

## The Gratitude of Leah

VaYetzeh 5782

The Talmud (Brachot 7b) teaches us, quite surprisingly, that Leah was the first person to truly express gratitude to the Almighty, when she named her fourth son, Judah, noting, “this time, I shall thank Hashem.”

While there is quite a bit of evidence that earlier figures, such as Noach and Avraham, actually expressed gratitude at various points in their life, it would seem that Chazal were specifically impressed by Leah’s expression of gratitude, and attributed to her a conceptual breakthrough. What exactly made Leah’s *hoda’ah* so remarkable?

I would modestly suggest the following interpretation of this puzzling comment. When she named her first three sons, Leah articulated a sense of bitterness at the state of her marriage, lamenting Jacob’s preference for Rachel. Her focus, quite clearly, was on that which was broken in her life, on that which she did not have.

In the instance of Reuven, Leah notes her state of oppression, and expresses hope that now that she has given birth, Yaakov will finally love her. When Shimon follows, and Leah’s hopes, apparently, remain unrequited, Leah simply observes that the Almighty knows that she is “*senu’ah*”, despised. There is no sense of hope or aspiration for a change in the status quo. When Levi follows upon that, there is unbridled optimism that surely Yaakov will be drawn towards Leah, the bearer of three sons. The common denominator in all of these cases, which so painfully oscillate between hope and despair, is Leah’s obsession with that which is absent from her life.

And yet, despite the fact that this deeply painful part of Leah’s existence did not change, and candidly, would never change, Leah made a fundamental choice upon the birth of her fourth son. She ceased to focus on all that she did not have, but rather, on the very many blessings- four, in particular- which the Almighty indeed had bestowed upon her.

If there was any doubt regarding just how much gratitude was necessary for these four children, one need not look far. The sense of bottomless despair that Rachel both feels and articulates at her childlessness, telling Yaakov that her situation is incompatible with life itself, *have li vanim v’im ayin, metah anochi*, is a clear and present reminder that Leah did well to reflect on what she had heretofore taken for granted.

Prior instances of gratitude in the Torah occurred, but only when those who proffered them had received that for which they yearned. Noach, after being saved from the deluge, offers *korbanot*. Avraham, after being promised both the inheritance of the Land and offspring, constructs an altar and is *koreh b'shem Hashem*. Sarah, on the birth of Yitzchak, breaks out into joyous praise.

To be sure, each and everyone of these expressions of gratitude is not only appropriate, but, morally and ethically, imperative. The halakha would later normalize, in the form of a Korban Todah, this modality of gratitude, mandating that when individuals are spared from objectively dangerous situations that they are formally obligated to express gratitude.

And yet, Leah is the very first, as noted by Chazal, to engage in a second typology of gratitude: a recognition that even if one has not received all that one desires, even that which one desires most, gratitude remains essential.

Only Leah, whose sense of being “*senu'ab*”, at the very least, secondary to Rachel, never abated<sup>1</sup>, is able, when naming Yehuda, to compartmentalize the tragedies and disappointments of her life and consciously express gratitude for the blessings which she does have. .

## II.

Indeed, this is the very essence of gratitude. None of us have perfect lives, and, if we wait for our lives to be without difficulty or disappointment of any sort, surely, we shall never properly express gratitude. On the contrary, our obligation to express gratitude is predicated not on the fact that we already possess everything for which we may aspire, but on a deep appreciation for that which we do have.

Though, for Rambam, almost all of the details of prayer are rabbinic in nature, with the exception of the daily requirement to pray itself, it is striking that expressing thanks, *hoda'ah*, is amongst the very few elements of daily prayer which Rambam presents as biblically mandated.

This *daily* requirement of *hoda'ah*, by its very nature, can not possibly be reserved for moments when we have been blessed with something for which we have yearned for years or decades. Rather, it clearly

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, it is after Yehuda's birth that Leah bitterly accuses Rachel of stealing Yaakov from her, *ha'me'at kachtech et ishi*. Likewise, when naming her sixth and final son, Leah, painfully, once again expresses the hope that Yaakov will establish a primary residence with her, *ba'pa'am yizbileni ishi*

reflects the mode of *boda'ah* the Leah was perhaps the first to articulate, a sense of gratitude for those things which we have in our lives, that we might otherwise, simply take as entitlements.

This, quite clearly, was Leah's epiphany, and it is our lodestar as well.