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Rachel's Ultimate Sacrifice and Hidden Love

The anniversary of the death of the Matriarch Rachel brings to mind the famous story of her delayed marriage, and selfless sacrifice.

Rachel is engaged to marry her soulmate Jacob, waiting for him for 7 years as he works for her father, Lavan, to earn her hand. Knowing the dishonest nature of her father, Rachel and Jacob arrange secret signs between them, so that should some other veiled lady be brought to Jacob in Rachel's stead, he would know that it was not the right woman.

Their caution is not misplaced, and Rachel realizes that her father plans on leading her sister Leah to the wedding canopy, rather than herself.

She faces a life altering choice, and makes a mind-blowing decision. She gives over the secret signs to her sister before she is led to Jacob, sparing her from the mortification of being discovered to be the wrong bride in public.

Not knowing at the time that she would go on to marry Jacob one week later, Rachel was fully prepared to give up her entire future and dreams, solely for the sake of her sister's dignity.

An incredible act of selflessness.

But this just scratches the surface of what Rachel did. Looking at later interactions between the two sisters, we discover more beauty and depth to her actions.

Both now married to Jacob, Rachel faces the challenge of waiting to conceive. Rachel asks Leah to give her some of her '*Dudaim*' a plant known to bring fertility. Leah surprisingly responds by saying 'Isn't it enough that you took my husband...?' ([Genesis 30:15](#)). A strange reply considering it was really the other way round!

The answer to this question brings to light the extent of Rachel's incredible kindness. Her entire life, Rachel never actually told Leah what she had done for her and was unaware of the sacrifice that Rachel had made on her behalf!

The *Daat Zekenim* explains that the secret signs between Rachel and Jacob were actually Jewish laws. The plan was that when he would question her on these and she would respond correctly, he would know that he was marrying the correct woman. Rav Shalom Shwadron explains that Rachel taught these laws to Leah and never told her why. Not only did Rachel make a life changing sacrifice, she did it with complete modesty and sensitivity, sparing her sister any feelings of guilt.

According to this approach, Rachel's act of kindness was not a one-off act, it was an act of continuous hidden love, selflessness, coming from the purest of motivations.

Perhaps the more obvious lesson in Rachel's story is the importance of never embarrassing another human being. Embarrassing another person is considered to be one of the most severe prohibitions in the Torah, compared to the seriousness of shedding blood (Bava metzia 58b).

But the insights into Rachel's secrecy, convey another powerful lesson in addition to this, and demonstrate how we can bring acts of kindness to the next level.

Kindness is not always a convenience. In fact, more often than not, it involves going out of our way, giving up time, energy, or comfort. This is the greatness of the act. However, even greater is to not disclose the inconvenience involved. To preserve the dignity of the recipient, perhaps through

anonymity, or concealing the difficulty of the action.

Like Rachel, we must try and keep people's feelings at the forefront of our minds.

It's not just about *what* we do, but about *how* we do it.



Believing in Our Abilities

One of the best predictors of whether I will attain a goal or not is if I believe that my actions can bring about the desired results. Believing in my ability to accomplish something specific will help generate a goal, boost motivation, and increase the likelihood of success.

This power of believing in our own abilities was first formulated in the psychological literature by Albert Bandura and is referred to as self-efficacy. Bandura understood self-efficacy to be domain specific, meaning that we have different beliefs in our abilities, depending on the type of ability in discussion. I may have high self-efficacy for writing but low self-efficacy for calculus. Later researchers suggested that there can also be a general self-efficacy that is not domain specific. This means that I can have a general belief in my ability to accomplish

tasks and overcome barriers, regardless of what type of task it may be.

As Yaakov makes his way to Charan he dreams of angels ascending and descending to the heavens. This vision proves impactful as he comes to the realization that God was present in that place ("Surely God is present in this place" [Genesis, 28:16](#)), a fact that until this point, he was apparently unaware ("and I did not know.") Rabbi Shimshon of Ostropoli, perhaps bothered by the assumption that Yaakov wouldn't have realized the presence of God before the dream, rereads this verse with a message related to self-efficacy. To fully understand the point, we first need some background.

