

## CONTENTS

Preface	ix
Note on the Sources	xv
The Family of Jacob and Leah (chart)	xvii
Introduction: We Meet Leah	1
1. Waiting for Leah	13
2. What Really Happened on Leah's Wedding Night?	45
3. Leah Begins Married Life in Conflict	67
4. Leah Continues the Conflict	101
5. Leah and the Family Leave Haran	119
6. Leah Comes to the Promised Land	137
7. The Deaths of Rachel, Leah, and Jacob	165
Conclusion: Learning from Leah's Story	187
Acknowledgments	191
Glossary of Names and Definitions	195
Notes	203
Bibliography	229
Index	235

## P R E F A C E

Why a book about Leah? Other biblical heroines perform more impressive deeds and deliver more memorable speeches than Leah. After Deborah leads the Israelites in a grand battle against the Canaanites, she commemorates her victory in a song of praise to God (Judg. 4:4–5:31). Hannah resolutely corrects the mistaken accusations of the priest and later expresses her thanks for the birth of Samuel in a song of prayer (1 Sam. 1:1–2:10). And in the Apocrypha, Judith saves the Israelites by killing the Assyrian general Holofernes, memorializing her victory in a song of glory to God (Jdt. 8:1–16:25). But the Bible does not describe any great victories for Leah, and she doesn't deliver any impressive prayer-songs.

It is true that Leah is a member of that exclusive club of biblical heroines whom we remember as our Matriarchs. In contrast with how the Bible describes the other Matriarchs, however, the text remains stubbornly mute about Leah's words and deeds. Those other Matriarchs are shown living brave and memorable lives of action and initiative, performing acts that change their families as well as the destiny of the Jewish people: Sarah protects her son by demanding the removal of his half brother Ishmael, a proposal expressly ratified by God (Gen. 21:9–13). Rebekah in turn intervenes for Jacob, her favorite son, by orchestrating Isaac's blessing ceremony so that it will be for the benefit of Jacob and ultimately for the Children of Israel (Gen. 27:5–17). And Leah's sister, Rachel, forcefully assumes responsibility over her own life and her posterity when she res-

olutely seeks to bear the children initially denied to her (Gen. 30:1–8, 14–15, 24).

But the Bible describes very few of Leah's qualities, recounts very few of her actions, and quotes even fewer of her statements. As a consequence, her position in the remembrance and affection of people throughout history seems slight in comparison with the popular regard for other biblical Matriarchs and heroines. To the extent that Leah *is* remembered by the people, this seems attributable more to reverence for her illustrious descendants than any appreciation or even awareness of her personal qualities. Leah has become our Lost Matriarch.

All these points certainly seem to present an impressive list of reasons for not devoting an entire book to Leah. But those very reasons are what compelled me to search for her—the silent woman who essentially lost her place as a great Matriarch. Because so little about her appears in the biblical text, I felt I had to seek out the fuller story of her life elsewhere.

We have all heard that the Bible is the best-read book in history. But that is not so. It may be the most *widely* read book in Western civilization, but it is probably also the *worst*-read book in the history of literature. The principal reason it is so hard to read the Bible as literature, I believe, is because of our culture's widespread reverence for the book. Many people view it as a God-written or God-inspired work, and this presumption makes it difficult to read the Bible critically in the same manner that we read other books.

And unlike the way we were introduced to other great world literature, many of us first learned to read the Bible as young children, instructed by religious-school teachers or our parents. Once a child has been introduced to the Bible via simplified Bible stories that are presented by an authority figure as being historically, literally, (and, for some, divinely) true, it is very difficult to return to it later and read it with fresh adult eyes.

As I began this search for Leah, it soon became obvious that I was far from the first to seek her. Fascinating clues to the con-

cealed story of her life can be found throughout that great body of inventive and thought-provoking traditional Jewish rabbinic and literary commentary on the biblical narrative called midrash (from the Hebrew root for “search out,” “seek,” “investigate”).

