rachel, and of no comely countenance. Jacob lay with her that night, as being both in drink and in the dark."[83] In Josephus' reading, Leah is simply unattractive. He even implies that Jacob could only bear her presence because he was drunk.

However, most other texts go to great lengths to explain Leah's weak eyes positively. It is as if the rabbis can not accept that this significant matriarchal figure may have been imperfect in her physical being. The Talmud itself provides us with great insight into the rabbinic thought process. In *Baba Batra*, the rabbis quote, "And the eyes

of Leah were weak" (Gen. 29:17). They immediately ask, 'What is meant by weak?' Could the text mean her eyes were literally weak?[84]

The rabbis respond in several ways. First, they interpret that Scripture does not denigrate the righteous, so this statement must not be meant literally. They conjecture that if Scripture does not even speak disparagingly of an unclean animal, how could it speak disparagingly of the righteous? There are two implications to this remark, one being that Scripture is generous; the other that Leah is righteous. Either way, the rabbis clearly see the need to reinterpret this description of Leah.

If this description is not literal, then what is its intent? Rabbi Elazar goes to great lengths to reinterpret the word *rakot* figuratively. In his interpretation, this word must really be *arukot*, or "long," in the sense that Leah's boundaries were extensive. In a footnote to his translation, Soncino interprets this reading to mean that Leah was privileged to have descendants who were priests and kings.[85] Clearly, this reading requires a philological leap, and the rabbis continue to seek an explanation.

Finally, in a second response, the rabbis conclude that the statement is actually meant literally. However, the fact that her eyes were weak is not a shortcoming, but rather an asset. Leah cried when she learned she was to marry Esau, and her profuse tears rendered her eyes weak. We will discuss this explanation in depth when we look at Leah's role as a young woman promised in marriage.[86]

These extensive explanations--and justifications--of Leah's physical appearance reveal the rabbis' commitment to protecting Leah's honor. In fact, we find that the rabbis

devote significantly more time to discussing the physical attributes of Leah than those of Rachel.

D. Roles in Relation to Others

Though rabbinic texts devote a great deal of time to the discussion of Leah's physical form, her character embodies considerable depth. Leah reveals herself to be a highly complex character, replete with her own set of desires and disappointments. Though her place in Biblical memory is often defined in relation to her sister, in Rabbinic Literature we also find an independent Leah who functions in a myriad of roles. In addition to being Rachel's older sister, Leah also relates to others as daughter, wife, barren woman, childbearer, mother, and child of God.

1. As daughter

Though some texts refer to the "mother of Rachel," we have no material at all regarding Leah's relationship with her mother. This absence of information is rather revealing, because we do have information about Leah's relationship with her father.

If Leah was influenced by her father, who was a man of deceit, and had little relationship with another adult figure, we can better understand her own deception of Jacob. Several texts refer to Leah being party to her father's deception on her wedding night,[87] and we can not help but conclude from the Biblical text that this was the case. Even if Leah did object to her father's plan, we know that she ultimately conceded to it.

2. As sister

We have already discussed the possibility that Rachel and Leah are twin sisters, a possibility that does not seem remote when we consider the great number of narratives involving twin brothers in the Biblical text. We have also considered the possibility that Bilhah and Zilpah are also daughters of Laban by concubines. This interpretation turns Rachel and Leah, and Bilhah and Zilpah into half sisters, a twist that further complicates this narrative. This possibility becomes even more feasible when we consider that Song of Songs Rabbah identifies six matriarchs, including Bilhah and Zilpah.[88]

Several texts also suggest that there were other sets of twins not explicitly mentioned in the Biblical text. The Book of Jubilees says that Dinah and Zebulon were twins: "She conceived, and bore two (children), a son and a daughter, and she called the name of the son, Zebulon and the name of the daughter, Dinah."[89] Sefer Ha-Yashar even suggests that all the sons of Jacob (except Joseph) were twins with a girl.[90] At least one interpretation of the verse "And all his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him" actually suggests that these siblings married each other.[91]

So, if we entertain the notion that Rachel and Leah were twins, the status of each may assume even greater significance. While one midrash in Bereshit Rabbah labels Leah 'The Great One,'[92] a subsequent midrash in the same compilation dubs her 'the less important one,' by calling Rachel *`ikara*, the principal one.[93] Ultimately, we find that there is no clear cut status position for either sister. In fact, their status relative to each other is constantly in flux. We recognize an elevated form of sibling rivalry as each sister tries to outdo the other by means of child-bearing and husband-loving.

Seen in this light, the exchange of mandrakes for love becomes especially important. Each sister has what the other sister desperately needs. Leah has myriads of children, but no love from her spouse. Rachel has the love of Jacob, but no children. In this way the sisters become eternally inter-dependent; one can not exist without the other. Rachel follows the model of her sister (giving her handmaid to Jacob) in order to acquire children, and Leah negotiates with a sister (giving her mandrakes to Rachel) in order to obtain a night of her husband's love. Their relationship becomes one of competition and negotiation, as each one struggles to find her own identity in a world that often defines her solely in relation to her husband and her children.

3. As young woman promised in marriage

As a young woman who knows that her marriage will shape her future, Leah learns a terrifying fact. Text after text tells us that Rebecca and Laban had a deal: Laban's younger daughter would marry Rebecca's younger son; and the older daughter would marry the older son.[94] When the young Leah learns of her father and aunt's plan, she inquires about Esau's character. What she learns is an anathema to her, and she weeps endlessly. The rabbis construct this tale to explain Leah's weak eyes: They were actually perfectly normal eyes, until she learns this terrible truth. Then she weeps until her eyes become weak.

The Talmud uses this tale to explain that Leah's weak eyes were actually a great credit to her, and not a disgrace at all. In *Baba Batra* 123a, Rav explains that after Leah learned that she was intended for Esau,

> She sat at the crossroads and inquired: 'How does the elder one conduct himself?' (Lit., 'what are his deeds'). [And the answer came that he was] a wicked man, a highway robber. (Lit., 'robbing people.') 'How does the younger man conduct himself?'-- *'A quiet man dwelling in tents'* (Gen. 25:27). And she wept until her eyelashes dropped (from their lids). And this accounts for the Scriptural text, *And the Lord saw that Leah was hated.* (Gen. 29:31)[95]

This story comforts the rabbis because it both proves Leah's righteousness and accounts for her weak eyes. The irony inherent in this text is that Jacob himself is actually the robber: Through deception, he tricked Esau of his birthright and blatantly stole Esau's blessing.

Bereshit Rabbah relates the same tale, but adds a new dimension: The element of prayer. In this version of the midrash, Leah actually changes her own fate by praying to God. The text asks, 'What does *rakkot* mean?' and the response is:

> That they had grown weak through weeping, for [people used to say]: This was the arrangement: the elder daughter is for the elder son, and the younger daughter for the younger son, while she used to weep and pray, 'May it be Thy will that I do not fall to the lot of that wicked man.' R. Huna said: Great is prayer, that it annulled the decree (her natural destiny), and she even took precedence of [over] her sister.[96]

As a young woman promised in marriage, Leah opposed her fate, and responded through the only vehicle available to her: prayer.

4. As wife

As much as the rabbis struggle with Leah's "weak eyes," they struggle equally with the fact that she is described in the Bible as hated. As a wife, the Bible tells us, Leah is hated. If the rabbis cannot imagine that a central matriarchal figure has a negative physical

trait, how much the more so do they struggle with the possibility that she is hated as a wife. Ultimately, they do not settle on a single explanation, but proffer a variety of reasons for this problematic text.

In *Baba Batra*, the rabbis supply the same reasoning with this text as they did for her "weak eyes." That is, if Scripture does not speak disparagingly of an unclean animal, how could it possibly speak disparagingly of a righteous person? The conclusion is that

> The Holy One, blessed be He, *saw that* Esau's conduct *was hateful* to her, *so He opened her womb*.[97]

This explanation transfers the blame from Jacob to Esau. Jacob did not hate Leah; rather, Esau's conduct was hateful to her. God witnessed this behavior and, as a result, opened Leah's womb.

The difficulty with this explanation is that it does not make sense in the current context. It makes sense prior to her marriage, when Leah learns that she is to marry Esau. Now that Leah is in a different marriage, why should she care about Esau? This rabbinic response reflects the rabbis' need to reinterpret the text. They can imagine Esau hating or being hated, but not Jacob.

Bereshit Rabbah reasons that the only way Jacob could hate Leah is if she provoked him to do so. Therefore, the reason Jacob hated Leah, one midrash concludes, is because she deceived her sister.[98] However, this reasoning is also problematic because Jacob himself is the quintessential deceiver. If Jacob hates Leah because she deceived him, then perhaps this sentiment reveals a certain amount of self-hatred on Jacob's part. At least one text supports this theory of self-hatred, saying that Jacob hated Leah because

she taunted him for also being a deceiver. She mocks him with the words, "I learned deception from you!"[99]

Despite these attempts at explanations, the authors of midrash generally have great difficulty even conceptualizing that Jacob actually hated Leah. In asking the question, 'Why was Leah hated?,' one midrash in Bereshit Rabbah finds four potential responses:[100]

1. She wept and cried like those who are hated.
2. She was bespoken for an enemy, in that she was supposed to marry Esau. She wept and prayed, 'May it be Your will that I do not fall to the lot of the wicked Esau.' R. Huna said: Great is prayer, that it annulled the decree; moreover she took precedence of her sister.
3. All hated her, saying, "This Leah leads a double life: she pretends to be righteous, yet is not so, for if she were righteous, would she have deceived her sister!"
4. Jacob determined to divorce her, because she deceived him by pretending to be Rachel. But as soon as God visited her with children, he exclaimed, 'Shall I divorce the mother of these children?' Eventually, he gave thanks for her, as it is said, *And Israel bowed down [in thanksgiving] for the bed's head. (Gen. 47:31)* Who was the head of our father Jacob's bed? Surely Leah, who was the first to give him children.

One text resolves the entire issue of hatred by refuting it. The Book of Jubilees describes Leah not just as loved, but also as truly cherished. The text provides the following description of a husband who loves his wife with all his heart and all his soul:

> And Leah, his wife, died in the fourth year of the second week of the forty-fifth Jubilee, and he buried her in the double cave near Rebecca, his mother, to the left of the grave of Sarah, his father's mother. And all her sons and his sons came to mourn over Leah, his wife, with him, and to comfort him regarding her, for he was lamenting her. For he loved her exceedingly after

> Rachel her sister died; for she was perfect and upright in all her ways and honoured Jacob, and all the days that she lived with him he didn't hear from her mouth a harsh word, for she was gentle and peaceable and upright and honourable. And he remembered all her deeds which she had done during her life, and he lamented her exceedingly; for he loved her with all his heart and with all his soul.[101]

This unique text describes a beautiful relationship between two spouses. After Rachel's death, Jacob and Leah are able to become devoted partners, no longer a complex group of three. Their relationship thrives, and an extraordinary love develops between them. This text is unique in describing the life between Jacob and Leah after Rachel's death, but it is a lucid explanation that adds a new dimension to the Jacob-Rachel-Leah narrative.

5. As barren woman

Though we often think of Leah as the wife who had no difficulty conceiving, the midrash defines her otherwise. First, the biblical text implies that Leah did not conceive until God actively opened her womb. Does this mean that her womb was previously closed? Bereshit Rabbah describes a woman without a womb at all, quoting I Samuel 2:5: "'...while the barren has borne seven.' Leah, who was barren, having no womb, bore seven."[102] Soncino comments that "she originally was physically incapable of childbirth, yet God wrought a miracle for her."[103]

Pesikta d'Rav Kahana corroborates this statement in its interpretation of Psalms 114:9: "He sets the childless woman among her household as a happy mother of children."

