Conceived in Hope

The Struggles of Biblical Mothers in the Tapestry of Redemption

Chana Tannenbaum

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Maggid Books

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First Edition, 2024

Maggid Books
An imprint of Koren Publishers Jerusalem Ltd.

POB 8531, New Milford, CT 06776-8531, USA
& POB 4044, Jerusalem 9104001, Israel
www.korenpub.com

Cover Photo © והריקותי לכם ברכה עד בלי די by artist Yael Neuwirth, 2021

The publication of this book was made possible
through the generous support of *The Jewish Book Trust*.

ISBN 978-1-59264-665-4, *hardcover*

A CIP catalogue record for this title is
available from the British Library

Printed and bound in the United States

Dedicated to all the women
who pray for a child and wait with hope

In loving memory of

Dr. Allen Goldstein *z"l*,

a shining example of the seamless integration
of Torah and secular knowledge.
A genuine Torah scholar, who for decades delivered
a captivating and insightful shiur –
he also received wide acclaim as a supremely
talented physician and surgeon.

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Introduction

Even now in the twenty-first century, women are fighting for equal rights. In some places, it is about the right of women to earn the same salaries as their male colleagues. In other places, women fight for the freedom to drive a car or attend university. And in some areas of the world, women struggle for the right to fundamental liberties and fairness.

In the ancient world in general, and in the biblical world specifically, men dominated society, religion, and the home. In this highly patriarchal society, women were often abused, ignored, undervalued, and unheard. A woman's identity, value, sustenance – her very existence – were directly connected to the men she was associated with, usually her father, brother, husband, or son. A woman's ability to give birth was one of her primary responsibilities and an important factor in her social standing.

No society can have continuity without its female members, yet their contribution seems to be underappreciated. It is women who are birthing, feeding, nurturing, raising, educating, and instilling values in the future male leaders.

The biblical woman is portrayed in contradictory fashions. On the one hand, she is often a victim, unnamed, uncounted, and with questionable value. Yet we also meet women in the Bible who are leaders and prophetesses. We meet opinionated "women to watch for," and

the female is commonly used as a metaphor for elements of incredible value including the Jewish nation, the Torah, and the soul.

The motif of birth and mothering, whether present or glaringly lacking, runs through many biblical stories and prophecies. The continuation of civilization in general, and of a specific nation in particular, is dependent on the birth and subsequent education of the next generations. The healthy family unit is one of the foundations of successful societal growth. It is not surprising that the relationship between God and the Jewish people is described metaphorically in terms of family. It is through our human relationships that we learn to relate to God and view Him as King, Father, and Lover.

God is commonly viewed as a male figure, such as in the verse in Malachi (2:10): "Do we not all have one Father? Were we not all created by one God?" or the phrase often repeated in prayer, *Avinu Malkeinu*, "Our Father, our King." Song of Songs describes God as the *dod*, "beloved" (male form) and the nation as the *raya*, "darling" (female form), a couple who repeatedly declare their love for one another and are constantly striving to unite.

On occasion, God is poignantly represented as a mother figure. In *Parashat Haazinu* (Deut. 32:18), Moses predicts the future, declaring that the Israelites will forget God, who "gave you birth." The mother-child bond is known to be exceedingly strong, so Moses questions how it is possible that the Israelites would reject and ignore such an innate connection to God. Other relationships, even marriage, can be severed, but the genetic connection between a parent and a child can never be denied.

Isaiah 42 is another instance where God is likened to a mother. In the text's description of God taking revenge on the enemies of His people, He cries out like a woman giving birth (42:14). The metaphor teaches us that the salvation of the people will emerge from the destruction of their enemies. The birth pangs represent the current suffering. A woman cries out in pain, but she bears the terrible discomfort knowing that it is necessary for the end result.

When the nation bemoans its fate, crying that God has abandoned it and its holy city, He answers: "Can a mother forget her own baby; can she fail to care for the child of her womb?" (Is. 49:15). Israel and Jerusalem are as dear to God as a child is to its mother. The prophecy

continues, saying that even if it were possible for God to forget His children, He promises never to do so. Jerusalem will again be filled with her children (Is. 49:17–21). In order to comfort the nation that feels bereft, rejected, and despondent, the prophet uses the metaphor of a mother – symbolizing an indestructible bond – to guarantee redemption and the return to God and Jerusalem.

Isaiah continues the metaphor in comforting Jerusalem, declaring that the child will be delivered even before the labor pains begin, meaning that the redemption will be swift and painless (66:7). The children of Jerusalem will be comforted as a newborn nursing from his mother. Where is the source of this comfort? The verse does not ascribe it to anyone, but it is God all along who is comforting the people and the city. Throughout this prophecy, God is described as a mother who suckles, comforts, and cares for the child more than anyone else. The prophet chooses this metaphor because there is no relationship that comes close to the depth and meaning of a mother's love. The primary attribute of God, especially of His four-letter name, is compassion. The Hebrew word for compassion is *raḥamim*, which comes from the word *reḥem*, meaning "womb."

If This Is So, Why Am I Living?

The challenges of infertility have affected women throughout history, including a surprisingly large number of women in the Bible. This timeless struggle still resonates today in the role of women in the Jewish family, society, and nation.

Biblical women contended with their place in a male-dominated society. For the vast majority, their role was centered on their ability to have children. But what happened to the woman who was barren, or the woman who lost her children? How did this affect her position and relationship to the world around her, including men, society in general, and God? What happened when some barren women did eventually give birth? How did the role of motherhood, as opposed to the unique role of a woman as an individual, manifest itself? What is the lesson these seemingly secondary characters add to our understanding of the role of biblical women?

Females who struggle in the Bible can be divided into four categories:

1. Barren women who eventually bear children
    a. The matriarchs Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah
    b. Hazlelponi (wife of Manoah, mother of Samson)
    c. Hannah
    d. The Shunamite woman
2. Barren women who never bear children
    a. Daughter of Jephthah
    b. Batya
    c. Michal
    d. Tamar, daughter of David
3. Women who fight for or lose their children
    a. Judgment of Solomon
    b. The wife of Obadiah
    c. Rizpah
    d. Athaliah
4. Women whose children play a role in the salvation of the world
    a. Daughters of Lot
    b. Tamar, daughter-in-law of Judah
    c. Ruth
    d. Jerusalem

We begin by exploring the stories of women who, although they were initially barren, do eventually bear children. We look at why they were barren, and how they react to their difficulties and the eventual arrival of their offspring.

The second group of women is comprised of those who never get to experience motherhood, mostly due to their victimization by men. The lack of children, and of continuation, is often tragic, but not necessarily so.

In the third group are women who have children, fight for them, and ultimately lose them. Is it better to have loved and lost than not to have loved at all?

Last, as we explore the children who become part of the salvation of the world, we learn that humanity's ultimate redemption has been established through a man born under questionable circumstances.

Acknowledgments

מָה־אָשִׁיב לַה׳ כָּל־תַּגְמוּלוֹהִי עָלָי (תהלים קטז:יב)
How can I repay the Lord
for all His bounties to me? (Ps. 116:12)

It is evident that without the grace of God, none of us could endure even for a moment. Our lives are a divine gift, and in gratitude, we owe Him our deepest thanks and adoration. This book serves as a testament to the countless blessings bestowed upon me by God. My hope is that this work fulfills its purpose and honors His name, while I pray for the continued opportunity to teach and share His word for many years to come.

