

This month's study with  
Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein



## Rachel: Our Matriarch of Compassion

The third matriarch of the Bible is Rachel. In Jewish tradition, whenever we mention the four matriarchs, we list them in the following order: Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah. While Leah technically was third in line – the woman who the patriarch Jacob married first and who became mother to six of his sons – it was Rachel who Jacob had *chosen* first to be his wife.

As Scripture tells us, Jacob loved Rachel (Genesis 29:18). Jacob sought Rachel's hand in marriage from her father, Laban. And while Jacob accepted Leah after he had been deceived by Laban and given Leah in place of Rachel, Jacob's most beloved wife remained Rachel.

Scripture tells us that Rachel was barren (Genesis 29:31). The Hebrew word for "barren" that appears in this verse is *akara*. This word can also be read as *ikara*, which means "the main" or "the most important." Although Jacob had four wives, Rachel never lost her status as his *ikara*, his favorite.

It is Rachel's first son, Joseph, who went on to attain great distinction as the one who helped the Israelites survive a severe famine by bringing them to Egypt. In the Christian Bible, of all Jacob's sons, only Joseph is singled out for his faith in believing that the children of Israel would someday return to their rightful homeland (Hebrews 11:22).

Tragically, Rachel and Jacob's union lasted only 14 years. Yet, Rachel is unique in that she is defined as much by her death as by her life. We read in Genesis 35:19 that Rachel died "*on the way to Ephrath*." The term "*on the way*" is relevant to Rachel's death as well as her life.

In her short lifetime, Rachel was always *on the way*, not ever quite arriving. Just

after we first encounter her, she is *on the way* to marry Jacob. She waited seven years to marry him, but because of her father's deception, she never had Jacob all to herself as they had both intended. Rachel was then *on the way* to start her life with Jacob, but he was stuck working for Laban for seven more years – which then turned into 14 years, making a total of 20 years that Jacob spent working for Laban (Genesis 31:38).

During that time, Rachel was also *on the way* to becoming a mother. She waited many painful years – watching her sister give birth to child after child – until she gave birth to her first son, and finally died during the birth of her second son. She never became the mother she had dreamed of being, or the one her sister, Leah, had been.

After her death, Rachel remained *on the way*. Literally, she was buried on the road, on the way to a different destination. In the Jewish tradition, we also consider Rachel to be on the way together with her children even today. Of all the matriarchs, Rachel is the only one considered to be with the descendants of Israel on their life journeys. Rachel is known for her compassion, and today hundreds of thousands visit her grave and pour out their hearts to her.

This month we will study the life and death of the matriarch Rachel. We will discover the strengths and qualities unique to Rachel among the matriarchs that exist within us all. We will look at this biblical character we thought we knew and gain deeper insight into her life and legacy, and her role in the story of Israel, and why she has remained a symbol of compassion for all ages.

*Rabbi Eckstein*

*Jacob was in love with Rachel and said, "I'll work for you seven years in return for your younger daughter Rachel."*

— Genesis 29:18



## A Foundation of Compassion

*When Jacob saw Rachel daughter of his uncle Laban, and Laban's sheep, he went over and rolled the stone away from the mouth of the well and watered his uncle's sheep. Then Jacob kissed Rachel and began to weep aloud. — Genesis 29:10–11*

We are first introduced to the third matriarch, Rachel, when Jacob arrived in Haran in search of a wife from his mother's family. As soon as he saw Rachel, he knew that she was the one. Genesis 29:11 tells us: *"Then Jacob kissed Rachel and began to weep aloud."* It was a divinely appointed meeting.

As the youngest daughter, it was Rachel's duty to take the family's flock to the well. It was not a coincidence that she was there when Jacob arrived. Jacob had just had his famous dream of angels climbing the stairway to heaven and had received God's promise of a homeland and descendants too numerous to count (Genesis 28:10-15), when he continued on his journey in Genesis 29:1.

