

The Path To Follow

Vayeitzei

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The Mandrakes

It is written, “Reuven went out in the days of the wheat harvest. He found mandrakes in the field and brought them to Leah his mother. Rachel said to Leah, ‘Please give me some of your son’s mandrakes’” (Bereshith 30:14).

Reuven ventured into the field at the time of the harvest, and there he found mandrakes and brought them back to Leah his mother. Rachel, who yearned to have children, had recently told Jacob, “Give me children, or else I am dead” (v.1). When Rachel saw Reuven bringing so much satisfaction to his mother, she also wanted to partake of this pleasing fragrance, and so she said: “Please give me some of your son’s mandrakes.” In other words: “Since you’ve merited children, give me some of your son’s mandrakes. Although I’ve not been fortunate enough to have children, I would like to at least benefit from what they bring you, that at the very least I should have the same as you in this regard.” However Leah refused and bitterly replied, “Was your taking my husband insignificant?” (v.15). That is: “It’s true that you are suffering from not having children, but you have Jacob in your tent, and he is more important than ten sons.” Hence she protested, “Isn’t it enough that Jacob gives you his love, that you also want my son’s mandrakes? It’s a fair trade-off: I have children, and you have Jacob.” Rachel understood what her sister Leah was saying, and made an agreement with her: “Give me the mandrakes, and tonight Jacob will sleep your tent.”

This requires an explanation. First of all, Leah’s answer is not clear, for is this the way to speak to a childless woman, especially when she is your sister and had the merit to marry Jacob? In fact Leah only married him because her sister gave her the agreed-upon signs! Secondly, Rachel’s conduct is not clear either, for what benefit did Rachel derive from these mandrakes? What did they signify, such that she was ready to forgo Jacob’s presence?

Our Sages have already looked into the subject of the mandrakes, having perceived allusions in it to extraordinary mysteries. We shall cite the salient points raised by the author of Beer Mayim Chaim, who explained it in detail.

As the Torah states, Reuven was upset by the fact that Jacob did not live in Leah’s tent, so much so that he “moved his father’s bed.” Thus when he found these mandrakes, which have the ability to rekindle love – for the term dudayim (“mandrakes”) comes from the same root as dodim (“lovers”) – he wanted to bring them to his mother, his hope being that Jacob’s love for her would grow and he would live in her tent.

For her part, Rachel felt that Jacob’s love for her had diminished, believing that after so much time without her having children, his love for her had changed. When she saw the mandrakes, she feared Jacob’s love for Leah even more, which is why she asked for a few mandrakes. It was in order for Jacob’s love for both of them to at least be the same. To this Leah responded, “Isn’t it enough that Jacob is constantly in your tent, that you also want to have all his love to yourself?” Once Rachel saw that Leah refused to give her some mandrakes, she offered a compromise: “Give me some of your son’s mandrakes, and if you fear for Jacob’s love, I will go without his presence tonight, and he will spend the night in your tent.” Leah agreed, for even if it meant that Jacob’s love for Rachel would grow, it would enable her to give birth to the tribes more quickly, which was preferable.

In this regard we may also say that both of them, Rachel and Leah, had pure intentions. Leah did all this so that Rachel would be happy with her lot and not be bitter, telling Rachel that she had something for which to rejoice. True, she did not have children, but Jacob was better for her than ten sons. She merited the love of the greatest man in the generation, the love of Jacob, a wholesome man who abided in tents, and thus participated in his share of serving Hashem and learning Torah. Rachel also did everything with pure intentions, showing Leah that she should also rejoice in her share, in her children, and not think that Jacob did not love her. That is why she agreed to forgo Jacob’s presence on that night, in order to show Leah that the share she had been given, namely children, was better for her than Jacob. All this was to encourage her, not to treat the presence of the tzaddik as something trivial (she was nevertheless criticized for it, since she should not have expressed herself in this way). Yet as we have said, she did all this in order to show Leah just how she should rejoice in her share. Thus not only did this not constitute a sin in regards to the relationship between people, it was precisely the opposite: Everything they did stemmed from their great love for one another. Neither was there an absence of satisfaction with their lot, for each of them understood what G-d wanted, and they were content with the share destined to them by the Creator of the universe. Yet when these two sisters saw one another, they each thought that the other was not happy, being miserable with her lot. Hence they said what they said in order to encourage one another.