The genesis of documenting my classes originated from the unsettling event known as the "kidnapping of the boys," among whom was our neighbor, Naftali Frankel *Hy"d*. During those difficult days, I asked myself, "In my distress I called on the Lord; the Lord answered me and set me free (Ps. 118:5)."

As I write this page, three of my sons are currently summoned to defend our fundamental right to inhabit this world. It has indeed been over eight years since the inception of this book, transitioning it from a mere idea to a tangible reality. The process of writing has served as a beacon, guiding me toward a place of solace and reassurance, allowing me to reestablish a profound connection to our source.

Without the unwavering support, encouragement, and assistance of numerous individuals, this endeavor would have remained but a distant aspiration.

My parents, Dr. Allen Goldstein, *z"l*, and my mother, Shulamith Goldstein, were the bedrock of my passion for learning and my unwavering pursuit of a deeper understanding of Torah. They fostered an environment where Torah infused every aspect of our daily lives, not just as a subject of study, but as a guiding principle that we lived and breathed. Their steadfast support and encouragement propelled me forward, celebrating my achievements and inspiring me to reach for further goals.

It is through years of teaching, or rather, through the rich interactions and engagements with my students, that I have gained new perspectives, attitudes, and insights. I am profoundly grateful to all those who have studied alongside me over the years, for they have played an instrumental role in shaping me into the educator I have become.

A heartfelt thank you is owed to the women who courageously opened their hearts, allowing the public a glimpse into their poignant memories: Leah, Sherri, Anna, and Anne. Special recognition is also due to Anne, whose instrumental efforts were pivotal in bringing this book to fruition.

My thanks to Yael Nuewirt, who graciously allowed her wonderful painting to appear on the cover of my book. I am also grateful to an anonymous sponsor who supported the publication of this book and enabled it to come to fruition.

I extend my sincere thanks to the entire team at Koren Publishers: Matthew Miller, Reuven Ziegler, Caryn Meltz, Aryeh Grossman, Alex Drucker, Rina Ben Gal, Kate Gerstler, Tali Simon, and Debbie Ismailoff, all of whom have contributed to transforming this book from a rough draft into a polished gem. Your dedication and expertise have turned what was once a mere clod of earth into a precious stone.

To my husband, Moshe, your patience, feedback, and support are woven into every aspect of this book. It would never have taken flight without you by my side. And to my children, their spouses, and their children, who continually inspire me with their achievements and successes, I am immensely proud of the remarkable adults you have grown into.

Part One

Barren Women Who Eventually Bear Children

הנך הרה וילדת בן

(Genesis 16:11)

Chapter 1

Barren Matriarchs

In mythology and folklore throughout the world, the conception and birth of the hero is often extraordinary. Death and misfortune are common themes in the tragic tales of infertile women, including the epic poem originating in ancient Madagascar that begins with a barren woman giving birth to the hero Ibonia; the hero of Irish mythology, Conall Cearnach, born to the barren Findchoem, who becomes pregnant after drinking well water that contains a worm;[1] and Lamia of ancient Greek mythology, whose barrenness is a punishment inflicted by the jealous Hera, wife of Zeus (since Hera cannot bear her own children, she attacks and kills the children of others).[2]

There is a talmudic saying that a barren person is like one who is dead (Avoda Zara 5a). Barrenness is an affliction that worsens with the passage of time, because as one ages it becomes harder to conceive. The

1. Anna June Pagé, "Birth Narratives in Indo-European Mythology" (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2014). Available at: https://escholarship.org/content/qt71m1f09s/qt71m1f09s_noSplash_f6ccebb2e4216e2f08eb6cd1410c1bbf.pdf.
2. Linda McGuire, "From Greek Myth to Medieval Witches: Infertile Women as Monstrous and Evil." Available at: https://docplayer.net/29530550-From-greek-myth-to-medieval-witches-infertile-women-as-monstrous-and-evil-linda-mcguire.html.

emotional pain also increases over time, as the infertile couple watches other families grow while they remain stuck. With no children to carry on their name, ideals, and legacy, an infertile couple's future often feels empty, perhaps even worthless. They may feel that their lives are but a blip in history, as little will remain once they are gone. The Hebrew word for barren is *akar*, derived from the root meaning "to pluck" or "to uproot," the very opposite of "to plant," indicating a lack of hope for growth, blossoming, or continuation – only certain death.

Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah, the mothers of the Jewish people, are all considered barren women.[3] God brought the world into existence out of His desire to create a world with purpose and meaning.[4] He created Adam and Eve with a goal: after blessing all of creation, God commands them to "be fertile and multiply." Eve's name in Hebrew is Ḥava – which means "mother of all life" – because God bestowed on her the unique ability to create another living being within her body. There, in a completely safe environment, the fetus develops, grows, and is nourished until it becomes a viable human being.

Eve also has a "counter-name": *Isha*, which complements Adam's role of *ish*, man. According to Rabbi Isaac Arama, the names Ḥava and Isha represent two different functions of womankind.[5] In her role as *Isha*, woman, she was brought into this world to work alongside man in making it a better place through intelligence and morality. As Ḥava, she fulfills the role of the mother. Although a barren woman may not be able to fulfill the role of Ḥava, she can succeed brilliantly in the role of Isha.

Still, one wonders: Why do all of the matriarchs suffer this same challenge? In the ancient Near East, having children was a significant desire for women, defining their status and worth. Barrenness was (and still is) considered an unnatural state. In order to have continuity and achieve God's purpose, the world needs to be fertile in all respects: produce, animals, and humans. Birth is not only a personal experience; it is significant to the continued existence of society as a whole. Most healthy couples are able to procreate; those who are unable to conceive are in

3. *Pesikta DeRav Kahana* 20.
4. Rashi on Genesis 1:1.
5. *Akedat Yitzḥak* on Genesis 9:1–7.

the minority. When a barren couple has a child, they join the quotidian, finally feeling that they are just like everyone else.

For a couple struggling with infertility, the birth of a child is keenly felt to be nothing short of miraculous. God does not perform miracles by suspending the natural order of events flippantly. Miracles do not just "happen." According to the Gemara, God bestows on mankind many different abilities in this world – planting, harvesting, baking, sewing. These are all forms of creation that are well within man's capabilities. However, there are three "keys" that God Himself maintains: the keys to birth, resurrection, and rain (Taanit 2a). These three life-giving experiences are miraculous and should be viewed as such.

Prayer

The Gemara questions why our matriarchs were barren and answers that it is "because He desires the prayers of the righteous" (Yevamot 64a). God asks: "If My people are wealthy, beautiful, and smart, why do they need Me?"[6] This answer is even more difficult to understand than the question! God has no desires or needs, so how are we to understand this answer, which seemingly attributes to God the simple mortal longing to feel needed?

Prayer has the ability to bend the rules of nature. With prayer, even those who are barren can have children, against all odds. The Gemara maintains that not only was Sarah barren, but she actually lacked a uterus.[7] It is hard to imagine slimmer odds than those.

