

THE LOST MATRIARCH – ADDITIONAL CHAPTER NOTES

For readers who may be interested in further details, these additional Chapter Notes contain ancillary and background material, analysis of connections between some elements of Leah's story and other Bible passages, and personal observations that go beyond what was able to be discussed in the book. References cited below are listed in full in the book's Bibliography, beginning at page 229. Even fuller discussion of some of the topics covered in these Chapter Notes can be found in the online **Supplements A – J**.

INTRODUCTION

Page 7 – The first incident of parental preference: Abraham was the first Jew, but he wasn't the first father-figure in the Bible to unleash familial dysfunction by exhibiting (or appearing to exhibit) preference between children. Abraham's parental preference for Isaac over Ishmael seems to have been prefigured in the story of God's apparent preference of Abel over Cain. (Gen. 4:4.)

CHAPTER 1

Page 15 – Rachel's Age: As an example of the diverse range of midrashic commentary, one rabbinic calculation has Rachel only five years old at the time of the meeting at the well (a calculation that is not the majority view). In one way, this view is convenient: If Rachel were as young as five, this could in part explain why Jacob volunteers to work for seven years as a bride price for her—so that she would be of the appropriate age of twelve by the time of the wedding. (Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 3a, 49; *Hachut Hameshulash*, 576 [citing Sforno]).

However, such a calculation is easy for us to reject. After all, would the text describe a five-year-old as beautiful in face and figure? And as a literary matter, concluding that Rachel was only five would be disappointingly inconsistent with all of the magnificent love-at-first-sight romance that we, and most of the classical commentators, delight to find behind the biblical text of Jacob meeting Rachel at the well. Surely we can't be expected to accept an interpretation that would spoil one of the Bible's great love stories.

Page 15 – Marriage as a familial and community concern: If local custom protected Rachel from involvement with the shepherds because she was the younger sister, this would be consistent with the later account of the sisters' weddings. The biblical story will go on to recognize that at that time in history, romance and marriage were not the personal events we often assume today. Romance was expected to be subordinate to marriage, and marriage was much more than an event between two individuals. We will see how marriage at that time involved family and community, as well as local customs. In her subsequent actions, Leah appears to accept that the formal structure of her marriage was a matter very much involving family and community. However, we will also see that she tenaciously clings to her intense desire to transform her official marriage with Jacob into a mutual romantic attachment.

Page 15 – Some other answers to why Rachel herded the flock alone: The basic text of the Jewish mystical tradition, the Zohar, sees this question (of why Rachel herded the flock alone) as asking not about human affairs but about how God acts to control history. According to the Zohar, God sent Rachel alone that day because she was the sister who possessed the outstanding beauty that could capture Jacob’s interest and love. This was necessary so that Jacob would stay, marry, and have children, and thus the future of the nation Israel could proceed. (Tuchman, Passions of the Matriarchs, 191; Matt, Zohar (153b), v. 2, 354.) As opposed to such mystical readings, other midrashic commentaries suggest more natural, straightforward explanations: Rachel may have gotten the job simply because she was the better shepherdess. Or perhaps Leah’s “weak” eyes (discussed below, when the Bible finally introduces her) may have been too sensitive for her to be outdoors in the desert. (Nachmanides [Ramban], Commentary on the Torah, v. 1, 360–1 [Leah’s sensitive eyes]; Tuchman, Passions of the Matriarchs, 190–1 [citing Nachmanides: sensitive eyes or better skills; and citing Chizkuni: Rachel acted from respect for her older sister]).

Page 18 – Using prophetic powers to explain acts by the Matriarchs and Patriarchs: Rachel’s accepting Jacob’s kiss without protest could be explained by attributing to her the prophetic knowledge of her destiny to be with Jacob as his wife for the rest of her lifetime. Some of the classical midrashic commentators use this method to explain many other actions of the Matriarchs and Patriarchs. As a literary matter, however, such an approach seems too convenient. Even commentators who presume that the Matriarchs and Patriarchs are sometimes granted prophetic foreknowledge of what comes later in the biblical story typically only intermittently rely upon this to explain behavior; they rely upon more typical and realistic human motivation where that can be found. And the biblical text itself relates instances where these supposed possessors of prophetic foreknowledge seem totally unaware of the implications of their acts and circumstances. Thus, selectively imputing prophetic knowledge offers an easy way to sidestep the reader’s task of finding motivation for the often dramatic actions by important characters in this family drama.

Page 19 – Some other reasons for Jacob’s tears of joy: Midrash speculates that Jacob may have cried from relief at having successfully carried out his mother’s charge to find safety and shelter with relatives, or out of simple joy at meeting a relative. Or he may have cried out in emotional thanksgiving to God for meeting Rachel. (Hachut Hameshulash, 572 [citing Kimchi: joy at meeting a relative]; Attar, Or Hachayim, 245 [tears of relief]; Tuchman, Passions of the Matriarchs, 195 [citing R. Abraham: gratitude to God].)

Page 20 – Jacob’s tears were tears of distress:

(a) **Distress over Jacob’s age:** The Bible isn’t explicit as to how old Jacob was when he arrived at Haran. But when Joseph eventually brings the family to Egypt, Jacob tells Pharaoh that he is 130 years old (Gen. 47:9). Based upon this, some commentators rely on clues in the text to calculate that Jacob was 77 years old when he met Rachel. On this basis some attribute Jacob’s tears to his bemoaning the loss of all those lonely years of his life before finally meeting his beloved. We should note, however, that ages and other numbers stated in the Bible or calculated in the classical commentaries are often very problematic for modern readers. Here, the traditional rabbinic calculation of Jacob’s age simply doesn’t jibe with contemporary scientific assumptions, especially as it would seem so incongruent with the rest of Jacob’s story in the text: fathering thirteen children from four wives, laboring as a shepherd for twenty years,

taking the long journey home from Haran, wrestling with the stranger, preparing to fight with Esau, outliving all of his wives, and surviving for another quarter-century or so.

(b) Distress over the delay in the holy task of creating children: Other commentators refuse to allow their Patriarch Jacob to express such a romantic response. Instead, they take their cues from the text describing Jacob's "Ladder" dream at Bethel on his way to Haran. According to the midrashic reading of that text, the twelve stones he set out around his sleeping area that night miraculously fused into a single stone when he woke the next morning (based upon the difference in the singular and plural word used in Gen. 28:11, 18). This event prophesied that Jacob would have twelve sons, through whom he would found twelve tribes that would coalesce to create the Jewish nation. Thus Jacob's tears at meeting Rachel could be his tears for the children he could have already had with Rachel if they had met earlier.

(c) Distress over his lack of wealth for a bride price: Another popular midrashic explanation for Jacob's tears is that Jacob wept in humiliation because of his economic destitution. Previously, when Abraham's servant came to the well at Haran and met Rebekah, who would become Isaac's wife and Jacob's mother, the servant had arrived with ten camels laden with gifts for the maiden and her family (Gen. 24:10). Jacob would be acutely aware of the contrast. The Rabbis don't agree whether Isaac sent Jacob on his way without any property, or as one midrashic legend has it, Esau's son, Eliphaz, robbed Jacob of all his possessions while he was fleeing. In either event, it appears from the biblical text that Jacob arrives at Haran empty-handed, a suitor without gifts or bride price. (For a detailed discussion of why Jacob was penniless when he arrived at Haran, see Supplement D: *Midrash on the Robbery of Jacob and His Night at Bethel*)

Page 26 – Laban had lost his wealth: When Jacob arrives at Haran, Laban has been restricted to using only his rationed portion of water from the communal well (since all the shepherds joined in the effort to roll the protective stone off the well), and his flock has been so reduced that it could be managed by a young girl.

Page 26 – The kisses in Jacob's life: We can note that Laban's kiss of welcome becomes another of the many strikingly problematic kisses in Jacob's life. At the height of Jacob's deception in obtaining his father's blessing, blind Isaac kisses him but is apparently fooled by the fragrance of Esau's clothing, which Rebekah had provided to Jacob. (Gen. 27:27) And we've just seen how the Rabbis painstakingly analyze Jacob's first kiss for Rachel. (Gen. 29:11)

Later, when Jacob finally flees with his family from Haran, Laban falsely justifies pursuing Jacob with his forces as merely an attempt to kiss his family farewell. (Gen. 31:28) After that, Jacob receives another significant kiss, the "kiss" (the Hebrew Bible text itself writes it with special dots that are the equivalent of cautionary quotation marks), once again on the neck, this time from his brother Esau. (Gen. 33:4) Legend even tells us that, like his father and grandfather, Jacob ultimately does not die by the hand of the Angel of Death, but by the kiss of the *Shechinah* (God's spirit) that gently draws away his soul. (Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 2nd ed., 411.)

But perhaps the most interesting kiss in Jacob's life is his kiss of Leah—a kiss that's entirely missing from the text. We'll soon listen in as the Rabbis speculate about how Jacob could have kissed his bride on the wedding night (as the Rabbis' personal experience and knowledge of human nature convinced them he would have done) without realizing that she was not his beloved Rachel, but rather her older sister, Leah.

Page 32 – Interpreting the Bible’s description of Leah’s eyes as a positive comment: Why do some interpreters read the ambiguous description of Leah’s eyes in a favorable light? It must be more than an inference that these sisters (perhaps twins) must have physically resembled one another, so that if Rachel is beautiful, then Leah must likewise be beautiful. The Bible makes it clear that even twins like smooth Jacob (Gen 27:11) and hairy Esau (Gen. 25:25, 27:11) can exhibit radically different physical appearances. (With the brothers, these physical differences seem to be markers alerting us to look out for important characterological distinctions between them.)

One commentator openly expresses the bias that may underlie many of these positive interpretations of “*rachot*.” According to the Rabbis’ traditional belief system, we ought to read the word used for Leah’s eyes as describing a positive quality because God’s Scripture would be too sensitive and considerate to use such bluntness if it were referring to a Matriarch’s defect. (Epstein, *Torah Temimah*, 130.)

