

Once Upon an Eyelash

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When we meet our foremothers, Leah and Rachel, we immediately learn about their appearance. Specifically, that Rachel was beautiful and Leah, less so:

בראשית כט:טז-יז

וַיֵּלֶכֶן שְׁתֵּי בָנוֹת שָׁם הַגְדִּלָה לְאָה וְשָׁם הַקְטְנָה רָחֵל: ¹⁷וַעֲיָנִי לְאָה רַכּוֹת וְרָחֵל הָיְתָה יָפֶת-תָּאָר וַיִּפֶּת מֵרָאָה: ¹⁶

Bereishit 29:16-17

¹⁶Lavan had two daughters, the name of the older was Leah and the name of youngest was Rachel. ¹⁷And Leah's eyes were swollen,¹ and Rachel was beautiful in form and beautiful in appearance.

What motivates these verses? Why does the Torah need to testify to how unattractive Leah is? It almost seems like *lashon ha-ra*,² harmful speech, to tell us which of the sisters is prettier than the other. Even if it were necessary to emphasize that Rachel is beautiful, if Ya'akov loved her because he was attracted to her, does the description of her beauty need to come at Leah's expense?! This unflattering description of Leah seems gratuitous. It would have

¹ This term, רכות *rakot*, means soft. It is often translated as “weak” (c.f. JPS) or more-literally as “tender” (c.f. KJV). I have chosen to translate it here as “swollen” or “puffy,” which reflects the literal meaning of soft and the context which implies that this is a softness which would disfigure someone's appearance.

² Halakhah distinguishes between different types of destructive speech. When Rabbinic texts refer to *lashon ha-ra*, it usually refers to relaying information about another person which is truthful, but nevertheless harmful.

been sufficient for the Torah to remark on Rachel's beauty alone and the reader would have understood that she was "the pretty one." Yet, this is precisely the point. As the information about Leah's sad eyes tells us nothing about Rachel and her appearance, we can understand that this verse is not primarily about Rachel at all. It is about Leah. And the Torah is not coming to gossip about Leah's ugliness, but rather to tell us about her beauty. The Torah only appears to be gossiping about Leah in order to teach us a crucial lesson about Leah and through her story, about the nature of *lashon ha-ra* itself.

The Talmud also evinces some horror at the way these verses describe Leah,

בבלי בבא בתרא קכג.

ועיני לאה רכות. מאי רכות? אילימא רכות ממש- אפשר בגנות בהמה טמאה לא דבר הכתוב- דכתיב (בראשית ז) מן הבהמה הטהורה ומן הבהמה אשר איננה טהורה³ בגנות צדיקים דבר הכתוב!... רב אמר: לעולם רכות ממש ולא גנאי הוא לה אלא שבח הוא לה שהיתה שומעת על פרשת דרכים בני אדם שהיו אומרים שני בנים יש לה לרבקה שתי בנות יש לו ללבן גדולה לגדול וקטנה לקטן. והיתה יושבת על פרשת דרכים ומשאלת גדול מה מעשיו איש רע הוא מלסטם בריות. קטן מה מעשיו (בראשית כה) איש תם יושב אוהלים והיתה בוכה עד שנשרו ריסי עיניה⁴...

Bavli Bava Batra 123a

And Leah's eyes were puffy (*rakot*). What does the verse mean by "*rakot*?" If you say that it literally means that they were swollen, is it possible that the text wouldn't speak disparagingly of a non-kosher animal,³ but would speak disparagingly of the righteous?...

Rav said, Yes. It is really means swollen. 'This isn't a disparagement of her, rather it is praise, that she would listen at the crossroads to people who would say, "Rivkah had two boys and Lavan had two girls. So Lavan has an older girl for the older boy and a younger girl for the younger boy."

And she would sit at the crossroads and ask, "The older one, what does he do?"

[They would answer], "He is an evil man and a highwayman."

³ The Talmud notices that it would use fewer letters to say that an animal is "impure" טמאה, but instead it describes the animal as "the animal which is not pure," הבהמה אשר איננה טהורה.

[She would ask], “The younger one, what does he do?”