Man's fundamental purpose in this world is to recognize God and glorify His name. Prayer is the ultimate expression of this goal. Through his supplication, man increases the manifestation of God's presence in this world. This is what it meant by the statement that God "desires" prayer: through the supplicant's sincere prayer, God's immanence is affirmed and magnified.[8] Sincere prayer is based on man's intense recognition of his dependence on God, the absolute realization that all that we

6. *Tanḥuma, Toldot* 9.
7. Yevamot 64a.
8. Rabbeinu Bahya on Genesis 25:21.

have is but a gift from God. Without God's beneficence man would not even exist, let alone flourish. Even the most basic of functions that the world takes for granted, such as waking in the morning, and the body's natural processes – including pregnancy and birth – happen because God has willed it to be so.

The lesson we learn from the matriarchs' struggles with fertility is about the relationship one develops with God through prayer, as well as the power that prayer has to change negative decrees. God listens and responds, though perhaps not always in the way we desire. Prayer helps us to accept God's decree and gives us strength to cope.

Barren women are sometimes the loneliest people on earth. On the topic of loneliness, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik describes the pain and the necessary dependence on God: "I despair because I am lonely and, hence, feel frustrated. On the other hand, I also feel invigorated because this very experience of loneliness presses everything in me into the service of God."[9]

Serving God

Although we have seen that the Gemara's lesson from infertility is the importance of prayer, the biblical text only mentions the prayers of one matriarch: Rebecca. And even then, the reference is indirect: The verse (Gen. 25:21) says that Rebecca's husband prayed *lenokhaḥ*, sometimes translated as "opposite her," suggesting that perhaps she prayed with him.[10] If the message of infertility was prayer alone, we would expect to see many lengthy prayers like those of Hannah included in the text of the Tanakh.[11]

The Midrash offers several rather difficult explanations for the infertility of our forebears.[12] One suggestion is that God wanted these women to spend the years of their prime unencumbered by the time

9. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "The Lonely Man of Faith," *Tradition* (Summer 1965): 7.
10. See Rashi there. He explains that Isaac and Rebecca stood in opposite corners of the room while praying to God for a child.
11. See the chapter on Hannah in this volume.
12. Song of Songs Rabba 2.

and emotional constraints of child-rearing so that they would be fully available to spread His word.[13] Only in their old age, after giving meaning and purpose to the lives of others, were they free to have children of their own.[14] Just as the previous explanation presented prayer as the way to bring recognition of God into the soul of the petitioner, here barrenness is presented as the very thing that enabled the matriarchs to inspire the souls of others. The biblical text says that when Abraham left his birthplace at the command of God, he took with him *hanefesh asher asu*, literally, "the souls they made" (Gen. 12:5). Rashi explains that he and Sarah "made" souls by teaching people Torah: Abraham taught the men and Sarah taught the women. We could also suggest that Rebecca was occupied with teaching, based on the Rashi that says that she experienced terrible pains when she passed places of idol worship.[15] Why didn't she just avoid those places? The explanation is that she was engaged in spreading belief in God.

Later in Genesis, we learn of Rachel stealing her father's idols (31:30–34), but it is unclear as to whether her purpose was educational. In fact, none of these sources paint a clear picture of the matriarchs actually being engaged in teaching others about God.

Beauty

Another opinion is that God caused the matriarchs to be barren so they could maintain their beauty and attractiveness for their husbands.[16] A strong bond between husband and wife is essential for establishing a Jewish home, and that secure spousal relationship is the foundation for a stable family, and on a larger scale, for building a nation. The beauty of the matriarchs is clearly stated in the text: Sarah's beauty is recognized by Abraham, and it brings trouble in Egypt (Gen. 12:11–20). Rebecca is described as beautiful when the servant Eliezer meets her (24:16), and again at least twenty years later in Gerar (26:7). Rachel is also identified

13. See Rashi on Genesis 12:5.
14. Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin, *Oznayim LaTorah* on Genesis 11:30.
15. Rashi on Genesis 25:22.
16. Song of Songs Rabba 2:8.

as beautiful (29:17), and Leah is described as "soft-eyed," which Rashbam says indicates beauty as well.[17]

National Benefit

In a different vein, the Midrash says that by postponing the birth of Isaac, God was able to shorten the Egyptian exile. Rabbeinu Bahya explains that since God calculated the Egyptian bondage from the time of the *Brit Bein HaBetarim*, God's covenant with Abraham, the more time that elapsed before the actual birth of the forefathers Isaac and Jacob, the fewer years of servitude would remain.[18] These suggestions teach us that all pain and suffering has value as part of a much broader divine picture that we are unable to perceive. The suffering endured by an individual may have a long-term benefit that is not readily apparent to the sufferer.

Summary

The Midrash proffers these answers in an effort to identify a purpose, or perhaps even an advantage, to experiencing infertility. It is a basic tenet of Judaism that everything comes from God and therefore has a purpose. The Midrash also provides different approaches for coping with human suffering, such as prayer, investment in other activities, finding support from others, and developing a broader vision and perspective.[19] The matriarchs took decisive action instead of allowing themselves to remain entangled in their pain. These actions included prayer, providing their husbands with a second wife, or turning their pain into a growth experience for themselves or a way to improve their environment.

The barrenness suffered by the foremothers allowed space for them to develop associations with those around them, in particular with God, since it was to Him they prayed and through Him that their

17. Rashbam on Genesis 29:17.
18. See Rabbeinu Bahya on Genesis 25:21. This idea is also found in Genesis Rabba, *Lekh Lekha* 45:4.
19. Heard from Ariel Tuchfeld.

prayers were answered. They were able to influence their spouses and help them make correct decisions. Lastly, they were able to relate to others around them, educating, hosting, teaching, and helping fill the world with the knowledge of God.

Still, none of these answers are satisfying. After all, the main goal of the foremothers is the formation of the nation of Israel. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook suggests that their barrenness gave them a complete break from their biological past.[20] The fact that the birth of their children is miraculous teaches us that they were not just a continuation of previous generations, but rather a completely new beginning. This is why Abraham and Isaac were also considered to be barren.

The children of Israel are viewed as God's children (Deut. 14:1). Their birth as a nation was miraculous, as is their continued existence. There is no other way to explain how they have not been destroyed by the numerous pogroms, exiles, and massacres throughout the generations. A tale is told of Fredrick the Great of Prussia, who asked his philosophers for proof of God's existence. The answer he received was: "The Jews, sire, the Jews."

The matriarchs all had to contend with different forms of barrenness preventing the blossoming of future potential. This lack of biological children is also reflected in the infertility of the Land of Israel. The land also represents potential. Mother Earth should be the womb developing the produce that we need to exist. Although promised to the forefathers, the Land of Israel was found to be unfruitful, suffering periods of infertility within fertility, with famines in the times of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Miracles brought about the birth of the Jewish nation, as well as the burgeoning of the Land of Israel. As gifts from God, children and the Land of Israel each serve a special purpose in this world, and the existence of both is miraculous.[21] Each has its own set of rules and its own relationship to God.

Repentance, also a miraculous gift from God, obligates us to continue to give birth to ourselves over and over again, to fulfill the

20. *Tallelei Orot* 267.

21. Heard from Rabbi Chaim Sabato.

responsibility that comes with being God's children, returning to our Creator and recreating our bond with Him.

