

"And He Found Mandrakes in the Field"

By Rav Yonatan Grossman

Reviewing the continuum of the birth of Yaakov's sons, we note that it is interrupted twice. First, after the birth of Leah's first four sons, a difficult and emotional dialogue is recorded between Rachel and Yaakov. In the wake of this dialogue, Rachel gives her maidservant Bilha to Yaakov, and the Torah then continues its listing of the birth of the sons. The second interruption in the narrative occurs after the two maidservants have each borne two sons. At that point, we find the story of the mandrakes ([Bereishit 30:14-16](#)).

The need for the conversation between Yaakov and Rachel (the first interruption) to be recorded is clear: it has a tangible effect on the building of Yaakov's household, for as a result Yaakov takes Bilha, and later also Zilpa, both of whom merit to take part in the establishment of the House of Israel. In contrast, the story of the mandrakes (the second interruption) is rather surprising. We may assume that during the seven years over the course of which Yaakov's children were born, several other incidents took place, but the Torah makes no mention of them because the text is focusing here on the birth of the sons. What is the relevance of the story of the mandrakes in this context? In what way did it influence the establishment of Yaakov's family and the birth of the sons?

In order to solve this question, let us first analyze this section itself, and then try to identify its significance in the overall context of the story of Yaakov's family.

The story of the mandrakes opens with a description of Reuven's act: "And Reuven went, during the wheat harvest, and he found mandrakes in the field" (verse 14). The expression "Reuven went" serves to introduce another episode in Sefer Bereishit: "And Reuven went and lay with Bilha, his father's concubine" (35:22). The connection between these two images is clear: in both instances Reuven is actively affecting the dynamics of the family relationships. In the story of the mandrakes, Reuven admittedly serves only as the background to the agreement that is reached between Rachel and Leah. However, the very fact that the Torah tells us how the mandrakes reached Leah's hands connects Reuven to the development of the events. In any event, it would seem that these two acts by Reuven are connected on a deeper level, as I shall explain below.

Attention should also be paid to the seemingly superfluous noting of the time when this story occurs: "during the wheat harvest." What does it matter to us whether it took place during the wheat harvest or in the middle of winter? This is one of the

examples brought in the Gemara ([Sanhedrin 99b](#)) of the teachings of Menashe ben Chizkiyahu, who would scoff at the Torah and claim that it included unnecessary details. The Sages criticized him sharply for assuming that the verse is redundant.

What is its true purpose? Further on in the Gemara, the Sages address this question and use the verse to learn something of Reuven's character: "Rava bar Yitzchak said in the name of Rav. From here we learn that righteous people do not take stolen goods" (see Rashi on our verse). In other words, there is a surprising contrast between the description of the time, "the wheat harvest," and what Reuven brings home – "mandrakes." Mandrakes grow in the wild. Considering the season when "Reuven went," we might have expected that he would return home with a sack full of grain, like Ruth upon her return from Boaz's field.

Our Sages, as noted, learn from this detail how careful Reuven was to distance himself from anything that could be interpreted as stealing. We may perhaps suggest that the Torah is hinting at a connection between the "wheat" and the "mandrakes." The very fact that the Torah emphasizes that Reuven goes wandering during the wheat harvest, and returns home with mandrakes, creates some kind of link in our consciousness between these two plants: wheat is the most basic food staple; without it we cannot live. Similarly, the function of the mandrakes in the story – or, at least, in the eyes of Reuven, Leah and Rachel – is related to man's most basic vitality. This connection serves to substantiate the opinion of Radak and others, according to whom the matriarchs regarded mandrakes as a talisman of fertility. Thus the mandrakes assume an importance parallel to that of wheat.

Later we shall address the significance of Reuven's finding the mandrakes "in the field," when we discuss Yaakov's own return "from the field" in the evening.

