דבר אחר | A Different Perspective

A Ladder to the Heavens

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Galactic wreckage in Stephan's Quintet, in the constellation of Pegasus, captured by the Hubble Space Telescope from 300 million light years away. Source: spacetelescope.org/images/heic0910i; credit: NASA, ESA and the Hubble SM4 ERO Team.

As Jacob sleeps, he sees a ladder with its base on the ground and its top touching the heavens (Gen. 28:12). The seemingly unreachable realm above the earth, Jacob discovers, is actually relatively accessible, almost within our grasp. The images from the Hubble Space Telescope—and space exploration more broadly—play a similar role for us. One might have expected that humanity's newly found ability to discover more about space would have blunted our sense of wonder, as more and more of the universe ceases to be so mysterious.

For Jacob, the effect of his experience on his sense of wonder is quite the reverse: "Jacob awoke from his sleep and said: 'Wow! God is in this place and I hadn't realized!'" (28:16). And the same is true for us. Either a browse of the galleries on the NASA and ESA Hubble websites, or a more detailed read about their recent discoveries, are almost guaranteed to open our minds to the vastness, complexity, and diversity of our universe. They may even lead us to exclaim, in Jacob's words, "How awesome is this place!" (28:17).

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The Emergence of Praise

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Our parashah begins with Jacob's profound, life-changing encounter with divinity: his dream of the ladder; his vision of God promising that his descendants will multiply and be blessed; and his vow that "if God remains with me…the Lord shall be my God" (Gen. 28:20-21). But our parashah includes another profound, life-changing moment of connecting to God—a less famous one—experienced by Leah. After giving birth to three sons and naming each of them in accordance with aspects of her life experience, Leah gives birth again and says *hapa'am odeh et Adonai* (Gen. 29:35)—this time I will praise/thank/acknowledge the Lord—and names her son Judah (*Yehudah,* from *odeh*).

To guess at what Leah might mean, we must examine the larger context of her life. We encounter Leah as the older, unwanted sister with "weak eyes," contrasted with Rachel's beauty (Gen. 29:16-18). Jacob loves Rachel and serves her father Laban to earn her hand, only to be deceived at his wedding: Laban brings him Leah instead. They consummate the marriage and Jacob realizes only the next morning whom he has married. His displeasure is clear: "What is this you have done to me?!" he says to Laban (Gen. 29:25). Jacob marries Rachel a week later and serves another seven years in exchange.

So Jacob gets what he wanted—but let us consider how this event must have affected Leah. Her new husband's response to her would have been horrifying to any bride. "What is this you have done to me?!" *Mah zot asita li?* As if marrying her is some kind of terrible punishment. These words harken back to two similarly distressing episodes in the book of Genesis. When Abram passes off his wife Sarai as his sister, Pharaoh takes her into his palace but then discovers the truth, saying to Abram, *Mah zot asita li?* (12:18) When Isaac does the same with Rebecca in Gerar, she escapes molestation only because the Philistine king Avimelekh realizes who she is—saying to Isaac, *Mah zot asita lanu,* What have you done to us? (26:10) In all three stories, the women are silent, passed between men as objects, without a shred of agency. The narratives focus on the men—whom they own, what they do with them, whom they think they are entitled to, whom they do and don't desire—while the wishes of the women they handle are deemed irrelevant.

With her lot in life defined by men—first her father, then her husband—it seems that Leah comes to measure her self-worth in terms of what benefit Jacob is able to derive from her. This is evident in the few lines that the Torah records of her speech (11 total)—most of which are said to no one in particular, emphasizing her isolation. Many of her statements involve naming her children based on etymologies of pitiful desperation: "Now my

husband will love me" (Gen. 29:32); "The Lord heard that I was unloved" (29:33); "This time my husband will become attached to me" (29:34); "This time my husband will exalt me" (30:20). Two other lines involve competition with Rachel for an evening of conjugal rights with Jacob (30:15-16). Almost everything we know of Leah involves her trying to gain her husband's favor by bearing children. After he dismisses her so callously the morning after their wedding, she becomes single-mindedly focused on this futile goal. Finding a loving husband, or living happily on her own, are not options in her world. Her value and her choices are determined by the men who lay claim to her.