SARAH

From the very first time we are introduced to Sarah, the Torah identifies her as barren (Gen. 11:30). The subject of her lack of descendants runs through many of the coming stories. Sarah's inability to conceive is described after a long list of verses depicting the generations between Noah and Abraham, with everything proceeding according to nature until the pattern stops with Sarah. She is unable to extend the generations; she cannot continue the Creation story. This seems to be an important part of her identity, as it is the only fact mentioned. The Sages point out that the double terminology used in Genesis 11:30 describing Sarah as both barren and having no offspring indicates that she did not even have a uterus (Yevamot 64a). One wonders if this was a fact known to Sarah in the time before X-rays and ultrasounds. Did she go into the marriage knowing that she couldn't have children? Was Abraham aware of this?

In the preceding verse (Gen. 11:29), Sarah is referred to as Yiskah.[22] This name reflects Sarah's spiritual prowess, physical beauty, and leadership skills, while the name Sarah connotes nobility. Yet with all these myriad talents she is unable to have children. The future mother of the entire nation can't naturally bring children into this world.

In God's first communication with Abraham, He promises to make him into a great nation when he leaves his birthplace, his father's home, and journeys to the land that God will show him. God also promises that the land will be inherited by Abraham's children (Gen. 12:7). In an act of true faith, Abraham believes what God tells him. Sarah, who did not benefit from hearing the command directly from God, packs their bags without question.

Once Abraham, Sarah, and their entourage arrive in Canaan, a famine plagues the land, and they are forced to relocate to Egypt.[23] In

22. Rashi on Genesis 11:29.

23. The Sages are divided on how to view this descent. Rashi says they were correct in

an effort to save Abraham's life (Abraham fears that an Egyptian will kill him in order to take Sarah), the couple insists that they are brother and sister. Does Abraham identify their relationship this way because it has not produced offspring?

Sarah is promptly abducted to Pharaoh's palace as a result of her exceptional beauty, and gifts are given to her "brother." Pharaoh and his household are then smitten with plagues *al devar Sarai*, which Rashi explains as "on account of Sarai" (Gen. 12:17). According to the Midrash, this phrase means "according to the words of Sarai," as Sarah prayed to God: "I followed Abraham based totally on faith, and this is my reward?"[24] Although in the text, Sarah is silent, a seemingly passive victim, the Midrash describes her influencing and affecting her destiny through prayer. Another opinion in the Midrash suggests that the plagues that afflicted Pharaoh were actually based on Sarah's words, meaning that she was the one who brought down God's wrath on the Egyptians.[25] The fact that Sarah is saved and returned to Abraham is an indication that God chooses Sarah, just as He chose Abraham, despite – or maybe because of – her barrenness.[26]

After ten years of living in the Land of Israel,[27] it seems that Sarah despairs of having biological children. She willingly introduces a competitor into her home by encouraging her husband to marry her maidservant, Hagar.[28] Sarah hopes that from this union, a son will be born, and through him, she will "build a family" (Gen. 16:2). Sarah clearly states her belief that a woman's ability to procreate lies in the hands of God (16:2). According to Rashi, Sarah actually hopes that because of this

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relocating, while Nahmanides considers it a sin.

24. Genesis Rabba 41:2.
25. Ibid.
26. Y. Grossman, *Abraham: A Story of a Journey* [Hebrew] (Rishon LeZion: Yedioth Books, 2014), 57.
27. Genesis Rabba 45:3 explains that it was only after being in the Land of Israel for ten years that Sarah considered taking action, based on the halakha that a woman is considered barren after ten years of childlessness. The many years that she spent outside of Israel are not included in the count.
28. According to Genesis Rabba 45:1, Hagar is the daughter of Pharaoh. Recognizing Sarah's greatness, Pharaoh decided that his daughter would be better off as a slave in Sarah's home than a princess in his.

selfless move, she will be rewarded with her own offspring,[29] while Radak assumes that Sarah would raise the child born to Hagar and Abraham as her own, filling her house with noise and joy.[30]

Nahmanides points out that although Abraham strongly desired children, he would not have made this move without explicit permission and encouragement from Sarah.[31] In the preceding chapter, Abraham cries out to God, "What will You have given me if I remain childless?" (Gen. 15:2). God promises him a biological child, with descendants that will ultimately outnumber the stars – but not necessarily with Sarah. This could explain why Sarah accuses Abraham, saying, "The abuse I suffer is your fault" (Gen. 16:5). Perhaps she is saying that he should have asked God for the child to be from her.

Unwilling to accept her current situation, Sarah solves her intense desire for motherhood in the only way she can think of doing. According to Mesopotamian law, a barren wife could present her husband with a slave and acknowledge their children as her own. Hagar and Abraham indeed go on to have a son, Ishmael, whose birth is not described as bringing any joy or even acknowledgment of a promise fulfilled by God. Hagar's pregnancy and subsequent lack of respect for Sarah (Gen. 16:4) cause tension in the household. Telling the story from Hagar's perspective, the verse says that Sarah treated Hagar harshly, and so she flees (Gen. 16:6). However, an angel of God tells her to return. Nahmanides[32] and Radak view Sarah's behavior and Abraham's silent acquiescence as a sin, resulting in the future punishment of their children under the sword of Hagar's son Ishmael. Tosefta disagrees, proposing that all of Sarah's actions stem from her prophetic abilities and are thus sanctioned by God.[33] The Netziv also disagrees with Nahmanides and Radak. He says that the persecution of Hagar was justified, and that not only was Sarah defending her own honor, she was defending the honor of God as well.[34]

29. Rashi on Genesis 16:2.
30. Radak on Genesis 16:2.
31. Nahmanides on Genesis 16:2.
32. Nahmanides on Genesis 16:6.
33. Tosefta on Y. Sota 5:7.
34. *Harḥev Davar* 15:6.

In the next chapter, Abraham is given the commandment of circumcision. During this event, God changes the names of Abraham and Sarah from the original versions, Avram and Sarai, and promises that Sarah will bear a son. It is surprising that Sarah is included in the experience surrounding the circumcision, as it is seemingly an event exclusive to the male members of the household. For both Abraham and Sarah, the name change indicates a change of status – they are about to become parents – and they both respond with *tzeḥok,* laughter. Although the Torah uses the word *tzeḥok* to describe the reactions of both Abraham and Sarah, Onkelos notes God's negative reaction to Sarah's laughter and translates the word differently in the two instances. Abraham's laughter is translated as a joyful one,[35] whereas Sarah's is cynical. He explains that when Sarah overheard the angel delivering the message about the future birth of Isaac, she laughed cynically at the preposterousness of the idea.[36]

Yet Sarah does have the child as promised by God, when He "remembered her" (Gen. 21:1). This birth brings with it the joy and gladness that accompanies a miracle (Gen. 20:7). The child's God-given name, Isaac, contains within it an element of *tzeḥok*. According to Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, this verb describes anything that strikes us as unexpected, or even absurd.[37] For a man of one hundred to have a child with his ninety-year-old wife does indeed seem unbelievable and absurd. God waited until they were at ages when it seemed impossible to have a child, and then He gave them one. Abraham and Sarah's personal miracle symbolizes the unnatural and incredible existence of the entire Jewish nation. From its inception and throughout history, the survival of the Jewish people has defied natural events. As a people, we identify with *tzeḥok*.