Page 35 – Emanations: *Kabbalah*, Judaism’s mystical component, pays great attention to the concept of emanations—expressions of the spiritual qualities of God. According to Kabbalah, Leah and Rachel can be seen to express different spiritual dimensions of God’s feminine aspect [*Shechinah*]. Rachel symbolizes passion and attraction, the physical, Earthly, revealed world of energy [*Malkut*]. Leah symbolizes devotion and depth, the concealed world of hidden energy, soul, and understanding [*Binah*]. (See Raver, *Listen to Her Voice*, 67.) Seeing these qualities as different aspects of love illuminates our perception of Jacob’s marriages to these sisters, suggesting that the quality of this polygamy for him might not have been exclusively competitive but perhaps to some extent was complementary.

Page 39 – The years seemed like days: Based upon the Rabbis’ observations of how love works in the world, some point out that an ordinary lover would be feeling an anguished pining over the seven year delay of the marriage, which should make the postponement period seem longer rather than shorter. So some midrash, never missing an opportunity to raise the moral status of a Patriarch, suggests that Jacob’s was not an ordinary love of physical, lustful desire, but instead a spiritual love without self-interest. (Sforno, *Commentary*, 206-07; A. Z. Friedman, *Wellsprings of Torah*, 59 [citing A. J. Heschel].)

Page 41 – Jacob’s age: As previously noted, ages and other numbers stated in the Bible or calculated in the classical commentaries often prove very problematic for modern readers. We may find it helpful to read the text without presuming that such numbers are necessarily intended to reflect literal numbers in contemporary terms.

CHAPTER 2

Page 47 – Jacob as provider of water: Gen. 29:8, describing Jacob initially meeting Rachel at the well, states that the shepherds declined Jacob’s suggestion that they begin to water the flocks because the well was capped by a huge stone, requiring the cooperative efforts of many of the shepherds to roll it off the well. This is generally read as a primitive form of communal rationing and security for the water, implying that the area was suffering from severe drought. Gen. 29:9 describes Rachel’s arrival with her father’s flock, implying that the flock was now a small one. Thus it appears that Laban’s flock had been decimated from the drought. Gen. 29:10

describes how Jacob single-handedly removed the rock so that he could water Laban's flock. That event, connecting Jacob with the water in the local wells, may have suggested the midrashic invention that, for the next twenty years, Jacob's presence in Haran was accompanied by a miraculous replenishment of the wells, which explains why Laban was so anxious to keep Jacob in Haran that he switched the brides at the first wedding.

Page 49 – Veiling the bride: Some contemporary Jews may erroneously assume that the present-day wedding custom of *bedeken* (veiling the bride) immediately before a wedding refers back to the deception of Jacob at his wedding ceremony to Leah. But the *bedeken* ceremony is not an unveiling of the bride in order that the groom, unlike Jacob, can be sure he's marrying his intended wife. The *bedeken* ceremony is the veiling of the bride's face (presently done by the groom but previously done by the community) as a symbol of the bride's modesty, dignity, and exclusivity for her husband. The ceremony recalls not Jacob, but his mother, Rebekah, who veiled herself as she approached her bridegroom, Isaac (Gen. 24:65). This reference is confirmed by the traditional blessing recited for the *bedeken* ceremony. The blessing is the same one that was recited for Rebekah when she left her home to journey to Isaac: "O, Sister! May you grow into thousands of myriads..." (Gen. 24:60.) (Ganzfried, *Code of Jewish Law*, v.4, p.10 (ch. 147:3); Klein, *Guide*, 401; Lamm, *Love & Marriage*, 207–9.)

Page 52 – Presumption of prophetic knowledge: As they do for interpreting other points of the story, many of the traditional commentators presume that both of these Matriarchs, Rachel and Leah, had received prophetic revelation of God's promise to Jacob at Bethel that Jacob would sire the twelve tribes of Israel. Perhaps once Rachel saw that Jacob had gone through the marriage ceremony with Leah, she was forced to conclude that she herself had not been chosen by God to bear the twelve tribes. Therefore, Rachel was willing to help her sister to be the one, especially if Rachel's actions would shield Leah from humiliation before Jacob. (Weissman, *Midrash Says*, 287–8.)

Page 54 – What really occurred in the wedding tent: Not only does Jacob's inability to recognize Leah suggest the absence of sexual foreplay, but it's also possible to read later biblical text as suggesting, with a surprising level of intimate detail, the particular sexual acts that occurred in the wedding tent. At the conclusion of Genesis, when Jacob delivers his deathbed prophecies and blessings to his sons, he calls Reuben "the first of my vigor" (*raishit oni*). (Gen. 49:3.) Midrash reads that as "the first drop of my semen"—concluding that Jacob's first seminal emission was with Leah on their wedding night, resulting in Reuben's conception. (Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 3b, 517.)

This reading would confirm the theory that there was no foreplay (which could have wasted the first drop of semen) because Jacob's sole motivation that night was procreation, not pleasure. One commentator even manages to conclude that this reading is sufficient to imply that Jacob broke Leah's hymen with his finger so that none of his semen would be wasted. (Attar, *Or Hachayim*, 415.)

Page 58 – Esau's cries: Although Isaac could not reverse the blessing he had given Jacob (since blessings—or curses—by the pious are irrevocable), he appears anguished by the event, and gives Esau a secondary and more limited blessing. Indeed, even the Rabbis, who generally dismiss Esau as the personification of evil and a symbol of oppression, are moved by the obvious sincerity and depth of feeling in Esau's cry of distress. They imagine that the tears of people Israel when they are suffering at the hands of future oppressors are the punishment for the tears

that Jacob caused Esau to shed by taking the blessing. In the rabbinic view, the nation Israel's tears of suffering in history are measure-for-measure punishment for the tears Jacob caused Esau. (Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 2, 512.)

Page 58 – The clues in Laban's language: The irony in Laban's morning-after exchange with Jacob is even stronger in the Hebrew. Laban doesn't use the ordinary Hebrew words of relative age to speak of a chronological distinction between younger and older. Instead he speaks here in the language of status. Laban uses a word for the younger Rachel (*tz'erah*) that is derived from a root (TZR) carrying the primary sense of restricted or insignificant. The word he uses for the older Leah is *b'cheerah*, the feminine version of *bichor*, the firstborn. So Laban is pointedly telling Jacob that, regardless of how Jacob obtained the birthright and the firstborn's blessing in Canaan, it's a different story in Haran, where they respect the status rights of the firstborn. (R. Alter, *Genesis*, 155, n. 26; R. E. Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah*, 99 [see translation and note].)

Page 58 – The Wedding Week: The contemporary custom of *Sheva Berachot*—"seven blessings"—marking a special period of seven days of rejoicing after a marriage, is derived from the biblical reference to Leah's wedding week of seven days with Jacob. (Lamm, *Love & Marriage*, 235.)

Page 59 – Another justification for Laban: Another possible defense for Laban's wedding hoax could be based upon the previously discussed midrash that Laban and Rebekah had betrothed their children "elder for elder and younger for younger." Perhaps Jacob's purchase of the birthright substituted him for Esau as Leah's betrothed. (Attar, *Or Hachayim*, 224–5.)

Page 62 – The wedding story as cultural history: The story of Reuben's life may demonstrate the historical fact that, at some point in the cultures of the ancient world, the traditional status and rights of the firstborn (such as priority in marriage, family authority, succession, double inheritance, and ritual duties) were no longer automatically and permanently fixed by birth order in all situations. (Attar, *Or Hachayim*, 251–2; Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary*, 181; Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 199.)

CHAPTER 3

Page 68 – Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah: Another midrashic interpretation of the statement that Jacob had marital intercourse with Rachel and loved Rachel more reads this phrase to mean that Jacob's love for Rachel was more than physical attraction. Midrash previously praised Rachel's act of extraordinary selflessness when she gave Leah the wedding night signs to save her from humiliation. And now the Rabbis can explain Jacob's preferential love for Rachel as her reward for her meritorious conduct with Leah. (Tuchman, *Passions of the Matriarchs*, 222 [citing Sforno].) Rachel's merit that earned Jacob's love was even greater since at the time she assisted Leah to pose as Rachel on her wedding night, Laban had not yet arranged for Rachel's subsequent marriage to Jacob. Rachel must have had to overcome the natural fear that if she helped Leah to marry Jacob, then the evil Esau might demand that Rachel be given to him in marriage to satisfy Laban's agreement with Rebekah (in the midrash) that his two daughters would marry her two sons. (A. Z. Friedman, *Wellsprings of Torah*, 60 [citing *Kedushat Levi*].)

Page 72 – Commentary by Translation: Some modern English translations try to make the point that Leah was only loved less than Rachel; they refuse to use the word “hated” and instead use “unloved” or “neglected”—both terms intending to convey a relative and less severe level of emotion that falls short of actual hatred. (See Bloom, *Book of J*, translation by David Rosenberg, 109 [“neglected”]; Mitchell, *Genesis*, 62 [“unloved”]; Rashi, *Commentaries*, v. 1, 326 [“unloved”].)

Page 72 – Another reason for Jacob’s anger towards Leah: One midrash states that Jacob’s displeasure with Leah was not because she wasn’t as beautiful as Rachel. Instead, Jacob was resentful because of Leah’s hurtful response (in the midrashic supplement to the biblical story) when he complained to her the morning after their wedding. Her unforgivable offense had been to remind him that her deception was just following the example of his own actions when he had deceived his father to obtain the firstborn’s blessing. (Ronson, *Women of the Torah*, 128–9; Townsend, *Midrash Tanhuma*, 185.) One commentator presumes that Jacob thereafter would have manifested his hatred by regularly speaking harshly to Leah and rarely spending the night with her. (Tuchman, *Passions of the Matriarchs*, 225 [citing Abarbanel].)

Page 73 – Gender differences for God’s interactions in the Bible: When the God of the Hebrew Bible acts in history by interacting with the principal characters, there certainly seem to be very marked gender differences. With the Patriarchs and male heroes, God becomes a personal protector, a covenanting partner, a direct communicator, and a military assistor. (See the stories of Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and the Prophets.) With the Matriarchs and heroines, God does not directly covenant and does not deal much other than on matters of fertility and birth—and even in these limited matters God generally does not communicate at all, or else communicates only indirectly or without being quoted in the Bible. (See the stories of Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah.) (Judith Hauptman, “Women,” in *Etz Hayim Torah*, 1356.)

