



MISHPACHAH II

Lessons From Our Sisters

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Text & Study

“The more a daughter knows about the details of her mother's life - without flinching or whining -- the stronger the daughter.”

Anita Diamant, *The Red Tent*

“But behind all your stories is always your mother's story, because hers is where yours begins.”

Mitch Albom, *For One More Day*



The stories of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs are a veritable treasure trove, there to be mined for contemporarily relevant and fertile examples of family dynamics – both the good and the bad. The story of Sarah and her family encompasses the near totality of human emotion: love and revenge, loyalty and jealousy, honesty and duplicity, objectivity and favoritism. How these progenitors negotiated these polarities in their own lives continues to provide insight into our own complicated family relations.

Among those storied relationships, those of siblings are remarkably rich. We know them well – continue to be both bemused and bewildered by their conflicts – Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Rachel and Leah, and Joseph and his brothers.

As we read about these sets of siblings, think about the following and let them guide your discussion:

- How does birth order factor into the relationship?
- What are the “battlegrounds” between siblings?
- How does favoritism, whether real or imagined, affect sibling relations?
- Is competition among siblings healthy?

Jacob and Esau [Genesis 25:22-24, 27]

22-24 The children pressed against each other inside her. She thought: 'If this is so, why do I exist?' So she went to inquire of the LORD. The LORD said to her:

'Two peoples are in your belly;
two nations shall branch off from each other from the womb.
One people shall prevail over the other;
the elder shall serve the younger.'

When the time came for her to give birth, lo - she had twins in her belly.....

27: When the boys grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the outdoors; but Jacob was a homespun man, keeping to the tents. Isaac favored Esau, because he provided food for him, but Rebekah favored Jacob.

Rachel and Leah [Genesis 29:16 - 31]

29: 16-20; 23-25; 31 Now Laban had two daughters; the elder was named Leah, and the younger was named Rachel. Leah's eyes were weak, but Rachel was beautiful of form and of face. Jacob was in love with Rachel, so he said, 'I will work for you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.' Laban answered, 'I would rather give her to you than to any other man; stay with me.' So Jacob labored seven years for Rachel; yet in his love for her they seemed to him but a few days.

23-25 In the evening, he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob ... In the morning, look - it was Leah! And Jacob said to Laban, 'What have you done to me? Wasn't it for Rachel that I agreed to serve you? Why did you deceive me?' And Laban replied, 'This is not done in our region, to give the younger before the first-born.'

31 Now, seeing that Leah was disfavored, the LORD opened her womb, while Rachel was childless ...

Leah to Her Sister

by Sherry Blumberg

My eyes are weak
But my body is strong
I'm not afraid to work
I have worked and will work
And someday will bear children

My eyes are weak
But my resolve is strong
I shall have my due
First to be married

First to bear children
Yet I'll not be as loved as you

My eyes are weak
But my love is strong
For I have loved you
You shall become a legend
I will always be second
Even in memory and in pray

The Torah: A Women's Commentary, URJ, 2008 (pg. 181)

Study Questions

Read the biblical text and then the poem, Leah to Her Sister. Based upon both these texts, what adjectives might you apply to Leah?

If you were to write a response from Rachel to Leah, what would you say?

MIDRASH

Rivalry between sisters makes for interesting and often very dramatic copy, which, for many, hits close to home and is often a reminder of painful episodes best forgotten. This section offers several interesting (and one slightly absurd) rabbinic (midrashic) accounts of sisterly affection and/or loyalty, both of which are in stark contrast to the biblical texts they are intended to complement.

Rachel and Leah

In the earlier section, conflict between Rachel and Leah originates with Jacob's obvious love for Rachel and Laban's trickery to manipulate Jacob's marriage to Leah instead. The seeds of sibling rivalry are sown from this point, and are compounded when Leah, the unloved wife, proves to be quite fertile, and Rachel, the beloved wife, is barren. Thus in Genesis 30:1:

When Rachel saw that she had borne Jacob no children, she became envious of her sister; and Rachel said to Jacob, 'Give me children, or I shall die.' ”

However, in an interesting midrashic twist, the Rabbis address this prototypical sibling jealousy within a larger theological discussion about the destruction of the Temple. In the following midrash, various biblical personalities confront God over why the destruction was permitted. One of the personalities to confront God is Rachel.

