

Leah's Prayers:



A Feminist Reading

How the “unloved” wife of the patriarch Jacob taught the God of our mothers and fathers a lesson in compassion



Women are obligated to pray, that is, petition God for their needs, for everyone needs *rakhmanut* [divine compassion]
(Jerusalem Talmud Berakhot 3:3)

{ By **NOAM ZION**

What is the window into the biblical woman's heart? There are no diaries in the Bible, certainly no women's diaries. But we do have a few rare personal prayers to God, recited by women at revealing moments of deepest pain and joy. In the book of Samuel, barren Hannah, ridiculed and taunted by her co-wife Peninah, pours out her heart in the temple of Shiloh as she weeps. Exhibiting a body language of extreme bitterness and desperation, she appears to be intoxicated to the decorum-conscious High Priest Eli: "And Hannah spoke in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought that she was drunk" (I Samuel 1:13). Then, after God responds affirmatively to her prayer by giving her a child, we have a magnificent theological poem in Hannah's prayer of jubilation and thanks (I Samuel 2:1-10).

Centuries later, the Rabbis of the Talmud expand this biblical account to enter Hannah's inner world, and ghostwrite a new and more audacious prayer for her:

"And Hannah spoke in her heart" (I Samuel 1:13). Rabbi Elazar said in the name of Rabbi Yose ben Zimra: She spoke *concerning* her heart. She said before God: Sovereign of the Universe, among all the things that You have created in a woman, You have not created one without a purpose: eyes to see, ears to hear, a nose to smell, a mouth to speak, hands to do work, legs to walk with, breasts to give suck. These breasts that You have put *on* my heart, are they not for nursing? Give me a son, so that I may suckle with them.

(Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 31b)

The Rabbis thus invent a new Hannah, liberated from her deferential stance toward the authority of her husband and the High Priest. They make her into a full-bodied feminist, who demands that the Sovereign of the Universe grant her rightful needs, in

a direct, unabashed prayer that sounds more like bringing suit than worshipful pleading. Such literary rendering of the inner life of a woman – imagined or real – through prayer became in the Jewish tradition the paradigm for the proper state of mind, *kavanah*, for all human petitionary prayer. Thus, paradoxically, women, who were excluded from temple worship, and marginalized and exempted (or excluded) from synagogue prayer, became – through their ability to express deep human need in words and tears – the halachic and midrashic models for effective prayer. In Judaism, the prayers of women pour out inner longing to God, who, in turn, is characterized as a compassionate listener to the voices of the persecuted, the neglected and the needy.

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Hannah may be the foremost of the Bible's praying women, but she's not the first. In the book of Genesis, we find the story of Leah, the elder and unloved wife of Jacob. Unlike Hannah – and her fellow matriarchs, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel – Leah had no problems with fertility, which is the usual motive for women's prayer in the Bible. In fact, she had six sons and a daughter. Yet Leah had much to pray for. Here too, her biblical prayers triggered the literary-psychological imagination of the Rabbis, who wrote her a personal prayer of petition and protest.



Praying at the *Sigd* festival of the Ethiopian Jewish community, Jerusalem, 2009. Photo by Pini Hamou.



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Let us follow Leah's inner life and its verbal expression, in both the Bible and rabbinic literature. She wrestles indignantly, even impudently, with God, who has sentenced her to a life deprived of her husband Jacob's love. But she also grows in emotional intelligence, as her initial jealousy of her younger sister Rachel, the wife that Jacob does love, gradually gives way to compassion. Ultimately, she will try to teach God Himself what she has learned about forgiveness.

"Now My Husband will Love Me"

To put it in Yiddish, Leah's inner life is characterized by *tzuris*, *chutzpah*, and *rachmonis*, roughly translated as troubles, audacity and compassion. Her *tzuris*—from the Hebrew word *tzarot*, troubles (or "dire straits," since *tzar* means "narrow")—derive from her placement in the family. (Indeed in biblical Hebrew, the name for co-wives of the same man is *tzarot*.) Leah is the first-born daughter, entitled to be married off first, yet she cannot compete with the exceptional physical beauty of her younger sister Rachel. She is passed over when their cousin Jacob, seeking a wife, falls in love with Rachel at first sight. Leah is introduced to the reader as an obstacle to the fulfillment of Jacob's romantic love.

