Relationships in the Parasha

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha

Parashat Vayetze: Rachel's Inner Work Builds Eternal Relationships

How Can Challenging Relationships with Our Sisters Help Us Grow?

Should We Strive to Make Our Sister Our Best Friend?

Someone once told me that sisters don't have to be best friends. I take issue with this statement. Hashem brought specific souls into the same family for a reason. Although friendship cannot be forced, I believe that sisterhood calls us to cultivate a particularly close, supportive bond. This understanding is reflected in the Torah's prohibition against marrying two sisters during their lifetimes (*Vayikra* 18:18). Being married to the same man sets sisters up against each other as rivals for his love. The Hebrew term for co-wife is צָרָה/*tzara* – 'rival,' a word that also means 'distress.' Ramban explains that sisters should love one another, and marriage to the same man would turn them into rivals. He connects this concern with the prohibition applying specifically during the first wife's lifetime (Ramban, *Vayikra* 18:18).

The very closeness of sisterhood also makes us vulnerable to the pain of rejection, competition, and jealousy. A beloved sister can hurt us so deeply precisely because her love matters so much. Yet, the solution is not to retreat into ourselves and give up on the closeness of sisterhood. On the contrary, we are called to work through the knots and bumps between us. Conflicts with a sister can become especially powerful opportunities for self-rectification. Who else has witnessed so much of our lives, knows our family patterns from within, and shares so much of our history? I believe this is because our souls belong to the same soul group, a connection also reflected in our biological relationship – we share both physical and spiritual genetics. Our shared physical and spiritual roots give us particular work to accomplish together.

In *Parashat Vayetze*, Rachel faces the hardship and vulnerability of sharing her husband with her sister – an exception to the Torah's prohibition against marrying two sisters. Within this entangled relationship, her pain reaches a breaking point. Yet Rachel's anguish does not define her relationship with her sister. Through her struggles, she reaches beyond herself, bringing about profound rectifications whose effects extend far beyond her lifetime. Her inner work opens a path that each of us can tap into.

Sadly, many sisters – who haven't learned from Rachel – are no longer on speaking terms over unresolved clashes. Every such estrangement represents a precious bond awaiting repair. Working toward reconciliation can deepen our self-awareness and help us change patterns that affect other relationships as well. Beyond personal growth, the effort to heal sisterhood draws us closer to Hashem. Following Rachel's example, our willingness to work on ourselves can bring blessing to all of Israel and help bring the redemption closer.

How Could Rachel, of All People, be Jealous of Her Sister?

סֵפֶר בְּרֵאשִׁית פֶּרֶק ל פָּסוּק א

וַתֵּרֶא רָחֵל כִּי לֹא יָלְדָה לְיַעֲקֹב וַתְּקַנֵּא רָחֵל בַּאֲחֹתָהּ וַתֹּאמֶר אֶל־יַעֲקֹב הָבָה־לִּי בָנִים וְאִם אַיִן מֵתָה אָנֹכִי׃

"Rachel saw that she had not borne children to Ya'acov, and Rachel envied her sister. She said to Ya'acov, 'Give me children, and if not, I am dead'" (*Bereishit* 30:1).

How could Rachel, who gave Leah the secret signs to spare her humiliation, become jealous of the very sister she enabled to marry Ya'acov? Rashi explains that Rachel envied Leah's good deeds. She reasoned that if Leah had not been more righteous than she, she would not have merited children (Rashi, *Bereishit* 30:1). Rather than simply wishing to possess her sister's blessings, Rachel turned her attention inward,

Midreshet B'erot Bat Ayin
Holistic Torah for Women on the Land
02-993-4945 | info@berotbatayin.org
www.berotbatayin.org

wondering what she herself needed to change.

Yet even a woman capable of extraordinary self-sacrifice can reach a breaking point. It is one thing to overcome ourselves in a single moment; it is another to live with the painful consequences of that choice year after year. When Rachel handed over the signs, she could hardly have anticipated what it would feel like to remain barren while her sister gave birth to one son after another. Her earlier generosity did not make her immune to the anguish that followed. To me, her struggle makes that initial act of self-sacrifice even more remarkable.

