

# Kol Chovevei TORAH

PARSHA PONDERINGS

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## Choosing a Wife - Did Yaakov Get It Right? By Rabbi Zev Farber

Yaakov is not the first of our founders and patriarchs whose wife is chosen through an encounter by a well, nor is he the last. However, he is the first patriarch who is described as finding his own wife. When we are introduced to Avram in chapter eleven, he is already married, and Yitzchak's wife is chosen by Avraham's servant because Yitzchak was forbidden to leave the Holy Land.

At first, when we look at the story of Yaakov choosing Rachel, the setting seems to be a virtual repetition of the choosing of Rivka, his mother. The fact that it is he himself doing it and not a servant almost seems irrelevant. However, a closer look at the two stories demonstrates that, perhaps, this factor may have been not only relevant but decisive in the success or lack thereof of the respective missions.

When Avraham's servant is sent to find a wife for his master's son, the only criterion explicitly mentioned is that she be from Aram, i.e., no Canaanite women. When Yaakov is sent, at the beginning of chapter 28, he is given a much more specific criterion; he was to pick a daughter of Lavan. In essence, Avraham's servant had to choose between hundreds of women, Yaakov between only two.

How does one go about making such a momentous decision? This is the question which poses itself to Avraham's servant. His answer is that he must devise a personality test. To do that, of course, it is necessary to decide what type of personality one is looking for, and this Avraham's servant does easily. He is looking for a woman who is kind. With this in mind he devises his test, saying that he will choose whichever woman brings him and his camels water. With this, the servant prays to God for success and waits.

When Rivka appears, the Torah shares with the reader some information about her. We are told that she is from the family of Betu'el, Avraham's nephew, but the servant could not have known this. We are told that she was a virgin, never having known a man. Modesty is considered an admirable trait in the Torah, but again, the servant could not have known. Finally, we are told that she was exceedingly beautiful, but it is too late for the servant to factor this in. If she is not kind, she will not offer him water, and she will not be chosen, despite her extreme beauty.

Luckily, Rivka does turn out to be the one. She offers the servant water, and also waters his camels, the servant makes his offer, and she accepts. One cannot help feeling that God gave Avraham's servant the help which he prayed for. Rivka turns out to be the perfect wife for Yitzchak. They are a couple described as loving and playful, and Rivka is even able to take the leading role in the family, when complications arise which

Yitzchak is unable to handle.

When Yaakov turns up at the well in Aram, he knows what he has to do. First off, he must find Lavan's house. He asks some of the shepherds, and they point out that Lavan's daughter is actually at the well at that very moment. Yaakov runs over to this daughter, who turns out to be Rachel, the younger one, and helps her water the flock. Does Yaakov know how many daughters Lavan has, if any? Does he know if they are single or married, or what sort of personalities they had? He probably did not, and this meeting must have seemed like a sign from heaven.

After a month goes by as a guest in Lavan's house, Yaakov makes his choice. He offers to work for Lavan for seven years in exchange for Rachel's hand in marriage. How did he make the choice? What were his criteria? The Torah gives us a hint by comparing the two women in the verse immediately preceding Yaakov's choice: "Leah's eyes were soft, but Rachel was well formed and pleasing of appearance." It would seem that Yaakov made his choice based on looks. Did he make the right choice? Was Rachel the woman destined by God to be the third matriarch or could it have been Leah all along?

It is impossible to answer these questions with any certainty, as only God knows His own intentions, but again there are certain hints in the text. Yaakov marries Leah against his own will. Leah has most of the children, and brings up all of them, as Rachel dies very young, and, of course, Leah, not Rachel, is buried in the Cave of Makhpelah.

An even deeper look reveals that Yaakov's infatuation with Rachel and her beauty, leads him not only to favor her over her sister, but most probably carries over into his infamous favoring of Yosef and Binyamin over his other children, almost leading to a permanent rift in his family.

If Yaakov had followed the example of Avraham's servant, and chosen personality criteria as opposed to physical ones, perhaps the story of Bereishit would have gone differently, avoiding much of the tragedy and pain our ancestors suffer throughout the Joseph narrative. Would Yaakov have chosen Leah? Would he have married both of his own accord? It is impossible to know the answer to such questions.

Nevertheless, it would seem that the Torah is unfavorably comparing Yaakov's process of choosing a wife with that of the servant of Avraham. Perhaps this can be a lesson to us all. If one of our forefathers could be led astray by external criteria at such a momentous occasion, we must articulate our own values before we undertake those decisions that may set the course of our lives.

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