"Now Laban had two daughters: the name of the elder was Leah, the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah's eyes were weak, but Rachel was fair of form and fair to look at. And Jacob fell in love with Rachel." (Genesis 29:16)

Leah is disadvantaged in "looks." Her eyes, says the Hebrew text, are "*rakot*," which most commonly means "soft," but can also connote weakness or fatigue. Leah's eyes affect her view of the world, but also the way she is viewed by others; they are the only way she is described, apart from birth order, in the biblical text. Rachel, by contrast, is good to look at, in terms of what feminist criticism calls "the male gaze." As a result, Jacob not only falls in love with her at first sight, but is also willing to pay a bride-price of seven years' labor for Laban. He makes it very clear which daughter he wants: "I will serve you seven years for Rachel, your younger daughter" (Genesis 29:18).

But Laban gets the better of Jacob, manipulating Leah as an instrument to deceive the choosy suitor: "Now in the evening he took Leah his daughter and brought her to him, and he went in to her" (Genesis 29:23). Justifiably, Jacob comes to complain the next morning against what Laban – not Leah – has done to him. Jacob contracted as a free agent for the beautiful younger daughter. Laban responds by citing Leah's advantage in traditional legal terms: "Such is not done in our place, giving away the younger before the firstborn" (Genesis 29:26). Indeed, Jacob and Laban had no right to make a deal in violation of Leah's birthright as the elder daughter. The Bible imposes poetic justice upon Jacob, who had stolen the birthright of his elder brother Esau by tricking his elderly, blind father Isaac. Yet here too, Leah is an instrument, a tool of divine chastisement.

After Jacob has served Laban for another seven years, he takes Rachel as his second wife: "He lay also with Rachel, and he loved Rachel also, more than Leah" (Genesis 29:30). It may be reasonably inferred from this verse that Jacob did also love Leah, albeit less than he loved Rachel. But as the Bible scholar Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg commented in her book *Genesis: The Beginning of Desire*:

Leah is the stone that fractures Jacob's perfect dream of romantic fulfillment with Rachel, which is why she cannot be fully loved. It is not so much that the women are different, but rather their symbolic roles in the dreams and disappointments of Jacob. Rachel will always represent the unattainable in the European, romantic sense, while Leah will always represent "unromantic" fertility. Leah's hopes to win her husband's heart through child-bearing can never be fulfilled, because fertility is part of the workaday world, like raising sheep.

In the very next verse, we see that God's perspective is radically different: "Now when God saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb, while Rachel was barren" (Genesis 29:31). And Leah, for her part, turns to God, praying that God's attentions, expressed in the fruitfulness of her divinely opened womb, will produce similar attentions from her husband:

She called his name: *Reu-ven* / See, a Son!
For she said: Indeed, God has seen my
being afflicted,
indeed, now my husband will love me!

Twice more Leah conceives and bears sons to Jacob, and again the naming of the child is also a prayer for love:

Indeed, God has heard that I am hated, so
he has given me this one as well!

And she called his name: *Shimon* /
Hearing.
Now this time my husband will
accompany me,
For I have borne him three sons!
Therefore they called his name *Levi* /
Accompanying" (Genesis 29:32-34)

The biblical Leah now emerges as a struggling woman, who insists on recognition from her husband as something she has earned through hard labor. But that recognition is not forthcoming. Instead, the

battle of the sisters escalates: "When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister" (Genesis 30:1). She gives Jacob her maidservant Bilhah as a concubine, to act as a surrogate mother to compensate for her own infertility. Leah, by now having produced four sons (Judah is born in Genesis 29:35), counters by giving her maid Zilpah to Jacob as another concubine.

