

# TORAT HAR SHMUEL

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## THE POWER OF A FLOWER

It's very interesting how Hashem decided which narratives to include in Sefer Bereshis. There are events we would think are worthy of highlighting that simply do not appear such as the passing of Rivka and Leah. On the other hand, events that on the surface appear to serve as "filler" have the potential to teach us a tremendous amount. With this in mind, let's look at five verses in chapter 30 (14-18).

Reuven picks flowers for his mother, Leah, identified as mandrakes which Rashi understands to mean either violets or jasmine. They are known for their ability to help a woman conceive, which explains why Rachel, barren at this point in time, is interested in them. She asks Leah for some of the flowers, to which Leah responds, "Is it a small matter that you have taken away my husband? And (now you want) to take my son's mandrakes also?" Rachel picks up on the obvious anger and, in exchange for the flowers, offers for Leah to be with Yaakov on that night, even though it was hers. From that union, Yissachar is conceived.

There are a number of questions we have to ask on these verses. The most obvious question is how can Leah answer Rachel in this manner? Yaakov originally negotiated for Rachel, only to wake up the next morning and find Leah. Who took whose husband? Secondly, what's going on with the mandrakes? If they had the power to help a woman conceive, why did Rachel wait until she coincidentally happened upon Reuven who was taking them to his mother? Why didn't she pick them herself earlier?

We all know what happened when Yaakov expected to marry Rachel and found himself with Leah. Lavan arranged for the switch to take place, claiming that the tradition in his locale was to give the older before the younger in marriage. Rachel was very aware of what was going on, and Yaakov knew just what type of scoundrel he was dealing with. Yaakov gave Rachel certain signs through which Rachel would confirm her identity. Rachel is left with a major dilemma. If she lets the scenario play itself out, the emotional damage the situation would inflict on her sister would be horrific. If she revealed the plot publically in advance, the emotional damage would be just as bad. The only real choice she had was to set up Leah in such a way that Yaakov would not know it was her until the next morning. The only question that remains is how to give Leah the signs in such a way so she would *not* realize that she was part of this

plot?

Rachel is so successful in addressing all the issues identified above that she becomes the only person whose prayers are heard by Hashem Yisborach on behalf of our people following the destruction of the first Bais Ha'Mikdash. Her kindness is exemplary to the point that everything she did is confirmed by Hashem Yisborach as bringing the theory and practice of kindness together successfully. She is the quintessential "Ba'alat Chesed"!!

So how did Rachel navigate these challenging waters? The three simanim, signs given to her by Yaakov were the essence of what goes into building a proper Jewish home: The laws of Challah, lighting candles and Niddah. Rachel gave over to Leah the "signs" in the form of a shiur, a Torah class. She said, "Leah, you're going to marry a very holy person and you need to know how to be the head of this home". So she went through all the laws and rituals associated with the topics above, simply to prepare Leah to take on the role of being Yaakov's wife. Later that night, when Yaakov asked Leah for the signs, Leah thought he was asking to see if she's prepared for her role as his wife. Nothing more, nothing less. She had no idea what was going on.

What many people don't realize, as brought down by HaRav Shalom Schwadron, ZT'L, is why Leah spoke to Rachel this way. The fact is that Leah **never** found out what happened on or immediately before her wedding. The fact that a switch took place is a secret that **Rachel took to her grave!!** Lavan never told her because it would only confirm what a louse of a father he was. Yaakov never told her because he would not hurt Leah by revealing this to her. It was Rachel who made the greatest sacrifice by choosing to carry this entire event privately for the balance of her life. Rachel did this knowing that she would never experience a normal marital relationship with her beloved husband, and that her sholom bayis would be compromised forever. It

was one thing to not cause her sister embarrassment when the incident occurred. To protect her dignity for a lifetime, despite the abuse she takes in this pasuk (30:15), turbo charges our understanding of the kindness Rachel extended to Leah. As long as Leah was alive, she never knew a thing!! How many of us are capable of keeping something of this magnitude confidential **for a lifetime??**

Now let's understand what is going on with the mandrakes. There is a Sefer entitled "Rav Pealim" written by Rav Avrohom, the son of the Vilna Gaon. I learned this from a friend in Eretz Yisroel who mistakenly claimed it was a Zohar, when in fact, it was found in this Sefer. **Thank you to HaRav Dovid Sharaby** for locating this – you are all so blessed and fortunate to have him as your Rov and teacher!! The Sefer (Page 42) explains that these flowers had powerful curative capabilities. The reason Reuven sought them out is because they were capable of curing the "bitter eyes" of his mother, Leah. This malady was a consequence of the constant crying Leah was subjected to when she thought she would have to marry Esav. The oldest goes to the oldest in marriage, so Leah thought she was stuck with Esav, a thought that brought out her tears and the best of the prayers she could offer to Hashem Yisborach to save her. What's clear from this is that Reuven was remarkably sensitive to the pain his mother endured even before she was married and obviously prior to his birth. He devoted himself to his mother's wellbeing – both physically and emotionally, as was once again (mistakenly) demonstrated after the passing of Rachel.

These flowers also had the power to help a woman conceive, which explains Rachel's interest in them. So, as is asked above, why did she wait till now when she coincidentally sees Reuven with them rather than go out herself and pick them earlier. There was a well-established fact

associated with the mandrakes. Their curative powers were strong after they were picked – BUT – anyone who uprooted them from the ground died immediately. How did Reuven pick them? He had Yaakov's donkey out grazing that day and recognized the mandrakes. He tied one side of a rope to the mandrakes and the other side to the leg of the donkey. When the donkey walked forward, it uprooted the mandrakes – and died. Now that he had the flowers, he could bring them to his mother to help her ailing eyes. He met Rachel on the way, who is desperate to conceive. Rachel gets her mandrakes, and Leah is with Yaakov on that night.

