



Rahel's Sacrifice

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Stories of sacrifice have a grammar of their own.

The stories we tell about sacrifice tell us about who and what we believe is valuable and noble. In telling us about the thing that is sacrificed, these stories tell us about what we believe is most difficult to give up. In telling us what we sacrifice for, these stories tell us about what our supreme values should be. In telling us what inner resources are required to bring the sacrifice, these stories tell us what virtues we ought to cultivate. In telling us who sacrifices, these stories tell us what a religious hero looks like—and who is capable of becoming such a hero.

Often, when we think of sacrifice in Bereishit, we think of the Akeidah (binding of Yitzhak). The Akeidah's model of sacrifice underlines the nature of singleness, of chosenness—to the exclusion of others—as the nature of covenant. In this vision, the covenant is carried by the single, chosen child. It is this model of covenant that makes the potential sacrifice of Yitzhak so valuable, underscoring what we must be willing to give up for God.



While the sacrifice—or averted sacrifice—of the Akeidah presents one model, one that underscores the singular nature of chosenness, it is not the only model of sacrifice offered in Bereishit. Hazal, in Eikhah Rabbah, turn to another model of what true sacrifice might look like, one whose roots they find in this week's *parashah*.

The *midrash* opens as the Temple is burning and the Jewish people are being led into exile. Patriarch after patriarch comes before God, calling on their merits to save their children. Each fails—even Yitzhak, who evokes the memory of his own sacrifice.

Finally, after each patriarch has tried and failed to save the Jewish people, Rahel jumps into the fray:

איכה רבה פתיחתא כד

באותה שעה קפצה רחל אמנו לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא ואמרה רבוננו של עולם, גלוי לפניך שיעקב עבדך
אֶהְבֵּנִי אֶהְבֵּה יִתְרָה וְעַבְד בְּשָׁבִילִי לֹאֲבֹא שִׁבְעֵי שָׁנִים, וְכָשֶׁהשְׁלִימוֹ אוֹתָן שִׁבְעֵי שָׁנִים וְהִגִּיעַ זְמַן נִשְׂוֹאִי
לְבַעֲלִי, יַעֲץ אָבִי לְהַחֲלִיפֵנִי לְבַעֲלִי בְּשָׁבִיל אַחוֹתִי, וְהִקְשָׁה עָלַי הַדָּבָר עַד מָאֵד כִּי נִדְּעָה לִי הָעֲצָה, וְהוֹדַעְתִּי
לְבַעֲלִי וּמִסְרָתִי לוֹ סִימָן שִׁיכִיר בִּינִי וּבֵין אַחוֹתִי כְּדִי שֶׁלֹא יוּכַל אָבִי לְהַחֲלִיפֵנִי, וְלֹאֲחֵר כֵּן נִחַמְתִּי בְּעַצְמִי
וּסְבַלְתִּי אֶת תַּאֲוָתִי וְרַחֲמֵתִי עַל אַחוֹתִי שֶׁלֹא תֵצֵא לְחָרָפָה, וְלַעֲרַב חֲלָפוֹ אַחוֹתִי לְבַעֲלִי בְּשָׁבִילִי, וּמִסְרָתִי
לְאַחוֹתִי כָּל הַסִּימָנִין שֶׁמִּסְרָתִי לְבַעֲלִי, כְּדִי שֶׁיִּהְיָ סָבוּר שֶׁהִיא רַחֵל. וְלֹא עוֹד אֶלָּא שֶׁנִּכְנַסְתִּי תַּחַת הַמָּטָה
שֶׁהִיא שׁוֹכֵב עִם אַחוֹתִי וְהִיא מְדַבֵּר עִמָּה וְהִיא שׁוֹתֶקֶת וְאֲנִי מְשִׁיבָתָהּ עַל כָּל דָּבָר וְדָבָר, כְּדִי שֶׁלֹא יִכִּיר לְקוֹל
אַחוֹתִי וְגַמְלָתִי חֶסֶד עִמָּה, וְלֹא קִנְיָנִתִּי בָּהּ וְלֹא הוֹצֵאתִיהָ לְחָרָפָה.

Eikhah Rabbah, Introduction #24

At that moment Rahel our Mother jumped before the Holy One and said, “Ruler of the World! You know that Ya’akov your servant loved me very much and worked for my father for seven years. When those seven years were done and the time of my wedding approached, my father schemed to switch me with my sister, and it was very difficult for me when I found out. I told my husband-to-be and gave him signs by which he could



distinguish between my sister and me so that my father could not switch us. After, I regretted what I had done, and I overcame my desires and had mercy on my sister that she should not be shamed. That night, they switched me with my sister, and I gave my sister the signs that I had made with my husband, so that he would think that she was Rahel. And not only that, but I concealed myself under the bed in which my sister lay with my husband, and when he spoke to her she was silent and I would answer so that he would not recognize my sister's voice. I did hesed for her, and I did not allow her to be shamed.”

