Jacob Marries Leah and Rachel

29: 14b–30

DIG: What was the reason for the dissension between Jacob's wives? What were the consequences of Jacob's favoritism of Rachel over Leah? What problems did Laban cause Jacob? How did Laban pull of the deceptive switch? Why didn't Ya'akov question who was in his tent on his wedding night?

REFLECT: When, like Ya'akov, have you had to suffer such delays in getting what you want? What did God want for you? Has favoritism hurt your family? If so, what does the Lord want you to do about it?

Jacob (Hebrew: Ya'akov) was hardworking and wanted to make himself useful, so he began to help with the family business, which was first and foremost handling the flocks. This kept him near Rachel and his love for her grew. He knew this was the woman ADONAI had chosen for him, and that she would fulfill every requirement to be the mother of the nation that God had promised. After Ya'akov had stayed with him for a whole month, Laban saw that Jacob was a valuable employee and he didn't want to let him go. So Laban said to him, “Just because you are a relative of mine, should you work for me for nothing? Tell me what your wages should be” (29:14-15).

We are now introduced to another daughter, Leah. Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older was Leah, meaning a cow, and the name of the younger was Rachel, meaning a ewe lamb (29:16). Both daughters were apparently well beyond the age at which women usually married, and Laban may have become very concerned about finding a husband for Leah, the older sister. According to Laban's later explanation (29:26), it was contrary to strong custom for the younger to be married before the older; and since Leah had been unable to find a husband, both she and Rachel had remained unmarried. Talk about pressure! Obviously, Laban should have explained this to Ya'akov at the time of his proposal, but he was full of guile. It was not clear why Leah was unable to find a husband; quite possibly it was because none of the eligible men of Haran were acceptable to her father.

The Bible says that Leah had weak eyes, but the adjective rak is translated weak in only a few places (Genesis 33:12; Deuteronomy 20:8). More often it describes something that is tender (flocks, Genesis 18:7), gentle (a king’s reign, Second Samuel 3:39), soft (speech, Proverbs 15:1; Job 41:3), delicate (a woman, Deuteronomy 28:56; Isaiah 47:1), and young (an experienced young man, First Chronicles 22:5 and 29:1; Second Chronicles
That is, she had eyes that according to the Oriental standard of beauty, were a great blemish. Bright eyes, full of fire, are considered the height of beauty.

Jacob wasn't interested in Laban's wages; he was in love with Rachel who was lovely in form, and beautiful. He immediately proposed that he would work for him seven years in return for his younger daughter Rachel. Jacob had shown up empty-handed in Haran, and the seven years of service would pay for the bride price. It is unclear if Laban thought up the scheme of switching his daughters on the wedding night at this point, but it wouldn't be a surprise. Laban said: It's better that I give her to you than to some other man. Therefore, when he said: Stay here with me, and the deal was set (29:17-19). But Laban turned this joyous occasion into a nightmare.

So Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, but all the years seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her. But when the seven years were up, Laban didn't say anything at all to Ya'akov because he wanted to keep him working for as long as possible. Finally, Jacob had to remind Laban that he had kept his part of the bargain, and now he wanted his bride. He demanded: Give me my wife. My time is completed, and I want to lie with her (29:20-21). Laban indirectly ignores Jacob's request, but instead makes plans for a wedding feast. Jacob assumes it is for his marriage to Rachel, but uncle Laban has a trick up his sleeve.

It was the custom to have a great wedding feast, lasting seven days, beginning with a banquet on the wedding night. So Laban brought together all the people of the place and gave a seven-day marriage feast (29:22). And at the banquet, Laban gave his servant girl Zilpah, meaning nearness of intimacy, as a wedding gift to his daughter as her maidservant (29:24). It seems that Jacob's senses were dulled with the wine of the feast. Wine was served there, and the veil and the darkness of the wedding tent would surely not themselves be sufficient to camouflage both Leah and her voice. The wine most likely affected Jacob's perception on his wedding night, just like wine affected Lot with his older and younger daughters. They, too, deceived their father, made him drunk, and had intercourse with him (19:30-38).

But when evening came, Laban took his daughter Leah to the marriage tent and gave her to Jacob, and Jacob lay with her (29:23). Like a lamb to the slaughter, Ya'akov never questioned that it was really Rachel. He was totally duped.
What is left unsaid here speaks volumes. How does Laban pull this off? Where is Rachel while all this was going on? Whether she had simply been persuaded, or commanded, by her father to go along with this deceptive plan, or whether she had to be forcibly detained in the women’s quarters during the evening and long night, we do not know. In any event, it must have been very difficult for her. It certainly wasn’t easy for Leah either. How does she feel about being led to Jacob’s tent by her father? Does she feel used? Although she really wanted a husband, she knew Jacob loved Rachel and that he thought he was making love to her that night. The Bible does not tell us what the feelings were between the two sisters. No doubt Leah was jealous of Rachel, but there is no reason to think that she would want to hurt her sister. Even though she was being obedient to her father in going through with the deception, she knew it was wrong. Unless she wanted Yaakov so badly herself that nothing else mattered, it was probably a difficult night for her as well.