The term “midrash” means different things in different contexts. It can refer to a literary form of explanation or elaboration of specific verses of the Hebrew Bible (*exegesis*) using a traditional process of close textual examination. But it can also refer to a written product of that process (a “midrash” or *pl.* “midrashim”), or sometimes to formal compilations of such writings.<sup>1</sup> Some scholars restrict the term to only early rabbinic commentaries from approximately the fifth through the thirteenth centuries; others use a broader period from the third through the sixteenth centuries. For some purposes, midrash is distinguished from similar commentary found within the Talmud. But in nonacademic settings, the term is commonly used to encompass all Hebrew Bible commentaries, regardless of date, including contemporary interpretations written by lay scholars and literary critics. For convenience, this book will adopt the latter common usage, and will use the terms “midrash” and “commentary” interchangeably.

But the most valuable treasure I found in pursuing Leah through the midrashic commentaries was not in the answers I discovered there. The real benefit of delving into these commentaries comes from absorbing the *process* of midrash, not just its conclusions. Midrash can show us how to read the Bible as literature by providing a model for developing our own interpretations of the biblical text. Biblical scholars are of course very familiar with the role midrash can play in interpreting the biblical text. However, many lay readers have not yet experienced reading the Bible as literature, including using the content and method of midrash to illuminate and expand the text. For me, approaching the Bible through midrash has been crucial in my search to uncover the secrets of Leah’s life.

Midrash is an attempt to solve a basic problem in reading

the Bible: What do we do when an important Bible story seems incomplete? How do we proceed when vital background information or a major character’s motivations and emotions are either ambiguous or totally absent? The Rabbis who first created midrash did exactly what we do today when we read contemporary literature. They imagined and speculated about what the unexpressed parts of the narrative might have said. And like modern readers and writers of midrash today, the Rabbis seldom agreed on interpreting the Bible. They were often influenced by the circumstances of their times, the moral lessons they wanted to share, or their underlying religious and philosophical beliefs.<sup>2</sup>

Reading midrash is not like reading accepted truths, but more like sitting in on lively conversation among spirited debaters—often with those debaters speaking with each other across the centuries. Reading midrash calls for honoring what has been called the principle of “indeterminacy”—accepting multiple interpretations, even inconsistent interpretations, as different yet possible aspects of the truth contained in the underlying text. Each commentary may be true for a different reader, in a different time, or under a different circumstance.<sup>3</sup>

In a sense, the rabbinic interpretations of midrash become no less than a second Torah (from the word for “teaching”). Jewish tradition developed the concept that there are indeed two Torahs: (1) the Written Torah that God delivered or dictated to Moses atop Mount Sinai, and (2) the Oral Torah, which is also seen as God’s Torah, but revealed through rabbinic explanations and elaborations on the sacred text. The Oral Torah was continuously passed on and developed in oral tradition from the elders to the Rabbis, to their disciples, and then to those disciples’ students, and so forth, until it was eventually written down. For the past two millennia, later generations of commentators have continued the tradition by adding their interpretations.

According to this traditional view, both the Oral Torah and the Written Torah constitute the holy word of God, with equal power and authority. But, as the contemporary Bible scholar

James Kugel notes, since the rabbinic explanations and elaborations of the Oral Torah were eventually accepted as *what the Torah means*, we could say that, in some sense, the Oral Torah of rabbinic midrash has become even more authoritative than the Written Torah.<sup>4</sup>

The Bible is a poorly read book because many people read the Written Torah without the aid of midrashic commentaries. In our attempt to understand the Bible as literature, of course, it is not necessary to personally believe that the commentaries constitute revelation of God's Oral Torah. It is not even necessary to believe that there is divinity at the source of the Written Torah. It is enough that the early Rabbis of the talmudic era and the great commentators of the Middle Ages believed that they were engaged in the holy enterprise of developing the Oral Torah. We can take them and their literature seriously because they took their task seriously. (This is not to say that the seriousness of the task of midrash dictated a serious form of prose. Quite to the contrary, we will soon see that midrash can be deliberately playful and irreverent, often adding mundane, earthy details to reverential Bible stories about our great heroines and heroes.)