There are seven childless women, according to this text, including: Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah, the wife of Manoah, Hannah, and Zion.[104] Though Leah has many children, the midrash tells us that she was initially barren.

6. As childbearer

When we learn that Jacob loves Rachel more then Leah, we also find that Leah's compensation from God seems to be childbirth. Children, then, become the single source of love in Leah's life, at least for a significant period of time. Bereshit Rabbah addresses the subject of Leah's fertility and acknowledges a change in her psychological state before and after motherhood. It begins by quoting Psalms 69:34:

> 'For the Lord hearkens to the needy, and does not despise His prisoners.' 'And does not despise His prisoners' refers to childless women who are as prisoners in their houses, but as soon as the Holy One, blessed be He, visits [i.e., blesses] them with children, they become erect [with pride]. The proof is that Leah was hated in her house, yet, when God visited her, she became erect, as it is written, '...and He opened her womb.'[105]

Although children change Leah's life significantly, there is one unfortunate result: children become a substitute for Jacob's love. This is reflected clearly in the biblical text through two specific incidents. First, in naming her children, Leah clearly exposes her unrequited love for her husband. The second example is the exchange of mandrakes. Leah will initially not give the fruit, a symbol of love, to her sister. She knows she does not own her husband's love, and will not give up what she does have. Finally, Rachel negotiates an exchange that offers Leah an evening of physical love, which Leah determines is worth more than the aphrodisiac she holds in her hand.

In looking back at his mother's barter, Issachar quotes Leah saying, "Jacob is mine and I am the wife of his youth."[106] This statement is most revealing: Leah clings to the one aspect of Jacob that Rachel can not lay claim to: the fact that she (Leah) is the wife of his first marriage. Though Leah can not claim Jacob's love for herself, she can claim his children. Her offspring far exceed Rachel's in number, and each time she bears another, she hopes that her husband's expression toward her will change.

7. As mother

Leah certainly cares about having children; she bears one after another in the hope that this time her husband will love her:

> Leah conceived and bore a son, and named him Reuben; for she declared, "It means: 'The Lord has seen my affliction'; it also means: 'Now my husband will love me.'" She conceived again and bore a son, and declared, "This is because the Lord heard that I was unloved and has given me this one also"; so she named him Simeon. Again she conceived and bore a son and declared, "This time my husband will become attached to me, for I have borne him three sons." Therefore, he was named Levi. (Genesis 29:32-34)

The Talmud even presents Leah as gaining a reward for soliciting Jacob after the mandrakes trade. In the biblical text, Leah approaches Jacob with a direct instruction:

> When Jacob came home from the field in the evening, Leah went out to meet him and said, "You are to sleep with me, for I have hired you with my son's mandrakes." And he lay with her that night. (Genesis 30:16)

The Talmudic midrash explains, her reward was that she became the mother of "men of understanding."[107]

Despite innumerable references to childbirth, we hear absolutely nothing about how Leah raises her children. The only active roles we see her play as mother are desiring children and naming them. When Issachar remembers his mother in his final speech to his children, he remembers her desire for children. He says, "Leah bore six sons...for God knew that for the sake of children she desired to be with her husband, and not for lust of pleasure."[108]

Ultimately, we learn about Leah in the context of desiring children and bearing children, but not in the role of mothering them. Though her children are defined as "men of understanding," certainly not all her children fall into this category. After all, the Bible tells us that Reuben rapes Bilhah, Rachel's handmaid. Where is Leah? Does she know about this incident? What is her response? And another of Leah's children, her only daughter, is the victim of a devastating rape. Again, how does Leah respond? How does she help Dinah recover? We know little about Leah's relationship with her children.

While one text acknowledges that Leah is rewarded for going out to her husband, medieval commentaries interpret *Vatetze* (going out), as a negative word, meaning "loose" or "indiscreet." The rabbis link the word *vatetze* in the Leah text and the Dinah text, and interpret this as promiscuity in both cases.

In the Book of Jubilees, Bilhah and Dinah (who are also both rape victims) die when they learn of Joseph's presumed "death."[109] Midrashically, these women shared a close relationship with Joseph and were protective of his well-being, to the point of being shattered by his death. And neither one is Joseph's mother: one is his mother's handmaid and one is his sister. If the midrash takes the time to tell us of these close relationships,

why is there no midrashic tradition which describes Leah's connection with her own children? Was Leah protective too? What was her role in the lives of her many children? Even the midrash, often so rich with explanation, leaves us only with questions.

8. In relation to God

Though we learn little about Leah's relationship with her children, we do learn that she has a thriving relationship with God. For example, as we saw in Bereshit Rabbah 70:16, she prays to God when she learns of her impending marriage to Esau. But in addition to engaging in *bakashot*, or prayers of request, Leah engages in another kind of prayer, *hodaot*, or prayers of thanksgiving.

In fact, *Berachot* 7b tells us that Leah herself was the first person to praise God in this way when she named her fourth child, Judah:

> And Rabbi Yohanan said in the name of R. Shimon b. Yohai:
> From the day that the Holy One, blessed be He, created His world,
> there was no person who praised *(hodah)* the Holy One, blessed be He,
> until Leah came and praised Him, as it is said: 'This time I will praise
> the Lord.' (Genesis 29:35).[110]

The rabbis of Bereshit Rabbah are even more specific in their explanation of Leah's prayer. They state that since the matriarchs thought that each was to produce three sons, when Leah bore a fourth son, she exclaimed, *<u>This</u> time I will praise the Lord. (Gen. 29:35)*[111]

In her final midrashic prayer to God, we learn that Leah prays for a daughter. A variety of texts state that Leah prays for the male embryo in her body to change to a

female, so that she may show compassion for her sister Rachel.[112] For example, in *Berachot* 60a, we find the following discourse:

> If a man's wife is pregnant and he says, may [God] grant that my wife bear, etc., this a prayer in vain. Are prayers, then, in such circumstances of no avail? R. Joseph cited the following in objection: *And afterwards she bore a daughter and called her name Dinah (Gen. 30:21).* What is meant by 'afterwards?' Rav said: After Leah had passed judgment on herself, saying, 'Twelve tribes are destined to issue from Jacob. Six have issued from me and four from the handmaids, making ten. If this child will be a male, my sister Rachel will not [even] be equal to one of the handmaids.' Forthwith, the child was turned to a girl, as it is said, *And she called her name Dinah.*

Despite Leah's jealousy of her sister, she is able to show compassion for Rachel when it comes to the possibility of humiliation. In the same way, Rachel is able to show compassion for Leah on her wedding night by giving her the signs, in order to prevent her from being shamed. The sisters' relationship is not proactive, but reactive. Though they do not actively treat each other with good will, they do protect each other in times of need. Through the vehicle prayer, Leah protects her sister from shame.

E. Personal Qualities

Leah's relationship with God is unique in the midrash. She is the first person to thank God, and she is one of the few women to actively petition God in matters besides conception. Looking at the spectrum of midrashim as a whole, we find that Leah is unique in other qualities as well. She is not merely an active child-bearer, as the biblical text would sometimes lead us to believe. Leah, we find, is a full and complex character, like her sister Rachel. Ironically, she shares many qualities with her seemingly dissimilar sister, including jealousy, resourcefulness, compassion, and deceit.

1. Pro-Active

Through her relationship with God, Leah is an active participant in her own destiny. Early in her life she prays for God to change her marital fate, and as an adult, she prays that her sister will bear Jacob a son instead of herself. The result of these prayers, according to the midrash, is that Leah is spared a marriage to Esau, and that her male embryo is turned into a female for her sister's sake.

Shaped by experience, Leah learns to become assertive, and not to passively accept her lot in life. While Josephus describes Rachel as an energetic, bubbly youth,[113] he chooses different terms for Leah: "elder...and of no comely countenance."[114] The one experience the midrash teaches us about Leah's youth is her inadvertent discovery of her father's marriage plans for her. Leah learns early in life that if you want something--or don't want it--you have to take charge. She becomes an assertive woman, and at times her assertive demeanor even turns to aggression, as we will soon witness.

Though Leah twice challenges her destiny through prayer, we also find a case where she acts equally assertively to fulfill her destiny. On at least one occasion Leah acts as a prophet, seeing the future and responding accordingly. Midrash HaGadol suggests that Leah gave Jacob Zilpah, her half sister, because she saw it was Jacob's destiny to have 4 wives.[115]

Even when Leah finds she is wrong about the future, she is assertive about acknowledging God's role. In Bereshit Rabbah we read that Leah thought that each of

Jacob's wives would produce three sons. [116] So, when Leah bore a fourth son, she exclaimed, 'This time I will praise the Lord' (Gen. 29:35).

2. Jealous

Leah's assertive nature does not prevent her from being jealous of her sister's successes. More than anything, Leah is jealous of Jacob's love for Rachel, something that seems unattainable for her. Josephus describes Leah's emotional torment in his own words:

> Now, Leah was sorely troubled by her husband's love for her sister; and she expected she whould be better esteemed if she bare him children: So she entreated God perpetually; and when she had borne a son, and her husband was on that account better reconciled to her, she named her son Reuben, *because God had had mercy upon her, in giving her a son,* for that is the significance of this name. After some time, she bore three more sons...[117]

Even after bearing four children, the Book of Jubilees tells us that Leah remains jealous of Rachel. "And when Leah saw that she had become sterile and did not bear, she envied Rachel, and she also gave her handmaid Zilpah to Jacob to wife..."[118] The biblical text itself explains how Leah named the two children that resulted from this union, and her choices are rather revealing. "Leah said, 'What luck!' So, she named him Gad. When Leah's maid Zilpah bore Jacob a second son, Leah declared, 'What fortune!' meaning, 'Women will deem me fortunate.' So, she named him Asher" (Genesis 30:11-12). Leah's own words reveal her lack of self-confidence and her need to gain approval from those around her. Feeling unloved, Leah expresses her low sense of self worth in the form of jealousy.

3. Resourceful

Leah is not a woman who quietly envies her rival. Aware of her own resources, Leah takes action. First, when Leah learns that Rachel has given her handmade to Jacob, she immediately does the same. Josephus alludes to Leah's resourcefulness in calling this act a "counter-stratagem."[119]

In the mandrakes incident, we watch Leah's jealousy toward her sister transform into resourceful behavior for personal gain. Resentful of Rachel's request for her mandrakes, Leah firmly denies her the fruit. But when Rachel presents a possible "trade," Leah immediately consents. In this exchange, and through consistent childbirth, Leah postures for status with her sister. If she has something Rachel wants, she will not concede it. Only now, when her potential gain exceeds potential loss will she engage in an exchange.

