

Rachel's and Leah's Prayers –

Biblical and Rabbinic Women stand up to and before God

By Noam Zion

“Women are obligated to pray petitional prayer (*tefillah/amidah*) in order that every single one will petition for *rachmanut* (mercy, maternal love)” (Jerusalem Talmud Berachot 3:3) and women need *rachmanut* also. Rashi explains: “ ‘They are obligated’ – because it is a matter of *rachmi*” (T.B.Berachot 20 b).

Dante Gabriel Rossetti. *Dante's Vision of Rachel and Leah*. 1855



The rabbinic derivation of women's obligation to pray, whether understood as *d'rabanan* (a rabbinic ordinance) or *d'oraitah* (a biblical mitzvah), whether according to Nachmanides or according to Maimonides, emerges from women's need awareness, their need for divine concern. It is derived by an appeal to common sense about all human beings (not from a proof-text) expressed in the word *rahmanut* drawn from the imagery of the womb (*rehem*). It is no surprise that the halachic paradigm for petitionary prayer is developed by a close reading of Hannah, Samuel's barren mother-to-be, who prays at the sanctuary in Shiloh out of bitterness and total emotional abandon for a child (T.B. Berachot 31 b in the name of Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat; see David Dishon, *Petitionary Prayer and Need Awareness*, pp.15ff). Not only in midrash halacha, but also in midrash aggadah, Hannah's and other barren biblical women's prayers are composed and embellished in rabbinic modes. Chutzpah characterizes most of these rabbinic midrashic prayers and characterizes the gendered female prayers in a striking way completely at odds with the usual image of the place of rabbinic women in the legal and social world that the rabbis sought to construct.

In this short study we will concentrate on the rabbinic prayers of Rachel and Leah which grow out of the typical biblical conflict between two co-wives of the same husband (as in Hannah and Penina, co-wives of Elkanah or Sarah and Hagar, co-wives of Abraham). The jealousy between these co-wives is exacerbated by their competition as sisters, one older and more fertile but less loved, and one younger, more beautiful, barren but more loved. Their competition mirrors the larger tale of brotherly conflict between Esav and Yaacov, into which their story is embedded as well as foreshadowing the conflicts among their sons and later among the tribes descended from their sons. In fact, these sisters continue the larger biblical understanding of the origin of human violence in Cain and Abel's struggle for divine approval that is the paradigm for all of the book of Genesis. Their prayers reflect the triangular relations between the woman petitioning God, her co-wife and sister competitor, and their common husband. God is asked to intervene in this triangle both in the biblical and in the midrashic prayers.

The Prayer of the Barren Matriarch

<p><u>Rachel</u></p> <p><i>For her blood runs in my blood And her voice sings in me. Rachel, who pastured the flocks of Lavan, Rachel the mother of the mother.</i></p> <p><i>And that is why the house is narrow for me, And the city foreign, For her veil used to flutter In the desert wind.</i></p> <p><i>And that is why I hold to my way</i></p>	<p><u>רחל</u></p> <p>הן דָּמָה בְּדָמֵי זֶרֶם, הן קוֹלָהּ בִּי רֵן – רַחֵל הָרוּעָה צֹאן לָבָן, רַחֵל – אֵם הָאֵם.</p> <p>וְעַל כֵּן הַבַּיִת לִי צָר וְהָעִיר – זָרָה, כִּי הָיָה מִתְנוּפֵף סוּדְרָה לְרוּחוֹת הַמְדְבָר;</p> <p>וְעַל כֵּן אֶת דְּרָכַי אֶחָז בְּבִטְחָה כְּזֹאת,</p>
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<p><i>With such certainty, For memories are preserved in my feet Ever since, ever since.</i></p>	<p>כי שמורים ברגלי זכרונות מני אז, מני אז!</p>
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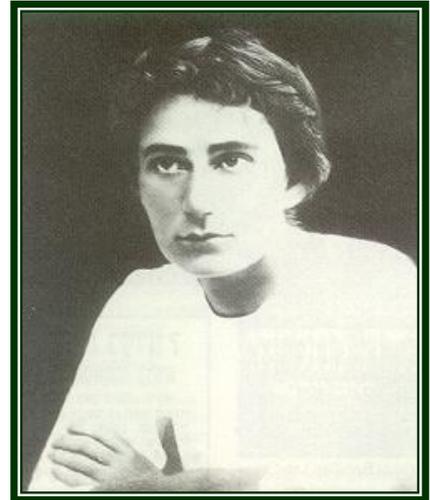
Rachel (Bluwstein) was born in Viatka, Russia 1880. After studying art in Kiev, she travelled to Palestine in 1909. She was kicked out of her settlement when she developed tuberculosis. She wrote it in 1928 when she was 38, three years before her death as a single woman, without a child. She died in 1931

Uri (Rachel poem sung by Achinoam Nini)

*If only I had a son, a little child, bright, with black curls,
To hold his hand and to walk slowly,
Down the paths of the garden,
A child.
A little one.
I would call him Uri, my Uri,*

*The short name is soft and pure,
A fragment of brightness,
I'll call out to my dark little boy,
"Uri."*

*I will yet become as bitter as the mother Rachel.
I will still pray like Hannah at Shilo.
I will yet long
For him.*



In general, while we will focus on the gendered characterization of Leah and Rachel,¹ we seek in no way to deny that the problematic of competition for love and blessing is portrayed as common to all human beings in the Genesis stories, without regard to sex, gender, national or racial differentiations.

That premise established; the emphasis on female barrenness is still much greater in the Bible and in rabbinic midrash than that of the men like Avraham, for example. It is not only that woman's roles are characteristically about childbirth. Ever since Adam renamed his wife (*isha*) as "Eve" (*havah* – mother of all life) (Gen. 3.20), this division of labor between Adam's struggle for survival of the human race through harsh, painful labor, and Eve's contribution marked by the pain of pregnancy and labor pains, belongs to the Biblical nature of things. Both man and woman are designed from the beginning (Gen. 1.26-28) for being fruitful and multiplying and conquering the earth by their labor, whether with or without pain (*etzev* – Gen.3.16-17).

However the matriarchs of Israel bear an extra burden of natural barrenness that makes birth, not only painful, but impossible without divine intervention. Prayer is not only a fallback recourse in an exceptional case in which the divinely given equipment of male and female (*zachar /nekevah*) fails to function so as to fulfill the divine

¹ Rachel asks Yaacov "Did your father not pray for your mother when she was barren?" Yaacov responds to Rachel, "You say that I should do like my father. I am not like my father. My father had no children when he prayed, but I do have children (from Leah). It is from you that God has withheld, Not from me" **Rashi**

God responded to Jacob: "Is this the way to answer a woman who is oppressed by her barrenness? By your life. Your children are destined to stand before her son Joseph!" - **Bereshit Rabba 71:7**

When Rachel depends on Jacob to pray for her, then her *kavanah* (intention in prayer) will be less intent, but once she is aware that she can expect no succour from a human, even if she was hurt by Jacob's sharp response, she can then pray with great intention and press God to fulfil her prayer. And indeed it is this prayer, from the depths of her heart, that is heard and granted. - **Rabbi Ophir Cohen**, Bar-Ilan University.