Page 74 – Did Leah suffer a physical barrier to conception? If Jacob became aware of a physical abnormality in Leah after their wedding, he may have concluded that her barrenness was the reason he had been tricked into marrying her—perhaps explaining why he “hated” her (since some of the Rabbis insist that Jacob’s noble goal was to begin to produce the twelve sons that had been prophesied for him at Bethel). (Ginzberg, *Legends of the Bible*, 173; Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 2nd ed., 285; *Hachut Hameshulash*, 580 [citing Kimchi].) One commentator proposes that God’s intervention to cure Leah’s barrenness was done specifically to compensate her for Jacob’s false belief that she had willingly tricked him out of personal desperation concerning her infertility, rather than (as midrash has her claiming) participating out of obedience to her father, Laban. (*Hachut Hameshulash*, 581 [citing Sforno].)

The Rabbis recognized the condition of an *aylonith*—a woman with undeveloped genitalia. (*Yebamoth* 119a) Under rabbinic law, marriage to a woman who turns out to be an *aylonith* is invalid (*Tosephta Kethuboth* 1:3), but the marriage is valid if the husband knew of the physical defect prior to the marriage (*Kethuboth* 11:6). (See Preuss, *Biblical and Talmudic Medicine*, 225-6.)

Page 74 – The rabbinic timeline for conception: It would not be a problem for the Rabbis to conclude that God acted on the wedding night to assuage Jacob’s resentment even before Jacob woke up to realize that Leah had taken Rachel’s place. The commentators could always argue that divine prescience would permit God to intervene in the conception process in anticipation of

Jacob's reaction the next morning. But the early Rabbis' idea of the time frame for conception and gestation also provides some leeway. According to the rabbinic view, conception generally happens within the first three days after intercourse. (Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 3a, 75.) Thus, depending upon the exact nature of Leah's physical impediment (not specified in the midrash), perhaps God could have enabled conception to result from the wedding night relations by opening her womb sometime during the first half of Leah's wedding week, after Leah would have had an opportunity to express her fears and prayers resulting from Jacob's morning-after resentment.

Page 76 – Did conception lead to love? A few commentaries conclude that eventually Leah obtained more from producing children than merely avoiding divorce. They take the position that eventually, after Rachel's death, Jacob did come to love Leah fully, or at least that on his deathbed he acknowledged sincere gratitude for her. (Jub. 36:22–24, p.214; *Midrash Rabbah*, Gen. 71.2.)

Page 77 – The names of Leah's first three sons—alternative interpretation: Another midrashic approach to decoding the names of Leah's first three sons is to read them not as showing the progression in Leah's hopes, but as showing the gradual changes in Jacob. With Reuben ("see"), Jacob stopped his observable, physical acts of anger towards Leah. With Simeon ("hear"), Jacob stopped his angry words. And Levi could be derived alternatively from the word for heart (*lev*), and so indicate that with the third child, Jacob's heart was finally changed towards Leah, and not just his outward acts and words. (Tuchman, *Passions of the Matriarchs*, 231 [citing Abarbanel].)

This is especially significant for the third birth since the text fails to state that it was Leah who named Levi. Unlike the other naming verses, the Hebrew text for the verb "named" for the third son uses the masculine form—literally, "he called his name" (*cara-sh'mo*). Therefore, some commentators presume that Jacob named him. (Tuchman, *Passions of the Matriarchs*, 231.) Under this view, Levi's name could be a direct statement of Jacob's feelings rather than Leah's hopes.

Rashi agrees with looking at the grammatical clues for the naming of Levi, but he cites another Midrash, apparently lost, explaining "He called" as indicating that it was God who named Levi because of Levi's destined role as the founder of Israel's priestly tribe. (Rashi, *Commentaries*, v. 1, 327–8, n. 34.) And as he does with Levi, Rashi also takes a grammatical approach to the naming of Reuben. He notes that the word used for "see" (*r'u*) is in the imperative, so the entire name is Leah's command to the community: "Look at (*r'u*) my son (*ben*)!" Leah is proudly pointing to the distinction between Reuben, the righteous firstborn son she has given to Jacob, as contrasted with Esau, the evil firstborn of Isaac who despised the birthright and sold it to Jacob. (Rashi, *Commentaries*, v. 1, 326, n. 32; Talmud *Berachoth* 7b.)

Page 78 – The Prophecy of twelve sons/tribes: The change in Leah's goals from love to marital stability could have happened at any time. But the classical rabbinic commentaries propose that this occurred with the birth of her third son because Leah, as a prophetic Matriarch, knew that Jacob was destined to have twelve sons from four wives. Thus these three sons constituted Leah's appropriate share of the total, and demonstrated that she was truly intended to be Jacob's wife. (Attar, *Or Hachayim*, 256–7.)

The Rabbis erect an elaborate structure of various convenient textual explanations based upon a midrashic reading of Jacob's night of revelation (the Ladder Dream) at Bethel (Gen.28:11, 18).

The biblical text there appears to describe Jacob arranging stones (plural) around his head at night, but in the morning the text tells how Jacob set up the stone (singular) as a pillar. Rather than accept this as a scribal error, classical midrash uses the inconsistency to infer that God miraculously fused twelve separate stones from the night before into a single stone in the morning. (Midrash Rabbah, Gen. 68.11.)

The Rabbis take this as a prophecy to Jacob that he is destined to produce twelve sons who will be the source of twelve tribes of his descendants, and that those tribes will fuse into a single nation. (*Midrash Rabbah*, Gen. 68.11.) [Of course, this is what happens later in the biblical history of Israel.] Midrash proceeds to attribute to Leah and Rachel prophetic knowledge of this promise to Jacob in order to help explain some of the sisters' problematic actions as the story develops. [See the midrashic discussions of Leah naming Levi and Judah, and her actions leading to the birth of Dinah.]

Page 78 – Judah's special history in the Torah: We should note at this point that whenever we read something about Judah in the text, we ought to keep in mind the views of the “new criticism” school of historical analysis of the Bible, which considers the interpretive implications of assuming the Bible's human authorship. One contemporary commentator has proposed that this portion of the Bible relating the special naming of Judah was actually first written down by scribes serving in the royal courts of Judah's descendants. (Bloom, *Book of J*, 9.) If so, we should remain alert to possible editorial decisions that might have shaped the text with bias—unintentional or intentional—for glorifying the Judah dynasty.

Page 80 – God caused Leah's barrenness: One classical commentary expresses a traditional view that God is the continuing author of history, and so He makes things happen in order to accomplish His further goals. Whatever follows in the text must be the goal that embodies God's purpose. Here, the announcement in the text that Leah stopped bearing is followed by the episodes in which the handmaidens, Zilpah and Bilhah, give birth to their share of Jacob's sons. Under this analysis, Leah stopped bearing after Judah because God had to intervene in order to enable the handmaidens to bear children in accordance with their destinies. (*Hachut Hameshulash*, 581 [citing Kimchi].)

Page 80 – Leah “stopped bearing” because of Jacob: The text doesn't say that Leah became “barren” (*acarah*, the word it uses to describe Rachel in Gen. 29:31). Rather, it states that Leah “stopped [ceased from] bearing” (*va-ta-amod mi-ledet*, Gen. 29: 35; see Brown-Driver-Briggs, *Lexicon*, p. 764), perhaps implying only the absence of marital relations instead of infertility. If Leah ceased bearing because Jacob stopped or diminished his frequency of sleeping with her, the dynamics behind such a scenario invite further speculation. Perhaps Jacob felt his spousal obligations towards Leah had been amply satisfied with the four births. Or perhaps Jacob was driven away by Leah's unrealistic, and apparently public, expectations that each birth would cause him to love her more. If Leah's expression of thanks to God for her fourth son was really a prayer that she stop having children (from contentment, resignation, or exhaustion), then both Leah and Jacob might have been ready for him to turn his attentions back to Rachel.

Page 80 – Rachel has not yet spoken during the first part of her story: After Rachel met Jacob at the well—where he does all the talking—Gen. 29:12 says only, “she ran and told her father.” However, the content of her report to Laban is not described in the text.

Page 80 – Rachel's prophetic foreknowledge: In the early part of the Haran story, the Rabbis presumed that Leah had prophetic knowledge that Jacob was destined to have twelve sons and

four wives. Now some commentators attribute Rachel's distress at being barren as likewise sourced in prophetic knowledge. Rachel knew that she was destined to die early, which explains why she was justifiably anxious to begin bearing children. (Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 2nd ed., 286, and n. 178.)

Page 82 – Persons considered as dead: Besides a childless person, the other three persons considered by the Rabbis as if dead can also be related to events in Jacob's life: a blind man [Jacob will eventually lose his own eyesight, and he obtained the firstborn's blessing due to Isaac's blindness]; someone who has lost his money [midrash says that during Jacob's flight to Haran, he used this argument to persuade Esau's son that it was not necessary to kill him in order to obey Esau's order to do so, since once Eliphaz took all of Jacob's property, it would be as if he were dead]; and a leper who cannot associate with people [perhaps applicable to how Joseph, Rachel's son, will feel when thrown into the pit by his brothers, or when he suffers isolation as a Hebrew slave or prisoner in Egypt]. (See Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 3a, 67; *Midrash Rabbah*, Gen. 45.2; Rashi, *Commentaries*, v. 1, 328, n. 1; Talmud *Nedarim* 64b; Tuchman, *Passions of the Matriarchs*, 237-238.)

Page 83 – Rendering a beautiful wife sterile: The Rabbis state that drinking the “cup of roots” would render a woman temporarily sterile ((*Tosephta Yebamoth* 8:4), and the Talmud even provides a list of ingredients: Alexandrian gum, alum, and garden crocus (*Shabbat* 110ab). (See Preuss, *Biblical and Talmudic Medicine*, pp. 412, 379.)

Page 85 – Presumption that Jacob had been praying for Rachel: Once again, some of the rabbinic commentators strive to elevate Jacob's character in their analysis of Jacob's response to Rachel. They insist that pious Jacob surely already had been praying for his beloved Rachel. Thus, he may have responded angrily out of embarrassment and frustration for his inability to move God, or perhaps in humiliation and disappointment that Rachel could think he hadn't already been praying for her. Or maybe Jacob believed that God ordinarily answers the prayers of the righteous, so if Jacob's previous prayers for Rachel's fertility had not been granted, this must indicate that there was some supervening unrighteousness in Rachel. (Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 3a, 68; Leibowitz, *Studies in Bereshit*, 332–3 [citing Ramban].)

