

Shabbat Shalom With a Side of Torah – Vayetzei

It is the dream of every young man; having women fighting for his attention and his love. We know the scene of a guy walking down the halls of a school with all the women following after him, swooning as he would tease them with a wink or a wave. This is the image that sticks with me every time I read the story of this week's Torah portion, and every time a young man talks about wanting or having lots of girlfriends, I refer him to the Biblical story of Jacob. Jacob has four wives. He loved only one, but had children with all four. The stories of the jealousies between his wives are enough to make any man realize that when it comes to women, it really is better to be faithful to only one. It is just this type of message that screams at the reader to think twice, for something just is not right here – in a book that purports to be the source of all truth and healing.

Somewhat overshadowed in telling the Jacob story, though, is the story of his wives. Well, certainly Leah and Rachel get a lot of play, but not much is told of Bilkhah and Zilpah. Ok, I know you are asking yourself, "Who are they?" They are Jacob's other two wives and the mother of one third of the tribes of Israel between them. Though at one point the Biblical tradition refers to them only as concubines, having children with Jacob only as surrogates for their masters (Leah and Rachel), at other places in text they are called equally Jacob's wives, and according to tradition, they are both buried in the tomb of the patriarchs in Tiberias (Israel). How is it that we overlook these ladies in our study, even in our prayers? The central prayer in a worship service calls to memory the merit of our ancestors, specifically mentioning the three patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) and four matriarchs (Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel). No mention is made of Jacob's other two wives.

One could argue that this is an admonition to all men to be careful of what they ask for – they might just get it. The horrific fights between sisters must be the reason that Jacob stays out in the fields more and more each day. At one point the sisters "negotiate a sale of his nightly services" over gathered wheat from the field (Genesis 30:15).

Certainly we can more poignantly argue that as servants, the text tells us that they did not deserve the same status as Leah and Rachel, but in a tradition that is egalitarian, that seems somehow out of touch. In fact, it flies in the face of our entire messianic ideal that at some point, we will see each other, all of us, as equal inheritors of God's blessings of peace. Perhaps, though, this is the point. We are taught that when Messiah comes, the bible becomes superfluous. Its lessons will be learned and internalized and peace shall reign, as per its teachings.

Every time we read this story, and the many like it that seem to pit one person's status against another, we become (or should become) uncomfortable with the text. We have all learned from our childhood that God is a God of love, and yet we keep trying to prove that God loves one of us more. I always thought that love was love ... period. Yes, there are different types of love, but the love a parent has for a child is absolute – the Torah teaches us that we are not allowed to raise one child over another – and yes, the trauma of Jacob's story is all rooted in his violation of this rule. Rachel's children are held above Leah's and both are held above Bilkhah's or Zilpah's. The text shocks us (or should shock us) in portraying a person, especially a patriarch loving one child more than another, so that the ultimate

lessons from the text are the negative lessons, the lessons of what elements of our lives we have to subdue, before the messianic age – the age of peace can be real. At that point in time, when we have truly learned not to behave in ways that diminish some of us while exalting others, the texts that teach these lessons, do indeed become no longer needed. And, yes, we have a long way to go. We do pick favorites, even amongst our own. We do value people in accordance with their standing in society, and even where one could argue that there are roles in society that play larger roles than others, we do have our priorities all messed. When athletes get paid for one year what teachers, nurses, police officers, or fire fighters can expect over an entire career, our priorities are certainly not in order. When someone who is homeless is somehow seen as less than human because he is without a home, our priorities are certainly not in order. If anything, this week's portion reminds us of what happens when we fall short of remembering each other's dignity and value. Jacob's life story is more tragic than any Shakespeare play, and each of us knows when reading it that if our eyes and hearts opened a little wider, these stories would be the interpersonal realities that we read about only in the history books, while we live lives that celebrate each other. Whatever our economic, political, or religious station in life, each of us shares equally as children of the same divine parent. Let's take every opportunity that we can to make this affirmation and bring nearer the age of peace. Shabbat Shalom.