Understanding midrash requires understanding what "truth" is for the Bible. Although Bible stories tell histories, the Bible is not history. The Bible does not attempt to tell historical or scientific or archeological truths. Instead, Bible and midrash tell other important truths: truths about human nature, how the world works, and how we should try to live our lives. From this perspective, it is not at all troublesome that the commentators often offer such conflicting interpretations of the biblical text. Midrash is an exploration of the possibilities in the text rather than a revelation of a single underlying truth. Conflicting interpretations may simply be proposing different possibilities, each carrying its own measure of truth.

All the foregoing explains the construction of this book. *The Lost Matriarch* tells Leah's story in familiar biblical-chronological

order, highlighting it against the background of the other major biblical figures who share and help shape her life. Biblical passages and midrashic tales and interpretations are integrated into Leah's story through quotations or summaries at appropriate points.

Because many important questions about Leah and her family have received more interpretations than we have room for in this book, I have included some alternative and additional commentaries in supplemental materials on my website at [www.jerryrabow.com](http://www.jerryrabow.com). I have also posted there some additional explanatory points in the form of extra chapter notes.

Finally, I want to make clear that this is a book about reading the Bible as literature. It is a book of interpretive techniques and possibilities, not an attempt to transmit any particular religious truth. The only truth I hope you will arrive at is that you can find your own meanings of the biblical text with the help of two thousand years of commentary—and most importantly, with your own insights as reader/interpreter/partner in the transmission of the Bible's great stories.

If you have any questions, comments, or personal interpretations of Leah's story that you want to share, I would welcome hearing from you. Please e-mail me at [jerry@jerryrabow.com](mailto:jerry@jerryrabow.com). I hope to post e-mails and my responses on my website, [www.jerryrabow.com](http://www.jerryrabow.com).

## NOTE ON THE SOURCES

The classical or “biblical” Hebrew originally used for the Bible is an ancient language. As a result, the Bible presents several special problems for reading in translation. The language of the time possessed only limited grammar and vocabulary. And the Bible in its original Hebrew text lacks capitalization, vowels, and punctuation (no commas or periods). There isn’t even a word for the present tense of the verb “to be” (the basic “is,” in English). Furthermore, the Bible’s literary style is often laconic and ambiguous. We have also lost some word meanings over time. All these problems have left us with biblical words and phrases—some of them crucial to understanding the story being told—that defy any agreed-upon translation.<sup>1</sup>

As a foundation for the English translations of Genesis (*B’reishit*), I have relied upon the New Jewish Publication Society (NJPS) translation (1962) for its high level of contemporary language and modern scholarship. However, some of the early commentaries or my own interpretations of the text are easier to understand when read with older, sometimes more literal translations, especially to appreciate the rabbinic wordplay often used in classical midrash. And so I have modified many of the Bible translations by using some words or phrases either from the first JPS translation (1917) or my personal translation.

While the JPS translations are the most widely read, there are other fine ones as well, so for your personal use and study I hope you will consider sampling the many available translations and commentaries, which reflect a broad range of con-