Page 86 – The Matriarchs are insightful, while the Patriarchs are “blind”: There are repeated examples showing that the true seers of Genesis are the Matriarchs, and not the Patriarchs: Sarah understands the necessity of removing Ishmael from the household, while Abraham must be instructed by God to do as she says (Gen. 21:12). Rebekah receives the revelation that Jacob's destiny is to be superior to Esau (Gen. 25:23), while blind Isaac prefers Esau (Gen. 25:28). Rebekah orchestrates Jacob's obtaining the blessing in furtherance of his divine destiny, while Jacob (whose eyesight will likewise later fail in old age) resists participating (Gen. 27: 6-13). When Leah and Rachel are both temporarily barren, they demonstrate (by providing their handmaidens and by negotiating over the mandrakes) that they understand the importance of providing for the successor tribes to carry out Jacob's destiny, while Jacob mutely accepts the sleeping arrangements assigned for him in these instances (Gen. 30:4,9, 14-15).

Page 88 – Bear a child on my knees: Rachel's phrase (Gen. 30:3) could refer to physical birthing or to subsequent child rearing. The Bible and Talmud mention the birthstool (*avnaim* or *mashber*)—a chair used for the final stage of birthing. (See Ex. 1:16; Is. 37:3; Hos. 13:13; *Arachin* 1:4, 7a; *Avodah Zerah* 29a; and see Rashi, *Commentaries*, v. 2, p.6 [Ex. 1:16].) The

practice of delivery on a birthstool chair “was probably first derived from the confinement on the lap of the husband or another woman.” (Preuss, *Biblical and Talmudic Medicine*, 397.) And in the second century classic work on gynecology, Soranus of Ephesus states that if a midwife's stool is not available, the delivering mother can sit on the lap of another woman. (Soranus, *Gynecology* 2.3.5.) However, according to Rashi (citing the *Targum* of Onkelos), having a child born on someone's lap or “knees” is used for Rachel (Gen. 30:3) and Joseph (Gen. 50:23) metaphorically, to indicate raising the child in the place of the parent. (Rashi, *Commentaries*, v.1, 329 [Gen. 30:3], 569 [Gen. 50:23] and Onkelos quoted there.)

Page 89 – Sarah's concern with community opinion when Hagar conceived: If Sarah were concerned because of the opinion of the community, and not just Hagar's attitude, this would be another instance where Midrash attributes a character's actions to an attempt to shield the self or another from humiliation and adverse public opinion. (See the commentaries on Jacob crying at the well, Rachel giving Leah the secret signs on the wedding night, and Leah's prayers regarding the birth of Dinah.)

Page 91 – Distinction between Hagar and Bilhah/Zilpah: The Rabbis who insist that the status of Bilhah and Zilpah and the legitimacy of their children became fully elevated when Rachel and Leah gave them to Jacob “as a wife” distinguish this from Sarah's situation. Even after Sarah gave her handmaiden, Hagar, to Abraham “as a wife”, Sarah is still referred to as Hagar's mistress. (Gen. 16:3-4) Therefore, Sarah never freed Hagar, and thus (consistent with the commentators' world-view and chauvinistic bias) Ishmael and his descendants do not enjoy equal legitimacy with Isaac, Jacob, and the Children of Israel. (Attar, *Or Hachayim*, 258; *Hachut Hameshulash*, 586 [citing Sforno].)

Page 93 – Wrestlings/Turnings: Among the midrashic meanings for Naphtali's name are *attachment* (Rachel has attached herself—become the equal of—Leah); *acceptance* (Rachel's prayers have been accepted); *turning* (Rachel has turned to God through prayer); and *twisting* (Rachel has changed or distorted the facts of her rivalry with Leah). (Rashi, *Commentaries*, v. 1, 330, n. 8; Ibn Ezra, *Commentary*, v. 1, 285–6.)

Page 93 – Bilhah's second son as reward for Rachel's second merit: The text seems to go out of its way to identify Naphtali as the “second” son, prompting midrash to ask why God granted Bilhah a second son for Rachel. The first son, Dan, is generally regarded as Rachel's reward for giving Bilhah to Jacob. One commentary therefore concludes that the second son must similarly be a reward, but for a different merit—Rachel's cooperation in Leah's wedding night switch, which she did for the righteous purpose of providing Jacob with the children that God had promised. (Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 3a, 70.)

Note how the Rabbis not only create the story of Rachel providing the wedding night tokens of identification to Leah as an explanation for what happened that night, but then they proceed to base interpretations of subsequent text upon that same story.

Page 94 – Midrashic reasoning from Leah's prophetic knowledge: The conclusion that Leah acted from jealousy when she gave Zilpah to Jacob becomes quite logical once midrash has attributed to Leah the prophetic understanding that her four sons were already in excess of her fair share of the twelve sons destined for Jacob from his four wives. Given this knowledge, Leah would have to be driven by some other powerful motivation, such as envy, to nevertheless persist in her rivalry with Rachel by contesting who would produce the rest of Jacob's children. But perhaps some of the classical commentators seem too ready to attribute prophetic knowledge to

the Patriarchs and Matriarchs on an *ad hoc* basis when that is convenient for making a neat interpretation of the text.

Page 94 – Textual evidence that Zilpah was the younger handmaiden: The Rabbis present an inventive proof for concluding that Zilpah was the younger handmaiden. The Bible narrates all of the previous six births of Jacob’s sons using the standard formula that Leah or Bilhah “conceived” (became pregnant, *tahar*) and “bore” (gave birth, *taylad*). For Zilpah’s two sons, however, the text says only that she gave birth (*taylad*). But surely the Bible can’t be saying that Zilpah gave birth without first becoming pregnant. So the Rabbis read the omission of the conception/pregnancy language as implying that Zilpah was so young that neither she nor anyone else noticed that she was pregnant. Zilpah and Jacob’s family must have presumed that the interruption of her menstrual cycle was an irregularity typical for her youth, rather than an indication of pregnancy. (*Midrash Rabbah*, Gen. 71.9; Rashi, *Commentaries*, v. 1, 330–1, n. 10.)

CHAPTER 4

Page 102 – What was the *dudaim* plant? Rashbam, grandson of the great Rashi, translates *dudaim* as figs. (Hirsch, *Pentateuch*, 139 [citing Rashbam].) Perhaps he offers this unique interpretation in deference to his grandfather’s argument that the tempting fruit of the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden that Eve gave to Adam in Gen. 3:6 was not an apple, but a fig. (Rashi, *Commentaries*, v. 1, 33, n. 7; Talmud *Berachoth* 40a.)

Page 102 – Magic and sorcery: It is understandable why many of the Rabbis work so hard to defend Leah and Rachel against the allegation that they believed in magic. Ideally, there should be no room in Jewish monotheism for any magic other than divine miracles. But magic is a very problematic issue in the Bible precisely because of the many instances that seem to point to belief in magic by the Jewish people or their leaders and heroes. For example, see the stories of Aaron competing with Egypt’s magicians by turning Moses’ staff into a snake (Ex. 7:10-12); Elijah competing with the prophets of Baal (I Kings 18:22-39); and Saul seeking the Witch of Endor to raise the spirit of Samuel in order to learn his fate (1 Sam. 28:7-25).

Just limiting ourselves to Jacob and his immediate family, we have, in addition to the mandrakes episode, the magic stories of Jacob controlling the colors of the flock’s offspring with the striped rods (Gen. 30:37-42); Rachel stealing Laban’s *teraphim* either to stop his divining the family’s flight or to use for her own fertility (Gen. 31:19); Jacob demanding to know the wrestling angel’s name, perhaps to control the divine being (Gen. 32:30); Jacob burying the family’s idols (Gen. 35:2-4); and Joseph placing his divination cup in Benjamin’s saddlebag (Gen. 44:2, 5).

Page 103 – Leah’s direct speeches in the Bible: Leah speaks her one line of reply to Rachel (Gen. 30:15), and in the next verse will speak her only line of dialog to Jacob (Gen. 30:16). She makes no other direct statements in the Bible. When the biblical text reports the names she gives to her sons, it also reports on her reason for choosing each name, in the form of “she said...” (Gen. 29:32-35; 30:18, 20). Since she is not speaking these lines in dialog with anyone, however, they may be reflecting her inner thoughts, in the sense of “she said to herself...” For the birth of her fifth son, the Bible states: “God listened to Leah”, so we can infer that she may have prayed to God, although her words are never quoted (Gen. 30:17). Finally, when Jacob

later consults with Rachel and Leah in the field about his plan to flee from Laban, the wives answer him jointly, so it is grammatically possible that Leah spoke some of the quoted words (Gen. 31:14). As will be noted below, however, midrash concludes that Rachel was the one who spoke to Jacob in the field, although presumably she was speaking on behalf of both of the sisters.

Page 104 – A righteous rivalry: It's no surprise that the classical rabbinic interpretations would prefer to see the sisters contending in righteousness—even at the cost of believing in magic—rather than competing for sexual gratification. Thus, a classical midrash counts it as favorable that Rachel and Leah were bargaining over the mandrakes. Since mandrakes were thought to assist fertility, the sisters' bargaining shows that their rivalry was a righteous one waged over the opportunity to bear Jacob's children, and not merely a contest for physical access to Jacob in order to satisfy the wives' sexual urges. (*Hachut Hameshulash*, 593 [citing Sforno].)

Page 106 – God assists Leah: One midrash even imagines God's active participation in the sleeping arrangements for the night of the mandrakes. When Jacob was riding on his donkey towards Rachel's tent and Leah went out to intercept him, Jacob resisted. But (perhaps borrowing from the later story of God controlling Balaam's donkey, Num. 22:22-27) God made the animal bring the unwilling Jacob to Leah's tent because Leah was acting in furtherance of the divine plan that Jacob will sire twelve sons. (Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 2nd ed., 287, and see n. 193.)

