

By Rabbi
Warren Kasztl

THE UNIQUE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF RIVKA & RACHEL

Based on the Hashkafa of HaRav Shimon Kessin, SHLIT'A

In memory of Eliyahu ben Yehuda, Dr. Elliot Hahn

There is an obvious question regarding Rivka that we need to answer in order to appreciate how Rivka became the Rivka we know. Rivka was the daughter of Besuel and the sister of Lavan, both of whom were detached from the philosophy and personality characteristics of Avrohom and Sarah. Nonetheless, the Midrash Rabba (Bereshit 60:16) informs us that when Rivka entered the tent of Yitzchok's Mother, Sarah, all the miracles associated with Sarah's home returned. The cloud hovered over Rivka's tent as it did when Sarah was alive. The blessing of the dough returned for Rivka and the flame that burned from one Friday to the next returned as well. What merit did Rivka have that allowed for the return of these three Divine miracles? Furthermore, how do we understand Rivka becoming our second Matriarch the moment she arrived and met Yitzchok? Raised in a home divorced from the values of Avrohom and Sarah, where did Rivka learn how to be an "Aim Yisroel", a Mother of Israel?

We all know that within Hashem's authorship of the Torah, there is not one extra letter or word. Without exception, every word and letter has its own meaning and understanding. How do we understand an entire verse (Bereshit 35:8) devoted to telling us about the passing of Devorah, Rivka's nurse? The Torah never mentions the death of Rivka but tells us about her nurse's passing. There are commentaries that say the pe-tira of Devorah provides a hint regarding the passing of Rivka. For me, the question looms greater. If Hashem wants us to know about the passing of Rivka, the Torah will tell us. If the Torah does not want to tell us, then the fact that Devorah's passing is mentioned must be teaching us something very significant about her as the person she was. It behooves us to learn more about Devorah, so we can understand why this verse was included while no mention is made of Rivka's passing.

Rav Yosef Soloveitchik elaborates on this thought first mentioned by Targum Yonatan ben Uziel. The Targum identifies Devorah as much more than a simple nurse. He qualifies her as a pedagogue, a teacher, a role model for Rivka. Devorah was one of the "souls" created by Avrohom and Sarah within their Kiruv movement. Devorah was a dedicated student incorporating into her own life their understanding of Hashem, their values and the lifestyle that grew out of their philosophy. Avrohom and Sarah's lives were founded on Chesed, giving to and being there for others. We learned the difference between kindness and Chesed, and the Torah provides a living example in the way Rivka treated Eliezer. Following Parashat Vayetze, we can legitimately conclude that Rivka did not learn what Chesed is from her father or brother. In fact, she learned this and much more from her nurse, her teacher, her "Rebbi", Devorah. When Rivka was born, Devorah approached her caretaker role as a Chesed opportunity reflective on how Avrohom and Sarah treated others. She knew that in Besuel's home, if she didn't teach Rivka the Derech Hashem she learned from Avrohom and

Vayishlach 5779

TORAT HAR SHMUEL

by

TASHMA

harshmuel.com

sharabymail@gmail.com

972-54-2002882

Sarah, Rivka would become nothing more than an extension of her wicked father and brother. Devorah dedicated herself tirelessly to the goal of raising Rivka as a Bat Avrohom, not a Bas Besuel. She saw in Rivka the ability and potential to grow well beyond her genealogical roots and become a true woman of valor. The reason the passing of Devorah and the mourning that accompanied her death is mentioned is because Devorah was responsible for the success Rivka enjoyed as a Mother of Israel from the moment she arrived and became Yitzchok's wife until her passing. If this verse hints at the death of Rivka, it may be because when Devorah passed away, that part of her that became Rivka was lost to our world as well. No more would that role model, that teacher with the warmth and Chesed of Avrohom and Sarah emanating from her be here to inspire others. The very fact that her passing and burial place are recorded along with what appears to be a change of name in that location tells us that Devorah's persona impacted many others in addition to Rivka. Rivka becoming an "Aim B'Yisroel" says as much about Devorah as it does about Rivka.

Let's move on to Rachel. A few years ago, I learned, in the name of Rav Sholom Schwadron how to interpret the conversation between Rachel and Leah regarding the "dudaim" that were picked by Reuven (Bereshit 30:14-16). Rachel wanted the dudaim because they were known to be an aid for a woman struggling to conceive. In response to Rachel's request, Leah says, "Is it a small thing that (first) you took my husband, and now you want to take the dudaim of my son"? Leah appears to be expressing herself in a less than cordial manner. Who was the primary wife of Yaakov? Of course, it was Rachel. So, how do we understand Leah's statement in response to Rachel's request? Many understand the chesed Rachel extended to Leah regarding the marriage switch in a very near-sighted manner. What this verse proves is something incredible. Leah never knew that years earlier, a switch took place. All along, she was led to believe that as the older sister, she was meant to marry Yaakov. Her tears and prayers were heard by Hashem Yisborach, and rather than having to marry Esav, Yaakov becomes her destiny. **Rachel took the secret of the switch to her grave!!** Therefore, how do we understand the way Rachel gave the three "simanim", signs to Leah? Those 3 secretive signs, given by Yaakov to Rachel so she could confirm on their wedding night

