Rachel and Leah: A Jewish Model of Sisterhood

Nora Gold

THE STORY OF RACHEL AND LEAH IS UNIQUE because it is the only example in the Torah of two sisters in relationship. As Elyse Goldstein points out in *Re-Visions: Seeing Torah Through A Feminist Lens*, there are other sisters in the Torah besides Rachel and Leah, but these are either sisters to men (such as Miriam to Moses), or groups of sisters who are treated as a unit, rather than as individuals. So the Rachel-Leah story is the quintessential sister narrative, in contrast to all the brother narratives in the Torah, and as such, is crucial to our understanding of how the Torah views sisters — and, by extension, sisterhood. For this reason, this story has drawn the attention of many feminist readers of the Bible. And many, like me, have been troubled by the portrayal of the relationship between Rachel and Leah as being basically one of rivalry, of two women fighting over a man — sisters, yet no sisterhood.

The way this story is told, of course, has precedents. In *The Feminist Companion to the Bible*, Athalya Brenner observes that pairs of women in the Bible "are always defined as two rivals who are interlinked by family ties and interlock in social combat, as if no alternative pattern of social behaviour is conceivable for them..." (203). I would suggest, however, that there is an alternative way to understand the relationship between Rachel and Leah, and that there is much more to this relationship than, as Sandy Eisenberg Sasso called it in *The Women's Torah Commentary*, a "cat fight" between two women.

In Genesis, of course, we already know by the time we come to the Rachel-Leah story that the Torah does not idealize family relationships. Just before the Rachel-Leah story, we read of the tumultuous relationship between Jacob and Esau, and in the generation that follows Rachel and Leah, we have the story of Joseph and his brothers. The Rachel-Leah story is "sandwiched" in between these two brother stories, and it has similarities to them thematically. But there are also several important differences.

First of all, while the brother stories are about boys competing for their father's love, the Rachel-Leah story is about two women competing for the love of their husband. Rather than being about same-sex parental love and approval, this one is about opposite-sex spousal love and desire, including all the sexual, erotic, and romantic components implied in this. Furthermore, the Rachel-Leah story is different from the brother rivalry stories because of the factor of gender. As Ilana Pardes points out in *Countertraditions in the Bible*, the official hierarchy in the Bible is of God-man-woman, and just as man can imitate God but never be God, so woman can imitate man, but can never be the equal of man. In this case, Jacob's is clearly the main plot of the story, and Rachel and Leah are just a sub-plot.

Furthermore, the underlying theme in Genesis' brother stories is the reversal of primogeniture. In Pardes' view, even if Rachel had dreams of reversing primogeniture, as Jacob did, in the end she does not succeed, and the natural order is maintained. Her older sister marries before her and has children before her. So it is hard to see Rachel as having prevailed over Leah, the way Jacob prevails over Esau when he succeeds at overcoming birth order and supplanting Esau as the number one son.

One other striking difference between the sisters' narrative and the two brother narratives is that the brothers, in both cases, reconcile. Jacob and Esau cry on each other's necks, and so do Joseph and his brothers. But, as Pardes points out, the biblical text offers no reconciliation between Rachel and Leah. We never see these sisters hugging and kissing and crying, like the boys do.

Yet another important male-female difference concerns the "wrestlings" of Jacob and Rachel. As Eisenberg Sasso notes, both Jacob and Rachel wrestle. Different Hebrew verbs are used for wrestle — *niftalti* for Rachel and *va'yeiavek* for Jacob — but these are both valid words for wrestling. Jacob's wrestling takes place with an angel the night before he is about to go meet his brother Esau after many years apart.

> *And a man wrestled* (va'yeiavek) *with him until the break of dawn.* (GENESIS 32:25)

Rachel's struggle, her "wrestling," comes about when her son Naftali is born through her concubine Bilhah, and at this point she speaks:

> *A fateful contest I waged* (niftalti) *with my sister; yes, and I have prevailed.* (GENESIS 30:8)

Eisenberg Sasso points out that Jacob's wrestling with the angel is taken very seriously in the Bible. It represents a highly important spiritual struggle, one that the rabbis interpret as a struggle with his brother, Esau. In contrast, the wrestling between Rachel and Leah is treated as just wrangling between sisters. Eisenberg Sasso suggests that Rachel's struggle with Leah was, like Jacob's with Esau, also a divine struggle, and should be taken just as seriously.

Unlike Jacob, Rachel never gets the chance to be transformed.

Pardes, commenting on Rachel's "yes, and I have prevailed," calls Rachel's boast one of "questionable validity" (65). After all, this is really Bilhah's child, and Rachel's own womb is still closed. Referring to an allusion of Henry James', Pardes writes: "Rachel runs breathless 'beside the coach' of the 'true agent'" (in other words, Jacob, and a full destiny for herself), "but neither manages to get her 'foot on the step,' nor to cease for a moment to tread the dusty road." An interesting image, given that Rachel ends up being buried by the side of a road.