Midrash Lamentations Rabbah (24)

Rachel beseeches God to be compassionate and to not be “jealous” of idol worship.

‘Sovereign of the universe, You have written in Your Torah (*Whether it be a cow or ewe, you shall not kill it and its young both in one day.* Lev. 22:28) but have they not killed many, many mothers and sons, and You remain silent!’

At that moment, the matriarch Rachel broke into speech before the Holy One, Blessed be He, and said ‘Sovereign of the universe, it is revealed before You that Your servant Jacob loved me more and toiled for my father on my behalf seven years. When those seven years were completed and the time arrived for my marriage with my husband, my father planned to substitute another for me to wed my husband for the sake of my sister. It was very hard for me, because the plot was known to me and I disclosed it to my husband; and I gave him a sign whereby he could distinguish between me and my sister, so that my father should not be able to make the substitution...

‘After that I relented, suppressed my desire, and had pity upon my sister that she should not be exposed to shame. In the evening they substituted my sister for me with my husband, and I delivered over to my sister all the signs which I had arranged with my husband so that he should think that she was Rachel. More than that, I went beneath the bed upon which he lay with my sister; and when he spoke to her she remained silent and I made all the replies in

order that he should not recognize my sister's voice. I did her a kindness, was not jealous of her, and did not expose her to shame.

‘And if I, a creature of flesh and blood, formed of dust and ashes, was not envious of my rival and did not expose her to shame and contempt, why should You, a King who lives eternally and are merciful, be jealous of idolatry in which there is no reality, and exile my children and let them be slain by the sword, and their enemies have done with them as they wished!’

So, the mercy of the Holy One, blessed by He, was stirred, and He said, ‘For your sake, Rachel, I will restore Israel to their place....’

Discussion questions

1. What alternative scenario does the midrash present about Rachel and Leah?
2. What is the intention of this story?
3. Do you think that the Rabbis' desire is to redeem the sisters (i.e. present a more favorable image of sibling relations) or do you think they have a different goal?
4. Is this imagined scenario credible?

The Story of the Suspected Adulteress

The following midrash complements the biblical account in Leviticus 5:11-31 that describes the ordeal imposed on the woman who is suspected of betraying her husband, the *sotah*. The Rabbis do not focus principally on the husband's suspicion or the actual ordeal, but instead introduce an interesting twist, a portrait of supportive sisters that is a marked divergence from the biblical text. This is an abbreviated account of the biblical text.

If any man's wife has engaged in sexual relations with another, without being forced and there are no witnesses “but a fit of jealousy comes over him [her husband] and he is angered that she has defiled herself,” or even if he *suspects* that she has defiled herself, he takes her with an offering of jealousy “a meal offering of remembrance which recalls wrongdoing” to the priest in the Tabernacle. The priest prepares a concoction of sacred water in an earthenware vessel and dirt from the floor of the Tabernacle, uncovers the woman's head and places her hands on the meal offering. He holds in his hands “the water of bitterness that induces the spell” and says to her: “If no man has lain with you, if you have not gone astray in defilement while married to your husband, be immune to harm from this water of bitterness... but if you have defiled yourself, here the priest shall administer the curse ... ‘may the LORD make you a curse and an imprecation among your people as the LORD causes your thigh to sag and your belly to distend’ and the woman shall say, ‘Amen, amen.’”

The priest writes out the curses and rubs them into the water and has her drink it. If she is guilty the potion will do as the priest described (her “thigh will sag, her belly distend”) and she will become a curse among her people. If pure, she will be unaffected by the water. The text concludes: “This is the ritual in cases of jealousy when a woman goes astray while married to her husband and defiles herself, or when a fit of jealousy comes over a man and he is wrought up over his wife: the woman shall be made to stand before the LORD and the

priest shall carry out all this ritual with her. The man shall be clear of guilt; but the woman shall suffer for her guilt.”