When morning came Jacob got a little surprise - there was Leah! Once the deception was discovered, he was obviously angry with both Laban and Leah. But after he cooled down he had to recognize the similarity of this situation to his deception of his father and brother. Just as Esau, the older brother, stood between Ya’akov and his blessing, here Leah, the older sister, stood between Jacob and his true love. Desperation clouded both decisions. Ya’akov believed that the end justified the means, and I am sure Laban and Leah felt the same way. In spite of her deception, Jacob realized that Leah had been in love with him all along. He was an honorable man and he didn’t want to hurt her any more. He did learn to love her, though he would always love Rachel more than Leah.

Because of this little mix-up, Jewish tradition dictates that the marriage contract, or the Ketubah, be signed before the wedding - not afterward. Jewish men check out that bride before they go down the aisle. Christian tradition says that it is bad luck to see the bride before the weeding. But Jewish men insist on seeing her! This accomplishes two things. First, it protects the husband from this kind of deception, and secondly, it protects the wife’s rights during the marriage and in case she is divorced or widowed. It is forbidden for Jewish couples to live together without a it. If the Ketubah is lost, a new one must be written. It has become traditional, since at least the fourteenth century, to decorate the Ketubah as artwork and hang it in the home as a keepsake.

This was not divine retribution of the ungodly. This was a loving heavenly Father using Laban’s guile for His glory. Later Jacob’s youngest son Joseph would say to his brothers, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good” (50:20). That is what happened here: Laban intended to harm Jacob, but God intended it for good. The desire of ADONAI was to teach Ya’akov three lessons that he needed to learn and use for the rest of his life.
At his first opportunity, Jacob confronted Laban and said to him, “What is this you have done to me? I served you for Rachel, didn’t I? Why have you deceived me?” Laban tried to rationalize his behavior by saying: It is not our custom here to give the younger daughter in marriage before the older one (29:25-26). The phrase: It is not our custom here, is translated you have done things that you should not have done elsewhere. Abimelech uses this phrase with Abraham after Abraham deceived him (20:9). Likewise, the sons of Ya’akov use this phrase after they hear about their sister’s rape (34:7). Tamar, daughter of David, attempted to discourage her half-brother Amnon from forcing himself on her by using this phrase. It is an expression that refers to serious violation of custom that threatens the very fabric of society, and is basically a rebuke.467

Laban tells Ya’akov that he hadn’t read the small print. This ancient custom still exists in the East. But Jacob was not informed of this in advance. In addition, he had served there for seven years and would have known of this custom. However, most likely, this was another lie by Laban. There can be no doubt that this was an Israelite in whom there was much guile (John 1:47 NKJ)! Then, since he was on a roll, he makes Jacob another offer. Finish Leah’s seven-day bridal week; then I will give you the youngest one also, in return for another seven years of work (29:27). Uncle Laban was certainly getting his money’s worth wasn’t he? But because Ya’akov was a man of character, and out of respect to Leah, he agreed.

Through this ordeal, ADONAI will teach Jacob three lessons. The first lesson was to learn humble submission. Because he had refused to submit to God, he must submit to serve a human master. The second lesson was to respect the rights of the firstborn. What Ya’akov had disregarded in connection with Esav, he must now concede concerning his wife Leah. The third lesson was to learn patience. Because he had refused to wait for the LORD’s timing for the fulfillment of His promise (25:23), he had to wait seven years before he could marry Rachel, and that he would have to serve another seven years after that.468

And Jacob did so. He finished the bridal week with Leah, and then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel to be his second wife (29:28). At about the age of eighty, he had received two wives in eight days. In addition, Laban gave his servant girl Bilhah, meaning terror, as a wedding gift to his daughter Rachel as her maidservant (29:29). She, like Zilpah, would play an important role in Jacob’s family life.

Even though the biblical record is accurate, ADONAI does not approve of polygamy. God didn’t approve of Satan’s lie and he didn’t approve of David’s sin. He judged them both for it. The Bible records several men who had more than one wife. King David had several wives and a harem, but it wasn’t the best thing for him and it wasn’t the best thing for Ya’akov, Leah
or Rachel. Even though the Biblical record is accurate here, the Bible never records any man who had more than one wife who was happily married.469

Jacob lay with Rachel also and he loved Rachel more than Leah. And he worked for Laban another seven years as the bride price for Rachel (29:30). Ya’akov was becoming like his mother and father, each of whom loved one son more than the other. Parental favoritism was replaced by marital favoritism.470 The former led to friction in Isaac’s family, and Jacob’s favoritism for Rachel will lead to family discord that will plague him for the rest of his life. In his old age, he favored Rachel’s son, Joseph, so much that Leah’s sons wanted to kill him, as we shall see (37:3–4, 18).471

29:20 to 30 follow an antithetical structure. There is a parallelism, where the first letter is antithetical to the second letter, and so on.

A Jacob’s payment for a wife (29:20)
   B Jacob’s marriage to Leah through deception (29:21–24)
         C Jacob’s accusation against Laban (29:25)
         C Laban’s defense (29:26)
   B Jacob’s marriage to Rachel by negotiation (29:27–30a)
A Jacob’s payment for a wife (29:30b)