Then, in a rather strange episode, Leah gets another chance to produce her own biological child:

And Reuben went in the days of wheat harvest, and found *duda'im* in the field, and brought them to his mother Leah. Then Rachel said to Leah, "Give me, I beg you, of your son's *duda'im*." And she said to her, "Is it a small matter that you have taken my husband? And would you take away my son's *duda'im* also?" And Rachel said, "Therefore he shall lie with you tonight for your son's *duda'im*." And Jacob came from the field in the evening, and Leah went out to meet him, and said, "You must come in to me; for I have hired you with my son's *duda'im*." And he lay with her that night. And God listened to Leah, and she conceived, and bore Jacob the fifth son. And Leah said, "God has given me my hire, because I have given my maid to my husband; and she called his name Issachar" (Genesis 30:14-18).

What are these "*duda'im*"? Most translations render the word as "mandrakes," but no one really knows exactly what plant or flower young Reuben picked in the field. *Duda'im* resembles the word "*dod*," which means "lover" or "beloved" (as in *dodi li* or *lekha dodi*), which supports the assumption that this was an aphrodisiac or a fertility drug. Here, in the Bible's sole verbal exchange between the two sisters, the contest over the *duda'im* is a battle for Jacob's love. Leah resists Rachel's request, indignantly comparing the "giving" of a few flowers to Rachel, to the "taking" of her husband. Her

reaction reflects how hurt and vulnerable she is, and suggests, though this is unspoken in the text, that Jacob has avoided contact with her, preferring to sleep with her *tzarah*, his second wife Rachel.

Leah's *chutzpah* comes to the fore in her confrontation with Jacob. She demands an extra night of conjugal duties, which she has purchased from Rachel for an insulting pittance of *duda'im*. "I have hired you," she tells her husband with ribald malice, as if he were a male prostitute. The transaction is stripped of emotion; she does not require love or attention. She simply demands Jacob's services as a hired stud. In Hebrew, the word *sachar* connotes payment and employment, hence the name of the child, Issachar.

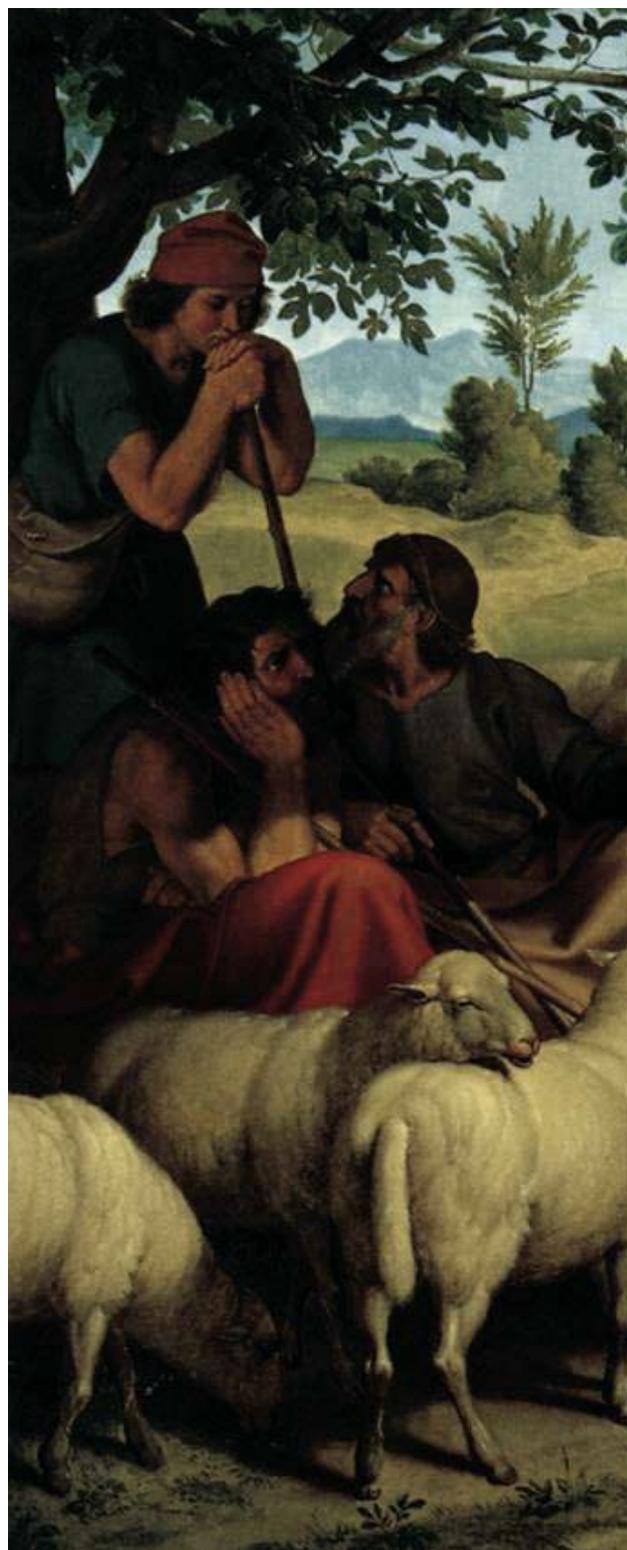
"I have hired you," she tells her husband with ribald malice, as if he were a male prostitute.

