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חירות ואחריות

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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

DRINKING EYES AND KISSING EWES

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*When Yaakov saw Rachel, daughter of Lavan, brother of his mother,
and the flock of Lavan, brother of his mother,
Yaakov approached
He rolled/revealed/rejoiced the stone off the mouth of the well
He kissed the flock of Lavan, brother of his mother
Yaakov gave Rachel a drink . . .*

Nechamah Leibowitz z"l used to joke that every Yeshiva student knew ten explanations for how Yaakov could kiss Rachel, but not that an explicit verse in the Torah forbids lying. Now we can (tongue in cheek) suggest an eleventh explanation. Yaakov did not actually kiss Rachel; he merely gave her a drink, albeit after drinking in her appearance. What he kissed were Lavan's sheep. The mistake arose because the Torah here uses verbs with identical letters – vav, yud, shin, qof - to mean "kiss" and "give drink to".

But our confusion about Yaakov's actions seems to mirror Yaakov's own confusion in the text. Both Rachel and the flocks belong to "Lavan, brother of his mother", and he notices them both before deciding which to water and which to kiss. Furthermore, is Rachel a name, or rather a common noun? If the latter, it means "ewe", so Yaakov was kissing sheep either way?

Now we might say that Rachel must be human because she is the daughter of Lavan, who is human. But later in the parshah, Lavan removes from Yaakov's flock all the speckled and brown sheep, so that Yaakov remains with the flock of leftovers that are Lavan, or white.

Lavan removes the speckled and brown sheep because he has agreed that Yaakov's salary for shepherding will be all the speckled and brown lambs born that year. But his original offer to Yaakov in Hebrew is "NKBH

your salary on me, and I will give it". The standard commentators translate NKBH as "make clear" or "cut" (meaning give a fixed value to). The Zohar, however, notices that NKBH can also spell nekeivah, female. Lavan expects Yaakov to again ask for a woman as recompense for his work, just as he had worked seven or fourteen years for Rachel. He is taken aback when Yaakov asks for actual sheep.

Asking for sheep rather than women reflects a new maturity in Yaakov. The Torah explains clearly what causes this development: Yaakov thinks of leaving Lavan only after Yosef is born. The birth of Yosef enables Yaakov to recognize Rachel as a person, rather than as the best-looking of Lavan's flock.

This new recognition makes him feel the need to have his own flock, and not depend on Lavan, in part because he realizes – perhaps for the first time – that he would like to grow old together with Rachel rather than replace her if she ages poorly.

Rachel was fully aware of Yaakov's attitude. Perhaps she was present when Yaakov, after completing his first seven years of labor, came to Lavan and said: "Hubba my wife, and I will have sex with her" (29:21). His failure to mention Rachel by name may have given Lavan the idea of substituting Leah, and In Chazal's understanding of the narrative, may have induced Rachel to cooperate with the switch. In any case, Rachel throws Yaakov's words back in his teeth when she says "Hubba sons to me, and if not, I am dead/will die". She is correct that only bearing his child will make her fully alive to Yaakov. But her words become bitterly ironic in retrospect when she dies in childbirth.

The late medieval commentator R. Isaac Arama, in his Aqedat Yitzchak, points out that Yaakov never accepts

a traditional salary from Lavan; he works either for Rachel or for his own flock. R. Arama suggests that Yaakov and Lavan were engaged in a complex social negotiation from the very beginning. Lavan's seemingly generous offers (29:15 and 30:20) to let Yaakov set his own salary are actually attempts to subordinate him, to convert him from an honored guest into a contract laborer. By demanding first Lavan's Rachel, and then a share of the flock, Yaakov constructs modes of compensation that he believes will generate rather than diminish social equality. The success of his last mode is captured by Lavan's sons declaration (31:1) that "it is from that which is our father's that he has achieved all this *kavod*/dignity." Yaakov's possessions are for the first time not seen as part of Lavan's family fortune. Having his own sheep gives him enormous dignity.

What about his first mode? A difference between people and sheep is that Rachel and Leah do not stop being Lavan's daughters just because they marry Yaakov. Truth be told, it is not clear that Lavan's sheep would ever fully cease being his if they were given to Yaakov as salary. Maybe Yaakov insists on his novel compensation regimen because it is only the next generation of lambs, who have known no previous owner, that can truly be his. By the same token, it is only the birth of Yosef to Rachel that makes him think of breaking free of Lavan.

Breaking free of Lavan is not easy. On the one hand, Yaakov makes an enormous step forward by speaking to Rachel and Leah together about his plans, and at least as importantly, they respond together. This might mean that Yaakov now sees Leah and Rachel each individually as full human partners. The problem with this theory is that he calls them (31:4) *toward the field, to his flock*. Yet that he calls them at all suggests a profound progression in the relationships.

When Yaakov speaks to them, moreover, he makes himself incredibly vulnerable by sharing with them his experience of G-d. Rachel and Leah might have responded mockingly. Perhaps worse, they might have responded separately and contradictorily, thus forcing him to choose between them. Instead, Rachel and Leah respond in the best way possible. They utterly sever their connection with Lavan, thus giving Yaakov the dignity of his own family. They affirm and support the normative implications of his religious experience. "*All the wealth which G-d saved from our father is ours and our sons. Now -everything which G-d said to you, do!*"

The result of this harmony is that Rachel and Yaakov now seem to be in tune. While Lavan is off shearing his flock, Rachel steals his *terafim*, and Yaakov steals his heart (31:19-20). Perhaps Rachel's action is inspired by Yaakov's newfound religious confidence in her. It is also possible that Rachel liked going to extremes.

But Yaakov and Rachel don't really know each other. He does not realize that Rachel has stolen the *terafim*, and so he affirms that whoever has done so will die - perhaps his words contribute to her early death. Moreover, Yaakov's dialogue with Lavan is all about who the women belong to, not about what they want or whom they feel loyalty to. The profound respect he showed in his conversation with them seems to melt in the heat of disputational polemics.

In the end, fervor is no substitute for depth of understanding and sustained commitment.