Immediately after describing how Reuven finds the mandrakes, the text records him handing them to Leah: "And he brought them to Leah his mother" (14). Note that the verb used here is not "he gave," but rather "he brought." Reuven does not regard himself as the possessor of the mandrakes, as being in a position where an act of acquisition is necessary in order to effect a change of ownership. He "brings" them to Leah; in other words, they are his in the same way that they are hers. (Needless to say, as the story develops both sisters relate to the mandrakes quite differently.)

The mention of the family relationship ("his mother") in conjunction with Leah's name is greatly significant. It is echoed again in the subsequent verses: "Please give me some of YOUR SON'S mandrakes... Will you then also take MY SON'S mandrakes... in exchange for YOUR SON'S mandrakes... I have indeed hired you with MY SON'S mandrakes." The text seems to be emphasizing to us the exceptional closeness

between Reuven and Leah. He acts by virtue of her being "his mother," and she sees him as "her son." This emphasis provides an opening for us to understand Reuven's motives in the story.

At times it seems that Reuven is merely the background to the central encounter of the story, which takes place between Rachel and Leah. But specifically because the fact that Reuven finds the mandrakes appears to add nothing to our understanding of the story (it would suffice for us to know that Leah possessed some), the Torah seems to be trying to teach something concerning Reuven as well.

The fact that immediately after finding the mandrakes he brings them to his mother, reveals his emotions. Reuven is Leah's first-born son; night after night he sleeps close to her in the tent from which Yaakov is conspicuously absent. Night after night Reuven wipes his mother's tears, and it is quite likely that it is to her first-born son that Leah opens her heart, bemoaning her painful relationship with her sister, and her husband's unfair treatment of her. Reuven's act of bringing mandrakes to his mother reflects a strong desire on the part of the son to comfort his mother, to bring her some happiness, to remind her that he is worth more to her than ten husbands.

It is from this perspective, it seems, that we should view the connection between the two stories that open with the expression, "And Reuven went." In both instances, Reuven is seeking to restore his mother's honor.

The unusual emphasis throughout the story identifying the mandrakes as "the mandrakes of her son" seeks to bring to the surface the significance of these mandrakes for Leah – a significance that far exceeds that of any talisman or omen. From her point of view, these are the "mandrakes of her son" – a symbol and reminder of the boy's love for his mother, for his empathy towards her. Attention should be paid to the fact that even when Leah ultimately informs Yaakov of the exchange agreement, she continues to emphasize the same point: "I have indeed hired you with the mandrakes of my son!"

We cannot know what Reuven thought, on the morning after the "mandrakes agreement," when he found that the mandrakes he had given Leah as a gift were in her sister Rachel's tent. Perhaps Leah explained to him that in handing them over, she had gained Yaakov himself, but a five-year-old child would have trouble understanding why his mother would agree to a gift that he had labored to acquire for her. (1)

Either way, the close relationship between Reuven and his mother becomes clearly apparent in this brief narrative. In light of this, Rachel's request of Leah – "Please give me some of your son's mandrakes" – could sound quite insolent, coming from the favored wife, but we must keep in mind Rachel's own profound distress. In this request she maintains her position from the previous dialogue that interrupted the narrative of the births of the children – her plea to Yaakov. There she asked that Yaakov give her children, and now she asks that her sister give her the talisman for childbearing – the mandrakes.

From this perspective, Reuven's title as "your son" assumes a different significance as Rachel utters it. We noted previously that the emphasis on Reuven's filial relationship with Leah is meant to impress on our consciousness their close connection, as well as the significance of the mandrakes for Leah. Now, it seems, the same title serves to emphasize Rachel's frustration at her own situation. "You, Leah, have a son," says Rachel. "Please give me some of the mandrakes that your son brought." We can almost see the mandrakes slipping unnoticed out of the conversation: "Please give me some of your son."

