

Vayetzei Gen 28:10 to 32:3 Triennial 2 30:14-31:16

Erev Tov,

This week's reading, Vayetzei is the seventh parsha in Torah, and deals with the third generation of Matriarchs and Patriarchs. They make babies who will be founders of the 12 Tribes of Israel, about three thousand, seven hundred years ago. To recap: Jacob has fled to Paddam-Haran to avoid the wrath of his brother Aysav. He dreams of a ladder to heaven with angels ascending and descending; many commentaries are written about this poetic and vivid imagery. At the well, prophetically the source of life, he meets Rachel, younger daughter of his uncle Laban. This makes Jacob and Rachel first cousins. Please keep this point in mind..it will take on meaning shortly. Jacob pledges himself to work for his uncle for seven years in order to marry Rachel. On the wedding night, Laban replaces Rachel with her older sister Leah. Jacob awakens the next day to Leah, deceived by his uncle but agrees to work another seven years to gain the sister he loves. Fourteen years after coming to Paddam- Haran he has --quote from Rabbi Sacks---two primary wives, two secondary wives, 12 children and a wealth of goats and sheep exceeding those of his father-in-law, through clever animal husbandry. Jacob knows he has lost favour with Laban and G*d instructs him to return to Can'aan, the land of his ancestors. He flees Paddam-Haran but Laban tracks down the entourage three days later.

The second part of the triennial cycle we're reading --verses 30:14 to 31:16---continues the love triangle between Jacob, Leah and Rachel. Rabbi Melissa Crespy of the Jewish Theological Seminary calls this parsha "Messy and Complicated Relationships" because there are many intertwined, complex emotions and power arrangements. Leah lives in sorrow and pain. She knows Jacob does not love her, although she has borne him four sons. Rachel too lives with heartbreak; she is infertile, unable to conceive, witnessing her sister able to do so. Rachel gives Jacob her handmaid Bilhah to be a surrogate for children who will be considered her own. Bilhah bears two sons in Rachel's name. Leah then gives Jacob HER handmaid Zilpah to conceive, and Zilpah mothers two sons. Rachel asks Leah for her firstborn Reuben's dudaim-- love fruits --I imagine to enhance her fertility; in exchange, Rachel sends Jacob to Leah, and they conceive three more sons. At this point "God remembered Rachel..and opened her womb" and she bore Joseph. Later she conceived and gave birth to Benjamin.

If all this sounds confusing and complex, it is. Family trees always confounded me so here's a graphic from Wikipedia. The first four sons are Leah's, sons 5 and 6 are Bilhah's but considered Rachel's. 7 and 8 are from Zilpah, considered Leah's. 9 and 10 Leah's. 11 and 12 Rachel's. Leah also has a daughter Deena, but that is another story.

What I will focus on today is--- the nation of Israel was founded through children borne of men with power and wealth, who could assumedly support multiple wives of differential status. As Jews we come from a wide genetic diversity, as Jacob's wives, mandated by G*d, came from other tribes.

There is much commentary written on the emotional distress of the two Matriarchs. Rabbi Sacks has a very beautiful dvar written in 2007, called Leah's Tears. Today I will not specifically

discuss the sisters' personal anguish, but rather the SYSTEM within which they lived their lives. Let us look at the social construct of polygamy, both then and today.

Starting with then--- nearly four millenia ago. What might have been some rationales for having polygamous families? Here are a few, drawn from a couple of sources---

Compensation for high mortality rates / infertility / cousin marriages to extend clan power/ widowhood (from which sprang the Levirate law) / low value of women and children as a free source of labour/ war that has reduced the population of available men/ a strategy so that young Jewish girls would not be outmarried in a country hostile to Jews. These reasons imply that there is a food supply sufficient to sustain more than one partner. But they do not account for interpersonal effects of a man having multiple wives.

In the Encyclopedia of Jewish Women online, Naomi Steinberg, .author of Kinship and Marriage in Genesis, writes:

The arrangement of two sisters married to the same man in anthropological parlance is called "sororal polyGyny" Jacob's primary wives, Leah and Rachel, were sisters, but they were also a marital economic arrangement, to build up the family wealth. Secondary wives had no economic status. Children of the secondaries, however, had status separate from their mothers. So although Jacob had four wives of unequal financial status, all the children were heirs to Jacob's wealth. Steinberg adds, however, because Gad and Asher were the children of secondary wife Zilpah, handmaid of the unpreferred primary wife Leah, they became tribes of lesser importance in the nation of Israel.

Just to note: although Leah was the unpreferred wife, it is through her that the nation of Israel was built. Leah's fourth son, Yehudah, is the ancestor of Yehudim, Jews as we now call ourselves. When Yehudah was born, Leah said "ha'pa'am odeh et Adonai" (this time I will praise G*d). Leah's ability to give thanks, despite her heartbreak, has continued. We awaken to Modeh/modah ani, like Leah, to be grateful for our day.

Let's continue. Who were Jacob's secondary wives, Bilhah and Zilpah?

Wikipedia states they were handmaids slash concubines (pilegesh in Hebrew.) Bilhah and Zilpah were sisters whose father, Rotheus, was redeemed from captivity by Laban. Laban gave Rotheus Euna, mother of the two girls. Midrash Rabbah states that Bilhah and Zilpah were also Laban's daughters, because Euna was Laban's concubine, and so were HALF sisters to Leah and Rachel. From a power perspective, building of a clan can clearly come when men can father many children with various women. When cousins marry each other, wealth simply stays in the dynasty. Patriarchy is reinforced through the children--they have full status because they are the MAN's children.

