*The Story of Rachel and Leah, and their Images in the Zohar*

Lecture for Workshop:

*Reading the Bible in the Pre-Modern World:*

*Interpretation, Performance and Image*

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Good afternoon.

In 2013, it was my privilege to publish my book *Temple Portals, Studies in Aggadah and Midrash in the Zohar*. In 2016, it was published in English by De Gruyter. In its chapters, I assessed the way the Zohar describes various episodes in the Bible and its heroes. The material in this book served as a foundation for a course that I teach now and then, titled “Biblical Heroes in the Zohar.” My students ask the same question each time anew: “What about *women* Biblical heroes in the Zohar?” The truth is that my initial defensive answer is, “It’s not me—it’s the Zohar.” In fact, however, there are also a few women heroes in the Zohar. I consider this lecture a necessary corrective measure, of sorts, to the enterprise to which I have long affixed my name. Here I wish to examine the place of the images of Rachel and Leah in the world of the Zohar, but no less, the reason that these two female characters, specifically, are privileged to have a status in the masculine ecosystem of the Zohar.

Rachel and Leah take up much room in the Genesis account, perhaps more than any other female characters. Sometimes we find them standing together—against their father, Laban, for example—but to no small measure they also appear juxtaposed or even at each other’s throats, competing for Jacob’s affection. So it is, for example, in the Biblical story of the mandrakes, in which the two women engage in “barter” over a night with Jacob. The confrontation and the contrast between Rachel and Leah stand out in particular against the background of Jacob’s attitude toward them. According to the Biblical account, Jacob loves only Rachel and takes her and her alone as his wife due to his love for her, whereas he marries Leah under duress as the outcome of Laban’s deceit. The Bible emphasizes this contrast when it describes Jacob’s attitude toward Leah as hatred, no less: “And the Lord saw that Leah was hated” (Gen. 29:31) and, in Leah’s own words: “For the Lord has heard that I am hated” (Gen. 29:33).

The idea that Jacob’s wife, one of the four matriarchs and the mother of half of the tribes, is in fact a reviled member of Jacob’s household does not square with the views of rabbis, philosophers, and commentators from antiquity onward. Some commentators do interpret her reproachfully as an accomplice in her father’s deceitful scheme. By so doing, they justify Jacob’s antipathy toward her. In greater part, however, the Biblical commentators and exegetes smile on Leah. Some attenuate the meaning of Jacob’s “hatred” in this context, considering it merely a diminished love (relative to his love of Rachel). Others explain that, yes, Leah is hated as the Bible attests, but not necessarily by her husband, Jacob; it is others, perhaps Rachel, who hate her. Be this as it may, the basic hermeneutic assumption behind all these explanations is that in the story of the two sisters, Rachel and Leah, unlike those of other siblings in Genesis, one sister is not rejected in favor of the other, the chosen.

Also conspicuous since antiquity is the tendency to “defend” Leah and mask her inferiority to Rachel, a relationship seemingly implied by the comparison in the Biblical narrative: “Leah's eyes were *rakot,* weak, but Rachel was of beautiful form and beautiful appearance” (Gen. 29:17). Be the interpretation of the adjective *rakot* in reference to Leah’s eyes as it may (and we will have more to say about her eyes below), plainly it stands in contrast to the description of Rachel as “of beautiful form and beautiful appearance.” Philo made a point of stressing that Jacob’s two wives were blessed with “different nature and different form”—each having her own virtue. Josephus also praised Leah effusively, describing her as “innocent and honest […] in all her ways […] gentleness, straightforwardness, peace, and dignity were in her.” He also remarks with emphasis that Jacob “grieved for her with all his heart and soul,” no less than he grieved for Rachel when she died. While none of them propose to leave Leah deprived, none imagine placing Leah’s virtue *above* Rachel’s—none, that is, until the Zohar.

Before I turn to the Zohar, I should preface with a brief background about the Zohar and its study; I apologize in advance to those who will find these matters familiar and known. The Zohar is the foundational canon work of the kabbala, Jewish mysticism, in all generations. According to the scholarly consensus, it was created in Castile in the late thirteenth century and the first few decades of the fourteenth, about a hundred years after the historical emergence of kabbala in Provence and Catalonia. The main approach today in scholarship on the Zohar considers it the product of multiple authors, all belonging to a single religious literary movement and a circle of artists whom we regularly call “the Zohar circle.” If we wish to characterize this work, we could say that it is a book of kabbala in terms of its contents, but in the way it was written—unlike other coeval kabbalistic works—it belongs to the Midrashic circle, that of Jewish homiletics and exegesis, and, in fact, represents another stage in the history of mediaeval Midrashic art. When we follow the metamorphosis of Jewish homiletic traditions from their cradle in the early centuries of the Common Era, or even earlier, to the innards of the Zohar, we may notice trends of continuity and change and detect the fingerprints of the kabbalists of mediaeval Castile. As I demonstrated in my book, the way the kabbalists chose to retell the Biblical account teaches us a great deal about their religious orientation and the social and historical contexts in which they operated.

