

# Vayetse

A Jewish reading by Dalia Marx  
and a Christian Response by Ursula Rudnick

***“Like Rachel and like Leah, which two did build the house of Israel” (Ruth 4:11)***<sup>1</sup>

Whether they be Bialik's Tzili and Gili, Luise and Lottie from Erich Kästner's *Das doppelte Lottchen*, or the tennis stars Venus and Serena Williams, pairs of sisters have always invited attention. Their differences and similarities, their intimacy and jealousy, have fired the imagination. Leah and Rachel – the earliest pair of sisters in our literature – tell a story (lean of words yet rich with significance) which began long ago yet remains unfinished unto this day.

The combination of two women, one fecund and practical, the other barren but beloved, is not unique in our sources. When the Midrash turns to describing the sins of the Generation of the Flood, it tells us:

Such is the Generation of the Flood: A man would take two wives, one for reproduction and the other for sexual pleasure. The one taken for reproduction spent her life like a widow, while he would give the one for sexual pleasure a cup of sterilizing potion to keep her from bearing children, and she would sit on his lap, decorated like a whore, as it is written: *And Lemech took for himself two wives, the first named Ada* [since she adorned herself with *adayim* – "ornaments"] *and the second named Tzila* (Genesis 4:19), for she would sit in his shadow [Heb. *tzilo*].  
(*Yalkut Shimoni Job* 910)

The midrash disapprovingly describes a male fantasy in which a man has one wife whose function is to produce offspring and create the next generation, and another wife who keeps herself well put-together, slim, and free of stretch marks. Her role is to keep him sexually satisfied. Whose fate is preferable – that of the woman who embraces her own children but is estranged from her husband, or that of the woman who is embraced by her husband while he keeps her from bearing children? And don't these women entertain any ambitions beyond romance and motherhood? The women of the Generation of the Flood were treated as objects by their husbands, and even though the story of our father Jacob is very different and much more complicated than that of the midrashic Lemech, perhaps we can identify an underlying critique of Jacob in his story as well, a voice which reproves him for remaining insensitive to his wives' complicated predicament (and we have yet to mention the two maidservants!).

Where the Torah is laconic, Jewish tradition lets the two sisters speak. Rachel's voice is heard throughout the land when Jeremiah transforms her into the nation's suffering mother and apologist: *Thus says the Lord: A voice is heard on high, lamentation, and bitter weeping, Rachel weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her*

---

<sup>1</sup> Translated Dr. Berel Dov Lerner.

children, because they are not (Jeremiah 31:14). And she wins a divine promise: *Thus says the Lord: Refrain your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for your work shall be rewarded, says the Lord; and they shall return from the land of the enemy* (verses 15-16). Her sister Leah is Judah's mother, Judah the progenitor of King David, from whose seed, according to tradition, the Messiah will eventually arise; Leah is the mother of the Jewish People. But here too a division of labor is maintained between the two sisters, the one earthly, from whom springs a lasting dynasty, the other grieved and tragic.

This division of labor also finds expression in the *Tikkun Hatzot*, a special prayer service developed by the Kabbalists of Safed that is recited after midnight. Of course, the notion of night being a time when deep fears and hidden hopes rise to the surface predates those Kabbalists by many centuries.<sup>2</sup> According to a Talmudic tradition attributed to Rabbi Eliezer, at night God Himself mourns the destruction of His Temple: "The night has three watches, and during each watch the Holy One, blessed be He, sits and roars like a lion, for it is said: *The Lord roars from on high, and His voice utters from His holy habitation; He roars mightily because of His fold* (Jeremiah 25:30)" (B. Berakhot 3a). From here we learn that the night – when the signs of human activity recede and the stillness allows for meditation and new insights – is a time for expression of the mind's deepest thoughts.

Unlike the statutory regular prayers, recited traditionally three times a day, *Tikkun Hatzot* is a voluntary prayer, recited as an act of piety and devotion. It is still popular in many religious, mostly Hasidic and Neo-Hasidic, circles. The *Tikkun* is divided into two sections. The first is called *Tikkun Rachel*, and it consists of lamentation for the destruction and exile, while the second part, *Tikkun Leah*, mainly expresses hope for redemption. *Tikkun Rachel* is recited first, while the worshipper sits on the ground. Some place ashes on their head before its recitation. Afterwards, the worshipper stands to recite *Tikkun Leah*. First they delve into the depths of despair and only afterwards come consolation and hope.