Rachel's suffering is unbearable. It is not enough that God has withheld children from her; there is a sense that her whole family is turning their back on her. First there is Yaakov's aggressive response to her desperate plea, hinting that she herself is guilty for her barrenness: "Am I then in the place of God Who has withheld children from you?" (30:2). Now Leah, her sister, is similarly displeased with her request, and hints that Rachel is unworthy: "Is it a small matter that you have taken my husband; will you take my son's mandrakes too?" (30:15).

Leah defines Yaakov as "my husband" (*ishi*), not "our husband" (*ishenu*). This definition reflects the reality, in which Leah married Yaakov first, and only afterwards did Rachel join the household as Yaakov's beloved wife. Still, these words cast an ironic light on the events, for Leah and Rachel know that Yaakov wanted Rachel – and only Rachel - from the start; hence, in a certain sense, it is Leah who joined the household unfairly and "took the husband" of Rachel from her. (2)

This sentence, then, which should have been formulated in precisely the opposite way, testifies most clearly as to the psychological complications that exist in this family. Leah, by her words, reveals her point of view of their reality: Rachel is stealing her husband from her. Needless to say, Rachel views things differently, and communication between the two sisters is all but impossible.

The lack of communication between them finds expression in Rachel's response. Rachel, who does not view reality in the same way that Leah has just defined it, gives Leah's theoretical statement ("Is it a small thing that you have taken my husband") a concrete response: "Therefore he shall lie with you tonight in return for your son's mandrakes" (30:15). Does the whole problem then concern just one night? Is this what Leah meant? It seems reasonable to assume that Leah was describing her feelings concerning the fixed, permanent, day-to-day family situation, but Rachel interprets what she says as a specific criticism that may be solved in a single night.

Following the agreement between them, the text moves on to describe its fulfillment. Surprisingly, the Torah introduces the realization of the agreement with Yaakov's return from work: "And Yaakov came from the field in the evening, and Leah went out towards him and she said..." (30:16). It seems that the Torah could have sufficed with noting, immediately after the sisters' agreement: "And he lay with her that night." The description of the encounter between Leah and Yaakov in the field appears to be redundant. But, as we see so often, it is specifically the "incidental" details that contribute so much to

our understanding of the emotional world of the characters described, and of the message that the text seeks to convey.

Here, again, the description seems to relate to two levels: both that of Yaakov, who is returning from the field, and that of Leah, who is going out to meet him. The expression, "And Yaakov came from the field," seeks to remind the reader of the previous occasion when this expression appeared (and it is, in fact, the only other appearance in the Torah): the story of the sale of Esav's birthright to Yaakov. There, it was Esav who came from the field: "And Esav came from the field and he was tired" ([Bereishit 25:29](#)).

What is the Torah trying to teach us by creating this connection? It should be pointed out that the similar linguistic expression gives rise to two similar images. In both cases, the Torah describes two siblings who agree to a certain exchange. Esav is interested in consuming a pot of lentils, and Rachel is interested in acquiring mandrakes. In both instances, the price paid for the desired acquisition is not a tangible one, but rather a right: the birthright, on one hand, and a night with Yaakov, on the other.

In light of the connection between the stories, we can understand Chazal's criticism of Rachel for "selling" the privilege of intimacy with Yaakov. Rashi, basing himself on Bereishit Rabba, explains: "Because she treated lightly her intimacy with that righteous man, she did not merit to be buried with him." (3) Keeping in mind the comparison to Esav, the criticism does indeed come to the surface, for the story of the sale of the birthright concludes with a covert judgment of Esav: "And Esav despised the birthright." Thus Chazal project the same conclusion onto Rachel – that she did not appreciate her privilege as she should have.

