

November 24, 2012

Vayetzei (Genesis 28:10-32:3)

This sidra contains the story of Jacob and Rachel, which should actually be called the story of Jacob and Leah and Rachel.

Leah's fourth son is Judah, and it is around Judah that Leah's importance comes to the fore, for several reasons. The tribe of Judah is the greatest of the Israelite tribes – we, today, are as fully children of Judah as we are children of Israel. Judah is the one who persuaded his brothers not to kill Joseph, but rather to sell him down to Egypt, and thus Judah is a prime participant in God's plan for the Jewish people. It is from the line of Judah that the Messiah is to emerge. Yet, we do not think in terms of Judah's mother. Leah should be honored by us, through Judah, and yet at Torah study we passed over Leah, except to wonder a bit about how Laban was able to trick Jacob into spending a wedding night with her without being aware that it wasn't Rachel.

There is a midrash that has a great deal of relevance to us, especially since this past Thursday was Thanksgiving. The midrash tells us that, in naming her fourth son "Judah," Leah said it meant, "This time, let me thank God." This makes Leah the inventor of prayers of thanksgiving. Prior to this time, those who wanted to thank God built an altar and killed something."

We discussed, briefly, Jacob's dream and the relevance of dreams as a source of private revelation, and Jacob's action at the well when he first met Rachel. We read all the way through the portion, including the confusing deal involving the speckled sheep and goats, and then we looked at some poems written about this pair of matriarchs—Rachel, who was loved, and Leah, who was fertile.