that it was her were the laws of hadlakat nerot, Shabbat candles, hafrashat challah, separating challah from the dough and the laws of family purity, taharat ha'mishpacha. Rachel gave these to Leah in the form of a class, a shiur. She advised her sister that she was about to marry a man from a unique home with a very special connection to Hashem Yisborach. Part of maintaining the spiritual integrity of that home was to be proficient in the observance of these laws. So, when Yaakov questioned Leah regarding the "signs", Leah thought he was asking if she was prepared to run their home in the same manner that Rivka and Sarah ran theirs. Yaakov thought it was Rachel confirming her identity.

We must look at "the morning after" from three perspectives: Rachel, Yaakov and Lavan. Rachel distinguished herself in a manner whereby it is her and only her that maintains a special bond with Yaakov's descendants when they go to Bavel following the destruction of the Bayit Rishon. "Rachel m'vaka al boneha" – Rachel cries for her children, and it is her voice that Hashem hears and responds to. The nature of that response will be addressed. Yaakov would never embarrass Leah by confronting her. Following his conversation with Lavan, he realized Leah was the innocent victim within this entire scenario. Lavan himself never said a word, which indicates two things. In his inner heart, Lavan knew that what he did was reprehensible. The way those twenty years Yaakov spent with Lavan unfolds also indicates that the communication between Lavan and his two daughters amounted to nothing. Lavan had no desire to answer for the situation he precipitated, so he left it alone.

As a side note, there is an interesting Zohar regarding the dudaim. Indeed, any woman that possessed them had a powerful fertility potion in their possession. The problem was that whoever pulled the living plant out of the ground died immediately. How did Reuven get the dudaim out of the ground? He tied one side of a rope to the plant and the other side to the leg of a donkey. He smacked the donkey; the donkey ran pulling the plant out of the ground and dropped dead immediately. Reuven then had the dudaim minus his donkey. In exchange for the dudaim, Rachel gave her night with Yaakov to Leah. It was on that night that Yissachar, whose children became gi-

ants in Torah learning, was conceived. What is the blessing Yaakov gives to Yissachar prior to his passing? He is a “strong-boned donkey” reflecting on the donkey that died, resulting in the night of his conception and referring to his unparalleled strength in the arena of Torah scholarship.

What we need to understand is the merit Rachel provides for Bnai Yisroel as they leave Eretz Yisroel for the first time, headed off to Bavel as prisoners of war. The construct that makes up our national identity is composed of three elements forming one unbreakable triangle. Growing from seven Mitzvos given to mankind, to a nation with six-hundred-thirteen Mitzvos in the Torah gives life to the guarantee upon which world transformation is founded. Secondly is the land of Israel. To us, Israel is not a piece of real estate as France is to the French. It is a land with which we have a dynamic, organic relationship. If we are steadfast in Torah observance, the spirit Hashem infuses in the land will protect and nurture us physically and more importantly, spiritually. Once mankind morphed from one entity into “Yisroel v’Umos HaOlom” the location from which world transformation can begin changed from anywhere in the world to Eretz Yisroel exclusively. When our Kedusha does not parallel the Kedusha of the land, the land will “vomit us out”. The land itself cannot tolerate us in a form that falls beneath a minimum spiritual standard. The third element that completes this organismic relationship is us as a people, a nation tied to our Patriarchs, Matriarchs and the Messorah. These three elements make up the body, the organism we call Knesset Yisroel, and are all integral to our survival. What is unique about this triangle is that for Knesset Yisroel to endure, all three elements – the nation, the land and our Torah – are required to exist together.

The question is obvious! Following the destruction of the first Bais HaMikdash, nothing remained, and we were carted off to Babylonia. How were we able to survive outside the land? Leaving our Holy Land was the equivalent of literally losing our heads. How does a decapitated person continue to live?! Here is where Rochel our Mother enters the picture. Rov Kessin explains the merit that Rachel provided enabled them to leave their homeland, not just live in Babylonia but thrive there in developing Talmud Bavli and return to their Holy Land seventy years later. We need to understand the inherent nature of Rachel,

who she was, and why she was buried in Bait Lechem rather than in Chevron with the rest of the family. The power of her character, her persona achieves something that is unique to her.

