



Parashat Vayetzei

Four Mothers, Four stories. Four legacies?

by Karen Perolman on Friday December 05, 2008

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Genesis 28:10-32:3

In this week's *parsha*, *Vayetzei*, we meet four women who gave birth to the Jewish people. One of the mothers was beloved but barren and one was unloved but fertile. Our tradition remembers these mothers, Rachel and Leah, in our sacred texts and liturgy. But two of the mothers were surrogates who, although they each gave birth to sons, were otherwise almost entirely forgotten by our tradition. As GLBT Jewish parents, we reclaim these unnamed parents as our forbears.

From the moment of their first meeting, Jacob loved Rachel, and our text reminds us of this love several times in the most explicit form we have seen in the Bible thus far. Rachel is described as "beautiful of form and of face," and perhaps is easy for Jacob to love because she embodies his culture's ideal for feminine beauty. The text tells us that Rachel's sister Leah's "eyes were weak," and that she was unloved by Jacob. Perhaps this rejection was because she did not embody that same traditional beauty.

Nevertheless, Jacob is called to the task of taking unloved Leah to wife, even before he can marry his beloved Rachel. Because Jacob's prospective father-in-law wanted to marry off his older daughter first, Leah became an unfortunate "treat" in a trick Laban devised. Jacob could marry Rachel if he worked for Laban for seven years, a proposition to which Jacob enthusiastically agreed. Our *parsha* tells us, "Jacob labored seven years for Rachel, yet in his love for her they seemed to him but a few days. Then Jacob said to Laban, 'Let me have my wife...I want to make love to her.'" Yet Laban tricks Jacob, by setting up a situation in which Leah is substituted for Rachel in the marriage bed. The text tells us that after the seven years that Jacob worked for Leah, he worked an additional seven years for Rachel. "Jacob loved Rachel-for whom he had served [Laban] yet another seven years-so much more than Leah." Despite her unloved status, Leah had the gift of fertility; despite Jacob's love for Rachel she is barren.

Much of the text of chapter 30 concerns the conception and birth of Leah's six sons and one daughter. The names of her sons only exacerbate her 'second-wife' position. For example, she names her son Reuben, "for she said, 'God saw (*ra-ah*) my plight; yes now my husband will love



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me.” She named her third son Levi, “now this time, my husband will be attached (*yil-veh*) to me, for I have borne him three sons.” Although she bears half the children who will become the tribes of Israel, she never gains the love of Jacob.

Bilhah and Zilpah, the surrogates, are the handmaids of Leah and Rachel, respectively. The text does not tell us much about them, except that Laban gave them to his daughters. When Rachel is unable to become pregnant, she gives Bilhah to Jacob and says, “couple with her and let her give birth on my knees, so that I too may have a son, through her.” Rachel’s physical manipulation of Bilhah—such that Rachel is vicariously giving birth through her—attests to the fact that in this culture, Bilhah’s sons will be attributed to Rachel. In fact it is Rachel who names the children, simultaneously taunting her older sister with their names. She names Bilhah’s first son Dan from the Hebrew “din” or “judgment.” Finally Rachel had been “judged” by God and was rewarded with a son. Bilhah’s second son, Naphtali comes from the Hebrew word for “contest of God” and shows that Rachel believes she has “won” the contest.

Zilpah’s role as surrogate is curious, as we know that Leah already had given birth to seven children. Yet, in her desire to win Jacob’s love, she gives him Zilpah with whom he gains two more sons. This time Leah names these sons, taunting her sister in return.

Although these four women give birth to the 12 sons that will become the tribes of Israel, only two get the credit. While Rachel and Leah are included as matriarchs of our tradition and we include them in the first blessing of the *Amidah*, in prayers for healing and when naming a child, Bilhah and Zilpah are forgotten. How terrible it must have been for them to conceive and bear children, only to have their status as mothers stripped away and their sons given to other women.

Men and women in the LGBTQ community know this feeling all too well. In our desire to become parents and raise another generation of the Jewish people, we become parents in a variety of ways. Some become pregnant and bear biological children. Some raise children born to others. Some adopt. Some partner and raise children. Some become parents alone. Many do not have children of their own, rather become parents to communities, to the children of a neighborhood or congregation. We are these parents whose names cannot be found on a birth certificate or official document, but are responsible for the life of so many. Like Chava who gave birth to the first children of the world, so many of us are givers of life as parents, role models, teachers and friends.

Congregation *Beth Simchat Torah* in New York has also added the “handmaids” Bilhah and Zilpah to the list of our forebears... Merely because Bilhah and Zilpah were not Jacob’s wives, their names have been excluded from this chain of tradition. For GLBT people, denied the right to legally marry their partners, who are often the co-parents of their children, and denied, in many states, the right to legally adopt children they would be so happy to raise or have, in-fact,



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raised, the addition of Bilhah and Zilpah symbolically redresses a wrong we cannot yet fully redress in society at large.

May God's promise to Jacob be revealed to each of us: "Your descendants shall be like the dust of the earth...and through you and your descendants all the families of the earth shall find blessing. And here I am, with you: I will watch over you wherever you go."

Ken Yihi Ratzon, May this be God's blessing for each of us.



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