[They would answer] “**He is an innocent man who dwells in tents.**”

And she would cry until her eyelashes fell out...⁴

Rav’s words come to account for how it is that Leah’s eyes became so soft and swollen, how she became comparatively unattractive. He reads verse 17 which describes the appearance of the sisters in light of verse 16 which tells us which daughter was older and who their father is. Leah’s haggard appearance is a direct outgrowth of her status as the older sister. Because she was the older daughter she was told that she would marry Esav, the older son. She was so distraught at thinking about her future with Esav that she cried away her beauty.

R. Baruch Ha-Levi Epstein⁵ in his *Torah Temimah*⁶ quotes the above passage from Bava Batra and in his footnote says that were it not for the damage to Leah’s eyes she would have been as beautiful as Rachel.⁷ He is inspired by the verse which says **וללכן שתי בנות**, **Lavan had two daughters**,

הי' די לכתוב 'וללכן בנות', והיינו יודעין ע"פ הכלל מעוט רבים שנים ששתים הן, ומדכתב מפורש שתי - מורה שהן שוות.

It would have been sufficient to write that “Lavan had daughters,” and we would have known—based on the exegetical principle that when you have an unspecified plural you assume the amount is two—that they were two. And since the verse explicitly says “two” it thereby indicates that they were equivalent.

⁴ It’s possible that the Talmud here is playing on רכות, soft, and reading it as ריקות, empty—that is denuded—of eyelashes.

⁵ 1860-1941, Belarus.

⁶ *The Torah Temimah* consists of two parts. In the body of the work, he quotes from passages in the Talmud and some other major Rabbinic texts that quote a given verse. But the true genius of the work is in his explanatory footnotes.

⁷ The *Torah Temimah* brings a Midrash from Bereishit Rabbah. This Midrash lists ten different qualities that Leah and Rachel have in common and point to the ways that all of their children are equally Jewish and have equal rights.

The Torah Temimah argues that the phrase, **Lavan had two daughters**, contains an extra word—two. This superfluous “two” puts Rachel and Leah in the same category as other doubles that we have in the Torah which Rabbinic tradition assumes are identical. They are like the goats which are brought on Yom Kippur which are referred to as two, שני שעירי עזים,⁸ and about which the Mishnah teaches that they should be of equivalent appearance, height, and value.⁹

Though the text says that Leah is less attractive than Rachel, the Torah Temimah’s argument points to the likelihood that, like many siblings, the two sisters were actually strikingly similar in their appearance. It is not only the Rabbinic rules of exegesis that support this reading, but also the biblical text itself. Later in the story, we are told that Lavan successfully switched Leah for Rachel on her wedding night.¹⁰ Even Ya’akov himself, who loved Rachel and had spent seven years in the presence of both his favorite wife and her sister, apparently could not tell them apart in the absence of sufficient lighting. Rachel and Leah were both beautiful, both attractive, but Leah’s years of inquiring after her fate and crying over it had left her bleary-eyed, world-worn, and bereft of her eyelashes.

Leah wasn’t born with sunken eyes; she *became* less attractive on account of her sorrow. Yet, Leah didn’t ruin her looks on her own. She had the help of the passersby who were perfectly eager to share with her the information that she asked for, the information that—according to this interpretation—ruined her life. Through Leah’s naming of her children we can see how desperate she was for reassurance, for the love and approval of her husband, and even for the approval of people whom she hardly knows. This is most strikingly displayed when her son Asher is born. She names him after the reaction of other people:

בראשית ל:יג

ותאמר לאה באשרי כי אשרוני בנות ותקרא את-שמו אשר.

⁸ VaYikra 16:9.

⁹ Mishnah Yoma 6:1: שני שעירי יום הכיפורים - מצותן, עד שיהו שווין במראה ובקומה ובדמים; ולקחתן כאחת

¹⁰ Bereishit 29:20-26.

Bereishit 30:13

Leah said, in my fortune, because women will congratulate me. And she called his name Asher (fortune).

Throughout the Torah, Leah is the only one who names a child in this way—not on account of the way he was born, not on account of his impact on her life or the life of her husband, but on the impression his birth will have on other women, on what outsiders will say, approvingly, about her. Her own name shares a root with the verb **הָאָזַל** to be weary and worn down, to take on suffering. *K'shmah kein hi*, she is like her name. Leah is so sensitive to what people think about her, what they feel about her, and what they'll say about her. She is particularly vulnerable to the gossip that she hears and takes it too much to heart.