Let us return to the episode of the two sister-matriarchs, Rachel and Leah, and the question of where “Leah the hated” stands. Here, as stated, we find that the Zohar takes a unique stance, different from everything we encounter in all Midrashic contexts. Allow me to read to you a short exegetic passage from the Zohar on portion *Va-Yetse* (154a):

*God saw that Leah was hated*. Why was she hated? After all, children of a hated woman are unvirtuous, while obviously all those issuing from Leah were virtuous. So how can you say that Leah was hated? But truly, Jubilee is always a concealed world, none of whose matters are revealed, so all its actions were concealed from Jacob. Come and see, Lower world is revealed, beginning of all to climb its rungs… So we call it *Attah*, you, since it is Sabbatical, revealed, higher world Jubilee we call *Hu*, He, since all its matters are concealed. Mystery of the matter of Leah as is written - *He lay with her in the night, Hu*—He, supernal world, constantly concealed. Jacob, aspiring, did not cleave to the concealed, rather to the revealed.

Clearly the exegete finds it difficult to accommodate Jacob’s hatred for Leah and her inferior status. He proposes to solve the problem through the medium of the kabbalistic teaching of symbols. “Sabbatical” and “Jubilee” are a familiar dyad of symbols in the mediaeval kabbalistic literature. They represent the two feminine *sefirot*—spheres or levels of divine energy used in Creation—in the system of sefirot: *malkhut*, kingship, and *bina*, understanding. These two sefirot, the Zohar adds, are also represented by a dyad of people, Rachel and Leah. It is important to know that in the world of the kabbalists from the Middle Ages onward, and above all in the world of the Zohar, the heroes of the Bible symbolize the upper sefirot in the present physical world. Thus, Abraham is identified with the sefira of *hesed*, kindness; Isaac with *gevura,* strength; and Jacob with *tiferet,* beauty or compassion. In this manner, the Zohar says, Rachel represents in this world the lower state of being among the ten sefirot—the one that mediates between the world of the sefirot and the corporeal world, a being that the kabbalists call *shekhina* (the immanent divine presence), the People Israel, the Land of Israel, and so on. Leah, in contrast, represents a higher sefira (the third in the count of sefirot), one that is unattainable, that of bina, understanding. Like the sefira of bina, then, Leah’s qualities are exalted and concealed from the human eye, and therefore Jacob cannot attain and adhere to them. One may say that he cannot detect her exaltedness, which surpasses that of Rachel by far. This is why Jacob loves Rachel more than he loves Leah—not because Leah is inferior but precisely due to her loftier and unknowable quality, which Jacob cannot grasp.

The Zohar develops and expands on this interpretive direction in various contexts. It explains, for example, why Rachel and Leah are buried separately—Rachel along the main road where everyone can see her, and Leah in a concealed place, in a cave, the Cave of the Machpela, befitting someone who represents hidden metaphysical being. Due to her superiority, the Zohar adds elsewhere, it is Leah who has the privilege of being buried with Jacob, unlike her sister, Jacob’s beloved, who is buried far away and separate from him.

In these Midrashic passages and others like them that place Leah above Rachel, it is not hard, as stated, to detect the tendency to “defend” Leah against the ostensible charge of inferiority in the Biblical account. However, the exegetical argument that surfaces here about Leah’s superiority over Rachel and Jacob’s blindness to this advantage is original and uniquely bold. Only by using the kabbalistic language of symbols, it seems, can the exegete express it.

