

Rachel's Lessons
Rabbi Lev Meirowitz Nelson
Flatbush Jewish Center
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This morning, I'd like to focus on the Haftarah, and specifically Jeremiah's reference to Rachel in verses 15-16, and what we can learn from it.

Thus said THE ETERNAL:
A cry is heard in Ramah —
Wailing, bitter weeping —
Rachel weeping for her children.
She refuses to be comforted
For her children, who are gone.
Thus said THE ETERNAL:
Restrain your voice from weeping,
Your eyes from shedding tears;
For there is a reward for your action
—declares THE ETERNAL:
They shall return from the enemy's land.

Of course, “return” in Hebrew is *shuv*; the historical promise that the exiled Jews will return to Israel is also a promise that each of us, spiritually exiled in all the places we have gone astray, will do *teshuvah* and return to our spiritual home.

But what action of Rachel's is God acknowledging here? What is she doing? To answer that, we first need a quick refresher on Rachel.

Recall that she was pregnant with her second son as Jacob and the family made their way back from Lavan's home to the land of Israel. Before they could reach their intended destination, Rachel went into labor and died giving birth to Benjamin. Unable or unwilling to bring her body to the family tomb in Hebron, Jacob buries her on the spot and raises a grave-marker, which is identified to this day as Rachel's Tomb near Bethlehem.

Fast-forward hundreds of years: The First Temple was destroyed, our tradition teaches, because of the sin of idol worship. When the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem and sent most of the Jews into exile, legend has it the exiles' forced march took them past Rachel's Tomb. From the *p'shat*, the surface reading of the biblical text, Jeremiah is saying that Rachel's tears are enough to move God to mercy. This is consistent with—and perhaps even one of the origins of—later rabbinic teaching that even after God has closed the heavenly gates of prayer out of frustration and disgust with us, the gates of tears remain always open. But as this image makes its way through centuries of rabbinic interpretation, her tears will morph into speech.

Let's jump forward to Eicha Rabbah, one of our oldest collections of midrash; scholars date it to sometime between 400-600 CE. It paints the following scene as God prepares to send the Jews into exile: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses each try to persuade God to have mercy on us, and one by one they fail. Then up steps Rachel. She reminds God of another famous midrash that explains how Jacob could be tricked on his wedding night and made to marry Leah instead of Rachel. When Rachel found out about Lavan's plan to swap the sisters, she told Jacob and gave him secret signs by which he could identify her in the dark. And then, she says in Eicha Rabbah, “I took pity by myself, I suffered and had patience with my own desire” —you might even translate it ‘lust’ —“and I had mercy on my sister so that she would not be shamed.” So she gave Leah the secret signs, and more than that, she hid under the marriage

bed and answered for Leah when Jacob spoke to her. “It was an act of love, *chesed*, for her,” says Rachel to God, “and I was not jealous of my sister. Now therefore, if I who am flesh and blood, dust and ashes, was not jealous of my *tzarah*”—I’ll translate that word in a moment—“if I did not cast her into shame and embarrassment, why would You, the eternal living and compassionate God, why would you be jealous of the worship of idols, which have no substance, no worth at all?”

And God, overcome with mercy, accepts her argument. This is her action and this is its reward: the return of the Jews from exile and the building of the Second Temple.

What is this word *tzarah* that Rachel uses to describe Leah in this moment? It has a range of meaning, from “narrow, cramped” to “distress” to “adversary, foe” and even, very specifically, a “rival wife.” You may know it best from its Yiddishized form, *tzuross*, trouble. Our machzor, in Avinu Malkeinu, translates it as “oppressor.” Such a wide range of feelings to hang on a single, small word. Was Rachel simply feeling hemmed in by Leah? Upset by her? Was she an active enemy?

This midrash transforms her wordless cry, as Jeremiah would have it, into an impassioned argument. Why do Rachel’s words sway God when the patriarchs’ do not? Abraham, Jacob, and Moses all tell God about the hard external work they did—leaving home as a wanderer, raising 12 children, leading the people in the desert. Isaac reminds God of personal, inner work he did—his willingness to be sacrificed upon the altar—but that work is entirely about himself, or between himself and God. Of these five characters, Rachel is unique because the emotional labor she does is inner work between her and one of the people she loves most in the world: her sister. In that moment of betrayal, of hurt, of displacement, Rachel could have lashed out. Instead, she finds within herself a wellspring of compassion, going above and beyond what I think any of us would expect from a sibling. When she asks God to do the same, in Eicha Rabbah’s telling, God can’t help but be moved.

On this Rosh Hashanah, may we, too, be moved by Rachel’s example to find wellsprings of compassion in ourselves and to forgive those who have hurt us.

