

Rachel and Joseph: Rooting, Uprooting, and Essence in Judaism

Rabbis for Ceasefire

Global Shavuot Teach-In 5784

Torah of Freedom for All

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[Slide text. PDF of slides, including graphical elements, is also available.]

<https://songeveryday.org/rachel-and-joseph-and-uprooting/>

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"To every thing there is a season,
and a time to every experience under the heaven:
A time for birthing,
and a time for dying.
A time for planting [*la-ta'at*]
and a time for uprooting [*la-'akor*] the planted."
– Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) 3:1-2

Jastrow dictionary explains:

the root ayin-kuf-reish, to uproot,
is opposite of nun-tet-ayin, to plant or to establish;
the root kuf-tzadei-reish, or to harvest,
is opposite of zayin-reish-alef, to sow.

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Torah and Its Words

We must learn how to study the inner life of the words that fill the world of our prayerbook....It is not enough to know how to translate Hebrew into English; it is not enough to have met a word in the dictionary and to have experienced unpleasant adventures with it in the study of grammar. A word has soul and we must learn how to attain insight into its life.

This is our affliction -- we do not know how to look across a word to its meaning. We forgot how to find the way to the word, how to be on intimate terms with a few passages in the prayerbook. Familiar with all the words, we are intimate with none.

– “The Spirit of Prayer,” Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, 1953

Although he was speaking about prayer and the prayerbook, Heschel's teaching also applies to how we engage with other sacred text.

“The Spirit of Prayer” was published in the *Proceedings of the Rabbinical Assembly of America* [Conservative], Vol. XVII, 1953, and reprinted as a pamphlet. Eventually (1996), the lecture was included in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*

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SVARA Method" and Torah Study

SVARA, the traditionally radical yeshiva, is based in Chicago and offers learning opportunities around the US and on-line.

The “SVARA method” of Talmud study asks pairs of students to look up every word encountered, even ones we think we know.

Part of translating together in class involves considering alternative meanings and chasing down word origins before settling on a reading with some coherent sense. It’s a slow way to get through any text, but it can reveal layers of poetry within a passage.

The main focus of SVARA study is Talmud. But a practice of looking up words, seeking out history and varieties of use, adds dimensions to learning other texts as well. It’s one way to “attain insight into the life” of a word, as Heschel encouraged.

SVARA has a kind of running joke that tracing the origins of any Hebrew or Aramaic word will eventually lead to a root that means either "to take things apart" or "to join things together." So, one day, I decided to search out words that don't fit that pattern but instead are based on bending what’s already there.

One of the words I spent a lot of time and energy exploring is 'ayin-kuf-reish, which comes up in Rachel's story, as it does in Rivkah's and Sarah's before her....

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Content Note:

There is no getting around the fact that the Book of Genesis is full of assumptions about gender, bearing children, and fertility that

A) have had, continue to have, a huge influence on Jewish and wider cultural ideas about these topics; and

B) have caused, and continue to feed, harm in all kinds of ways.

This session is not about Biblical or post-biblical Jewish ideas of fertility – in fact I am suggesting that we should find new ways to think and talk about the Hebrew root sometimes translated as “sterile” or “barren”

... my plan is to tread as carefully as possible around tender ideas relating to bearing, or not bearing, children. But I do want to acknowledge that we are heading into territory that is extremely sensitive for many of us.

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עקר , 'ayin-kuf-reish

עקר -- Biblical root 'akar = bent, curved; uproot

(Up)Rooting

-- “a time to plant, a time **la-'akar** [to uproot]”

-- '**oker** Harim [uprooter of mountains]

-- “‘Yaakov’ will not be **she'ya'kar** [uprooted]”

Sarah, Rivkah, and Rachel are called “ '**akara** ”
[at one point before each becomes pregnant]

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עיקר or עקר , ayin-(yud)-kuf-reish'

עיקר -- Post-biblical 'ikar = primary, key, chief

Primary Essence

-- “...the name Yisrael with be '**ikar** [primary]...”

