



BEREISHIT

Vayishlach
A Mother's Tears
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A MOTHER'S TEARS

ABSTRACT

What can we do when our children are hurting?

We all know how much we love our children, how much we care for their well-being, how much we would do to ensure that their lives are beautiful and joyful.

Unfortunately, the world that we live in is not exactly perfect. No matter how much we try, sometimes our loved ones are faced with serious difficulties and challenges. As much as we try to educate our children to walk down healthy, righteous paths, the world can distract them and lead them astray.

Sometimes our children make bad decisions to the point of seriously hurting themselves. Witnessing a child's suffering while feeling powerless to do anything about it is for a parent devastating, heartbreaking, and the worst thing to deal with.

So the big question arises: Is there something a parent can do to ease a child's suffering? And another question, perhaps even more challenging: How should a parent respond to child that is hurting him or herself?

As always, we shall turn to the Torah for the answer. In this week's reading, the Torah teaches us how we can comfort our children, provide them with the tools to comfort each other, and advocate for their wellbeing in this oft-difficult world.

And the Torah does so by holding up the example of our mother Rachel, who knew exactly how to love – and help – her children especially when they hurt.

How fitting is it then that today we honor the beginning of the 90th anniversary the Rebbe and the Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka marriage (Kislev 14, 1928)? Though they had no children of their own, all the children were theirs. And they taught us how to love our children in these challenging times

1. Hairy Situation (Joke)

One morning, as little Hannah was sitting at the kitchen sink watching her mother wash and dry the breakfast plates, she noticed that her mother had several strands of white hair mixed in with her dark hair.

Hannah looked at her mother and said, “Why have you got some white hairs, Mommy?”

Her mother replied, “Well darling, every time a daughter does something bad to make her mother cry or unhappy, one of her mother's hairs turns white.”

Hannah thought about this information for a few moments then said, “Mommy, so how come all of Grand-

ma's hairs are white?"

2. Parents and Children

We all know how much we love our children, how much we care for their wellbeing, how much we would do to ensure that their lives are beautiful and joyful.

Unfortunately, the world that we live in is not exactly perfect. No matter how much we try, sometimes our loved ones are faced with serious difficulties and with challenges. As much as we endeavor to educate our children to walk down healthy, righteous paths, the world can distract them and lead them astray.

Sometimes our children make bad decisions to the point of seriously hurting themselves. Witnessing a child's suffering while feeling powerless to do anything about it is for a parent devastating, heartbreaking, and the worst thing to deal with. How can a mother not suffer when her children suffer? How can a father bear it when his children are in pain?

It doesn't matter whether the hurt was self-inflicted or not – when a child weeps so does the parent.

So the big question arises: Is there something a parent can do to ease a child's suffering? And another question, perhaps even more challenging: How should a parent respond to child that is hurting him or herself?

As always, we shall turn to the Torah for the answer. In this week's reading, the Torah teaches us how we can comfort our children, provide them with the tools to comfort each other, and advocate for their wellbeing in this oft-difficult world.

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3. Parshat Vayishlach

In this week's Torah portion – Parshat *Vayishlach* – we read about the travels of Jacob, his four wives, eleven sons, and one daughter. They and their caravan of riches were on the road from Beth-El, near Jerusalem, heading south. Rachel, very pregnant, went into labor on the side of the road near a city called *Beit Lechem*, Bethlehem. And there, Rachel gave birth to Jacob's twelfth child – the progenitor of the twelfth tribe – Benjamin. But it was a difficult delivery and, in the process of giving birth to new life, Rachel lost her own.

Thus Rachel died, and she was buried on the road to Efrat, which is Bethlehem. And Jacob erected a monument on her grave; that is the tombstone of Rachel until this day.¹

¹ Genesis 35:19-20.

If you travel today to Bethlehem, just south of Jerusalem – on the road to Efrat and Hebron – you will come upon Rachel's tomb, a place where her grandchildren can always be found praying, more than three thousand years later.

One of the reasons that Rachel was buried on the side of the road near Bethlehem and not 20 miles south in Hebron, in the Machpelah Cave with the rest of the matriarchs and patriarchs, is that Jacob foresaw that her grandchildren would one day be exiled and would pass by this spot. They would be a broken people heading south on the road leading out of Jerusalem, and Rachel would be there to comfort them in their pain and hurt, to cry with them and reassure them in their time of doubt.²

This is what a mother does.