The Be'er Mayim Chayim explains that Leah's children drew Ya'acov increasingly close to her. Rachel saw the change in his love and found herself envying the sister who had once been the less beloved wife. According to this interpretation, her cry, "Give me children, and if not, I am dead," expressed how unbearable she found the jealousy itself, as it states, "a hundred deaths are preferable to one experience of jealousy" (Be'er Mayim Chayim, *Bereishit* 30:1; *Devarim Rabbah* 9:9). Rachel longed for children, but she also longed to be free of an emotion that threatened her bond with her sister. Sometimes our deepest anguish comes from discovering feelings within ourselves that seem so far from the person we strive to be.

How Can We Respond to a Loved One's Pain When We Cannot Fix It?

Rachel turns to the person whose love she most needs, yet Ya'acov responds with anger:

סֵ֚פֶר בְּרֵאשִׁ֣ית פֶּ֔רֶק ל פָּסוּק ב וַיִּֽחַר־אַ֣ף יַעֲקֹ֔ב בְּרָחֵ֖ל וַיֹּ֣אמֶר הֲתַ֣חַת אֱלֹהִ֔ים אָנֹ֑כִי אֲשֶׁר־מָנַ֥ע מִמֵּ֖ךְ פְּרִי־בָֽטֶן׃

"Ya'acov's anger flared against Rachel, and he said, 'Am I in place of G-d, Who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?'" (*Bereishit* 30:2).

How could Ya'acov answer his beloved wife so harshly in her distress? Ramban understands that Rachel wanted him to pray until she was granted children. Surely his prayers could accomplish what his father's prayers had accomplished for Rivkah! Yet even the prayers of a tzaddik cannot guarantee a particular outcome. Ya'acov could pray, but the answer remained in Hashem's hands. Ramban also considers it impossible that Ya'acov had not already prayed for his beloved wife; his prayers had simply not yet been accepted (Ramban, *Bereishit* 30:1).

The Ohr HaChayim adds another dimension to Ya'acov's anger: Rachel's declaration that she was dead carried the force of a curse. He reads בְּרָחֵל/***b'****Rachel* as indicating that Ya'acov was angry for her sake, concerned about the effect of her words (Ohr HaChayim, *Bereishit* 30:2). Nevertheless, understanding Ya'acov's frustration does not erase the pain of his response. The Midrash relates that Hashem rebuked Ya'acov: Is this how one answers a distressed woman? He declared that Ya'acov's sons would one day stand before Rachel's son Yosef. Ya'acov had emphasized that he already had children, whereas Rachel did not. Yet those very children would eventually depend on Rachel's son for their sustenance (*Bereishit Rabbah* 71:7).

This encounter teaches us something essential about responding to a loved one's suffering. We may be unable to provide the blessing they desperately seek, but we can still listen, pray, and share their burden. A truthful explanation of our limitations does not fulfill their need for compassion. When someone we love cries out, we must try to hear the pain beneath the words, even when the words themselves are difficult to receive.

How Can Painful Jealousy Become an Opportunity for Rectification?

Rather than remaining absorbed in the pain of Ya'acov's response, Rachel searched for what she could change within herself. Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim of Luntschitz explains that she examined her deeds and identified her jealousy as the trait requiring rectification. he then moved toward the opposite extreme: whereas she had been jealous even of her sister, she now undertook not to be jealous even of her maidservant. By giving Bilhah to Ya'acov, Rachel actively made room for another woman to receive the very

Midreshet B'erot Bat Ayin
Holistic Torah for Women on the Land
02-993-4945 | info@berotbatayin.org
www.berotbatayin.org

blessing she herself longed for (Kli Yakar, Bereishit 30:2).

This was no small undertaking. Rachel did not merely resolve to feel differently. She chose an action that challenged the possessiveness at the root of her jealousy. Her words, "I too will be built through her," express the possibility that another woman's blessing could become part of her own rebuilding (*Bereishit* 30:3). What had seemed to threaten her place could become a means of spiritual growth.

The Degel Machaneh Efraim finds repair within Rachel's words – "here is my maidservant." He explains that her choice of אֲמָתִי/*amati* rather than שִׁפְחָתִי/*shifchati* was intended to sweeten her earlier expression מֵתָה/*metah* – 'dead,' transforming its letters toward הָאֱמֶת/*ha'emet* – 'the truth' (Degel Machaneh Efraim, *Vayetze*). The mouth that had voiced despair now expresses the next step toward rebuilding.