Leah's awareness of her lack of status in her own home forces her to become exceptionally resourceful. Eschewed by her husband, Leah tries to compensate through her behavior. Josephus relates the incident in his own words. First Leah addresses her sister sarcastically, then eagerly accepts her sister's terms of negotiation:

> When Rachel saw them [the mandrakes], she desired that she would give her the apples, for she longed to eat them; But when she refused, and bid her be content that she had deprived her of the benevolence she ought to have had from her husband, Rachel, in order to mitigate her sister's anger, said she would yield her husband to her; and he should lie with her that evening. She [Leah] accepted of the favour, and Jacob slept with Lea, by the favour of Rachel.[120]

Bereshit Rabbah addresses this incident in terms of gain and loss. Though it appears that Leah gained the upper hand in the transaction by winning a night with Jacob consequently birthing two sons, the text acknowledges that both sisters gained and both lost:

> R. Eleazar said: Each lost [by the transaction], and each gained. Leah lost the mandrakes and gained the tribes (and the birthright), while Rachel gained the mandrakes and lost the tribes (and the birthright). R. Samuel b. Nahman said: The one lost mandrakes and gained [two] tribes and the privilege of burial with him, while Rachel gained mandrakes and lost the tribes and burial with him.[121]

This passage implies that Rachel and Leah are necessarily at odds with each other. In their imbalanced relationship, no matter what the trade, neither one can emerge the winner.

4. Compassionate

Despite the fact that Rachel and Leah are often at odds with each other, they are not at war. Even with all their complex interactions, it is hard to imagine Leah fortifying an army against Rachel, as Jacob does with Esau. Though Leah may address Rachel with blatant hostility, she privately prays for her welfare.

Leah's only defense against her lack of love from her husband is her abundance of children. When she becomes pregnant with her seventh child, she finally acknowledges the imbalance in the number of her offspring compared to Bilhah, Zilpah, and Rachel. If Rachel bares no more children, then even the handmaids will have more children than her sister. Leah finally has compassion for her sister and prays for a girl, so that Rachel may

bare the final male child in the family. Though Leah does not publicly treat Rachel with compassion, she petitions God on her sister's behalf.

5. Aggressive

While the rabbis look to Rachel for a model of modesty, Leah is the model of the aggressive woman. These contrasting qualities seem to contain inherent value judgments. In the rabbinic world view, modesty is an admirable quality in a woman; aggression is inappropriate behavior. (The text "A woman of valor...," from Proverbs 31:10-31, contains a detailed description of the qualities most valued in women.) However, the rabbis actually view both qualities--Rachel's modesty and Leah's aggression--in a positive light. When Leah trades her mandrakes for a night with her husband, her aggression becomes the source of two tribes of Israel. And, as the rabbis point out, Leah does not walk; she runs to cash in on her trade.

The biblical text tells us, "When Jacob came home from the field in the evening, Leah went out to meet him and said, 'You are to sleep with me, for I have hired you with my son's mandrakes.' And he lay with her that night" (Genesis 30:16). Here, Jacob comes home from work to find a wife who gives him a clear directive regarding the evening activity. But the midrash adds a new, even more aggressive, element to the story.

In more than one midrashic text, Leah impatiently awaits her husband's arrival. She rushes out to meet him as soon as she hears the braying of his ass. In the Babylonian Talmud *Nedarim* 20b, Rabbi Levi comments on the text in Ezekiel, "I will remove from you those who rebel and transgress against Me."[122] Who qualifies as a transgressor?

Rabbi Levi identifies nine categories: children of fear [rape], of outrage, of a hated wife, one under a ban, of a woman mistaken for another, of strife, of intoxication [during intercourse], of a mentally divorced wife [her husband has decided to divorce her], and of a brazen woman.[123] This interpretation is extremely problematic in the context of the Jacob-Rachel-Leah narrative, primarily because it identifies most of the tribes of Israel as transgressors. Clearly, Leah is a woman mistaken for another. Are her children, then, all transgressors? And as an aggressive woman who solicits her husband, Leah also falls under the category of "brazen woman."

Rabbi Samuel ben Nahman disagrees with this final category. The Talmudic text reads,

> But that [category of "brazen woman"] is not so: for did not R. Samuel b. Nahmani say in the name of R. Jonathan: One who is summoned to his marital duty by his wife will beget children such as were not to be found even in the generation of Moses?

As a proof text, the Talmud quotes Chronicles I 12:33, which refers to the children of Issachar as 'men who had understanding of the times.' Consequently, this Talmudic midrash compliments Leah for her aggression. Her reward for her "brazen" behavior is great: "children such as were not to be found even in the generation of Moses."

Another Talmudic text addresses the issue of Leah's solicitation directly, asking "What is the implication of the Scriptural text, 'And he lay with her that night?' (Genesis 30:16).[124] The answer provided is:

> It teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, assisted in that matter. For it is said, 'Issachar is a large-boned ass;' (Genesis 49:14) it is the ass that has caused the birth of Issachar. [125]

In a footnote to his translation, Soncino interprets the text as an allusion to the legend that Leah heard the braying of Jacob's ass and ran to meet him, demanding her conjugal rights.[126] The text itself makes a philological connection between the words 'ass' *(garem)* and 'cause' *(garam)*. The braying of the ass caused Leah to come forth, and ultimately 'caused' the birth of Issachar.[127] The rabbis of Bereshit Rabbah interpret this text in the same way, saying that the ass was responsible for his existence.[128] Despite indications in rabbinic texts that aggressive behavior is a negative quality in women, the rabbis value this quality in Leah because it leads to the birth of children.

6. Deceitful

Like her sister and her husband, Leah embodies the quality of deceit. Like Rachel and Jacob, Leah's deceit is learned behavior. Jacob's mother, Rebecca, tutors him in the art of deceit when she clothes him like Esau to win Isaac's blessing. Rachel and Leah are both witness to Laban's deceit when he tries to switch his daughters. But Leah claims her learned behavior has another source: Jacob.

When Jacob angrily accuses Leah of deceiving him, she responds with clarity, "I learned deception from you!" In this light, the rabbis of Bereshit Rabbah recreate the dialogue of the morning after the wedding:

> **Jacob:** What, you are a deceiver and the daughter of a deceiver!
> **Leah:** Is there a teacher without pupils? Didn't your father call you Esau, and you answered him! So did you too call me and I answered you! [129]

Earlier in Bereshit Rabbah, the rabbis point out that Jacob hated Leah because she deceived her sister.[130] But this text also suggests that Jacob hated Leah because she

taunted him for his own deceit.[131] While Jacob blames Leah for her deception, he neglects to acknowledge his own acts of deception. Ironically, these are the very acts that led him to this place, as he fled the wrath of Esau.

In the case of the wedding night deception, we have conflicting midrashic accounts of who participated in the deceit. On the evening that Jacob and Leah marry, we do not know whose voice Jacob actually hears. In Bereshit Rabbah we learn that "the whole night he [Jacob] called her [Leah] Rachel and she answered him."[132] Yet, in a later rabbinic text, Lamentations Rabbah, we find Rachel herself under the bed responding. Rachel confides in God,

> And not only so, but I crawled under the bed on which he was lying with my sister, while she remained silent, and I made all the replies so that he would not discern the voice of my sister.[133]

Whether or not Rachel was actively involved in deceiving Jacob, we know that Leah played a leading role in the deception. Though Laban was the initiator of this deceitful switch, Leah seems to participate willingly. But, ultimately, Leah does not point to Laban as the source of her deception; she blames her new husband, Jacob.

7. Leah's Motto is Thanksgiving.

One text in Bereshit Rabbah ascribes mottoes to Rachel and to Leah. This text reads,

> Leah made *hodayah* [confession/thanksgiving] her métier, and so all her descendants did likewise.... Rachel make silence her métier, and so all her children practiced concealment.[134]

For examples of Leah's descendants, the rabbis look to Judah, David, and Daniel.

Judah acknowledges Tamar's truthfulness, saying, "'She is more in the right than I'" (Genesis 38:26). David gives thanks to God repeatedly in Psalms. Daniel also thanks God with the words, "'I thank and praise You, O God of my fathers'" (Daniel 2:23). *Hodayah* translates as both "confession" and "thanksgiving." Both definitions of the word involve a type of "recognition." In the first proof text, Judah recognizes and confesses that he is wrong. In the second and third, David and Daniel offer words of thanksgiving to God.

The authors of this text, however, neglect to draw direct parallels to Leah. Yet, we can draw clear conclusions from the translation of *hodayah* as "thanksgiving" in that Leah repeatedly gave thanks for her children. But we have no clear examples of Leah engaged in an act of confession. Perhaps the rabbis' connection to this translation was purely linguistic. Whatever the specific reference, it is clear that the rabbis' are complimenting Leah by ascribing to her the word *hodayah*.

Rachel, on the other hand, is ascribed the quality of silence or concealment. This quality seems to be in direct contrast to the translation of *hodayah* as 'confession.' In fact, the quality of concealment seems significantly less complimentary than either thanksgiving or confession.

For examples of Rachel's 'silent' descendants, the rabbis look to Benjamin, Saul, and Esther. Benjamin knew of Joseph's sale, but did not reveal it; Saul concealed the words of Samuel from his uncle (I Samuel 10:16); and Esther did not reveal her people (Esther 2:10). Concealment has both positive and negative implications, as these examples indicate. However, the word *hodayah*, even with its various translations,

indicates only positive qualities. In this midrash, the rabbis seem to link Leah with only the admirable qualities of her ancestors.

F. Leah Remembered

For the rabbis, Leah is a complex matriarchal figure. She does not fit into clear categories, and the rabbis struggle to define her role. The biblical text tells us she is unloved, deceptive, and aggressive in soliciting sexual activity from her husband. Through the vehicle of midrash, somehow the rabbis manage to explain, even justify this behavior. She wasn't actually unloved; she learned deception from Jacob himself; and her aggressive behavior led to the growth of Israel.

1. In death

In death, Leah has the distinction of being buried with her husband, Jacob. Rachel has no such honor. Immediately before his death, Jacob gives the following instructions to his children:

> I am about to be gathered to my kin. Bury me with my fathers in the cave which is in the field of Ephron, the Hittite, the cave which is in the field of Machpelah, facing Mamre, in the land of Canaan, the field that Abraham bought from Ephron the Hittite, for a burial site--there Abraham and his wife Sarah were buried; there Isaac and his wife Rebekah were buried; and there I buried Leah--the field and the cave in it, bought from the Hittites. (Gen. 49:29-32)

According to Jacob's words, four couples are buried in the cave in the field of Machpelah, including Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and Jacob and Leah. Leah, not Rachel, is the wife who is honored in death.

The Talmud adds to the list of distinguished couples buried in Mamre. In the Babylonian Talmud *Eruvin* 53a, Rabbi Isaac calls Mamre, the city of Arba ("four"), "the city of the four couples." These couples include Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and Jacob and Leah.[135] At least two other texts also refer to the four matriarchs buried in the 'city of four' (Kiriat Arba): Eve, Sarah, Rebecca, and Leah.[136] If in life Leah's role was as the second place wife, she certainly finds matriarchal distinction in her death.

2. As matriarch

In Bereshit Rabbah, the rabbis reinterpret the word *banot*, daughters (of Laban), as *bonot*, builders (of Israel). The text comments on the phrase "Now Laban had two daughters" (Genesis 29:16), and the midrash reads:

> --like two beams running from end to end of the world.--Each produced captains, each produced kings, from each arose slayers of lions, from each arose conquerors of countries, from each arose dividers of countries...[137]

Here, the rabbis acknowledge parallelism in the accomplishments of Rachel and Leah, and they draw direct lines of comparison between the sisters and their descendants.

However, the very next line leads to the midrash that defines Leah as "the great one" and Rachel and "the small one." Despite their efforts to balance the historic contributions of these sisters, the rabbis still struggle to resolutely define who was the

"greater of the sisters." In some cases, Rachel emerges the victor, winner of her husband's love, and mother of Joseph, the next significant figure in the biblical text. For example, in our earlier discussion, the text of Ruth Rabbah interprets the wording of the blessing, "May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah" (Ruth 4:11), to mean that Rachel is superior to Leah. But the rabbis also reverse the traditional model, as they find ways to 'elevate' Leah above her sister. In her motto (thanksgiving/confession), in her "greatness," and in her death, Leah becomes a powerful matriarchal figure through midrashic interpretation.