35. Onkelos on Genesis 17:17.
36. Onkelos on Genesis 18:12.
37. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch on Genesis 17:17.

The difference between the reactions of Abraham and Sarah, and the difference in their laughter, is also due to the source of the information. Abraham heard directly from God that he would have a child with Sarah. When he received the news, he was occupied with the circumcision and did not immediately go to share the message with her. When the angels came to Sarah's tent, she perceived them as regular travelers and thought they were simply giving her an unlikely blessing – especially because it seemed clear that there was no chance of it being fulfilled.[38] It is easy to understand Sarah's hesitation and her unwillingness to believe that such a thing could happen, yet we know that God can do anything, and so understandable though her reaction may be, she is still faulted for it.[39]

Perhaps Abraham bore some of the guilt for Sarah's cynical laughter, prompting God to include him in the reprimand. Abraham questions Sarah about the laughter, which she promptly denies. Sarah could have shared her view with him, explaining that it was simply impossible and beyond human nature for them to have a son. In affirming her laughter (Gen. 18:15), Abraham gives Sarah the tools to concede to the implausible, opening her to the miracle of conception.[40] His acknowledgment opens the door to the impossible.

The next chapter, Genesis 20, describes Sarah being taken to the house of Abimelech, king of Gerar. At first glance, the reader's sympathies lie with the king, who claims innocence and pure intentions. Surprisingly, we discover that God plagues Abimelech's household with a form of barrenness, in which the wombs of the whole household are shut. Abraham prays for their complete recovery and through his prayers, Sarah is also cured from her barrenness.

Sarah becomes pregnant and delivers a son (Gen. 21:2). With the birth of Isaac, we hear about the emotional pain that Sarah suffered, as she declares, "God has brought me laughter; all those who hear will laugh with me" (Gen. 21:6). Before the birth of Isaac, Sarah was an outcast

38. See Sforno on Genesis 18:12 and Nahmanides on Genesis 18:15.

39. The commentators disagree about whether it was God or Abraham who spoke to Sarah.

40. Grossman, *Abraham*, 173.

in society. She felt that she was a failure to her husband because she could not bear his children. Her statement here emphasizes the supernatural quality of Isaac's birth, and it also indicates repentance for her cynical laughter earlier. Sarah uses the word *tzeḥok* twice, this time to denote her sincere happiness and joy at the totally unexpected blessing coming to fruition.

Later, while celebrating the weaning of Isaac, Sarah discovers Ishmael behaving inappropriately in Abraham's house. She demands that Abraham remove the negative influence from the house, lest Ishmael induce Isaac to also act in an unbecoming manner. Sara witnessed Ishmael "mocking." At face value, this might suggest Ishmael was quarreling over inheritance. However, according to Rashi, this action alludes to the three cardinal sins of adultery, murder, and idol worship. It is here that we see Sarah as a responsible, determined mother of her biological son and all future generations. Sarah sees and understands, as is confirmed by God, that Ishmael cannot coexist with Isaac in Abraham's household.

We find Sarah to be an equal partner with Abraham, as well as a prophetess on a higher level than her husband. She is the one who understands what is important for the continuation of the miraculous nation that she is birthing. The prophet Isaiah states (51:1–2): "You who chase righteousness, listen to Me, you who seek the Lord: Look to the rock you are hewed from, the quarry from which you were carved; look to your father, Abraham, to Sarah who gave you birth, for I called him, one alone, and blessed him, made him many." Isaiah defines Sarah's contribution as being the source of the wondrous nation of Israel.

Her contribution is also inextricably linked with that of her husband. It is well known that Abraham's defining character trait is kindness. The Bible shows us many examples, including the way he opens his home to guests and prays on their behalf, and the story of Abraham going to war to save his nephew, to name but a few. But without boundaries, kindness can become perverted, as seen with Lot.[41] The boundaries of Abraham's kindness are reined in by Sarah's defining character

41. Lot offers his daughters to the wild crowd in order to save his guests (demonstrating kindness without boundaries), and then his daughters rape him in order to prevent human extinction – also kindness of a sort, but certainly perverted.

trait: strength. She has the strength to tell Abraham that Ishmael and Hagar must go. Sarah and Abraham balance each other, and together they strive for perfection.

REBECCA

We meet Rebecca in Genesis 24, when she passes the test for kindness that is set up by Abraham's servant Eliezer. The servant convinces Rebecca's family to allow her to return to Canaan with him in order to marry Isaac. As Rebecca and Eliezer approach, she spots Isaac from afar, before he sees her. This idea of Rebecca seeing (or understanding) something before Isaac is a pattern that will repeat itself throughout their life together.

When she sees Isaac for the first time, Rebecca immediately falls off her camel and covers her face with a scarf. This reaction demonstrates the unique relationship that Isaac and Rebecca had, one based on awe and perhaps also fear.[42] The Torah records only one conversation between Rebecca and Isaac, unlike the many exchanges between other biblical couples that are detailed in the text. Yet the Torah also makes a point of stressing that Isaac loved Rebecca (Gen. 24:67).

The verses that follow describe the generations (Gen. 25:12–18), beginning with those of Abraham, then Ishmael, and finally Isaac, but here we come to an abrupt stop because Rebecca is barren (Gen. 25:21). The Gemara suggests that since the verse states that Isaac prayed *lenokhaḥ ishto* – which some translate as "opposite his wife" – this means that he too was infertile, and so a second wife would not have solved the problem (Yevamot 64a). According to another interpretation, the term *lenokhaḥ* indicates that Rebecca also prayed: Isaac prayed in one corner of the room, while she prayed opposite him in the other corner.[43] This approach shows Rebecca as the only foremother who prayed for a child (see above, "Serving God"). The Midrash indicates that she and Isaac prayed incessantly for years without despairing.

42. Netziv on Genesis 24:64–65.
43. Genesis Rabba 63:65, as quoted by Rashi.

Isaac is forty years old when he marries Rebecca (Gen. 25:20) and sixty (Gen. 25:26) when his sons are born. What transpired during those twenty years? Were he and Rebecca constantly praying? Did they consider the maidservant option, or perhaps adoption?[44] The text tells us nothing about those long, painful years, and it is not clear how Rebecca reacted to being barren. Should her story be lumped together with those of Sarah and Rachel?

As Rebecca is leaving her father's home, she is blessed, "Our sister, may you grow into thousands" (Gen. 24:60). The fact that it takes twenty years for Rebecca to bear children suggests that her family's blessing had no influence.[45] Though Rebecca comes from a questionable background – her father and brother are not upright individuals – thanks to her righteousness and fine character, she is given the privilege of continuing Sarah's legacy.

Instead of bringing in a second wife, Isaac prays on their behalf and Rebecca becomes pregnant. Her pregnancy is a difficult one. She questions her desire to have children, and she seeks an answer from God. While we don't know what Rebecca felt during those painful barren years, we do read of the pain she experiences during the pregnancy, which causes her deep anguish (Gen. 25:22).

