

This month's study with
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Leah: Our Matriarch of Prayer

Leah is the fourth and final matriarch in the Jewish Bible. Although all the matriarchs are considered the spiritual mothers of Israel, Leah is the biological mother of half the 12 tribes of Israel (eight if you include Gad and Asher, born to Leah's handmaid Zilpah). This is remarkable considering the fact that Leah only became a matriarch because her duplicitous father, Laban, tricked Jacob into marrying her.

Leah started out as a young woman with “*weak eyes*” (Genesis 29:17), and became the wife who was unloved (Genesis 29:31), but ultimately fulfilled her role as a respected and important figure in the development of the nation of Israel. In the book of Ruth, we find the following blessing made upon Ruth before her marriage to Boaz: “*May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the family of Israel*” (Ruth 4:11).

Leah's name means “tired” or “weary.” According to Jewish tradition, Leah was disillusioned with her life. However, her weariness did not cause her to give up. Rather, Leah used her dissatisfaction as a powerful impetus for change. Leah harnessed the power of passionate prayer throughout her life to change her fate, and in so doing, altered the history of all humankind.

With the power of prayer, Leah went from being the unwanted wife to becoming the eternal mother of royalty and priesthood as the mother of both Judah and Levi. Of Judah, Jacob said, “*The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet*” (Genesis 49:10). This statement is verified by God when He promises David, who descended from the tribe of Judah, “*Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever*” (2 Samuel 7:16).

Similarly, regarding the priesthood from the line of Levi, through his descendant Aaron, God told Moses: “*Have Aaron your brother brought to you from among the Israelites, along with his sons Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar*

and Ithamar, so they may serve me as priests” (Exodus 28:1). As we read in the next chapter, this, too, was an eternal command: “*tie sashes on Aaron and his sons. The priesthood is theirs by a lasting ordinance*” (Exodus 29:9).

For this reason, when the Bible calls Leah the “older” sister and Rachel the “younger” sister (Genesis 29:16), the Scripture is also telling us that Leah was the “bigger” sister because her reward was greater than that of Rachel who was “small” in comparison to Leah. While both sisters built the nation of Israel, and both made important spiritual contributions, Leah was the one who produced kings and priests for eternity.

Judah, Levi, Moses, Miriam, Aaron, David, Solomon, and Hezekiah are just some of the momentous biblical figures to come from Leah's line. Indeed, in the Christian Bible, the book of Matthew traces the lineage of Jesus back to Leah's son, Judah (Matthew 1:1-2).

In addition, while Leah felt like a second-class wife for most of her life, it was Leah, and not Rachel, who was buried with Jacob in the Cave of the Patriarchs. At the end of Jacob's life, we read, “*Israel [Jacob] bowed himself on the head of the bed*” (Genesis 47:31, NKJV). According to the *Talmud*, Judaism's Oral Tradition, “*the head of his bed*” is a direct reference to Leah. In death, Jacob acknowledged that Leah, the mother of seven of his children — Leah had one daughter with Jacob, named Dinah (Genesis 30:21) — as the head of his household.

Join me this month as we learn how Leah was able to transform a life of neglect and rejection into a life of purpose and eternal significance through the power of prayer. Leah's example of heartfelt and consistent praying is her legacy to all people of faith. In this *Limmud* study, we will explore how we can model and harness this powerful approach to prayer into our own lives.

Rabbi Eckstein
President and Founder

The sons of Leah: Reuben the firstborn of Jacob, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar and Zebulun.

— Genesis 35:23





Shaping Her Own Destiny

Leah had weak eyes, but Rachel had a lovely figure and was beautiful.

— Genesis 29:17

Our first introduction to the matriarch Leah is a bit odd. After learning about the “love at first sight” encounter between Jacob and Rachel in Genesis 29:10-11, we are told that “*Laban had two daughters; the name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel*” (Genesis 29:16). Our first meeting of Leah is in the shadow of her younger sister, Rachel.