Unlike Jacob, Rachel never gets the chance to be transformed. Pardes relates this to the fact that there is never any explicit reconciliation between Rachel and Leah. Jacob's inner transformation after struggling with the angel is inextricably bound up with his capacity to reconcile with his brother. This difference in Jacob's and Rachel's sibling experiences suggests that in the Torah, personal change and growth is possible, but only in the male realm.

Still, it is possible to challenge the traditional depiction of Rachel and Leah as two women who fight over a man and never manage to get their act together as sisters. After all, in at least two points in the text, they do. First, Rachel and Leah are united regarding the decision to leave their father's house. In the field with Jacob, they respond with one voice in their agreement to leave Laban:

> *Then Rachel and Leah answered him, saying, 'Have we still a share in the inheritance of our father's house? Surely, he regards us as outsiders, now that he has sold us and has used up our purchase price. Truly, all the wealth that God has taken away from our father belongs to us and to our children. Now then, do just as God has told you.'* (GENESIS 31:14-16)

It is also quite striking here that Jacob invites both Rachel and Leah into the field to talk, to discuss leaving Laban. Jacob could have thought in that situation, "Now's my big chance — I can dump the wife I don't love, and be with the one I do." But this is not what he does. I think the Torah is offering here some options for what a marriage can be — it can be erotically-based, or not. Aside from eros, there is also duty and respect for the mother of one's children, or even (without children in the picture) respect for the person one has married.

Secondly, in terms of the two sisters' capacity to collaborate, Rachel and Leah work something out in the incident with the mandrakes. In Genesis 30:14-15, Leah's son, Reuben, brings mandrakes to his mother, and Rachel asks Leah if she can have some. Leah responds, "Was it not enough for you to take away my husband, that you would also take my son's mandrakes?" Rachel replies, "I promise he shall lie with you tonight in return for your son's mandrakes." Yes, there is tension here between the two women. But Rachel and Leah's dialogue leads them to strike a deal where each one gets the prize she lacks. Leah gets Jacob for the night; Rachel gets the mandrakes with their putative fertility properties. So they have found a way to co-operate even in times of stress and distress.

Even more importantly, beyond the striking of deals of joint self-interest, Rachel and Leah, according to rabbinic tradition, show each other great kindness and generosity. This occurs on at least one occasion we know about for Leah, and at least two for Rachel. In this sense, their story — and, more broadly, our tradition — can provide an alternate archetype of Rachel and Leah that is quite moving, and that changes the whole way we look at the relationship between these two sisters.

Leah doing kindness for Rachel:

> A midrash connected with this Torah portion relates the following:
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> All the wives of Jacob [Leah, Rachel, Bilhah and Zilpah] prayed with Jacob to erase Rachel's barrenness, and after that, for the first time, and on New Year's Day, God granted Rachel a son. (Midrash HaGadol, cited in Louis Ginzberg's 1956 *Legends of the Bible*, p. 176)

This is quite extraordinary. Leah prays for her rival to have the one thing that grants Leah superiority over her. And yet, perhaps it isn't so strange.

In a sense, Leah owes Rachel, because long before this event happens, Rachel did something beautiful for her.

> *Rachel doing kindness for Leah:*
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> On Jacob's first wedding night, the one where Rachel is supposed to marry Jacob but Leah marries him instead, Rachel does a wonderful thing. According to a midrash, Rachel suspected that her father might try to switch brides, so she and Jacob arranged signs and passwords so that Jacob would know it was really her, and not Leah. But just before the wedding, Rachel took pity on Leah, feeling that Leah would be terribly embarrassed and humiliated if the deception were discovered. So Rachel revealed all the secret signs to her.

Imagine giving your sister the man you passionately love! The man you think of as your soulmate and life partner. You actually help your sister steal away this man from you. This is amazing. Remember: At this point, Rachel had no way of knowing "the end of this story" — that Jacob was going to be willing to work another seven years for her. For all she knew, she was losing him forever. And yet she gave him away to her sister. How many of us would be able to do something like that?

This gives us a sense of what makes Rachel so special. In our liturgy, Rachel is mentioned before Leah, even though she is the younger sister. We say Rachel and Leah, not Leah and Rachel. This is not, of course, to denigrate Leah, about whom there isn't a bad word in the Torah. She was one of the mothers of the twelve tribes of Israel, a respected mother of our nation, and one of our four matriarchs. But Rachel was special. In her, there was an enormous capacity for love, a true greatness in her kindness and generosity. This, despite the tension between her and Leah — a tension, it should be noted, that was created not by them, but by a patriarchal system that pitted women against each other in very crass terms for the love and economic protection of men.