The difficulty with Rebecca's pregnancy is described as children struggling within her. The source of this struggle is attributed to different causes. R. Yoḥanan proposes that the fetuses were literally trying to kill each other. Reish Lakish sees the struggle as a spiritual one, each trying to deprive the other of mitzvot. R. Berakhya asserts that the struggle in the womb shows that the differences between Esau and Jacob are predetermined and are not rational or based on actions.[46] Rashi quotes the Midrash's explanation that Rebecca does not know that she is having twins and therefore does not understand why the same child kicks when she passes a house of God and when she passes a place of idol worship (Gen. 25:22).

44. Little is known about adoption in biblical times, but the Midrash does mention cases of people taking foundlings into their homes.
45. Genesis Rabba 60:13.
46. Ibid. 63:6.

The struggle causes Rebecca to cry, "If this is so, why am I living?" (Gen. 25:22). How can we understand this phrase? Rashi suggests that Rebecca is questioning why she ever desired to become pregnant. Nahmanides rejects this explanation without explaining why, but perhaps he understands that an infertile woman would willingly accept all forms of pain and suffering in order to deliver a healthy child. Nahmanides also quotes Ibn Ezra, who says that Rebecca consulted other women and determined that her pregnancy was unusual. While she does not regret her desire to conceive, she is concerned about the fact that her pregnancy is unusual. Nahmanides rejects Ibn Ezra's idea and suggests that Rebecca is questioning her very essence and purpose in the world.[47] Sforno takes another approach entirely, proposing that Rebecca is afraid that the child will die and that she is in danger of dying in childbirth.[48]

Whatever she meant with this cry, Rebecca's response to her pain and confusion is to seek out God (Gen. 25:22). How would she do that? She may have sought out the "rabbinic" leaders of the time, Shem and Ever,[49] or she may have consulted Abraham,[50] or perhaps she herself prayed.[51] Why does she not turn to Isaac? Maybe she is embarrassed to complain about this pregnancy for which they have prayed and waited for twenty years.

Rebecca receives a prophecy explaining the battle inside her. God tells her that there are two nations in her womb, and that one nation will be stronger than the other, with the younger serving the older. It seems that she does not share this prophecy with Isaac. Since she did not turn to him with her worries previously, maybe she also lacks the ability to communicate with him now that she has received an answer. Or perhaps she wanted the twins to have an equal upbringing, and she is concerned that Isaac may become prejudiced and favor one over the other if he hears the prophecy. Alternatively, Nahmanides points out that one does not share a prophecy with a prophet.[52] Either way, just

47. Nahmanides on Genesis 25:22.
48. Sforno on Genesis 25:22.
49. Rashi on Genesis 25:22.
50. Ibn Ezra on Genesis 25:22.
51. Nahmanides on Genesis 25:22.
52. Nahmanides on Genesis 27:4.

as Abraham did not share his prophecy with Sarah, Rebecca does not share hers with Isaac.

Though Rebecca may have hoped that her sons would be treated equally by their parents, the Torah tells us that Rebecca loves Jacob absolutely, and Isaac loves Esau because he has a taste for wild game (Gen. 25:28). This dynamic, as well as the one between Rebecca and Isaac, results in the story of the stolen blessings. Rebecca overhears Isaac telling Esau that he is planning to bless him. She tells Jacob to cover himself with goat hair in order to pretend to be his brother, deceive his blind father, and appropriate the blessings for himself.

Rabbi Hirsch explains that Rebecca's goal is not to steal the blessing for Jacob but rather to demonstrate to Isaac how easily he can be tricked. She fully expects to be caught.[53] Rabbi Soloveitchik continues the point, explaining that Isaac and Rebecca disagreed about who should be the last forefather. Isaac feels that a strong person who is familiar with arms and hunting should be the ancestor of the nation. Would it be so terrible to have a little strength in the genetic makeup? Rebecca, who grew up among people like Esau, knows that this is not a prudent plan, but she cannot convince Isaac. With the deception, Rebecca shows Isaac that if necessary, Jacob is able to take on attributes of Esau, but an Esau could never become a Jacob. Isaac understands the message and blesses Jacob.[54]

We see here that it is Rebecca who decides which son will ultimately serve as the continuation of the nation after a miraculous birth. On her own initiative, she boldly intervenes to ensure the right succession of the covenant. She makes a decision that changes the course of Jewish history and the Jewish religion for good.

Isaac's defining character trait is strength, demonstrated via self-control in his willingness to give his life for God at the binding of Isaac.[55] Too much strength can have serious consequences, as it can lead to being too demanding of others and not having compassion for

53. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch on Genesis 27:1.

54. Heard from Dr. Allen Goldstein, a dedicated student of the Rav.

55. This idea is based on the teaching in *Pirkei Avot* (4:1): "Who is strong? Someone who controls their inclinations."

their struggles. An excess of strength can also lead to abuse. But Isaac's strength is balanced by Rebecca, who demonstrates kindness from the outset when she offers water to both Abraham's servant and his camels. The two balance each other, and together they work toward perfection.

The Isaac/Rebecca dynamic echoes the Abraham/Sarah dynamic. Abraham's kindness is reined in by Sarah's strength, and Isaac's strength is balanced by Rebecca's kindness.

LEAH

One might be surprised to find Leah on the list of barren women, given that she births 50 percent of Jacob's children. However, the verse says that "He opened her womb" (Gen. 29:31), indicating that it was previously closed and that God's intervention was necessary to help her conceive.

The beginning of that verse discloses that God intervenes because Leah is hated. The Gemara explains that this hatred can't possibly be referring to how Jacob feels about Leah, because in such a case, it would be forbidden for them to remain married. Rather, the hatred is Leah's attitude toward Esau (Bava Batra 123a). When God sees how much Leah desires to be part of the establishment of the Jewish nation, He opens her womb.

Sforno says the hatred stems from Jacob's prophetic ability to recognize Leah's barrenness; at their first meeting, he saw in her the signs of a woman who cannot conceive.[56] Perhaps this explains why she was willing to marry him under false pretenses – it was her only hope of marriage at all.

The Midrash understands the hatred as indeed being Jacob's feeling toward Leah, and it offers several reasons, including: (1) the fact that Leah was originally destined to marry Esau, and (2) her monumental deception of Jacob when she poses as Rachel on their wedding day, leading to a hatred so deep that Jacob planned to divorce her.[57] God blesses her with pregnancy, preventing this eventuality. Nahmanides explains that God "saw" the hatred but knew that Leah's motivation was pure:

56. Sforno on Genesis 29:31.
57. Genesis Rabba 71:2.

to be married to this righteous man and become part of the creation of the Jewish people.[58]

An alternative reading is that Leah is "hated" by the larger community, seen as a laughingstock who could only get married by tricking someone. Her pregnancy is proof to the world, and to Jacob,[59] that she is worthy of becoming a mother of the nation.

Once Esau loses his claim to be one of the forefathers, based on the poor decisions he makes, the woman who was predestined to be his wife finds herself in a difficult predicament. When Jacob receives Esau's blessing through trickery, he receives Leah, Esau's predestined wife, by trickery as well. In the morning, when Jacob discovers the exchange, he says to Leah, "All night I was calling you Rachel and you answered. Why did you deceive me?" Leah replies, "Because when your father called you Esau, you also responded."[60] The pot cannot call the kettle black.