Who is conceived that night?? None other than Yissachar, who is blessed with the words, "Yissachar chamor gorem.." (Bereshis 49:14). Yissachar is a large boned donkey meaning that he carries the weight of Torah and the scholarship associated with it with the same strength that a donkey can carry the heaviest of loads. The association with the donkey of course begins with the circumstances surrounding the conception of Yissachar, and grows into the tribe's role as Torah scholars par excel lance.

If there is one theme that runs through the concepts described above, it is human sensitivity, as exemplified by Rachel's compassion for her sister and Reuven's for his mother. We all like to think of ourselves as compassionate people, as this is part and parcel of who the Jewish people are. What we need to be sensitive to is a famous Gemara (Nedarim 64b) that expresses that there are four people who are considered dead: A poor person, a childless person, a blind person and one afflicted with tzara'as. Three of these four situations are identified over the last two weeks. Yitzchak is blind, (Bereshis 27:1). Elifaz, the son of Esav, is sent to kill Yaakov for stealing the blessings. When he catches up to Yaakov, Elifaz acknowledges his dilemma. He's been told by his father to kill Yaakov, but having grown

up on the lap of Yitzchak, he knows he cannot do this. Yaakov tells Elifaz to take everything he has, (which Elifaz does), because a poor person is considered dead, (Bereshis 29:11, Rashi). He can thereby achieve the directive of his father without taking Yaakov's life. Thirdly, when Rachel tells Yaakov to pray for her to conceive as Yitzchak prayed for Rivka, she says, "Give me children, if not, I am dead", (Bereshis 30:1).

We've all encountered people who unfortunately fall into one of these categories. Our reaction to their plight is to try to make it better, to frame their situation in words that will bring them comfort and strengthen them. It's interesting to note that the Gemara does not qualify the four people who are considered dead. They simply stand on their own. What do I mean? We encounter a person who, at one time, was a successful businessman, whose luck has changed and is now in great debt. The situation leaves him emotionally devastated, (proving that to have had and lost is harder than never having had at all). We give him what we can, which we know is not enough to address the depths of the challenges he faces. We try to make up for this by pointing out the highlights in his life. "You have a beautiful wife, and your children continue to give you loads of Yiddische Nachas." Here is where the problem lies. The four statements as they appear in the Gemara stand on their own. They are not qualified, so as to say if you have good children it's less painful to be poor or blind. The reality is that comments such as these demonstrate that we cannot relate to the essence of their pain, so we try to mitigate it by addressing something positive that has no ability to solve the problem at hand.

I met a woman this week, a real Aishes Chayil, who was visiting her children and grandchildren from up north. In the last four months, two of her three children relocated

from the northeast, one to Israel and the other to South Florida. Both moved because opportunities arose to grow from where they were previously. Before the relocation, this woman could visit her children and grandchildren anytime she wanted. Now a simple visit involved a plane trip (along with the dreaded luggage) and days away from her righteous husband. When I first saw her, I sensed that this was (and continues to be) a difficult adjustment for her. I really felt for her!! I could have said, "Everyone is doing so well. They've settled in so nicely. They're happy." What I did say was that I sensed her pain and I really felt for her.

The very thing that gives Jewish parents their greatest pleasure is the very same thing that causes them pain. We want to raise our children to be able to be self-sufficient, make an honest living, contribute to their community and most importantly, do so from a place that testifies to their dedication to Torah, Mitzvos, Ma'asim Tovim and all that those concepts stand for. When they find their place, especially when that place is a plane ride from us, the pain we feel can be remarkably depressing. Why? Because we view raising our children as a lifelong obligation, and that role includes our grandchildren!! When they move away and our presence in that picture is subsequently removed, it hurts!! So when we respond to someone going through this by verbally trying to make it better, what we're really doing is expressing how we don't understand what they're going through. That's why Chazal in so many places sing the praises of silence. There are times we can say more, much more through our eyes than we can via the spoken word. Just validating the pain they're experiencing without trying to explain it can leave them with the feeling that "he/she understands".

How would we have reacted if we were the "fly on the wall" and witnessed the interaction between Leah and Rachel? Would we have spoken up on behalf of Rachel?

Would we have encouraged her to defend herself? Rachel kept quiet. She knew Yaakov loved her more than Leah, and rather than focus on the pleasure she had, her eyes were on the pain her sister constantly experienced knowing that she was both the older sister, and the "second fiddle" in this marriage. Leah traded in her tears over Esav for the tears of living a life that never saw her husband love her the way one could have under normal circumstances. The fact that Reuven doted over her may have been some comfort, but fell short in addressing the real issues responsible for the challenges in her life, issues that when it was all said and done, went unresolved.

I encourage everyone to be kind, to be proactive in helping others when the opportunity arises. At the same time, remember that it's not about us but about them. Our words addressing our perception of what they need to hear are not near as therapeutic as us addressing **their place, their situation!!** Better to remain silent and let our eyes and a warm hug speak for us, than words that convey the message that we really don't understand what they're going through. May the zechus that comes with us being there for each other result not only in the comfort we help others achieve, but in Hashem answering our collective prayers and solving the problems Klal Yisroel faces as individuals, families and a nation.