What were the relationships between the four wives? Let's recall Roslyn's excellent dvar of last week, in which she outlined the DYAD relationship of two interlocutors. Presumably at any given

time, one person is a listener, and the other a speaker, and roles shift back and forth. How much more complex with four women with different power and status, sharing one husband. The secondary wives were “given” to the primaries on the occasions of the primaries’ marriages. Laban gave Bilhah to Rachel when she married Jacob, and Zilpah to Leah, also as a wedding present. Personally, I find the whole concept of one woman being the “property” of another quite repugnant by our 21st century standards, but in parts of the world, no doubtedly these arrangements continue.

How might polygamy played out in everyday life back then? Two contemporary works of fiction may give us some imagined clues. Anita Diamant, author of *The Red Tent*, describes exactly that. Unfortunately I read this many years ago and only recall vaguely it spoke to how the ladies got along, or not. *The Handmaid’s Tale* by Margaret Atwood, set in our close-to-now future, is the very unequal power relationships of infertile wives using lesser status women for the purpose of reproduction. Wikipedia mentions a third literary work called *Rachel and Leah*, by Owen Scott Card, which I will one day look for.

A Chabad shiur asks..Why are Bilhah and Zilpah not considered Matriarchs as are Leah and Rachel? According to footnoted Talmudic and kabbalah references, the SOULS of the Four Matriarchs are the embodiment of Malchut--Royalty. While Bilhah and Zilpah HAD lofty souls, theirs were not not as lofty as their “owners”. Their role was to act as agents for Leah and Rachel, by having children in the name of the Matriarchs. Again, inequality of power.

Chabad cites Rashi taught that the difference between primary and secondary wives was legal rights. Primaries had both kiddushin, the ability to divorce, AND ketubot, contracts regarding possessions and rights. By contrast, a handmaid would have had a ketubah, but no ability to end the relationship. Secondary wives were indeed just that--an underclass present for the purpose of having children. Hopefully they found ways to make it all work. And there may have even been some advantages in that children would have had many moms around them?

Is polygamy “good” for men? Mathematically speaking, most societies are roughly split 50/50 between males and females, unless there are extreme circumstances. I shudder considering China’s one child policy with reported infanticide of girl babies so that now it’s estimated that for every 100 females there are 119 males. Other societies have been marked by severe losses of young men to civil conflict or wars. Polygamy seems to support “alpha” males who can afford multiple wives. One man then has many women, leaving “beta” males unable to find mates through lack of supply. What does that do to a society?

If you want to pursue the prevalence of polygamy in Jewish history, and rabbinical positions on it, consult Wikipedia’s article *Polygamy and Judaism*.. Maimonides for example, did not approve of it personally but cited legal reasons for it.

And now, I segue to the 21st century. Polygamy still is practiced today, primarily in Muslim countries and Africa, but this is changing. In 2000 the United Nations Human Rights Committee

took a strong stand against polygamy, stating it violates women's human rights outlined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, or ICCPR. In Israel, polygamy is illegal, yet some exceptions are made. Yemeni and Mizrahi families arriving already in polygamous families are permitted to continue (this could be the subject of another dvar) . However, no new polygamous families can be initiated, Bedouin indigenous people are allowed to have polygamous families, and it's estimated 20 to 30% of all Bedouin families are so constructed. Sharia law upholds the practice, reinforcing the belief it is "God's will".

In the past twenty years a significant body of social science research has emerged on polygamy, in Israel and worldwide. By serendipity, a friend who is a mental health researcher in Shanghai sent me an academic paper titled *Polygamy and poor mental health among Bedouin women: do socioeconomic and social support matter?* This particular study was conducted twelve years ago, a collaboration between Ben Gurion University and Toronto's Dalla Lana School of Public Health, and was published in *Ethnicity and Health* in 2013.

Researchers interviewed 464 Arab Bedouin women living in a marginalized town in the Negev who were clients of a maternal-child health centre. About 22% were in polygamous relationships. These women reported almost twice the odds of depressive symptoms than those living in monogamous marriages. Self-reported health status was lower in polygamous women. However, social support --defined on a scale of six measures of material, emotional and informational support--seemed to reduce the odds for poor self-reported health, including depression. Socio-economic status and the level of education attained by the women had lesser protective effects for mental health outcomes.

This study builds on previous works of two Israeli researchers. Dr. Alean Al-Krenawi, PhD in social work, is the first Bedouin director of an Israeli academic institution, and is author of *Psychosocial Impact of Polygamy in the Middle East*, published in 2013. Interpersonal relationships in polygamous families were studied, including relationships between children of different mothers. His book covers the role of Sharia law and offers mental health practitioners cultural context and perspective for working with Bedouin populations. Dr. Vered Slonim-Nevo, professor of social work at Ben Gurion University of the Negev, has researched psychosocial conditions, finding that family relationships and economics have significant impacts on multi-wives' wellbeing. Overall, however, polygamy in both well-functioning and poorly functioning families is painful, especially for wives. Polygyny women had more mental health issues compared to women in monogamous marriages. However, there were factors that made it difficult to reliably transpose these findings to different societies.

To summarize: I am rooting the personal suffering of Leah and Rachel in the system they endured--- the larger context of polygamy. In social work, we would call this The Personal is the Political..our environment shapes who we become. Polygamy is a complex social structure and is about power, with deep cultural, social, economic and political roots, and it still exists today. What may have had intrinsic survival benefits 4000 years ago is no longer the norm for 21st century city dwellers who have evolved into nuclear families. Is there some learning, some transferable wisdom from our ancestors we can incorporate today? We are a diverse people,

born of many gene pools. Rather than being victims of our genes or external circumstances, we are strengthened by our diversity. And we are always changing. What if we DID return to living in larger units, embodying nonconflictual, collaborative childrearing, resource sharing and a larger circle of family? In my opinion, what would need to happen first is to flatten the curve of hierarchy. What do you think? Shabbat shalom!