Jacob arrived at the well with God's resounding promise in his heart, *"I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go"* (Genesis 28:15). And so, with this assurance of divine protection and guidance, Jacob met the shepherds who pointed out Laban's daughter, Rachel, to him (Genesis 29:6). It was love at first sight.

Verse 18 informs us that, indeed, *"Jacob was in love with Rachel"* from the very beginning. According to Jewish tradition, Jacob immediately asked Rachel for her hand in marriage, and while Rachel gave her assent, she knew that her father was a deceiver. As it was the custom then for the oldest sister to be married first, Rachel knew that Laban would likely try to substitute Leah.

Jacob offered to work for Laban for seven years in return for Rachel as his bride — terms that Laban eagerly accepted. For the love-struck Jacob, the years *"seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her"* (Genesis 29:20). Yet, when his time of service was up, as Rachel had expected, Laban succeeded in tricking Jacob into marrying Leah instead of Rachel. *"When morning came, there was Leah!"* (Genesis 29:25). By the time Jacob realized that he had been duped, it was too late.

Much is made of Laban's duplicity, but in the Jewish tradition, it is Rachel's actions in this drama that garner the most attention. In the Oral Tradition, which Jesus was certainly taught as a young boy in synagogue, Rachel and Jacob had worked out ahead of time secret signals to assure him that the veiled bride was indeed Rachel, and not Leah.

In what is perceived as an extraordinary act of kindness, Rachel taught Leah the signals. When she learned that Laban, in fact, was going to take Leah to Jacob as Jacob's bride, Rachel couldn't bear the thought of Leah being shamed and disgraced in front of the whole town. The compassion that Rachel felt for her sister was so overwhelming that she was willing to sacrifice her own future for the sake of her sister.

This act of self-sacrifice was not easy. Consider that Rachel had just completed seven years of waiting for Jacob. At the time, Rachel had no idea that she would marry Jacob. In addition, the sages taught that Rachel understood that Jacob would father the special nation of God. She gave up the opportunity to be the mother of that nation.

God did not forget this compassionate act. Centuries later, when the nation of Israel was sent into the Babylonian exile, according to Jewish tradition, it was Rachel who interceded on their behalf. Jewish tradition teaches that God wanted to make the exile permanent. All of the patriarchs and Moses appealed to God on behalf of the sinful nation without any success.

Finally, Rachel came before God and said: "Master of the Universe, I waited seven years to marry my beloved Jacob. When the time of the wedding finally came, my father schemed to switch me with my sister Leah. Jacob suspected this would happen, so together we made up secret signs. But I realized that Leah would be put to shame if the scheme were uncovered, so I had compassion for my sister and gave her the signs. I overcame my own feelings and was not jealous. I allowed a competitor into my home. So if I was able to do it, God, then all the more so You, too, should not be exacting of the idol -- the competitor in Your home" (Midrash Genesis Rabbah, 82:10).

Immediately, God's mercy was awakened and He said: "For you, Rachel, I will bring Israel back, as it says: *'Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for your work will be rewarded... Your children will return to their own land'*" (Jeremiah 31:16).

Rachel's compassion for Leah has eternal consequences. Her act continues to stand as favor for all Israel, and a resource that we can tap into for all time.

### think about it...

1. Jewish tradition teaches that when Israel was exiled, many great figures of the past prayed on their behalf. Only Rachel's prayer was answered because of the compassion she showed Leah. Why do you think compassion might be a virtue above all others?
2. Who are the people in your life who "gave up" time, possessions, honor, or other things so that you could grow up with all the opportunities you were given? How did those sacrifices specifically help you?



## A Great and Powerful Love

*So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem).*

— Genesis 35:19

As much as Rachel loved her sister Leah, it was not easy sharing a husband. To make matters even more challenging, Leah bore six sons to Jacob in rapid succession while Rachel, like Sarah and Rebekah before her, remained childless.

