

Parshat Vayigash

Ki Einenu: Can We Connect Through the Nothingness of Grief?

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Genuinely joining in someone's pain is both the greatest work we can do as humans on this earth, and yet at times, an immensely difficult task. Ironically, empathising with those that are closest to us can be the most difficult, especially if our experiences diverge. Rachel and Yaakov's relationship in Sefer Breisheet is an example of this difficulty; they were a couple that connected both in love, life, and death, yet their experiences of loss and empathy diverged and met challenges.

Yaakov was so connected to Rachel that his connection is evident even in her death; while Rachel is not mentioned by name in Parshat Miketz or Parshat Vayigash, her presence is felt throughout the narrative. Rachel's death informs Yaakov's pain of losing Yosef, and anxiety about losing Binyamin, such that he is forced into a mourning without comfort. While Yaakov's love for Rachel is expressed explicitly after their initial meeting many years prior, his love for her continues after her death in his deep attachment to her children.

Although Yaakov loved Rachel, one of their only conversations in the text reveals a moment of brokenness in their relationship. Rachel, after watching her sister Leah give birth to four children, turns to Yaakov in a famous cry:

הבה לי בנים ואם אין, מתה אנוכי

"Give me children or I shall die." (Breisheet 30:1)

According to many commentators, Yaakov had a hard time relating to Rachel's cry and desperation for a child. After all, Yaakov had children, albeit from a different woman. Could Yaakov relate to Rachel at that moment, who felt that she was worth nothing - אין, and could not even feel alive, because she had no children of her own? Yaakov does not seem to empathise with Rachel at the moment, and instead becomes angry, expressing:

התחת אלוקים אנוכי?

"Can I take the place of God? (30:2)

And yet, in the loss of Rachel and the seeming loss of her children, Yaakov seems to finally relate to Rachel's cry. Yehudah explains to Yosef, in his speech demanding that Binyamin not be taken captive, that Yaakov would be considered dead if he had to leave Binyamin's side:

ונאמר אל אדני, לא יוכל הנער לעזב את אביו ועזב את אביו ומת

"We said to my lord, 'The boy cannot leave his father; if he were to leave him, his father would die.' (44:2)

In contrast, when Yaakov is indeed reunited with Yosef in Egypt, Yaakov's spirit is enlivened:

ותחי רוח יעקב אביהם

...the spirit of their father Jacob revived (45:27)

Yaakov even describes his current situation with the same words that describe a woman in her barrenness, or after a miscarriage. Yaakov, when talking about the loss of Yosef, uses the root word שכולה twice:

ויאמר אליהם יעקב אביהם- אותי שכלתם, יוסף איננו...

Their father Jacob said to them, 'It is always me that you bereave: Joseph is no more...' (42:36)

Yaakov here blames his sons for making him שכולה, one who does not have a child. Later on, when Yaakov acquiesces and allows Binyamin to descend on the journey to Egypt with his brothers, he says:

ואני, כאשר שכלתי שכלתי...

As for me, if I am to be bereaved, I shall be bereaved. (43:14)

Yaakov has already experienced the loss of two children, Yosef and Shimon (who is currently in jail), and so he is giving into his pain of being a שכולה, one who experiences the loss of a child. In the using the word שכלה to describe his anxiety and loss of his children, Yaakov connects his pain to barren and childless women, namely, Rachel.

Without Rachel to share in his grief of losing Yosef, Yaakov's pain is tragically a mirror of Rachel's pain in her own barrenness. In addition to the lack of a partner in Yaakov's grief, Yosef's death had no evidence, no body to bury, no real proof of loss. Similarly, Rachel, in her infertility, experienced an ambiguous loss, one that had no body to bury; infertility is a void and loss that causes its sufferers to look into a black hole of nothingness.

Yaakov's pain is again connected to Rachel's in language. Rachel describes her pain to Yaakov with the word מתה אנכי אין, expressing that as a woman without children, Rachel felt like nothing. Yaakov, when describing the loss of Yosef, uses the word איננו repeatedly. The brothers describe Yosef as the brother who is איננו- who for some reason, is not with them, just gone, into the void. Yaakov, without his beloved wife, bereaved of a proper burial for his presumed dead son, can feel this sense of אין- of nothingness in this world.

Yaakov's anger as a response to Rachel's pain of infertility may seem misplaced, but also resonates with the experience of many couples who experience loss, particularly surrounding infertility. A couple's grief can take different forms from one another for a variety of reasons, and cries of pain to one another can be misinterpreted as accusations to the ones closest to them. Yaakov loved Rachel, but her cry of nothingness landed on him in a way that may have blocked him from properly giving her care.

It is only in Rachel's absence that Yaakov can finally empathise with her; the loss or lack of a child caused both Rachel and Yaakov to lose a sense of vitality. Rachel and Yaakov became united in their deaths and in their mournings, perhaps when it was too late for them to connect. Rachel's cry as described by the prophet Yirmiyahu echoes her husband's grief :

קול ברמה נשמע: רחל מבכה על בניה, מאנה להנחם כי איננו.

A cry is heard in Ramah—Wailing, bitter weeping—Rachel weeping for her children. She refuses to be comforted For her children, who are gone (Yirmiyahu 31:15)

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Rachel refuses to be comforted; her children are **אינו** - nowhere to be found. Yaakov similarly refuses to be comforted, when Yosef is nowhere to be found:

ויקמו כל-בניו וכל-בנותיו לנחמו וימאן להתנחם

All his sons and daughters sought to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted,
(Breisheet 37:35)

Let the tears of Rachel, ones that still resound in our nation's memory, be a reminder of both the challenge and importance of giving voice to those who are experiencing loss of **אינו** - ambiguous pain that can be unseen, and let us find strength in our own presence, to bring comfort to even those who may refuse **נחמה**.



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