3. As role model

Finally, as a role model, Leah may be an important paradigm for our ability to change. In her lifetime, she goes from being a partner in deception and an unloved wife, to a woman who actively seeks ways to spend time with her husband, to a partner in a loving relationship (if we find validity in the Book of Jubilees' interpretation.) In the Book of Jubilees we witness Jacob burying Leah, the woman he loved with all his heart and soul.

As a member of an unresolved threesome, Leah struggles to find her place. She quickly learns that her means of access to happiness, status, and attention is through children. She knows that as long as she and her sister share the same husband, she can never find true fulfillment, and she will never define a clear place for herself in this complex family structure.

According to the Book of Jubilees, after Rachel's death, Leah and Jacob are able to build a loving relationship of their own, and Leah finds some semblance of peace. Her

story is a tragic one, in that she can not find happiness while her sister is still alive. Laban has manipulated their marriage so that neither sister can build the relationship she truly desires. This is a story of a family that becomes so embroiled in deceit that the structure of their lives can never be repaired. Only when the structure changes, through death, can the characters in this drama find fulfillment.

Through her struggle, Leah never gives up the hope for change. She knows she is impotent to alter the overriding structure of her life, so she carefully seeks out areas where she does have the power to initiate change. As a young woman, she finds sustenance through prayer. As a married woman, she gains strength through negotiation and childbearing. And as an older adult, she finally has the opportunity to build a relationship with her husband on her own. From an unloved bride to a partner in a loving relationship, Leah finds strength in the aspects of her life over which she bears control, and waits for a time when she can find completion.

Chapter 4:

An Analysis of the Midrashic Understanding of Rachel and Leah

A. The Midrashic Rachel: Ongoing Themes and Variations over Time

Over time, rabbinic interpretation of Rachel both changes and stays the same. Certain themes remain constant, reappearing in text after text, regardless of date. For example, in a wide variety of midrashic texts, Rachel warns Jacob that her father is cunning.[138] This reading emphasizes that Rachel's painful awareness of the theme of the deception in her family, as she warns a newcomer to the community that he could never match her father's deceit. The irony inherent in this statement, of course, is that Jacob has already matched Laban's deceit. In fact, the reason for his arrival in Haran is that he is escaping the consequences of his own deceit. Just as the biblical text revisits the theme of deceit repeatedly, so do the authors of the midrash emphasize the theme of deceit by repeating this midrash in multiple texts over a variety of time periods.

Related to the theme of deceit, the midrash regarding secret "signs" appears repeatedly. For example, from the Talmud, to the fifth century text Lamentations Rabbah, to the later anthologies of midrash, we read about these signs. Note, for example, the following tradition from B.T. *Megillah* 13a:

> What modesty did Rachel demonstrate? As it is written, "And Jacob told Rachel that he was her father's brother" (Gen. 29:22). Now was he really her father's brother? He was actually the son of her father's sister. Rather he said to her: 'Marry me.' She said to him: 'Yes; but my father is deceitful, and you will not be able to stand up to him.' He said to her: 'I am his brother in deceit.' She said to him: 'And is a righteous man permitted to increase deceit?' He said to her: 'Yes, [it says], "Be pure with the pure, but be sly with the crooked" (2 Sam. 22:27).' He said to her: 'And what is the deceit?' She said to him: 'I have an older sister, and he will not marry me off before her.' He gave her signs [to identify herself to him on the wedding night]. When the [wedding] night came, she said: 'Now my sister will be disgraced.' She gave her the signs. That is why it says, "And behold in the morning it was Leah" (Gen. 29:25). Does this

> mean that until now it was not Leah? Rather, because of the signs that Rachel passed on to Leah, he did not know until now. Therefore, she merited that Saul descended from her.[139]

In order to protect themselves, Jacob and Rachel invent a confidential system of signs so that Jacob will be able to distinguish Rachel from Leah should Laban try to switch the two. If Laban initiates this monstrous act of deceit, Jacob and Rachel will be armed with their own form of counter-deceit to foil Laban's plan. However, the counter-plan never materializes. After inventing this elaborate plan with her betrothed, Rachel suddenly has compassion for her sister, and wishes to save her from humiliation. In a twist to the theme of deceit, Rachel deceives her husband, with whom she planned to outwit her father, and teaches her sister the signs. In a slight variation to this midrash, one text has Jacob inventing the signs,[140] and another attributes them to Rachel.[141] Whoever invents the specific signals, it is clear that both agree to participate. When Rachel deviates from the plan, she proves herself capable of matching both Laban and Jacob's deceit.

This complex plan of deceiving family members results in the complex marriage of Jacob and Rachel and Leah. As all three learn to adjust to this less than ideal marriage, the theme of deceit turns to competition. The sisters participate in a battle of birthing, vying for status and love. They engage their handmaids in the process, each hoping to outdo the other. The twelve tribes of Israel are born through the ravages of jealousy and competition. Finally, after Rachel repeatedly pleads for her own child, we find that God answers her wishes. In a wide variety of midrashic texts, we find that God visits Rachel on the very same date: Rosh HaShanah. Regardless of the time period or historical context of each midrashic text, this date remains constant. Rachel begins a new era in her

life--and the people of Israel enter a new stage with the conception of Joseph--on the first of the year.

While these particular themes are ongoing, we also find some striking changes in midrashic readings over time. Most significant is the timing of Rachel's marriage to Jacob. In the biblical text, Laban tells Jacob, "'Wait until the bridal week of this one is over and we will give you that one, too, provided you serve me another seven years'" (Genesis 29:27). But the Hebrew may have more than one meaning. The Hebrew text reads, *Vayimaley shavuah zot....* Literally, this translates, "And fulfill the *shavuah* of this one...." While *shavuah* generally means 'week,' it is derived from the word *sheva*, meaning seven. One dictionary translates this word in the following way: "week; seven days; seven years."[142] If we understand *shavua* to mean seven years, this reading still makes sense in the context of the narrative. Jacob has already worked seven years for his first bride. Laban then tells him, 'If you fulfill another seven year contract, you can marry the second one.'

The common reading of this text is that Jacob works seven years for Rachel, and unwittingly marries Leah instead. After Leah's bridal week is fulfilled, Jacob then marries his intended bride, Rachel. However, at least one midrash interprets the chronology of events differently, reading *shavua* as seven years. Josephus writes,

> Jacob lay with her [Leah] that night, as being both in drink and in the dark. However, when it was day, he knew what had been done to him; and he reproached Laban for his unfair proceeding with him...[Laban responded that] nothing should hinder him [Jacob] from marrying Rachel; but that when he [Jacob] had served another seven years, he [Laban] would give him her whom he loved. Jacob submitted to this condition, for his love of the damsel did not permit him to do otherwise; and when another seven years were gone, he took Rachel to wife.[143]

In this reading, Jacob works another seven years to marry Rachel. Ginzberg interprets Josephus' reading as a linguistic misunderstanding. In his endnotes he writes,

> The statement of Josephus, *Antiqui*, I, 19.7, that Jacob married Rachel after having served seven years is due to a misunderstanding of the Hebrew *shavua* (Gen. 29.27), which means 'septinate' and 'week.'[144]

Either this is a misunderstanding, or it is an alternate reading of the text. This reading does not reappear in the midrash, but it is a widely held misconception that Jacob worked fourteen years before he was permitted to marry Rachel.

A second midrashic reading that indicates a deviation from standard themes appears in Lamentations Rabbah. Here, we find Rachel as not only a significant matriarchal figure, but also the very savior of Israel. In this text, Rachel addresses God directly to plead for the life of the people of Israel. In this way, Rachel assumes the role of Abraham, who pleaded with God on behalf of the people of Sodom and Gomorra. Only here the stakes are raised; Rachel addresses God only after every other patriarch has tried and failed. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses all have pleaded and negotiated with God on behalf of Israel, but to no avail.

Suddenly, Rachel appears and states her case. To paraphrase Rachel, she asks, 'If I, God, could endure through my trial, if I could watch my sister marry my beloved, if I could give her signs to aid her on her wedding night, if I could hide under their very marriage bed and make all the responses to his calls--if I could do all these things and still have no jealousy for my sister--how then can You, the merciful king, be jealous of idolatry --which is nothing!' By relating her own human experience, she actually rebukes God for God's inability to refrain from envy. If I am able to endure this pain without jealousy, she

entreats, how much more so should You be able to have mercy on your people, and not be jealous of foolish idolatry.

Only upon hearing the words of Rachel does God reconsider. Rachel saves the entire nation of Israel, a task none of the patriarchs were able to accomplish, even by citing their own faithful deeds. Although the spectrum of midrashic literature generally treats Rachel with great respect and dignity, suddenly in this fifth century text we find an entirely new image. In Lamentations Rabbah, Rachel is presented as a true heroine, the sole savior of the people of Israel. She addresses God as ruler, but also as a ruler who must take responsibility to make thoughtful choices. She rebukes her Creator but maintains respect, asking, 'How is it possible for You to behave in this way?' In doing so, Rachel seems to jog God's memory, and suddenly God's measure of justice is balanced by a measure of mercy. For Rachel's sake alone, God saves the people of Israel.

While a variety of themes certainly repeat themselves in the rabbinic portrait of Rachel, occasionally new items are introduced. Interestingly, later texts tend to repeat much of what earlier texts have to offer. Rather early in the midrashic process is where we tend to see the most innovative rabbinic readings. Over time, certain early midrashim are repeated in different contexts. While many later texts "adopt" earlier material, some of the more innovative interpretations are not pursued in later readings. Perhaps this is because they are not considered normative, or alternatively (in the case of Lamentations Rabbah) too unwieldy.[145]

In the early period, Josephus' reading of *shavua* as seven years, whether erroneous or intended, is not repeated again. Similarly, the most innovative reading of the entire

Rachel narrative appears only once, in Lamentations Rabbah. Nowhere else but in this fifth century text do we find Rachel painted as the sole savior of Israel. We see elements of the text repeated elsewhere (including the exchange of signs), but not in the same context.

Perhaps this unique text appears only once for practical reasons: It offers a lengthy and detailed account of our ancestors' dialogue with God. Or perhaps it is not repeated because it introduces a radical element into our ancestors' relationship with God: In this text, God responds only to Rachel. God dismisses the merits of the patriarchs and responds only to the deeds of this courageous matriarch. Rachel, not Abraham or Moses, is the sole person who is able to convince God to save her people. The rabbis of later periods may have viewed this text as too radical to repeat. But regardless of the reason for its absence from other compilations, this innovative text gives us a compelling insight into the character of Rachel. This candid glimpse into Rachel's character helps us decipher her motives and draws a more complete picture of this potentially one-dimensional character.

B. The Midrashic Leah: Ongoing Themes and Variations over Time

Just as a variety of themes repeat themselves in the rabbinic portrait of Rachel, so do multiple themes reappear in the rabbinic portrait of Leah. For example, the rabbis again and again repeat the same explanation for Leah's "weak eyes." They cannot accept that Leah's weak eyes are a euphemism for her weak appearance. Instead, they create a story early in the midrashic process to attribute her weak eyes to her righteous behavior.