What is so special about Rachel is her extraordinary soft-heartedness and compassion. She felt the pain of her sister so vividly that she could not allow her to be hurt. This far exceeds the usual sort of niceness or kindness; this is a kind of compassion that reaches up to the heavens. According to a midrash, this single act of Rachel's — of giving Leah the secret signs on her wedding night — is the reason why Rachel's prayers for us were listened to on high, and the reason why God delivered us from exile. According to the midrash on Lamentations, after the first Temple was destroyed and the Jews were in captivity, the souls of each of our forefathers and foremothers pleaded with God to bring us back to our homeland and redeem us from exile. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses all tried, but none of them succeeded in influencing God. Then it was Rachel's turn, and this is what she said to God:

> "If I, a creature of flesh and blood, formed of dust and ashes, was not envious of my rival, and did not expose her to shame and contempt, why should you, our Ruler who lives eternally and are merciful, be jealous of idolatry and exile my children?"
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> (LAMENTATIONS RABBAH, P'TIKHTA, 7:49)

When Rachel says "my" children, she isn't pleading just for her own children; she is pleading for all of Israel, as if they are all her own children. The midrash continues:

> Forthwith the mercy of the Holy One, the Blessed One, was stirred, and God said to Rachel, 'For your sake, Rachel, I will restore Israel to their place.'

Jacob and Esau may have reconciled with each other,
and Joseph with his brothers, but Rachel brought us as
a people to reconcile with God.

Thus, it is because of this prayer of Rachel's, and the merit she had earned in God's eyes because of her kindness to Leah, that God and the children of Israel were reconciled with each other. Jacob and Esau may have reconciled with each other, and Joseph with his brothers, but Rachel brought us as a people to reconcile with God. And she was able to do this only because of her deep love for her sister, which endured despite the difficult situation the two of them found themselves in as rivals.

Jacob and Esau's story ends in tears, and Joseph and his brothers' story also includes tears. But Rachel's tears are different. On the second day of Rosh Hashanah, we read a passage from Jeremiah that mentions Rachel's tears. Jeremiah quotes God as saying about the children of Israel:

I will turn their mourning to joy
I will comfort them, and cheer them in their grief. (JEREMIAH 31:13)

A bit later, this passage continues:

Thus said the Lord:
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 Lord:
Restrain your voice from weeping,
Your eyes from shedding tears;
For there is a reward for your labor,
— declares the Lord:
They shall return from the enemy's land.
And there is hope for your future,
— declares the Lord:
Your children shall return to their country." (JEREMIAH 31:17)

Jeremiah wrote this in the 6th century BCE, probably alluding to a folk tradition already popular at that time that Rachel is the mother who weeps in prayer over the Jewish people (Tamar Frankiel, "Our Mother of Sorrows," in *Beginning Anew*). Rachel here was weeping not only for her own children, but also for Leah's, and for all the exiled Jews. Underscoring her empathy for all children, in the midrash it is Rachel, not Leah, who greets Leah's children when they return from exile, so much did she see all of the children of Israel as hers.

My grandmother, who was named Leah, was very much like the above description of Rachel. She was so soft-hearted that whenever she read the newspapers, she would cry for strangers on the other side of the world — weeping and weeping and weeping. To save her pain, her children used to try to hide the newspapers from her. She had the same kind of heart as the one ascribed to Rachel. Rachel is a figure overflowing with compassion, the figure of a loving mother, *our* loving mother (*Rachel imeinu*). Rachel, in this image, also embodies the idea of drawing strength from sorrow — the weeping mother who enables us to transform our sorrow into something else.

But how do we transform sorrow into strength? One hint about this comes from the name of Rachel's second son. As she is giving birth to her second son, Rachel knows that she is dying, and she names this son "Ben-oni," the son of my sorrow. Jacob, however, renames this baby, and calls him Binyamin (Benjamin). There are several meanings given to this name, but the most prevalent is: son of my right hand, which is an image of strength. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, in *The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis,* points out that, on the face of it, the baby, Ben-oni, is named twice: "to record both the anguish of the dying mother and the virile triumph of the father" (215). She cites Ramban, however, as suggesting a different reading. He notes that all the children of Jacob were named only by their mothers. Jacob does not rename the child, says Ramban; he translates the word oni to mean goodness and strength. Gottlieb Zornberg writes that in response to an enigmatic expression in the midrash ("the child's father named him Ben-yamin, in the holy tongue" — GENESIS RABBAH 82:9), Ramban notes, "Jacob translated Rachel's language into goodness." Because, says Gottlieb Zornberg, "it is the very nature of [goodness and] holiness to translate pain into strength" (215).

