

# Vayetse

A Christian reading by Ursula Rudnick  
and a Jewish Response by Dalia Marx

## **Fighting with a sister – fighting with God: Rachel and Lea**

One man and two women: One does not need to be a prophet to see conflicts looming. It begins as a romantic love story. Jacob, who had cheated his brother and stolen his blessing, had flown from Esau's wrath to Haran, where his uncle Laban lived. Upon his arrival, he meets his cousin Rachel at the well. He kisses her and weeps: love at first sight, at least for Jacob. The Bible is silent about Rachel's feelings. Jacob knows what he wants: he wants Rachel as his wife and for this he is willing to work seven years, serving Laban. The years pass quickly for Jacob: "and they seemed unto him but a few days, for the love that he had for her." (Gen. 29.20)

The wedding takes place. Jacob and his wife spend the night together: "And it came to pass in the morning that, behold, it was Leah." (Gen. 29.25) Jacob is angry. The biblical text tells the reader – unlike the rabbinic literature – little about the feelings of the women. What did Leah think of this marriage? Did she deem it fair and appropriate? After all, she was the older sister and Laban defends his action with the custom that the older sister must be married before the younger one. Laban suggests a new deal: Jacob will also receive Rachel as his wife, but he has to serve another seven years.

Rachel and Leah are competitors Jacob's love. Rachel is Jacob's favored wife and Leah does not seem to receive much affection. Thus, God intervenes on behalf of Leah. "And the Lord saw that Leah was hated, and he opened her womb; but Rachel was barren." (Gen. 29.31) Leah gives birth to many sons and their names tell the story of her desperation and her hopes. Reuben: "Because the Lord has looked upon my affliction; for now my husband will love me.... [Simeon:] Because the Lord has heard that I am hated, he has therefore given me this son also." (Gen. 29.32-33)

In the world of Rachel and Leah sons are of major importance. They not only carry the expectations of the family, but they provide for their parents in their old age. Not being able to procreate, means having no future.

Leah has given birth to four sons, yet Rachel does not get pregnant. She envies her sister. One day she yells at Jacob: "Give me children or else I die." (Gen. 30.1) Jacob is helpless and he explodes in anger: "Am I in God's stead, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?" (Gen. 30.2) And like today, women who are not able to conceive, attempt much to reach this goal. Rachel "gives" her servant Bilha to Jacob, so that Bilha's child will be hers – a form of ancient surrogate-motherhood that was not uncommon in the ancient Near East. Bilha gives birth to a son and Rachel names this child Dan: "... God has also heard my voice." (Gen. 30.6) A second son follows from Bilha's womb and Rachel names him Naftali: "God-wrestlings have I wrestled with my sister and prevailed." (Gen. 30.8)

Many Christian readers are familiar with Jacob's wrestling with God, yet few know that Rachel perceives her wrestling with her sister as a wrestling with God. (It should be noted that many translations translate the Hebrew "naftulei elohim" as "great wrestlings" rather than as "God-wrestlings" which would be the literal translation.) It was Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso who brought this to my attention.

Why does Rachel see in her fight with her sister a struggle with God? Because she knew or sensed that God was siding with Leah and had made her fertile? Or: because her attempts to get pregnant were a struggle that encompassed her entire being. The Protestant philosopher of religion Paul Tillich once defined God as that which is of "ultimate concern" to human beings. And in this way Rachel's struggle for a child can be understood as a wrestling also with God. .

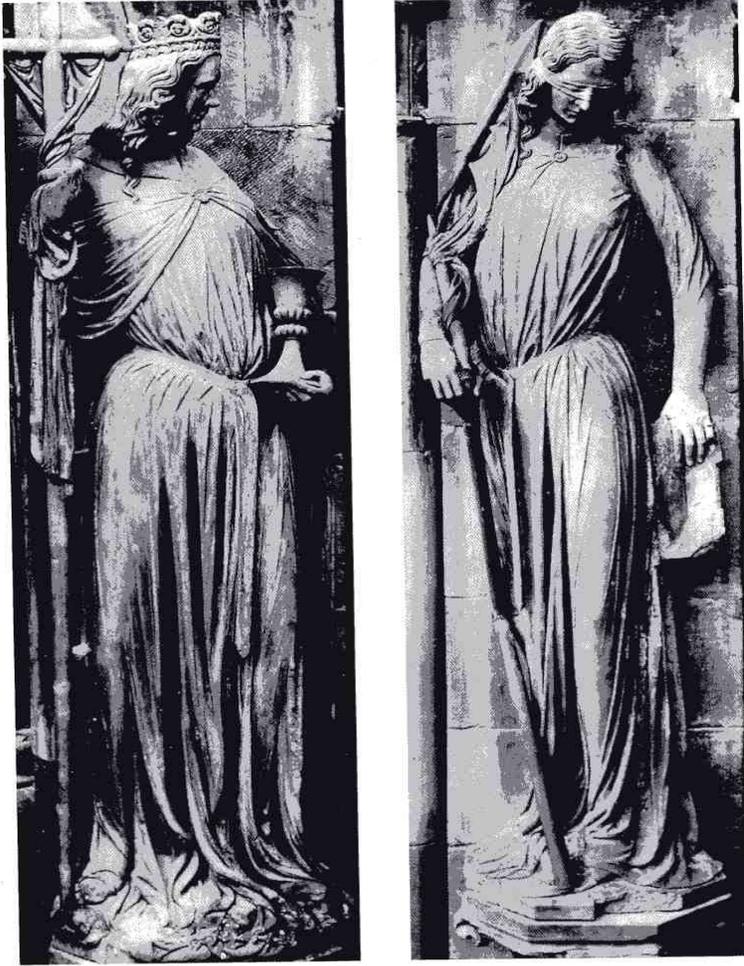
Sandy Sasso Eisenberg further elaborates: "Rachel and Leah teach us that reconciliation involves struggle, not only with the external enemy but also with ourselves. It asks that we see what we hate in the other part of us... Rachel reminds us that we also embark on a spiritual journey with others, that our character is formed in the midst of the demands and trials of daily life. She teaches us to find within all encounters the presence of God, and to wrest from that presence a blessing."