It is this final act of sacrifice that arouses God's mercy. Where every other sacrifice fails, even that of the Akeidah, Rahel's sacrifice succeeds in convincing God to have mercy on the Jewish people.

The story that Rahel tells about herself is of an impossible choice between loyalty to her husband-to-be and her father. At first, it is her love for her husband-to-be that wins the day, leading her to betray her father's secret and tell Ya'akov about his plan. They create the signs together, a certain way to evade Lavan's machinations.

But at the last moment, Rahel tells God, she chose to imagine what it would be like for her sister on the night of her wedding when she would be shamed and rejected by Ya'akov. Rahel argues with God that he owes her mercy for her act of mercy, and that if she was able to overcome her jealousy in order to save her sister from shame, God must be able to overcome God's jealousy of false idols in order to save the Jewish people from exile and disgrace.

The contrasts between the Akeidah and Rahel's sacrifice are woven throughout the *midrash*. Whereas Avraham's would-be sacrifice of Yitzhak is the result of a direct demand from—and a sign of loyalty to—God, Rahel's decision is one that necessitates a betrayal. Whereas the Akeidah, according to Bereishit Rabbah (55:7) takes places in the most central location, at the



site of the future Beit ha-Mikdash, Rahel's sacrifice takes place in an obscure tent. Whereas Avraham is a glorified hero whose piety is announced from the heavens, Rahel is a hero precisely because she is no hero at all—precisely because she makes her the best choice she can in unclear circumstances, precisely because she makes her act of sacrifice while shrouded in darkness.

In the context of Bereishit, Rahel's choice isn't only a story of a woman willing to sacrifice her best chance for happiness with her husband. In a world where the covenant is passed on through sons, a woman's only chance of becoming part of the covenant is through marriage to the chosen, only heir. Rahel is not only sacrificing her chance at being her husband's sole, beloved wife—she is sacrificing the chance to be the sole female carrier of the covenant, through whom the only beloved son will be born.

Rahel's sacrifice—and God's acceptance of it—offers an alternative idea of what the hardest religious act is: not to give up your only, beloved one, but to give up the chance of being the only beloved one. Her sacrifice is the choice to be a sibling: to be one of many. In choosing to share her husband, Rahel blows open the terms of the covenant, insisting that if her chosenness requires her sister's rejection and shame, she cannot accept it. Rahel's sacrifice is to look at the covenant and to say: not without my sister.

Yitzhak's model of sacrifice is encoded in our holiest days. On Rosh HaShanah, the *shofar* evokes God's memory of the ram sacrificed in Yitzhak's stead and of Avraham's willingness to carry out the Akeidah.¹ On Yom Kippur, in the times of the Beit ha-Mikdash, the Kohen Gadol—the chosen, beloved son—enters the *kodesh ha-kodashim* (Holy of Holies), the site where the Akeidah is said to have taken place.

¹ See Talmud Bavli Rosh Hashanah 16a.



Where, though, might we find reference to Rahel's sacrifice as she describes it in this *midrash*? Perhaps we might find an allusion to it in the last *mishnah* of Massekhet Ta'anit:

משנה תענית ד:ח

אמר רבן שמעון בן גמליאל: לא היו ימים טובים לישראל כחמשה עשר באב וכיום הכיפורים, שבהן בנות ירושלם יוצאות בכלי לבן שאולין שלא לבייש את מי שאין לו.

Mishnah Ta'anit 4:8

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says: Never were more joyous festivals in Israel than the 15th Av and Yom Kippur, for on them the maidens of Jerusalem used to go out dressed in white garments—borrowed ones, in order not to cause shame to those who had them not of their own.

In this *mishnah*, we encounter a different sort of ceremony that takes place on Yom Kippur: not that of a single, chosen man in the central place, but of masses of young women in fields, dancing, and, implicitly, in search of husbands. The *mishnah* notes that there were strict rules to this ritual: whereas one might expect young women looking for husbands to wear their most beautiful dresses—whether to make themselves physically attractive or to indicate that they come from wealthy families—instead, the women all wear borrowed white dresses in order to avoid shaming those who have none.

Perhaps at the moment that the Kohen Gadol, the chosen, beloved son carries out the rituals of Yom Kippur in the chosen, beloved place, reenacting, in some way, a memory of the Akeidah, these young women, in their exchange of dresses, in their care for one another and their unwillingness to let another woman be ashamed, are reenacting the sacrifice of Rahel. In the moment that they pass their dresses to one another before they go out to the field, they invoke the memory of Rahel giving her sister the signs that would allow her to escape shame. By caring for one another, perhaps they are invoking the memory of the new terms of the



covenant established by Rahel's sacrifice: one in which women—siblings—are not rivals but each others champions, one in which there is room enough in the covenant for everyone and in which sisters and their commitment to care for one another, are at the center.

Perhaps it is ultimately that giving that creates this day of ultimate happiness and forgiveness in the Jewish calendar: giving that results from love between sisters. Giving that can bring even a furious God to tears. Giving whose impacts lasts millennia and eventually brings the Jewish people home.

