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Blessing Enough for All: Overcoming the Narrative of Scarcity

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Scarcity is an inherited mindset. It comes from fear and loneliness, and the belief that we must compete for love or favor, because there is not enough to go around. We encounter Jacob in Parashat Vayetzei, fleeing from the wrath of Esau, whose blessing he has stolen, and seeking a wife to satisfy his parents' wishes.

Imprinted by his experience that blessing is limited and conditional, Jacob learns that parental love and divine favor must be won by any means, even by manipulation, deception, and betrayal. That mindset leads him to betray his twin, who could have been his greatest partner or ally.

Jacob sets off alone, and when it gets dark, he takes a stone as a pillow. Perhaps he neither knew nor thought he deserved to reach for greater comfort than a stone. Jacob's uneasy sleep on the stone yields dreams of angels. Jacob dreams he hears God reassuring him:

> וְהִנֵּה אָנֹכִי עִמָּךְ וּשְׁמַרְתִּיךָ בְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר־תֵּלֵךְ וַהֲשִׁבֹתִיךָ אֶל־הָאֲדָמָה הַזֹּאת כִּי לֹא אֶעֶזָבְךָ עַד אֲשֶׁר אִם־עָשִׂיתִי אֵת אֲשֶׁר־דִּבַּרְתִּי לָךְ׃
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> Remember, I am with you: I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." (Gen. 28:15)

In the dream Jacob hears reassurance for which we can imagine he hungered. Rabbi David Kimhi (13th c) expounds on God's expansive promise to Jacob:

> **וְהִנֵּה אָנֹכִי עִמָּךְ.** אַף עַל פִּי שֶׁאַתָּה בּוֹרֵחַ. **וּשְׁמַרְתִּיךָ בְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר תֵּלֵךְ**, בְּלֶכְתְּךָ וּבְשׁוּבְךָ **כִּי לֹא אֶעֶזָבְךָ עַד אֲשֶׁר אִם־עָשִׂיתִי.** אִם כֵּן לֹא יַעַזְבֵנוּ לְעוֹלָם, כִּי הַהַבְטָחָה לוֹ כָּל יָמָיו לְעוֹלָם וּלְזַרְעוֹ אַחֲרָיו.
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> *I will be with you. Although you are fleeing now, I will protect you now, on your journey, and once you are able to return home. I will never abandon you. That promise will extend throughout his life and for his offspring.*

While Jacob awakens with enough strength to continue on his journey, he does not fully take in God's blessing. He goes on to imprint the narrative of scarcity he carries onto the two sisters he marries, and who seek his affection and approval.

Leah and Rachel, too, are frequently portrayed as rivals and not allies. The rabbis amplify this reading, describing Leah's eyes as soft, וְעֵינֵי לֵאָה רַכּוֹת (Gen. 29:17) in contrast to Rachel's beauty. That somehow renders Leah undesirable or unloveable. Most of the commentators explain that her eyes were soft or weak from crying. Bereishit Rabbah imagines that Leah wept from fear that she, the elder sister, would be matched with Esau, the older brother. Perhaps she wept from the fear that she too would be denied blessing.

The drama that plays out between Jacob, who favors Rachel, and Laban, who engages in subterfuge and deception that echoes Jacob's own behavior, begins to feel like a familiar pattern. The sisters risk being reduced to the value assigned to them by their father and their husband, determined by who is more desired, the number of children she produces, and the way in which she produces them.

Yet while it is clear that Jacob prefers Rachel to Leah, it is less clear that the sisters are actually rivals to one another. In one Talmudic rendering, Rachel anticipates Laban's plan to substitute Leah for her, and gives Jacob signs by which he could identify her on their wedding night. But wanting to save her sister from humiliation, Rachel shared them with Leah:

כִּי מְטָא לֵילְיָא, אֲמַרָה: הַשְׁתָּא מֵיכַסְפָא אֲחָתַאי. מְסַרְתִּינְהוּ לְנִיהֲלָה.

When the night came, she said, 'Now my sister will be ashamed. [So] she gave them to her. (Megillah 13b)

The Torah gives us one instance of Rachel feeling jealous of Leah, when she longs for a child. וַתֵּרֶא רָחֵל כִּי לֹא יָלְדָה לְיַעֲקֹב וַתְּקַנֵּא רָחֵל בַּאֲחֹתָהּ וַתֹּאמֶר אֶל־יַעֲקֹב הָבָה־לִּי בָנִים וְאִם־אַיִן מֵתָה אָנֹכִי׃

When Rachel saw that she had borne Jacob no children, she became envious of her sister; and Rachel said to Jacob, "Give me children, or I shall die." (Gen. 30:1).

While Rachel wants what Leah has, it isn't clear that she identifies Leah as the source of her pain. She expresses her wish to Jacob, who we can imagine is in a position to help. He responds with anger, not compassion.

וַיִּחַר־אַף יַעֲקֹב בְּרָחֵל וַיֹּאמֶר הֲתַחַת אֱלֹהִים אָנֹכִי אֲשֶׁר־מָנַע מִמֵּךְ פְּרִי־בָטֶן׃

Jacob was incensed at Rachel, and said, "Can I take the place of God, who has denied you fruit of the womb?"

Jacob responds from a place of scarcity. He assumes that God metes out blessing sparingly. Later, when Rachel's handmaid Bilhah gives birth to a son, she calls him Naftali, explaining:

וַתֹּאמֶר רָחֵל נַפְתּוּלֵי אֱלֹהִים נִפְתַּלְתִּי עִם־אֲחֹתִי גַּם־יָכֹלְתִּי וַתִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ נַפְתָּלִי׃

And Rachel said, "I wrestled with God, I wrestled with my sister, and I have prevailed." So she named him Naphtali.

The word is not a common one in the Bible. Classical grammarians Ibn Ezra and Radak define it as wrestle or twist: "the root פתל means to twist or be twisted as in פתיל תכלת, a string made of blue wool, i.e. two strands of yarn combined to make a cord, twisted. By pulling the two strands together the whole string becomes stronger.

Are the sisters in a contest against each other, or are they engaged in the same contest with one another–together? They both call on God, they are both engaged in the same struggle.

It is not God who has limited blessing to offer. It is the limitation of a certain human orientation which cannot see the beauty and worth of two siblings or two peoples at the same time. Who cannot value the tears and mourn the losses of two siblings at the same time.

In times of increased vulnerability, as Jews we can relate to the feeling of being the less favored sibling. Our eyes have been so often soft with tears. But if we internalize the scarcity we feel, or we fear, we risk replaying these harmful dynamics in every generation. Our compassion, grief, and vulnerability invite God's blessing. While we carry the inheritance of suffering, we also carry the inheritance of God's promise: I will be with you. I will protect you now, on your journey, and once you are able to return home. I will never abandon you.

While we cannot choose whether we will experience loss and suffering, we can choose if we want to inhabit scarcity, deception, and competition, or if we want to embrace a sense of plenty. If we carry the divine promise of God's presence, even when we are scared and alone, we might come to believe that there is enough blessing to go around. Cultivating a posture of plenty and abundance can help us reach out to others instead of seeing them as our rivals. If we approach others with generosity, we might discover that others are prepared to be generous with us.

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