

Sister Act

Parshat Vayetze - 5782

With the fall of the Iron Curtain, the Lubavitcher Rebbe began to send Rabbis to the former Soviet Union to rejuvenate the Jewish population. Among the first, in Elul of 1990, were Rabbi Moishe and Miriam Moskovitz, who went to Kharkov, Ukraine. The massive Choral Synagogue, whose dome towers over the city, had served for decades as a sporting facility, and had just been given back to the Jewish community by Gorbachev. Rabbi Moskovitz was prepared to take on the immense challenge of restoring Jewish life to a place where it had been dormant and repressed. People were thirsty for Judaism; on the first Friday night, 1,000 people showed up in shul; a few weeks later, on Rosh Hashanah, 3,000 people attended. What he was not prepared for was the level of ignorance he encountered. The 3,000 Jews who showed up on Rosh Hashanah had no idea what a shofar was! A few days before Yom Kippur, an older man, accompanied by his middle-aged son, approached Rabbi Moskovitz and asked him, in Yiddish, when Yom Kippur was. Rabbi Moskovitz told him, and then the son asked Rabbi Moskovitz *what* Yom Kippur was. Rabbi Moskovitz is not an antagonistic person, and he felt his job was to listen to those asking questions, but he could not help himself. He asked the older man, “How could it be that your son knows *nothing* about Yom Kippur?” The man tearfully replied, “You don’t understand. I could not teach my children anything about Judaism, because I feared they would inform on me to the KGB for teaching religion...”

A few months after the Chaggim of that first year, Rabbi Moskovitz was preparing for his Shabbos morning sermon. The subject he planned to address was Yaakov's perplexing, and seemingly prohibited marriage to two sisters, the story of which is described in this morning's Torah reading. He had prepared a sophisticated presentation addressing whether the forefathers kept the entire Torah, or whether they only did so in the land of Israel, and marshalled many proofs in support of each thesis. He began by setting the scene, describing Yaakov's love for Rachel, and Lavan's treachery in substituting Leah for her. When he told of Yaakov realizing, the next morning, that "Behold, his new bride was Leah," the entire shul let out an audible gasp. It dawned on him at that moment that ***no one had ever heard the story before!*** No longer would he deliver sophisticated sermons that he had planned on; Instead, he would simply tell basic stories from the Torah¹.

I suspect that everyone here *does* know the story- or we think we do. But do we really? If we thought about it, we too would let out a gasp, because it is so astonishing. How could Rachel and Leah agree to switch places? How could they conspire to violate someone's trust through an egregious breach of modesty and propriety?

This last question is heightened when we realize that the Talmud² actually *praises* Rachel for her modesty. *In the merit of the modesty she displayed, she was rewarded with an illustrious descendant like Shaul, who in turn merited a descendant like Esther.* In what way was her remarkable modesty manifest? The Gemara describes how Yaakov and Rachel anticipated

¹ <https://rabbanan.org/?p=18833>

² Megillah 13b

that Lavan might attempt to deceive them, so they devised a secret code to enable them to identify one another. The code was to talk about Shabbat candles, Challah, and the laws of Taharat Hamishpacha. In order to spare Leah's embarrassment, Rachel gave these very signs to her sister. In his commentary on the Talmud titled *Ben Yehoyada*, Rav Yosef Chaim of Baghdad (1835-1909), a halachic authority, Talmudic commentator and kabbalist who is revered by many Sephardic Jews, asks a terrific question. If any positive character trait displayed by Rachel is worthy of comment, he says, modesty is not it. After all, Rachel is teaching her sister how to seduce a man. Is there anything more immodest than that? No, the admirable trait she displayed here was *selflessness*, giving up the man she loved to spare her sister from humiliation. So why do we extol her for her modesty? And if we think about it, how would this ruse actually accomplish the goal of sparing embarrassment to Leah? Surely Yaakov would figure it out, and besides, Leah would wake up every day knowing that she was an afterthought, the less preferred wife!

The Talmud's description is not the first time Rachel's selflessness is ignored. Leah herself seems rather ungrateful to her sister, who saved her from having to marry Esav or remaining unattached. Later on in our Parsha, once Leah has already given birth to four sons, Reuven returns from the field with מַדְוָּאִים, mandrakes. Rachel, who has no children of her own to bring her flowers, is envious of her sister, and asks for some of them, as they were widely believed at the time to be aid fertility or to have aphrodisiac properties.

וְתֹאמַר רָחֵל אֶל-לֵאָה תְּנִי-נָא לִי מְדוּצָאִי בְּנֶגֶד:

In light of all the above, Leah's answer seems unduly harsh:

וַתֹּאמֶר לָהּ הִמָּעוּט קִהְיִתְךָ אֶת־אִישִׁי וְלָקַחְתָּ גַם אֶת־דִּוְדָאִי בְנִי וַתֹּאמֶר רָחֵל לָכֵן יִשְׁכַּב עִמָּךְ הַלַּיְלָה תַּחַת דִּוְדָאִי בְנִי:

But she said to her, “Was it not enough for you to take away my husband, that you would also take my son’s mandrakes?” Rachel replied, “I promise, he shall lie with you tonight, in return for your son’s mandrakes.”

