

BSD

Rachel: Return to Jewish Nature

The 11th of Cheshvan can be called “Jewish Mother’s Day” (יום האם היהודית). This is the day of passing of our matriarch, Rachel. It is also the 41st day of the new year, and 41 is the numerical value of “mother” (אם), in Hebrew.

In the book of Genesis, we read that Jacob leaves the land of Israel and reaches Haran, where he meets his cousin, Rachel, immediately falling in love: “And Jacob loved Rachel.” This is apparently love at first sight. Later, the plot thickens, when the scheming Laban, Rachel’s father, gives his elder daughter, Leah, to Jacob as a bride instead of Rachel. Ultimately, most of Jacob’s sons were from Leah, including the tribe of priests (Levi) and the tribe of kings (Judah). Today, most Jews are descendants of Leah and not Rachel, as many of Rachel’s descendants were exiled by the Assyrians because they were part of the Northern Kingdom, who have not yet returned to Israel. Nonetheless, Rachel was and has remained the “mainstay” of Jacob’s home. Jeremiah promises her, in God’s Name, “and the children will return to their border.” [Note that the Hebrew word for “border,” גבול, also equals 41, the value of “mother.”]

Natural or Coerced?

What can we learn from the love of Jacob for Rachel. An important question disturbs many: Is our connection to God, our fulfillment of the Torah and the *mitzvot*, something natural to us, simply flowing from our being, or do we have to invest much effort and force ourselves to achieve it in a rather artificial manner?

Both are true. On one hand, if we do only “what we feel” we will enter very dangerous territory. All of our evil inclinations and negative desires will float to the surface and drown our personality and the world around us, creating total chaos. Thus, the foundation of Judaism is the acceptance of the yoke of Heaven. By nature, we are a bit uncouth and we need a serious yoke on our shoulders to keep us on the straight and narrow path.

On a deeper level, however, deep inside our souls, the true Jewish nature is concealed. This nature intensely desires to be connected to God, to pray to Him, to study His Torah and to perform His *mitzvot* (*mitzvot* means “commandments” but its root means “togetherness”). The secret of this concealed Jewish nature—the natural connection with God—what Jacob’s love for Rachel represents. She is, “beautiful of form and of beautiful appearance.” Jacob immediately felt that she was his life-partner and soul-mate and connected to her from his deepest nature.

From Exile to Redemption

The problem is that our Jewish nature is concealed. Everyday reality and its hardships is like the troubles that Laban makes for Jacob. It creates confusion and interferes with our great love of God.

Thus, as long as we have not reached the complete redemption, our true nature is not revealed. It seems completely natural to eat, drink and “just live”. But it does not “feel” natural enough to conduct ourselves with sanctity and purity, with Torah and prayer.

Rachel is buried on the road. She does not find comfort until the last of her children returns to his border. The literal meaning of returning to our borders is a return to the land of Israel, where the Kingdom of Israel was meant to be and will arise. This is our natural place. But, on a deeper level, returning to our borders also means returning to the place, deep inside our souls, where our true, perfectly attuned Jewish nature lies. The nature that feels that we will be the most beautiful of form and beautiful of appearance when we are Jews who love God, the people of Israel, the Torah of Israel and the land of Israel.