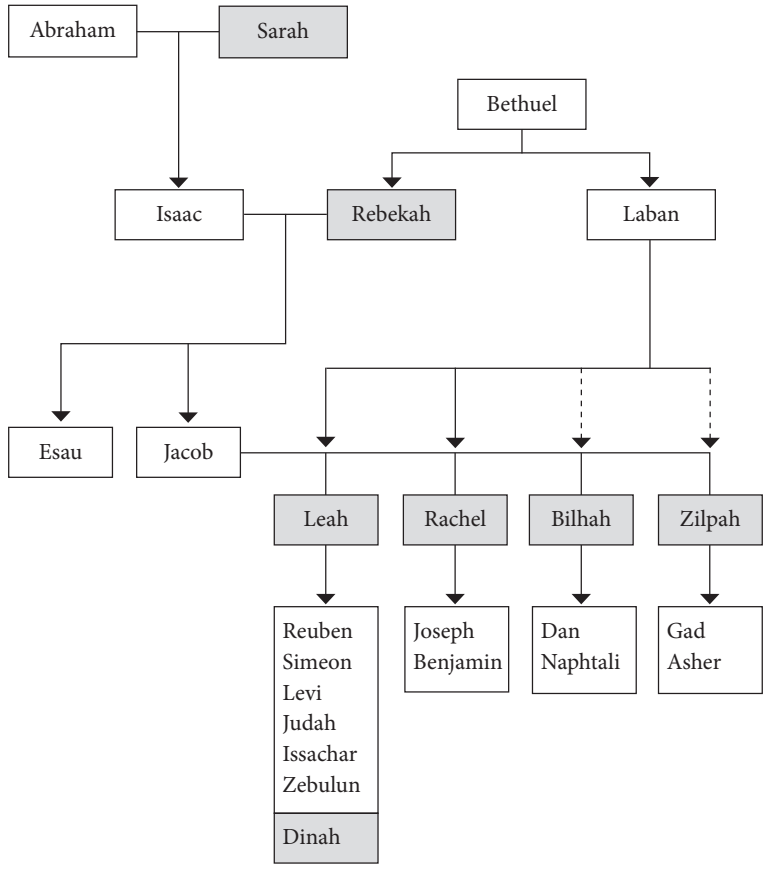


temporary scholarship and viewpoints, such as the several listed in the bibliography: JPS's *Torah: The Five Books of Moses* and *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary*; Oxford's *The Jewish Study Bible*; Harvey A. Fields, *A Torah Commentary for Our Times*; Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary*; Richard Elliott Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah: With a New English Translation*; Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses*; Stephen Mitchell, *Genesis: A New Translation of the Classic Biblical Stories*; and W. Gunther Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*.

I have also substantially adapted passages from the Midrash Rabbah and the Talmud, based on the translations of contemporary commentator Jacob Neusner.<sup>2</sup> The capitalized text in the Midrash Rabbah and the Talmud refers to passages from the Bible, which either appear in the original translations or have been added by me for clarification.

Use and adaptation of the selections from the Torah and from Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, are with permission of the Jewish Publication Society. Use and adaptation of the Neusner/Scholars Press selections from midrash and Talmud is with permission of University Press of America (Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group).

# THE FAMILY OF JACOB AND LEAH



**KEY :**

Male Female

Parent(s) of: Possible parent(s) of:

## INTRODUCTION

### *We Meet Leah*

#### Why Leah Is Important to Us

Ordinarily, we expect that the relative amount of text devoted to a character in a book gives us an indication of the character's importance in the story being told. But the Bible doesn't work that way with Leah. Her life story receives only skimpy treatment, while if we consider Leah's role in the Bible's grand story of the Jewish people, she surely qualifies as one of its major figures.

Leah is one of the four Matriarchs of the Bible. She gives birth to six of the twelve sons of Jacob (the original twelve "Children of Israel"). From her sons come the two great dynasties of Judaism that developed in the early nation of Israel—the priesthood through her son Levi's descendant Aaron and the monarchy through her son Judah's descendant David. And the Bible promises us that at the end of history, it will be Leah's descendant (through the Davidic line) who will finally appear as the Messiah.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the tribes of Judah and Levi, descended from Leah, are the only ones surviving today. The other ten tribes of Israel have been lost through foreign conquest or assimilation into Judah. Thus, all present-day Jews who claim ancestry back to Abraham count themselves as descendants of Leah through the tribes of Judah or Levi.<sup>2</sup>

And while it is true that Leah has to share her husband, Jacob, with his three other wives, Leah can claim a unique status there

as well. Leah is not only Jacob's first wife, she may have been his only legal wife, as we will explore later. Leah appears to have had the longest marriage to Jacob of all his wives, and she is the only wife buried with Jacob in the holy Patriarchal/Matriarchal burial cave at Machpelah, along with Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Rebekah.

