

The Lost Matriarch: Supplement I

Midrash on the Death of Rachel

And they journeyed from Bethel; and there was but a little way to come to Ephrath; and Rachel labored with child, and she had difficult labor. And it came to pass, when she was in difficult labor, that the midwife said to her, Fear not; you shall have this son also. And it came to pass, as her soul was departing, for she died, that she called his name Benoni; but his father called him Benjamin. And Rachel died, and was buried in the way to Ephrath, which is Beth-Lehem. And Jacob set a pillar upon her grave; that is the pillar of Rachel's grave to this day. (Gen. 35:16-20)

Why Did Rachel Die Prematurely

The tragic story of Dinah, Leah's last child, is soon followed by the tragic story of the birth of Rachel's last child, Benjamin. But the tragedy in the story of Dinah is a personal disaster for Dinah that escalates into a public disaster of national slaughter. The effect upon her mother, Leah, is never mentioned. In contrast, the story of Benjamin's birth is not really about him, but is essentially the story of the death of his mother, Rachel.

Under the classical midrashic presumption that God's justice is expressed in history, the Rabbis respond to Rachel's premature death by seeking explanations. The commentators need to find previous acts to blame.

The Primary Explanations for Rachel's Death

Jacob's Curse

Midrash targets two primary events as likely causes of Rachel's death. The first was when Jacob cursed with death whoever had stolen Laban's *teraphim*, unaware that it was Rachel who had taken them. (Gen.31:32)¹ Because of Jacob's righteousness, even this unintentional curse had power and effect (just as Isaac's unintended blessing of Jacob had irrevocable effect).

The Rabbis also note another aspect of the *terephim* incident that may have contributed to Rachel's death. Rachel stopped Laban from finding the stolen *teraphim* by sitting on them and telling him that "the custom of women is upon me." (Gen. 31:35) This claim of menstruation was false (midrash calculates that Rachel was already pregnant with Benjamin when she left Haran), so Rachel's deception of her father could be another sin that is punished when she dies.² It is ironic that Rachel's death gives truth to her lie: she will die while engaged in another "custom of women"—giving birth.

Rachel's Words

The second event commonly blamed for Rachel's death was what Rachel said as a barren woman pining to give birth. Initially she had demanded to Jacob, "Give me children, or else I die." (Gen. 30:1) The Rabbis deem this a sin, since Rachel should have relied upon God to come to her aid rather than demanding children from Jacob with the threat that she would die if he did not provide them. The measure-for-measure punishment for her words takes effect in a stroke of ironic divine justice at Benjamin's birth. Rachel gets her wish ("children"—that is, more than one child), but she also dies to accomplish this.

Other Explanations for Rachel's Death

Rachel's Answer in the Field

Midrash also finds an alternative instance of Rachel's improper speech in the episode when Jacob consulted with Rachel and Leah in the field about fleeing from Laban. Although Leah was the older sister and the first wife, Rachel answered first.³ (Gen. 31:14) For modern readers, this may seem far too small a fault to lead to death, but some Rabbis see a repeat of the usurpation of an older sibling's entitlements by a younger sibling and the consequences that result—the central theme that has dominated Jacob's life since the womb.

Solving the Illegality of Rachel's Marriage

In a way, Rachel's death is very convenient for the Rabbis. They believe that the Patriarchs were prophetic and righteous men who studied and observed the basic laws of God's eternal Torah even though the Torah would not be given to the Israelites until the time of Moses. Therefore, Jacob's concurrent marriages to two sisters would be in contravention of the Torah's express prohibition of that practice (Lev 18:18), and would present a very serious problem for Jacob's presumed piety. The Rabbis' solution is to note the specific location of Rachel's death as stated in the text—on the road to Bethlehem. They take this to be near the border of the Holy Land. Thus, up to this point in the story Jacob could be excused for having marital intercourse with the two sisters in Haran, because the Patriarchs were not obligated to observe all the Torah law outside of the Holy Land (although Jacob is credited with having gone beyond his obligations in order to observe most of the Torah laws even while living in Haran).⁴ And since Rachel was about to give birth to Benjamin when they entered the Holy Land, and died near the border, the Rabbis can presume that Jacob did not sleep with her in the Holy Land, and so did not technically violate the proscription against marrying sisters.⁵ In a sense, this midrashic analysis does not blame any of the characters for Rachel's early death. Rachel died as a necessary sacrifice to uphold the ritual purity of Jacob and the nation of Israel that descends from him.

