

Zera Shimshon

by Rabbi Shimshon Chaim Nachmani zt"l

Published Mantua 1778*

Chapter L: Ki Tavo (Deut. 26:1–29:8)

Essay 10. Why is the Congregation of Israel called “Rachel”?

בַּמִּסֹּרֶה "וְרַחֵל" חֲמִשָּׁה, וְסִימָן "וְרַחֵל בָּאָה עִם-הַצֹּאן", "וְרַחֵל הָיְתָה יִפְתָּחָאֵר", "וַיִּפְתַּח אֶת-רַחֲמֶיהָ וְרַחֵל עָקְרָה", "וְרַחֵל לָקְחָה אֶת-הַתְּרָפִים", "וְאֶחָד נָגַשׁ יוֹסֵף וְרַחֵל וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ".

The Masoretic tradition tells us that the word “וְרַחֵל” [*v’Rachel*] [“and Rachel” or “but Rachel”] appears **five** times in Scripture,¹ as an indication for the following verses:

[1] “**and Rachel** came with the flock of her father,”²

[2] “Leah had weak eyes, **but Rachel** was of beautiful form and fair to look upon,”³

[3] “the L-rd saw that Leah was unloved **and he opened her womb; but Rachel** was barren,”⁴

[4] “**and Rachel** had taken the idols and placed them in the camel cushion and sat on them,”⁵

[5] “**and last, Joseph and Rachel** came forward and bowed low.”⁶

רַחֵל לָמָּה שְׂאִירַע לְכַנְסֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׂגַקְרָאֵת "רַחֵל" וְכַמָּה דְאֵתָּ דְאָמַר "רַחֵל מְבַכָּה עַל-בְּנֵיהָ", מִתְחִילָה וְעַד סוּף, שְׂבַאֲשֵׁר נִכְנְסוּ לְאֶרֶץ "וְרַחֵל בָּאָה עִם-הַצֹּאן" וְכוּ' הָיְתָה "בָּאָה עִם-הַצֹּאן אֲשֶׁר לְאֶבְיָה", כְּמוֹ שְׂגַאֲמַר "וְאֵתָּן צֹאֲנֵי צֹאֲן מְרַעִיתִי אֲדָם אִתָּם", "כִּי רָעָה הוּא" כְּלוֹמַר הָיְתָה רוּעָה אוֹתָנוּ "בְּמִיטֵב הָאֶרֶץ", וְאִזּוּ שְׂמָה "נֹדַע בְּשַׁעְרֵיהֶם" וַיִּהְלֹוּהָ וַיִּשְׁבְּחוּהָ, שְׂבַנּוּ אֵת הַמִּקְדָּשׁ וְהָיָה ה' עִמָּם לְשֵׁם וּלְתַפְאֲרַת וּלְתִהְלָהּ.

[This] will hint why it happens that the Congregation of Israel is called “Rachel,” as you may say, “Rachel weeps over her sons,”⁷ examining these five indicated phrases “from beginning to end.”⁸ For when they entered into the Land of Israel, it says, [1] “**and Rachel**

* English translation: Copyright © 2021 by Charles S. Stein. More essays are at <https://www.zstorah.com>

¹ The first edition reads “ ורחל ה' ”, using the letter *heh* for its Gematria value of five. Curiously, Rabbi Yaakov ben Asher (Cologne, 1270 – Toledo, Spain c. 1340) (“Ba'al Ha-Turim”) noted in his commentary on Torah, at Gen. 30:3, that Rachel was the only matriarch that lacked the letter *heh* in her name [the *heh* being significant as being two of the four letters of the Tetragrammaton].

² Gen. 29:9.

³ Gen. 29:17.

⁴ Gen. 29:31.

⁵ Gen. 31:34.

⁶ Gen. 33:7.

⁷ Jer. 31:14.

⁸ The term “from beginning to end” appears in numerous places in the Talmud and Jerusalem Talmud.

came with the flock,”⁹ etc., that is “[she] came with the flock of her father,”¹⁰ as it says “for you, My flock, flock that I tend, are men.”¹¹ “For she was a shepherdess,”¹² that is to say, that she shepherded us “in the choicest part of the land,”¹³ and then her name was “known in the gates”¹⁴ and she was praised and glorified, that we built the Temple and the L-rd was with them “for fame and splendor and praise.”¹⁵

וְנָהוּ וְרַחֵל הַיְתִימָה יִפְתַּח־תְּאֵר וַיִּפְתַּח מְרָאָהּ, "יִפְתַּח־תְּאֵר" לַהֲקַב"הּ "וַיִּפְתַּח מְרָאָהּ" לְאוֹמוֹת הָעוֹלָם.