But these undeniable markers in the biblical text that establish Leah's formal status as a great Matriarch don't point to the most significant basis for her claim to greatness: her unique relationship with God. This relationship can be seen in the special ways the Bible depicts God perceiving Leah's travails and responding to them by intervening to help her. In reading the Bible as literature, it is important that we read the text through the lens of those who wrote and compiled the book, as well as those for whom the book was initially written. The Bible is not just a history of humankind or a story of how families work, but a story of how God works in the world, how God intervenes in history.<sup>3</sup> Although some modern readers may not feel comfortable with biblical stories about God, we should not dismiss the Bible's God-talk as a separate or extraneous religious add-on. As a matter of literary interpretation, God is central to what the Bible is trying to express. The problem here, however, is that it takes some work for us to recognize and understand the often veiled biblical descriptions of what God's actions indicate about Leah's character.

Our challenge is that, despite Leah's exalted position and unique achievements, she has only two short lines of direct dialogue, and the text expresses only brief and indirect indications of her thoughts and feelings about just a few of the most momentous events in her life. Leah has a rich story; it is only that she has not been permitted to tell it in the Bible.

Fortunately, even those few words from or about Leah in the Bible are enough to reveal that her life encompasses a magnificent struggle against the most daunting confluence of challenges. We see Leah trapped in the entanglements of family

relationships, communal expectations, cultural standards, and the forces of history (or in biblical terms, divine intervention). She continually wrestles with opportunities for good and evil. Moreover, her life is defined by a seemingly unending sibling rivalry over love, power, and status. The Bible presents Leah to us as love driven, love obsessed, and always, always, love denied. Leah our Lost Matriarch is Leah the Unloved.

And although we might initially see Leah solely in terms of being the unloved wife of Jacob, a closer reading of the text points to other aspects of love that go beyond romantic love or its absence. Leah also struggles, as we all do, with issues of love and the lack of it in her other relationships, including at times being unloved by her sister, her father, her children, the community at large, and, in a sense, by history. Moreover, Leah sometimes seems to struggle with how to love herself.

Reading about Leah in the Bible presents more than just the challenge of putting the few puzzle pieces of her life together; it also compels us to find within the meager hints about her life important lessons about the struggles we all face. Leah appears to be living a life of continual conflict, which, on the surface at least, she often seems unable to overcome. And yet if we dig deeper, she does seem to achieve a significant measure of victory. She eventually becomes, if not the beloved of her husband, then the beloved of God. She manages to triumph over the lack of love to become a much different person than she was at the beginning of her story.

Leah struggles with the challenges of love, disappointment, and the need to persevere to the limits of human endurance—all challenges that can confront us today. Most importantly, Leah manages to accomplish all that she does without sacrificing her essential moral standards. Indeed, she appears to have attained her life's real victories as a direct consequence of heroically maintaining her ethical concerns in dealing with others despite her daunting struggles. Even the Bible's few terse lines about Leah's life are enough to convince us of the universality

of the themes she battles over. But we are also left convinced that we need more than those limited words of the text to fully grasp Leah's experiences.

When we moderns approach a book, film, or play that withholds crucial information, we understand that the author has made it our job to work at filling in the gaps—to figure out the inner life of the main character, detecting underlying motivations and feelings so that we can better understand her and perhaps apply the lessons of her life to our own. While much has changed during the two thousand years of rabbinic commentary swirling around Leah's story, one element has remained constant: the Rabbis share our compelling curiosity about Leah, the Lost Matriarch. Like us, they are not content to read Leah's story only through the Bible's handful of words about her. Instead, the biblical commentators struggle to grasp what must have been the fuller reality of this character's physical, emotional, and moral life, and how she coped with the crushing conditions of a life without love.

If we open ourselves to midrash—this second Torah of rabbinic interpretations—we can deepen and transform our understanding of Leah's story. With the help of classical and contemporary midrashic commentaries we can learn some of the timeless lessons of our Lost Matriarch.

