

of having. Yet, with an awareness of the reality of her life, she still has the desire to express gratitude (*odeh*) to God. Indeed, the Babylonian Talmud records a statement made by Rabbi Yohanan in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai observing that Leah was the first person in the history of the world to express gratitude to God (BT Berakhot 7b). Gratitude is introduced into the world from such an improbable source. Leah, perhaps the most challenged of the patriarchs and matriarchs, offers God appreciation for the wonders of her life and the birthing of a family. Gratitude—in spite of the fact that there was so much that she did not have.

I suggest that Leah teaches us one of the more profound lessons of the religious life: the ability to express wonder and gratitude about our own lives with the reality of the imperfections and disappointments of our lives. She is able to feel God’s intimacy and kindness in a moment where she could have been consumed in anger and the frustrations of her own existence.

At the moment that Leah transcends the limitations of her particular condition, when she feels the real pain *and* the wonders of her own life, the name for the Jewish people is born. *Yehudah*, ultimately, is the source for the term *Yehudim*: Jews. The religious life of the Jew is born in the awareness of something outside of oneself. Leah knows that despite the failure of her own marriage, her children will birth a nation. As she transcends her own personal drama, Leah becomes able to experience God’s compassion and kindness in her own life. The nation that is born in the experience of God’s loving-kindness is now tasked with the command to create more loving-kindness in the world.

Fifty years ago, Heschel presciently warned: the human being will not perish for want of information but for want of appreciation.

With our Torah reading this Shabbat and in these weeks before Thanksgiving, let us learn from Leah and renew a daily practice of gratitude.

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ויצא תשע"ט



Why Religion?

Rabbi David Hoffman, Vice Chancellor and Chief Advancement Officer, JTS

Big picture: What is religion trying to do in the world?

Maimonides claims that the aim of Torah is the creation of lives and communities that manifest “mercy, loving-kindness, and peace” (*The Laws of Shabbat*, 2:3). All of the commandments, the entirety of our wisdom tradition, seeks to create people who—through their actions—bring more love, sensitivity, and peace into the world.

It is in this context that I share my favorite line in the entire corpus of Abraham Joshua Heschel’s writing: “Indifference to the sublime wonders of living is the root of sin” (*God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, 43).

Heschel argues that the principal characteristic of the religious life is a sense of wonder. This posture toward the world is an attempt to cultivate a way of seeing and relating to all of Creation. Wonder broadens our awareness to include concerns beyond the self. It pushes us to be attentive to the quiet call of God asking us to enter into partnership for the betterment of the world. Wonder keeps aflame our awareness of what Heschel refers to as “the great fellowship of all beings.” Religion asks that we attempt to identify the blessings and wonders present in our own lives, despite any of the real personal challenges that we may face. For Heschel, a blindness to the mystery of being constitutes the essence of sin. In this regard, sin should be understood as any type of behavior or thinking that impedes the aims of the religious life. Put in plain language, an unwillingness to identify the wonders and acts of kindness present in each of our lives creates an obstacle for us to bring more loving-kindness and peace into the world.

This connection between the acknowledgement and appreciation of the blessings in our lives (which we would call gratitude) and the creation of loving-kindness and peace in the world is not self-evident and deserves more attention. I want to begin to consider the relationship between gratitude and loving-kindness by looking at a moment in this week's Torah reading that is deeply painful but, I hope, also instructive.

Right from the beginning of the narrative of Rachel and Leah's lives, the Torah hints at the tragedy about to unfold. The Torah introduces Leah in an unfavorable physical contrast to her younger sister Rachel. Rachel is "shapely and beautiful," while Leah is described in the same sentence as having "weak eyes"—that is to say, lacking luster (Gen. 29:17). Comparisons between people are never productive, but comparisons between siblings have particularly damaging consequences.

Immediately after this description of Rachel and Leah, we learn that "Jacob loved Rachel" (*vaye'ehav Ya'akov et Rahele*) (29:18). This fact accentuates feelings of inequity between the sisters.

Jacob arranges to work for Laban, Rachel's father, for seven years in return for permission to marry her. Seven years by all accounts is a real block of time, yet the Torah tells us it seemed to Jacob "but a few days because of his love for her" (29:20).

A love affair that began with a kiss at a well (29:11) is about to become tragically complicated. Laban substitutes Leah for Rachel, and Jacob now weds the older, less attractive daughter. Was Leah a willing participant in this plan? Did she hope that what would begin in deception might end with Jacob's falling in love with her? Was this her attempt to grab for herself the blessings that seemed to naturally flow to her younger sister? The Torah is silent regarding these questions, but what is clear—even at this point in the story—is that this deception would have terribly painful human consequences.

Leah enjoys one week with her new husband before Jacob corrects the course of events and marries Rachel in exchange for another seven years of work for Laban.

The joy that Leah may have hoped for with her new husband quickly gets quashed, and Leah is pushed into the old emotional space where

she exists in the shadow of her sister: "He (Jacob) loved Rachel even more than Leah" (29:30).

"God saw that Leah was unloved" (29:31): the plan had tragically backfired, and God felt Leah's humiliation. Leah tries desperately to capture her husband's attention and love. It is in this context of intense rejection and feelings of inadequacy that the next verses of the chapter should be read:

Leah conceived and bore a son, and named him Reuben (*re'uvén*); for she declared, "It means the Lord has seen (*ra'ah*) my affliction;" it also means, "Now my husband will love me (*ye'ehavani/re'uvén*)." (29:32)

This sentence is less a declaration and more of a prayer. We feel Leah's desperation for her husband's love. However, the birth of Reuben does not win her Jacob's attention, so she tries again:

She conceived again and bore a son, and declared, "This is because the Lord heard (*shama*) that I was unloved and has given me this one also"; so she named him **Shimon**. Again she conceived and bore a son and declared, "This time my husband will become attached (*lava*) to me, for I have born him three sons." Therefore, he was named Levi. (29:33–34)

The pleas become more urgent and raw, ultimately giving voice to the simple but painful question: "What can I do to get my husband to love me?"

Three sons later, something is different with Leah's new child:

She conceived again and bore a son, and declared, "This time I will praise (*odeh*) the Lord." Therefore, she named him Judah (*Yehudah*). (29:35)

"This time" something is different. With her fourth son, whom she calls Judah, Leah does not focus on her relationship with Jacob. Gone are the times where she prayed for his attention and love. Apparently, she has made her peace with the reality of her life: Jacob did not love her as he loved Rachel. She would never have the marriage that she once dreamed