

Sermon | Parshat Vayeitzei
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The first Jewish President of the United States is about to take the oath of office. Sitting in the crowd, is his mother. As the scene before her unfolds, the dignitary sitting beside her leans over and whispers, "You must be beaming with pride." She turns to her to respond, with a smile from ear to ear, and says, "Yes, I am, because my other son is a doctor!"

The humor of the joke hinges on our shared assumption in the American Jewish community that there is no better way for a Jewish child to make their parents proud than to become a doctor. For years, Jewish parents have promulgated the expectation that their children study hard in school, attend a prestigious college, and continue to medical school or some other post-college professional program. In some ways, these expectations have benefited us individually and collectively in the Jewish community. But I imagine that there are a few stories of young Jewish Americans who internalized these expectations, taking upon themselves a profession that they did not really want. There is great power in communicating our expectations and promulgating certain assumptions, but that power may lead to both positive and negative outcomes. Parshat Vayeitzei helps us to explore this notion about the risk of internalizing others' expectations for ourselves.

The *parsha* begins with Jacob fleeing from his brother, Esau, and heading towards Haran. There, he will meet his wives, build a family, and amass great wealth. But at the outset, we know very little about Jacob's future wives. The Torah tells us only that Leah was the older daughter, and Rachel the younger. And about them it says,

וְעֵינֵי לֵאָה רַבּוֹת

Leah had weak eyes;

וְרַחֵל הָיְתָה יְפֹת־תֹּאֵר וְיִפְתַּ מְרֹאֶה:

Rachel was shapely and beautiful.¹

Others in the Torah are characterized like Rachel, both men and women. Joseph is described in the exact same way when he is taken into the household of the Egyptian Potiphar, וַיְהִי יוֹסֵף יְפֹה־וְיָפֵה מְרֹאֶה; תֹּאֵר וְיִפְתָּ מְרֹאֶה “Joseph was well-built and handsome,”² and Esther too is described as יְפֹת־תֹּאֵר.³ Considering those passages, we know that the Torah is making a statement about Rachel’s physical beauty, and juxtaposing that with something different about Leah.

I cannot find an example where the Torah describes another character’s eyes as *rakot*, weak, as it does for Leah. But the Torah does, in at least two places, describe the eyes of other characters. In last week’s *parsha* we read, וַיְהִי כִּי־זָקֵן יִצְחָק וַתִּכְהֶינּוּ עֵינָיו מְרֹאֶת, “When Isaac was old and his eyes were too dim to see...”⁴ In the narrative that follows, Jacob tricks his father into believing that he is his older, ruddier, and hairier brother, Esau. It appears that he is only able to do this because his father’s eyes had become too dim to see. Why were his eyes dim? There is a *midrash*⁵ which suggests that when Isaac was bound upon the altar, and his father was about to slay him as commanded by God, the heavens opened up, and the ministering angels looked down upon the scene, and wept. As their tears fell to the earth, they dropped upon Isaac’s eyes and dimmed them forever. Here, a moment of pain, anguish, and sadness leads to the dimming of Isaac’s eyes.

¹ Genesis 29:17.

² Genesis 39:6.

³ Esther 2:7.

⁴ Genesis 27:1.

⁵ Genesis Rabbah 65:5.

According to a *midrash*, it is also tears that make Leah's eyes weak. In the Talmud, Rav, a third century *amora*, teaches: While walking around town, Leah would hear the townspeople and travelers say, "Rebecca has two sons and her brother, Lavan, has two daughters. The older two, Leah and Esau, will be married, and the younger two, Rachel and Jacob, will be married." Learning about her intended, Leah would ask the passerby, "What is the older one like?" And they would tell her that Esau was an evil thief. "And what is the younger one like?" And they would tell her that Jacob was a quiet man, who spent time in his tent. Believing that she was destined to marry the evil thief, Esau, she cried and wept until her eyelashes fell from her eyes.⁶

This narrative depicts Leah as terribly distraught. She has internalized the assumptions of the world around her and concluded that her marriage to Esau is inevitable. She was not born with weak eyes; they are only this way because she has cried and wept for years, broken and despondent by what she believes to be her unavoidable fate. Just like Isaac, tears of pain and anguish weakened her eyes.

We all know that Leah turns out to be wrong—she marries Jacob, the younger brother, and avoids what seemed to be her unavoidable fate. But that does not change the impact that the assumptions of the world had upon her. Everyone believed that the elder would marry the elder. All knew that these cousins were going to be wed; that was the prevailing custom at that time. Leah could not help but internalize those assumptions, and in so doing, she made herself unhappy and distraught.

⁶ Bava Batra 123a.

Too often, we internalize the assumptions of those around us. At times, those internalized assumptions are to our detriment, as they were for Leah. We allow the assumptions and expectations of those around us to inhibit our actions, stymie our creativity, and impinge upon aspirations for a better future. What, then, can we do to protect ourselves?

For one answer, I turn to the third character in the Torah whose eyes are the object of discussion. Near the very end of the Torah, at the very end of Moses' life, we read, "Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died, לֹא־כָבְדָהּ עֵינָיו, his eyes were undimmed, and his vigor unabated."⁷ Despite his length of years, despite the harsh realities of life in the wilderness, despite the decades of stressful leadership, Moses' eyes were just as bright on the day that he died as the day he descended from the peak of Mount Sinai, glowing with a divine radiance after his intimate encounter with God. Isaac's eyes and Leah's eyes were scarred by tears of sadness and despair, but Moses' eyes were illuminated by his sacred encounter with the Divine.

Lest we romanticize the life of Moses, let us remember that he faced hardships of his own. He was raised in a foreign home, away from his true family. He fled for his life into the wilderness of Midian. He was tested time and again by the flock that he tried so tenderly to shepherd. He was barred from entering the Promised Land. And despite all of this, Moses' eyes were bright with hope, joy, and life.

What was different for Moses than for Leah and Isaac? It appears to me that Moses mastered something that many of us struggle to attain: knowing from where to derive support, seek assistance, find hope, and feel safe. Throughout our lives, we have and will face our own

⁷ Deuteronomy 34:7.

challenges. There is no way to avoid this. But that does not mean that we have to face these challenges alone. Moses knew from where he could derive support, assistance, hope, and safety. Moses had a network of leaders that worked on his behalf. He had partners in his brother and his sister. And he had a deep abiding faith in God from which he could derive that which he needed to maintain his radiance even in the face of despair. Leah lives in a home without such support—a father who uses her as a pawn, a rival and jealous sister, and a husband who seems to care little for the emotional wellbeing of his spouse. Isaac suffered a terrible trauma at the hands of his father, then lost his mother, and his only solace was in his wife, who collaborates with one of their sons to trick him. It is not surprising, then, that Isaac and Leah have dimmed eyes, whereas Moses' are vibrant and strong.

Parshat Vayitzei reminds us all to seek out the support that we need to manage the challenges that we face in our lives. We could and often do simply internalize the assumptions and expectations of others, even to our detriment, without considering the paths that we could take that would alleviate that burden. We have relatives, friends, mentors, coworkers, clergy, and others, all who are waiting for us to step forward and ask for help, seek their council and care. May we all feel empowered to seek the support that we need, and may our eyes and our lives be radiant and bright. Shabbat shalom.