Originally, Leah was just as beautiful as Rachel, but when she learned of Laban and Rebecca's plan to marry her off to the wicked Esau, she became engulfed in despair. She cried until she could cry no more, and her eyes became weak. Her weak eyes are a tribute to her righteousness, for she could not bear the thought of spending her days with a wicked man.

The rabbis cannot bear to have a matriarch who is considered unseemly. In fact, they cannot imagine the possibility. This explanation is picked up and repeated by early, middle, and late texts alike, to emphasize Leah's righteousness and de-emphasize her physical imperfections. (This rabbinic need to account for a physical defect also occurs in the case of Moses, whom the rabbis also defend. Moses cannot possibly have been born with an actual speech defect; it had to have been caused by some test of righteousness.) Some texts even express that Leah prayed to God to be released from her fate, and God responded. From this act of prayer, the entire Jacob-Rachel-Leah relationship will evolve.

As in the Rachel portrait, the theme of deceit appears time and time again in Leah's story. When Jacob accuses Leah of being a deceiver and the daughter of a deceiver, she admonishes Jacob: 'I learned deceit from you.' Ironically, when Rachel earlier warns Jacob that her father is an expert in deceit, Jacob responds with the words, "I am his brother in deceit." Jacob spends his youth outwitting his brother without regard to consequence; in fact, he brags about his skill in this area. Suddenly the victim of someone else's conniving plan, he lashes out at Leah for being party to her father's deceit. Leah calmly turns the tables. She knows Jacob's history and is not afraid to remind him of his

past deeds. This story is woven through the spectrum of midrash just as the theme of deceit surfaces throughout the biblical narrative.

The same assertive Leah who is not afraid to point out her new husband's earlier deeds, also acts assertively later in her marriage. The rabbis spend a great deal of time commenting on Leah's behavior in the mandrakes incident. The biblical text tells us that she traded her mandrakes for a night with her husband. If Leah can not rely on her beauty, she can certainly rely on her negotiating skills. Instead of condemning Leah for her aggressive behavior, the rabbis commend her. They view the tribes of Issachar and Zebulon as a reward for soliciting her husband. Leah, who could easily be viewed in a different light for her manipulative behavior, is instead rewarded for her savvy, both personally and historically. Leah is a figure to be admired, and historically she mothers two more tribes of Israel.

In each of these ongoing themes, the rabbis find a way to defend Leah from being maligned: Her eyes are weak from crying; She is not inherently deceitful; Her aggression was admirable and resulted in reward. Though the rabbis also elevate Rachel, they don't find the same need to defend her. In the biblical text, Leah creates greater problems for the rabbis: Her eyes are weak; She is unloved; She pursues her husband aggressively. However, the rabbis find "appropriate" explanations for each of these questionable traits.

Most of the rabbinic responses are repeated over time. As in the Rachel portrait, later midrashic texts pick up on early readings and repeat them again and again in different contexts. Only occasionally does a truly unique text appear, and when it does, it tends to

be an early tradition. For example, the Talmud officially dubs Leah as the first person to praise God:

> Rabbi Johanan further said in the name of Rabbi Simeon Bar Yohai: From the day that the Holy One, blessed be He, created His world, there was no man that praised the Holy One, blessed be He, until Leah came and praised Him. For it is said: *This time will I praise the Lord* (Genesis 29:35).[146]

The Hebrew verb used here is actually *hodah*, which means "to thank," rather than "to praise." In later texts, the rabbis pick up on the theme of thankfulness, for example in Bereshit Rabbah where *hodayah* is defined as Leah's motto.[147] But it is the Talmud that acknowledges that Leah was the very first person to give thanks to God.[148] This is no small deed; we have Leah to thank for the concept of *hoda'ot*, prayers of thanksgiving. The rabbis are sure to give praise where praise is due.

With all the virtuous qualities the rabbis find in Leah, they are not about to let the words *"Vayar Adonai ki-semuah Leah,"* And God saw that Leah was hated, (Genesis 29:31) go by uninterpreted. The rabbis simply cannot accept that Leah was hated, and they completely reinterpret this phrase. In this case, the rabbis do not settle on a single explanation, as they do with Leah's weak eyes. Instead, they approach the problem from various angles in various periods.

In a very early reading, the Book of Jubilees rewrites history by detailing how much Jacob and Leah actually love each other. After Leah's death, they become true life partners, to the point that Jacob loves Leah "with all his heart and all his soul."[149] This text does not directly address the issue of Leah as an object of hate. Instead, it refocuses and redefines Jacob's feelings at a later date in their relationship. This is the only text that focuses so specifically on the love between Jacob and Leah. Later texts do not repeat this

emotional description, but instead opt for rational explanations for Leah's state of "hatedness."

The rabbis of the Talmud are especially troubled that their matriarch is defined so negatively. If Scripture does not speak disparagingly of an unclean animal, how could it possibly speak disparagingly of Leah? They restructure the sentence, "And God saw that Leah was hated," to mean not that Leah was hated, but that she hated her predicament: She did not want to marry the wicked Esau. So, in the Talmudic era the rabbis entirely redefine the issue at hand. Leah is not hated by Jacob. Rather, Leah herself hated Esau's behavior.[150]

This explanation would be possible if the biblical phrase *ki senuah Leah* had appeared earlier in the biblical text. That is, if this statement occurred prior to Leah's marriage to Jacob it would make sense for Leah to feel hate toward Esau, the man she (midrashically) believed she was destined to marry. Placed where it is, the rabbis' explanation regarding Esau is rather illogical. Leah no longer has to fear that she will be married off to Esau. Despite the lack of logic in this midrash, it teaches us a great deal about the rabbinic world view of the Talmudic authors. Leah, a matriarch, can not be represented as the object of hate, even if this is explicitly stated in the biblical text. Rather, the text must have some other motive in mind. To whom can the rabbis relate as an object of hate? Esau. Therefore, they redefine the statement in terms of Esau's evil behavior, without regard to linear logic.

In the midrash, the rabbis also struggle to find explanations and rationalizations for the troublesome biblical phrase, *ki senuah Leah*. Here, the rabbinic response also reveals

a great deal about the rabbis themselves. But in this midrashic tradition we learn something different about the authors. The rabbis do not deny that Leah is hated, as the rabbis of the Talmud did. The rabbis in Bereshit Rabbah are able to accept that a matriarch could be fallible. However, their responses reflect that they will not accept that Jacob, the patriarch, could be fallible. Ultimately, each of their answers reflect the fact that Jacob could not possibly have hated his wife unless he were deliberately provoked.

One midrash in Bereshit Rabbah concludes that Jacob hated Leah because she deceived her sister.[151] Another outlines four possible rationales for Jacob's hatred of Leah.[152] Briefly stated, these responses are: that Leah behaved like she was hated, that she was supposed to marry a hated man, that everyone hated her for deceiving her sister, and that Jacob hated her because she deceived him. In this last response, Jacob wanted to divorce Leah, but refrained from doing so 'for the sake of the children.' Eventually, Jacob even gave thanks for her.

In this tradition, the rabbis accept that Leah is flawed. In fact, they more than accept it; they embrace this idea. The rabbis place blame on Leah herself, on Esau, and on the entire community. In fact, everyone except Jacob assumes the blame for the fact that Leah is hated; Jacob emerges from the rabbis' analysis unscathed.. In effect, this midrash says that Jacob hated Leah because she was hateful. Jacob had good reason for wanting to divorce her, but chose to remain married to her for his children's' sake. Ultimately, Jacob even found the strength to appreciate her. Somehow in this scenario, Jacob becomes the victim rather than Leah.

From the interpretations of the Book of Jubilees to the later readings of the Talmud and midrash, we see three very different explanations for the word *senuah*, "hated." In the first, we see a complete transformation from hating to loving. By the end of their lives, Jacob loves Leah with all his heart and soul. In the second, the rabbis can not accept that Leah was hated, and instead manipulate their reading to direct this adjective at Esau. In the extensive rationalizing of Bereshit Rabbah, we find that the rabbis do read the text literally, arguing that Leah was hated. But Leah herself somehow merited this hatred, either because of her behavior, or through circumstance, or through public perception. Jacob could never hate Leah unless she truly merited this response.

In some ways the rabbis become less tolerant in this chronological progression. First they create a beautiful scenario of reconciliation, then they protect Leah, then they look to Leah and others for a reasonable explanation. Yet, even this final, rather judgmental text, stops short of condemning Leah. It concludes with the words,

> Eventually he gave thanks for her, as it is said, *And Israel bowed down [in thanksgiving] for the bed's head. (Genesis 47:31)* Who was the head of our father Jacob's bed? Surely Leah. (the first to give him children.)[153]

Ultimately, Leah's character is somehow redeemed, through childbirth, the one deed that comes easily to her. However, when viewed in chronological progression, these texts teach us more about the rabbinic authors of various midrashim than they do about Leah herself.

Despite their different interpretations, rabbis across the spectrum of midrash have difficulty seeing Leah as hated. "Hated" is simply not an adjective they are able to apply to a mother of Israel. Perhaps this aversion relates in some way to their own history as

victims of hate and persecution. In this way, Leah becomes a metaphor for themselves. Just as Leah is hated without a clear reason, Jews have been hated and persecuted without reason. The rabbis need to find ways to mitigate the word "hated," for this mother of Israel, like themselves, could not have rightfully deserved such a fate.

Conclusions:

Rachel and Leah Redefined

A. Stereotypes

Collective memory would sometimes lead us to remember Rachel in one light and Leah in another. However, when we view these two women across the wide spectrum of rabbinic understandings, we actually find two complex characters, filled with contradiction and complexity. We can no longer view Rachel only as being "shapely and beautiful" and Leah as being "weak-eyed." In fact, viewed through the fascinating lens of midrash, these sisters become more and more human, filled with strengths and weaknesses, joys and sorrows, jealousies and convictions.

1. Rachel the Beautiful

From a limited perspective, we tend to remember Rachel only as 'Rachel the Beautiful.' The biblical text tells us little about who this woman is. We know certain key details about her life: She is attractive; she desperately wants children; she steals her father's idols; she dies in childbirth. But this information clearly provides a terribly limited framework for the life of such a significant figure. We know almost no details about Rachel's life, a striking absence in the text, considering this is one of the great matriarchs of Israel, and literally the Mother of Israel.

The biblical text presents merely the outline of a person, with no real description of the trials of her life. The midrash, however, provides a colorful characterization of an otherwise flat figure. It fills in details where we have none and speculates where the

biblical text leaves off. By no means complete, the midrash at least provides us with glimpses of a real person, to be both admired and reproached.

Without midrashic additions, Rachel can almost be seen as the Torah's parallel to Esther, the queen remembered largely for her beauty, and often contrasted with the less desirable Vashti. Only when the scroll of Esther is read with the addition of midrashic literature and contemporary midrashic speculation do these characters come to life. Without midrash, Esther and Vashti, too, are condemned to the one-dimensional realm of stereotype. They are compared to each other instead of being judged by their own deeds. One is forever remembered as the 'good' and attractive wife. And despite textual indications to the contrary, the other is etched in our memories as the 'bad' and not-so-attractive wife.

2. Leah the Weak-Eyed

Leah suffers the terrible fate of being compared to Rachel. She is rarely viewed as an individual in her own right. Instead, she is judged against the merits of her sister. The biblical text establishes a precedent for this form of comparison the very first time it describes Rachel and Leah as a pair:

> Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older one was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah had weak eyes; Rachel was shapely and beautiful. (Gen. 29:16-17)

What sibling would ever wish for such a comparison? In the biblical text we read of Leah always in comparison with her sister. She sadly takes her place in biblical history as the ugly 'second place' wife, never quite given the opportunity to establish her own identity.