In the sefer, Netzach Yisroel by the Maharal, at the end of the first chapter, he speaks of Rachel and her burial place. We need to view the chiddush not in where she’s buried, but where she is *not* buried, that being Chevron. Bait Lechem is viewed as the doorway to golus following the Churban Bayit Rishon. Because of the kindness extended by Rachel to Leah, Hashem promises that when her children, Bnai Yisroel go into golus, He will hear her cry exclusively and return our nation to its rightful borders. As expressed above regarding the dudaim, Leah accuses Rachel of first taking her husband, and now she wants her son’s flowers. This makes it apparent to all that Leah never knew a switch was on. Let’s examine the psychology of family communication for a moment. Siblings tend to talk freely and honestly with each other. They generally do not hold back their feelings, especially when they are being wrongly accused. There is no question that within this exchange, Rachel is right, and Leah is in the wrong. Rather than Rachel viewing herself as wronged and offended, she gave priority to Leah’s feeling as the innocent victim, the person that had been wrongly manipulated and then kept in the dark. This exchange with the dudaim took place many years after her marriage occurred. By that time, one would think that the sensitivities associated with the entire fiasco would have dissipated. Nonetheless, Rachel treated her sister with the same sensitivity as should have immediately after Leah’s wedding. Keeping the family together in peace, stability and tranquility was always the sole and exclusive priority in Rachel’s mind and heart.

Midrash Bereshit Rabba identifies Rachel as the “Akeret HaBayit”. As per the Netzach Yisroel, the primary role of anyone blessed with this accolade, this title is one who “brings together and unifies her home”. Without unity, there is no shalom. In theory, we give these values their place of importance. How many define these values in the moment when they are challenged the way Rachel was. Hashem views what Rachel did for her sister, Leah, with such esteem that it is Rachel alone who can save Bnai Yisroel as they leave Eretz HaKadosha for Babylonia. Her burial

in Bait Lechem serves a far greater purpose than providing the future generations with a place to pray. To quote the Netzach Yisroel, "Through the merit of Rachel – having the strength to unify Israel – while in golus, because of her strength of unity, Israel will return from its golus".

It's interesting to note that we don't hear of fighting or conflict while we were in Babylonia. To the contrary, some of the greatest heights in Torah learning were achieved there, specifically the development of what becomes the Babylonian Talmud. Our nation, as the third arm of the triangle described appears to thrive in this foreign land. How can that be? The reason, as per Rov Kessin and proven by the Netzach Yisroel, is specifically because of Rachel's ability to keep the family unified. In that merit, our people may have left the land, but with Rachel watching over them from afar, her presence in Bait Lechem, her eyes on our people are as if she keeps them tied into Eretz Yisroel. Because of the unity Rachel precipitates, because of her love for the family beginning with her sister and continuing for hundreds of years, our people may be in Babylonia, but the nation as a concept and a practical reality remained in our Holy Land via Rachel. She was the conduit, "holding our place in line" while we were away. We may have been in Babylonia, but with our real-time connection to Mother Rachel, we were still connected to our Holy Land. As people, we may have left the land, but Rachel keeps our nation there.

To fully appreciate Rachel, we need to understand the concept of "heroics". Last week, Stan Lee passed away at the age of 95. Going back to the mid-1900s, he was the author-creator of super-heroes such as Spiderman, Superman and the like. He established his reputation in the comic book industry and made a fortune as these super-heroes came to life on the movie screen. As successful as Stan Lee was, our concept of what designates a person a "hero" comes with remarkably different criteria. First, and most obviously, our concept of a hero is a normal person finding the courage to reach unanticipated heights when a situa-

tion calls upon him/her to go beyond the norm to solve a crisis. As a simple man in chutz l'Aretz, I recognize that every man and woman in the IDF – religious or not yet religious – fits the definition of a hero. Normal people dedicated to a cause and conducting their lives in a super-normal manner. There is another important factor that is part of a hero's makeup. If we look at Avrohom and Yitzchok during the Akeyda, Yaakov wrestling with the angel, Yosef being seduced by the wife of Potiphar, all these events, together with Rachel's situation and relationship with Leah, have one critical, heroic factor in common: They all took place in the private domain. There were no audiences to cheer them on, no fanfare, trophies or hand shaking when their tests were completed. They approached the moment alone and left that moment in solitude. Pirke Avot identifies conquering one's evil inclination as heroic because it is a private battle fought within the confines of one's mind. Rachel carried Leah's secret her entire life, making sure to protect Leah's dignity, her self-image even at the cost of suffering personal humiliation. For the sake of Achdut in her present and our future, she gave up her burial place beside Yaakov and situated herself – for the family – in Bait Lechem. Everything was done quietly, privately and for all the right reasons.

There is a place in all of us where the courage to be a hero is found. What's important to note is that Hashem is not asking us to be Avrohom, Yitzchok, Yaakov, Rachel or Yosef. All He wants is for us to be the best possible version of ourselves. Chances are that those moments will not involve doing something that appears on the evening news. They will be important, meaningful and probably on the quiet side. Nonetheless, in the Eyes of Hashem, Avinu She'baShamayim, they may carry much more weight and meaningfulness than we realize. Be all **you** can be, slow and steady, one day at a time. Your heroics will define their place in the unified heroics that defines Knesset Yisroel.