-- “And **ha-'ikar** [the key thing] is to not fear...”

-- “'**ikar** [essence] of song is ...”

In midrash, Rachel is called “ '**ikar(a)** ” as well as “ '**akara** ”

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ayin-kuf-reish [רָקַע] – biblical uses

1) uproot

(1a) plant -- **Kohelet 3:2**

“a time to plant;

a time to uproot [לְעֶקֶר] – *la'akor*].”

(1b) horse (hamstring) -- **2 Sam 8:4**

“...David houghed [וַיַּעְקֹר] – *va'y'aker*] all the chariot horses”

2) regrowth

(2a) stump -- **Dan 4:23**

“...leave the stump [יְעָקֵר] – *'ikar*] of the root of the tree”

(2b) offshoot -- **Lev 25:47**

“...or an offshoot [לְיַעְקֹר] -- *-'eiker*] of a stranger's family”

3) fertility-related

re: humans & livestock

Gen 11:30: “Sarai was infertile/barren [עֲקָרָה] – *'akara*]; she had no child.”

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“Three of the four matriarchs are described as “*'akara*” עֲקָרָה

Gen 11:30 -- Sarai was *'akara*; she had no child

Gen 25:21 -- ... because [Rivkah] was *'akara*

Gen 29:31a -- YHVH...opened Leah's womb...

Gen 29:31b --...but/and Rachel was *'akara*

No child-bearing struggles are mentioned for Zilpah and Bilhah

I have only found midrash for Rachel using *'ikar* as well.

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ayin-kuf-reish [רקע] – post-biblical uses

1) primary

(1a) status: B. Berakhot 13a

"...the name Yisrael will be primary [עיקר – *'ikar*] and Yaakov secondary..."

(1b) in time: B. Avodah Zarah 41a

"Initially [מעיקרא – *me'ikara*] they thought..."

2) key, root

essence, key aspect, importance

[two examples, one category]

B. Sukkah 50b

"Essence [עיקר – *'ikar*] of song is instrumental.... essence is by mouth... ."

Nachman of Breslov

"And the key thing [העיקר -- *v'hayiker*] is not to fear at all"

3) uprooting

[uses, extends biblical usage]

B. Ber. 13A

"...not that Yaakov will be entirely uprooted [שׁיעָקַר – *she'ya'akar*] from his place..."

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Meanings Collide

Both Genesis Rabbah and Ruth Rabbah use post-biblical readings of biblical language to comment on Rachel's status:

But Rachel was 'akara (Gen 29:31).

Rabbi Yitzchak said: Rachel was primary in her household. As it is said: But Rachel 'akara; 'ikara Rachel.

Rabbi Abba bar Kahana said: Most of the participants in the feast* were primarily from ['ikar shel] Leah; that is why Rachel was made primary [osim Rachel 'ikar]....

*Footnote cites wedding feast of Ruth and Boaz (see below) and Leah having the majority of Jacob's children.

Near the end of the Book of Ruth, the townspeople offer a blessing for Boaz, upon his marriage to Ruth:

“ ‘...May Hashem make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, both of whom built up the House of Israel!...’ ” – Ruth 4:11

Ruth Rabbah 7:13 –

Rabbi Berachya said: "Most of those sitting there were from Leah, and so he makes Rachel the main subject [oseh et Rachel 'ikar]."

Rabbi Abba the son of Kahana said: "Rachel was primary ('ikaro), as it is said: "but Rachel was 'akara (Genesis 29:31)": 'ikar)....

'ikar(a) --- 'akara

Genesis calls Rachel ayin-kuf-reish referencing lack of pregnancy

Midrash calls Rachel ayin-kuf-reish meaning "primary"

Genesis Rabbah 71:2 -- וְרַחֵל עֲקָרָהּ, עֲקָרָהּ רַחֵל.

– Ruth Rabbah 7:13 וְרַחֵל עֲקָרָהּ, עֲקָרָהּ

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Genesis Rabbah 71:2 Midrash continues

...Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai taught:

Because all the matters are dependent on Rachel, that is why Israel is called by her name:

“Rachel weeps for her children [baneha]” (Jeremiah 31:15). Not only is it by her name, but also by her son's name:

“Perhaps the Lord, God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph” (Amos 5:15).

