

Why Did Jacob Weep?

Then Jacob kissed Rachel, and broke into tears”
(Gen. 29:11).

Thus begins the love story of Jacob and Rachel in the book of Genesis. The setting for their first encounter is a well (Gen. 29:1-14). Rachel is there tending her father’s sheep, whereas Jacob has just arrived having fled his home in Beersheba after causing a major family upset. His brother Esau wants to kill him so, on the advice of his mother Rebekah, Jacob sets out on a journey to the household of Rebekah’s brother Laban who lives in Haran. While seeking his uncle, he stops at a well where a young shepherdess named Rachel turns out to be Laban’s daughter.

Jacob’s outburst of emotion upon seeing Rachel is puzzling, is it not? Why does he weep? Sometimes it is interpreted romantically: ‘love at first sight.’ Indeed, in the creative interpretations of the Jewish tradition, the sages identify Rachel as the love of Jacob’s life, a love story marked by difficulties and sadness, including Rachel’s premature death. Says the revered Torah scholar Rashi, through divine inspiration Jacob foresaw that one day Rachel would not be buried with him—thus he wept.

But perhaps there is another way to explain this verse, starting with the episode preceding the scene at the well. From where has Jacob just come? From a powerful encounter with the divine. During an overnight stop he has a dream in which the Lord God speaks to him of his destiny and role in the unfolding Abrahamic covenant. (Read the account of ‘Jacob’s Ladder’ in Gen.28:10-22.) Upon waking, Jacob is awestruck by what has just occurred, his amazement beautifully phrased in verses 28:16-17.

Even so, the revelation is also a confusing, disturbing experience. God promises ‘I will watch over you,’ yet Jacob knows he is a marked man in Esau’s eyes. God promises the gift of the Land, but Jacob is about to leave that Land to live in exile. God promises descendants, yet Jacob is leaving behind familial security. A moment filled with promise occurs amidst risk, danger, loss. This

young man has a lot to process! Is it surprising then that by the time he reaches the well after a desert journey he is a mass on pent-up emotions?

And what happens at the well? We may think it’s all about Rachel. But look carefully at the text: the most frequently mentioned person is Laban. In just three verses (9-12), Laban is referred to (by name, as father, as brother, as kinsman) no less than seven times. And in verse 10 reference to Laban’s identity as Rebekah’s brother is repeated twice. Repetition, teach the Jewish sages, should fire our interpretative energies. How might the Torah be speaking to us? When Jacob sets eyes on Rachel, who does he see? The love of his life, or the face of his kin? What does he feel? Romantic love, or the relief of reaching familial shelter? In the view of Rabbi S.R. Hirsch,¹ Jacob constantly carried with him the memory of his mother, Rebekah. In Rachel—Rebekah’s niece—he recognizes the living image of his mother. Yes, he also recognizes a potential spouse. But here too other dynamics may well be at work as Jacob is confronted by the realization that God’s promise of descendants is soon to be fulfilled... As noted earlier, this is a tumultuous time for the emotional-spiritual psyche of a young man who is both a fugitive and a servant of God—and at the sight of Rachel it all comes tumbling out. *“Then Jacob kissed Rachel, and broke into tears”* (Gen. 29:11).

What do you think? Is this a plausible reading of the text? It is certainly one which leads us to ponder those times in life when spiritual, geographic and relational upheavals coincide. Do you have a story like that? How does the Torah speak to you? •

1. S.R. Hirsch: a leader in Jewish religious/educational life in 19th c. Germany. See Munk, 390.

Sources: Herczeg, ed., *The Torah: With Rashi’s Commentary* (New York, 1995, 1999); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bereshit* (New York, 1994); Munk, *The Call of the Torah* (New York, 1994). Scripture: NJPS.

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