

Relentless COMPASSION

More than a beloved figure in an ancient love story, Rachel is the voice of holy perseverance as she cries for God's deliverance. MICHELLE CLIFTON-SODERSTROM

*Thus says the LORD:
A voice is heard in Ramah,
lamentation and bitter weeping.
Rachel is weeping for her children;
she refuses to be comforted for her
children, because they are no more.
(Jeremiah 31:15)*

Everybody loves Rachel. Her story is one that has roused an abundance of creative work in art, literature, mysticism, and midrash. When Sunday-school girls are asked to name their favorite biblical character, it is commonplace to hear a resounding “Rachel!” The late Rabbi Samuel Dresner deemed her Jewish history’s most beloved folk heroine. Rachel is beautiful, graceful, wealthy, and clever, and she is the beloved of Jacob, the great patriarch, pillar of his people.

When we speak of the people of God, Jacob is the eponym—the pillar we notice and the hope we want to emulate. He has visions of ladders to heaven, with angels ascending and descending. He is a provider who navigates familial difficulties with success. He works for his blessings, and he gets them. On his journey home to Canaan, Jacob prevails in a celestial wrestling match against God. His vic-

tory gains him not only one of these blessings, but a new divine appellation—Israel.

In the shadow of Genesis’s focus on Jacob, it is tempting to forget that Rachel is a pillar herself. She, too, stands for her people. She, too, is the ancestor of the nation of Israel. Moreover, even in her death, she perseveres. From the prophets all the way into the Gospels, Rachel can be heard weeping for her children in the midst of exile and slaughter. She refuses to be comforted. She will not let go.

Why Rachel? Why not Leah—the obedient, fecund, first wife? To be clear, Leah is an exemplary figure. She suffers, for she is not Jacob’s beloved. God hears Leah’s affliction and blesses her first. She bears many children, and the meaning of her sons’ names—“see, a son” (Reuben), “to hear” (Simeon), “to join” (Levi), “to praise” (Judah)—express Leah’s spirit of thanksgiving and recognition of God’s providence (Genesis 29:32-35). Leah remains faithful to God, and in the end, the book of Ruth appropriately vests Leah alongside Rachel as Israel’s matriarch (Ruth 4:11).

Rachel’s distinction as Israel’s pillar is her enduring compassion for her people. Her compassion arises from

a deep hope that God will restore his children, despite the fact that her oracle is more haunting than Jacob’s. Her tears and her refusal to be comforted serve as intercessory cries for deliverance—a blessing for a beloved, sinful people. Rachel is the matriarch who wrestles with God from the tomb, and this distinction casts her in a light unmatched in the Old Testament account and in the eyes of the Jewish people.

Most of us are familiar with Rachel’s story. She first meets Jacob at the well. He greets her by rolling back the stone covering the well so that her father’s sheep can drink. After watering her flock, Jacob kisses Rachel. And then he weeps. A few verses later, we learn that Jacob loves Rachel. This opening scene marks the lens through which we read. Many a reader becomes permanently allied with Rachel, even after we read of Leah’s painful experience as the unloved wife of Jacob.

As the story moves on, Rachel meets a variety of difficulties. She is second, as opposed to first, wife, and she chooses not to speak out when Leah is substituted in her place on her wedding night. The text does not