And not only by her son's name, but by the name of her grandson, as it is stated: “Is Ephraim a dear son to me?” (Jeremiah 31:20).

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Ruth Rabbah 7:13 continued

Rabbi Shimon the son of Yochai taught:

"Because they spoke words against Rachel,**
so the descendants were called by her name, as it is written:
'Rachel weeping for her children (Jeremiah 31:15).'

And that is not the end of the matter with her name,
but also in the name of her son, as it is said:
'Perhaps Hashem will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph (Amos 5:15).'

And that is not the end of the matter with the name of her son,
but also in the name of her grandson, as it is said:
'Truly, Ephraim is a dear son to Me, A child that is dandled! (Jeremiah 31:20).'

** "The words spoken against Rachel" might reference other midrashim:

1) When Benjamin is caught with the goblet that seems to be stolen from pharaoh's house (Gen 44:12), the other brothers call him, "thief, son of a she-thief." (See Sefer Ha-Aggadah 55:106, also cited in Jewish Women's Archive).

2) Calling Rachel "she-thief," in turn, references her stealing of the teraphim from her father's house (Gen 31:19).

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she-thief and son-of-a-she-thief

It seems unlikely that the midrash calling Rachel "she-thief" and labeling Benjamin as "son-of-a-she-thief" intended any positive meaning....even if the intention was to disparage the brothers for harboring such ill-thoughts about Rachel and Benjamin, rather than to cast shade on Rachel. What it DOES, however, whether intended or not, is re-focus on Rachel and her sons as somehow set apart from others in the family:

- It returns us to Rachel's decision to steal the *teraphim*, which is one way the text suggests her strong attachment to her original home.
- It reminds us that Benjamin is the only one of Jacob's children born in "the Land" – which means that his experience is very different from that of the older siblings.
- The goblet episode and the stress on Benjamin as, like Joseph, Rachel's son, points toward many other midrashic links exploring the special bond between these brothers and the challenges of living as a family divided by location: Midrash says, for example, that Benjamin names his children for ways he was cut off from Joseph – like "Chupim" because they missed each other's weddings.

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All matters depend on Rachel

Because all the matters are dependent on Rachel, that is why Israel is called by her name: “Rachel weeps for her children [*baneha*]” (Jeremiah 31:15).

Thus says YHVH: A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping,
Rachel weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are not.
Thus says YHVH: Refrain your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears;
for your work shall be rewarded, says YHVH; and they shall come back from the land of the enemy.
And there is hope for your future, says YHVH; and your children shall return to their own border.
– Jeremiah 31:15-17

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Also Joseph

Not only is it by her name, but also by her son's name:

“Perhaps the Lord, God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph” (Amos 5:15).

Seek good and not evil,
That you may live,
And that YHVH, the God of Hosts, May truly be with you,
As you think.

Hate evil and love good,
And establish justice in the gate;
Perhaps YHVH, the God of Hosts,
Will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.
– Amos 5:14-15

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...and Ephraim, too

And not only by her son's name, but by the name of her grandson, as it is stated: “Is Ephraim a dear son to me?” (Jeremiah 31:20).

Truly, Ephraim is a dear son to Me,
A child that is dandled!
Whenever I have turned [Lit. “spoken”] against him,
My thoughts would dwell on him still.
That is why My heart yearns for him
I will receive him back in compassionate love—declares YHVH
– Jeremiah 31:20

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If the future of the people is through Rachel

- with her attachment to a distant home and her longing for her people (not particularly for “the Land”) –

and through Joseph,

- who spent his entire adult life outside “the Land,”

and whose partner and children and work are all based in another culture --

and through Ephraim,

- born and raised in Mitzrayim of a Mitzrayim-ite woman --

- and if all of this is somehow related to Rachel being “the essence” of her family uprooted and re-rooted...