

## Judah and Gratitude

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*In memory of my dear Opa, Refoel ben Eliezer (Phillip Posen) and in honour of my nephew Yehuda Yehezkel ben Yehiel (Judah Ezekiel Fachler)*

In *Berachot 7b* the *Talmud* states:

From the day that the Holy One Blessed Be He created His world there was no person who thanked Him until Leah came and thanked Him, as it says, 'This time I will thank G-d.'<sup>1</sup>

While it is surely commendable to offer thanks to G-d, the commentaries ask why Leah waited until her fourth son was born to express her gratitude, why did she not do so earlier? *Rashi*, basing himself on *Genesis Rabbah*, explains that Leah foresaw prophetically that Jacob would have twelve tribes. She calculated then that each of his four wives would have three children. When she was blessed with a fourth child the realization that she had received more than her fair share prompted her to offer thanks to the Almighty.<sup>2</sup>

The above explanation raises more problems than it solves. When the *Torah* recounts an episode of history it does not merely tell us a story but requires us to learn from the actions of its protagonists. If Leah only thanked G-d when she received more than she deserved, are we similarly only obligated to show gratitude when we perceive that we are receiving more than is due to us? Are we not meant to appreciate everything that comes our way? And even if we are permitted to take certain things for granted, how is our prophet-less generation meant to know what is deserved, and what is not?

Rabbi Jonah Munk<sup>3</sup> offers a different interpretation to *Rashi*: Leah's marriage to Jacob was beset by more than the usual problems that accompany matrimony. The *Torah* records that Jacob, who was cheated by his father-in-law into marrying the elder sister of the woman he truly loved, hated his first wife. Seeing that Leah was placed in such a terrible predicament, G-d 'opened her womb'<sup>4</sup>. However, even though she had hoped that Jacob would love her after she provided him with a firstborn son, as she declares at Reuben's birth, 'G-d has seen my affliction and now my husband will love me'<sup>5</sup>, this was not to be. Indeed, even after her second son, Simeon, was born, she records that 'G-d had heard' that she 'was hated'<sup>6</sup>. It was only when her third son, Levi, was born that she felt that her husband would be her true companion, 'This time my husband will accompany me'<sup>7</sup>. Our commentaries teach us that Jacob acquiesced to Leah's wishes for a closer relationship and that is why it was he who named his third child, with all the connotations of companionship that this name, Levi, conjures up. When her fourth son arrived, and when she realized that his birth was not merely a means to attract her spouse's attention, she thanked G-d for the special gift of a son.

<sup>1</sup> Genesis 29:35, recording the birth of Leah's fourth son, Judah.

<sup>2</sup> *Rashi*, *ibid.* 29:34-35; *Rashi*, *Berachot 7b*

<sup>3</sup> Hagey Yonah pp.53-54

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 29:31

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* 29:32

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.* 29:33

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.* 29:34

While this is an interesting explanation it still does not offer a complete answer to our questions. Why should it matter what motives are assigned to the birth of a son? Is it not enough that one is blessed with the miracle of childbearing? Should we not thank G-d regardless? I would humbly suggest that the answer lies more in psychology than in theology.

In Hebrew the terms for 'offering thanks' (הודיה), and 'acknowledgement' or 'admission' (הודאה), are very closely related. The reason for this is that we are only able to appreciate someone else and express gratitude when we acknowledge that other people's deeds and actions affect our lives. If we are caught up in ourselves and in our predicaments, however justified, we are unable to see those around us and to appreciate what they are doing. A despised and, most probably, depressed wife whose love for her husband is unreciprocated cannot possibly dream of anything else but a happy marriage. Only after she is assured that her husband is a true partner can she appreciate what she has. Prior to Levi's birth Jacob's actions led Leah to believe that he was not her true companion. However, after he verbally affirmed that this was not the case, she was free to meditate on what was happening beyond the confines of her marriage. She could finally appreciate the unfettered joy of childbirth. She could now ecstatically thank G-d on his beneficence in blessing her with a fourth beautiful son.<sup>8</sup>

The penultimate blessing in the *shmone esrei* (a central Jewish prayer) consists of a prayer of thanks to G-d for what He has bestowed upon us, and it is quite possible that this was inspired by Leah's open expression of gratitude.<sup>9</sup> The *Talmud* cautions against offering prayers in 'a state of depression'.<sup>10</sup> This *Talmudic* dictum found its way to all the classic *halachic* (Jewish law) literature and has become part of *halacha*. If this is so, it is very possible that from a purely *halachic* perspective Leah's depression barred her from thanking G-d. Only once she gained confidence in herself could there be any meaning in her submission to G-d and in her acknowledgement that everything was directed by His hand.

The *Tiv Gittin*<sup>11</sup> suggests that Leah's statement is in fact a confession rather than an expression of thanks. Prior to Judah's birth Leah did not understand the travails that she experienced. Why was she the unloved older sister? Why did Jacob detest her? Why even after Reuben and Simeon were born was there no difference to her marital relationship? Only after her fourth son is born, effectively making her the matriarch of a plurality of the tribes of Jacob, does she finally realize the purpose of her suffering. Only now can she say, 'I admit to you G-d' that my suffering had a purpose, that in order to become the female progenitor of the Israelites I had to undergo what You had in store for me.

Through Judah's birth Leah bequeathed to us, her descendants, the gift of acknowledging that G-d has great plans in store for us, even if it does not always appear that way. Contemporary thinkers have suggested homiletically that the reason we are called Jews is because we are ready to admit the truth.<sup>12</sup> We need to live up to this legacy. We need to heed Leah and Judah's message and realize the truth that G-d is constantly looking after us. Once we internalize this, we will become happier, humbler and more grateful servants of Hashem.

<sup>8</sup> See also Samson Raphael Hirsch, commentary to Genesis 29:35.

<sup>9</sup> See *Meshech Chochma* [ibid.] where he refers to Leah's statement as a blessing.

<sup>10</sup> Berachot 31a

<sup>11</sup> FRIEDMAN, A. Z. *Wellsprings of Torah*. [Hebrew edition]. V.1:134.

<sup>12</sup> In Hebrew Jews are יהודים, and therefore we contain in our name הודאה – acknowledgement or admission