After giving birth, Rachel dies and is buried on the road to Efrat, not in the Cave of Machpelah where our other foremothers and forefathers are buried, including Jacob and Leah later on. A number of commentators, including Ramban, think that Jacob felt guilty about abandoning Rachel on the road, rather than burying her in the Cave of Machpelah. According to Nehama Leibowitz's *Studies in Beresheit,* however, Rashi comments that Jacob buried Rachel there "in accordance with the Divine command that she should be of assistance to her children in time to come." According to Leibowitz, Ramban, quoting this Rashi, explains: "...The text means to suggest that she was buried at a spot where her descendants were destined to pass, when they were on the way going into exile." Leibowitz then adds:

> Rachel then is pictured as the symbol of the Matriarch of Israel standing by to protect her descendants on their way into exile and interceding on their behalf for their eventual return to the homeland...expressing the wish of the patriarchs that their descendants should not be overcome by the bondage of Egypt nor perish in the Babylonian exile (541).

So even after her death, Rachel continues to be a source of support, comfort, and redemption to her people. For over 3,000 years Jews have been stopping on that road to pray at Rachel's Tomb. I'll never forget a trip I took 33 years ago in Israel when I worked with elderly people in Beit Shemesh, a development town near Jerusalem. A few of us took a busload of old Mizrachi women on a day trip from Beit Shemesh to Rachel's Tomb. To this day I remember the way they wailed and wept and howled and cried and pleaded and begged and prayed. They poured out their hearts to Rachel like she was their sister, or their mother, or both. She was one hundred percent alive for them. And this is how many people even today feel about Rachel and behave at her tomb.

So what can we learn from Rachel? Rachel teaches us to live with sorrow, to choose sorrow and compassion over detachment from others. Rachel never separated herself from her community. She didn't turn off, or dull, her feelings or sensitivities to the pain of others, in order to protect herself. She allowed herself to fully feel what other people felt. This is a necessary precursor, I think, to pursuing tikkun olam and social justice. If you can't feel what is felt by someone who is oppressed economically, socially, or otherwise, then it is very easy not to act to help them.

Rachel stands as a model for us that is, in some ways, in contrast to Jacob. As Eisenberg Sasso points out, Jacob exemplifies the need, as part of one's spiritual journey, to separate oneself from one's community and enter solitude in order to find God. Rachel, however, teaches us to engage as fully as we can with the world around us, with one another, and with the Jewish people as a whole. Rachel teaches us to live with passion and prayer, and to never give up hope. Recall how Jeremiah says in that Haftorah: *And there is hope for your future, declares the Lord.*

> Leah, no less than Rachel, teaches us
> about the love one sister can hold for another.

What can we learn from Leah? Leah teaches us about selflessness, generosity, and the willingness to sacrifice one's position of superiority over another in order to facilitate that person's well-being. Leah, no less than Rachel, teaches us about the love one sister can hold for another. And as the older sister, Leah likely taught Rachel this kind of sisterly love through her own example.

From Leah we also learn the validity and dignity of a certain kind of marital bond: one based not primarily on erotic love, but on something else.

Jacob respects Leah's opinion equally to Rachel's when it comes to the decision as to whether or not to leave Laban. And significantly, in the end Jacob is buried not with Rachel, but with Leah. Furthermore, it is not through Rachel, but through Leah (through her fourth son, Judah), that the dynasty of David will later on sprout. In addition, Leah has the distinction of being the first person — male or female — since the time of creation to praise God (GEN. 29:35; BERAKHOT 7B), doing this upon the birth of Judah.

Finally, what can we learn from Leah and Rachel together? These two women are equal to each other as matriarchs of the Jewish people, and it is striking that together they constitute half of our four mothers (and also that half of our four matriarchs are sisters to each other). This suggests to me that Rachel and Leah are intended as exemplars for us, and that through them, our tradition wants to teach us some very important lessons. From Leah and Rachel I think we learn about extraordinary compassion, kindness, and loyalty. We learn that there is a bond so profound between sisters that it can supersede even their relationships with men ("sisterhood is powerful"). And we also learn, inspiringly, I think, that it is within our power to transcend envy and rivalry, and to truly love each other. May all of us learn from Rachel and Leah to find this power within ourselves, so that we can love and respect all our many sisters and brothers. And as we do this, may Jeremiah's prophecy — *v'hafakhti evlam l'sasson*, that God will turn Israel's mourning to joy — come to pass. May all of our mourning be turned into joy.

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Note: All translations of the Bible are from the Jewish Publication Society edition.

DR. NORA GOLD *is the editor of the new online journal,* Jewish Fiction.net, *as well as an author, academic, activist, and therapist. Her first book,* Marrow and Other Stories, *won a Canadian Jewish Book Award, and she recently completed her first novel,* Exile. *Gold is an Associate Scholar at the Centre for Women's Studies at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto (OISE/UT). A short film called* Jewish Girl Power *was made about Gold's research, which can be viewed on her website at www.noragold.com.*