Conflict, wrestling with others and with one's own self, are part of life. The challenge is not to avoid conflict and to be weighted down in light of their existence, but to actively seek reconciliation and to wrest blessings from life – whatever the situation may be.

The story of Rachel and Leah is not only the story of two sisters fighting for their husband's love. It has been used by the fathers of the church to denigrate Jews and the Jewish tradition. They used the verse: "And Leah's eyes were weak; but Rachel was of beautiful form and fair to look upon." (Gen. 29.17) Justin, the church father, wrote: "Leah is your people and [represents] the synagogue, however Rachel [represents] the church (Dial. 34.3-5) Leah's weak eyes have been interpreted as blindness as an alleged trait of Judaism.

The motif of the two sisters: one blind, the other sighted, has played a major role in the *history of contempt*, as the French historian Jules Isaac calls the anti-Jewish tradition of the churches. The motif of "ecclesia and synagoga" can be found not only in the theological literature, but also in Christian art. It appears in books, on altar-pieces and church-windows, it "adorns" reliquaries and even liturgical vestments. It was used in all forms of Christian art, as part of the local folk-art or as highly sophisticated art-work. The motif appeared first in the 9<sup>th</sup>. century and was known in many European countries until the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Then it fades from popularity, but it continued to be used almost to the present day.

One of the most famous depictions is to be found at the cathedral of Strasburg. Two young women are chiseled in stone, both of the same size, each one beautiful and elegantly dressed. Yet, one stands erect and she rules, with a crown on her head and a banner in her hand. The other's posture is slumped, her staff is broken, her eyes are blindfolded and the Torah is falling from her hands.



*Ecclesia and Synagoga at the Strasbourg Cathedral, about 1230*

Over the course of the centuries Christians have been defaming Judaism over and over again: in images and words. It is particularly bitter that the words and images used to denigrate Judaism were often taken from the Tenach, like the image of Rachel and Leah. Theologians claimed that the church is Rachel and they projected the role of “weak-sighted” Leah onto Jews and Judaism. Hopefully this teaching of contempt belongs forever to the past.

Over the past decades Christians are learning that each community of faith has got blessings of her own. New models of the theological relationship between Christianity and Judaism have been developed. A very coherent and appealing model has been presented by the North-American episcopal theologian Paul van Buren. In three volumes, called *A Theology of the Jewish-Christian Reality*, he envisions a relationship of Christians to Jews and Judaism that is free of polemic and any kind of anti-Jewish defamation. In the second volume, *A Christian Theology of the People Israel*, he ponders the mission of the church vis-à-vis the Jewish people. He starts out, stating that the mission of the church does not consist in attempting to missionize Jews. “A God of Israel who had lost his Israel, the God of the covenant who had lost the covenant partner, could hardly be the God who had called together a Gentile church in fulfillment of a part of his promise to Abraham and in confirmation of all his promises to his

people Israel.” The church owns its very existence to the Jewish people because it received from it the knowledge of the God. One of the tasks of the church now is to protect Jews, since Antisemitism still exists. “The church is suited to be Israel’s ADL (Anti-Defamation League)... It knows all too well the nature of Gentile anti-Jewism: it has led the world in this enterprise for too many centuries...”

The German Protestant theologian Britta Jüngst thinks along similar lines. She has written a Christian-feminist post-Shoa theology. Rather than using old paradigms, she focuses on the Biblical story of Naomi and Ruth as a new paradigm of interaction. Christians should act be like Ruth and be in solidarity with Naomi. Ruth joins Naomi into an unknown future. At the time of her decision she does not know that she will not starve of hunger, but that she’ll find a new husband. Ruth proclaims: “Your God is my God...” – May this insight grow among Christians and may we find the strength to act like Ruth.

Ursula Rudnick

### **Dalia’s response to Ursula**

The Torah has seventy faces, one can read it as a document of exclusion and even hatred and one can read it as enabling and inclusive. I agree with you, Ursula, that studying the canonical texts that are shared by the two faiths can be an empowering and near drawing. In my paper I tried to show that the two sisters are multifaceted, one cannot reduce Leah and Rachel to the “happy” and the “miserable”, or to the “loved” and the “hated” one etc. The blessing may be found in the multitude and the diversity.

I find Jüngst suggestion to use the story of Naomi and Ruth as a positive depiction of the relationship between the religions moving and at the same time, I must admit that I find it slightly disturbing - Naomi and Ruth’s past was not common but they chose a common future, here the situation is the opposite – the origin of the two religions is common but they departed from each other quite early. Additionally, in the biblical story, Naomi represent the past and Ruth – the hopes of the future. I’m sure that Jüngst does not imply that the people of Israel as represent an expired covenant but I’m not sure that I would choose this paradigm. I would prefer the complex relations of Leah and Rachel, which enable a dynamic perception of the relationship between the two.

I find the Paul van Buren put on the shoulders of the church extremely moving, to me it represent the essence of the concept of *tikkun* (repairing, mending of the world) - taking something that used to be a source of suffering and injustice and turning it into a commitment to bring blessing to humanity.