Notably, these passages, which tell the story of the two sisters so surprisingly against the backdrop of their kabbalistic representation, are hermeneutic and literary works that belong solely to the Zohar and have no traces in earlier kabbalistic literature. Furthermore, the very use of Rachel and Leah as representative of the sefirot of kingship and understanding, respectively, is not found in the first hundred years of the kabbalistic literature, by which I mean up to the appearance of the Zohar. When we trace its first occurrences, we find that this imagery sprouted in the circle of Castilian kabbalists who were active in the late thirteenth century around the Zohar—the “Zohar circle.” In Nahmanides, who died around the year 1270, this motif is still absent, as it is among Castilian kabbalists of his generation. It occurs thirty to forty years later in the writings of R. Moshe de Leon and R. Joseph Gikatilla. The first appearance of these symbols and this hermeneutic approach is in R. Moshe de Leon’s *Sefer haRimon*, written in 1287. It becomes more conspicuous in the writings of the kabbalist R. Joseph Gikatilla, because in his introduction to the kabbala *Sha’are Ora,* written in 1293, these symbols already appear, where in his book *Sha’are Tsedeq,* conventionally viewed as a prequel of sorts to *Sha’are Ora,* evidently written several years earlier, these kabbalistic metaphors are still absent. Furthermore, kabbalists contemporary to De Leon and Recanati, who were in contact with the Zohar but did not belong to the Castilian circle, remain thunderingly silent on the topic. The Italian kabbalist R. Menachem Recanati, for example, already notes Rachel as representing the divine presence but says nothing about Leah as representing understanding. In certain locations in his writings, it even seems that Leah, like Rachel, represents the divine presence, the sefira of kingship. R. Bahya b. Asher of Saragossa, too, mentions no such symbolic associations in his commentary on the Torah, written in 1291.

I emphasize again that many medieval homileticists and exegetes, not necessary kabbalists, have tried to reconcile the twists and turns in the stormy human plot and give “Leah the hated” her status back. All of them, however, usually attempt to teach that Leah is not inferior to Rachel but equal to her in stature. The tendency of the Zohar to turn the tables and show that Leah surpasses Rachel is aberrant and exceptional by any interpretive standard. The motivation for this Midrashic demarche is hard to detect in the older Biblical or religious context; rather, one should seek it elsewhere. How can one explain the eagerness of the thirteenth-century kabbalistic exegete to defend Leah’s status with interpretive ferocity and to glorify her so radically as perhaps to overshadow Rachel? And whence comes the motivation to make room in this esteemed pantheon of symbols of Biblical characters, a very masculine place indeed, for a dyad of women as well?

I wish to find the key to this in the context of the medieval Jewish-Christian debate, particularly in response to the metaphor of Ecclesia et Synagoga, a common feature in the thirteenth-century theatre and Christian art.

The artistic representation of the Ecclesia as representing the Church and the Synagoga as the Jewish faith had been evolving since the ninth century. These two clashing metaphors had first emerged in the Christian iconography of the Crucifixion scene in the ninth century, or thereabouts, in manuscripts, medallions, and prayer books. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, they also began to appear in sculptures on cathedral façades in France (the best known being in Strasbourg and at the Notre-Dame in Paris), Germany, and England. They were in plain sight and were evidently meant to give the theological message of the triumph of the Christian truth a presence in the Christian urban milieu, where the Jewish population was steadily growing.

If, as stated, the artistic representation of Ecclesia et Synagoga dates to the ninth century, the identification of Rachel and Leah with church and synagogue is much older. It came up already in Justin Martyr in the second century CE—long before the artistic representation of Ecclesia et Synagoga. So wrote Justin Martyr (*Dialogue with Trypho* / translation, introduction, and notes by A. Lukyn Williams, 1930, pp. 276–277):

The marriages of Jacob were types of the act that was to be completed by Christ. For it was not right that Jacob should marry two sisters at the same time… Now Leah is your people and the Synagogue, but Rachel is our Church… Jacob served Laban for his spotted and speckled sheep. Christ served His service even as far as the cross, for man of various colors and looks out of every nation, purchasing them by blood and the mystery of the cross. Leah's eyes were weak and, in truth, very weak are the eyes of your souls. Rachel stole the gods of Laban, and hid them until these present days, and similarly for us have our ancestral and material gods perished.

As many scholars have shown, the Church Fathers accepted this interpretation from then on. According to Cyprian, the third-century Church Father and Bishop of Carthage, “Leah, the first-born with the ailing eyes, is the metaphor of the Synagogue whereas Rachel, young and beautiful, is that of the Church; she was barren until she became pregnant with Joseph, the metaphor of Jesus.” And according to Ambrose, Bishop of Milan in the fourth century, Leah symbolizes Judaism, which in its blindness refuses to recognize Christ, whereas Jacob is called Israel, “and it has been proved that Christ, too, is Israel, who is—and is even called—Jesus.”