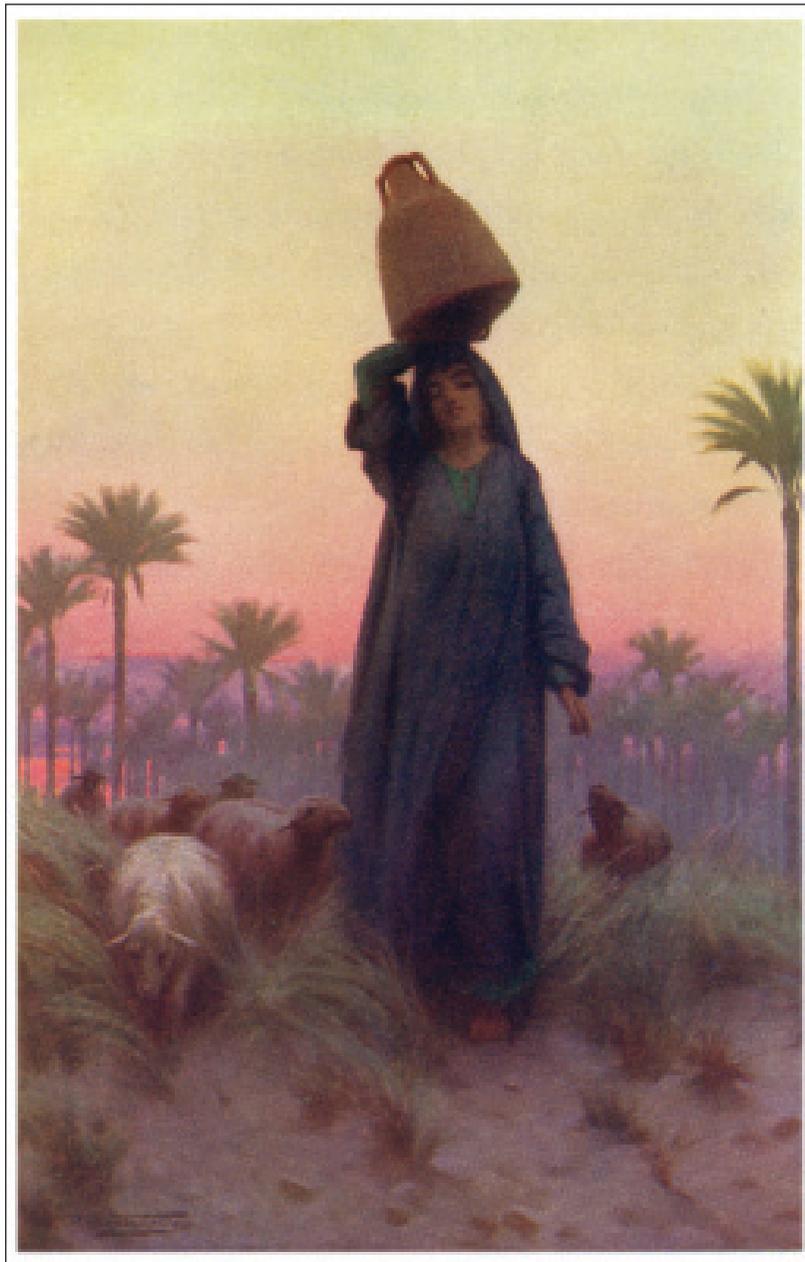
explain why, but many Jewish prayers and writings refer to this moment as evidence of Rachel's virtue and care for Leah. In addition to her inferior spousal status, Rachel is barren. So excruciating is this for Rachel that she cries out to Jacob, "Give me children, or I shall die!" (Genesis 30:1).

Within these recognizable plot movements are parts of the story with which many are less familiar. For starters, Rachel is a shepherdess. She is unique among other women in Scripture for her

role in caring for the flock. It is a job requiring a kind of competency not afforded her contemporaries.

While there is only brief mention of her work, the note is one that merits creative reflection on the part of readers of Scripture. Shepherds are the humble heroes in the biblical narrative. Abel, the patriarchs, Moses, King David, the prophet Amos—all were shepherds. The psalmists write of the Shepherd who supplies our needs, the Bible likens Jesus himself to the Good Shepherd, and the word "pastor" literally means shepherd. Rachel's vocation as shepherdess connects her intimately with those who care for and love their people.

Rachel's relationship with Leah is also worthy of note. The paradigm of



rivalry in the matriarchal narratives of Genesis is a recurrent theme. Yet their rivalry is not the only marker of the sisters' relationship. They have a complex, dynamic connection. Their silence on the first wedding night is one instance of this complexity. When external threats come to them—for example, when Laban begins to look unfavorably upon Jacob and God tells Jacob to return to Canaan—the two women band together. Discerning one of the more significant decisions of their adult lives, Rachel and Leah advise their husband in unison: return to the land of your ancestors and to your kindred. Jacob hears their accord, and with his family he sets out on a journey home.

These lesser-known parts of

Rachel's biography play a role in the larger story of Rachel's perseverance with God. She is not exactly a stereotypical female, for she enjoys considerable power. She speaks directly and in concert with God when push comes to shove. She outsmarts her father by taking his idols, making a considerable mockery of his authority. She has agency in the progression of the narrative, and God listens to her—and not just in life, but also in death. From the depths of the grave, Rachel represents the side of hope that

struggles with God in the meantime.

In Jeremiah's chronicle of the attrition of the Israelites and the destruction of the first temple, Rachel can be heard weeping from her grave, crying out to God on behalf of her exiled people: Let them come home! In the Gospel of St. Matthew, shortly after the birth of Christ, we learn of Herod's edict to kill Hebrew babies. For the innocent children slaughtered, Rachel wails yet again. She mourns loudly and refuses to be consoled: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more"

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(Matthew 2:18). The Jewish people remark that Rachel also wept in the wake of the Holocaust, and that she continues to do so on behalf of her people in difficult circumstances.

