

Sisters

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The story of Rachel and Leah is a bittersweet one. Jacob arrives at the well in Ur and falls in love with beautiful Rachel on the spot. He proves himself by rolling a huge stone off the well, something that normally took lots of male shepherds to do. Clearly, he was not a weakling.

Lavan hearing of his arrival runs out to meet him hoping that he brings as much wealth with him as Eliezer did. Jacob disappoints him but offers to work for his keep. He impresses Lavan and when Lavan asks what he wants, he says he would like to marry Rachel. Lavan agrees a price of seven year's work. Comes the wedding night Lavan replaces Rachel with Leah the elder, uglier sister. Jacob remonstrates but has no option and has to work another seven years for Rachel.

I always felt sorry for Leah. She knew not only that she was less attractive but also said that Jacob "hated her." Did he really? Or did she think he did? The fact is that she proved very fruitful and provide six of Jacobs sons. That still did not endear her to Jacob and when Rachel died he did not move into her tent. And she keeps on repeating the theme of pain and rejection in the naming of her sons.

How could Jacob have been so insensitive, so unfeeling? Surely he should have tried to reassure her? But at the same time Leah is insensitive towards Rachel's infertility. Rivalry between wives or concubines is another repeated theme. The fact that the Torah returns to it shows two things. One is inevitable rivalry that only Isaac escapes because he had only one wife. The other is the fathers seem remarkably incapable of understanding or being sympathetic to their wives.

Was this the sign of the times or a reflection on them and their priorities?