Page 112 – The legend of the twin sisters: The midrashic tale that Dinah was a twin could be a specific application of the more general midrashic legend that female twins were born with Jacob's sons. But we can note that midrash tells its initial tale of a twin girl being born with a male Bible figure long before the story of Jacob's family in Haran. The theme begins immediately after the expulsion from Eden. According to the Rabbis, the real cause of the quarrel leading to Cain killing Abel was their competition to marry the twin girl who had been born with Abel. (*Midrash Rabbah*, Gen. 22.7.)

Page 113 – A sandal: The Talmud describes in detail the type of aborted fetus known as a sandal, including the laws of maternal impurity associated with its delivery. (*Niddah* 25b-26a; and see Preuss, *Biblical and Talmudic Medicine*, 417-8.)

Page 115 – The realm of nature is not the realm of prayer: This view is forcefully stated in Talmud *Avodah Zarah* 54b:

Our Rabbis taught: Philosophers asked the elders in Rome, 'If your God has no desire for idolatry, why does He not abolish it?' They replied, 'If it was something of which the world has no need that was worshipped, He would abolish it; but people worship the sun, moon, stars and planets; should He destroy the Universe on account of fools! The world pursues its natural course, and as for the fools who act wrongly, they will have to render an account. Another illustration: Suppose a man stole a measure of wheat and went and sowed it in the ground; it is right that it should not grow, but the world pursues its natural course and as for the fools who act wrongly, they will have to render an account. Another illustration: Suppose a man has intercourse with his neighbor's wife; it is right that she should not conceive, but the world pursues its natural course and as for the fools who act wrongly, they will have to render an account.'

CHAPTER 5

Page 120 – God didn’t reward Rachel until Leah reciprocated Rachel’s sacrifice: Jewish and Christian theologians exhort people to behave morally by following the principle of *imitatio dei*—to act as God would act. Perhaps we can read the birth of Joseph to Rachel as an inversion of this principle. Here, it is God who seems to be modeling on Leah’s reciprocal act of sibling compassion in changing Dinah’s gender.

Page 121 – God granted fertility to Rachel because of the family’s fear of Esau: Several of the Rabbis conclude that God ended Rachel’s barrenness due to her sufferings over her fears about Esau. Previously, Leah had feared that once Jacob was married to his beloved Rachel, he would divorce Leah, and then the wicked Esau would claim her under their parents’ marriage pledges. It was to avoid this outcome that God arranged for Leah to produce children for Jacob. Now Rachel was similarly terrorized by those same concerns. Rachel feared that, if she remained childless, Jacob would divorce her, and Esau could then claim her for his wife. (Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 3a, 76; Rashi, *Commentaries*, v. 1, 334, n. 22; Townsend, *Midrash Tanhuma*, 195.)

Under one variation of this midrash, Rachel’s concern was specifically that, when it was time for Jacob to leave Haran and return with his wives and children to the Promised Land, her father, Laban, would not permit her to leave because she had no children, so he could then give her in a profitable marriage to Esau or to one of Laban’s neighbors. (Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 2nd ed., 287-8, and see n. 199; see also *Midrash Rabbah*, Gen. 73.3.)

Another commentator concludes that God responded not only to Rachel’s concerns about Esau, but also to the fears of Jacob. According to Midrash, Leah had originally cried until she had “tender” eyes over fears that, due to the agreement between Rebekah and Laban, Leah (the older daughter) would be forced to marry Esau (the older son). But without intending to, Jacob had married Leah. Esau might now complain that Jacob had wrongfully taken the bride pledged to Esau, just as Jacob had previously taken Esau’s birthright and blessing. As a result, Jacob now feared that Esau could insist that it would be only fair for Esau to now claim the younger sister, Rachel, especially since she’d not given Jacob any children (a sign of divine disfavor for Jacob’s marriage to Rachel). (Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 3a, 76.)

Page 121 – The Rabbis’ bias against Esau: The early Rabbis wanted to elevate their archetype of piety, Jacob, by heightening the contrast with their archetype of evil, Esau—a character they identified with Israel’s great oppressors, Edom and Rome. Modern readers might therefore ask how much the midrashic assertions that the family feared Esau may be attributable to the rabbinic desire to paint Esau in the worst possible colors.

Page 123 – Another son: Rachel doesn’t ask for more sons (plural); she asks for another son (singular). As they do to explain Leah’s actions, the Rabbis attribute to Rachel the prophetic knowledge that Jacob was destined to sire twelve sons, of whom her Joseph was the eleventh. (Epstein, *Torah Temimah*, 134; *Talmud of the Land of Israel*, vol. 1, p. 340 [*Berachot* 9:5].) Therefore, Rachel asked no more than that she be the one to give birth to the one son remaining to be born to Jacob. (*Midrash Rabbah*, Gen. 72.6; Rashi, *Commentaries*, v. 1, 335, n. 24; Tuchman, *Passions of the Matriarchs*, 273 [citing Abarbanel].)

But we have noted that entire midrashic invention of a Bethel promise to Jacob of twelve sons/tribes was based on what may have been a scribal error in using the singular word-form (in that case, the multiple stones at night—imagined by Midrash to be twelve stones—are transformed to become a singular stone in the morning, Gen 28:11, 18). Similarly, midrash will once again rely upon an instance of singular-plural word form to interpret the upcoming scene where Jacob confers with his wives in the field (Gen. 31:14).

Some of the commentators find great fault in Rachel's choosing a name for her first son that is in essence a demand for another son. The prophecy at Bethel technically seems not about Jacob siring twelve sons, but rather establishing a nation of twelve tribes. According to midrash, because of her righteousness Rachel was initially destined to become the ancestress of all twelve tribes, which would have been founded by her twelve grandchildren (the Bible later reports that Joseph has two sons and Benjamin has ten sons). But because of her inappropriate disregard for the miracle of Joseph's birth, only three of the tribes to receive territory in the Land would now descend from Rachel (Benjamin's tribe and the tribes of Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh). (Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 2nd ed., 288.) Under this interpretation, when Leah ultimately becomes the ancestress of the majority of the tribes, including the especially important ones, she does not gain that great victory in the sisters' competition because of her own righteousness. Leah wins by default because Rachel disqualified herself through ingratitude. (But see *Midrash Rabbah*, Gen. 73.6 [Rachel was asking for a son with a different destiny].)

Page 123 – More Rabbinic presumption of piety: In furthering their efforts to glorify the Matriarchs and Patriarchs, some of the Rabbis see Rachel's second explanation for Joseph's name (add to me another son) as motivated by the pious aim of desiring to bear children for Jacob. But offsetting these favorable commentaries is the critique of Rachel for first failing to express her thanks for Joseph (as Leah did for Judah). (Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 2nd ed., 288.)

Page 124 – Was Rachel Punished for answering first? *Midrash Rabbah*, Gen. 74.4, details the give-and-take among the Sages in the fundamental dispute as to whether Rachel seriously sinned when she answered first before her older sister:

AND RACHEL AND LEAH ANSWERED, etc. [Gen. 31:14]. Why did Rachel die first? R. Judah said: Because she spoke before her sister. Said R. Jose to him: Have you ever seen a man call Reuben and Simeon answer him? Surely, he called Rachel, and Rachel answered him. No difficulty arises on R. Judah's view. On R. Jose's view, she died as a result of the patriarch's curse, as it says, With whomsoever you find your gods, he shall not live [Gen. 31:32], and this was like an error which proceeds from a ruler [Eccl. 10:4].

Page 128 – Jacob personally prepares for the journey home: The text describes the start of Jacob's flight from Haran by telling us that "Jacob arose and lifted his sons and his wives onto the camels..." (Gen. 31:17). This language calls to mind other important Torah journeys that begin with the leader personally making the preparations:

When Abraham sets out to sacrifice Isaac as commanded by God, we're told: "And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and broke the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went to the place of which God had told him." (Gen. 22:3)

When Pharaoh changes his mind and decides to pursue Moses and the Israelites to the Red Sea, we're told: "And he made ready his chariot, and took his people with him." (Ex.14:6-7)

And when Balaam answers God's command to go with the princes of Moab to curse/bless the people of Israel, we're told: "And Balaam rose up in the morning, and saddled his ass, and went with the princes of Moab." (Num. 22:21)

This common literary formula seems to reflect the actor's wholehearted enthusiasm for beginning the task—a desire to answer God's command in the case of Abraham, Jacob, and Balaam, but an implacable hardened heart in the case of Pharaoh.

Page 128 – Rachel's theft of the *terephim* as an act of virtue: *Midrash Rabbah* , Gen. 74.5 states:

AND RACHEL STOLE THE TERAPHIM THAT WERE HER FATHER'S [Gen. 31:19]. Yet her purpose was indeed a noble one for she said: 'What, shall we go and leave this old man [Laban] in his errors!' Therefore Scripture finds it necessary to inform us, AND RACHEL STOLE THE TERAPHIM THAT WERE HER FATHER'S.

Page 129 – Laban used the *teraphim* for divination: The biblical text itself furnishes some clues to the concept that Laban used the *teraphim* for divination. We'll soon read how Rachel successfully hides the *teraphim* in her saddlebag in order to evade Laban's search (Gen. 31:34). In a later episode, when Joseph becomes Viceroy of pagan Egypt, he will instruct that his divination cup be placed secretly into Benjamin's saddlebag because of a search (but in that situation not in order to frustrate a search, but conversely in order to have the object found in the search that Joseph will command). (Gen. 44:4-5)

And many translations of the wage bargaining between Jacob and Laban at the end of the initial fourteen years have Laban saying that he has learned "by divination" (*nichashti*) that God has bestowed prosperity on him because of Jacob's presence. (See translations of Gen. 30:27 in *Etz Hayim Torah/JPS* , p. 178 and note 27; Rashi, *Commentaries* p. 366 and note 27; *Tanach, Stone Ed.*, p. 73.)