Jacob's Delay in Tithing

Other midrash assigns additional blame for Rachel's death to Jacob. Following a standard midrashic tool of analysis, the Rabbis note that Rachel's death comes immediately after Jacob returns from revisiting Bethel because God had directed him to set up an altar in thanks for his return from Haran. (Gen. 35:1) God appears to accept this belated expression of gratitude, and promises that Jacob and his descendants will inherit the land promised to Abraham and Isaac (Gen. 35:12). However, Midrash concludes that Jacob was wrong in not having gone to Bethel to offer thanks to God immediately after parting from Esau. (Instead, Jacob went to Succoth and then to Shechem, suffering the consequences told in the Dinah story, before God had to remind him of his vow to return to Bethel.)⁶ Here was another shortcoming of Jacob.

Many years later on his own deathbed, Jacob will interrupt his burial requests to Joseph by referring to Rachel's death and burial. (Gen. 48:7) The contemporary commentator Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg suggests that Jacob's introductory words describing Rachel's death in terms of his own life ("And as for me ...") show that Jacob still felt guilt for Rachel's death, because either his inadvertent curse or his delay in going to Bethel had caused her death.⁷

Why Did Jacob Bury Rachel On the Road to Bethlehem?

Jacob buries Rachel where she died, on the road to Bethlehem. (Gen. 35:19) This calls for elaboration, since the burial places of the Patriarchs and the Matriarchs are an important concern in Genesis ever since Abraham bargained for the purchase of the cave at Machpelah as a family tomb. (Gen. 23:3-20) The question posed by the text is not only why Jacob did not bury Rachel in Machpelah, but why he didn't even bury her in near-by Bethel.*

The Rabbis' standard explanation for why Jacob buried Rachel on the road turns to an important verse later in the Bible. Jeremiah began his prophetic career around 627 BCE, warning about the approaching destruction of Jerusalem and the First Temple and Nebuchadnezzar's exile of the people to Babylonia, but offering consolation. God has promised to protect and return to the Land the exiled remnants of both the Ten Tribes of the Northern Kingdom and the tribes of Judah and Benjamin of the Southern Kingdom. A key image of this prophesy of consolation was the depiction of Rachel at her tomb, crying for the people passing by on their way to exile:

** Nachmanides revised his initial commentary on this point after he left Spain and came to the Holy Land, when he saw that Rachel's tomb is less than a mile from Bethlehem. (Nachmanides [Ramban], Commentary on the Torah, 427) Based upon viewing the location, he concludes that Jacob had prophetic knowledge that Bethlehem would be in the territory allocated to the tribe of Judah (Leah's son), and therefore instead buried Rachel on the road, within the border of the territory that would be allocated to the tribe of Benjamin (Rachel's son). (Nachmanides [Ramban], Commentary on the Torah, 428) Thus, for the Ramban, the Leah-Rachel rivalry continues even after Rachel's death.*

Thus says the Lord; A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping; Rachel weeping for her children refused to be comforted for her children, because they were not. Thus says the Lord; Refrain your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for your work shall be rewarded, says the Lord; and they shall come again from the land of the enemy. And there is hope for your future, says the Lord, that your children shall come again to their own border. (Jer. 31:14-16)

Under the Rabbis' view of God's involvement in human affairs, there are no accidents in history. If Jeremiah tells how Rachel's tears over the people's exile moved God to promise the hope of return, then Jacob's prophetic powers would have revealed that earlier. It therefore follows that Jacob buried Rachel on the road to Bethlehem so that she would be in the proper location to plead the exiles' cause when they passed by. In order to achieve this, Rachel had to forfeit being buried in Machpelah (further south, away from the route of the exiles).⁸