An Entirely Different Subject

It is written, “[He] remained there all night” (Bereshith 28:11).

Concerning Rashi’s explanation, according to which Jacob never slept during the 14 years in which he studied with Shem and Ever because he was learning Torah, Rabbi Meir Yechiel of Ostrova was asked the following question:

“How were these 14 years so special? Even beforehand, Jacob studied in the yeshiva of Shem and Ever, as Rashi explains on the verse: ‘abiding in tents’ [Bereshith 25:27] – the tent of Shem and the tent of Ever.’”

He replied that Jacob initially studied with them how to serve Hashem among Jews, for at that time he was living among tzaddikim such as his fathers and teachers. During those 14 years, however, Jacob wanted to learn how to live as a Jew among non-Jews and evildoers such as Lavan. That was an entirely different subject.

Two Ways

It is written, “Jacob took a vow, saying: ‘If G-d will be with me...’” (Bereshith 28:20).

After G-d promised Jacob, “I will guard you wherever you go” (v.15), why did he need to pray and make this vow? If it was because he feared sin, then what good would making a vow do?

Rabbi Israel Salanter teaches that there are two ways in which Hashem acts with men: One way is by sending misfortunes that force a person to serve Him. Another way is by giving him a comfortable life and abundant sustenance, in which case he has more opportunities, though his trial is more difficult.

Concerning Jacob, it is said that “Hashem was standing over him” (v.13). This means that the Holy One, blessed be He, wanted to act “over him” – which is to say that Jacob was to serve Him through misfortune and servitude. Hence Jacob vowed, “If G-d will be with me” – by not sending Jacob misfortune and forcing him to serve G-d – but only that He provides him with “bread to eat and clothes to wear” (v.20), meaning that all his needs would be met in abundance and without poverty, “and I return in peace to my father’s house” (v.21), that even this kindness would be granted to him, that he could rejoice in seeing his father the tzaddik once more, then “Hashem will be a G-d to me” (v.21). With such generosity on Hashem’s part, Jacob would overcome all trials and succeed in fully serving G-d.

It Was Only Natural

It is written, “G-d remembered Rachel” (Bereshith 30:22).

This is surprising, for in regards to Sarah we read: “Hashem remembered Sarah” (Bereshith 21:1). Yet in regards to Rachel, the Name El-kim (“G-d”) is used.

Here Rabbi Avraham Suissa offers a fine explanation based on the words of the commentators, namely that the Name El-kim has the same numerical value as hateva (“nature”), whereas the Tetragrammaton (“Hashem”) represents a modification of nature. It was clearly not natural for Sarah to have given birth at the age of 90, as it is written: “Shall a child be born to a 100-year-old man? And shall Sarah – a 90-year-old woman – give birth?” (Bereshith 17:17). In other words, Sarah could no longer give birth at such an age according to the laws of nature. Hence the Tetragrammaton is used in her regard, for it represents a modification of nature.

On the other hand, it precisely the Name El-kim (which evokes the natural realm) that is used in regards to Rachel, for Rachel was young and it was only natural for her to have children.

Lavan’s Trade Secret

It is written, “He heard the words of Lavan’s sons, saying: ‘Jacob has taken all that belonged to our father, and he amassed all his wealth from what belonged to our father.’” (Bereshith 31:1).

Rabbi Itzele of Volozhin explained this with a nice parable: A craftsman concealed a certain trade secret from his student, lest the student become more skillful and take away his livelihood. In the end, however, the student succeeded in discovering this secret and he became a famous craftsman.

The sons of the craftsman began to complain, saying: “This student took what belonged to our father, ‘and he amassed all his wealth from what belonged to our father.’”

Thus Lavan’s sons said: Jacob learned the trickery of our father, which was his trade secret, and with it he amassed all his wealth.

Where He Went, What He Did

It is written, “Vayeitzei Yaakov miBeersheva [And Jacob departed from Beersheba]” (Bereshith 28:10).

The Ba’al HaTurim sees an allusion in these words:

The first and last letters have the same numerical value as the name Ever, teaching us that Jacob went to live with Shem and Ever to study Torah.

The term miBeersheva has the same numerical value as haTorah (“the Torah”), meaning that he went to study the Torah with Shem and Ever.