Page 129 – Some familiar examples of biblical and midrashic polemics against magic idols: The classic midrashic tale attacking idols is story of young Abraham smashing the clay idols made by his father, Terach, in order to teach him that those icons had no powers. (*Midrash Rabbah*, Gen. 38.13.) Much of the Talmud tractate *Avodah Zerah* is devoted to issues of idolatry. In the Bible, the Golden Calf episode is most familiar episode about Israelite idolatry. (Ex. 32:1-8)

It appears that it was very difficult for the Israelites to live amongst pagan people and not be influenced to adopt local gods. After Jacob, his family, and his troops enter the Promised Land, God summons him to return to the holy place of Bethel. Before he can do that, however, Jacob must purify the people. He demands that they surrender all of the alien gods (presumably *teraphim* idols) in their possession, which Jacob buries. (Gen.35:2-4)

Later, when Michal helps David escape from King Saul, she conceals the escape by putting a mannequin figure into David's bed and claiming that he is ill. (I Sam. 19:13) This figure is generally presumed to be a household idol. (See, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2d Ed., s.v. *Teraphim* [vol. 19, p. 646].)

Page 129 – Rachel’s desperate measures to bear children suggest the same motivation for stealing the *teraphim*: Rachel’s previous actions include: giving Bilhah to Jacob as a wife in order to produce surrogate children who would count as her own; bargaining with Leah for the mandrakes to aid fertility; becoming envious of her sister for having produced children; making a fierce demand to Jacob for children; and not expressing thanks for her first son, but rather naming him as a prayer/request/demand for another son. So it seems likely here that the household gods (*teraphim*) included idols of *Astarte/Ishtar/Ashtoret*, the pagan goddess of fertility and childbirth, and that Rachel took them because she believed that praying to them could help her in her quest for another child.

Page 130 – Irrevocability of a king’s decree: The irrevocability of a king’s decree is a principal plot device in the Book of Esther (Esth. 8:8-12), which tells the familiar Purim story. Even after King Ahasveros learned that the wicked Haman had tricked him into issuing a death decree against all the Jews in the Persian Empire, the King could not directly revoke his immutable royal decree. The Jews were saved only by a second decree allowing them to arm and defend themselves.

Page 130 – Did Jacob’s curse cause Rachel’s death? As noted, some of the commentators find that Jacob’s curse would be irrevocable because of his status as a pious Patriarch, and that he therefore caused Rachel’s death. Some even conclude that Jacob’s curse was so powerful that God had to actively intervene in order even to delay the implementation of Jacob’s curse of death until Rachel could give birth to her second son, Benjamin. (R. Alter, *Genesis*, 171, n. 32; Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 2nd ed., 293.)

But Midrash is seldom content with a single, obvious connection. Some commentators reject outright the proposal that Jacob’s “curse” had anything to do with Rachel’s death—it’s simply that many women die in childbirth, and Rachel happened to be one of them. (Ibn Ezra, *Commentary*, v. 1, 303.) Others point out that Jacob’s curse was conditional. It was restricted to anyone with whom Laban found the *teraphim*, and in fact Laban never finds them. Thus, Jacob must be innocent of causing Rachel’s death. (*Hachut Hameshulash*, 620 [citing Sforno].) Others read what Jacob said as being not a curse or prayer for death, but rather a promise to Laban that Jacob would do justice and have the thief killed. (*Hachut Hameshulash*, 616 [citing Kimchi]; Rashbam, *Commentary*, 192.) Obviously, Jacob never acted on this oath, so again he is blameless in Rachel’s death.

It is possible that Jacob wasn’t even making that promise to Laban, but was announcing a policy to his family—that he would punish any of his household who slipped back into pagan idolatry. Later, Jacob will have to take action to purify his household by burying their foreign gods (presumably *terephim*). (Gen. 35:2-4)

Page 132 – The recurring theme of stones in Jacob’s life: Jacob and Laban commemorate their parting covenant with a heap of stones. This seems especially appropriate for Jacob. Stones mark several significant life events for Jacob, including the midrashic tale of the twelve stones that turn into a single pillow stone when he has his Ladder dream at Bethel (Gen. 28:11, 18), the stone pillar he raises up the following morning (Gen. 28:18), the huge stone he miraculously rolls off the well when he meets Rachel (Gen. 29:10), the second pillar he erects when he returns to Bethel (Gen. 35:14), and the stone that marks Rachel’s grave (Gen. 35:20). There is even a charming midrashic tale that the Ladder dream at Bethel really occurred at Mt. Moriah (which God miraculously moves near to Jacob’s path that night), and thus the twelve

stones that fuse into the pillow/pillar stone are part of the stones making up the altar upon which Abraham had bound the young Isaac for sacrifice. (See Alshech, *Torat Moshe*, 135 [pillow stone at Bethel]; R. Alter, *Biblical Narrative*, 55 [Rachel's gravestone].)

Page 132 – What was Laban demanding for his daughters when he parted from Jacob (Gen. 31:50)? Midrash reads Laban's first demand (don't afflict my daughters) to mean that Jacob must not withhold marital relations from Leah and Rachel. Perhaps Laban has observed the strife between these sisters over marital access to Jacob. One commentator notes that Jacob was already forbidden to withhold conjugal relations from his legal wives under the standard terms of the Jewish marriage contract (which the Patriarch is presumed to observe even though the custom obviously had not yet been fixed). From this it would follow that Laban's prohibition against withholding marital relations applies not to Leah and Rachel, but to Bilhah and Zilpah, who did not have the status of legal wives. Other commentators interpret the bar against afflicting as including not only withholding marital relations but also in general performing any inappropriate or degrading conduct towards the wives. (Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 3a, 105–6; *Hachut Hameshulash*, 623–4 [citing Kimchi]; Ibn Ezra, *Commentary*, v. 1, 307–8; Rashi, *Commentaries*, v. 1, 356, n. 50; Talmud *Yoma* 77a–b.)

CHAPTER 6

Page 137 – Jacob and Joseph: The dramatic parallel between the twenty-two year absences of Jacob and Joseph may suggest more than the divine ironic justice noted by the Rabbis. Joseph's failure to contact his father and brothers seems readily understandable. Joseph's jealous brothers brutally threw him into the pit and then sold him into a life of slavery and imprisonment. (Gen. 37:24, 28) And although Joseph was his father's favorite, it was Jacob who set everything in motion by sending Joseph into peril on a strange task to report on the brothers. (Gen. 37:12-14)

Thus, Joseph's lack of attempt to contact his father, or even to learn about his welfare, could be motivated by anger at his father for failing to protect him from the brothers. The pointed parallel between Jacob's and Joseph's twenty-two year periods of isolation may be intended to point to a similar motivation for Jacob. Perhaps he, too, was angry at his father, Isaac, not only for favoring Esau, but for failing to at least protect Jacob against the threatened revenge promised by the warrior brother Esau.

Page 139 – Two Camps: The challenge of interpreting "*Mahanaim*" also offers an example of how Midrash can reveal the Rabbis' struggles between poetics and practicalities. One commentator may read *Mahanaim* as a grand metaphor for Jacob's life—division and conflict—but another may shrug it off for grammatical reasons, noting that place names often have a plural ending ("-aim") such as *Mitzraim* (Egypt) without necessarily signifying any special duality. (Nachmanides [Ramban], *Commentary on the Torah*, v. 1, 393.)

Page 140 – Two versions of a story in the text: As with many of the Bible's twice-told tales, it is not clear whether the two versions of Jacob dividing his family are telling about separate events, telling the same event from different aspects in order to draw different lessons, or repeating a single event because the redaction process preserved two different versions from earlier oral or written stories that were both regarded as holy or authoritative.

There are many other instances in the Bible of multiple versions of what appears to be the same story, beginning with the two stories of the creation of mankind (Gen. 1:26-27; 2:7, 21-22) and including the thrice-told story of a Patriarch journeying from famine and claiming that his wife was his sister (Gen. 12:12-20; 20:1-14; 26:6-11).

Page 142 – Why did Joseph come before Rachel in the presentation of the family to Esau?

Although the standard rabbinic interpretation is that Joseph was shielding Rachel from Esau's view, midrash offers its typical range of alternative interpretations:

One suggestion reverses the target, proposing that Joseph was trying to shield Esau from Rachel's view. Although she was already pregnant with Benjamin, Rachel was still fearful of being claimed by Esau under the terms of the original marriage compact entered into by Rebekah and Laban for their infant children. So Joseph was concerned that Rachel's terror upon seeing Esau could lead to a miscarriage. (Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 2nd ed., 303, and see n. 262.)

Still another theory is that Rachel put Joseph ahead of her so that she could keep him in her view in order to guard him from Esau. Rachel would be understandably overprotective of this son finally born to her after so many years of childlessness. (*Hachut Hameshulash*, 657 [citing Kimchi].)

On the other hand, the contemporary commentator Richard Elliot Friedman suggests that Joseph's action might not have been a praiseworthy attempt to protect his mother. Instead, Joseph may have pushed himself ahead of Rachel simply as an expression of his youthful vanity and conceit, personal traits of his that will be examined in midrash later when the Rabbis consider Joseph's story. (R. E. Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah*, see note at 114.)

Page 145 – Dinah reforms Job: To show that Jacob was wrong to fear a marriage between Esau and Dinah, midrashic legend relates how later in life Dinah went on to marry the gentile Job, who converted to Judaism and became a virtuous man because of her influence (demonstrating how she similarly would have been able to reform Esau). (Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 3a, 163; Ginzberg, *Legends of the Bible*, 266; *Midrash Rabbah*, Gen. 57.4, 76.9; Townsend, *Midrash Tanhuma*: 220.)

Page 146 – The sins of the fathers: The Bible itself shows some inconsistency concerning punishment of innocents for the sins of others. However, some commentators insist that the Bible does not display inconsistency but rather records a historical process of maturation through the continuing development of more enlightened ethical concepts. For example, we can contrast the early dire threat of Deut. 5:9 (the sins of the fathers shall be visited upon their descendants) with the later consoling parable of Ezek. 18:1-32 (the fathers shall eat bitter fruit but their children's teeth shall not be set on edge).

Page 149 – Midrashic defense of Dinah and Leah: One commentary observes that when the first sentence of the Dinah chapter states that she was born to Jacob, it recalls the previous midrashic tale that Dinah was conceived as a male, but that Leah's prayers to save Rachel from further humiliation resulted in a change of gender so that Dinah was "born" female. Perhaps, then, Dinah's act of "going out," which would in the majority view deserve criticism as wantonness in a female, might be excused as the result of Dinah retaining some of her original "masculine" character traits—in this case, having a curiosity to explore (which the Rabbis apparently regard as appropriate in a boy, but inappropriate in a girl). (Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 3a, 162.)