In this way, Leah becomes strangely parallel to Vashti, who, regardless of her possible courageous motives, is literally dismissed by her husband, the king. Leah is also dismissed by her husband, the patriarch, but in a figurative sense. The rabbis struggle endlessly to explain the word *senuah*, meaning "hated" or "unloved," in Genesis 29:31, "The Lord saw that Leah was *senuah*." However we translated *senuah*, the implication is clear: Jacob values Rachel and not Leah. In some ways, Leah's fate is even more haunting than Vashti's. While Vashti is banished from the kingdom to be replaced by a ravishingly beautiful second wife, Leah is forced to remain in her husband's domain while her beautiful sister takes her place as 'first' wife.

B. Complex Characterizations

1. Rachel: Painting a well-rounded profile

Rachel's description as beautiful sister and favored wife seems to give her status over her older sister. She is a woman who seems to have it all: beauty, love, and--eventually--children. Of course, the biblical text also presents another side of Rachel: the envious sister. The rabbis of the midrash round out this picture by actively acknowledging Rachel's jealousy of her sister. This woman who seems to have it all is devastated by the absence of one thing: children.

While Rachel envies her sister's prolific childbearing, this is not the only example of Rachel craving her sister's possessions. The biblical text candidly illustrates Rachel's desire for her sister's mandrakes. The midrash explains how Rachel is ultimately punished

for her impulsive behavior: She loses two tribes.[154] In the midrash, even the seemingly infallible Rachel finds there are consequences for her behavior. This fallibility makes her so much more real than the seemingly flat picture we find in the biblical text.

Even Rachel's positive qualities become more substantial and believable in the midrash. Rachel is no longer silent during Laban's trickery, as she is in the Bible. Midrashically, Rachel is very much aware of her father's plan to dupe Laban, and she takes an active role in foiling his plan.[155] Rachel does not play the obedient daughter; we see an courageous side of this woman usually described only as beautiful. Here is a woman who finds the strength to stand up for what is hers.

And yet beneath this courageous exterior, the rabbis find a deep sense of compassion. While Rachel schemes with Jacob to outwit Laban, she suddenly feels a deep sense of regret. She feels compassion for her older sister, who will be deeply shamed if Rachel succeeds in revealing Laban's trickery. Rachel ultimately opts not to play the role of obedient daughter or obedient wife; She defies her own plan with Jacob to outwit Laban's plan. Ultimately, the authors of midrashic literature inadvertently tell us that Rachel values her relationship with Leah even over her relationship with Jacob.

Suddenly the character of Rachel is richer and more believable. She feels a deep sense of compassion for the very sister who causes her to feel she will die of envy. Simultaneously jealous and compassionate, Rachel assumes the qualities of a real human being. She struggles to balance her evil and good inclinations. She struggles to deal with the fact that while she has so much (physical beauty, her husband's love), she really has so little (no children). She feels a kinship with her sister that can never properly evolve

because they are married to the same man. This is a three way marriage of love, competition, and envy. Finally, Rachel yearns for fertility, but with tragic irony, she dies in the throes of childbirth. Through the colorful lens of midrash, Rachel comes to life. She is no longer simply the beautiful sister, but a real person, filled with conflict, yearning, and compassion.

2. Leah: Painting a well-rounded profile

As with Rachel, the authors of midrash do their best to construct a well-rounded profile of Leah. In the biblical text, Leah is portrayed as the jilted wife, surrounded by her many children. Midrashic literature attempts to find in Leah all the qualities of a real person. Rachel's desires are clear: She wants children. In many ways, Leah emerges a more complex person than Rachel.

From the outside, Leah's life is a success story. She averts a potential marriage to an undesirable man; she bears multitudes of children. But Leah remains unfulfilled. The rabbis struggle to define Leah's character even more than Rachel, because certain other attributes trouble them deeply. They create an elaborate story to place a positive spin on Leah's weak eyes, and they struggle at length with the troubling description that Leah was hated.

The biblical text tells us directly that Jacob values Rachel more than Leah, describing how Leah negotiates with Rachel for a night with their husband. The events in Leah's life indicate that her behavior is based on experience. If her husband treats her as

inferior to her sister, she must rely on her childbearing ability to gain her husband's attention. Unloved, she must rely on her own resources to get what she wants.

But Leah has another side that we find in the midrash. Leah is not simply a smart, unloved woman who relies on her savvy to survive. Midrashically, Leah is an introspective person who is religious, sensitive, and compassionate. She is devastated to learn that her father has promised her in marriage to an unethical man, and prays to God for guidance. When she realizes that her sister may be shamed by bearing fewer male children than her handmaids, she prays that her own child will be born a girl, so that Rachel can have the honor of bearing Jacob's final son. Despite their different lots in life, Leah cares for Rachel and prays for her well-being.

Ultimately, like many siblings, Rachel and Leah are more alike than they may think. They share one significant negative quality: envy. They also share one significant positive quality: compassion. As such, they are subject to the same pitfalls and joys of sibling life as any contemporary sibling pair. They each want what the other has, and they simultaneously want to protect each other. The difference in their relationship is that the stakes are higher. Because they share a single spouse, neither sister is ever quite able to establish her own domain, and both question their roles in their marriage. What is certain is that from a midrashic perspective, these women are not stereotypes at all, but rich, complex characters who struggle to make sense of their lives.

C. Parallel Struggles Between Sisters and Brothers

1. Same Conflict, Different Form

The realization that Rachel and Leah are actually quite similar in their personal qualities led me to an even more compelling possibility: Rachel and Leah are engaged in a struggle that is nearly identical to that of Jacob and Esau. These two sibling pairs possess striking similarities in terms of roles and behavior. Biblically we know a great deal more about Jacob and Esau than we do about Rachel and Leah, so these parallels are not immediately evident. But after extensive research into the midrashic profiles of Rachel and Leah, I believe they offer a female version of the famous brotherly rivalry.

First, I find a clear parallel between the episodes involving Esau's soup and Leah's mandrakes. The narratives are strikingly similar: Both stories involve one sibling desiring food that the other possesses. In both situations, the sibling who desires the food wins the item, but pays a price for immediate gratification. In both instances, the results of the trade are long-lasting and carry high emotional stakes. The only clear difference between the two narratives is the age of the victor. In one version, the younger sibling, Jacob, acquires the enduring prize; in the other, the older sibling, Leah, acquires it.

The external differences of gender and age do not diminish the significant parallels between the two versions of the story. Clearly, this is the same story of desire, negotiation, and acquisition. In both cases, the sibling who wants the food acts impulsively, without considering the consequences. They both gamble with high stakes:

Esau treats his birthright as a commodity to be traded; Rachel treats her husband in this way. In both cases, the other sibling recognizes an opportunity and seizes it. Neither Jacob nor Leah initiates the interaction, but both profit greatly from it.

The reversals that occur in the different versions of the story relate to status and gender. These reversals add an interesting dimension to the comparison. First, status plays a role in terms of age, aggression, and ownership. In the male version, Jacob outwits his older brother, Esau; in the female version, Leah outwits her younger sister, Rachel. Perhaps this reversal can be accounted for in that Rachel effectively functions as the 'older' sister regarding her husband's affections. That is, it was intended that she be the first to marry Jacob, and she continues to function in this role.

Status continues to play a role in this narrative because in both cases the younger sibling makes the offer to the older one. And ownership also plays a part in this story: Jacob prepared his soup himself and is eagerly willing to trade it. Leah was given the mandrakes by her son, and the possibility of negotiation only occurs to her when Rachel suggests it.

The other difference in these parallel accounts of negotiation deals with gender. That is, Jacob engages in this encounter to fulfill practical desires: He wants the birthright. Leah hopes to fulfill her emotional longing for her husband's love. Jacob is more aggressive in fulfilling his desires. When he recognizes Esau's great need, he immediately constructs a plan, saying, 'Sell me your birthright and I will give you my soup.' The impulsive Esau, believing he will die if his physical needs are not immediately gratified, agrees:

> And Esau said to Jacob, 'Give me some of that red stuff to gulp down, for I am famished'--which is why he was named Edom. Jacob said, 'First sell me your birthright.' And Esau said, 'I am at the point of death, so of what use is my birthright to me?' But Jacob said, 'Swear to me first.' So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. Jacob them gave Esau bread and lentil stew; he ate and drank, and he rose and went away. Thus did Esau spurn the birthright. (Gen. 25:30-34)

Leah, on the other hand, does not construct a premeditated plan, although she knows a good deal when she sees it. When Rachel offers her a night with Jacob for her mandrakes, she accepts:

> Once, at the time of the wheat harvest, Reuben came upon some mandrakes in the field and brought them to his mother Leah. Rachel said to Leah, 'Please give me some of your son's mandrakes.' But she said to her, 'Was it not enough for you to take away my husband, that you would also take my son's mandrakes?' Rachel replied, 'I promise, he shall lie with you tonight, in return for your son's mandrakes.' When Jacob came home from the field in the evening, Leah went out to meet him and said, 'You are to sleep with me, for I have hired you with my son's mandrakes.' And he lay with her that night. God heeded Leah, and she conceived and bore him a fifth son. And Leah said, 'God has given me my reward for having given my maid to my husband.' So she named him Issachar. (Gen. 30:14-18)

Underlying both these accounts of negotiation are sibling relationships fraught with tension. Both pairs are entangled in a web of jealousy and deceit. Their emotional scars run deep; The least painful way to deal with the other is through the practicality of a business transaction: They trade tangible goods. In doing so, they actually change history. Jacob wins the birthright from his brother, while Leah bears two more tribes of Israel.

The second major parallel between these two versions of the same narrative deal with all four siblings' desire for love. Jacob seeks the practicality of the birthright, but he also seeks his father's love in the form of the blessing. In contrast to his behavior when he loses the birthright, Esau is devastated when he learns Jacob has stolen his father's

blessing. While Jacob and Esau seek personal affirmation through their father's love and blessing, Rachel and Leah both seek affirmation through their husband's love and God's blessing. Rachel knows she has her husband's love, but remains unfulfilled until she bears children. Leah knows the satisfaction of bearing children, but remains unfulfilled without her husband's love.

While Jacob and Esau engage in a battle of negotiation and trickery to win their father's love and blessing, Rachel and Leah engage in "baby wars" to win their husband's love and acquire God's blessing. The tactics are different but the motivations are identical. In many ways, their stories are the same, and the comparison is significant: Rachel and Leah offer a female version of the Jacob and Esau rivalry.

2. Reconciliation

Both Rachel and Leah and Jacob and Esau engage in rivalry, though each struggle takes a slightly different form. Amazingly, both sibling pairs reconcile their differences in the same manner: through prayer. In the Jacob-Esau narrative, the account of reconciliation is detailed in the biblical text. In the Rachel-Leah narrative, we learn of reconciliation only through the vehicle of midrash.

As Jacob nears the moment of reunification with Esau after many years, he is gripped with fear. He knows he may be doomed to destruction, so he turns to God for guidance. The Bible records Jacob's prayer in detail:

> O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O Lord, who said to me, 'Return to your native land and I will deal bountifully with you!' I am unworthy of all the kindness that You have so steadfastly

> shown Your servant: with my staff alone I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps. Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; else, I fear, he may come and strike me down, mothers and children alike. Yet, You have said, 'I will deal bountifully with you and make your offspring as the sands of the sea which are too numerous to count. (Gen. 32:10-13)

Jacob's prayer is simple and direct: 'God, remember all the promises you made to me? Now I'm afraid my brother Esau will strike me down and kill me! Please help me! And don't forget...You promised to deal bountifully with me!' Jacob prays for God to calm the wrath of Esau, so he may avoid his brother's fury.