Rachel began to envy her sister after Leah had borne Yaacov four sons because she attributed this good fortune to her sister's piety. After she implored Jacob to pray for the termination of her barrenness, he hinted that Sarah was only blessed with Isaac because "she had brought her rival (Hagar) into her home." Rachel then gave her maidservant, Bilhah, to Jacob. **Genesis Rabba, 71:6-7**

God remembered Rachel, God hearkened to her and opened her womb. She conceived and bore a son (Genesis 30:22-23)... **Rashi** says that God "remembered the signs that Rachel had given Leah on her wedding night. He remembered the compassion Rachel had felt for Leah.

blessing and mandate of gen 1.26-28, but essential to the whole process. Sarai is first introduced by her exceptional lack, “*Now Sarai was barren, she had no child*” (Gen. 11.30). In the midst of a long genealogy of all of Noah, the second Adam’s, sons in which women are hardly mentioned and daughters not at all, Avram’s wife is an obstacle to the normal course of human generation. It is this lone fact of Avram’s family background, that is the only real textual hint by which to explain Avram’s instant readiness to leave all he has known to proceed to an unnamed country where he will become a father (a punning etymology of his name *av-ram*) of a whole great nation.

As Elaine Scarry emphasizes in her book *The Body of Pain*, God enters the history of the chosen people as a supernatural, miraculous force that makes those clinically declared barren give birth. Birth is dependent wholly on fulfilling the divine will, the covenant, without which children are not granted or their survival is threatened. Survival and blessing, which seem to belong by nature to the good world God created, have become conditional grants. In this context, prayer to God has a special significance for the woman who is the barren co-wife whose child, if granted, will be the chosen heir of God’s plan and the family’s dreams.

Yet strangely, despite this exposition of the Jewish matriarch’s direct dependence on divine intervention, it is remarkably difficult to find these female prayers in the body of the text until the paradigmatic story of Hannah, whose is, in a real sense, not a matriarch at all but the mother (like Samson’s mother of a savior (*shofet*) of Israel.

In the case of Sarah no actual prayer by Avraham or Sarah is reported. Instead God takes the initiative to promise a child, especially one via Sarah, and the couple need not pray but only express suspicions about the ever delayed fulfillment of those promises (Gen. 17.17 –18 and Gen. 18. 12).

In the story of Rivkah it is the patriarch who has no alternative wife who prays for his wife’s fertility (“*Yitzchak entreated God on behalf of his wife, for she was barren, and God granted his entreaty. Rivkah his wife became pregnant*” - Gen. 25.21).

In our story of Rachel and Leah, we also lack any explicit prayers to God, however we do have child namings composed by Leah and thereafter Rachel as prayerful petitions for something more, not merely as expressions of thanks and wonder for the children granted. All of Gen. 30 is a veritable battlefield of baby namings as the sisters and co-wives struggle with God’s help or their concubines’, for the heart of their husband for the attention of God, or for the triumphal benefits of producing male heirs.

Relying on the explicit model of the biblical Hannah’s prayer and the implicit prayer-qua-naming in Gen. 30, the rabbis composed two magnificent *hutzpadik* prayers, one for Leah and one for Rachel. These prayers share in the argumentative tradition of Abraham at Sodom (Gen. 18) and Moshe after the golden calf (Exodus 32-34) and after the fiasco of the 12 spies (Numbers 13-14). This special form of argumentative pleading has been described brilliantly by bible scholars (see Yochanan Muffs, “*Tefillatan shel Neviim,*” *Torah Nidreshet* edited by Moshe Greenberg and Walter Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology*, pp. 22-39).

However these rabbinic prayers put in the mouths of Rachel and Leah have a unique gendered aspect not only in their childbirth-based content and rhetoric but in their ethos of compromise and forgiveness. The feminist scholar of moral development, Carol Friedman Gilligan, identifies this ethos with the cultural ideal of the “good woman” in western society. Each prayer sums up an inner struggle with female jealousy of the other woman, which is transformed into a prayer for the other. The negative stereotype of the lack of female solidarity engendered by the triangular competition for power, love and progeny in a patriarchal world of scarcity is transcended when the women learn the art of relinquishing their need for one upmanship. This message of hard-earned solidarity is then directed to a God who seems, in the eyes of these women, to need a lesson in forgiveness, in foregoing one’s ego needs and showing the selfless maternal love implicit in the term *rahmanut*. These sisters overcome the jealousy created by their juxtaposition as competing co-wives which their father Lavan and their husband Yaacov produced as a result of the patriarchal system of law and love in place in genesis. Then these women are well positioned not only to pray to God for one another’s needs but to pray that God abandon the way of jealousy so typical of God. God introduced himself to Israel at Sinai as the *el kana*, the jealous God (Ex. 20. 5; Ex 34.14) whose identifying attribute echoes the jealous husband of the *sotah* (Numbers 5.14-15,30). They bring suit against God not only to protect Israel from God’s wrath but to offer to God an alternative way of being God.

Leah as an Instrument of Machinations

Let us examine these rabbinic prayers as they grow out of and transform the biblical battle of sisters and co-wives. We begin with Leah and then proceed to Rachel. We need to explore the biblical character briefly before examining the rabbinic midrashic prayer that both extrapolates from and reinvents the biblical character.

Leah is introduced to the reader as an after thought, a disturbingly ominous, at first overlooked obstacle to fulfillment of Yaacov’s romantic love.² The first born of Lavan arrives late on the biblical literary scene as an aside to the reader in the midst of Yaacov’s brideprice negotiations.

² Love at first sight: Yaacov and Rachel - Genesis 29:1-12:

- The first moment that Yaacov set eyes on gorgeous Rachel, he kissed her and he wept. He was enchanted by her. The smooth-skinned, expressive man held nothing back. There was love at first sight, a marriage “made in heaven.” In Yiddish, this is called a *bashert* relationship. When the angels join you and the union is meant to be, you may know it in the first glance. Rachel and Yaacov were a magnificent pair. - *Listen to her Voice*, Miki Raver
- “*And broke into tears*”: Because Yaacov foresaw, through sacred inspiration, that Rachel would not be buried together with him. Also: because he had come with *empty hands*. He said, “Eliezer, my father’s servant, had *in his hands* rings and bracelets and delicacies, while I – I have *nothing in my hands*.” - Rashi
- Yaacov is the first person to be specifically described as *oved* and *ohev*, engaged in physical labor, and – before marriage – loving a woman. Yaacov is, in a sense, the first lover in the Torah narrative. I mean that he aspires to an ideal, all-consuming love. – Avivah Zornberg

Gen.29.16 (Now Lavan had two daughters: the name of the elder was Leah, the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah's eyes were soft/weak/delicate/tired,³ but Rachel was fair of form and fair to look at. And Yaacov fell in love with Rachel)

ABEL PANN, 1883 – 1963 "Rachel was a Shepherdess" 1949



³ Leah's Eyes: Genesis 29:17.

- Leah's eyes were weak – **Septuagint**
- Leah's eyes were delicate, but Rachel was fair of form and fair to look at. - **Everett Fox**
- [At first, it had been decided that] Leah was in fact to be married to Esav, and Rachel to Yaacov. But Leah used to stand at the crossroads and ask what Esav was like, and they would say to her "He is an evil man, and murderer, one who robs travellers, and 'red and like a hairy mantle all over' " [Gen 25:25], a wicked man who has done all things abominable to God. When she shared these things she wept and said "my sister Rachel and I have come from the same womb, yet Rachel is to be married to the righteous Yaacov, while I am to be married to the wicked Esav! And so she wept and afflicted herself until her eyes became soft. –**Midrash Tanchuma, Veyetze 4.**
- Rachel is "the beautiful girl who has no eyes" (**Zohar 2:95a**).
- Rachel "had no eyes" for the pain, because the torment of being barren was so intense. She did not deny it, but closed her eyes to it in order to stay focused on her goal (Rabbi Nahman - *Likutey MoHaran* I, 65:3).