Another commentary blames Dinah for going out, but concludes that Dinah was not imitating her mother, Leah, but her father, Jacob, whose life was marked by his wanderings and by being ruled by passion and love. (Aschkenasy, *Woman at the Window*, 55.)

Some of the commentaries defend Dinah by focusing on the opening phrase stating that Dinah went out “to see the daughters of the land.” Since she was then the only daughter in a family of eleven brothers, it is understandable that she would go out to seek female companionship of girls her own age. (Attar, *Or Hachayim*, 283.)

Or perhaps Dinah didn’t even initiate this situation. One version of the story presumes that Prince Shechem, who had seen Dinah from a distance, arranged for neighborhood girls to dance in front of Jacob’s tents in order to entice Dinah to come out where he could seize her. (Attar, *Or Hachayim*, 283; Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 3a, 166; Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 2nd ed., 307.)

Other commentaries conclude that Dinah may have been so young—perhaps only six or eight years old—that she did not deserve blame in this situation. (Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 3a, 168.)

Page 150 – Would even a degrading rape justify the brothers’ revenge? In trying to determine just what happened, the Rabbis also deal with the final word in the verse describing Shechem’s act: *vay’anechah* (he defiled/degraded/humbled/afflicted/violated her). The previous word in the verse already stated that Shechem had sexual intercourse with Dinah—he lay with her (*vayishkav otah*)—so what more does the final word say? Some of the commentaries attribute a very specific meaning: If the first term (he lay with her) refers to normal intercourse, then the second term (he defiled her) must refer to unnatural (anal) intercourse. (*Midrash Rabbah*, Gen. 80.5; Rashi, *Commentaries*, v. 1, 383, n. 2.) In this way, classical midrash increases the culpability of Shechem, possibly in order to justify the coming vengeance by Jacob’s sons.

Some commentators stop short of concluding that this was clearly a case of rape, rather than seduction or mutual love. (R. E. Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah*, see note at 115–6; Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women*, 181–2, 189.) Some of the defenders of Prince Shechem nevertheless retain a justification for the brothers’ revenge by concluding that even if this were more in the nature of a seduction, Dinah was a young virgin and would have felt physical pain rather than pleasure, so that the situation should be regarded as if it were rape. (Ibn Ezra, *Commentary*, v. 1, 327 [she suffered pain from the sexual act]; Attar, *Or Hachayim*, 283 [the act warranted punishment as if it were rape]; *Hachut Hameshulash*, 665 [the act warranted punishment as if it were rape, citing Kimchi].)

Page 154 – Jacob was eventually active against Shechem: Midrash cannot accept that Jacob, now Israel, could have remained passive and uninvolved in the Dinah incident as depicted in the text. The Rabbis tell the story that, after his sons attack Shechem, Jacob came to their aid with his army in order to deter Shechem’s political allies from joining in the battle. (*Midrash Rabbah*, Gen. 80.10; Rashi, *Commentaries*, v. 1, 534, n. 22.)

Page 157 – One Version of the Legend of Dinah’s Daughter: (From Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 2nd ed., 347–49):

When Simon and Levi massacred the men of Shechem, Dinah refused to leave the city and follow her brethren, saying, “Whither shall I carry my shame?” But Simon swore he would marry her, as he did later, and when she died in Egypt, he took her body to the

Holy Land and buried it there. Dinah bore her brother a son, and from her union with Shechem, the son of Hamor, sprang a daughter, Asenath by name, afterward the wife of Joseph. When this daughter was born to Dinah, her brethren, the sons of Jacob, wanted to kill her, that the finger of men might not point at the fruit of sin in their father's house. But Jacob took a piece of tin, inscribed the Holy Name upon it, and bound it about the neck of the girl, and he put her under a thorn-bush, and abandoned her there. An angel carried the babe down to Egypt, where Potiphar adopted her as his child, for his wife was barren. Years thereafter, when Joseph travelled through the land as viceroy, the maidens threw gifts at him, to make him turn his eyes in their direction and give them the opportunity of gazing upon his beauty. Asenath possessed nothing that would do as a present, therefore she took off the amulet suspended from her neck, and gave it to him. Thus Joseph became acquainted with her lineage, and he married her, seeing that she was not an Egyptian, but one connected with the house of Jacob through her mother.

Page 160 – Rabbinic justifications for the revenge by Dinah's brothers: Maimonides (the Rambam) says that the entire kingdom was properly punished because it is the obligation of citizens to establish effective courts of law to punish the worst transgressions of even the royal family. (Rambam [Maimonides], *Mishneh Torah*, Bk. 14, p. 234 [Kings and Wars 9.14]; Weissman, *Midrash Says*, 327.)

On the other hand, Nachmanides rejects this analysis and instead furnishes a plausible scenario that would avoid the brothers' culpability: Their initial plan was to impose such a harsh condition (circumcision) on the proposed marriage that their offer was sure to be rejected by the Shechemites, whereupon the brothers would retrieve Dinah by force, as they promised: "But if you will not listen to us, to be circumcised, then we will take our daughter, and we will be gone." (Gen. 34:17) And in the unlikely event that the Shechemites did agree to undergo circumcision, all that the brothers intended to do was to enter the town on the third day, when they couldn't be stopped, and rescue Dinah. The universal slaughter of the males by Simeon and Levi was not part of the plan originally approved by all the brothers, but was simply a case of violence that got out of hand when the two brothers went to retrieve their sister. (Nachmanides [Ramban], *Commentary on the Torah*, v. 1, 416.) Nachmanides concludes that, if the end result was suffering and death for the Shechemites, then the city's population must have been guilty of other grave violations of law and morality (not specified in the Bible) that would have merited such punishment. (Nachmanides [Ramban], *Commentary on the Torah*, v. 1, 419.)

Another commentator likewise concludes that the men of Shechem must have deserved death, either because they had assisted Prince Shechem in abducting Dinah (and so were kidnappers, a capital offence), or because they surrounded the palace and tried to block the brothers' rescue of Dinah. (Attar, *Or Hachayim*, 286–8.)

Some commentaries suggest a fine moral distinction between the brothers' actions. Only two of the sons of Jacob (Simeon and Levi—identified in the text as "Dina's brothers") carried out the murderous revenge against all the males of the kingdom of Shechem. (Gen. 34:25) As the text hints, they were acting as Dinah's brothers, fulfilling their familial obligation to defend, avenge, and rescue their sister. On the other hand, the text implies that it was the other "sons of Jacob" who followed them and plundered the city (Gen. 34:27-29). (*Etz Hayim Torah*, 210 [translation of Gen. 34:27, and see *p'shat* n. 26, 27].) Could this imply that while the murder by two of Dinah's brothers was justified, the pillage by Jacob's other sons was done in self-interest, and their theft was thereby more culpable than the mass killings by Simeon and Levi?

Page 160 – Intermarriage with the Hittites: The Bible previously describes how Esau’s initial marriages with two Hittite women caused great unhappiness to Isaac and Rebekah (Gen. 26:34-35). In Dinah’s story, intermarriage with the Hittites is precisely what Hamor and Shechem propose (and to which the sons of Jacob purport to agree).

It is even possible that from the beginning Prince Shechem was utilizing a local custom of marriage by abduction in order to force a marriage to Dinah, either because he was already infatuated with her or he wanted to increase the wealth and power of the kingdom that he would inherit.

Gen. 34 includes some possible clues supporting the interpretation that, although the Dinah story does not offer a general warning against intermarriage, the story may be commenting upon the ancient Israelites’ need to avoid family entanglements with the Canaanite tribes who will have to be ousted from the Promised Land. Perhaps Dinah’s real culpability was simply in going out to see the daughters “of the land,” pointing to the risk of assimilation and, ultimately, intermarriage with the Hittites. Other references in the Dinah story to the underlying issues of land and conquest include Jacob purchasing some land from the Shechemites (Gen. 33: 19); identification of Shechem as the prince of the land (Gen. 34:2); Hamor’s negotiation with Jacob’s family where he emphasizes economic benefits to the Israelites from assimilation and intermarriage (Gen. 34:9-10); the negotiation by Hamor and Shechem with the Shechemites where they emphasize the economic benefits to the Shechemites (Gen. 34:23); the brothers’ plunder of the city (Gen. 34:27-29); and Jacob’s sole comment on the killing and plunder being expressed in terms of the risk of attack by other local tribes (Gen. 34:30).

CHAPTER 7

Page 167 – The Bethel promise was for twelve tribes, not twelve sons: *Midrash Rabbah*, Gen. 68.11 states:

AND HE TOOK OF THE STONES OF THE PLACE [Gen. 28:11]. R. Judah said: He took twelve stones, saying: ‘The Holy One, blessed be He, has decreed that twelve tribes should spring forth. Now neither Abraham nor Isaac has produced them. If these twelve stones cleave to one another, then I know that I will produce the twelve tribes.’ When therefore the twelve stones united, he knew that he was to produce the twelve tribes.

As noted above, the fanciful rabbinic concept of multiple stones fusing into one relies upon a simple grammatical inconsistency in the biblical text—the stones are referred to in the plural just before Jacob’s dream (Gen.28:11), but they are described as a single stone when he wakes up (Gen. 28:18).

Page 167 – Calculating the numbers of sons and tribes: Doing the math about the twelve sons/tribes can be confusing. If we no longer count Joseph among the sons because Jacob adopts his two sons in his place, then there would be thirteen sons. But the prophecy of twelve—the twelve stones fusing into a single-pillow stone for Jacob at Bethel—is talking about twelve territorial tribes fusing into a single nation. For purposes of counting the twelve tribes that will share in the inheritance of the Land, Manasseh and Ephraim are added to the twelve actual sons (for a total of fourteen), but Joseph is not counted because he is represented through his sons, and Levi is also not counted because that tribe is “tithed”—The Levites are the one-tenth of the

remaining tribes who are dedicated to the service of God through their priestly duties, and therefore not allocated any particular territory in the land. (Attar, *Or Hachayim*, 433–4; Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 2nd ed., 402-3; Townsend, *Midrash Tanhuma*, 298.)