The identification of Ecclesia et Synagoga with Rachel and Leah and, effectively, the integration of the artistic representation of the two sister-religions with the metaphor of the sister-Matriarchs, Rachel and Leah, gained strength in the Middle Ages. From the middle of the twelfth century onward, we find the Synagogue embodied in iconographies and illustrations as an image blindfolded with a scarf. This motif has been interpreted in various ways, but there is no ignoring that the Christian interpretation of Genesis, seeing Leah as representing Judaism, stresses the fact that her eyes are *rakot*, meaning—according to this interpretation—weak or ill. Either way, whether the artist meant it or not, this symbol reinforced the association of Synagoga with Leah in the observer’s eyes. This identification found epitomic expression in illustrations of Biblical stories in the *Bible moralisée* manuscripts that were produced in the thirteenth century for the French royal house. And as Sarah Offenberg wrote in her dissertation—they influenced, in their content and style, art in other areas and set the tone in describing the Jews [מצגת] [Here is the place to thank Sarah Offenberg for her help and guidance in this, her field of specialization.]

Here, in the picture that you see, Jacob chooses Rachel and spurns Leah. True to his method, the author of this document accompanies each picture with a description of its content and a typological Christian commentary. Next to each picture, we read (in English translation: Guest, G. B., *Bible Moralisée,* 1995):

Here [Jacob] has four wives, two old and two young, and Jacob keeps to the young and abandons the old.

And the typological commentary:

That Jacob abandons the old and takes the young, signifies Jesus Christ who puts the old law behind him and takes to the Holy Church who is young and beautiful.

Thus, Jacob represents Jesus, who has chosen the young, namely the Church, over the old, the Jewish synagogue.

Finally, the typological binary of Rachel and Leah recurs in the classical theological literature of the thirteenth century, with Rachel representing the exalted contemplative life as opposed to Rachel, who represents the active life, in a manner that clearly alludes to the binary of Christianity and Judaism. Thus Thomas Aquinas writes in *Summa Theologica* (Thomas Gilby edition, Vol. 46, p. 69):

The contemplative life suits man according to that which is most excellent in him, namely his intellect, and this in terms of its proper objects, namely intelligible things, whereas the active life is concerned with the external things. Hence, Rachel, signifying the contemplative life, means vision of the principle, but the active life is symbolized by Leah, who was *blear-eyed* […].*'*

Against this background of the Christian use of the Rachel and Leah metaphors in the thirteenth century, I wish to propose that the Zohar is in fact fighting back. By elevating Leah to the sefira of understanding and allowing Rachel to represent “only” the sefira of kingship, the Zohar effectively boosts the Synagoga, along with Leah, to the level of understanding, surpassing the Ecclesia. The Jewish religion now stands at the summit of the scale of sefirot, the place of the hidden. The fact that Leah is not “of beautiful form and beautiful appearance,” likeRachel, is due not to her inferiority, the Zohar says in response to the Christian allegation. It’s the other way around—like the sefira of understanding that she represents, her unique essence is invisible and, for this reason, is not publicly seen. Furthermore, the blindness that the Christians attribute to Leah persists in the Zohar’s iteration of the story, but now it is not the portion of Leah-Synagoga but specifically of Jacob. Indeed, Jacob’s disability and blindness relative to Leah’s hidden essence should also be interpreted, in my opinion, as a discourse with the Christian myth in which Jacob-Jesus rejects Leah in favor of Rachel. The blindness, then, is that of Jesus, who cannot understand the immensity of Leah’s depth and chooses the visible dimensions of the faith, the lower ones, which are represented by Rachel.

Hermeneutic commentary was an important medium for Jews’ polemics with the Christian theology in antiquity and in the Middle Ages. By means of kabbalistic hermeneutics and the theosophic and metaphorical spaces that it offers, the “arsenal” for use in this war could be expanded and enhanced. It turns out that the promotion of Leah was not the only tactic for coping with the Christian interpretation of Rachel and Leah as Ecclesia et Synagoga. The very identification of Rachel with the sefira of kingship may also be seen as a different kind of retort to the Christian argument. Sharon Koren has written at length about this and the connection between the persona of Rachel and that of Mary. Another worthy direction of investigation in this context is the elevation and idealization of blindness that is attributed here to Judaism, and specifically to blindness as a way of connecting with invisible mystical truths. There is no doubt, however, that the surprising tendency to boost Leah to the grade of high concealed being is the most surprising of all.

This metaphor of Leah in the sefira of understanding reverberated powerfully as the history of kabbala continued to unfold. We will, for example, hear in the periphery of Lurianic kabbala about the ritual of Tikkun Rachel and Tikkun Leah as relating to these two sefirot—kingship and understanding. If these symbols of Rachel and Leah are indeed outgrowths of Jewish–Christian polemics, this is further evidence that the stormy relations between the faiths would leave their imprints on the fabric of the views and beliefs of both sister religions in the days and years to come.

Thank you.