When Bilhah gives birth to Dan, Rachel acknowledges that Hashem has judged her, heard her voice, and given her a son. Rashi explains that she had been judged, found guilty, and found worthy (Rashi, *Bereishit* 30:6). Read alongside the Kli Yakar, this naming reflects Rachel's willingness to acknowledge a shortcoming without surrendering her hope. She takes responsibility for her jealousy and accepts Hashem's judgment, allowing it to become a doorway to renewal.

How Can Our Struggles with a Sister Make Us Stronger?

סֵ֚פֶר בְּרֵאשִׁ֔ית פֶּ֖רֶק ל פָּסוּק ח וַתֹּ֣אמֶר רָחֵ֗ל נַפְתּוּלֵ֤י אֱלֹהִים֙ נִפְתַּ֣לְתִּי עִם־אֲחֹ֔תִי גַּם־יָכֹ֖לְתִּי וַתִּקְרָ֣א שְׁמ֑וֹ נַפְתָּלִֽי׃

"Rachel said, 'With mighty struggles I have struggled with my sister, and I have also prevailed.' She called his name Naftali" (*Bereishit* 30:8).

Rabbi David Kimchi connects the language of her struggle with twisting and binding, like strands twisted together into a cord (Radak, *Bereishit* 30:8). This imagery reveals how the very relationship that challenges us can ultimately strengthen us. Separate strands become stronger through being intertwined. Likewise, working through the painful entanglements between sisters can develop capacities that neither would have discovered alone. Rachel's declaration, גַּם־יָכֹלְתִּי/*gam yacholti* – "I have also prevailed," anticipates the words spoken to Ya'acov after his struggle with his brother's angel: וַתּוּכָל/*vatuchal* – "and you prevailed" (*Bereishit* 32:29). Both undergo a profound struggle connected with a sibling relationship. Ya'acov's spiritual encounter becomes physically visible in his limp; Rachel's struggle unfolds within her heart and finds expression in naming Bilhah's second son.

Rachel's victory was overcoming the jealousy that could have consumed her relationship with Leah. Her sister remained her sister, and the children of both women would need to belong to one family. Rachel's inner work helped lay the spiritual foundation for their descendants to become one people.

How Can Our Inner Work Open Channels of Blessing for All of Israel?

Rachel's longing reaches beyond her personal desire for motherhood. Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Epstein explains that she understood Leah's first four sons as corresponding to the four supports of the Divine Chariot. After Yehudah's birth, Rachel feared that Ya'acov's spiritual family was already complete and that she had lost her opportunity to participate in bringing these holy souls into the world (Ma'or VaShemesh, *Vayetze*). Her anguish concerned her place in the unfolding mission of Israel as well as her place within her marriage.

Rabbi Yekutiel Yehuda Teitelbaum reads Ya'acov's response as directing Rachel to pray for the fulfillment of the higher spiritual reality she embodied. Her task was to open the supernal source of fruitfulness associated with Rachel, thereby bringing blessing into the world. Giving Bilhah to Ya'acov became part of this rectification, and Rachel's own rebuilding was included within the greater repair (Yitav Lev, *Vayetze*).

From this we learn why our most intimate relationships can demand so much from us. The work taking place within them reaches beyond the immediate disagreement or hurt. When we loosen the grip of jealousy

and make room for another person's blessing, or renew our willingness to love, we participate in a repair whose full effects we may never fathom.

Rabbi Eliyahu de Vidas identifies Rachel's conduct toward Leah as an example of overcoming our natural inclinations and yielding our will for another (*Reishit Chachma*, *Derech Eretz*, introduction). Rachel accomplished this when she handed over the signs, and she had to deepen that achievement as the consequences unfolded. Her greatness grew through repeatedly choosing to work on herself amid circumstances she had never wished for. We can draw strength from her whenever an old hurt or familiar jealousy returns. Each renewed effort can deepen the rectification, strengthen the bonds within our people, and help prepare the way for redemption.

Midreshet B'erot Bat Ayin: Holistic Torah for Women on the Land is for women who seek to delve deeply into their souls through intensive textual study and creative expression. We engage women of all ages and nationalities in intense Torah study and sustainable living. Drawing on creativity and life experience, students participate in art & drama workshops, authentic movement, and organic gardening, and take turns cooking wholesome meals for each other. Dormitory facilities are available in the peaceful, rural setting of Bat Ayin, nestled in the Judean Hills and located just 20 minutes south of Jerusalem.