

Genesis 30:1-4

“Rachel saw that she had not given birth to children from Yaakov, and she became jealous of her sister. She said to Yaakov: “Give (*havah*) me children – if you don’t, I am dead (*meitah anokhi*)”.

Yaakov was furious with Rachel. He said: “Am I in place of G-d (*hatakhath Elokim anokhi*), who has denied you fruit of the womb?”

She said: “Here is my maidservant, Bilhah – ‘Go in’ to her. She will give birth on my knees, and I too will have sons through her.”

She gave him Bilhah her maidservant as a wife, and he ‘went in’ to her.

Two questions:

- 1) What does Rachel expect Yaakov to do that he hasn’t already done?
- 2) Why does Yaakov react with anger, and indeed with extremely hurtful words, rather than sympathy?

We could, of course, decide that Rachel was irrational and Yaakov unfeeling or worse. For understandable reasons both theological and textual, this has not been the traditional approach.

Nechamah Leibowitz ז”ל popularized a stunning suggestion from the Akeidat Yitzchak (R. Isaac Arama, medieval Spanish philosopher). He suggests that Yaakov was furious because Rachel implied that her sole reason for living was her relationship with him, that having his children was all that gave meaning to her life. This put him “in place of G-d”, Who is the true source of meaning in life. Since G-d has chosen not to give her children, He must have had another purpose for creating her.

R. Arama continues this theme by noting that women are given two names in Genesis, “Chavah and Ishah”. Chavah represents the maternal, feminine role, Ishah the generic human role. By claiming that her life was purposeless without children, Rachel was denying her role as “Ishah”, which involves study of Torah, understanding G-d, etc.

(Note: This is a gloriously feminist medieval moment. In the interest of intellectual honesty, however, it should be noted that Akeidat Yitzchak is at best less definitive about the survival of the Ishah role post-Eden in his commentary on parshas Breishis.)

This interpretation reads “hatachat Elokim” as “in place of G-d”. This is accepted pretty universally, although one midrash reads it hyper-literally as “under G-d”, i.e. Yaakov denies that he is the one to whom G-d has delegated this decision.

R. Arama’s reading also justifies Yaakov’s anger – it is not personal but philosophic – and his biting “who has denied you fruit of the womb”, which cannot but remind her that he has not been denied children. Many midrashim make no effort to justify Yaakov, saying simply “This is how one reacts to someone suffering grievously?!” or even claim that her peremptory tone is poetic justice for his crude statement to Lavan when his first seven years of labor end: “Give (*havah*) my wife that I may ‘go in’ to her”.

I’m not sure, however, that philosophic anger is contextually likely. Also, Rachel reacts by offering Yaakov Bilhah, and Yaakov accepts, behavior that doesn’t seem to be the natural consequence of the dialogue as he explains it.

Most commentators suggest that she wanted Yaakov to pray, as Yitzchak had successfully for Rivkah, and that he reacted by saying a.) I’m not as great as my father, and b) my father was also childless at the time, and therefore his prayer had more immediate emotional force, or his gesture in praying for his wife rather than himself was more powerful.

Ramban suggests that Yaakov’s anger was caused by a suicide threat. This reads “meitah anokhi” as “I will die”, rather than “I will be dead”, or as the Talmud takes it, “I am as good as dead.”

Several perhaps relevant points worth noting in conclusion:

- 1) Ibn Caspi draws attention to the contrast between here and I Samuel 1 in that there G-d closes the womb of the favored wife, whereas here he opens the womb of the disfavored wife. He attributes this to the philosophical imperfection of the author of Samuel, but other explanations are possible.
- 2) When G-d finally opens Rachel’s womb (30:22), it is in response to her own voice.
- 3) G-d opens Leah’s womb *because* He sees that she is disfavored. Had Yaakov loved his wives equally, how many children would he have had at this point? From which wife?

Shabbat Shalom