### The Background of Leah's Story

The stories of Genesis comprise a grand family saga. The major characters are part of a genealogical history stretching back to the sixth day of Creation. But historical context in the Bible does not only look backward; the lives of these heroes are also illuminated by what will happen to their descendants. More than a literary device, the setting of Bible stories in the context of both preceding and future generations reflects the Bible's underlying religious-philosophical view of how God works in history.

In particular, one of the principal literary devices used by the Bible to tell the family story of humankind is the central

concept of “measure for measure” (*middah k'neged middah*)—the notion that God rewards or punishes a person in ways that reflect and repeat the essence of his or her previous good or evil deeds, or sometimes the deeds of his or her ancestors. The later event commonly resounds with a specific, ironic echo of the prior act. Today the expectation of fairness pervades much of our contemporary culture. In the Bible, however, extreme punishments or rewards readily attach to later generations who are wholly innocent of their ancestors’ actions.

It is not important whether we personally believe that history unfolds in accordance with this premise that individuals or their descendants reap what has previously been sown. What is important for reading the Bible as literature is that the Bible appears to have been written—and frequently interpreted—by people who believed in such a view of how the world works. Understanding this is one key to reading midrash, for in the classical midrashic commentaries, the Rabbis often pursue their biblical analysis by searching for antecedent behaviors that might explain a character’s present actions or circumstances.

In addition to that essential philosophical approach, the Rabbis’ interpretations often reflect their practical knowledge of human nature, gained in their roles as teachers and confidants in their communities and in their personal life experience as sons, brothers, husbands, and fathers. And this knowledge of human affairs must have convinced the Rabbis that the meager outline of Leah’s life expressed in the Bible conceals a far richer and more meaningful story, replete with valuable lessons for us all.

*The Lost Matriarch* is the story I found deep within the midrashic commentaries that have interpreted, expanded, and, to put it bluntly, *created*, a fuller story of the biblical Leah. But although we’re about to explore the Leah story that speaks to me, you may find other insights in the classical texts that speak more convincingly to you. That is how you can personally participate in the midrashic process. Such participation is encour-

aged by the central Jewish texts of commentary and interpretation, such as the Talmud and the Midrash Rabbah, which traditionally handle divergent interpretations by including and discussing alternative approaches rather than presenting only a single authoritative conclusion. *The Lost Matriarch* will likewise often include alternative possibilities, and more will be available online at [www.jerryrabow.com](http://www.jerryrabow.com) if you wish to delve deeper.

So now, because the creators of Leah's story believed that past actions influence present developments measure for measure, we begin our search for Leah in the same manner they did. We start by recalling the Genesis story of her husband, Jacob, leading up to the point when our heroine first appears for her brief turn upon the Bible's main stage to meet him.

A modern psychological profile of Jacob's character might begin by examining the influence that his parents have had on him. His father, Isaac, is the son of Abraham and Sarah, and Isaac's life has been affected by two critical childhood events: First, his parents exile his older half brother, Ishmael, from the family to protect Isaac from sibling rivalry and Ishmael's bad influences (Gen. 21:9–14). Then Isaac suffers the extraordinary near-sacrifice by his father (Gen. 22:1–13).

Isaac's traumatic last-minute escape from sacrifice seems to transform him from a potentially heroic Patriarch like his father, Abraham, into a tragically passive character. He suffers major alienation and isolation from his family. He never lives with or speaks again with his parents after that episode. Later, he so deeply mourns his mother's death that he can only be comforted when a bride is selected for him and brought to him, and he takes her to his mother's tent. His family life with that wife, Rebekah, and their children will be marked by a continuing lack of communication, and worse. Isaac will suffer deceit and manipulation at the hands of each of his family members.

