

Genesis 29:21–35 (Five Books of Moses)

Then Yaakov said to Lavan: Come-now, (give me) my wife, for my days-of-labor have been fulfilled, so that I may [have relations with] her.

Lavan gathered all the people of the place together and made a drinking-feast.

Now in the evening he took Lea his daughter and brought her to him, and [Yaakov had relations with her] her.

Now in the morning: here, she was Lea! He said to Lavan: What is this that you have done to me! Was it not for Rahel that I served you? Why have you deceived me?

Lavan said: Such is not done in our place, giving away the younger before the firstborn; just fill out the bridal-week for this one, then we shall give you that one also, for the service which you will serve me for yet another seven years.

Yaakov did so—he fulfilled the bridal-week for this one, and then [Lavan] gave him Rahel his daughter as a wife. So he came in to Rahel also, and he loved Rahel also, more than Lea. Then Yaakov served Lavan for yet another seven years.

Now when YHWH saw that Lea was unloved, he opened her womb, while Rahel was barren. So Lea became pregnant and bore a son; she called his name: Re’uven/See, a Son! for she said: Indeed, YHWH has seen my being afflicted, indeed, now my husband will love me! She became pregnant again and bore a son, and said: Indeed, YHWH has heard that I am hated, so he has given me this one as well! And she called his name: Shim’on/Hearing. She became pregnant again and bore a son, and said: Now this time my husband will be joined to me, for I have borne him three sons! Therefore they called his name: Levi/Joining. She became pregnant again and bore a son, and said: This time I will give thanks to YHWH! Therefore she called his name: Yehuda/Giving-Thanks. Then she stopped giving birth.

## What's in a Name?

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

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Scripture: Genesis 29:21-35

When we last saw Jacob, he was delighting in the end of his seven years of servitude to Laban. He had worked for Laban for seven years to pay the bride price for Rachel. We read that the seven years seemed to him but a few days because he loved her so much.

Jacob sounds like a patient man. But this morning we see his eager side. "Give me my wife, for my days-of-labor have been fulfilled, so that I may [have relations with] her." Seven years is a long engagement, and Jacob is keen to enter the wedding bed.

Laban moves immediately. He gathers all the people. They have a huge wedding feast of food and drink. When darkness had fallen, Laban brought his daughter, after the custom, to Jacob's tent. It is the formal moment of moving from her father's house to her husband's house. Fathers in weddings today symbolically hand their veiled daughters to the groom as the wedding begins to symbolize much the same thing. Veiled Rachel enters the tent and the marriage is consummated.

Except. Except, in the morning light and the veil removed, it's not Rachel, but Lea. The Hebrew captures the stunning surprise beautifully: Now in the morning: here, she was Lea!

It's not hard to imagine Yahweh doing belly laughs up in the council of the Gods. Can't you just see Yahweh laughing so hard that he can hardly catch his breath, but trying yell out, "Hey Jacob, remember that sheepskin you and your mother used to fool your father? You made old Isaac think you were his older son, Esau. Well, Laban's your mother's brother, isn't he? He's got the same trick up his sleeve. You were the younger and fooled Isaac into believing you were the older. Now, you wanted to marry the younger daughter and you got fooled into believing the older was the younger. What goes around comes around, my boy."

Of course, Jacob complains bitterly to Laban, but Laban simply informs him that in this part of the world you don't marry a younger daughter while an older daughter is still single. But Laban says, "Here, I've got a deal for you. For just another seven years of labor you can have Rachel, too. I'll even be more generous this time. First, stay with Lea alone for the bridal week. Then after a week you can marry Rachel, also. I won't make you wait the whole seven years this time. Such a nice guy am I."

Well, Jacob knows when he's been had. He agrees quickly, and the next major movement of our saga gets underway. We begin the births of Jacob's twelve sons who will be the twelve tribes of Israel. It is the first generation that truly expands Abraham's promised heirs that would number as the sands of the sea and stars of the sky. The twelve tribes will also figure prominently when the Promised Land is divided into tribal sections.

But at this point the story stays grounded in the present moment. We are presented a family with all its complications and foibles. And we see once again how much the ancient writers of Hebrew liked to make puns or plays on words.

When Jacob tricked Isaac and stole Esau's blessing, it created a rift in the family. So, when Laban tricked Jacob and slipped Leah into his tent, it has caused tension. It was no secret that Jacob was madly in love with Rachel. So, Leah got a husband, but a husband who from the

very beginning preferred her sister. Some translations say that Leah was hated, but the force of the Hebrew is much more subtle. Jacob preferred Rachel. But that may have been more devastating for Leah. She has hope that she can win Jacob's affection. I suppose it's one of the reasons polygamy has been outlawed. A man with two wives will inevitably prefer one. A woman with two husbands will inevitably prefer one. And the un-preferred inevitably feels great pain and rivalry.

So, here in our story, we find no exception. Leah feels scorned. She feels unloved, at least in comparison to Rachel. But Yahweh favors Leah with the firstborn.