The sisters are set up in an unequal but also an ambivalent juxtaposition. Leah is first in birth order with all the attendant privileges as well as Lavan's presumed prior duty to marry her off. Yet Leah is disadvantaged in "looks". Her eyes are deficient in some way affecting her view of the world and stigmatizing her for these eyes are the only trademark worth mentioning besides her birth order. While Rachel is good to look at, from the point of view of the male gaze which can be translated not only into Yaacov's love at first sight but also into the added bride price value that he must render to Lavan. The physical features that are called "looks" define both women in the eyes of the patriarchal world they inhabit as placeholders. Yaacov specifies his bride, as a contractual good to be earned, in terms of her relative youthfulness – Gen. 29.18 – *"I will serve you seven years for Rachel, your younger daughter."*

Then Lavan manipulates Leah as an instrument wielded to deceive Yaacov, the choosy suitor.⁴ Gen. 29.23 – *"Now in the evening he took Leah his daughter and brought her to him, and he came in to her."* The passivity of Leah is expressed in her grammatical subservience to two males involved in contractual negotiations, obligations and shenanigans. Justifiably Yaacov comes to complain the next morning against what Lavan has done to him, not what Leah has done to him. Yaacov had chosen and contracted as a free agent for the beautiful, younger daughter. Lavan's response specifies Leah's advantage in traditional legal terms, her status as the elder which is disputed by no one. Lavan insists that *"Such is not done in our place, giving away the younger before the firstborn"* (Gen. 29.26). In fact Yaacov and Lavan have no freedom to negotiate a change of birth order traditions. Leah is not only "older or bigger" which are terms of size and chronology but she is the *bechora*- the "firstborn" as a legal status better translated as the possessor of the birthright.

Clearly, in accordance with biblical double causality, the theologically controlled reason for Lavan's successful deception is the punishment and the lesson Yaacov needs to learn about his unlawful or at least insensitive stealing of the birthright of the firstborn from his older brother by deceiving his elderly, blind father. Here too Leah's role is as an instrument of larger purposes whose cunning is not obvious to the participants.

⁴ Lavan's Duplicity:

- "Lavan carried out this trickery [in part] because of Leah's unattractiveness, for during the seven years of Rachel's betrothal; no one had come to marry [Leah]." - **Ephraem**, Gen. 27:2
- In the evening, they [the revellers] came to escort them [the wedding couple] in, and they put out the candles. He [Jacob] said to them "what's this?" They said to him, "Do you think that we are immodest, as you people are?" - **Midrash Hagadol 29:23**
- But at night Yaacov assumed that she was not Leah, because Yaacov had given signs to Rachel by which she could identify herself to him, but when she saw that they were taking Leah in to him, she said, "Now my sister will be humiliated." She therefore arose and gave her those signs.- **Rashi Gen. 29:25** on the secret signs)
- All that night Jacob called her "Rachel" and she answered him. In the morning [he saw that] she was Leah. He said to her, "What?! Cheater and daughter of a cheater! Didn't I call you 'Rachel' at night and didn't you answer me?" She said to him, "Is there a teacher without a pupil? Wasn't it the same when your father called you 'Eisav' and you answered him "It is I, Esav, your firstborn(27:19)." - **Bereshit Rabba 70:19**

Yaacov's response to Leah, the unwitting instrument of fatherly and divine manipulation of Yaacov, is itself defined not in absolute but in relative terms. "*He loved Rachel also, more than Leah*" (Gen. 29.30). Neither vindictive behavior nor blame for Yaacov's humiliation via Leah is mentioned. In fact, there is a reasonable grammatical reading that Yaacov also loved Leah, even though somewhat less than the woman with whom he had fallen in love, whom he had chosen freely in his negotiations with Lavan and for whom he had worked for seven years so expectantly of his reward.

As Aviva Zornberg writes (*The Beginning of Desire*, p.209, 214):

"On the surface, the deception is not tragic: after the elapse of seven days, he marries Rachel; the work and the desire come to their fulfillment. But in reality, a wholeness has been fractured. . . . The heart of Jacob's tragic experience is that everything in his life is shaped by the threat of a breakdown of desired form. The integrated harmony of his vision is diffracted into pieces with jagged edges. Reality reveals itself to him in the sharp, successive, provisional images of *ve-hine..ve-hine* ("behold...behold...")"

Leah is that stone that fractures his perfect dream of romantic fulfillment with Rachel and therefore she cannot be loved as is Rachel. It is not the women who are so different, but their symbolic role in the dreams and disappointments of the ever-dreaming Jacob. Rachel will always represent the unattainable in the European, romantic sense, while Leah will always represent the "unromantic" fertility. In other words, according to Aviva Zornberg, Leah's pursuit of her husband's heart via fertility can never be fulfilled since she merely returns him to his work-a-day world of fructifying sheep and women as part of his destiny to spread out and fill the earth.

Leah's Battle for Love: Names that are Prayers

Yet God's perspective is radically different: "*Now when God saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb, while Rachel was barren*" (Gen. 29.31). Perhaps Leah felt hated which is also a synonym for rejected as in the feelings leading up to divorce and expulsion from the husband's home (Deuteronomy 24. 3). In a world of scarce resources, in a zero sum game, whatever Yaacov's actual behavior the competitive situation by definition makes for winners and losers, beloved and hated, not merely older and younger or bigger and smaller. God's response rather than teaching Yaacov the bounty of two co-wives and the need to appreciate each for her own special qualities, reinforces the jealous competition between the women – now regarding childbirth.

Only now as the chapter of the birth of 12 of Yaacov's 13 children commences, do his wives and first of all Leah emerge as characters who not only react but who speak and initiate action and thereby focalize the narrator's interest in their inner world. Leah's speech is first and foremost a speech of naming-cum-prayer directed in the first person to god who is described in third person. Leah who suffers it seems from a lack of recognition – not only on that first fateful night when Yaacov came into her without recognizing her as Leah – but ever since by contrast with the love felt and probably shown to Rachel. Only in turning to God, does Leah acknowledge having been seen, heard and accompanied. She prays/ wishes that God's attentions,

expressed in the male fruitfulness of her divinely opened womb, will produce magically similar attentions from her husband.

The names are each a prayer for husbandly attention⁵ as well as a thanks for God's down-payment of initial recognition or perhaps for compensatory affirmative action:

*“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!*

*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.” (Gen. 29.32-34)*

The biblical Leah now emerges as a struggling woman insisting on recognition from her husband as something she has earned through hard labor. The 20th century commentator Arnold Ehrlich (*Mikrah Kefshuto* Gen. 4.1) explained her behavior in analogy to Eve's firstborn son's naming:

“She became pregnant and bore Cain and she said: ‘I have acquired my husband and God’” (Gen.4.1). No place in the Bible is a one day old child called “ish”, therefore I say that “ish” here means “my man / husband”, that is Adam. For after all that befell Adam on account of Eve, the events of the tree of knowledge stood between them like a Satan and so Adam's heart was not open to his wife as it once was... When a male firstborn was born to Eve, she said: “I have acquired my husband's” (heart, for from now on he will relate to me as before). The new mother is dear to her husband as Leah said after the birth of Reuven – “Now my husband will love me.”