The Talmud in Bava Batra comes to highlight the role that *lashon ha-ra* plays in this story and to highlight the impact that *lashon ha-ra* had on Leah's life and destiny. The Torah tells us two things about Leah—that she once was as beautiful as Rachel and that she wasn't beautiful any longer. The text isn't designed to speak ill of our mother. It only draws our attention to Leah's appearance in order to show us how it changed through the *lashon ha-ra* that Leah heard about herself. In other words, the reason why the Torah *appears* to be speaking *lashon ha-ra* about Leah is to signal to the reader that it is through *lashon ha-ra* that she became the woman she did, the woman who bore seven children, fostered two, and still always felt bereft and desperate for approval.

In the story that Rav tells, Leah would have been happy were it not for two pieces of information that she heard. The first appears to be innocent, almost silly gossip: these two sets of siblings are a perfect match for this set of siblings. The second was frightening and damaging information: that Esav was a highwayman and a threat to the public. She accepts both the canard that Esav is a bad man and she accepts that she is a good match for him. She tragically assumes that this reflects poorly on her. Rav highlights the effect the *lashon ha-ra* has on Leah, and how, despite herself, she seeks it out. She sits at the crossroads begging for information then uses those rumors to destroy herself.

The Talmud in Arakhin discusses the dangers of *lashon ha-ra* at length and speaks to its ill-effects:

בבלי ערכין טו:

במערבא אמרי לשון תליתאי קטיל תליתאי הורג למספרו ולמקבלו ולאומרו

Bavli Arakhin 15b

In the West (i.e. Israel), they say: Third-party speech kills three. The one who tells it, the one who accepts it, and the one about whom it is spoken.

It is easy to see how *lashon ha-ra* kills the one who speaks it; it is morally corrosive to gossip. It is also easy to see how *lashon ha-ra* kills its subject and can have long-lasting and harmful effects. What is difficult to understand is how it kills the one who hears it. How is *lashon ha-ra* so damaging to them? They are both innocent and uninvolved!

The story of Leah is the answer. It isn't always the case that the recipient of the *lashon ha-ra* will be irreparably damaged by it, but sometimes they will be. We can only imagine what would have happened if Leah had asked after Esav and had been told, "The older son is an impressive hunter who is devoted to honoring his father." Maybe then Leah's self-esteem would not have been destroyed. What if Leah had been told, "People are always saying nonsense about other people; if you want to know what Esav is like, you need to meet him yourself?" What if Leah hadn't felt compelled to ask about Esav at all because no one was sitting idly at the crossroads talking about who might be the right match for whom? We don't know. And what is so frightening about this is that we don't know how many times we ourselves have thought that we were answering an innocent question with accurate information, but to the person who was listening it was so much more than that. And we won't ever know.

lashon ha-ra seduces the one who speaks it through its supposed truth-value and through its claim of innocence. It is, however, like a snake bite where the venom's effects are delayed.¹¹ Lavan, who has a reputation as a trickster and who has no regard for the truth appears to be the only one who is not enthralled by this baseless claim that the oldest child goes to the oldest and the youngest to the youngest. He wants Leah to be married, and he hews to a completely independent rule when he is challenged about having swapped Leah for Rachel. Lavan explains,

בראשית כט:כו

וַיֹּאמֶר לָבָן לֹא-יַעֲשֶׂה כֵן בְּמִקְוֵמֵנוּ לְתֵת הַצְעִירָה לְפָנֵי הַבְּכִירָה:

Bereishit 29:26

It is not done so in our place, to give the younger before the older.

The *lashon ha-ra* that Leah heard, that Leah internalized about being destined for the older son isn't relevant and isn't true, but that doesn't matter. She finds this out too late. She doesn't have to marry Esav, and she doesn't, but Leah discovers this only after she has already been devastated. We don't know what the other story could have been. That is what is so horrible about *lashon ha-ra*: it forecloses the opportunity for new information, for another story to be and to become true.

When I was a little girl, I remember being told that when you see a stray eyelash, you should blow it away with a wish. I see Leah as her eyelashes fall out and think about how it didn't occur to her to dream of something different, to wish for something better than what she had been promised. The *lashon ha-ra* that she solicited and the *lashon ha-ra* that she received prevented her from hoping. The story of Leah is not about what she looked like. She looked just like her sister. The story of Leah is about the *story* of Leah, the stories other people tell about us, and the stories that we tell about ourselves.

Wishing you a Shabbat of communication *with* one another, not *about* one another.

¹¹ See Arakhin 15b.