Couldn't she give Rachel a few flowers? Even if Rachel had done *nothing* for Leah, isn't it heartless not to spare a flower or two for someone who is experiencing fertility challenges? On top of everything else, she then accused Rachel of being a homewrecker. Remember that, according to our sages, it was Rachel who sacrificed her chance at love so her sister shouldn't be shamed. If anything, it was *Leah* who stole *Rachel's* husband!

To resolve the questions raised by this troubling narrative, and our sages' perplexing interpretation of it, I'd like to share with you a brilliant insight from Rav Sholom Mordechai HaKohen Schwadron, the Maggid of Jerusalem. Rav Schwadron used to deliver sermons on Friday night at the Zichron Moshe shul in Jerusalem; people would return to the packed shul after dinner and listen, mesmerized, as he spoke for hours on end, sharing insights into the Torah and the spellbinding stories for which he was renowned. Rav Schwadron suggests that the only possible explanation for Leah's ingratitude is that ***she did not know about Rachel's sacrifice***. Somehow, Rachel managed to give over the secret code without letting Leah know that they had been given to Rachel in advance, by working the hints into regular

conversation. So effective was Rachel's subliminal messaging that Leah was convinced *she* was the primary, preferred wife. The Torah does attest that Leah was *senu'ah*, that she was hated, but that is how she felt; there is nothing in the text that suggests that Yaakov *treated* her that way. The modesty shown by Rachel is that her sacrifice was two fold. She gave up the man of her dreams, and she forfeited the enormous benefit she could have accrued by revealing that to her sister, in the form of good will, owed favors and a perpetual moral high ground. None of that existed between Leah and Rachel, because Rachel was too modest to trumpet her actions.

The message of Rachel's modesty and sacrifice is one that challenges all of us. It is difficult enough to sacrifice for others, but one of the guilty pleasures associated with giving is the feeling that those we helped consider us to be heroes. We enjoy it when others are indebted to us, and sometimes, we reap the rewards of that indebtedness, even beyond that feeling serving as its own reward. Real modesty, therefore, is to do good for others and our community while forgoing the honor, indebtedness and moral high ground that comes with doing someone else a favor. This is why, according to the Rambam, one of the highest forms of charity is when it is bestowed without the recipient knowing where the money came from.

It can be especially difficult, therefore, when we help someone and they don't know it, and we receive nothing but ingratitude and abuse despite our hidden kindnesses. Rabbi David Stavsky, was the legendary Rabbi of Beth Jacob Congregation in Columbus, Ohio for nearly 50 years. He founded virtually every Torah institution in Columbus, including the Mikvah, the Eruv, the Kollel, day schools and much more, and was a pioneer of NCSY nationally.

Rabbi Stavsky was beloved by leaders of every faith tradition, across all denominations of Judaism and among all shades of Orthodoxy. Before Columbus had a high school of its own, Rabbi Stavsky encouraged many of the local young men to go off and study in yeshiva for high school and beyond. He would remain an active influence in these young men's lives well into adulthood, and indeed, many of them became Rabbis and communal leaders themselves. In a candid moment with a young rabbinic colleague, Rabbi Stavsky shared that it pained him ever so slightly that when these young men would find a wife and prepare for their weddings, they would often ask their Rebbe or Rosh Yeshiva to serve the highest honor of *mesader kiddushin*, of officiating at their wedding. These boys had no idea what Rabbi Stavsky did for them. For one boy, he may have saved his parents' marriage on several occasions; for another, he arranged to pay his yeshiva tuition, and for yet another, it was his recommendation and persistence that enabled that boy to be admitted to yeshiva in the first place. Of course, he never said a word about it to anyone; those secrets accompanied him to the grave. Kindness for the sake of kindness, and not to receive remuneration, recognition or accolades, is the Jewish way, and it is the way of Rachel Imeinu.

There is another important point that arises from Rav Schwadron's explanation. We must acknowledge that we do not really know the extent to which we have benefitted from the secret acts of chesed and self sacrifice made for us by *others*. We have to be extremely careful about the way we relate to others. It could be that the very person you are angry with- maybe someone who didn't invite you to a simcha, or whose politics you find reprehensible, or who complains too much and won't leave you alone- is someone who did you a favor unbeknownst to you. It also means we need to be mindful of the people who help us, and

here, I don't mean people like our parents; I mean the unrecognized, anonymous, unacknowledged people who expended effort on our behalf without us ever knowing they did it, or even who they are. AJ Jacobs, in his book called *Thanks a Thousand*, embarks on a journey of gratitude in which he attempts to locate and thank all the people responsible for producing the cup of coffee he drinks every morning, from the barista to the growers, the harvesters to the truckers, those who paved the roads and those who painted the yellow lines on them. He made a spreadsheet of a thousand people, but he said it could have gone to one million people. The supply chain crisis being felt now across the world is a perfect illustration of the importance of this kind of gratitude.; we must be grateful for the nameless and faceless truckers who are now in short supply, the dockworkers who unload our children's Chanukah toys from boats and the captains of those boats themselves- and, of course, the people who work under near slave labor conditions producing the ever elusive microchips that are in such high demand. We must never assume that we have what we have and that we have achieved what we have achieved, independent of a larger network. The key to gratitude is the awareness that we wouldn't even know where to start acknowledging everyone.

May we do for others without a need to be recognized or celebrated, and may we learn to appreciate the extent to which others have done for us throughout our lives and every day.