And that is exactly what happened. Some one thousand years after Rachel's passing, the cities of her family went up in smoke. Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, conquered Jerusalem and enslaved the children of Israel, the children of Rachel.

As her grandchildren shuffled down the road from Jerusalem into exile, their bleeding legs shackled in Babylonian chains, their scarred faces too sad to cry, they passed by the resting place of their mother Rachel.

4. Horrific Scene

Picture the horrific scene:

Our grandparents – the grandmothers and grandfathers of you and I – leaving their homes behind for a foreign land, while the blood of their loved ones was still coursing through the desecrated streets of Jerusalem, their hopes shattered, their hearts broken, their Torah scrolls, *talleitim*, *teffilin*, *mezuzot*, stuffed into makeshift rucksacks slung over their shoulders.

In this scene from hell, as the Jews slouch along, just south of Jerusalem, they come upon the resting place of their mother Rachel. And she embraces her children, caressing them gently in their misery. She says: "I am here, my child. I cannot wipe away your tears, but I can cry with you."

The Prophet Jeremiah put it into these words:

*So says the Lord: "A voice is heard on high, lamentation, bitter weeping, Rachel weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, for they are not."*³

² Bereishit Rabbah 82. See also *Rachel Weeps For Her Children* by Rabbi Simon Jacobson.

³ Jeremiah 31:14.

As the earth below is scorched in the fires of destruction, a cry can be heard in the heavenly firmaments above. Rachel, seeing her family pillaged and broken, sobs her heart out. Heaven tries to comfort her but Rachel cannot be consoled. How can she be, when her children are not? Rachel cries out to heaven: “How can you try to comfort me when my children sit in mourning for their loved ones, their city, their Temple?”

How does heaven respond?

5. Up in Heaven

The Midrash⁴ describes the harrowing scene up above in heaven reflecting the distressing scene down below on earth.

As the Jewish people are being exiled, all of their ancestors, the men and women of G-d, the great leaders now up in heaven, come before G-d to beg for mercy.

But what can they say to mitigate the great transgressions committed by their descendants which caused the destruction and exile?

One of the main catalysts for the destruction of the Temple, the one that really tipped the scales, was when the Judean king, Manasseh, a bloodthirsty, unG-dly tyrant, placed an idolatrous image in the holy Temple. G-d had had enough: the Jews had been corrupt for generations, serving idols, an embarrassment to their G-dly purpose on this earth. When Manasseh placed a graven image of a foreign “deity” in the holiest on place of earth, a place that exemplified unity and oneness, it was the final straw. That’s when the Babylonians came and our ancestors were slaughtered and those that remained were exiled.

The Midrash says that this is when all of our ancestors and leaders up in heaven came to try to appease G-d for this great sin. They begged G-d to forgive the Jewish people for desecrating the Temple, for hating each other, for not being faithful to their heritage and purpose.

Abraham came, Sarah came, as did Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob, Leah, Moses. They all came to beseech G-d for mercy, to be compassionate to their children, to G-d’s children. They quoted chapter and verse from the Torah in a desperate attempt to change G-d’s mind.

Moses cried out to G-d: “It is written in Your Torah, *An ox or sheep you shall not slaughter it and its offspring in one day*⁵ – and yet they have already slaughtered children and their mothers many times over – and You are silent?!

⁴ Aicha Rabba 24.

⁵ Leviticus 22:28.

Moses was referring to a Torah law that prohibits the slaughter of a mother animal and her child on the same day.⁶ He pointed out that here the Babylonians have killed countless of Jewish mothers and children in one day. He demanded: “G-d, how can You allow them to desecrate Your own Torah? You do not allow us to slaughter animals on the same day, and yet You allow them to slaughter Jewish mothers and their children?”

But G-d did not respond.

6. Rachel's Plea

At that moment, Rochel Imeinu, Rachel our mother, spoke up:

“Master of World, you know how much Jacob, Your servant, loved me. He worked seven years for my hand in marriage. When it finally came for the time of our marriage, I was highly troubled, for I knew that my father Lavan was a conniving charlatan, and I was concerned that he might pull a bait-and-switch with my elder sister Leah. Thus, I gave certain signs to Jacob so that he would know for certain that it was I under the wedding canopy and in the marriage bed, not my sister Leah.

“Lavan my father did indeed switch me out for Leah.