Although Leah is not mentioned in the Bible's story of Rachel's death, she becomes a central character in the Rabbis' discussion of Rachel's burial place. In order to explain why intercession by Rachel was required to move God to mercy, the Rabbis rely upon the midrashic stories for a previous episode—Leah's wedding night, when Rachel gave her sister the secret identification signs for Jacob in order to save Leah from humiliation. This wedding night sacrifice earned Rachel such merit that her later pleas on behalf of the exiles were effective even when none of the spirits of the other Matriarchs, Patriarchs, or great leaders could change God's judgment. Only Rachel could confront God and point out that she'd had so much compassion for Leah that she gave her the secret signs even though that would enable Leah to become Jacob's first wife. If compassion moved Rachel, a mere human being, to perform such a selfless act, God should likewise show compassion for the children of Israel even though they had lapsed into grievous sin (idol worship) justifying their exile.⁹

Alternative commentaries utilize other aspects of the rivalry between Leah and Rachel as the basis of other explanations for Rachel's burial place. When the sisters bargained over the mandrakes, Rachel's willingness to trade away the ability to spend the night with Jacob (and the possibility of bearing him a child from that night) was seen by some commentators as such a grave sin that it brought about Rachel's loss of her place in Machpelah. Since Rachel didn't sufficiently value her opportunity to sleep next to Jacob that night, she lost the opportunity to sleep next to him in Machpelah for eternity.¹⁰

Another explanation is that since Leah married Jacob first, she was his only fully legitimate wife, and therefore the only one who could be buried with the family in Machpelah.¹¹ And this was not only a loss for Rachel. According to Midrash, Jacob so loved Rachel that his prophetic knowledge that they were not destined to be together side-by-side for eternity was one of the reasons he wept when he first met and kissed her at the well in Haran.¹² And the Bible later shows that Jacob still regretted Rachel's burial place even at the end of his life when he was arranging for his own burial in Machpelah. (Gen. 48:7)¹³

Notes to Supplement I

- ¹ Jacob's curse caused Rachel's death: Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 3a, 190; R. E. Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah*, 119.
- ² Rachel's lie to Laban caused her death: R. E. Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah*, 119.
- ³ Rachel answering first in the field caused her death: Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 3a, 190.
- ⁴ Although Jacob observed many of the Torah laws, some were not obligatory outside of the Holy Land: Rashi, *Commentaries*, v. 1, 360, n. 5; Ronson, *Women of the Torah*, 160 [citing Ramban]; Tuchman, *Passions of the Matriarchs*, 316.
- ⁵ Rachel died at the border because Jacob could not be married to two sisters in the Holy Land: Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 3a, 195-6.
- ⁶ Rachel's death (and Dinah's episode) caused by Jacob's delay in tithing: *Hachut Hameshulash* 673 [citing Kimchi].
- ⁷ Jacob felt lifetime guilt for causing Rachel's death: Zornberg, *Beginning of Desire*, 374.
- ⁸ Rachel had to be buried on the road to Bethlehem in order to be on the path of the exiles: Bialik, *Book of Legends*, 50; Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 3a, 197; *Midrash Rabbah*, Gen. 82.10; Rashi, *Commentaries*, v. 1, 528, n. 7; Ronson, *Women of the Torah*, 161.
- ⁹ Rachel could win God's compassion because of her compassion for Leah on the wedding night: Zornberg, *Beginning of Desire*, 375-6 [citing the Maharal].
- ¹⁰ Rachel forfeited Machpelah in the mandrakes bargain: *Midrash Rabbah*, Gen. 72.3; Rashi, *Commentaries*, v. 1, 332, n. 15.
- ¹¹ Rachel forfeited Machpelah because Jacob married Leah first: Ronson, *Women of the Torah*, 160.
- ¹² Jacob cried at the well because Rachel would not be buried with him in Machpelah: *Midrash Rabbah*, Gen. 52.12; Rashi, *Commentaries*, v. 1, 320, n. 11; Zornberg, *Beginning of Desire*, 213.
- ¹³ Jacob regretted Rachel's burial place even at the end of his life: Zornberg, *Beginning of Desire*, 374.