Who Sets the Price of Life? Vayyetze 5787

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Parashat Vayyetze begins with God making a promise to our ancestors: “Your descendants shall be like the dust of the earth” (Genesis 28:14). This promise will be fulfilled through women whose bodies are compared with one another, negotiated over, and taken for granted. Is the God-given nature of the promise sufficient grounds to legitimize what our matriarchs underwent?

Genesis 29:17 describes Rachel as beautiful and Leah being marked by eyes that are “רַכּוֹת” (*rakkot*—an ambiguous term we will try to translate soon). The medieval French commentator Rashi (c. 1028–1105) explains that Leah’s eyes were ‘weeping’ because she feared becoming married to Esau. The Spanish-born Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra (c. 1089–1169) prefers to translate *rakkot* as “weak,” and he reproaches puzzled readers for assuming that all creatures should have the same form. Whereas Rashi gives Leah’s distinctive feature a history, ibn Ezra does not demand that Leah’s eyes be justified with a backstory. Should she have to explain her body in order to be accepted? In his article “Disability, Desirability and Leah's Eyes in Genesis 29,” Dr. William Bowes shows how the narrative associates lesser desirability with presumed impairment. Even if her eyes limited certain activities, no limitation would justify assigning her lesser worth.

God, according to Genesis 29:31, ‘opened’ Leah’s womb after seeing she was unloved; meanwhile, Rachel remained childless. Leah bears children without gaining love; Rachel is loved but cannot bear children. The ancient rabbinic anthology Bereshit Rabbah 71:2 interprets Psalm

145:14's testimony that God "supports all who fall" as referring to childless women who are raised up through motherhood. This *midrash* acknowledges their suffering but makes their restoration dependent upon a change in their reproductive condition. The *midrash* further relates that Jacob considered divorcing Leah but abandoned the idea when he saw her children; her fertility alone let her remain part of the household. The experiences of infertility and disability are not interchangeable; certain bodily norms can nevertheless produce comparable forms of disqualification.

Yet this same *midrash* declares:

רָחֵל הָיְתָה עִקָּרוֹ שֶׁל בַּיִת.

Rachel was the foundation of the household.

Genesis 29:31 called Leah עֲקָרָה (*akarah*, "childless"); our *midrash* plays with the sounds of this Hebrew word and, referring to the household, labels Rachel עִקָּרוֹ (*ikkaro*, "its foundation"). In showing how the traits of these women were ultimately spelled nearly identically, the *midrash* refutes: motherhood cannot be the sole condition of any woman's worth.

But what if Rachel had not been indispensable? Would she have had any right to belong?

Rachel, in Genesis 30:1, demands of Jacob, "Give me sons, or I shall die!" In the next verse, he rhetorically asks, "Am I instead of God?" Bereshit Rabbah 71:7 imagines a divine rebuke: "Is this how one answers those who are suffering?" The Spanish commentator

Nachmanides (1194–1270) depicts Jacob intending first to humiliate Rachel, then to defend his anger. It is not within Jacob's power to give her a child—nor is it his responsibility to humiliate a suffering woman. He could have acknowledged Rachel's suffering without turning her infertility into grounds for reproach. The limits of his power are not the limits of his responsibility.

The promise made to Jacob does not erase an ethical mandate. No one should have to prove their usefulness in order to belong, and no one should have to live at a price set by others. To witness the world through eyes that are *rakkot* should only ever be the first, and not the last, step of joining a world that welcomes all bodies.

This week's Torah commentary, like all commentaries on the Book of Genesis in this Jewish year, has been dedicated by Barbara and Art Hoffman to the memory of Carolyn J. Hoffman.