“I loved Jacob with all my heart. I could not fathom myself not with him. Nor could I fathom him with another woman, especially my sister. I was jealous and distraught. And yet, what did I do? I did not heed my own desires and my own needs, but instead I mustered up compassion, and gave my sister the signs so that she would not be humiliated under the wedding canopy, so that Your will, G-d, would be fulfilled.

“Moreover, after the ceremony, when they went to consummate the marriage, I hid under the bed so that when Jacob, my beloved, would talk to Leah, I would reply and Leah would remain silent so as not to be found out, rejected, and humiliated.

“I am a mere mortal, of flesh and blood, dust and ashes, and yet I did not succumb to my jealousy and did not subject my sister to shame and humiliation. How is it that You, living, eternal and compassionate King of the Universe, is jealous of an insignificant idol of stone?! How is it that, because of some irrelevant, inconsequential, petty lump of stone, You allow my children to be exiled, to be slaughtered by the sword of their enemies?”

⁶ Rashi states that this law only applies to a mother and her child, but not to the father and his child.

7. G-d's Response

As Rachel was speaking, suddenly the compassion of the Holy One was aroused. And G-d said to Rachel, "Because of you, I will return Israel to its rightful place."

And this is why it is written in the Book of Jeremiah:

*So says the Lord: "Refrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for there is reward for your work," says the Lord, "and they shall come back from the land of the enemy. And there is hope for your future," says the Lord, "and the children shall return to their own borders."*⁷

"True," says G-d to Rachel, "now your children are in exile, but I promise, there is reward for what you have done. There will be a happy ending. Your children will return home."

Before they were exiled, the children of Israel, of Rachel, were not living up to their divine potential. Instead of bringing love to the world, they despised one another ... instead of making holy everything that is mundane, they brought defilement into the holy Temple ... instead of embracing their relationship with G-d, they began to have strange relationships with foreign stones, images and idols.

When one self-destructs on such a level, it is always bad. And the Jews' self-destruction was as bad as bad gets. This resulted in the Babylonian conquest, slaughter and enslavement of an already weakened people.

On a certain level, G-d was right when He refused to accept Moses' argument. He must have been thinking, "Don't come now to quote Me chapter and verse from My Torah when for tens of years the Jews had completely forsaken My Torah."

But then came Rachel, speaking as a mother:

"Look at me, a simple woman of flesh and blood. I did not focus on my jealousy, anger, or my own desires. I focused on what was right for my children. Perhaps You, G-d, should do the same. Of course, Your children made mistakes, but if I could overcome my jealousy of Leah so that she should not be humiliated, I think You G-d can overcome Your jealousy of some stupid idol that the Jews don't really believe in anyway."

When G-d heard this, G-d's compassion was awakened, and He promised that that all would end well.

⁷ Jeremiah 31:15-16.

8. Lesson For Us

What does all of this teach us about dealing with our own children? How can we ease their suffering? What can we do to help them overcome their challenges and correct their mistakes?

We can approach every difficult situation with our children in one of two ways:

1) we can focus on the mistakes, on the challenges, on the difficulties,

or ...

2) we can focus on the fact that these are our children and any mistake comes from a place that is petty, inconsequential (mere idols of stone and mortar) but nothing eternal or everlasting

Say a child suffers – then we must move heaven and earth to ease that suffering like Rachel did. We cannot be comforted until our children are comforted. Like Rachel, we can never be silent when we see our innocent hurting.

That is even the case when the pain is self-inflicted. When our children make big mistakes, sometimes even devastating mistakes that break our hearts, we must remember that our children's mistakes are not who they are. And we must forgo our own hurt feelings like Rachel did.

As she told G-d: "How can You be hurt over an insignificant idol that is essentially a block of stone? How can You not be there for Your children when they need You most?"

And how can we not be there for ours when they need us most?

This does not mean there will not be pain. Sometimes an action is so heartbreaking that it takes years for the wounds to heal. But, above all, we must keep in mind that, no matter the size of our children's mistake, their mistake is not who they are.

9. G-d and Israel

Parents and children can never be divorced. Nothing can annul their innate relationship. Just as nothing can annul the relationship between G-d, our Father, and Israel.

G-d and Israel are meant for each other. But sometimes the world gets in the way.

An idol in a sanctuary is unnatural for the Jew, as is driving on Shabbat, as is eating a shrimp cocktail, as is not praying every day. But the world looks askance at these things and, sometimes, we forget ourselves and we falter. What do we do when we have realized our mistake?