Page 169 – Jacob’s pattern of silences: Besides his silence at the Bilhah-Reuben incident, some of Jacob’s other surprising silences occur when Laban defends the wedding night hoax, when Rachel and Leah offer their handmaidens to be his wives, when Leah claims her right to sleep with him because of the mandrakes exchange, and when he hears of the incident between Dinah and Shechem.

Page 169 – Reuben’s loss of firstborn status: Although Reuben does not suffer an immediate loss of status as Jacob’s firstborn son as a consequence of the Bilhah episode, his situation does ultimately change. It will eventually be Joseph, and not Reuben, who will receive the firstborn’s double inheritance portion (when Jacob adopts Joseph’s two sons as Jacob’s direct heirs to share on an equal basis with his other sons, Gen. 48:5-6). But because the text immediately following the Bilhah incident does not foreshadow such a punishment, Reuben’s demotion seems more readily attributable to other causes, such as the questions raised by the Rabbis as to his technical legitimacy as a result of Jacob’s mistaken state of mind during Leah’s wedding night. (See Attar, *Or Hachayim*, 251–2.) Or perhaps this is just another variation of the recurrent biblical struggles over the rights of the firstborn, expressed in the stories of Cain and Able, Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, Leah and Rachel, and possibly finally resolved with Aaron and Moses. (Could that final resolution of the issue be marked by the tenth plague of the killing of the firstborn?)

Page 169 – Midrashic speculation on Reuben moving the beds: Midrashic inventiveness runs wild on the issue of just what Reuben did (other than actually having sexual relations with Bilhah) as described in Gen. 35:22:

Later in the text, the Tribe of Reuben will be assigned to affirm a curse upon those who have sexual relations with their father’s wife. (Deut. 27:13, 20) Some of the Rabbis infer that being assigned this role means that Reuben couldn’t have actually slept with Bilhah, so he must have committed only some sort of similar or related offence, like rearranging the beds.

Some commentators manage to find virtue in Reuben’s act of moving the marital beds. In the same verse reporting whatever it was that Reuben did, the next sentence states that Jacob had (only) twelve sons. This may indicate that in his grief over Rachel’s death, Jacob moved his bed away and ceased having marital relations with any of his surviving wives. So perhaps Reuben moved Jacob’s bed back to the women’s tents out of shame for Leah and the maidservants, or wanting to save Leah from a continuation of the jealousy that had so consumed her during Rachel’s lifetime, or in order to induce Jacob to return to his remaining wives and fulfill his spousal obligations. (Ibn Ezra, *Commentary*: v. 1, 334; Hirsch, *Pentateuch*, 159 [see translation and note].)

A very noble but far-fetched explanation of Reuben’s actions speculates that Reuben had prophetic knowledge that he would ultimately lose his birthright to Joseph (son of Rachel). He therefore rumbled the bedclothes or lay near (not “with”) Bilhah to give the appearance of sexual immorality, in order that Jacob’s ultimate preference for Joseph would be attributed solely to Reuben’s shortcomings rather than any faults of Reuben’s mother, Leah. (Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 3a, 199.) On this analysis, Reuben’s action would be revisiting the theme of

saving another from humiliation, a theme that has already repeatedly appeared in the lives of Jacob, Leah, and Rachel.

If the offence were only about moving a bed, it may have reflected that Jacob's bed previously had been regularly located in Rachel's tent. After Rachel's death, Jacob may have moved his bed into the tent of Bilhah, Rachel's handmaiden, to be consoled by her, or he may have moved Bilhah's bed to his tent. Reuben would have seen this as an affront to Leah, Jacob's senior wife, so perhaps he replaced Bilhah's bed with Leah's. (Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 3a, 198; *Hachut Hameshulash*, 685–6 [citing Kimchi]; Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 2nd ed., 318; Talmud *Shabbat* 55b.)

Other commentators infer a darker motive for Reuben interfering with Jacob's sleeping arrangements: This was not about Leah at all. Reuben might simply be acting out another replay of the battle over the rights of the firstborn, the strongest recurring theme in the lives of Leah, Rachel, Esau, and Jacob. Reuben may have feared that if Jacob continued making his own preferred sleeping arrangements, more children would be born, which would dilute Reuben's prospective inheritance. Reuben would be the likely son to take action to prevent further expansion of Jacob's family because Reuben would be the one whose economic interest would be most diluted—as the firstborn, he expected a double inheritance portion. Midrash speculates that Reuben had to worry only about Bilhah producing additional children because Leah (here treated as the older of the two sisters) was by then too old to have children, and Zilpah was either dead or would not have been approached by Jacob because of her primary loyalties as Leah's handmaiden. Under this version, Reuben's crass actions were punished measure for measure when he eventually lost his double inheritance birthright to Joseph, whose two sons each receive a portion equal to each of Reuben and the other brothers. (Nachmanides [Ramban], *Commentary on the Torah*, v. 1, 430.)

Page 172 – Esau's sons forced the attack: In one version of the midrashic tale of Leah's death, Esau was reluctant to attack the mourning family but was forced to do so by his sons. They were angry that their uncle Jacob had received the oldest son's double inheritance portion from Isaac that should have gone to their father. (Jub. 37:1–9, at pp. 214–6.) This version conflicts with other midrashic stories that portray the previous division of Isaac's inheritance between Jacob and Esau as having been controlled by Esau. (See Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 2nd ed., 320, and n. 316.)

Page 173 – The Bible's first story of illness: The Rabbis note that Jacob was the first individual in the Bible who suffers from illness that causes his death. They contrast the blindness of Isaac with the sickness of his son Jacob (although Jacob's vision was also affected by the time of his death). In analyzing the blindness of his father, Isaac, the Rabbis suggest a variety of explanations for that affliction (as a consequence of his near-sacrifice by Abraham, or as a gift from God to shield Isaac from learning of Esau's iniquities, or simply as a metaphor for Isaac's moral blindness in favoring Esau's savory meats over Jacob's scholarly wisdom and righteousness). Whatever the cause, Isaac apparently feared that his blindness signaled his impending death. This may be what convinced him that it was time to bless Esau. But since Isaac then survives for several more decades after giving the blessing, it is clear that Isaac's blindness had nothing to do with his life span. Midrash takes a different view of Jacob's illness in Talmud *Baba Metzia* 87a:

Until Abraham there was no old age; whoever wished to speak to Abraham would speak to Isaac, and the reverse. [People could not distinguish them because God had caused Isaac's appearance to be identical to Abraham's in order to squelch the community's doubts that a one hundred year old man could have fathered Isaac; now Abraham desired to end the resulting confusion of identities.] Thereupon he prayed, and old age came into existence, as it is written, And Abraham was old and well-stricken in age. Until Jacob there was no illness: then Jacob came and prayed, and illness came into being, as it is written, And one told Joseph, Behold, thy father is sick.

Noting that mention of Jacob's illness is immediately followed by his deathbed blessings for his sons, the Rabbis deduce that Jacob had asked God to inflict him with evident illness preceding his death so that (unlike the debacle of Isaac's "deathbed" blessings) Jacob would know when it was time to gather his sons and bestow his final blessings. Talmud *Baba Metzia* 87a.

Page 174 – Jacob's other grandchildren: The double inheritance to Joseph's two sons does more than merely reassign the birthright privileges to Joseph. It is also unmistakable evidence of Joseph's elevation to leadership over his brothers, especially when we contrast what happens to the other pairs of grandsons referred to in Jacob's story. The other grandsons mentioned are sons of Joseph's only rivals for leadership of the brothers—Reuben and Judah.

We are told that Reuben, Jacob's eldest son who would ordinarily be entitled to the double inheritance portion, also has two sons. But we only meet them when Reuben foolishly tries to ease Jacob's fears about letting Benjamin go to Egypt. Reuben offers the lives his two sons as sureties for Benjamin's safe return. This would mean, of course, that if disaster befell Benjamin, Jacob's loss would only be compounded by the loss of these grandchildren. This offer clearly fails to relieve Jacob's anxieties over his family's welfare, and he forcefully rejects Reuben's proposition (Gen. 42:37). (Bialik, *Book of Legends*, 47; Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 3b, 517–8.)

The theme of loss of two of Jacob's grandsons from a rival of Joseph for leadership also resurfaces in a later Bible episode involving Judah, when two of Judah's sons, Er and Onan, die after they marry Tamar (Gen. 38:7-10).

Page 176 – Jacob felt guilt for Rachel's death: Some of the commentators believe that much of the misfortune in Jacob's life results from his failure to honor his initial pledge to God at Bethel that upon his safe return from exile in Haran he would come to Bethel to worship and tithe (dedicate a one-tenth portion) from his wealth in thanks for God's support and protection (Gen. 28:20-23). Jacob delayed fulfilling that vow until God expressly commanded it when He appeared to Jacob just after the Dinah episode and just before the death of Rachel. This placement of God's reminder to Jacob between two major tragedies in his life to that point suggests to some of the Rabbis that Jacob's failure to promptly honor his vow was the cause of both Dinah's and Rachel's sufferings. (Attar, *Or Hachayim*, 400.)

Others conclude that Jacob's guilt for Rachel's death was related to the burial cave at Machpelah. Because Jacob had been tricked into marrying Leah first, his second marriage to Rachel violated the later biblical prohibition against marrying two sisters. (Lev. 18:18) Therefore, to bury both sisters in Machpelah would have dishonored Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Rebekah. Even though Rachel died first, she was Jacob's second wife. So in the Promised Land (and in Machpelah), where the Patriarchs and Matriarchs observed even those biblical laws that had not yet been promulgated (including the prohibition against marrying two sisters during their

joint lifetimes), Leah was Jacob's only valid wife and therefore the only one who could be buried in Machpelah. (Nachmanides [Ramban], *Commentary on the Torah*, v. 1, 574–5.)

Page 179 – Survival of the Levites: Because members of the Levites lived throughout the tribal territories, some survived with the tribe of Judah in the Southern Kingdom, accompanying them on the temporary Second Exile to Babylonia. Since qualification for the priesthood (as *Kohanim*) or Temple service (as Levites) turned on direct patrilineal descent from Levi, the remnants of that tribe maintained their special identity rather than being absorbed into the tribe of Judah.