This is the meaning of [2] “but Rachel was of beautiful form and fair to look upon”: [She was] “of beautiful form” to the Holy One, Blessed be He, “and fair to look upon” to the nations of the world.

וּמָה עָשָׂה לָהּ הַקַּב"ה? "וַיִּפְתַּח אֶת־רַחֵמֶיהָ וְרַחֵל עָקְרָה", כִּדְאָמְרֵינוּ בַּגְּמָרָא "רַבִּי עָקְרָה לֹא יִלְדָה", מִשּׁוּם דְּלֹא יִלְדָה — רַבִּי? אֵלֶּא "רַבִּי" וְכֹי' שְׁלֹא יִלְדָה בְּנִים לְגִיּוֹנִים וְכֹי', וְאִף כֵּן אָמַר הַכְּתוּב שֶׁפְּתַח רַחֵם הַנְּקֻרִית לְהוֹלִיד בְּנִים לְגִיּוֹנִים "וְרַחֵל עָקְרָה" מִלְּהוֹלִיד בְּנִים כְּאֵלוֹ לְגִיּוֹנִים.

And what did the Holy One, Blessed be He, do to her? [3] “And he opened [Leah’s] womb; but Rachel was barren,” as it is said in the Gemara (Berachot page 10a):

A certain heretic said to Berurya [a brilliant woman who was the daughter of Rabbi Chananyah ben Teradyon and who was married to Rabbi Meir], “[Scripture says:] ‘**Shout for joy, barren woman who has not given birth!**’¹⁶ **Because she has not given birth**, she should **sing** and rejoice?”

[Berurya] said: “Fool! Go to the end of the verse, where it is written: ‘For the children of the desolate shall be more numerous than the children of the married wife, said the L-rd.’ **Rather**, what [is the meaning of]: ‘**Shout for joy, barren woman who has not given birth?**’ [It means:] Sing congregation of Israel, which is like a barren woman **who did not give birth to children who are [destined] for Gehenna** like you.

- Berachot 10a

⁹ Gen. 29:9.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ezek. 34:31. The first edition incorrectly reads “וַיִּפְתַּח צִיִּי” (from Ezek. 34:17) instead of “וַיִּפְתַּח צִיִּי”. The translator has corrected the Hebrew text here.

¹² Gen. 29:9.

¹³ Gen. 47:11.

¹⁴ Prov. 31:23.

¹⁵ From the Lecha Dodi prayer welcoming the Sabbath, composed by Rabbi Shlomo ha-Levi Alkabetz (c. 1500–1576), a kabbalist in Safed. The text is derived from a phrase in Jer. 13:11, “וְלִשְׁמֹעַ וְלִתְהַלֵּל וְלִתְפַאֶרֶת”, but reverses the last two words.

¹⁶ Isaiah 54:1, “Shout for joy, barren woman who has not given birth! Shout aloud for joy, you who did not travail! For the children of the desolate shall outnumber those of the married wife, said the L-rd.”

And even here, Scripture says that he opened the womb of the non-Jew to give birth to children [destined] for Gehenna, “**but Rachel** was barren” from giving birth to children such as these for Gehenna.

אֲמַנְם כְּשִׁחְטָאוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל וְעַבְדוֹ עֲבוּדָה זָרָה דְהֵיִינוּ "וְרַחֵל לָקְחָה אֶת־הַתְּרַפִּים" אִז נִשְׁמַעְבָּדוּ בְגִלוֹת וְהָיוּ עֲבָדִים, כְּמוֹ שְׁכַתּוּב "וְהִתְמַכְרְתֶם שָׁם לְאִיבֵיךָ לְעַבְדִים וְלִשְׁפָחוֹת", וְזֶהוּ "וְאַחַר נָגַשׁ יוֹסֵף וְרַחֵל וַיִּשְׁמְחוּ."

Indeed, when Israel sinned and engaged in idol worship, which is hinted at by the text, [4] “**and Rachel** had taken the idols,”¹⁷ then they were enslaved in exile and became slaves, as is written, “There you shall offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves,”¹⁸ and this is [the meaning of], [5] “and last, Joseph **and Rachel** came forward and bowed low.”

* * *

¹⁷ We know that Rachel did not take them for the purpose of idolatry, but rather to prevent her father from using them for that purpose. But, as noted earlier in this essay, “Rachel” can be a nickname for the Children of Israel, and thus the phrase can be interpreted here as referring to idol worship on the part of the Jews.

¹⁸ Deut. 28:68.