

## Parshat Vayeitzei

### Gratitude for the Small Things in Life

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Among the many historical events in this week's Parsha is the birth of eleven of Yaakov's sons, who would eventually head eleven of the tribes. The birth of Rachel's first-born son Yosef is given more attention than the birth of his other brothers, as Hashem finally answers Rachel's heartfelt prayers. The Torah tells us: "G-d remembered Rachel; G-d hearkened to her and He opened her womb. She conceived and bore a son; and said, G-d has taken away my disgrace." (30:22-23)

Although Rachel's initial reaction to her first child is a bit vague - "G-d has taken away my disgrace" - it does not seem too difficult to understand to which disgrace she is referring. Seven children (including Dinah) have been born to her sister Leah, and two to each of the maidservants, Bilhah and Zilpa. Yet, Rachel, Yaakov's initial wife of choice, remains without a single child to her credit; thus helpless as a partner in creating G-d's chosen people. Indeed, this is how Rashi explains the simple meaning of Rachel's disgrace - she was barren!

If one continues reading Rashi, they will notice a second idea, quoted from the Midrash, as to the nature of Rachel's no longer existent disgrace. The Midrash explains that when a couple lives together without children, the wife is always in the wrong when there is a mishap in the house. If something spills or breaks, she is blamed, but once there is a child, the blame shifts to the youngster and he becomes the one blamed for breaking the family heirloom that was passed down from Bubbe. Okay, someone spilled cholent on the newly purchased carpet. Big deal - it was the kid. Until now, she was always the one blamed. With a child in the picture, the blame is shifted from the woman to the child and people do not seem to mind as much. According to this Midrash, Rachel's initial reaction to the birth of her son is acknowledging Hashem for taking her out of the "disgraceful" position of being the default to blame.

Does this reaction not seem rather peculiar? After childless years of agonizing pain, Rachel's initial reaction that the Torah records is acknowledging that she is now exempt from blame if someone dropped a glass or spilled the milk. Was this really the root of the pain that resulted from barrenness? Was becoming exempt from unimportant blame the source of her jubilation that accompanies the childbirth that she had so desperately anticipated? In light of having a first son after such hardship, any happiness gained from not being blamed for spilled milk seems so minute, so trivial. The chance to experience the pleasures that accompany the world of motherhood and be an active participant in creating the future of Am Yisroel seem so much more important. It seems according to this Midrash that Rachel Immeinu had her priorities messed up. She was finally relieved that she wouldn't be blamed for taking the cookie from the cookie jar!

Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz zt"l addresses the Midrash's approach to Rachel's seemingly strange response and explains things in a new light. Instead of being a woman with messed up priorities, Rachel was actually someone who had an unbelievably deep and sensitive understanding of life. Let's say a poor man named Bob won the lottery. The first things that will obviously pop into Bob's head when he finds out that he won will be the new fancy mansion, the shiny red sports car, etc. Most likely, Bob's initial reaction will NOT be to think of the slightly warmer blanket he will now be able to afford. Although factually, it may be a true benefit of winning lots of money, it is hardly important in the overall picture. Rav Shmuelevitz explains that even at one of the most joyful and excitement-filled moments in Rachel's life (probably even more exciting than winning the lottery), Rachel was able to think of even the smallest blessing that came with a child. Rachel was on such a high spiritual level that she remembered to show *hakarat hatov* (gratitude) to Hashem not only for finally experiencing the commonly-celebrated joys of motherhood, but even for the most trivial and minute advantages that resulted from the experience.

Rachel demonstrated extraordinary capabilities in demonstrating *hakarat hatov* to Hashem. Perhaps, to increase our *achdut bein-adam-l'chaveiro* we can apply the same approach that Rachel did with Hashem. Don't just say "thank you" for the big things, but put in an extra effort to pinpoint the smallest of things that people do for your benefit. Demonstrating sincere appreciation for the little things could truly blow the other person away. Perhaps improving this trait can be a vital tool in improving our *achdut* - not just with our friends, family, and co-workers, but also with people we randomly meet in stores, buses, trains, and restaurants. The list is endless. Remember to thank even that someone who filled up the empty cookie jar!