– Bnei Shushan

In the Light of the Parsha

Tzeddakah Saves from Death

It is written, “He dreamed, and behold: A ladder was set up on earth, and the top of it reached to the heavens” (Bereshith 28:12).

The book Turei Zahav cites an interesting idea from the Baal Shem Tov: The term sulam (“ladder”) has the same numerical value as mammon (“money”), teaching us that since money is something material, it is “set up on earth.” Nevertheless, money gives a person the ability to reach the heavens if he uses it for tzeddakah.

Money is compared to a ladder because just as a ladder has steps by which a person can climb to a higher level – just as he can descend to a lower level – the same applies to money: If a person puts his money aside for tzeddakah, he can climb to a higher level. Conversely, if he fails to give his money to the poor, he will descend to a lower level and fulfill the verse: “Riches hoarded by their owner [are] to his misfortune” (Kohelet 5:12).

In the Aggadah our Sages say, “Tzeddakah pleases Me more than offerings, as it is said: ‘Doing what is right and just is preferable to Hashem than an offering’ [Mishlei 21:3].” If someone has sinned, let him repent and give tzeddakah, and he will be forgiven, as it is written: “Through kindness and truth, iniquity will be forgiven” [ibid. 16:6]. If someone has a fortune consisting of millions, it will not help him when he needs it, as it is written: “Wealth will not avail on the day of wrath” [ibid. 11:4]. When will it help him? When he gives it to charity, as it is written: “Tzeddakah saves from death” [ibid. 10:2]. Whoever gives tzeddakah, even if he has sinned, Hashem does not let the Angel of Death touch him. The reward for the tzeddakah which he has given will come before the Angel of Death and prevent it from striking him. Furthermore, it will push the Angel of Death away, saying: “Even if he has sinned and the angel has been given permission to strike, the tzeddakah which he gave will enable him to live, saving his soul from death.”

Marrying the Younger Before the Firstborn

It is written, “Why have you deceived me?” (Bereshith 29:25).

Lavan responded to this question from Jacob by saying, “Such is not done in our place, to give the younger before the firstborn” (v.26). From here Tosaphot conclude (Kiddushin 52a) that in practice, the Halachah follows Lavan: Where there exists a doubt in regards to kiddushin between two sisters, in principle we hold that kiddushin applies to the firstborn.

Tosaphot speak of a case brought before Rabbeinu Tam in which Rabbi Oshiya Halevi’s son gave kiddushin to the daughter of a rich man. When doing so, however, all he said was: “Your daughter mekudeshet [is betrothed] to me,” not specifying which daughter he was referring to. Rabbeinu Tam ruled that the kiddushin was valid. Even if he did not specify a name, in principle we hold he was referring to the firstborn, for “such is not done in our place, to give the younger before the firstborn.” Rav Menachem of Yuni did not agree with him.

The Gemara cites Rabbi Ammi as saying, “For an assembly, wisdom takes precedence [Rashbam: Whether for a Din Torah or another Torah assembly, the wisest is given a more honorable place than the oldest]. For a festive gathering [which includes weddings], age takes precedence” (Bava Batra 120a).

The Tur (Yoreh Deah 242) cites this Gemara in the context of the Halachah which states that for a festive gathering or wedding, we give the most honorable place to the oldest. The Bach objects: “This is surprising. Why does he need to specify a ‘wedding’ more than any other festive gathering?” He replies: “It appears that when speaking of a wedding, it means that if brothers or sister are to get married, even if the oldest is not the wisest, we do not marry off the younger one because he is greater in wisdom. Rather, we marry off the oldest first, even if he is not as great in wisdom.” In fact it is said in perek yesh nochalim, concerning the daughters of Zelophehad, that in one place they are listed according to age, while in another place they are listed according to wisdom. The Rashbam explains that when they were married, the verse listed them according to age: “Mahlah, Tirzah, Hoglah, Milcah and Noah, the daughters of Zelophehad” (Bamidbar 36:11), which seems to follow the order of their birth, in accordance with the dictum: “Such is not done in our place, to give the younger before the firstborn.” Yet when they came before Moshe, they were listed according to wisdom: “Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah” (Bamidbar 26:33). Wisdom takes precedence when it comes to being seated for a Din Torah or other Torah assembly, and age takes precedence when it comes to a festive gathering, which follows what the Torah says about the daughters of Zelophehad.