But the comparison between the two stories is also related to the character who has not yet been mentioned by name: Yaakov. Surprisingly, Yaakov is the object that is being passed from hand to hand. The sisters decide between themselves whom Yaakov will sleep with that night, and it is clear that they have no thought of consulting with him or receiving his approval. In fact, Yaakov's passivity in the narrative of the birth of the children has already been emphasized earlier on, in the conversation with Rachel, concluding with her suggestion that Yaakov take her handmaiden – "Here is my handmaiden, Bilha – come to her" (30:3). Lo and behold, there is no reaction whatsoever on Yaakov's part! The text describes him as doing as his wife has suggested, offering no words of his own. Moreover, when Leah then adopts the idea and gives her handmaiden, Zilpa, to Yaakov, there is no mention of even a request that Yaakov agree to this. It must be noted that such a dialogue must almost certainly have taken place; it is reasonable to assume that Yaakov also answered Rachel, expressing his agreement. But in the Torah's omission of these words, there is undoubtedly a lesson to be learned about Yaakov's character in these scenes.

Yaakov's passivity also stands out in his reaction to Leah in the exchange agreement – or, more accurately, his lack of reaction. Here again, the Torah makes no mention of Yaakov's feelings in the face of this bizarre sale. Did he try to change Rachel's mind? Was he angry at his wives? Or perhaps he actually

understood Leah's distress and went to her tent willingly? We may offer many different hypotheses, but the silence of the text speaks louder than any of them.

As noted, part of the significance of the connection between this "sale" of Yaakov and the sale of the birthright is that it highlights a change in Yaakov's status. Once before it was Yaakov who initiated an exchange agreement with his brother, and now it is Yaakov who becomes the object that is exchanged.

The Torah hints at Yaakov's passivity in a veiled reference to yet another story. The result of the mandrakes agreement is that "he lay with her that night" (30:16). This formulation seems to want to remind us of a different story – that of Lot and his daughters. There we read, "And they gave their father wine to drink that night, and the elder one came and lay with her father, but he did not of her lying down or her arising" ([Bereishit 19:33](#)). There appears to be no other instance of intimate relations where the man is passive to the extent that we are told, "He was not aware of her lying down or her arising." Yaakov, of course, was not inebriated when he came to Leah's tent, but the fact that this connection is hinted at teaches us something of Yaakov's passivity in all matters concerning the conflict between his wives.

In contrast to Yaakov, Leah is depicted as quite active. This is apparently the intention of the text in emphasizing her "going out" to meet Yaakov: "And Leah went out to meet him, and she said: You will come to me, for I have indeed hired you for my son's mandrakes" (30:16). Leah cannot wait any longer in her tent. We can almost imagine her sitting in the tent, looking out of the window from time to time and perhaps sending her children outside so that they can inform her of his arrival. The moment he reaches the area of their encampment, she "goes out to him," immediately uttering the final result, so important to her: "You will come to me." (4) The reason for this result comes only afterwards: "For I have indeed hired you...." The special double formulation (*sekhar sekhartikha*) also contributes to the ceremonial atmosphere of Leah's declaration.

Now we shall complete the circle. The story began with Reuven finding mandrakes "in the field" and bringing them to Leah: "AND HE BROUGHT (*va-yavei*) them TO LEAH, his mother." Now Yaakov returns from "the field," and Leah tells him: "You will COME TO ME (*elai tavo*)." The exchange is hinted at also in the words themselves: in exchange for Reuven's mandrakes from the field, Leah will receive Yaakov "from the field."

We must now address the question with which we began: what is the significance of this narrative for the story listing the birth of Yaakov's sons? To answer this, we must note another point. After the birth of Leah's four sons, we are told: "And she ceased to bear." This statement is most surprising, if we take into account the fact that over the course of seven years Leah bore a total of seven children (six sons and a daughter!). What is the meaning of the expression, "ceased to bear," if she then went on to bear another three children?

It would seem that the birth of Leah's last three children should be seen as a Divine response to the story of the mandrakes. The very fact that in the wake of that story God heard Leah's cry,

and blessed her with another two sons and a daughter, indicates that the text is inclined towards Leah in its judgment. The Torah hints, in its declaration that Leah "ceased to bear," that we should not expect to read of any further children issuing from her. But behold – after the story of the mandrakes, Leah does indeed bear more children. This can only be a reward for Leah, for being prepared to forego the mandrakes in favor of Yaakov. In the words of R. Levi (Bereishit Rabba, parasha 72, 5):

"Observe how beautiful the sale of the mandrakes was in the eyes of the Creator: for through the mandrakes two great tribes of Israel came into being – Yissakhar and Zevulun. Yissakhar sits and is occupied with Torah study, while Zevulun goes out by day and comes to support Yissakhar [with his material profits], such that the Torah prevails in Israel."