Next we learn, “*Leah had weak eyes, but Rachel had a lovely figure and was beautiful*” (v.17). In comparing the two sisters, Scripture tells us that Rachel was beautiful while Leah had “*weak eyes*.” This, too, seems peculiar. The opposite of beautiful is ugly, not weak eyes. What was Scripture trying to tell us with this physical description?

The *Talmud* teaches us that while Rachel was physically beautiful, Leah’s beauty was hidden inside. According to Jewish teaching, Leah’s eyes were “weak” because of her incessant sobbing, her crying out to God in relentless and passionate prayer because of her intended destiny.

In biblical times, it was common practice for marriages to be arranged between extended family members. We see this when Abraham sent his servant to find his son Isaac a wife among his own relatives (Genesis 24). Jacob himself was sent to Laban’s household to find a wife (Genesis 28:2).

As Laban had two daughters and his sister Rebekah had two sons, the obvious conclusion was that her sons would marry his daughters. Specifically, the elder daughter of Laban, Leah, was intended to marry the elder son of Rebekah, Esau. The younger daughter, Rachel, was intended to marry the younger son of Rebekah, Jacob.

Imagine Leah’s horror when she discovered that her intended marriage partner was an immoral man — a murderer and a thief. (According to Jewish tradition, Esau had murdered Nimrod and stole valuable possessions from him.) How could she wed such a wicked individual? Leah knew that no one could change her destiny for her. The father of the home was the ultimate decision-maker in such matters, and Laban was set on Leah’s marriage to Esau. From all appearances, Leah would be trapped in an unwanted marriage forever.

Yet, Leah also understood that there was one God who controlled everything. Believing there was an all-loving, all-powerful God, Leah did the only thing she could do — she poured out her heart before God with tears and supplication. According to the *Talmud*, she prayed, “May it be Your will that I not fall to the fate of the evil

Esau”. This is why Leah’s eyes were “weak.” They were swollen and tender from her tears.

As we know from Scripture, Leah’s prayers were heard and answered as her father contrived to have her marry Jacob in place of her sister, Rachel (see Genesis 29:21-27). And although she must have known that she was not Jacob’s first choice, she was overjoyed to be wed to the righteous brother instead of Esau.

Leah is the first woman in the Bible to teach us about the power of prayer. Centuries later, another woman, Hannah, found herself in a similar situation to Leah. She, too, shared her husband Elkanah with another wife, Penninah, and while Penninah had children, Hannah was childless. Scripture tells us that year after year when Elkanah and his family would go to Shiloh and offer sacrifices to the Lord, Hannah would cry to God about her situation.

We read in 1 Samuel 1:10, “*In her deep anguish Hannah prayed to the LORD, weeping bitterly.*” Following Leah’s example, Hannah poured out her heart to God (v.15). Hannah’s prayer resulted in the birth of Samuel, the prophet. Like Leah, through prayer, Hannah changed her own destiny and that of the nation of Israel.

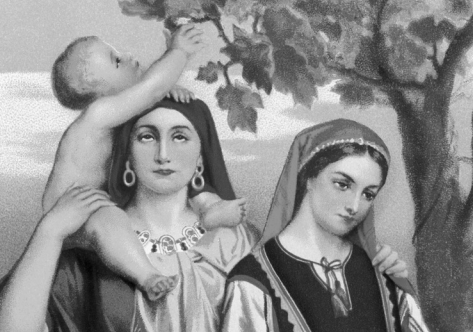
Because of her “*weak eyes*,” Leah takes her rightful place as our matriarch of prayer, the first to model the power of heartfelt prayer. Leah’s life reminds us to pour out our hearts in prayer, too: “*Trust in him at all times, you people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge*” (Psalm 62:8).

Only then, can we, too, can change the destiny of our lives and our world.

think about it...