The extent of Rachel's longing for children is revealed to us in Genesis 30:1 when she said to Jacob, *"Give me children, or I'll die!"* In response, Jacob reminded Rachel of the obvious — that he was not God and could not give her children (v.2). In her embittered state, Rachel decided to bring another woman into her home. She gave her handmaid Bilhah to Jacob as a wife so that she might bear children whom Rachel could raise as her own, much like Sarah's plan when she gave her servant Hagar to Abraham.

Rachel was willing to assume the risk of things going wrong, as they had for Sarah when Hagar became arrogant, because the possibility of having children was more important to her than her honor. Rachel's deepest desire was to have children that she could care for and shower with her endless love.

Eventually, Rachel gave birth to Joseph. Tragically, she died giving birth to her second son, Benjamin. With her last breath, Rachel named her newborn *"Ben-Oni,"* usually translated as "son of my affliction." However, the name can also be translated as "son of my strength."

Rachel was not resentful of her newborn that had caused her affliction. Rather, she saw her child as the product of her strength. She literally gave her child every last bit of strength that she had so that he might live. Jacob modified the child's name calling him Benjamin, which means, "son of my right hand," the "right hand"

referring to the strength of Rachel.

Strangely, Jacob did not bury Rachel in the Cave of Machpelah, where Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Rebekah were buried. Scripture tells us *"Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem)."* Hebron, where the cave is, is not far away from Bethlehem. Jacob could have easily brought Rachel there for burial. Moreover, Jacob buried Rachel on the road instead of bringing her into the city for a proper burial. Why would Jacob bury the woman he loved most in such a dishonorable way?

Jewish tradition teaches that Rachel *wanted* to be buried on the side of the road.

The prophet Jeremiah helps us understand why. In Jeremiah 31:15, the prophet was offering hope to the exiled children of Israel, and he wrote, *"This is what the LORD says: 'A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.'"* It was almost as if Rachel were watching the nation of Israel being led in chains right past her gravesite, and ever the mother, she wanted to be with her children at their most difficult time.

In Christian Bible, this very same verse is repeated in Matthew 2:18 in reference to the slaughter of baby boys King Herod had ordered, describing the overwhelming sadness of the mothers of Bethlehem as their sons were killed. Who better than Rachel, the symbolic mother of the exiled children of Israel, to understand the depth of sorrow and weeping of these mothers?

As we have already read, Rachel's tearful pleas were successful. God answered, *"Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for your work will be rewarded...They will return from the land of the enemy"* (Jeremiah 31:16), promising that the children of Israel, Rachel's children, would one day be restored and reunited in their homeland.

Rachel teaches us that there are times that we need to give up on things that we might want, large or small, for the sake of others. Jesus, who would have been taught about Rachel's sacrifice as a student of the *Torah*, echoed this principle to his disciples in John 15:13: *"Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends."*

When we love God and His children with a deep and great love, we have the strength to make any sacrifices we are called upon to offer.

3. Where in your life can you give up something so that someone else can thrive?
4. Rachel displayed great compassion and empathy in her life. How can we bring those two virtues into our everyday living?
5. What lessons do we learn from Rachel's life about achieving goals? About what defines our lives?





# A Mother for All Time

*This is what the LORD says:*

*“A voice is heard in Ramah,  
mourning and great weeping,  
Rachel weeping for her children  
and refusing to be comforted,  
because they are no more.” — Jeremiah 31:15*

**O**f the four matriarchs in the Bible, only one is considered among Jewish people to be THE mother — Rachel, who is affectionately referred to as “Mama Rachel.” Even though she only gave birth to two of the 12 brothers who eventually formed the nation of Israel, Rachel is considered the mother of all Israel. Ironically, Rachel achieved in death what she could not achieve in her life — being a mother of many.

Why is Mother Rachel placed above the rest?