Leah is able to change her fate. Once she determines Esau's true character, she prays and cries, weakening her eyes,[61] asking God not to place her in the home of an evil man. Her desire to be part of the building of the nation of Israel is so strong that she allows herself to be part of an elaborate deception, resulting in Jacob's antagonism toward her.[62]

Leah bears children, and their names represent her desire to earn Jacob's love: Reuben ("God has seen my affliction. Now my husband will love me" – Gen. 29:32); Shimon ("God has heard that I am unloved, so He has given me this son also" – Gen. 29:33); and Levi ("Now that I have borne him three sons, my husband will walk with me" – Gen. 29:34). All of these names depict Leah's pain and suffering. Not only barren women suffer. Leah gives birth to a fourth son, Judah ("This time I will praise God" – Gen. 29:35). She understands that she has birthed more than her fair share of Jacob's sons.[63]

58. Nahmanides on Genesis 29:31.
59. Genesis Rabba 71:2.
60. Ibid. 70:19.
61. Ibid. 70:16.
62. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Yemei Zikaron* [Hebrew] (Sifriat Elinar, 1986), 61–66.
63. Genesis Rabba 71:4.

Leah realizes that she has stopped having children and follows her sister in giving her maidservant, Zilpah, to Jacob (Gen. 30:9). Zilpah gives birth to two sons, Gad and Asher, both names expressing luck (Gen. 30:11–13). The choice of names indicates to us that at this point, Leah is happy and almost secure in her position as mother of the majority of Jacob's children. This will give her an undeniable advantage and prestige in the home, where a wife's standing is based on her ability to bring healthy children into the world. This explains why she gives her maidservant to Jacob, even though she was certainly not barren. She understands that her position is directly connected to the continued delivery of Jacob's offspring. We see from Leah's response to Rachel during the incident with the mandrakes[64] that she views herself as Jacob's primary wife, exclaiming to her, "Is it not enough that you have taken my husband?" (Gen. 30:15). Leah and Rachel make a trade for the plants, and Leah bears two more sons to Jacob, Issachar and Zebulun (Gen. 30:17–20).[65]

Leah represents strength. She has a glimpse of her destiny, and with all her might, she fights it and takes back control. She knows what she wants and does what is necessary to achieve it.

RACHEL

Jacob meets Rachel, falls in love with her, and serves Laban for fourteen years in order to marry her.

Like Sarah and Rebecca, Rachel is clearly identified as a barren woman (Gen. 29:31). In a play on words, the Midrash states that although Rachel is barren, *akara*, she is the *ikar habayit*, the prominent personality in Jacob's household.[66] When the two sisters are mentioned in the

64. In Genesis 30:14–16, Reuben finds mandrakes in the field and brings them to his mother Leah. Rachel asks if she can have some of them, as they are believed to be a fertility aid. In the end, Rachel gives Leah her own night with Jacob in exchange for the mandrakes.

65. These brothers are successful in creating the partnership that Jacob and Esau did not build.

66. Genesis Rabba 71:2.

Book of Ruth, Rachel's name precedes that of her older sister Leah, even among Leah's descendants (Ruth 4:11).

The verse tells us that when Rachel realizes that she is barren, she becomes jealous of Leah, and tells Jacob that if he doesn't give her children, she will die (Gen. 30:1). This dramatic statement demonstrates the devastating pain of a barren woman who feels that there is no meaning in her life and has no will to continue.

How is it that Rachel, who was willing to do the impossible for her sister, is suddenly jealous of her? The Midrash explains that Rachel is jealous of Leah's virtuous actions, proof that Leah is more righteous and therefore deserving of pregnancy.[67] Meanwhile, Jacob's harsh response, "Am I in place of God?" surprises us. Where is his compassion for the woman he loves? The Midrash deduces that indeed, Jacob is later punished for this insensitivity.[68]

Like Sarah, Rachel gives her maid, Bilhah, to Jacob, hoping to "build a family through her" (Gen. 30:3). This may be an act of repentance for her jealousy; not only does Rachel overcome this negative trait, but she now allows and even encourages her husband to take another wife. Rachel's maid delivers two sons, their names also a window into Rachel's world: Dan ("God has vindicated me. He has listened to my voice and given me a son" – Gen. 30:6) and Naftali ("I have struggled hard with my sister and I have won" – Gen. 30:8). Rachel views these sons as her own and names them herself, revealing the desire, pain, and jealousy she experienced. The name Dan comes from judgment; Rachel accepts God's harsh judgment of barrenness. Through introspection, she realizes that it was not in Jacob's hands. It was purely from God. The name Naftali is not necessarily a negative reflection of Rachel's relationship with her sister, but rather denotes a new connection to other mothers, a bond that she could never have as a barren woman.

Reuben, Leah's first son, brings mandrakes from the field to his mother. Rachel asks Leah for some of the flowers, and eventually trades them for her evening with Jacob (Gen. 30:14–16). According to various commentators, these plants were viewed as medical aids for conception.

67. Ibid. 71:9.
68. Ibid. 71:7.

In desperation, Rachel trades physical intimacy with her husband, grasping at straws in order to conceive. The birth of the sons through her maidservant still doesn't fulfill her own desire to conceive, but she makes a poor choice in this event.[69] She gets the flowers, but Leah conceives Issachar and Zebulun.

Afterward, God remembers Rachel and He opens her womb (Gen. 30:22). Why now? At this point, ten of Jacob's twelve sons have been born and Leah turns to God and begs Him to give Rachel a child.[70] The circle is now complete: Rachel saved Leah from embarrassment, and now Leah saves Rachel from the same. Rashi suggests that Rachel was afraid that if she was barren, she would be sent from Jacob's home and end up with Esau, just as Leah had feared.[71] Rachel names her child Joseph, saying, "God has taken away my shame" (Gen. 30:23), in the hopes that she will have another son (Gen. 30:24).

While the family begins to return to the Land of Israel, Rachel goes into labor and dies in childbirth at the age of thirty-seven,[72] after discovering that she has birthed a boy whom she names Ben Oni (literally, "the son of my suffering"). Jacob renames him Benjamin (Gen. 35:16–20).

Rachel is buried on the road and her position there serves an important purpose. Years later, when the Jews are exiled, they are able to pass by her grave and pray. Rachel is heralded as one whose petitions before God are accepted. It is said that during the destruction of the Temple, the forefathers and foremothers tried to defend the Jewish people, but to no avail. Rachel then came before God and said, "You know how difficult it was for me when I thought I was to be married but instead Laban decided to put Leah in my place. Yet I, a human being, was not jealous and gave my sister the signs so she would not be humiliated." God answered, "Yes, Rachel, cease your crying. There is a reward for your actions. Your sons will return to their land."[73]

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69. Genesis Rabba 72:3 states that Rachel is not buried with Jacob as a result of trading away her night with him.
70. *Tanḥuma, Vayetzeh* 8.
71. Rashi on Genesis 22:30.
72. *Seder Olam Rabba* 82.
73. *Pesikta Eikha Rabba* 24.

When Rachel gave Leah the signs to trick Jacob into thinking she was Rachel, she put herself in an impossible situation. It is against Torah law for a man to marry two sisters. The forefathers kept all of Torah before it was given,[74] but only in the Land of Israel.[75] This meant that when they entered the land, the sister who Jacob married second could not go with them.

