

Managing disappointment is a preeminent theme in this week's *parsha Vayitzei*. Two of the protagonists in the narrative experience disappointment of some kind. Their response to disappointment is instructive.

Up to this point, the book of Genesis has concentrated on sibling rivalry but only of the fraternal variety. Abel and Cain; Ishmael and Isaac; and Jacob and Esau all experienced poor relations. That one of the opening incidents of Genesis is an act of fratricide, murdering one's brother, is no mistake. Relations between siblings can be especially fraught. That theme will continue until the

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end of Genesis as we will see in upcoming chapters about Joseph and his brothers.

This *parsha* is the first time that we see sibling rivalry between two sisters. That rivalry plays some role in the disappointments each faces, a point I will return to later, but the disappointments also have their own particular quality independent of how they relate to the situation of the other sibling.

Leah's disappointment revolves around the lack of love her husband has for her, and Rachel's disappointment is that she is unable to have a child. Let's examine Leah first. She and her husband Jacob have relations, and they have a child. Leah names

him Reuben which means, “Now my husband will love me” (29:32). The Torah teaches that she conceived again and named him Simeon, which means “the Lord heard that I was unloved and has given me this one also” (v. 33). She conceives a third time and bears Levi, saying “This time my husband will become attached to me” (v. 34).

Each time Leah gives birth, she hopes that the love that she hasn't received from Jacob will appear with the birth of the son. In each of the cases, it does not. In short, Leah's disappointment is sustained. No matter how she thinks circumstances will change,

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and she will attain what she truly yearns for –  
Jacob’s love –, they don’t.

We all find ourselves in circumstances that disappoint us, and we respond in a variety of ways. Sometimes, we wish. We tell ourselves a story that if only one factor changes – how we don’t know – then our disappointment will end, and we will gain contentment. Sometimes, we submit to despair and allow our disappointment to consume all that comprises our lives. Sometimes, we come to terms with it and say, “This is how it is.”

Leah, however, shows us another way forward. Upon the conception and birth of her fourth child,

she responds differently. She names him Judah, saying “This time I will praise the Lord” (v. 35). The shift is dramatic and unforeseen. In the midst of disappointment, Leah finds the ability to praise God. From her we learn the Jewish way to manage disappointment. Not for nothing is the son connected to this name Judah. Judah is the predominant tribe that remains of the twelve tribes of Israel. From Judah, we get the name Judeans and eventually Judeans becomes Jews. Jewish living is encapsulated by Leah and her response to disappointment. In spite of disappointment, we seek to praise God. This is the underpinning of hope.

The Jewish people has many blessings, but it also faces serious difficulties. Report after report indicates rising antisemitism in the Diaspora, and almost weekly, we read of rocket fire emanating from Gaza into Southern Israel. How does the Jewish people manage its disappointment in the midst of these afflictions? In spite of them, we seek to praise God, or at least live a life that is praiseworthy.

Leah's sister, Rachel, also has disappointment in her life. The lives of the two sisters are mirror images. What Leah has, Rachel lacks, and what Leah lacks, Rachel has. Rachel's response to the

disappointment of being barren, however, differs from Leah. The Torah states, “When Rachel saw that she had borne Jacob no children, she became envious of her sister” (30:1). She submits to envy rather than striving for praise. My point is not to judge Rachel. The pain of the barren woman is a serious matter, but the Torah has already shown us the danger of jealousy between siblings. Cain’s distress over the favor that Abel won from God for his offering led to murder.

What is remarkable in the relations between Leah and Rachel is how, in spite of Rachel’s jealousy, she is able to maintain a relationship with

her sister. To be sure, a competition ensues with each offering their handmaid to Jacob so that he may have children through them. The competition remains, however, within bounds. Neither tries to outright prevent the other from being intimate with Jacob. Rachel even creates a situation in which Leah may lay with Jacob after a period of distance between the two. Perhaps because in spite of her jealousy, she kept cordial relations with her sister, God rewarded her because soon after Leah and Jacob are intimate again, Rachel gives birth to Joseph.

In a sense, the Torah forbids jealousy. One of the *aserot hadibrot* instructs us not to covet what our neighbor possesses. Nevertheless, jealousy is so deeply human that it cannot be completely forbidden without eradicating human nature altogether. While Rachel's manner of responding to disappointment is not as graceful as her sister Leah's, she keeps her jealousy from festering and becoming a source of strife. We will see soon enough how jealousy among Jacob's sons leads to the selling of one into slavery.

Sibling rivalry is a hackneyed phrase, but it is also quite real. When you grow up in the same home as someone, you have ample opportunity to observe

them – the traits they possess, the objects that belong to them. The Torah surprisingly does not command us to love our brother or sister. Nonetheless, loving one’s brother or sister falls under the rubric of honoring one’s parents. One cannot say for certain how Leah and Rachel were able to manage their sibling rivalry so much more effectively than their sons.

In fact, as the *parsha* progresses, Leah and Rachel become more unified. The Torah states that when Jacob was planning on escaping and returning to the land of Canaan, he had “Rachel and Leah called to the field” (31:4). When Jacob tells them of

his plan to leave, they respond in unison, “Have we still a share in the inheritance of our father’s house?...Now then do just as God has told you” (vv. 14-16).

One could say that, of course, the two would be reconciled. After all, Rachel’s cause for disappointment – her barrenness – was resolved with the birth of Joseph. Never, however, do we see evidence in the Torah that Jacob loved Leah. Despite her longing to be loved by her husband, she lived her life without it. Leah comes across as the true hero of the *parsha*. She moves through her disappointment to offer praise to God. That praise does not eliminate

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the disappointment. The disappointment remains, but she refuses to let it define her.

Each of us kind find areas of our lives that are sources of disappointment. We can wish these areas away, concede to them their power, allow them to consume us, or move through them to a sense of gratitude and praise. This is the example that Leah models for us, and we would be wise to pay it heed.