

Parashat Vayetze, Rabbi James Proops

In this week's parasha we are introduced to the daughters of Lavan, Leah and Rachel. The Torah's initial introduction of the future mothers of *Klal Yisrael* is curious, וְעֵינֵי לֵאָה רַבּוֹת וְרַחֵל הֵיטָהָּלָה יְפֹת־תֹּאֵר וַיִּפֶּת מְרָאָהּ - Leah's eyes were weak, while Rachel was beautiful of form, and beautiful of appearance (Breishit 29:17)." It is strange that the Torah seems to criticize Leah's appearance and therefore we must search for a deeper message. Rashi comes to our assistance and explains, "For Leah thought that it was her fate to marry Esav, and she cried. For everyone was saying, 'Rivka has two sons, and Lavan has two daughters; the elder [son] for the elder [daughter], and the younger [son] for the younger [daughter].'"

Convinced that she would be forced to marry Esav, Leah wept constantly, her tears rendering her eyes permanently scarred. Therefore the Torah is not criticizing Leah but on the contrary, the Torah wishes to draw attention to her piety that the thought of marrying someone as spiritually diminished as Esav caused her to extensively cry. Leah, unmoved by Esav's material success or physical strength, demonstrates her credibility to be worthy of taking her place among the foremothers of the Jewish Nation.

In light of Rashi's explanation, we must now consider what was it that led Leah to feel that she would be compelled to marry Esav? Could it be that Lavan would force her into a marriage against her will? We learnt from *Parashat Chaye Sara* when Eliezer sought out Rivka as a wife for Yitzchak that Lavan said וְנִקְרָא לְנָעֳרָה וְנִשְׁאַלָהּ אֶת־פִּיהָ - let us call the maiden (Rivka) and ask her decision" (Breishit 24:57)". On that *pasuk* Rashi comments: "From here we learn that it is forbidden to marry off a woman without her consent." Therefore we see that even the wicked Lavan would never have coerced his daughter to marry someone with whom she had no desire to live. So why was Leah worried? All she had to do was refuse.

In his book *HaChevra V'Hashpaatah -The Two-Way Channel: Society and the Individual* Rabbi Avraham Baharan, the famed Torah educator suggests a possible answer to this question. One must make a careful reading of the words of Rashi. The reason Leah cried was because "everyone was saying" that she would marry Esav. It was clear that all those around her were in agreement that this was the way it should be, despite the fact that she had made it clear that she was against it. Rav Baharan explains that society exerts an overwhelming influence over the individual and therefore Leah wasn't concerned that she would be forced into the marriage, but she was worried that with the passage of time, she too would be drawn to the same conclusion. Whether through rationalization, despair

or simply from being worn down by the words of those around her she feared that she would ultimately accept and even desire to marry Esav.

This insightful answer is in keeping with the teaching of the Rambam that, "It is human nature for a person's traits and deeds to be influenced by his friends and acquaintances; he will act in the manner of the people of his region (Hilchot Deyot 6:1)". Despite her conviction, Leah knew that the opinions, conjecture and words of those around her would ultimately come to bear influence on her and that it was highly likely that she would inevitably succumb. The only way for Leah to protect herself was to cry incessantly and through her tears, Leah prayed to Hashem to protect her and forge for her another path. This attitude of Leah coupled with her acute awareness of human frailty when it comes to being influenced by others, is one of her most praiseworthy and defining features, hence the Torah drawing our attention to it by making note of the fact that "וַעֲיַיֵן לְאֵה רַבּוֹת" - Leah's eyes were weak".

How much more do we need to be aware of the voices around us that could come to influence us and cause us to abandon our convictions and moral compass. We have chosen, with good reason, to live, work and raise our families in the midst of a modern society driven by values, some that are in congruence with our beliefs and some which are the opposite. In order to survive and thrive in the model of 'Modern-Orthodoxy' we must follow the example of Leah Immeinu and continually strive and pray that we not be negatively influenced by the voices around us and that we remain steadfastly committed to the tenets of our faith. That has always been and continues to be the secret to the survival of the Jewish People and we can't afford to let it wane now.

Shabbat Shalom