And yet, even now, Leah does sustain the hope that her husband will love her. The birth of Issachar is followed by that of Leah's sixth and last son, Zebulun:

"God has presented me with a good present,
this time my husband will prize me
(*yizbeleni*) –
for I have borne him six sons!
So she called his name: *Zevulun* / The Prince."

(Genesis 30:20)

In the very next verse, Leah gives birth to a daughter whom she names Dinah. But this naming, unlike those of Jacob's twelve male children, does not rate a prayerful explication. So it goes, in the patriarchal narrative of the Hebrew Bible. But there is more to the story.



Imitation of Woman

The birth of Dinah is immediately followed by the birth of Joseph, Rachel's long-awaited first child:

Afterwards she bore a daughter, and called her Dinah. And God remembered Rachel and God listened to her and opened her womb, so that she became pregnant and bore a son. She said: "God has removed



[*asaf*] my shame!" So she called his name Yosef, saying: "May God add [*yosef*] another son to me!" (Genesis 30:23-24).

A host of questions arises from these two juxtaposed events. Why does Leah, who has begun again to bear children, suddenly stop after Dinah? Why is Dinah the only one of Jacob's children whose name is not explained by her mother? Why did Leah choose the

name Dinah, from the same root, meaning "justice," as Dan, the son of the concubine Bilhah, Rachel's maidservant? And, most intriguingly – why is Rachel remembered by God right after the naming of Dinah; and why does it say God listened to Rachel, when the Bible never mentions Rachel praying directly to God? In Midrash Tanhuma, the rabbis of antiquity sought to provide some answers by inventing a prayer for Leah:



"Jacob Encountering Rachel," by the Austrian painter Joseph von Führich, 1836.

Leah, who after bearing [Jacob] six sons, saw prophetically that twelve tribes were to emerge from Jacob. Having [herself] borne six already, and pregnant for the seventh time, and with the two sons born to each of the two maidservants, ten had already been born. Therefore, Leah stood, angrily confronting the Almighty, saying:

“Master of the Universe, twelve tribes are to emerge from Jacob, of which I have six, and am pregnant with a seventh, and by means of the maidservants two and two, hence there are ten. If this [unborn] child [I am carrying] is also a son, then my sister Rachel’s share will not [even] be that of the maidservants!”

At once the Blessed Holy One heard her prayer, and the fetus in her belly was turned into a female . . . And why did Leah call her Dinah? Because the righteous Leah stood before the Master of the Universe demanding justice, and the Blessed Holy One said to her: “You are merciful, and I too have mercy on her [Rachel],” and it is immediately written: “And God remembered Rachel.”

(Midrash Tanhuma, Vayetzeh, Chapter 8)

Until this point, God has opened Leah’s womb and kept Rachel’s womb closed, as a way of pressing Jacob to love Leah, mother of his children, no less than Rachel. But it hasn’t worked. Jacob never engages in self-reflection even when confronted with Rachel’s prolonged infertility. He responds to Rachel’s demand for children by a brusque denial that this has anything to do with him at all:

And when Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said to Jacob, “Give me children, or else I die.” And Jacob’s anger was kindled against Rachel; and he said, “Am I in God’s place, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?” (Genesis 30:1-2).