Before Jacob meets Leah, his life as a son of Rebekah and Isaac is marked by a fierce and pervasive sibling rivalry with



his older twin brother, Esau. Their rivalry bears the unmistakable mark of their father's own rivalry with his older brother Ishmael—parental preference. For Jacob and Esau, moreover, the parental preference issue is heightened by the competing preferences of both parents: "Isaac loved Esau . . . but Rebekah loved Jacob" (Gen. 25:28). As a result, Jacob's early character is forged by his rivalry with Esau. The Bible opens the story of Jacob and Esau by relating how these apparently diametrically opposite character types begin their struggles, literally, in the womb. Their subsequent conflict as young men in their parents' home is presented to us in two crucial episodes that raise deeply troubling questions about Jacob's integrity.

In the first episode, the birthright story, Esau the hunter comes back from his day in the fields to find Jacob cooking a pot of red lentils. The famished Esau demands some of the food. Jacob demands in exchange that Esau cede to him the birthright of the firstborn. Esau agrees to the bargain, dramatically declaring that he is about to starve to death (Gen. 25:29–34).

On the basis of this biblical text about Jacob's actions, we have to wonder just what kind of Patriarch would take such advantage of a starving brother. The Rabbis wonder too. One possible response might be to admit that young Jacob indeed acts unfairly in obtaining the birthright, just as he will next act deceitfully in obtaining the firstborn's blessing. Acknowledging Jacob's deceit could still be consistent with his ultimate patriarchal character if we were to attribute Jacob's early behavior to youthful inexperience. Then, by virtue of his later life experiences, Jacob could still be transformed into a great moral Patriarch.

The later well-known scene of the mature Jacob wrestling with the stranger/angel could symbolize such a transformation. Jacob's wrestling victory results in God changing Jacob's name in recognition of his new character. As we shall soon see with Leah's children, names are often extremely important in the early Bible stories. At birth, Jacob had grabbed the heel of

his twin brother, Esau, in order to emerge from the womb, perhaps in a struggle to be born first. Jacob's birth name, *Ya'akov*, refers to this grasping (the name is apparently derived from the word for "heel," *ekev*) (Gen. 25:26). But after his wrestling episode, the Bible will explain that his new name, Israel (*Yisra'el*), proclaims that he has wrestled (*sarita*) with God (*El*) and man, and prevailed (Gen. 32:29; 35:10).

However, most classical rabbinic commentaries do not see Jacob's life as a gradual development of ethical character. The Rabbis prefer their biblical heroes to be pure from birth, even if this requires extrabiblical stories to make the point. So midrash works hard in an attempt to show that Jacob always acts ethically, despite apparent contradictions in the Bible itself. To achieve this, the commentators expend much effort in closely examining the text of the birthright episode for the slightest clues that might salvage Jacob's character from the implication of wrongdoing.<sup>4</sup>

The second major episode in Jacob's rivalry with Esau—the blessing story—is even more troubling. At the urging of his mother, Rebekah, Jacob tricks his blind father, Isaac, into performing a powerful, permanent ceremony. Jacob poses as his older twin, Esau, in order to have Isaac give to Jacob the special blessing reserved for the firstborn son. The Bible presents an uncharacteristically detailed narrative of this episode, replete with direct quotations of the participants' conversations. The biblical record of the event suggests that Jacob is expressly lying to his father, deceiving him by taking advantage of his blindness. This is hardly behavior we expect to observe in a Patriarch. The episode concludes when Rebekah arranges for Jacob to flee from Esau's anger and seek refuge (and find an appropriate bride) with her brother Laban's family in Haran, the Mesopotamian city of Rebekah's family home.

For the blessing story, as for the earlier birthright episode, many of the commentators labor hard attempting to justify Jacob's participation in what seems to be monumental unfair-

ness. But some commentators are forced to concede that Jacob's actions are simply inexplicable. These interpreters accept that Jacob's moral character must have subsequently developed through time and experience, or else that, in appropriating the blessing, he simply exhibits some of the inevitable human imperfections found in all biblical heroes and Patriarchs.<sup>5</sup>

### Leah's Life with Jacob

Thus, before Jacob meets Leah, the Bible recites his personal history, including the two dramatic episodes of the birthright and the blessing. Regrettably, the text fails to relate any corresponding backstory for Leah. Those few details that the Bible does reveal concerning Leah's background and life leading up to Jacob's arrival in Haran are so minimal that they scarcely require compression in order to be briefly summarized. The text abruptly presents Leah with neither background nor history. She is simply introduced as Laban's older daughter—implying, perhaps, that she is not worthy of more description.