Midrash Tanhuma, Naso, 6

A story is told of two sisters who resembled one another. One sister was married and lived in one city; and the other sister was married and lived in another city. The husband of one grew jealous of his wife and wanted to bring her to Jerusalem to drink the bitter waters.

That sister went to the city where her sister lived with her husband. Her sister said to her: ‘Why are you here?’ She said to her: ‘My husband wants me to drink the bitter waters.’ Her sister said: ‘I will go in your stead and drink.’ She said: ‘Go.’

She dressed herself in her sister’s clothes and went in her stead. She drank the bitter waters, and was found to be innocent.

She returned to the home of her sister, who came out happily to greet her. She embraced her sister and kissed her on the lips. When they kissed one another, her sister breathed in the smell of the bitter waters and she immediately died.

cited in *A Bride for One Night: Talmud Tales* by Ruth Calderon,
JPS, English translation 2014

Discussion Questions

1. How does the midrash vary from the biblical account?
 2. What seems to be its intended message? What is intended by its ending?
 3. How, or does, the inclusion of the second sister change the focus of the biblical account?
 4. How might this midrash about sisters be read through a feminist lens?
 - a. Sisterly solidarity can extend even beyond blood ties.
 - b. Sisterly solidarity can be forceful in the face of a patriarchal system, subverting male dominance.
 - c. Sisterly solidarity, confronting a male-centric power structure, can be dangerous and requires both courage and commitment.
 5. If you could rewrite the ending, would you? What would it look like?
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Non-Fiction Books on Siblings

My Sister, My Self: Understanding the Sibling Relationship That Shapes Our Lives, Our Loves, and Ourselves (McGraw Hill, 2006) by Vikki Stark.

Stark, a psychotherapist, lives in Montreal where she is the director of the Sedona Counseling Centre. Internationally renowned, she has appeared on The Today Show and Oprah radio. Her blog on Psychology Today Magazine called "Schlepping Through Heartbreak" deals with all aspects of relationships.

The theme of *My Sister, My Self* is that one's position as a sister will influence just about every area of a woman's life - family, career, personality.

Whether your sister relationship was close, conflicted or somewhere in between, that childhood bond shaped the woman you are today. Having grown up as an older, younger, middle, or twin sister influences your choice of occupation, circle of friends, love life, even how you feel about your body.

My Sister, My Self provides tools to:

- Come to terms with a challenging sister relationship
- Make sense of your need to depend on or control others
- Recognize how your sister role influences your interactions with friends and colleagues
- Understand the sister role you've played since childhood

This study of sibling relationships will take you to new depths of understanding of yourself, your sister, and the myriad ways you shaped each others' lives. You'll find a wealth of workable suggestions for getting to a healthier, happier relationship with the one woman who shares your genes and your history.

Sibling Revelry: 8 Steps to Successful Adult Sibling Relationships (Dell 2001) by Joann Levitt, Marjory Levitt and Joel Levitt

The Levitt siblings have researched adult sibling relationships and offered workshops. Jo Ann is an R.N. at Canyon Ranch health resort in Lenox, MA. Marjory has a Ph.D. and teaches psychology, and Joel is a management consultant. Their eight-step program to help strengthen sisterly and brotherly bonds combines stories, interviews and assignments.

In eight clearly focused steps, with added material for home study, the authors show how to transform sibling rivalry into extraordinary, nurturing adult bonds that will enhance all other relationships. Now you can regain the closeness you and your siblings once shared, heal old wounds, and pave the way to a happier, healthier future. Learn how to:

1. Define your relationship: Unload the myths of your shared past and discover who you are to each other now
2. Witness the effect of old rivalries and use them as a springboard to adult relationships
3. Envision a new future: Break the habits that hold your relationship firmly in place and create a new vision for yourself and your family
4. Explore new modes of contact. Examine the role you play in your family and free yourself from old patterns
5. Heal wounds and misunderstandings. Resolve old conflicts as you sort through issues of fear, anger, guilt, and hurt
6. Invent new family legends. Uncover the myths and legends that have shaped your relationship and then create new ones
7. Make room for differences. Clear out sibling clutter and accept your siblings exactly as they are
8. Honor your strengths. Celebrate the positive qualities each sibling brings to the relationship and set the stage for a lifelong connection