In his book *Pri Etz Hayyim*, Rabbi Hayyim Vital, the disciple of R. Isaac Luria, provides an extended account of how the female entities called "Rachel" and "Leah" grow and contract during the night. He writes: "For is not the secret of the coupling of midnight that of Jacob with Leah, while Rachel is called the barren one of the house [*akeret habayit*] and has no coupling. And every midnight she cries out and roars to the blessed Lord about the destruction of the Temple...therefore it is proper for one to join with her, to act as she does. Therefore one must make much of it and weep and cry every night about the exile of the Divine Presence, which is Rachel" (*Sha'ar Tikkun Hatzot*, 1).

On some days only one of the *Tikkunim* is said; *Tikkun Rachel* is not read on days of joy or mourning, neither is it read during *Sefirat Ha'Omer* or the Ten Days of Repentance. However, on the night of the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av, the saddest day of the Jewish year, only *Tikkun Rachel* is recited. On that day we allow ourselves to experience Rachel's absolute mourning and lack of consolation – for she is the tragic figure who waited for her beloved, who asked to die because she was childless, and who finally

---

<sup>2</sup> Already in Psalms we find the verse: *At midnight I will rise to give thanks [Hebrew: hodot] unto You because of Your righteous ordinances* (119:62). Actually, the verse seems to be about avowal [*hoda'a*] rather than thanksgiving [*hoda'ya*], since the dimension of judgment is alluded to in the second half of the verse.

died when her request for a child was answered. Rachel refuses to be comforted. We ourselves remain in that condition for a short time but on the morrow – the day of 9<sup>th</sup> of Av itself – we slowly begin to breathe the spirit of healing and redemption.

Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav notes that the *Tikkun* is concerned with the present rather than the past. It does not only speak of the people's exile and redemption, but also of "that which is happening to the person. And when he utters it at midnight in this way, he can find the entire contents of his heart in the midnight recitation." (*Likkutei MOHaRaN*, part II, 101). The kabbalistic tradition, which denotes the two parts of *Tikkun Hatzot* with the names of the sisters, grants the two women a place in the yearnings of the individual and of the community throughout the generations. It also preserved the standard attitudes towards them.

Returning to the biblical story of Leah and Rachel, (and I take pains to switch the "normal" order of the names, as Leah was the elder and her name alphabetically precedes that of Rachel) we discover that the differences between them are not as absolute as we tend to think. Each of their personalities encompasses contradictions and the relationship between the two women is ambivalent. Weak-eyed and unloved Leah becomes the mother of many children and the derivations of her children's names allude to the constructive process she undergoes through the years. Finally, she cries out upon Judah's birth, *This time I shall thank the Lord* (Genesis 29:35), an exclamation that alludes to completion. And that is, by the way, the first expression of thanksgiving to God in human history.<sup>3</sup> The desirable and beloved Rachel winds up unfulfilled in life and separated from her beloved in death (she alone of the Matriarchs was not buried in the cave of Machpela). Even the name she gave her son just before her death does not survive intact. But she also becomes Israel's vindicator and she is the one who is granted a divine promise of redemption.

Together as one, the sisters encompass the plurality and complexity of the People Israel. The elders and townspeople were right to bless Ruth with the wish that she be *like Rachel and Leah, who both built the House of Israel* (Ruth 4:11).

Leah and Rachel teach all who read their story (including their husband) that it is impossible to squeeze them – or for that matter, anyone else – into simple templates. The sisters call upon us to apply their lesson in our dealings and contacts with others, they teach us to be aware of the "Rachelness" of the Leahs and "Leahness" of the Rachels whom we encounter in our lives. But even that is insufficient, for every individual is an entire world.

### **Ursula's response to Dalia's article:**

It is very interesting to see in which ways Judaism and Christianity have used the story of Rachel and Leah. Your text, Dalia, introduces me to a fascinating expression of desire for the healing of the world that is connected to the Biblical figures of Rachel and Leah. It finds its expression in the special prayer service initiated by the Kabbalists of Safed.

---

<sup>3</sup> In the Talmud (B. Berakhot 7b) we read: "From the day the Holy One, blessed be He, created His world, no human thanked the Holy One, blessed be He until you came, Leah, and thanked Him."

As in the Rabbinical Literature, the figure of Rachel in the book of Genesis is merged with the Rachel that laments the loss of her children in the book of laments. The pain of the matriarch Rachel because she is childless and the pain of the woman named Rachel who experienced the Babylonian conquest of Judah, the destruction of the Temple, the war and deportation, are fused.

In the prayer-service Rachel becomes the symbol of pain and lament, Leah stands for the hope of redemption. You, Dalia, show that all the readers of this story carry elements of both women in themselves. It is important not to allow ourselves or others to let ourselves be limited to a certain role. My family can serve as an example of this: my father played the role of the eternal optimist, my mother that of the pessimist. Needless to say, that their discussions were rarely very fruitful. Yes, it is important to listen to the small voices in ourselves, those which tend to be repressed, because they do not fit the image we have of ourselves.