In Ehrlich's reading, Leah is motivated by a desire for love and she uses the male child as an instrument to win her husband's affection. However, Ehrlich's primary example is Eve, whom he describes as accepting the blame her husband Adam put upon her. His model of the mother is one of remorse and restitution of an earlier idyl destroyed by the mother's own misconduct and now restored by the pain of her

⁵**מנחה בלולה:** כי עד הנה נהלתי הילדים אחד בימיני ואחד בשמאלי, עתה יהיה הכרח לאישי שיסייעני וילוה אלי שהרי לי שלשה בנים.

My husband will be joined to me: Up to now I took my children, one on my right and the other on my left, now that I have three children, my husband will have to help me and accompany me.

Mincha Belula

ספורנו: שכבר אני מוחזקת בהיותי רבת בנים כאמרם ז"ל: "בתלת זמני הוה חזקה.

This time my husband will be joined to me: I now have an established claim, as our Sages say, "Three times establishes a claim". - ***Sforno***

Upon the birth of her fourth son, Judah, Leah became the first person since the time of creation to praise the lord. Since God knew that Leah's intentions were honourable in requesting Jacob's affection in return for the mandrakes, she was blessed with two additional sons, Issaschar and Zevulun – **Genesis Rabba 72:5**

childbirth – a penal labor under divine curse. In the context of Leah one might have expected her to feel remorse for her part in the father’s deception of her husband. However Leah’s Biblical naming speech suggests that she feels herself to be the innocent victim of Yaacov’s unjustified emotional preference for Rachel. She is the afflicted one who seeks not only love and recognition but a rectification of her state of unjust affliction..

In the midrash Genesis Rabbah a stereotyped description of the mother of a male child in relation to her husband is offered thus reifying the image of Leah and Eve:

“*She said I have acquired my husband.*(*ishi*, literally the “man” who corresponds to the woman in the creation of the woman , when man named her and himself by the same name – *ish/isha* – man/ woman)” (Gen. 4.1). When this woman saw she had a sons, she said: The acquisition (purchase, *kinyan*) of my husband (*baali* , literally the one who mounts or owns me) is in my hand.”

Here the term for acquisition (*kinyan* connected by its sound similarity to the name of Cain) has overtones of legal acquisition that serve to reverse, in an ironic sense of poetic justice, the typical rabbinic description of the ways that a woman (wife) is acquired (*nikneet*) by her owner (*baal*). The term “my hand” in rabbinic and Roman legal contexts implies legal power as reflected in the Latin based words “manipulate” based on the word “*manu*” for hand (for example, manuscript – handwritten document). The power relations dominate this view of the woman. However here too the text of Leah’s naming/prayer suggests that love, attention and company are more central to Leah’s goals than power for its own sake. Still as Mordechai Gafni points out regarding Leah (in his forthcoming book on uncertainty as a religious category) what began as a real need for love turns into mere manipulation that can never give her the love she craves:

“Leah feels ugly. She feels she is not enough. She feels that she needs to find fulfillment or completion outside herself and that the person who can provide this for her is Jacob. Leah pathologically needs Jacob in order to fulfill the Leah which she experiences as being so deeply lacking....It is this core uncertainty that Leah is desperately attempting to resolve in marrying Jacob. When Lavan substitutes Leah for Rachel, Leah still has ways of letting Jacob know that he is deceived. But she chooses instead to participate fully in the deception....We have all of us at one time or another tried to attain things or people by pretending to be someone other than our true selves. We have all of us, on some level, married Jacob in the darkness. ...In co-dependency, my entire identity and source of satisfaction is based on the fact that someone else loves me. I establish the love of another person as a necessity in order to fulfill my own lack of self-worth. Paradoxically, usually in co-dependency the person upon whom I am co-dependent does not love me...”

“We have examined Leah’s story in this light, sympathizing and empathizing with her tragic and lonely plight. But does Leah really love Jacob? Or does she only love him for what he can do for her? ...Manipulation (Lavan pushing Leah into Jacob’s bed and Leah contributing her part to the deception of Jacob and the impersonation of Rachel) always creates the need for the next manipulation, using someone always creates the need to use someone else. And so she uses her children. From the moment her children are born, she begins to treat them not as people that need to be loved unconditionally, but as vehicles to attain attention she so desperately craves from her husband.”

Mordechai Gafni goes on to find hope for Leah's independence from Yaacov's love. He sees evidence for her weaning herself, at least temporarily, from the need to be recognized by Yaacov in the fact that the naming of Judah and some of the other children do not mention the desire for her husband's attention. Nevertheless, Leah's desperate need for recognition, her sense of being embattled and persecuted continue throughout this birth battlefield chapter. When Rachel joins the battle, "*Rachel was envious (jealous) of her sister*", Leah who finds herself unable to get pregnant, responds in kind desperately extending her birthing age through the surrogate womb of her concubine, whom she manipulates as did her barren sister.

In the incident of the "*dudaim*" lovemandrakes serve as an aphrodisiac, as a fertility drug or simply as a token of a child's love for his mother). Leah compares the "giving" of a few of her son's flowers to Rachel, to the "taking of *her husband* as well as *her son's dudaim* "(literally "love couples ") (Gen. 30.15). Leah's sarcasm and exaggeration reflect how hurt and vulnerable she is. This hurt transforms every exchange with her sister into a zero sum game over the core of her identity as woman – wife and mother. Shulamit Hareven, in a lovely Zionist reading of the Leah story entitled, "*In Praise of Leah*", points out that Leah treats Jacob as her sole legitimate mate. She attributes to her sister, who is in fact a legal co-wife and an emotional first wife, the desire to steal her husband just as she would steal her son's flowers. Rachel, who will become famous for stealing her father's "*terafim*/ idols" might have turned the tables and accused Leah of collaborating in the theft of her lawful, contractual husband on that first wedding night. But here Rachel is treated from Leah's perspective, as an outsider, an illegal intruder, a stereotypically younger, more beautiful "other" woman threatening the status quo by her incessant efforts to win Leah's husband away. Shulamit Hareven praises Leah's powerfully romantic love of her husband, her desperate battle for his love – a battle which by its very nature must be one for exclusivity in love. Leah shows the vitality and perseverance and active pursuit of her goals which is the key to survival that makes her into the true mother of most Israel's tribes. Rachel is merely a kvetch, a pretty bauble loved by her husband for her external beauty, for her status as his first love after leaving his mother, but not for her character. Leah is the one destined to be a mother of Israel because she too knows how to struggle with men and with God. She, not Rachel, prays to God constantly and makes demands on the divine in the name of her passionate love.

Yet we must demur from Hareven's image of the self-accepting Leah because it misses Leah's deep-rooted envy of her sister whom she impersonated on the fateful wedding night. Max Scheler, the philosophical anthropologist, captures Leah (and in many ways Rachel) in his definition of "impotent envy":

"Impotent envy is the most terrible kind of envy, hence the form of envy which gives rise to the greatest amount of resentment. It is directed against the individual and essential being, an existential envy. For this envy, as it were, is forever muttering: 'I could forgive you anything, except that you are, and what you are; except that I am not what you are; that 'I' am not 'you.' This envy from the start denies the other person his very existence."