In Responsa Iggerot Moshe, Reb Moshe Feinstein discusses the case of a young man who asked if he could marry before his older brother, who was distressed by the fact that his younger brother was getting married before him. Reb Moshe explains that the Bach and the Shach hold that when two brothers are engaged to get married, precedence is given to the older brother. However if the older brother is not yet engaged – and even if he is a more learned talmid chacham than his younger brother – the younger brother does not have to wait for him to find a wife, for even a simple man does not have to delay a mitzvah for the sake of a talmid chacham. In regards to the question of respect, an older brother only has precedence when both brothers, not just one of them, are in a position to get married, as mentioned in regards to a festive celebration. The daughters of Zelophehad all found someone to marry at the same time, which is why they married according to age, for age takes precedence in a wedding celebration.

If the firstborn absolves his younger sibling and has no issue with letting him getting married first, says the author of Avnei Chefet, then clearly there is no prohibition here, since the main thing is the obligation to respect the firstborn. Even in regards to a father, if he forgoes a sign of respect, it can be waived.

The Shulchan HaEzer notes that, according to a statement of the Arugat HaBosem, a man who reaches the age of 20 years without having married, and who incurs the malediction of the Sages, does not have to worry if he wants to marry a woman with the same name as his mother. Therefore how much more is there no prohibition of “such is not done in our place,” for there is certainly reason to be lenient.

Rachel was the Firstborn!

Some have asked why Jacob did not foresee Lavan’s objection that the younger is not given in marriage before the firstborn. The Ohr HaChaim explains that Jacob believed that it was up to Lavan to tell him, and that moreover it was not something that could hinder things when a man wants to marry off his younger daughter before the firstborn. When Jacob said, “Give me my wife” (Bereshith 29:21), in principle he meant Rachel, and Lavan should have told him that he could not marry off Rachel before Leah. At that point, it would have depended on Jacob to wait until Leah was married, or to marry Leah himself. However Lavan deceived him by not saying anything.

Another objection has been raised in this regard: The Bach and the Shach have ruled that in the case of two brothers or two sisters who are engaged to get married, the wedding of the younger sibling should not take place first, even if the younger is greater in wisdom. In that case, why does the Halachah go according to the view of Lavan, not Jacob, who wanted to marry the younger sister?

The book Pardes Yosef explains in the name of Rabbi Ephraim that Rachel and Leah were twins, and that Leah emerged from the womb first, followed by Rachel. Citing the Midrash, Rashi notes in Parsha Toldot (Bereshith 25:26) that Jacob and Esau were twins, and that Jacob was holding Esau’s heel to prevent him from leaving the womb first, for Jacob had been formed by the first drop and Esau by the second. The birthright thus belonged to the one who was first created, not the one who first emerged from the womb. The fact that Jacob acquired the birthright was only to justify himself in the eyes of the world, for in reality Jacob was the firstborn.

Consequently, Jacob believed that Rachel was also the firstborn, since Leah emerged from the womb first, meaning that she was formed last. However Lavan thought that Leah was the firstborn because she emerged first. Hence there was no arguing over the fact that “such is not done in our place.”

Guard Your Tongue!

Many People Make Mistakes in this Area

If Reuven is speaking to Levi and telling him disparaging things about Shimon, and Levi relates this to Shimon, then it is forbidden for Shimon to go to Reuven and say: “Why did you say this about me to Levi?” In that case, Shimon would be guilty of Rechilus [talebearing]. Even if Shimon does not say that he heard it from Levi, it will be easy for Reuven to understand on his own that it was Levi who told Shimon about it. This is forbidden, yet because of our numerous sins many people make mistakes in this area.

– Chafetz Chaim

In our previous article, we mentioned the remarks of the Sages on the importance of naming a newborn after the holy Patriarchs, or after a great man who is known for his integrity and piety.

Despite all this, we must be very careful in regards to what name we choose for our newborn. It is preferable to give him a name that is common, not too rare, so that the child does not grow up and become embarrassed on account of it. The book HaTzofen cites a story involving the Gerer Rebbe, Rabbi Pinchas Menachem Alter Zatzal (the author of Pnei Menachem): One of his chassidim came to him and said that he had decided to name his daughter “Yenta,” after his grandmother. The chassid made sure to tell the Rebbe that he had asked his wife for permission, and she agreed.