Leah also approaches reconciliation with her sister through prayer, though her prayer takes a very different form. We do not have a detailed account of her words to God in the biblical text. In fact, we have no biblical reference to reconciliation at all. Only through the midrash do we find evidence of reconciliation. In B.T. *Berachot* 60a, Leah prays to give birth to a girl so as not to shame her sister. While Jacob seeks to avoid his brother's fury, Leah seeks to avoid her sister's shame and envy.

Just as gender played a role in the siblings' struggle with each other, so does gender play a role in their efforts toward reconciliation. In both cases, we learn about the attempted reconciliation through the eyes of the sibling who "won" the greater reward in the food negotiation incident. Jacob and Leah are now prepared to revisit their pasts and make up with their siblings. However, in Jacob's case, he prepares to meet his brother not only through prayer, but also through bribery and preparation for battle. Leah, meanwhile, makes a simple prayer on her sister's behalf.

For Leah, this is no reunion after a long period of physical separation. But this is a realization, after many years of competitive childbearing, that Leah does not want to out-

do her sister to such a degree that she shames her. After using childbirth as a means for gaining equality with her sister, Leah finally recognizes that her goal has changed. The sisters have spent so many years battling each other; it is time to give in and take care of each other.

This act of caring for each other is, in fact, Rebecca's wish for her own children. She, like many mothers, wants only for her children to love each other. In the Book of Jubilees we learn that this is Rebecca's final prayer for her only two sons. On her deathbed she says to Esau,

> I ask you that the day I die, you will take me in and bury me near Sarah, your father's mother, and that you and Jacob will love each other, and that neither will desire evil against the other, but mutual love only, and so you will prosper, my sons, and be honored in the midst of the land, and no enemy will rejoice over you, and you will be a blessing and a mercy in the eyes of all those that love you. [156]

If Rachel and Leah's mother could have given her daughters a final blessing, she might have spoken these very same words.

D. Areas for Further Exploration

If I had the opportunity to supplement this thesis at this time, I would round out the rabbinic perception of Rachel and Leah by exploring in depth the later midrashic texts. I would focus on midrashic anthologies, explore medieval commentaries, and read material from the Zohar. Following midrashic changes over a longer time span would further enrich the midrashic portrait of these complex characters.

To paint a more complete portrait of Rachel and Leah, I would also look to parallel traditions in Christian literature. In the research process, the more midrashim I studied, the more aware I became of the complexity of these characters and their relationship to each other. The study of parallel traditions would create an even fuller picture of these unique matriarchal figures.

In addition to enhancing the profiles of these characters, further study could aid in the analysis of midrashic traditions over time. An even more thorough study of the historical venues in which the midrashim were written would provide greater insight into the lives of the rabbinic authors. Greater historical perspective would lend a new depth to this kind of analysis.

I would also be curious to look at contemporary translations and textbooks for children that involve Rachel and Leah. It would be interesting to explore whether or not these texts teach young people stereotypes of these matriarchal figures, or if they offer a more well-rounded perspective of these fascinating midrashic characters.

Finally, I find the tool of Drama Midrash to be an overwhelmingly effective teaching tool. By studying the biblical text, asking compelling questions, and composing original dialogues, students are able to truly identify with the men and women of our tradition. When students engage in this process, traditions no longer consist of only words on a page, but they become living, breathing texts that offer meaning, richness, and relevance to our lives. I hope to expand my work in Drama Midrash into a book on the subject that will guide Jewish educators, rabbis, and lay people to explore Judaism in a new and wholly engaging way.

Appendix:

Drama Midrash: Contemporary Portraits of Rachel and Leah

A. Workshop Setting: Kol Isha
(Jerusalem summer program for young women
campus leaders from around the world)
World Union of Jewish Students
Jerusalem, Israel
July, 1994

Midrash #1.
Written by Laurie Katz and Anna Tankiewia (Warsaw, Poland)
Time period: Before the first wedding

R: I can't believe this is happening. I want to feel happy for you Leah, but I don't know how to make my heart feel that way--

L: You know our tradition. We will not change it. I will marry Jacob because of tradition. I am not in charge of your happiness. You will be able to marry him if I will do it first. You will be able to be happy with him only in that way.

R: Tonight he will be your husband, Leah. How will we be able to live like this? You are my sister--We have always shared everything. But this I cannot share with you!

L: I know you love each other. I will not say that this love is stronger than the love between us. This love is different. And maybe because of this reason we have to chose. We are sisters but first of all we are women growing up in a tradition which we must and should respect.

R: What kind of tradition makes enemies of sisters and separates lovers?!

L: Our situation isn't usual. Let's take a lesson from this. We have to be clever, maybe to try to build something new--step by step.

Midrash #2.
Written by Trina Volfson (Saratov, Russia) and Michelle Wein (London, England)
Time period: After the first wedding

L: Morning, sister. Why had you departed us so early yesterday? You do not look happy about me. If you really didn't want me to be the first...

R: What can I say, Leah? I want you to be happy, and I know that it is impossible for me to put my own happiness before the wishes of our father. I am happy, for you.

L: Look, sister, our father's decision was cruel towards you, but he showed the great mercy towards me. You know I'm ugly and nobody in our tribe had a use to marry me. You mustn't break the law to be happy. There's only a week left for my happiness and then your time will come forever.

R: It is so cruel that we have been turned against each other--You are my sister, and we have been together all of our lives. I am not angry with you, but I feel pain that will never go away.

L: This marriage is also a pain for me because I probably fell in love with this man who never loved me before. And now, when he discovered the betrayal of our father he treats me with disgust. But also he treats me as his wife...

R: And you will bear his many sons, and be his fist wife, and I his concubine.

L: You were so disappointed when I came that I didn't tell you that I'm now here only because there is a quarrel between father and Jacob. He insists on the second marriage.

R: How can I marry him now? You are his wife...

L: (Just crying) You make me sorry about it.

R: (Wailing and weeping) I am sorry too! I will be happy, for your sake, because you are my sister. Be strong, and I will be strong also.

Midrash #3.
Written by Ariella Levites (Yardley, PA) and Rebecca Margolis (Montreal, Canada)
Time period: After Leah has borne many children

Leah is nursing her child and cooing at baby.

R: Stop! I can't bear it...

L: She won't sleep unless I talk to her. Children are like that--
You'll learn if you ever have one of your own.

R: You are a harsh woman. If it wasn't for me you would never have borne any children let alone ever experienced a man. The child is, in my eyes, rightfully mine--I helped to create it.

L: Are you ill? Jacob would have married me with or without your interference. He was rightfully mine all along. I am the oldest and the best at bearing children. I always knew your beauty could only take you so far.

R: Looks are irrelevant in this situation. Who taught you the signs? Who was it that helped to prevent you being left "on the shelf?" Me! And how was I rewarded, no--punished even: I am barren. Jacob worked those first 7 years for me not you.

L: Fine, Rachel, is that what you want. To tear me apart. Yes I am ugly and no one has ever loved me. And yes Jacob loves you and sees in you more than he'll ever see in me no matter how many children I give him. But this child, this darling girl, she is mine. We belong to each other. And she loves me.

R: I loved you Leah; you were my soul mate. You took advantage of that love when you took Jacob and still I said nothing, but now when I see you surrounded with the miracle of children I flare up inside. It is not me tearing you apart it is you and your children tearing me apart.

L: I never intended that my children would hut you. I wished that you would take an interest in them, play with them and love them. But ever since Reuven was born you have not come to my tent. I see you peering out from your own tent at my children and me, your eyes green. But you never gave them a chance. You have kept all your love inside you and now its turning you mad.

R: I cannot show love to you children while I feel intense jealousy, almost hatred, inside of me. You have no conception of what it feels like to be barren, unable to fulfill the mitzvah and feel complete as a woman.

L: Perhaps if you left your tent and your incense and your prayers to a God that does not listen and looked within yourself you would find a complete woman. I remember you as a child. You had so much courage and you were always laughing and now that girl I loved, my sister, is dead.

R: You played your part in killing that part of me and now you must help me to rebuild it so that we can rediscover the closeness again.

L: Do you think we can really trust each other again?

B. Workshop Setting: Temple Sinai Religious School
Lawrence, Long Island
Eighth Grade Students
February, 1997

Student-generated questions:
Why didn't Jacob leave Leah?
Did Jacob love Leah more after she gave him sons?
Could the sisters work together?
What was the sisters' relationship like before and after they met Jacob?

Midrash #1. "Rachel and Leah: Before and After"
Written by Alison Santopolo and Amy Greenbaum
Leah's bedroom the day after she marries Jacob

L: Can you believe it? I'm married to Jacob!

R: Yeah, its great (unhappily)

L: Why don't you sound excited? I thought you'd be happy for me!

R: Well, I would be if Jacob didn't really love ME and if Daddy didn't TRICK him into marrying you!

L: Listen, honey! Just because I'm older and Daddy likes me better doesn't mean you have to have an attitude!

R: How could you do this to me! Where did my loving older sister go? You knew how I felt about Jacob! I couldn't keep away from him!

L: Uh uh! Don't pull that guilt thing on me. It wasn't all my fault. It wasn't like I had much of a choice.

R: But you don't have to gloat! You know you're making me jealous--just the thought of you being married to my man makes me sick!

L: You jealous of me. You've always been the beautiful one and I've been the one with the weak eyes. Let me enjoy my time in the spotlight.

R: I never knew you felt this way. I'm sorry I've been so mean! When we share Jacob, we won't let him come between us!

L: I love you!

Midrash #2. What happened the morning after Jacob married Leah?
Written by Adam Mayer and Mitchell Cooper
Jacob confronts Laban:

Jacob: What is going on here?

Laban: You married Leah, remember?

J: You are a cheat; I asked for Rachel!

L: If you promise to work another 7 years, you can marry her now.

J: That's not fair, I put in my time for Rachel.

L: So what?

J: You are a bad uncle. But I want to marry Rachel, so I'll work.

L: I'm not a bad uncle. I'm just following the rules of society. The oldest must be married first.

J: Why didn't you say so in the first place!

L: I wanted more work from you. I didn't want a stranger marrying my children.

J: I'm not trusting you again.

L: That's tough.

C. Rodeph Sholom Religious School
Music, Art, Dance, Drama Teachers
November 1997

Participants: Ellie (music), Renee (drama), Fran (dance), Daphna (art), Devorah (storytelling), Vered (drama)

Group-generated questions:
What is the significance of Jacob greeting Rachel with a kiss and tears?
Why does Laban refer to Leah as "this one?"
What is the significance of Laban kissing Jacob?
Why weak eyes?
How did marriage within one week affect their relationship?
Shavua= week or vow?
(Did Jacob fulfill the bridal *week* of Leah and immediately marry Rachel OR did he fulfill his *vow* to work seven [more] years for Rachel, and then marry her?)
What were the sisters' expectations? What did they have to say about this? Did they know of Laban's plan? Did they have a choice? Did Jacob have a choice?
"God opened Leah's womb, but Rachel was barren" How do we interpret this?
Why was Rachel barren?

Midrash #1.
Written by Fran and Daphna
Why is Rachel barren and Leah is not?

