

# The Lost Matriarch: Supplement J

---

## Midrash on the Leah-Rachel Rivalry Continuing With Joseph and His Brothers

Rachel's death is recorded in Chapter 35 of Genesis. However, her death doesn't mark the end of her rivalry with her sister, Leah. That conflict continues to be waged by proxy throughout the rest of the book of Genesis, ending with the concluding Chapter 50. Rachel is represented by her son Joseph, the final hero of Genesis, whose story recounts his struggles against Leah's sons and the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah.

### Joseph and His Brothers in the Bible

Joseph's story is one of the most familiar tales in the Bible. Anyone who has ever attended Sunday School remembers how the narrative starts with the brothers' jealousy over Joseph's grandiose dreams, fancy mannerisms, and tale-bearing, as well as the brothers' anger when Jacob reveals his favoritism towards Joseph through the gift of the many-colored coat. His brothers narrowly stop short of killing young Joseph, and instead sell him into slavery. Joseph is taken to Egypt where he becomes a slave in Potiphor's house. Joseph resists the advances of Potiphor's wife, but upon her false accusations he's thrown into prison. There he impresses a servant of the Pharaoh with his ability to interpret dreams. His skills are remembered later when no one else can interpret Pharaoh's dream about two groups of seven cows, and a second dream about two groups of seven ears of corn. Joseph is brought to Pharaoh and impresses him with his ability to translate the dreams into a prediction of an approaching period of seven years of plenty to be followed by seven years of famine. As a result, Pharaoh elevates Joseph to become Viceroy of Egypt, responsible for managing Egypt's food resources. From this position of power, Joseph is able to manipulate and test his brothers when they come to Egypt to seek food for Jacob and the family. Finally satisfied that his brothers have reformed and truly repent their earlier actions toward him, Joseph reveals himself to them, and he gathers Jacob and the entire family to live in safety in Egypt.

This brief summary is basically all that most of us, as children, learn of the story. We're taught about a conflict between a solitary hero, Joseph, and the undifferentiated group of his ten half-brothers, who eventually learn their lesson and reform. (Joseph's full brother, Benjamin, didn't participate in selling Joseph into slavery and later is only an innocent pawn in Joseph's manipulation of the other brothers.) Through his faith in God, Joseph overcomes fraternal betrayal, slavery, sexual temptation, and imprisonment. From his position as Viceroy he saves his family as well as Egypt and that entire part of the world. And once satisfied that his brothers have changed, he forgives them. While it is good that the brothers have learned their lesson and repent, there seems nothing heroic about them. The biblical text is presented as a simple, satisfying children's story.

## **Joseph and His Brothers in Midrash**

Midrash, however, reads Joseph's story in part as both a consequence and an extension of the rivalry between Leah and Rachel. Since he is Rachel's son, Joseph's outstanding heroic character and righteous actions go to her credit, perhaps equalizing for the limited number of children she was able to produce. And since Joseph is Jacob's second-youngest child, Joseph's triumph over his brothers becomes another major plot element referring back to the central motif of a younger child supplanting an older sibling.

### **Judah's Leadership**

If age were always determinative, we would expect the leadership of the other brothers to fall to Reuben, the firstborn, or at least to one the other of Leah's first four sons who were born before she became barren: Simeon, Levi, or Judah. But which one? Midrash answers by paying close attention to which brother takes any particular action against Joseph. Sometimes this is easy, as when the Bible tells of Reuben's failed intention to rescue Joseph (Gen. 37:22), or Judah's successful maneuvering that deflects the brothers' intention to kill Joseph (Gen. 37:26-27). Sometimes midrash must use some ingenuity to identify which of the brothers acted, as when the Rabbis conclude that the brothers who first proposed killing Joseph were Simeon and Levi.

So how does the text establish the brothers' appropriate leader? Reuben does not rescue Joseph as he had planned, and is also stained with the action he took regarding Bilhah after Rachel's death (Gen. 35:22). And the Rabbis regard Simeon and Levi, the slayers of the Shechemites (Gen. 34:25-26), as continuing to be potentially troublesome and perhaps unrepentant. This leaves Judah to assume the leadership position of the brothers who come to Joseph in Egypt. The biblical text itself tells how Judah is the one who convinces Jacob to let the brothers bring Benjamin back with them to Egypt, a condition that the Viceroy (Joseph) had demanded (Gen. 43:8-9). And when they return to Egypt, Judah is the one who responds to Joseph on behalf of the brothers (Gen. 44:15-16). This leadership is later confirmed when the Bible later reveals that the house of Judah will be the source of the permanent kingship of Israel, including David and Solomon, and eventually producing the Messiah.