Rachel's celestial wrestling match is not like Jacob's, for it comes from the tomb. In the face of death, exile, and profound loss, Rachel intercedes for her people. When does she do this? Rachel is the name the Scripture writers evoke when they want to contrast human lament while portraying God's providence amidst the worst of times, and her lamentations are a sign of hope. She pleads with God for deliverance. She cries out for mercy. She intercedes on behalf of her children. It is hopeful because God blesses her postmortem struggle: "Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for there is a reward for your work...they shall come back from the land of the enemy; there is hope for your future... your children shall come back to their own country" (Jeremiah 31:16-17).

In Judaism, the doctrine of the "merit of the fathers" explains the noteworthiness of Rachel's virtue as it plays a role in Israel's deliverance. The idea is that God's pardon to the thousandth generation comes from those who love him (Exodus 34:6-7). The merits of the forefathers are connected to God's mercy, and, as Paul writes in Romans 11:28, Israel is beloved for the sake of her ancestors. In short, the patriarchs' merits protect God's people even when they sin.

In particular times of trouble or despair, Jewish people refer also to the "merit of Rachel." Rabbis have attributed Jeremiah's reference to Rachel's pleading and God's affirming reply to the redeeming power of Rachel's own virtue. A number of Jewish prayers consign God's protectiveness to Rachel's great merit. In the *Yesod Likra*, a prayer that many Jewish people recite at her tomb, Rachel is referred to as the one who cries out for Israel's fate—the holy and pure

one who pleads Israel's cause until the Messiah comes again. The Jewish people pray that Rachel's merit will continue to protect them today. They recall Rachel's compassion on Leah's wedding night, her endurance through barrenness, and, finally, her wailing in Ramah as protective coverings and the path of God's deliverance.

Hope has two parts: the one from the heavens and the other from the grave. Jacob stands for his people in life. He dreams of ladders to heaven. He wrestles with God and prevails. The divine-human meeting marks faithfulness on the part of Israel. Jacob refuses to let go until he is blessed. When God blesses him, Israel undergoes a kind of deliverance in the "now."

Rachel stands for her people in death. She wrestles with God, and her oracle is from the tomb. She cries out for deliverance, but restoration is "not yet." Nevertheless, God responds, and the divine-human meeting marks the hope that God will redeem a beloved, sinful people.

As a theologian, I put Rachel at the top of my list of favorite biblical characters. One might guess it is because Rachel holds a special status as an Israelite woman. The writers of Genesis spend a great deal of time developing her character and telling her story. It is her sons who finish out the book of Genesis on a note of great triumph.

But really what I love most about Rachel is that she desires for her people to be spared. Her cries are not only for herself or her own children—they are for the nation of Israel, God's chosen community. At key moments in the story, Rachel's refusal to be comforted highlights a confrontation with the brokenness of her people, including their unfaithfulness to God and disobedience to the covenant. Rachel is incapable of fixing the world, but instead of withdrawing, she remains entrenched in the plights of her people—even, or most espe-

cially, after she dies. For Rachel, hope is not escape. It is, rather, dealing with the darker side of Israel's inner landscape as a sinful, beloved people. In the midst of this brokenness, Rachel refuses to let go. She wrestles with God—not with the hope of winning, but with the hope that God will deliver.

The Jewish cemetery *Bet Hayim* sheltering Rachel's tomb is called "House of Life." Men and women, Jews, Muslims, and Christians make the pilgrimage to pay homage to her gravesite. Survivors of the Holocaust and women who cannot conceive find particular solace in her posthumous tears. When people are asked why they come, they answer simply, to pray, to cry, to offer thanksgiving, to learn Torah.

Everyone knows that Jacob wrestled with God and won. He refused to let go until he received the blessing. God answered, and named him Israel. However, there is more to the story, more to hope. Rachel is still engaged in her own celestial wrestling. She also refuses to be comforted until she retains the final blessing and her children come home. She reminds us of that for which we, God's people, await. Really, Rachel desires a simple blessing—the comfort of a people reunited. In agreement with Rachel's demanding tears, the mystical words of the apocalyptic Jewish prayer paint a sublime picture of such a blessing—one of the first acts by the crowned Messiah, on the other side of our waiting:

Where shall this be?
On the way to Ephrat
At the crossroads,
Which is Rachel's grave.
To mother Rachel he will bring
glad tidings.
And he will comfort her.
And now she will let herself be
comforted.
And she will rise up
And kiss him.

—Zohar 2.7a-9a ■