Even in the last naming /prayer speech after Leah has resumed birthing and has given 6 of her own sons and 2 of her concubine's sons to her husband, she still prays:

"God has presented me with a good present,

*this time my husband will prize (yizbuleni) me –
for I have borne him six sons!
So she called his name: Zebulun / The Prince.”*

At this point Leah falls silent from the literary point of view. She gives birth to a daughter whom she names Dinah, but this naming does not rate a prayerful explication. Perhaps a daughter is nothing to crow about and adds no leverage in the battle for her husband’s heart. Perhaps she senses in Dinah (literally, judgment) a divine refusal to grant her the epitome of motherhood – seven male sons (as in Ruth 4.15). Somehow Dinah refers intertextually to Rachel’s concubine’s first child Dan –

*“God has done-me-justice; yes, he has heard my voice! He has given me a son!
Therefore she called his name: Dan / He-Has-Done-Justice” (Gen. 30.6).*

The last statement attributed to Leah is one of rare solidarity of the sisters in their empathy for their exploited husband in his competition with their father Lavan. After Yaacov’s eloquent and yet pathetic self-pitying speech:

*“Rachel and Leah answered him, they 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.” (Gen. 31.14-16).*

Finally Yaacov treats both co-wives as his allies and his partners whose free consent and perspective is essential for the family’s survival in the struggle to be liberated from Lavan and to take one’s rightful, hard earned share. They respond as people concerned for their own as well as their children’s economic rights, but also as daughters insulted by the way their father alienated them, treating them as a commodity, depriving them of their inheritance. These women do not lack for self-respect or for economic sense and do not destroy themselves to undermine one another at this moment of truth in choosing between loyalty to their father or to their husband who so desperately needs their consent. Both women implicitly acknowledge that Lavan tricked them just as he tricked Yaacov, for they are now collaborating in a measure for measure retaliation that will fool and humiliate as well as rob their father.

Leah has already given her come-up-ance to Yaacov in the story of the *dudaim*. By negotiating over rights to sleep with Yaacov she has reenacted Yaacov’s dirty deal in buying the birthright from a starving and tired Esav, while reversing the roles of the younger and the older, so that the younger is now bested. Leah has requited Yaacov’s loveless sexual couplings with her by blatantly demanding the conjugal rights with Yaacov that she had purchased from Rachel for an insulting pittance of *dudaim*.

*“Leah went out to meet him and said:
‘You must come in to me,
For I have hired, yes, hired you in exchange for my son’s dudaim.’ “*

Lacking in any cover of emotion or the hoped for attention of her previous births, Leah simply demands Yaacov’s services as a hired stud. The atmosphere of retaliation

and manipulation dominates these stories even if the co-wives get together to prefer retaliation against their father over competition among themselves at this juncture.

Still unsettled in the biblical story is the state of the relations between Leah and Rachel. Did they ever make-up or rebuild their relationship after the birth of Joseph? Here is a gap into which the midrash entered with delight and literary and psychological insight.

Bridging the Gap between Leah and Rachel: Leah's brings Suit against God

Midrash Tanhuma Vayetze places an exceptional prayer in the mouth of Leah based on the verses:

"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!' " (Gen. 30.21-22).

Midrash Tanchuma, Vayetze, Chapter 7 on Gen.30.21-24:

The midrash seeks to fill gaps and solve a whole series of textual conundrums, for example: why does Leah who has just begun again to bear children, suddenly stop after Dinah; why is Dinah the only daughter mentioned; why is she the only one whose name is not explained by her mother; why did Leah choose the name Dinah, when the same root was used by Rachel to name Dan, the child of Rachel's concubine whose name is explained as a matter of divine justice and vindication; why is Rachel remembered by god right after the naming of Dinah, who is Leah's last child; why does it say god listened to her – meaning apparently Rachel – in opening her womb, when in fact the Torah never mentioned Rachel as praying directly to God.

The midrash answers all these questions while building a dramatic and moral ending to an embarrassing story of the matriarchs' petty jealousy. The squabbling co-wives provide an appropriate paradigm to the battles between their descendants – both Yosef and his brothers and the tribes of Joseph – Ephraim and Menashe – in generations to come until the exile of the 10 lost tribes by Assyria. However these matriarchs offer no morally or dramatically satisfying story of moral transcendence until the midrash explains the plot turning point – the unexplained jogging of the divine memory that opens Rachel's womb – by a moral inner turning both of Leah and subsequently of God.

God (who is described as acting to open Leah's womb and implicitly to leave Rachel's closed in the opening of the birth stories in Gen. 29) is motivated by his concern for Leah's pain of rejection by Yaacov. God seeks to force Yaacov to change his attitude to Leah as well as to compensate her lack of love with the pride of producing male children and the hope that someday Yaacov will see the light and love her no less than Rachel. Therefore God's change of mind, his remembering as a description of an internal mental process, is best explained in the light of his client, Leah's, change of mind.

Unfortunately, Yaacov never gets the hint, never even engages in self-reflection when confronted with Rachel's prolonged infertility. He responds to Rachel's demand for children by a denial that this has anything to do with him at all. "*Am I in place of God, who denied you fruit of the body?*" (Gen. 30.2). Yaacov never shows any tenderness to Leah, therefore there is no reason for God to remove his punishment of Yaacov and his preferential treatment for Leah, unless Leah herself relinquishes her demand for justice or unless God is overwhelmed by sheer *rachmanut* for Rachel, the innocent victim of God's intervention into Leah and Yaacov's relationship.

In the midrash both possibilities are synthesized in such a way as to turn Leah from an angry and hurt, even if unfairly neglected victim demanding justice, into a no less strong demanding character who seeks her sister's welfare. The demanding chutzpah displayed by Leah in going out into the field to waylay Yaacov in advance and telling him bluntly that his sexual services have been purchased, is transformed into a prayerful chutzpah insisting that god give Rachel, her rival, justice or mercy as the case may be. Interestingly, Leah's sexual initiative to her husband, which might otherwise be condemned by the Rabbis as a violation of the proper marital hierarchy, "and he shall rule over you"(Gen. 3.16), is praised in T.B.Eruvin 100 b:

"Rabbi Yochanan says: Every woman that demands that her husband perform a d'var mitzvah (his conjugal duties to her) earns greater sons than lived in the days of Moshe...as it says regarding Leah – "*Leah went out to meet him (Jacob) and said: You come to me for I have hired, yes, hired you*"(Gen.30.16)..."

This exceptional reversal of hierarchy between man and wife is even more striking in the relation of human to God. Yet Leah is praised again for her bringing suit against God. While the substance of her plea is to request *rachmanut* / mercy for her sister (as Leah sums up the appeal), the style of the pleading is adversarial and insistently logical not an appeal to pathos. She names her daughter Dinah, not Ruchama, and she argues her case in terms of moral and mathematical symmetry of the tribes and their mothers.

Most exceptional, Leah offers herself as a role model for God who decides to act in imitatio woman, rather than human beings acting in imitatio dei. In the midrash God accepts her paradigm: “you were merciful (to Rachel), therefore I too shall be merciful towards her (and her children).”