In the Bible, Joseph attains virtually unlimited power as Pharaoh's Viceroy, and seems in full control of the brothers. Joseph is repeatedly able to manipulate and test the brothers without disclosing his identity. Joseph finally chooses to reveal himself only after Judah argues passionately for Benjamin's freedom (Gen. 44:18-34). This strong defense by Judah (a son of Leah) of his half-brother Benjamin (a son of Rachel) demonstrates to Joseph that the brothers have finally developed a family unity and loyalty that transcends maternal lines and thus they deserve reconciliation. Judah's actions in to the biblical text also serve two further functions: they indicate to us that the rivalry of Leah and Rachel has finally come to an end, and they provide a foundation of righteousness for the tribe of Judah.

### **The Brothers' Powers**

But midrash goes far beyond the biblical story of an all-powerful Joseph who finally becomes convinced to reconcile because of the righteousness of Judah's intervention on behalf of Benjamin. Midrash tells tales of the fantastical powers of the brothers, portraying a much

more evenly matched conflict. Indeed, in the midrashic stories, it is not clear that Joseph finally did, or could, win the physical contest with his brothers.

The sons of Jacob are pictured in Midrash as a breed of super-heroes, physically large men having the ability to fight fiercely. They possess supernatural powers and strength that permit each of them alone to defeat an army of ordinary soldiers. For example, when midrash tells how Esau attacked the family while they had assembled in a fortress to mourn Leah's death, the description of that battle makes it clear that the brothers individually went out separate gates to pursue and overcome large armies in personal combat.<sup>1</sup>

According to the midrashic tales of the family's reconciliation, it was Joseph's fear of the brothers' awesome powers, and not Judah's demonstration of reformation, that forced Joseph to reveal himself and make peace with his brothers. In the legend, when Judah's pleas failed to move Joseph, Judah and the brothers let out a thunderous yell and stomped on the ground, causing reverberations so powerful that they fractured every wall in Egypt, caused all the pregnant women in the land to miscarry, knocked Pharaoh and Joseph off of their thrones, and spun around the heads of all the palace advisors so that they faced backwards.<sup>2</sup>

The Rabbis tell how Judah speaks in Hebrew to his brothers in the presence of Joseph (his identity remained unrecognized by the brothers, who thought he was an Egyptian-speaking Viceroy). Judah proposes that each of the brothers destroy one of Egypt's central markets, and that they should also kill Pharaoh and his Viceroy, Joseph. The brothers caution Judah that destroying Egypt's markets would destroy the entire world, since Egypt's food was sustaining the world during the famine. Only after witnessing all of this does Joseph reveal himself to his brothers.<sup>3</sup>

So Midrash puts a very different face on the Bible's happy ending of reconciliation between the sons of Leah and the sons of Rachel. Joseph doesn't act from a position of righteousness and power, convinced that the brothers have learned their lesson. Joseph acts from fear—fear for his own safety, fear for Pharaoh and Egypt, and fear for the world.

Midrash even questions whether the brothers have genuinely reformed and reconciled with Joseph, or if they are still enemies. In one version, after Joseph reveals himself to the brothers, there still is no reconciliation. The brothers try to kill Joseph, and he is saved only when an angel appears and knocks the brothers into a stupor, scattering their bodies to the corners of the room.<sup>4</sup>

### **Joseph's Conflict with the Brothers as Commentary on Jacob, Rachel, and Leah**

The story of Joseph, which concludes the book of Genesis, offers many parallels between Joseph's life and the life of his father, Jacob. This suggests that Joseph's story may add to our understanding of the story of Jacob and his wives. From the biblical text it's clear that the conflict between Joseph and his half-brothers is sourced in (and continues) the rivalry between their mothers, Leah and Rachel. The Bible also indicates that this multi-generational conflict finally ends when Joseph and the brothers reconcile.

However, midrash causes us to reexamine the text's neat and convenient resolution of that continuing conflict. Just as they did with Jacob and Esau, the Rabbis remain skeptical of whether sibling rivalries are ever truly healed. Previously, midrash transformed Esau's kiss of reconciliation into a bite intended to kill. Similarly, midrash here views the reconciliation between Joseph and the brothers as more like Jacob's wrestling contest—proceeding without a

true winner or loser, but ending in a manner that at least enables the parties to continue on the course of their respective destinies.

## Notes to Supplement J

---

- <sup>1</sup> The brothers defeat the attack by Esau's army: Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 2nd ed., 320-1.
- <sup>2</sup> The power of the brothers when they confront Joseph in Egypt: Berman, *Midrash Tanhuma*, 273; Bialik, *Book of Legends*, 55-6; *Midrash Rabbah*, Gen. 93.7.
- <sup>3</sup> The brothers plan to destroy Egypt, including killing Joseph and the Pharaoh: Berman, *Midrash Tanhuma*, 271; Townsend, *Midrash Tanhuma*, 275.
- <sup>4</sup> Joseph must be saved from his brothers by an angel: Berman, *Midrash Tanhuma*, 273.