Now zip ahead some 500 years to Rashi, the great medieval rabbi. When he comments on these verses from our Haftarah, he cites the same midrash, but in condensed, paraphrased form. And I was bowled over by the audacity I perceived in Rashi’s words when I first saw them. Here’s my translation:

The patriarchs and matriarchs went to appease the Holy Blessed One after King Menashe placed an idol in the Temple, but God was not appeased. Then Rachel entered and said: Master of the Universe, whose mercies are greater, Yours or humanity’s? Of course one would say Yours. Is it not so that I brought my *tzarah* into my house? For all the *avodah* that Jacob did in my father’s house was only for me. [Remember here that *avodah* means both ordinary, everyday work and ritual worship.] ... Not only did I keep silent—I gave Leah my signs! Now You, if Your sons have brought your *tzarah* into Your house, keep silent for them.

Now, obviously I’m not in Rashi’s head. I can only interpret the words on the page. But as I read it, Rashi has transformed Eicha Rabbah’s emotional appeal into a sort of logical analogy. And what a radical analogy it is! Lavan placed a *tzarah*, an oppressor, in Rachel’s house. The wicked king, Menashe, placed a *tzarah* in God’s house. Rachel put up with it. God should too.

The least radical thing here is the analogy comparing Jacob’s *avodah*—both his work in the fields and, presumably, the marital *avodah* he and Rachel did together in Rachel’s bed—to the

Temple service. To say that we serve God in all parts of all our lives, in all that we do, is refreshing but not unheard of; Chasidism takes that line regularly. But to say that God can have a *tzarah*, an oppressor or foe or perhaps a rival wife, is pretty astounding. And to equate Rachel's house with the Temple is effectively to equate Rachel with God. The rabbis regularly tell us parables about a king of flesh and blood, who is of course a stand-in for God, but so very rarely do we see a woman play that role.

On this Rosh Hashanah, may we, too, make peace with the competitors in our lives—or recognize them as insignificant shadows—so that we may focus our attention on the relationships and the *avodah* that truly matter to us.

Zip ahead again with me to eastern Europe, sometime between 1780-1820, to a *tekhine*—a woman's prayer—written in Yiddish by Sered, daughter of Rabbi Jacob Regal of Dubno, wife of Rabbi Mordechai Katz Rappoport, head of the rabbinic court of Oleksiniec. This translation is by Chava Weissler, in the book *Four Centuries of Jewish Women's Spirituality*, edited by Ellen Umansky and Dianne Ashton. In "*Tekhine* of the Matriarchs for Shofar," Sered writes,

And we also ask our mother Rachel to plead for us, that we may be inscribed and sealed for good, and that we may have a year of life and a year of livelihood. And may we never suffer any sorrow. We know well that you cannot bear to hear of any sorrow. For when your beloved son Joseph was led to Egypt, the Ishmaelites caused him great sorrow, and he fell on your grave and began to weep, "Mother, mother! Have mercy on your child! How can you look on my sorrow, when you had such love for me? And today I am so embittered, and you have no compassion for me!" And you could not bear to listen to the sorrow of your child, and you answered him, "My dear child, I hear your cry, and I will always have compassion when I hear your sorrow."

I hear our Haftarah clearly in the background here—in the very next verse, Jeremiah will refer to the entire people of Israel by the name Ephraim, Joseph's son—but in Sered's sacred imagination, she has transposed the scene in time and character, keeping the location—Rachel's Tomb—the same. Now instead of an entire people being led into exile, one beloved son is going—sold there by his jealous older brothers, leaving behind a younger brother who will grow up thinking Joseph dead. In Sered's prayer, Rachel's compassion is not shaped by the magnitude of the calamity. A single teenager deserves compassion as much as an entire nation.

On this Rosh Hashanah, may we, too, open our hearts to the pain and the needs of others, whether or not they make headlines.

And finally, come forward with me to 1976, to Israeli poet Dalia Ravikovitch's poem "Like Rachel." Not precisely a version of this midrash, but an artistic snapshot of her death and life. In one couplet, Ravikovitch writes, "All the days of her life churn inside her, like a baby who wants to be born." The image, for me, is that the baby and the future are one and the same. All the potential pain, all the potential beauty, all the potential growth must squeeze through this narrow place, this *tzarah*, and it's going to kill her because it's too much. Rachel is more full of vision on the inside than she can possibly conduct safely into the world. Knowing this, caught between two impossibilities, she chooses to give up her life in order to birth a future for her people.

On this Rosh Hashanah, may we, too, be open to dreams still gestating inside us. May we have the courage to give birth to possibilities not yet imagined, even if it feels like the effort might kill us.

And this Rosh Hashanah, may Rachel take her rightful place in our pantheon of Rosh Hashanah's powerful women, alongside Sarah, Hagar, and Hannah.