Jeremiah's Rachel

Let us now trace the characterization of Rachel from the specific texts in Genesis to the rabbinic midrash. Here an important way station on this trip from the Torah to the rabbis is found in Jeremiah, one of the last of the prophets of the First Temple. In Jeremiah 31 we see the hypostatization of Rachel the human mother and wife into a transhistorical matriarch lamenting for her missing children (“*einenu*”) and refusing to be comforted. Her refusal to accept their disappearance into exile – in particular the 10 lost tribes (including Ephraim son of Joseph) exiled by the Assyrians in 722 b.c.e. - becomes an implicit plea to God to comfort her. The prophet (Jeremiah 31. 14- 19) uses this literary figure to preach God's change of mind and his promise to return Israel from exile as Israel returns to God in contrition. Rachel here is reminiscent of Jacob who (after Rachel's death and after Joseph's disappearance and presumed death at the hands of a wild animal) refuses to accept his other sons' condolences (Gen. 37.35), refuses to be comforted for a child who is often referred to as “*einenu*” – missing (Gen. 37.30; Gen.42.13). In the end Joseph who has been sold into slavery and exile does reappear thus corroborating his father's refusal to be comforted, that is to accept the permanence of his disappearance.

In Jeremiah 31 the prophet makes Rachel a stand in for the 10 lost tribes who are still thought of as potentially recoverable in the days of King Josiah in 612 b.c.e. Perhaps this literary image of a transhistorical matriarch draws on or feeds into the hypostasized image of a female goddess of the city who represents, protects and later mourns the fate of her city. This ancient near eastern tradition seems to lie behind the female imagery of Jerusalem in the book of Lamentations (*eicha*) written contemporarily with Jeremiah's life. It will provide the bridge to the rabbinic image of Rachel as a prayerful intercessor for Israel as God weighs the possibility of exiling Israel in the days of the Babylonian exile in 586 BCE.



Statue of Rachel at the Ramat Rachel kibbutz overlooking Grave of Rachel with verse from Jeremiah that the Kibbutznikim fulfilled

Passive Rachel and the Male Gaze



ABEL PANN, 1883 - 1963
"Rachel" 1960

In the biblical Rachel we first encounter a young shepherdess who is exceptionally beautiful, who arouses Jacob's adrenalin to roll off the rock from the well, to kiss her even before being introduced to her as her cousin, to break into tears and to fall so desperately in love at first sight that he commits himself to 7 years of labor to her father Lavan - seven years that "*seem in his eyes as but a few days, because of his love for her*" (Gen. 29.20). Shulamit Hareven in her article "*In Praise of Leah*" suggests that Rachel is just a placeholder for Jacob's unrealistic romanticism, someone who reminds him of his mother with whom he falls in love on his first adventure beyond his mother's tent.

Jacob's self introduction to Rachel at the well stresses - three times - his familial connection through his mother (Gen. 29.10 – 12). This is reminiscent of Rebecca, Rachel's aunt and Jacob's mother, who also found a marital *shiduch* at the same well and who consummated her relationship with Yitzchak at first sight in his mother's tent (Gen. 24.67 – "*Yitzchak brought her into the tent of Sarah his mother, he took Rivka and she became his wife, and he loved her. Thus was Yitzchak comforted after his mother*" who had died). Rachel is loved for her looks and perhaps for her similarity to Jacob's mother with whom he had such a close and such a dependent relationship from whom it must have been hard for Jacob to part. Yet we know nothing of Rachel's character except that in her excitement she ran to tell her father Lavan about the new arrival. .

Rachel is passive again in letting Lavan switch the sisters at the evening wedding ceremony. Perhaps she is totally dependent on her father, perhaps obedient to her older sister, perhaps observant of local customs giving priority to the marriage of the

older daughter first, perhaps too young still to have a mind of her own. In any case Rachel does not earn a literary role as an independent character until she is aroused with envy of her sister and co-wife who has borne 4 sons already, while Rachel is described as barren.

Jealousy brings Rachel to Life

*“Now when Rachel saw that she could not bear children to Yaacov, Rachel envied her sister. She said to Yaacov: Come now, give me children! If not, I will die “ (Gen. 30.1). Until this point even though her wedding is postponed by a week due to Lavan’s trick with Leah, Rachel is securely the beloved one of an adoring, worshipping distant, dashing young cousin. She is loved more than Leah and she does not evoke God’s attention for she is not persecuted. However her barrenness may be a divine decision, though not an explicit one and not one explained as a punishment for sin. From this point she is the most brutally direct woman imaginable whose whole life is focussed on producing sons and who will use any and every means to obtain her goal. She is ready to threaten Yaacov (perhaps hinting at suicide, but surely exposing him to what seems like a hysterical emotional outburst and ultimatum that leaves him uncomfortable and angry at his beloved wife). There is no deference in her tone but an unequivocal demand that may be hinting that Yaacov did not do enough to help her give birth. After all, it says that Jacob’s father Yitzchak prayed and entreated God while standing before his barren wife, Rivka, and succeeded (Gen. 25. 21), but no similar prayers of Yaacov’s are mentioned. After all, as Yaacov replies in anger so unsympathetically, *“Am I in place of God, who has denied you fruit of the body?”* (Gen. 30.2) - you are denied fruitfulness by God, but I am not barren with Leah. Yaacov does not sense that Leah’s fruitfulness and perhaps Rachel’s barrenness are a punishment for Yaacov’s neglect or rejection of Leah.*

We do not know what precisely is motivating Rachel’s outburst. Is she concerned that she too be a mother, that she not be upstaged by her older sister again, that she cannot give to her husband the offspring that he wants, that she fears he will begin to love Leah more, precisely because Leah has been so fertile or that she feels rejected by God and needs a sign of acceptance in his eyes? In any case, we see that she does not give up easily despite her husband’s anger and insult. She is risking her relationship with Yaacov, the one advantage she has in life, to obtain offspring. Next she gives her husband a concubine as her surrogate *“so that she may give birth upon my knees, so that I too may be built –up-with-sons through her.”* (Gen. 30.3). Relying on ancient near eastern law and on the precedent of Sarah, she gives her husband a gift which while it seems to us is for her own sake is nevertheless seen also as a worthy sacrifice for his sake. When Leah does the same with her concubine, Leah explains that her own subsequent pregnancy (the fifth after an unwanted, natural hiatus) is a reward from God for her generosity. *“God has given me my hired-wages (yissachar), because I gave my maid to my husband! So she called his name: Yissachar / Hired –Wages.”* (Gen. 30.18). The midrash in Bereshit Rabbah 73 states that *“God remembered Rachel* is a matter of justice for she brought her co-wife into her house *“(in this case, the co-wife is Rachel’s concubine who bore Jacob’s son Dan as in the Hebrew word for justice / din.) By virtue/right of Dan, Rachel was remembered/visited, by virtue/right of Dan, Joseph and Benjamin were born.”*

In naming her two surrogate children, born of her concubine and her husband, Rachel, like her sister before her, offers an implicit prayer to God. While Leah often refers to her hopes for reconciliation with her husband in these namings-cum-prayers, Rachel focuses on her relationship to her sister as well as her shame as a barren woman and her relationship to god. The names are explained as follows:

“ Rachel said:

*God has done – me- justice; yes, he has heard my voice! He has given me a son!
Therefore she called his name: Dan / He-Has-Done- Justice...*

Rachel said:

*A struggle of God have I struggled with my sister; yes, I have prevailed! (yacholti)
So she called his name: Naftali / My Struggle.” (Gen.30.6-8)*