Even after the humiliation of her childbearing years is over, Leah is permanently consigned to second-class status in Jacob's eyes. When he faces his brother Esau and fears retribution for having deceitfully stolen their father's blessing, Jacob prepares his company for a possible attack—putting Zilpah and Bilhah and their children first, then Leah and her children, then Rachel and her children last (Gen. 33:2). Each group will serve as a human shield for the group behind them if necessary. Leah's lower status is clear. Not even her death is recorded by the Torah; we learn only after the fact that she was buried in the Cave of Makhpelah, in the family plot next Jacob (Gen. 49:29-31). One wonders if she even would have been accorded this honor had Rachel not died on the journey and been buried by the side of the road.

Leah serves as an archetype of the compromised status of women in biblical times. She is an object, unloved, de-prioritized, with a highly circumscribed role—bearing children, irrespective of whether her husband cares about her physical or emotional wellbeing—and even when she fulfills that role, she remains unvalued by those most important to her.

In crucial ways, women have come a very long way since then. As we saw when a lewd recorded exchange surfaced during the recent presidential campaign, making light of the objectification of women cost a successful television personality his high-profile new job as co-host of NBC's *Today Show*. And yet, bragging about sexual assault did not stop his interlocutor—the one boasting in such aggressive yet cavalier terms—from winning the election a mere month later. After the recording came to light, writer Kelly Oxford invited women to share via Twitter their stories of sexual assault; more than a million women responded, and over 27 million people engaged in the social media movement spawned by the hashtag #notokay. For the many women who came out of the woodwork to share their stories, and for the countless others who chose to keep their stories secret, it felt like a critical consciousness-raising moment across the country—a long-awaited recognition of what they had suffered. The election result, then, was experienced by many victims of sexual assault and sexual harassment as a distressing national stamp of approval on—or at least an indifference to—what happened to them.

Our foremother Leah reminds us, in our current historical moment, of how far we have yet to go. But in spite of everything, there is a redemptive moment in her story—an indication that, even just briefly, something emerges as being more important to

her than the Sisyphean project of trying to gain Jacob's affection. This is the moment when she gives birth to her fourth child and names him Judah—a name that has nothing to do with her husband but that is inspired, rather, by Leah's own relationship to God. *Hapa'am odeh et Adonai*—this time I will thank the Lord. It is a name of gratitude, of spirituality—a name that asserts the value of her son's life as something more than a marital pawn; that declares the import of her own feelings in her life's story; that acknowledges the presence of divine blessing.

We can't know why her fourth child evokes this unexpected psychological breakthrough for Leah. Rashi and others understand it as an acknowledgement that she has borne more than her "share" of children (i.e. three), and so any child beyond that is a cause for gratitude. But the conception and birth of a child are never guaranteed, and every child is a cause for gratitude, so this explanation is unconvincing to many. Perhaps, after trying and failing three times to win Jacob's love through procreation, she is suddenly able to realize that the birth of a child may have another, higher meaning. She is able to see Judah not for his potential utility vis-à-vis her husband, but as a gift from God in and of himself—and as a cause for joy in her own life, independent of Jacob.

Admittedly, this transcendence is short-lived. After Judah's birth, Bilhah begins to bear children as Rachel's surrogate, and Leah descends quickly back into the fray of the childbearing competition, with Zilpah as her surrogate. Yet this moment of connecting to the deeper meaning of having a child, free from the weight of her husband's indifference to her, seems to have a lasting effect—even beyond the span of Leah's own life. When Jacob blesses his sons from his deathbed at the end of the book of Genesis, Judah's blessing begins *Yehudah, atah yodukha ahekha*—Judah, your brothers will praise you (Gen. 49:8). The word *yodukha* is derived from the same root as *odeh,* the key word in Leah's powerful statement, as is Judah's name.

Moses, when blessing the tribe of Judah at the end of the Torah, says "Hear, O Lord, the voice of Judah" (Deut. 33:7). A special relationship with God seems to have come into being with Leah's utterance upon Judah's birth: a place of blessing, value, and praise. King David—traditionally considered to be the author of the Psalms, the Bible's greatest collection of praises of God—was of the tribe of Judah. And, according to the tradition, the Messiah will ultimately be as well.

The sense of transcendent blessing that accompanies Judah's birth remains with him into adulthood and continues on with his descendants. The moment in which Leah emerges from her subjugation to acknowledge the presence of God in her life, even temporarily, changes the course of Jewish history.

In a time of fear for women and other disadvantaged populations globally, we pray for moments of spirituality to occur even in the midst of darkness and oppression. Just as God saw that Leah was unloved and came to her aid (Gen. 29:31), may God remember all those who are abandoned or oppressed by the social structures around them, and may they and their children ultimately find a life of agency and blessing.

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