

VAYEITZEI 5786

We are all no doubt familiar with Rachel's extraordinary act of supreme kindness when, to avoid her sister Leah's humiliation, she divulges to her the secretive signs that she (Rachel) and Yaakov devised to prevent the devious Lavan from switching brides on the wedding night. Both on verses 29:25 and 30:22, Rashi references the Talmud (Bava Batra 123a) and Midrash (B'reishit Rabba 73:4) and states that it was this very act of exceptional sensitivity that merited Rachel's having her first child, Yosef. Moreover, what made Rachel's chesed that much more remarkable was that it was done in the hush privacy between two sisters with Rachel seeking no accolades or the applause of a crowd to acknowledge her deed. A true act of Jewish heroism as Rav Soloveitchik has so defined it.

But even beyond these ethical features of Rachel's outstanding deed, the Midrash (Eicha Rabba, P'sichta 24) takes this act of Rachel's willingness to forego what was legitimately hers to an entirely new level. Here is the abridged quote. "When the Holy One blessed be He saw the Temple [in ruins] … He was weeping and saying: Woe is Me for My Temple. My children, where are you? … What could I do for you? I warned you but you did not repent. The Holy One blessed be He said to Jeremiah: '… Go and call Avraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov, and Moshe from their graves, as they know how to weep.' [But neither the Forefathers nor Moshe were able to elicit HaShem's mercy] …

"At that moment, Rachel Imeinu interjected before the Holy One blessed be He and said: 'Master of the universe, it is revealed before You that Your servant Yaakov loved me abundantly and worked for my father seven years for me. When those seven years were completed and the time for my marriage to my husband arrived, my father plotted to exchange me with my sister for my husband. The matter was extremely difficult for me when I became aware of that plot, and I informed my husband and gave him a signal to distinguish between my sister and me so that my father would be unable to exchange me. Afterward, I regretted what I had done and suppressed my desire. I had mercy on my sister, so that she would not be led to humiliation. In the evening, they exchanged me with my sister for my husband, and I transmitted to my

sister all the signals that I had given to my husband, so that he would think that she is Rachel. Moreover, I entered beneath the bed on which he was lying with my sister. He would speak with her and she would be silent, and I would respond to each and every matter that he said, so that he would not identify my sister's voice. I performed an act of kindness for her, I was not jealous of her, and I did not lead her to humiliation.

"If I, who am flesh and blood, was not jealous of my rival, and I did not lead her to humiliation and shame, You who are a living and eternal merciful King, why were You jealous of idol worship that has no substance, and You exiled my descendants, and they were killed by sword, and the enemies did to them as they pleased?' Immediately, the mercy of the Holy One blessed be He was aroused and He said: 'For you, Rachel, I will restore Israel to its place.' That is what is written: "So said HaShem: A voice is heard in Rama, wailing, bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be consoled for her children, as they are not" (Yirmiyahu 31:14). And it is written: "So said HaShem: Restrain your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears, as there is reward for your actions … And there is hope for your future, the utterance of HaShem, and your children will return to their borders" (ad loc. 15-16).

Just imagine: what our Forefathers and Moshe were unable to accomplish, the young Rachel, with her utterly selfless act of compassion for her sister, prevails upon the mercy of the Almighty to promise that, notwithstanding the devastation of the Churban, the Jewish people will return to their Land. In a word, we are in Israel today because of Rachel's phenomenal almost superhuman deed!

And there's more: taking note of all the invaluable and wonderful results of Rachel's virtuous behavior, there is one final and important observation to be made. For this, we turn to a profound insight by Rav Eliyahu Dessler (Michtav MeiEliyahu 1, p. 99). He states that "the past is KULO ZICHRONOT, all memories, the future is KULO DIMYONOT, all imagery, but the present is ZEH HACHAYIM KULO NISYONOT, this is life - all tests. We are enjoined to live in the here and now, and to determine a given course of action based upon what is happening now and not to allow the past or the future to influence our decision. If Rachel had considered the past seven years during which she had pined and waited for Yaakov, she surely would have not shared her signals with her sister. Had she allowed herself to think about the future and what she was risking by allowing her sister to marry Yaakov and possibly forfeiting her opportunity to have children with

him, she certainly would have thought twice about Leah taking her place under the wedding canopy.

But Rachel chose a "road less traveled". She acted in a totally unexpected fashion. She realized that in her present HOVEH situation, her sister might suffer disgrace and mortification if she proceeded and not given the signs to Leah. And so, Rachel, recognizing the ethical imperative of the moment, dismisses the past and ignores the future although she had every right not to do so. Instead, Rachel heroically withdraws and cedes her wedding night to her sister. And for this, not only does she merit having children, but her reward is so incredibly enormous that the entire future of the Jewish people owes its destiny to this one deed by one very righteous woman.

The importance of living in the present cannot be gainsaid, especially when that present demands a certain ethical action and, notwithstanding the difficulties involved, impels one to act courageously and do the right thing. This is a message sharply and eloquently made by the eminent literary scholar, C.S. Lewis, in his trenchant commentary to a scene in Shakespeare's King Lear (Act 3, Scene 7).

"It is our attempt to guess the plot of a drama in which we are the characters. But how can the characters in a play guess the plot? We are not the playwright, we are not the producer, we are not even the audience. We are on the stage. To play well the scenes in which we are "on" concerns us much more than to guess about the scenes that follow it.

"In King Lear, there is a man who is such a minor character that Shakespeare has not given him even a name: he is merely "First Servant". All the characters around him - Regan, Cornwall, and Edmund - have fine long-term plans. They think they know how the story is going to end, and they are quite wrong. The servant has no such delusions. He has no notion of how the play is going to go. But he understands the present scene. He sees an abomination (the blinding of old Gloucester) taking place. He will not stand it.

"His sword is out and pointed at his master's breast in a moment: then Regan stabs him dead from behind. That is his whole part: eight lines all told. But if it were real life and not a play, that is the part it would be best to have acted...

"But we think thus because we keep on assuming that we know the play. We do not know the play. We do not even know whether we are in Act I or Act V. We do not know who are the major and who the minor characters. The Author knows. The audience, if

there is an audience may have an inkling. But we, never seeing the play from outside, never meeting any characters except the tiny minority who are "on" in the same scenes as ourselves, wholly ignorant of the future and very imperfectly informed about the past, cannot tell at what moment the end ought to come. That it will come when it ought, we may be sure; but we waste our time in guessing when that will be. That it has a meaning we may be sure, but we cannot see it. When it is over, we may be told. We are led to expect that the Author will have something to say to each of us on the part that each of us has played. The playing it well is what matters infinitely."

In our perspective on life - our hashkafa - we certainly subscribe to the belief that individuals can change the course of history. But, it's not only those great men and women about whom the historical chronicles extol. Those consequential and momentous changes can be made by the common individual, by everyone. You see, "if all the world is a stage", not only do we not know which scene in the play we are in, we don't even know whether it's a comedy or tragedy or a combination of both. The one thing we can know is to choose and act the best we can in the times we find ourselves - in our own special and unique present!

Long ago, a beautiful young maiden acted in the "now" and did what was right. She contained her feelings, suppressed her legitimate rights, all so that her sister's dignity would not be compromised and shamed. And in so doing, her stature rose to the level of the heroic. We can also aspire to emulate Rachel's incomparable deed. For, like Rachel, who knows how our behavior will reverberate over time. It may save our family, redeem our life. It may even change the world!