Rachel is a struggler like her husband Yaacov, with whom she is paired in so many ways. As Haim Chertok points out (*“ Rachel and Esau”*. Haim Chertok, Tikkun, vol.1, no.2) the sisters replay and often reverse the history of the relations between the brothers. For example, Leah (as a stand-in for Esav) negotiates an extremely needy Rachel (as a stand-in for Yaacov) into a disadvantageous deal in exchanging flowers from the field for a fruitful night with yaacov. This repeats and reverses the deal in which Yaacov the younger exchanged a pot of lentil soup for a birthright with his needy brother who had just come from the field. In the naming of Naftali after Rachel’s struggles with God and with her sibling, the Torah foreshadows the renaming of Yaacov as *“Yisrael/ God –Wrestler, for you have fought with God and men and have prevailed (vatuchal)”*(Gen. 32.29). Both Rachel and Yaacov know how to struggle as underdog younger siblings and as unblest would be carriers of the divine destiny. Both know how to deceive and steal as well as to be deceived and cheated out of what is legally their own. The implication is that Rachel also knows how to struggle with God. Her reference to being listened to and favorably judged by God is reflected in the naming of Dan, her first surrogate son. Rachel has clearly prayed to God in the past over her closed womb, which as Yaacov says explicitly, is perceived to have been closed by god who is the only one who can decide to open it up. Though those prayers are not recorded, the exultation at their having been answered suggests that they were prayers that brought suit against God, prayers of complaint as are typical in later psalm literature, demands for divine action in a tone not dissimilar to Rachel’s bold and brash and uncompromising plea to Yaacov for sons.

Rachel, however, is not satisfied with the two surrogate sons. She keeps on struggling, never at rest, and sells her husband’s sexual services to the competitor – Leah – in exchange for the *dudaim*. The implication is that Rachel is not after Yaacov’s love and not afraid of her position in his eyes as a barren wife, but she is motivated by maternal needs and by her competition with her sister to show who is the real woman. Only when:

“God remembers Rachel, God hears her and opens 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!”
(Gen.30.22-24).*

Rachel is still not satisfied but her core shame as a barren, unfulfilled woman has been removed. She double interprets the name of Yosef, not only to remove past shame, but to promise future fertility.

This powerful woman sets off with her husband despite her second pregnancy with Benjamin. She steals the *terafim* of her father as a fertility god or as vengeance on the man who stole so much from her; she lies to her father and hides her theft, and finally she dies in childbirth on the way to Beit Lechem after her husband has earned his new name, so much like her own self-description as the struggler, and after his reconciliation with his brother.

Rachel's Way to God's Feelings

In Jeremiah 31 Rachel is characterized by absolute allegiance to her children and that earns her God's comforting message. Again the content of her possible prayer to God in their behalf is missing, but the words are less important than the inconsolable grief as an act of defiance of fate rather than as a hysterical loss of control. Her lack of realism, her lack of accommodation with barrenness or with exile or with the disappearance of her children, are the spiritual forces which are somehow tied to the changing of God's mind.

Jeremiah 31.14-19

The leitwort of the root *nachem* provides the literary and emotional logic of the transformation of God's will. Rachel refuses to be "have her mind changed / to be comforted/ *l'hinachem*" and therefore God returns, "repents/ regrets/ has his mind changed / *nichamti*" (Jer.31.14,18). For both God and Rachel, Ephraim is a beloved child upon whom they have mourned and upon whom their inner "maternal love/ mercy/ *rachem arachamenu*" has been aroused as he is remembered. Just as Rachel was remembered after her period of estrangement from God, so now Ephraim is now remembered both in the sense of memory of the past and in the sense of gaining divine attention and sollicitation to needs for the future. Intriguingly, as God takes his cue from Rachel's tears, God announces the new era when women will take the lead in courting men (Jer. 31.22).

These two biblical passages, Gen.30 and Jeremiah 31, lead us to attend to the great rabbinic prayer that has been placed in Rachel's mouth. This prayer is located literarily at the moment that the rabbis reflect on the destruction of the second temple while reading the book of Lamentations, which they attribute to Jeremiah mourning over the first temple. In Eicha Rabbati in the petichta 24 we find a series of prayers directed to an angry jealous God who is determined to send his people into exile forever. A series of historical figures who have known how to defend Israel from

God's wrath are transformed into transhistorical heavenly intercessors. Moshe is of course the best of Israel's defense lawyers with a proven record in the biblical text both after the scandals of the golden calf and the 12 spies. Moshe knew how to evoke God's womblike qualities, *el chanun v'rachum* as revealed to him in the unique private revelation of the 13 attributes (Exodus 34.6) upon which the rabbis built many of their prayers, like the High Holiday selichot, for example. However Moshe is unable to evoke a divine response this time, even when he appeals to the death of "many, many mothers and their sons and You remain silent!" This provides a literary and rhetorical opening to Rachel's more successful prayer.

Suddenly Rachel "jumps up" to argue the case. She chooses not to use prooftexts but to use her personal experience as her moral authority. Her appeal is crowned with a positive response quoted from Jeremiah's prophecy of consolation which we saw above. What is Rachel's successful angle?

Eicha Rabbati Petichta 24:

In Eicha Rabbati Rachel succeeds by a show of chutzpah in challenging God and a show of self-control in foregoing her desires for Yaacov and in transcending her jealousy of her sister. Her argument is based on an already well-known midrashic tradition that Rachel passed her sister Leah the secret signs of recognition which Yaacov had given her to prevent any typical chicanery by deceitful Lavan the Aramean. As James Kugel has argued persuasively in his book *In Potiphar's Court*, midrashim are not direct, unmediated readings of the biblical text in a private dialogue of reader and text, but rather further salvos in a public conversation shared by a readership which has already heard and accepted as part of the biblical tradition earlier midrashim. The midrash in Eicha Rabbati presupposes an earlier story, which has come down to us in T.B. Megillah 13 b and Tanchuma Vayetze 39. These alternative sources are not more or less authentic or ancient but they fill in some of the conversational background and at the same time they use the common tradition for very different secondary purposes just as does the source embedded in Eicha Rabbati.

T.B.Megillah 13 b

In T.B. Megillah 13b, for example, Rachel is identified with the trait of *tzniut/modesty, reticence*, which is somehow inherited by King Shaul and later Queen Esther. This is allotted all three characters, the ability to hide the truth, to keep secrets. In contrast to this midrash's picture of Yaacov as a braggart who claims he can outcon Lavan, Rachel is concerned to prevent shame to her sister and at the same time to teach Yaacov a moral lesson about the ease which with he is willing to use deception in his struggle with a deceptive Lavan.

In Tanchuma Vayetze 39 (6) Rachel is identified with the trait of *silence / shtikah* For not protesting that the wedding gifts sent her were transferred by Lavan to her sister. Both traits – silence and modesty – are said to earn Rachel God's "remembering". God's remembering is not an act of gratuitous mercy but a long delayed payoff. The ability to suffer shame earns Rachel divine concern and fertility, just as Leah's suffering earned her god's opening of her womb in the biblical story. But while Leah suffered involuntarily from her husband's neglect, here Rachel voluntarily accepted deprivation and delayed gratification.

However as we stated before, Eicha Rabbati identified a wholly different trait in the story of Rachel's generosity to her sister Leah. Rachel's "jumping" up and into the conversation with God when Moshe has hardly finished his appeal is an act of chutzpah, not modesty or silence. In fact Moshe's claim against God is that he should not be silent/ *shotek* in the face of a slaughter of mother and child in the streets of Jerusalem. But Moshe is unable to bring God out of his silence in the face of destruction. Rachel wins a promise of redemption, though not a cancellation of the punishment of exile, because of her traits of *rachmanut* on her sister, who would otherwise be shamed, and of self-control of libidinal desires (*taavah*).