In his vision of the throne of God, [Yechezkel \(10:14\)](#) describes seeing four faces; a cherub, a lion, an eagle, and a human. The Talmud ([Chullin 91b](#)) elaborates on Yaakov's dream and suggests that the angels were going up and down, looking at the picture of the human's face by the throne and comparing it to Yaakov's face. Seeing the resemblance, they became jealous of his presence on the throne and wanted to harm him, so God had to protect Yaakov.

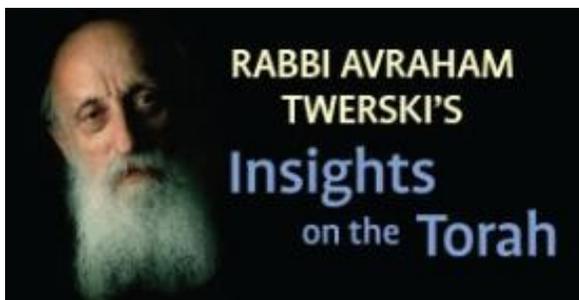
Rabbi Shimshon of Ostropoli suggests that Yaakov was previously aware that there were creatures that could reach elevated spiritual heights. He knew that the cherub, lion, and eagle had their place by the throne of God, but he was not aware that his image was there as well. It wasn't until the dream, where he saw the angels comparing the image on

the throne with his face that he realized his true potential.

In a brilliantly creative rereading of the verse, Rabbi Shimshon suggests that alluded to in Yaakov's word choice is the discovery of self-efficacy. Yaakov already knew the spiritual potential of "*achein* – surely," in Hebrew spelled *Aleph – Chof – Nun*, representing the lion (*aryeh*, which begins with an *aleph*), cherub (which begins with a *chof*), and an eagle (*neshet*, which begins with a *nun*). Yet, until this dream, he was unaware of the spiritual potential of *anochi*, literally myself, and spelled *aleph – nun – chof – yud*, representing, the three from "*achein*" with the addition of the *yud* for Yaakov.

This new-found self-efficacy was not domain specific. It was not just limited to spiritual pursuits. Yaakov's new attitude pervaded all his interactions, as is clear from the very next episode regarding the shepherds by the well. In a powerful sermon ("The Stone on the Well – Boulder or Pebble?"), Rabbi Norman Lamm contrasts the attitude of the shepherds with that of Yaakov. When Yaakov asks the shepherds why they aren't working, they respond that there is a giant stone covering the well and until more people come to help push it off, "*lo nuchal*" – they just can't do it. They don't believe in their ability, so they don't even try. Yaakov, believing in his ability to accomplish, walks over to the stone, tries, and succeeds in removing it from the well. He believes in his ability to effect change, puts in the effort and succeeds.

How many areas of life – spiritual or otherwise – do we write-off as being too hard or not within our abilities? Perhaps if we learn this lesson from Yaakov, we can work on boosting our self-efficacy by realizing our potential, putting in the effort and increasing our chances of success and accomplishment.



When Years Seem like a Few Days

He (Jacob) said, “Look, the day is still long; it is not yet time to bring the livestock in; water the flock and go on grazing” (Genesis, 29:7).

Jacob was rather harsh in reprimanding the shepherds. Wasn't it obvious that the stone covering the well was so massive that it required many men to move it? The Rabbi of Gur (Imrei Emes) said that Jacob was aware of this, but that he rebuked them for not trying to move it. But is it not possible that they had in fact tried but could not move it? Yes, but just because they failed once, why were they not trying again? But how did Jacob know that they had not tried repeatedly? Was his rebuke justified?

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch sheds light on this episode by asking, why was it necessary to cover the well with so massive a stone? Could they not have covered it with something not quite as heavy? He answers that the shepherds were suspicious of one another, and feared that a lighter cover would enable one of them to uncover the well on his own and take an unfair share of the water for his flock. In order to prevent this, they made it impossible to have access to the water unless they were all present.