Rachel, who suffered so much in her own life, feels the pain of her children. Rachel waited seven years to marry the love of her life only to have him taken away on her wedding day. She felt the painful sadness of being childless. Then, Rachel lost her life giving birth to her second child. She never had the pleasure of watching her sons grow up into men.

Rachel knew well the pain of suffering. Today, you will find many people crying and praying at Rachel’s Tomb. They pray to God with faith that Mama Rachel will intercede on their behalf, and God will send a miracle.

And miracles do happen. The following is a true story that took place in Israel:

In the fall of 2008, Rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu, formerly the Chief Rabbi of Israel, was released from the hospital after recovering from a life-threatening illness. The elderly rabbi insisted on going almost immediately to Rachel’s Tomb. He visited the tomb and prayed there three times.

Shortly after, Israel went to war. A group of Israeli soldiers had been charged with the task of cleaning out the areas surrounding Gaza City. When the soldiers approached the first building on their list, they saw an old woman dressed in black yelling at them to go away because there was danger in that place.

The soldiers didn’t want to take any chances so they went to their next target. They were surprised to see the same exact woman they had seen at the first building. She issued the same warning as she had before. The soldiers moved on to the third target, and this time they were completely stunned to find the same old woman waiting for them. Again, she warned the soldiers of danger. Realizing that this was no ordinary woman, one soldier asked for her name. She answered, “Rachel.”

As it later was discovered, each building where this woman appeared had been booby-trapped. Had the soldiers entered those buildings they most certainly would have lost their lives.

After the story made its rounds, Rabbi Eliyahu’s son, who was also a rabbi, was asked to find out if the story was connected to his father’s visit to Rachel’s Tomb. The younger Rabbi Eliyahu shared the story with his elderly father and asked, “Should we believe it?” The older Rabbi

Eliyahu answered, “It is true.”

Then he explained, “When I went to Rachel’s Tomb I told her: ‘Rachel, a war is on! Don’t withhold your voice from crying (based on Jeremiah 31:15-17). Go before God, and pray for the soldiers, who are sacrificing themselves for the nation of Israel, that they should strike — and not be stricken.’”

The younger Rabbi said to his father, “Well, you should know that she really did that.” The elder Rabbi replied, “Did she mention that I sent her?”

In Song of Songs 8:6, we read, “*for love is as strong as death.*” Indeed Rachel’s love for her children supersedes time and place. Rachel shows us that the love that we share with others does not disappear once a person is gone. A mother is always a mother, a husband remains a husband, and a friend remains a friend, even after they are gone.

We are all part of a chain that stretches all the way back to the matriarchs and beyond. Though our lifetimes may be separated by thousands of years, we are connected for all time by the faith and compassion that has preceded us.

## apply it...

- 1. SHOW COMPASSION.** Rachel was the model for compassion toward others, during her lifetime and beyond. Look for ways you can model compassion in your life. (Psalm 145:8-9; 1 Peter 3:8)
- 2. TAKE LESS, GIVE MORE.** Just as Rachel made sacrifices for others, we are also called to give up things like money, time, or the spotlight for the sake of others. Consider what you might sacrifice today for someone you love. (Genesis 44:33; John 15:13)
- 3. SHOW APPRECIATION.** So many people have given up something for our sake — teachers, parents, family, friends, co-workers, and so on. Let them know you notice and that you are grateful. (Deuteronomy 24:13; Philippians 1:3)
- 4. LISTEN LOVINGLY.** Visitors often take their difficulties to Rachel’s Tomb and pour out their hearts. Sometimes the greatest gift you can give someone is listening to his or her problems in a loving way. (Job 21:2; Luke 8:18)
- 5. ENJOY YOUR JOURNEY.** Sometimes we are so caught up in reaching our goals that we fail to appreciate the process of getting there. As they say, “Life’s a journey, not a destination.” (Ecclesiastes 9:9; 1 Timothy 6:17)