In my judgment what is truly unique in Rachel's characterization via the prayer is the way that she functions in certain ways like the wise woman of Tekoa before King David. That woman acted the role of a widowed mother whose son had killed her other son and she wanted the king to prevent the family from killing her remaining son as a blood vengeance. The point was to do a psychodrama, without David knowing it, in which he would realize he himself was both the mother who had lost Amnon to Avshalom and he was also the family demanding a blood vengeance punishment of the remaining son, Avshalom. David was forced to face his inner conflict.

Similarly Rachel models for God her own inner strife, but in her case unlike the wise woman of Tekoa, she does not use the wisdom of an actress and does not conceal the parallel to God. Rachel shows God that she felt jealous for Yaacov's love, she too felt deep desire for intimacy, she too was deeply insulted by Leah's and her father's betrayal of her interests and needs for love. In all this she was similar to God's love of Israel, his desire for intimacy with them and his deep sense of shame and betrayal at being shunted aside for an idolatrous adultery with a lesser lover. However, as Rachel

emphasizes, she transcended these feelings not toward philosophic stoicism but toward *chesed* and *rachmanut*, God's traits in the world. She continued to feel the jealousy and the desire but she suffered them. She was not pleased to let an impersonator take over her position but her concern for her sister Leah's shame transformed her into an accomplice in the tricking of Yaacov. Rachel was not merely silent in suffering herself to be replaced but active as a ventriloquist under Leah's bed as Yaacov heard Rachel's voice but felt Leah's body. Rachel's reversal of Yaacov's deceit of his father Yitzchak is done one better by Rachel who, unlike Yaacov, anticipated the problem of the disguised voice and solved it in a way much better than Yaacov who was almost caught by his voice. Rachel actively pursued *rachmanut* and *chesed* and she successfully changed her own mind, consoling herself in her pain and reversing her selfish inclinations (*ken nichamti b'atzmi*).

Therefore Rachel can criticize god for not showing the same ability to overcome jealous as she has. It is God's and Rachel's very human appreciation of hurt pride, denied desire and competitive jealousy with one's competitor that establishes the analogy between them and enables Rachel to call upon God to outdo himself, to learn from her hard won virtue. As Rachel points out in a theological twist worthy of the second Isaiah, since the competitors of God – the so-called gods - are simply empty idols without reality that do not merit jealousy. It is beneath you to compete with them and rather foolishly gives them seeming legitimacy.

Immediately God's own now uncontrollable emotions of *rachmanut* overflow and he comes to comfort Rachel and promise that her children now on the way to exile will come back passing her grave (located by some traditions on the northern route between Jerusalem through the land of Benjamin and Ephraim in the Ramah and the road to Assyria, Babylonia and later Rome).

Rachel has evoked God's promise to forgive her children and to comfort Rachel because she has shown her humanity in three ways:

- 1) her love for her children and her incontrovertible commitment to bring them back home whatever the realities of the present catastrophe;
- 2) her love for her sister and concern that she be not shamed even though she felt keen jealousy of her sister ;
- 3) her love for Yaacov/ Israel whose deprivation by an interloper she was willing to suffer for the sake of her sister .

Petitional Prayers of Protest

We must place the rabbinic Rachel and Leah in the tradition of the prayers of negotiation with God whose origins are in Abraham at Sodom and Moshe at Sinai. Let us quote Walter Brueggemann at length for his beautiful treatment of this tradition.

Walter Brueggemann, *The Theology of the Old Testament* pp.29-34:

Brueggemann roots the radicality of Rabbinic midrashic prayer in the literal meaning of the biblical tradition of prayer. The midrashic Rachel and Leah are women who

now carry on the theological innovations of the biblical men, Abraham and Moshe. Their female point of view adds a gendered particularity and punch to their appeal to God's feminine attributes.

The Feminist Perspective

Finally we come back to sum up the feminist aspects of this exploration of the woman's prayer in the story of Rachel and Leah. These women suffer jealousies that are structurally reinforced by the patriarchy with its two co-wives competing to produce male offspring for the male line. However their jealousy is not in principle different than that of the brothers which is structured around the same zero sum game of the firstborn right which may be inherited only by one male child. These women however do have a resource for dealing with jealousy that is more natural to them than to their male counterparts – *rachamanut* as a maternal instinct and a concern to prevent sisterly shame at the expense of their own egos.

This quality is not typical of men but it is strikingly typical of God whose jealousy and *rachamanut* are oddly but firmly yoked to one another both in God's and in these women's emotional lives. Armed with that *rachmanut* and utilizing the tradition of arguing with God which is shared by man and woman in the Bible, these women set out to teach God to overcome the worst aspects of his jealous ego-driven behavior. In contemporary terms of Carol Gilligan these women represent the female values of solidarity, networking and compromise as opposed to male values of competition, individuation and moral autonomy. Women promote a concrete morality of responsibility that includes all, not an abstract morality of rights that requires the rejection of one side as against the other.

Carol Gilligan, *In A Different Voice* p.6-20 :

Much of this complex of feminist values and traits is clearly evident in the rabbinic prayers of Rachel and Leah. However we must add to this picture a bold willingness to challenge the man-woman/ God –human hierarchy. Daring challenge, rather than "deference," is typical of these rabbinic images of the matriarchs. Moral certainty, not "diffusion and confusion of judgment," characterizes their demands. They speak in the name of mercy/compassion, but in a tone of moral accusation turning human needs into human rights (*dinah*). This rabbinic *chutzpah* is not adversarial as in the Promethean sense. It is not an exercise in self-assertion for the sake of "autonomy and independence" but a covenantal demand rooted in relationship that refuses to relinquish the connectedness. These women speak out of a personal pain and at the same time an experience of jealousy that grows out of their sense of self. They would not feel jealousy or barrenness so acutely if they were self-less. But at the end of an inner struggle they succeed in transmuting these moments into a moral strength that makes them boldly strike out to rebuild relationships and to bridge over difference and rivalry. In the biblical and midrashic world women are never exempt from ego-driven jealousy any more than are men. The feminine ideal of *rachmanut* belongs to the God

of Israel in his covenantal relation to Israel and it is expected of the men of Israel as well (Israel are expected to be *rachmanim bnai rachmanim*, merciful children of merciful.). The reality is far from this ideal but the ideal is by no means restricted to women. But it is specifically women who show the way to the diffusion of their womb-generated *rachmanut* even into the psyche and self consciousness of men (as in the case of Avigail who mollifies David) and of God (see Nehama Aschkenasy, *Journeys of Eve*).

Appendix: Contemporary Midrash of Rachel and Leah

1. Rivkah Miriam, “The Tune to Jacob who removed the stone from the Mouth of the Well”
2. Shirley Kaufman, “Leah”
3. Naomi Hyman, “Leah”
4. Lynn Gottlieb, “Soft Eyes Woman, Leah”
5. Ziese Wild Wolf, “Two Monologues: I am Leah, Adonai ; I am Rakhel, Adonai”
6. Thomas Mann, *Joseph and his Brothers*
7. Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, “The Jewish Woman,” *Judaism Eternal*
8. Rosa Felsenburg Kaplan, “Sisters”
9. Avis Johnson Oehlbeck, “Leah Rebukes Jacob”