Rachel's character trait is kindness, demonstrated by her willingness to give the signs to her sister. Jacob, once he received Esau's blessing, has two main character traits: strength and kindness, which together with love, beauty, and harmony fuse into *Tiferet*. *Tiferet*, the sixth of the ten kabbalistic *sefirot*, integrates kindness and strength to create a necessary balance between these two characteristics. Hence, Jacob needs both Rachel and Leah in order to reach perfection.[76]

74. Mishna Kiddushin 4:14.
75. Nahmanides on Genesis 26:5.
76. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Yemei Zikaron* [Hebrew] (Sifriat Elinar, 1986), 61–66.

Leah's Story: Trial by Water

By Leah V. Herzog

At the beginning of my marriage, going to the *mikve* felt like a privilege and a gift. I embraced the experience for all its spirituality. This was a woman's mitzva, and I felt so proud to be able to do it. The water represented so many things to me: the primordial waters of *Bereshit,* Miriam's well, rebirth, joy, life itself. As I went into the *mikve*, I sometimes felt tears of joy and awe well up in my eyes. I said each word of the *berakha* with my eyes closed, understanding the full meaning, and then immersed with open hands and a brimming heart. I felt myself preparing my *neshama* and my body for the new life that would grow. I said *tefillot* and *tehillim* and offered my own pleas to the Creator. I thought that if I did this mitzva right, if I had the purest and most proper *kavana*, then we would be blessed with a child.

Each month that I didn't get pregnant was a blow. The physical pain was a shadow of the psychological and spiritual pain. And each month, as I prepared for the *mikve*, I fought with myself. I grappled with doubt and anger. If I was following the rules, if I was doing what Hashem commanded me to do, why wasn't I having children? My next thoughts often went like this: *This is my* yetzer hara *and I can't listen to it! Hashem only sends us* nisyonot *that we can handle.* That was followed by: *Hashem wants your* tefillot*, just like He wanted those of the* Imahot. But that midrash either rang hollow and cruel in my ears, or it shot arrows of guilt through me. *Who do you think you are, comparing yourself to the* Imahot*?*

I saw the *Avot* and *Imahot* as role models. My Hebrew name is Leah, and when I was eighteen, I was diagnosed with an incurable eye disease. Somewhere in the back of my mind, as I grappled with coming to terms with a lifelong degenerative vision impairment, I had the following thought: *Well, if I am like Leah in having weak eyes, at least I will also be like Leah in having a lot of children.*

I had always wanted to be a mother. I imagined having children before I thought about being married. I don't really know where that deep maternal instinct and yearning came from. Perhaps it was because I was lonely. I was an awkward kid, I didn't have many friends, and my three half-siblings were ten, twelve, and fourteen years older than I (and they didn't marry until much later). Perhaps it was because I was a child of survivors, and I was trained from a young age to take care of my mother. Perhaps it was because I was born in Tammuz – the astrological sign of the crab is associated with nurturing. When I was little, my dolls and stuffed animals were my babies. By the time I was twelve, I was babysitting. I was the girl who was always holding someone's kid, the girl who wanted to be a kindergarten teacher when she grew up.

I loved being Jewish and when I was a teenager, I became observant. Orthodox Judaism provided – and continues to provide – three vital things for me: a set of rules connected to a higher purpose, a sense of community, and a source of meaning and spirituality. I'm a *Yekke* by birth, upbringing, and temperament, so rules are important to me. On the other hand, I am a Hasid in my *neshama*, and I very much wanted to belong to something. The concepts of *hashgaḥa pratit*, *sekhar ve'onesh*, and fidelity to Hashem, Torah, and mitzvot resonated deeply, and I firmly believed that if I did what was right and true, my dream of becoming a wife and mother would be fulfilled.

I am deeply cognizant of the *ḥesed* that Hashem did for me in sending me the man who became my husband, who was completely undeterred by my diagnosis, and whose desires to have a large family matched my own. We talked happily about having six,

seven, even ten kids. We were young when we married – twenty-one and twenty-four – and we were blissfully naive.

Before my wedding, a woman whom I had been close to since I was a teenager called me up and told me some of her own story. "Do you remember the big thermometer you once saw in my bathroom?" she asked me. "I needed to take my temperature every day because we were trying to have children. I'm telling you this because one in six couples has infertility issues. I just want you to know. I hope you don't ever need this information, but I wanted to make sure that someone told you."

This knowledge was another *ḥesed*. Our infertility journey was long and painful. It took us nine years to have our son; we started treatments after fourteen months of marriage.

As time wore on, and we were immersed in infertility treatments that were exhausting, wreaked havoc with my hormones, emptied our bank account, and exhausted our souls, I wondered whether Hashem was even listening or caring. Besides, I already had one *nisayon* – my deteriorating vision. Wasn't that enough?

After almost four years, I became pregnant for the first time. Fear lurked under the joy, and indeed, the pregnancy ended with a traumatic stillbirth at thirty-two weeks. I closed myself off from Hashem. It wasn't that I lost my *emuna*; rather, I had no interest in having a conversation with the *Boreh Olam*. I was a Torah teacher, we lived an observant life, I went to *shul*. At home, in *shul*, and in the *mikve*, along with my *tefillot* for children, I now also davened to find my way back to Hashem. I delved into the lives of the women in Tanakh, so many of whom struggled with infertility, and I tried to emulate them. They were not saints. Each one displayed anger and despair in her own way. Their humanity was what inspired me and gave me hope. I never stopped fighting with myself not to become bitter, to keep trying, to find joy, to be involved with other people and their families. I spent time in nature and reveled at the almost indescribable beauty of Hashem's universe. I wrote, I played instruments, I learned Torah and worked on my doctorate.

I very consciously chose life. Gradually, the door that I had closed but never locked began to open again.

Our son was born after almost nine years. I named him after my father. Like the biblical Leah, my firstborn's name is Reuven. Like Leah, I felt that Hashem had seen my suffering and given us a son. The alternate way to read the name Reuven also rang true for us: *Re'u! Ben!* – Look! A son!

There was another disastrous pregnancy, which ended with miscarrying twins. This time, I found my way back through Malbim's introduction to the book of Job. According to one opinion, Job was written by Moses, as he too grappled with the unknowable. As I stared into the waters of the *mikve*, which still reminded me of the original waters and of life itself, I thought of what Hashem finally said to Job: "Were you there when I created the universe?" I realized that I needed to learn to live with *emuna* alone. There would never be any answers.

A little over a year after the miscarriage, almost four years after our son was born and twelve and a half years after we married, Hashem answered us and we had our daughter, Eliana.

We have two children, not ten or even six. We have a boy and a girl. They are healthy, bright, wonderful human beings who bring us great joy. And while I realize that Hashem's rules are as unfathomable as the deepest waters, I also know that like the *Imahot* before me, I have *emuna*.

Leah V. Herzog, M.Ed., spent thirty years teaching high school students and adults in the US and now lives in Israel, where she is a senior educator at The Lookstein Center at Bar-Ilan University. Leah is also a writer, a tour guide for the Bible Lands Museum Jerusalem, and a mentor for people dealing with vision impairment and reproductive challenges.