Jacob understood this, and reasoned that people who had no trust in one another were likely to be indolent and not exert themselves. Traits are infectious. Trust and diligence are likely to go hand in hand, as are distrust and sloth. Jacob knew that they had not even tried to uncover the well.

Even in a competitive world, we should have faith that what God decreed for us to have cannot be taken from us. Begrudging other people's success because we may think that it comes at our expense is a contemptible character trait, and unless we rid ourselves of this trait, it may affect other aspects of our character.

Character traits are not likely to exist in isolation. True faith in God and to *farigin* others (be happy for someone else's good fortune) tend to go together.

So Jacob worked seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him a few days because of his love for her (29:20)

Some of the commentaries note that this appears to be the reverse of what we usually experience. Being separated from someone one loves makes each day of separation feel like an eternity. How could it be that Jacob's love for Rachel made seven years seem like but a few days?

I am indebted to one of my patients for an insight into this verse. This young man was recovering from an addiction to alcohol. He had become dependent on alcohol, and the thought that he could never drink again was intolerable. When he joined the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous, he was told not to focus on the rest of his life, but to deal with just this day. "It is not impossible for you to abstain from drinking just today, is it? Then focus only on what you must do today. There is nothing you can do today about tomorrow's sobriety, so there is no point in contemplating it."

I have found this principle in the works of *mussar*. The *yetzer hara* (evil inclination) says, "What point is there in trying to observe all the Torah prohibitions? There is no way you can do so for the rest of your life. You are certain to violate Torah in quest of your desires. Why fight a losing battle? Why struggle and deny yourself so many pleasures when you are doomed to fail at it? You might as well just give in now." The response to the *yetzer hara* should be, "I do not have to deal with the rest of my life today. I know that today I can withstand temptation, and that is all I am concerned with. When

tomorrow comes, I'll deal with that challenge then."

The literal translation of the verse above is not "they seemed to him a *few* days." The Hebrew word *achadim* means "single days." The delay of seven years would have been very difficult to manage. Jacob, therefore, did not think of seven years, but took each day as it came. He could tolerate the deprivation *today*, and that was all that was necessary.

This is an important lesson for us. It is commonplace for people to make "New Year's resolutions," and these are soon broken. The reason for this is that a year is too great a task to undertake. One should resolve, "I will not lose my temper *today*," or "I will not smoke *today*" or "I will adhere to my diet *today*." Reducing challenges to smaller segments of time makes them much more manageable.



Out Into The World

The message of this week's Torah portion is immediately evident from its name -- *vayetzei*, "and he went out." Jacob goes out to the world. He does not choose to go out into the world. His brother, Esav, is chasing

him in order to kill him, and Jacob has no choice but to leave.

I find that in the Jewish world, there are two opposing attitudes. Perhaps one approach is born as a reaction to the other. But neither is the ideal Jewish approach.

There is the approach that says a Jew must lock himself in a ghetto and never venture forth -- *no matter what the circumstance* -- lest he become sullied by the outside world. And then there is the opposing view that says a Jew must interact with the outside world -- *no matter what the circumstance* -- lest he become insular and unworldly.

As with all extremes, each of these approaches is deeply flawed. True Judaism can be found as a balance somewhere between the two.

An environment devoid of focus on Godliness is not something a Jew should wish to engage by choice. It is distracting and confusing. However, there are times and places that he must do so. To escape danger, as in Jacob's circumstance; to make a living; to defend values that are held dear, or, as in our generation, to reach out and educate. Sometimes we Jews must go out into the world. And we should do so reluctantly, as did Jacob. But equally we should do so wholeheartedly -- as did Jacob.

In Judaism, there is nothing wrong with being insular -- as long as you do not shirk responsibility by doing so and as long as, like Jacob, you are ready to move into the world at a moment's notice. Equally, there is

nothing wrong with engaging in the world -- as long as it does not become an end unto itself, that blurs the distinction between what is valuable and what is not.

Extremes are always more comfortable, and that's why they attract us. But for a Jew, extremes are unproductive. Only the struggle for balance paves the road to meaningful existence.

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