Just as a side note, the complicated business of two wives seemed to extend to a complication about inheritance, too. Deuteronomy covers the situation with a very explicit law: If a man has two wives, one of them loved and the other disliked, and if both the loved and the disliked have borne him sons, the firstborn being the son of the one who is disliked, then on the day when he wills his possessions to his sons, he is not permitted to treat the son of the loved as the firstborn in preference to the son of the disliked, who is the firstborn. He must acknowledge as firstborn the son of the one who is disliked, giving him a double portion of all that he has; since he is the first issue of his virility, the right of the firstborn is his.

Yahweh favors Leah as the mother of Jacob's firstborn son. It's a big deal. And Leah responds with great joy. I will name him Reuben, Re'uven. See a son, it means. It also plays on words we heard quite awhile back from Hagar when she used similar words to say, "God has seen my affliction." Together these meanings express Leah's hope. Leah celebrates a first-born son, Jacob's first-born heir, thanking God for seeing her affliction, and hoping that all this will make Jacob love her.

But alas, it does not seem to happen. Then Leah bears another son. Now, she hopes, maybe things will change this time. She names him Simeon/Shim'on God hears; God has heard that I am hated, says Leah. God has given me another son. Surely I will become Jacob's favorite now!

But again, nothing much seems to change. Then Leah becomes pregnant a third time. Again she hopes this will change Jacob's heart and he will be joined to her as his beloved. She names her third son Levi, meaning joining, with that hope in mind. But again, no.

Nothing has worked in Leah's plans to win her husband's affection. Finally a fourth son is born. This will be the last child that Leah will bear for some time. It says, "Then she stopped giving birth." The story in the next chapter insinuates that the reason may be because Jacob discontinued marital relations with Leah. Four sons and rather than affection, Jacob turns away from Leah altogether.

So Leah names her fourth son Judah/Yehuda, Giving thanks. Leah says she names him Yehudah because she gives Yahweh thanks. As far as we can tell Leah is not being sarcastic. She's not saying, "Thanks a bunch God—for nothing." At the birth of her fourth son Leah seems sincerely thankful.

We are not given much more information than that. We are left to speculate as to what fueled Leah's gratitude. But I've got a pretty good guess. Let me tell you a story.

There was a man who wandered throughout the world seeking his deepest desire. He wandered from one city to another, from one realm to another looking for fulfillment and happiness, but in all his wanderings never came to it. Finally one day, tired from his search, he sat down underneath a great tree at the foot of a mountain. What he did not know is that this was The Great Wish Fulfilling Tree. Whatever one wishes for when seated underneath it immediately becomes true.

As he rested in his weariness he thought to himself, "What a beautiful spot this is. I wish I had a home here," and instantly before his eyes a lovely home appeared. Surprised and delighted he thought further, "Ah, if only I had a partner to be here with me, then my happiness would be complete," and in a moment a beautiful woman appeared calling him "husband" and beckoning to him. "Well, first, I am hungry," he thought. "I wish there was food to eat." Immediately a banquet table appeared covered with every wonderful kind of food and drink, main courses, pastries, sweets of every variety. The man sat down and began to feast himself hungrily, but partway through the meal, still feeling tired he thought, "I wish I had a servant to serve me the rest of this food," and sure enough a man servant appeared.

Finishing the meal the man sat back down to lean against this wonderful tree and began to reflect, "How amazing it is that everything I wish has come true. There is some mysterious force about this tree. I wonder if there is a demon who lives in it," and sure enough no sooner than he thought this than a great demon appeared. "Oh, my," he thought, "this demon will probably eat me up," and that is just what it did. (Hindu)

And another.

Nasrudin was eating a poor man's diet of chickpeas and bread. His neighbor, who also claimed to be a wise man was living in a grand house and dining on sumptuous meals provided by the emperor himself. His neighbor told Nasrudin, "if only you would learn to flatter the emperor and be subservient like I do, you would not have to live on chickpeas and bread." Nasrudin replied, "And if only you would learn to live on chickpeas and bread, like I do, you would not have to flatter and live subservient to the emperor." (Sufi)

A couple of things happened for Leah. More than anything she wanted to earn Jacob's affection. No matter what she did, she could not. Finally she had to face that she was not going to get the thing she most desired in life. The one thing she most wanted she could not have. Has that ever happened to you? It was very painful for Leah. She named her first three children after that single hope. And then she gave up. And you know what? Leah realized that she was still alive. She didn't need Jacob's affection to live. Indeed, Leah suddenly was able to experience gratitude for what she did have, not the least of which was four beautiful sons. She gives thanks to Yahweh for what she has.

But there's more. Once Leah let go of the stranglehold of want and experienced appreciation and gratitude, she also experienced the freedom from want itself. Had she gotten everything she wanted, like the tree in the story, it probably would have eaten her alive. Want is never satisfied. Indeed, in many ways, the more one succeeds at getting what one wants, the more empty, the more eaten alive it leaves one.

Also, as Nasrudin understood, fulfilling want comes at a high price even before it eats you up. He reminded the rich man that if he would but lean to live simply, he wouldn't have to spend all his life and energy flattering the emperor.

Suddenly Leah experienced a level of freedom she had never known. She would no longer spend all her time and energy trying to win Jacob's heart. She would be free from that. She was grateful for the freedom from the cost of want. She was grateful that she was not eaten by the tree of fulfilled wishes. Leah shouted out, Yehuda. She said I give thanks to God. Amen.