The text hints at this idea in the introduction to Leah's next childbirth following the story of the mandrakes: "And God heard Leah, and she conceived and bore..." (30:17). This introduction appears also at the birth of Leah's first child, and again at Yosef's birth to Rachel. On these two occasions, God gave the matriarchs their respective firstborns, and so the expression is appropriate in these cases. Why does it appear again in connection with Leah? Its repetition at the birth of Leah's last children seems to indicate that there was a need for special Divine providence. In other words, Leah had truly already "ceased to bear," and it was only in the wake of the mandrakes episode that God opened her womb again.

It appears that Rachel, in her desire for the talisman of fertility and her foregoing of Yaakov, actually delayed her pregnancy even further, while Leah – who agreed to relinquish magical omens for Yaakov – merited to bear another two sons who would help to build Yaakov's household. This idea is echoed in the teaching of Chazal in Bereishit Rabba (parasha 72, 3):

"Rabbi Eliezer taught: This one lost and the other one lost; this one gained and the other one gained. Leah lost the mandrakes but gained two tribes and the birthright; Rachel gained mandrakes but lost both tribes and the birthright.

Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman taught: Leah lost the mandrakes but gained tribes and the right of burial with Yaakov; Rachel gained the mandrakes but lost tribes and burial with him."

In summary, the story of the mandrakes reveals the tensions hidden beneath the surface of Yaakov's household. There is Reuven, attempting to comfort his mother; the plight of the barren Rachel, who cannot even find a sympathetic ear; the plight of lonely Leah, who feels that her husband has been snatched from her; the inability of the sisters to communicate properly; and Yaakov – who is unsuccessful in bringing peace between his wives.

Ultimately, the problems are solved only with Divine intervention: "And God heard Leah," "And God remembered Rachel and God heard her." It is not some miracle fertility drug

that solves the family's problems, but rather the prayer that is heard by the Creator. In this context, we may make mention of the literary connection with which we began: the connection between this story and Reuven's sexual impropriety concerning Bilha ("and Reuven went"). Both stories seem to describe an "exaggerated" human attempt at intervention in the events. Rachel seeks to seize the keys of reproduction – keys that belong only to God, while Reuven seeks to determine the order of leadership in the family – an order for which Yaakov is solely responsible.

FOOTNOTES

1. It is reasonable to assume that Reuven was about five years old. It should be remembered that after his birth, Leah bore another three children (Yissakhar, Zevulun and Dina), and that all of these children were born within the space of seven years. It is possible that R. Bekhor Shor is correct in asserting that Dina was Zevulun's twin sister (and therefore there is no mention of the pregnancy, in contrast to the usual formulation), but even then Reuven could not be older than five. I cannot understand the Radak's calculation that "Reuven was then about seven years old" (in his commentary on 30:14).

2. Rachel's punishment seems exceedingly harsh, but it is formulated in "measure for measure" form: Since Rachel treated lightly the privilege of a night with Yaakov, therefore she was punished by not lying by his side for all eternity; she was not buried with him in Me'arat ha-Makhpelah.

3. An opinion in Bereishit Rabba (parasha 99, 6) maintains that Yaakov's criticism of Reuven (in parshat Vayechi) – "For you went up to your father's bed" - refers not to Reuven's intimacy with Bilha (as the literal reading of the text suggests), but rather to his finding of the mandrakes in the field, and all that transpired as a result!

4. The text may be hinting here at both senses of the verb "tavo": that Yaakov will come to Leah's tent, and also intimate relations.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

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