R: God made me barren to prove that the life cycle and *hitravut* have nothing to do with love. Love is separated from reproduction.

L: NO--Jacob will learn to love me because I have brought him children. Children and family will bring him to love me.

R: Still, why can I not bare? I will bare and my child will be a special child!

L: All of a sudden!...How will you bare? Besides, by then Jacob will be an old man; he will have relationships with my sons. Even IF you had a son, it would be too late.

R: Sarah, our mother waited for her child. Isaac is our father. Many children are just *yimalu et ha'aretz*. One child can be a leader. I must say that my hope to have a child are just hopes. I do not understand-- still why was I punished.

L: It is always the OLDEST who is the leader. And you, you have not been punished. You are beautiful and Jacob loves you! It is me who has been punished. I bare Jacob children. I love him and I get nothing in return. I am suffering not you.

R: Child, love is the ultimate love that you can give and receive. I am not creating anything. I am just the person between Laban and Jacob. Jacob loves me. I don't know if I love him but I know I would love my child--if I had one. I don't care for his love without being able to bare him a child.

Midrash #2.
Written by Ellie and Renee
Rachel and Leah after the wedding

L: You may be shapely and beautiful, and Jacob might have loved you on first sight, but a rule is a rule, and the older sister gets married first. That's the way it had to be--

R: But he loved me, not you--and I love him. What if he leaves, now that he knows he was tricked? What am I supposed to do?

L: He can't leave--Daddy made him promise to stay here and work--He has to stay, he has no choice. And if he's not a man of his word and he leaves, yes you may be broken hearted but I will have to go with him as his wife--I will have to leave my family and all that I love--to go away with a man who doesn't even love me!

R: Did you even try saying no? Tell Daddy you wouldn't marry Jacob? I know you aren't happy, and I'm sorry for that, but if you had married someone else you wouldn't be less happy and I would be married to Jacob!

L: At first I did try to say no--really I did. I didn't want to hurt you--You are my sister and I love you--but it's not right to go against the word of our father. He just kept telling me it was the right thing to do. He wouldn't take no for an answer. Rachel, oh Rachel, what are we going to do?

R: I can't help resenting you for being married to the man I love, but I know Dad is really the one to blame. And you know, to be honest, we don't look that much alike--how could Jacob not know? If he really loved me, I think he would have known. I could never mistake him for someone else. Leah, I'm so upset right now. I can't tell what I feel or who to blame. I suppose you're kind of a convenient target right now.

Endnotes

[1] Aaron Hyman, Torah Haketuvah v'Ha-mesorah al Torah, Nevi'im u'Ketuvim (Tel Aviv: 1979).
[2] Louis Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews (Philadelphia: 1967).
[3] Genesis 2:24, as translated in The Jewish Publication Society's Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures (Philadelphia: 1985). All biblical translations employed in this thesis will be taken from this JPS translation, unless otherwise noted.
[4] Anchor Bible Dictionary, Volume 4, p. 560.
[5] Ibid, p. 564.
[6] Ibid, p. 563.
[7] Ibid, p. 560.
[8] Ibid, p. 563.
[9] Ibid, p,. 564.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Rachel entry.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid, Rachel and Leah entries.
[14] Nehama Leibowitz, New Studies in Bereshit, p. 266.
[15] Ibid, p. 268.
[16] Bereshit Rabbah 70:15.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Lamentations Rabbah, *Petichta* 24.
[19] The Book of Jubilees 28:5.
[20] See Chapter 3, A Rabbinic Portrait of Leah.
[21] Tanhuma Buber, *Vayetze* 12.
[22] Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, 19:5.
[23] Bereshit Rabbah 60:7. See also Bereshit Rabbah 70:13. Translations of texts from Bereshit Rabbah are from the Soncino translation, unless otherwise noted.
[24] Paraphrased from Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews 19:5.
[25] B.T. *Megillah* 13a, *B.T. Baba Batra* 123a. See also Bereshit Rabbah 70:13 for explanation of "I am your father's brother." All translations of B.T. are from the Soncino translation, unless otherwise noted.
[26] Sefer HaYashar, *Toledot* 43a-43b, Translated by Ginzberg in The Legends of the Jews, Volume I, p. 327.
[27] Bereshit Rabbah 74:13.
[28] See Chapter 2, A Rabbinic Portrait of Rachel, and Chapter 3, A Rabbinic Portrait of Leah.
[29] Bereshit Rabbah 71:2.
[30] Yalkut Shimoni, vol. I, remez 125.
[31] Bereshit Rabbah 71:2 and Ruth Rabbah 7:13.
[32] Ruth Rabbah 7:13.
[33] Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, 19:4.
[34] Bereshit Rabbah 71:7, Adapted from Ginzberg's translation in Legends of the Jews, Vol. I, p. 364.

[35] Targum Yerushalmi Gen 30:23, Translated by Ginzberg, Legends of the Jews, Vol. I, p. 369.
[36] Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, 19:8.
[37] Bereshit Rabbah 73:2.
[38] Bereshit Rabbah 71:6.
[39] *Aggadat Bereshit* 51, 104.
[40] Bereshit Rabbah 72:6.
[41] B.T. *Rosh HaShana* 11a, Bereshit Rabbah 73:1, and Midrash HaGadol to Genesis 30:22.
[42] B.T. *Rosh HaShana* 11a.
[43] Bereshit Rabbah 73:3-4.
[44] Midrash HaGadol to Genesis 29:25.
[45] Bereshit Rabbah 73:6.
[46] Ibid 61:4.
[47] Midrash HaGadol to Genesis 30:24.
[48] Bereshit Rabbah 86:6.
[49] Ibid 92:8.
[50] Ibid 87:6.
[51] See Chapter 2, A Biblical Portrait of Rachel, "As Sister" section
[52] Bereshit Rabbah 73:7.
[53] Ibid 71:9.
[54] Sefer HaYashar, *Vayetze.*
[55] Bereshit Rabbah 72:6.
[56] See Chapter 3, A Rabbinic Portrait of Leah.
[57] Lamentations Rabbah, Petichta 24 as translated by Jacob Neusner in Lamentations Rabbah: An Analytical Translation, p. 78-79.
[58] Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, 19:5.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Bereshit Rabbah 71:6
[61] Lamentations Rabbah, *Petichta* 24.
[62] Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, 19:8.
[63] Ibid.
[64] The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, 1:15-2:2, adapted from Ginzsberg's translation.
[65] Ibid 2:5
[66] B.T. *Megillah 13a*, Neusner translation.
[67] Bereshit Rabbah 71:8.
[68] Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, 19:9.
[69] Bereshit Rabbah 74:5.
[70] Ibid 74:9.
[71] Ibid 71:5.
[72] Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, 21:3.
[73] Bereshit Rabbah 70:12 and 72:3.
[74] Louis Ginzberg, Legends of the Jews, Vol.I, p. 367.

[75] Bereshit Rabbah 70:3.
[76] Ibid 74:4.
[77] Ibid 70:12.
[78] Bereshit Rabbah 70:15, and others.
[79] Ruth Rabbah 7:13.
[80] Ibid 70:15.
[81] The Book of Jubilees 28:5-6
[82] Tanhuma Buber 7:12. See Chapter 2: A Rabbinic Portrait of Rachel for a more detailed analysis of this text.
[83] Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, 19:7.
[84] B.T. *Baba Batra* 123a.
[85] B.T. *Baba Batra 123a*, Soncino Translation, footnote C8.
[86] See Chapter 2, Section D3: "As young woman promised in marriage."
[87] Bereshit Rabbah 70:19.
[88] Song of Songs Rabbah 6:4.
[89] Paraphrased from The Book of Jubilees 28:23.
[90] Sefer HaYashar, *Mikketz* 95a.
[91] Bereshit Rabbah 84:21.
[92] Ibid 70:15.
[93] Ibid 71:3 and Ruth Rabbah. See also Chapter 2, A Rabbinic Portrait of Rachel.
[94] Bereshit Rabbah 70:16 and 71:2, Baba Batra 123a, TanB I 152-3, Tan VaYetze 4.
[95] B.T. *Baba Batra* 123a.
[96] Bereshit Rabbah 70:16
[97] B.T. *Baba Batra* 123a.
[98] Bereshit Rabbah 71:2.
[99] Tanhuma Buber 7:11, Aggadat Bereshit 48.
[100] Bereshit Rabbah 71:2.
[101] Jubilees 36:21-24.
[102] Bereshit Rabbah 72:1.
[103] Ibid, Soncino's comment, p. 662, footnote #4.
[104] Pesikta d'Rav Kahana, *piska* 20.
[105] Bereshit Rabbah 71:1.
[106] Testament of Issachar 1:10.
[107] B.T. *Eruvin* 100b.
[108] Testament of Issachar 2:2-3.
[109] The Book of Jubilees 34:15.
[110] B.T. *Berachot* 7b.
[111] Bereshit Rabbah 71:4.
[112] B.T. *Berachot* 60a, Bereshit Rabbah 72:6, Tanhuma Buber 7:19, Tanhuma *Vayetze* 8, Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer 35, Midrash HaGadol to Genesis 30:22.
[113] Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, 19:4-5.
[114] Ibid, 19:7.
[115] Midrash HaGadol to Genesis 30:9.
[116] Bereshit Rabbah 71:4.

[117] Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, 19:8.
[118] The Book of Jubilees 28:20.
[119] Paraphrased from Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, 19:8.
[120] Ibid.
[121] Bereshit Rabbah 72:3.
[122] Ezekiel 20:38.
[123] B.T. *Nedarim* 20b.
[124] B.T. *Niddah* 31a.
[125] Ibid.
[126] Soncino Translation of B.T. *Niddah*, p.59, footnote 11.
[127] Ibid, p. 216, footnote 14.
[128] Bereshit Rabbah 99:10.
[129] Ibid 70:19. Also Tanhuma Buber 7:11.
[130] Bereshit Rabbah 71:2.
[131] Ibid 70:19..
[132] Bereshit Rabbah 70:19.
[133] Lamentations Rabbah, *Petichta* 24.
[134] Bereshit Rabbah 71:5.
[135] B.T. *Eruvin* 53a.
[136] B.T. *Sotah* 13a and Bereshit Rabbah 58:4.
[137] Bereshit Rabbah 70:15, and others.
[138] B.T. *Megillah* 13a, B.T. *Baba Batra* 123a, Bereshit Rabbah 70:13, and others.
[139] B.T. *Megillah* 13a
[140] Ibid.
[141] Lamentations Rabbah, *Petichta* 24.
[142] Alkalay, The Complete Hebrew English Dictionary, p.2522.
[143] Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, 19:7.
[144] Louis Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews, Vol. V, p. 295, footnote 166.
[145] See Chapter 2: A Rabbinic Portrait of Rachel, for the text of Lamentations Rabbah.
[146] B.T. *Berachot* 7b.
[147] Bereshit Rabbah 71:5.
[148] B.T. *Berachot* 7b.
[149] The Book of Jubilees 36:24.
[150] B.T. *Baba Batra* 123a.
[151] Bereshit Rabbah 71:2.
[152] See Chapter 3: A Rabbinic Portrait of Leah, section D4, "As wife" for a detailed outline of rabbinic responses.
[153] Bereshit Rabbah 71:2.
[154] Midrash HaGadol to Genesis 30:24.
[155] Midrashim that refer to signs include: B.T. *Megillah* 13a, Lamentations Rabbah *Petichta* 24, and Midrash HaGadol to Genesis 29:25.
[156] Paraphrased from The Book of Jubilees 35:20-21.

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