When we ourselves are the children who have transgressed against G-d, our Father, we have the example of Rachel to follow:

1) we must beseech G-d as she did

2) we must act with compassion toward our sisters (and brothers) as she did, so that G-d will act with us in kind

Sure, there will be consequences to our mistakes, but those mistakes and those consequences do not remove the love that Rachel felt for her children, the love that Rachel felt for Leah, the love that G-d feels for us, His children.

10. The beginning of the Rebbe and Rebbetzin's 90th Anniversary

Today is the 14th of Kislev, when we honor the beginning of the 90th anniversary the Rebbe and the Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka marriage (Kislev 14, 1928). On this day a new epoch in Jewish life began: Though they had no children of their own, all the children were theirs. And they taught us how to love our children in these challenging times.

The Rebbe and the Rebbetzin's entire life work is saturated with the constant care and love for each Jew, like the love of Rachel for her children. The Rebbe poured out his heart and soul in hundreds of hours of his talks beseeching G-d to have compassion for his children. Who can forget the Rebbe's heart wrenching talk on Hoshana Rabba 5744, or the 15th of Shevat 5739, crying out to G-d about the ongoing bitter exile?! Two of many such talks over the years.

Indeed, the Rebbe went completely out of his "comfort zone," as a scholar and private citizen, to go "on the road" and be together with each one of us in our travels, even our most difficult ones, like Rachel who is "on the road" to be with her children as they are exiled.

And the same was true for his Rebbetzin. Allow me to share with you a story that demonstrates the power not just of the Rebbe but of the Rebbetzin to love and bless Jews:

In 5740, the N'shei Chabad sent flowers to the Rebbetzin for her birthday on 25 Adar. Along with the flowers, they sent a letter with requests for brachos for women who needed help. The Rebbe was home at the time and he ate the meal with the Rebbetzin.

I presented the flowers to the Rebbetzin and I gave the letter to the Rebbe. The Rebbe looked at it and said, "It's for her."

I said, "They're asking for brachos!"

The Rebbe looked at me and said, "Nu, she can also give brachos."

I didn't say anything further to the Rebbe but I thought that it was certainly because of the Rebbe that the Rebbetzin could give brachos. The Rebbe read my mind and responded, "And I mean, in her own right."

I continued thinking that if the Rebbetzin could give brachos, then what was the difference between her bracha and the Rebbe's bracha? Then the Rebbe asked me, "Did you learn Derech Mitzvosecha?"

I said that I had and the Rebbe asked, "Which part?" I answered that I had learned *shoresh mitzvas ha'tefilla*, about prayer..

The Rebbe said, "If so, then you know the difference between *sovev* and *memalei*. When I give a bracha, it's *mimalei*, which means that a person has to do something for the bracha to be fulfilled. Her brachos are *sovev*, and you don't have to do anything for the bracha to be fulfilled!"

11. A Gift for Momma (Joke)

Sidney passes by a pet shop in Main Street and notices a parrot in the window selling for one million dollars! He goes inside and asks why it costs so much. The salesman tells him the parrot speaks five languages.

"Five languages!" exclaims Sidney. "Does it speak Yiddish?"

"Sure it does," says the salesman.

As his mother lives all by herself, and Sidney is a loving and caring son, he decides to send her the parrot as a present. It will keep her company – they could converse in Yiddish. Sydney thus pays the million bucks and arranges for the shop to deliver the parrot to his mother.

The next day he phones his mother. "Momma, did you like the parrot I bought you?"

"Mmm, it was delicious!" she says.

"What do you mean delicious?"

"I made soup out of it, it came out great!"

"What?! Mammeh, that parrot wasn't for eating. It spoke five languages, including *di mammeh loshon*, Yiddish!"

"Really? So tell me: When I was preparing it for the soup, why didn't it say anything?"

As we see, oftentimes parent and child are not on the same page. Son buys her a Yiddish parrot, mother thinks it's a chicken for soup. But, at the end of the day, they are mother and child, and that trumps all.

12. On the Same Page (Conclusion)

Sometimes we, the children, are not on the same page with our Father in heaven. He sends us a holy gift and we make mundane use of it or worse yet, abuse it.

But once we realize our mistake and ask forgiveness, it's time for us to stop crying.

Rachel our mother has cried long enough, and so have we. It is time for the happy ending that G-d has promised us all. For has He not told us:

“Refrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for there is reward for your work ... there is hope for your future ... [your] children shall return to their own borders.”

Shabbat Shalom!

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