Where is Leah's history? Female characters in the Bible (even the Matriarchs) are not nearly as developed as their male counterparts. This is especially true for Leah, who must share her life story not only with her husband, Jacob, but also with Jacob's three other wives. These co-wives crowd Leah off the biblical stage. She is rendered strangely silent and invisible even at key points in her own life. Consistent with this, the immediate background leading up to Leah's story is largely not about her but about her husband, Jacob.

When Jacob first arrives at Leah's home in Haran, he immediately falls in love. Unfortunately for Leah, it is not she, but her younger, beautiful sister, Rachel, who becomes Jacob's beloved. Jacob agrees to work for their father, Laban, for seven years as the bride-price for Rachel. But as we shall soon examine in detail, on the wedding night, in a momentous event that will echo throughout and beyond Leah's lifetime, Laban tricks Jacob by substituting Leah as the bride. After the deception is revealed

the next morning, Jacob obtains the right to marry Rachel also, but only by promising to work for yet another seven years.

Leah and Rachel then engage in a battle to produce sons for Jacob, even providing their respective handmaidens, Zilpah and Bilhah, as proxy wives to bear them more children. The final third of Genesis is devoted to the story of Jacob's twelve sons, centering on the conflict between Rachel's son Joseph and his ten half brothers. The conflict is sharpened when Joseph is appointed viceroy of Egypt and Leah's Judah becomes the leader of the brothers who had remained in Canaan. But the sisters' competition over producing Jacob's sons seems ultimately resolved later in the Bible when we learn that the hereditary kings and priests of the Jewish people will descend from Leah's sons.

Because of the paucity of biblical text about Leah's life, her story as related in the Bible is easily misinterpreted. Some of the rabbinic commentaries read Leah's life primarily in terms of the apparent contrasts with her younger, attractive sister, Rachel. Since the Bible goes out of its way to describe Rachel's beauty while remaining ambiguous and essentially silent about Leah's, it is easy for us to presume that Leah was plain or perhaps even ugly. And since the Bible repeatedly emphasizes Jacob's immediate and lifelong romantic love for Rachel, it is easy for us to presume that Leah was unloved to the point of being hated (which is the literal meaning of the Hebrew word *s'nuah* actually used to describe her husband's feeling for her in Gen. 29:31). Finally, since the last narrative segment of Genesis focuses on the extraordinary triumph of Rachel's son Joseph, who saves Jacob and all his descendants from disaster, it is tempting to conclude that Leah's life is not especially important for the grand history of humankind or of the Jewish people.

The magnificence of midrash, however, is its many voices. If we search them out, we find a broad range of interpretations of these biblical texts. Many commentators see Leah in her own right and not merely as "not-Rachel." Accordingly, some are

Ô[]^iä @^âŒ æŒiæŒ

able to conclude that Leah shares physical beauty and moral dignity with her sister, that she feels romantic love for Jacob and eventually comes to be loved by him in return, that God has a unique relationship with Leah, and that in the Bible as well as in Jewish history as a whole, it is Leah who becomes the more important and more rewarded of the two sisters.

Midrash holds the full, dramatic story of Leah's life and the lessons it can teach us, which we're about to explore in some detail. The often-divergent rabbinic commentaries fill in many of the gaps in Leah's story with approaches ranging from respectful to audacious, traditional to groundbreaking, and ancient to contemporary. Listening closely to the frequently discordant chorus of commentators' voices, we can finally hear the powerful themes of this life—lessons from Leah, the Lost Matriarch.