Surprised and disturbed by this, the Rebbe asked: “And will you ask the child herself if she agrees on having this name?”

Fostering Good Traits

Starting from the assumption that we should link the destiny of a newborn to the name we have chosen for him (as mentioned in Sefer Chassidim, there are some people who carry the name of a holy man and succeed in life, thus becoming great. This is what Jacob said, “Let my name be named on them, and the name of my fathers”), we must ask if the name of a holy man can also be useful to an evildoer who carries the same name.

We learn the answer to this question from what the Maggid revealed to Rabbi Yossef Karo: “Even if an evildoer carries the name of the righteous, this name is not useless, for there are good traits to which this name alludes. For example, a person named Abraham will have a tendency towards showing kindness, a person named Joseph will have a tendency towards overcoming physical temptations, or towards providing others with food.”

The Main Thing is Unity

On to the great question: Who gets to choose the name of the newborn – the father or the mother? Without a doubt, this is not a simple question, for it is an issue on which many parents hesitate. Sometimes it ends with arguments whose effects run deep. The best solution is for the newborn’s name to be chosen by both parents in love, harmony, and peace.

The Ramban discusses this issue, citing “some people” for a custom that existed in times past (when Jacob’s sons, the fathers of the tribes, were born), namely that the firstborn was named by the father, the second by the mother, and so on. This is also the explanation given in Da’at Zekenim on the verse, “It was at Chezib when she bore him” (Bereshith 38:5) – this being the reason why it is said: “and she [Judah’s wife] called his name Shelah.” Since it was Judah’s turn to name their child, but he was not at Chezib at the time, Judah’s wife named him. However the Ramban has his doubts in regards to this custom, believing that it makes little sense.

In looking through Sefer Bereshith, we discover that the names of Adam’s sons were given by Eve, and that the names of Jacob’s sons [except Benjamin] were given by their mothers. On the other

hand, Noah was named by his father, as were Isaac and Ishmael (Midrash Tanchuma, Bereshith states that Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Solomon, and Josiah were all named by G-d). “If the generations had merited it, the name given to a child would let us know what his conduct would be.” This is also what Joseph did when he named his sons Manasseh and Ephraim, something that we also see when Moshe named his sons.

In our time, the custom among Ashkenazim is to name the first boy after the mother’s father, and the second boy after the father’s father. Among the Sephardim it is the opposite: The first boy is named after the father’s father, and the second boy after the mother’s father. Responsa Keter Ephraim gives a reason for the custom of the Ashkenazim: The mother, after getting married, feels distant from her father and her home. She is therefore given the right to name the child after her father, in order to strengthen, as it were, her emotional bond with her father’s home.

The book Ta’amei HaMinhagim cites the Sages in giving an interesting view on the honor due to the grandparents of a newborn: The punishment of death incurred by Nadav and Avihu had its source in the fact that Aaron named his firstborn son Nadav, which was the name of his father-in-law (Amminadav), and only afterwards did he honor his own father by naming his second son Avihu (“he is my father”). Aaron was punished for having followed this sequence.

The Maharshal discusses the case of a certain individual and his wife. This individual’s father was named Meir, and his wife’s father was named Uri. Since they could not agree on what to name their son, for the sake of peace they called him “Shneur,” meaning “two lights” – Meir and Uri.

A Change of Name

It is sometimes necessary for a person to change his name in order to improve his lot. Let us first cite what the Maharsha says: “Changing names is only useful if the decree against a person results from his natural destiny. However if it results from his sins, only teshuvah can help.”

The Sages say, “Four things tear up the verdict against a man: Tzedakah, crying out in prayer, changing one’s name, and changing one’s ways” (Rosh Hashanah 16b).

In regards to changing one’s name, or adding an additional name, we must begin by seeking the advice of a talmid chacham and posek, and he will decide the issue. The book HaTzofen cites Rav Yosef Brok Zatzal (the Rosh Yeshiva of Netivot Olam) in regards to one of his students named Peter. This student went to see the Steipler Zatzal, certain that the Rav would tell him to change his name. However the Steipler told him that one of the Ba’alei HaTosafot was named Rabbeinu Peter. He therefore asked, “If it was good enough for one of the Ba’alei HaTosafot, why wouldn’t it be good enough for you?”