There is thus no reason for God to alter his preferential treatment of Leah, unless Leah herself relinquishes her demand for justice, or God is overwhelmed by sheer *rakhmanut*, compassion, for Rachel, the innocent victim of God’s intervention into Leah and Jacob’s relationship. In the midrash, both possibilities are synthesized, as Leah is turned from an angry victim into a strong, audacious character who demands the fair treatment of her sister. God’s change of mind, his “remembering” of Rachel, is thus understood in the light of the change of heart of his “client,” Leah, who has moved beyond jealousy to *rachmonis*.

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The midrash praises Leah for bringing suit against God. While the substance of her plea is to request mercy for her sister, her co-wife or *tzarah*, the style of the pleading is adversarial – *chutzpadik* – an appeal to logic, not pathos. She names her daughter Dinah – “Justice,” as it were – and argues her case in terms of the moral and mathematical symmetry of the tribes and their mothers. Most strikingly, Leah offers herself as a role model for God, who decides to act in imitation of woman, rather than the usual theological model, in which human beings act morally, in *imitatio Dei*: “You [Leah] are merciful, and I too have mercy on her [Rachel].”

In the midrash, Leah is crowned with a new trait missing in her biblical character – *rakhmanut*, which in Hebrew derives from *rekhem*, womb. In this Jewish biological

metaphor, compassion is the archetypal trait of women, whereas in the Greek counterpart, women are portrayed as hysterical (from the word *hysteria*, meaning womb, the origin of the word “hysterectomy”) – incapable of controlling their emotions, unmanly in their lack of self-control. Such emotion is strictly negative in the Greek world, which celebrates rationality and physical courage. But it is a positive mark of divinity in the Bible, where *el rakhum* – merciful God – is the first of the thirteen attributes of divinity revealed to Moses at Sinai, and a central idiom of rabbinic prayer, especially on the High Holidays. Asking for divine *rakhmanut* is a cornerstone of Jewish liturgy, an ongoing tribute to such women as Hannah and Leah as models for petitionary prayer.

A Feminist Postscript

The ethos of *rakhmanut* is consistent with aspects of modern feminist theory. Carol Friedman Gilligan, a leading scholar of moral development, describes the cultural ideal of the “good woman” in western society. According to Gilligan, women represent such values as solidarity, networking and compromise as opposed to male values of competition and individualism. Women promote an inclusive morality of mutual responsibility, not an abstract morality of rights in which one side wins at the expense of the other.

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At the culmination of her inner struggle, Leah transcends her jealousy of Rachel and acquires the moral strength to rebuild her relationship with her sister. In Genesis 31, Rachel and Leah join forces with Jacob in defying Laban, who sold his daughters as commodities, tricked their husband, and now seeks to deny their family of their hard-earned wealth. The chapter begins:

And he [Jacob] heard the words of Laban's sons, saying, “Jacob has taken away all that was our father's, and from that which was our father's has he gotten all this honor.” And Jacob saw the countenance of Laban, and, behold, it was not toward him as before. (Genesis 31:1-2.)

God speaks to Jacob in a dream, telling him to rise up, leave Laban's house in Padan-Aram, and go back to Canaan. Jacob tells his wives about the dream, and they reply in unison:

And Rachel and Leah answered and said to him:

Do we still have a share, an inheritance in our father's house?

Is it not as strangers that we are thought of by him?

For he has sold us and eaten up, yes, eaten up our purchase-price!

Indeed, all the riches that God has snatched away from our father – they belong to us and to our children” (Genesis 31:14-16).

At this moment of truth, these women are no longer rivals, seeking to undermine one another. They have no trouble choosing between their deceitful father and their now-vulnerable husband. They are moral agents, empowered by solidarity and prayer. Jacob and his household flee with all their livestock and goods. Rachel, in a final act of *chutzpah*, steals the household gods of her father the idolator. The compassionate God is watching, and we may assume that S/He is happy too.



Noam Zion, a fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute, has an Master of Arts in philosophy from Columbia University. His numerous publications include: *A Different Night: The Family Participation Haggadah*, *A Different Light: The Big Book of Hanukkah* and *A Day Apart: Shabbat at Home*. Noam is also a leading contributor to the SHI website's Education Channel.