1. If you could change one thing about your life, what would it be? If you could change one thing about the world, what would it be? Keep a prayer journal of how you are praying for those things daily.
2. In the Jewish tradition, prayer is often compared to a bow and arrow – the deeper the prayer comes from inside us, the further it “shoots” toward heaven. How does knowing this affect your prayers?
3. In what ways has Leah’s story inspired you? What lessons from her life might you share with others?

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He Hears Our Prayers

When the LORD saw that Leah was not loved, he enabled her to conceive, but Rachel remained childless.

— Genesis 29:31

As the story of Rachel and Leah unfolds, it becomes clear that both sisters struggled with a persistent difficulty in their lives, but each one struggled with very different challenges. Scripture tells us: “*When the LORD saw that Leah was not loved, he enabled her to conceive, but Rachel remained childless.*” Rachel enjoyed the love of Jacob, but like Sarah and Rebekah before her, endured the pain of being childless and the longing for what she did not have. Leah, on the other hand, was blessed with multiple children, but never had Jacob’s love, and thus, longed for his affection.

Leah hoped that bearing children would win Jacob’s heart, and indeed the first three names that she chose for her children reflected that aspiration. How Leah must have prayed and prayed to have children! The names of the first three affirm that God was aware of her suffering and had answered her prayers.

Leah chose Reuben (*Re’uven*) for the name of her firstborn: “*It is because the LORD has seen (ra’ah) my misery (b’anyi). Surely my husband will love me now*” (v.32). God had given Leah a son; she was now the mother of Jacob’s child. She was confident that this would cement her relationship with Jacob and raise her status in the home. However, although Leah bore Jacob’s son, he was unmoved.

Leah’s second son was named Simeon (*Shimon*), “*Because the LORD heard (shamah) that I am not loved, he gave me this one too*” (v.33). Once again, Leah affirmed that God had heard her prayers and answered them with another son. Now that she had given Jacob two sons, she was certain he would love her. Yet, Jacob remained aloof, and Leah was alone much of the time.

Leah called her third son Levi (*Layvi*) in hopes that “*Now at last my husband will become attached (yilaveh) to me, because I have borne him three sons*” (v.34). This time Leah had no doubt that God had answered her prayer to have children and to have Jacob more to herself. As a father of three, certainly Jacob would have to spend more time with her and with their growing family.

In naming her sons Reuben, Simeon, and Levi, Leah asserted the main foundations of the Jewish faith — that God sees us in our suffering, hears us, cares about us, and will act on our behalf. Indeed, Christian author Liz Curtis Higgs wrote, “For all the hurting Leahs among us—those of us who are ignored by the men in our life, who feel unloved by a father, boyfriend, husband, or son—here’s a word of

hope: You are indeed loved, and your suffering hasn’t gone unnoticed.”

Years later, when Leah’s descendants were enslaved in Egypt, we read, “*The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out... God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant ... So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them*” (Exodus 2:23-25). As the twelve tribes became a nation, these foundational ideas played a critical role in the Exodus story and the forming of the nation of Israel.

King David, a descendant from the tribe of Judah, expressed his confidence that God saw him and heard him at all times. In Psalm 18:6 David wrote, “*In my distress I called to the LORD; I cried to my God for help. From his temple he heard my voice; my cry came before him, into his ears.*” In Psalm 33:13-14, David affirmed, “*From heaven the LORD looks down and sees all mankind; from his dwelling place he watches all who live on earth.*”

Knowing that God saw, heard, and cared for him gave David the strength to overcome his many challenges – just as his ancestor Leah drew strength from her own prayers. And just as we, people of faith, do today.

apply it...

- 1. PRAY FOR CHANGE.** When we know that God can do anything, we can pray for anything. Don’t be satisfied with how things look right now. Pray to God for a better future. (Nehemiah 1:1-11; Acts 8:14-15)
- 2. POUR OUT YOUR HEART.** Talk to God as if He is your best friend. Tell Him about your challenges, your concerns, and your feelings. Prayer from the heart is the most powerful prayer of all. (1 Samuel 1:10; Mark 14:32-34)
- 3. COUNT YOUR MIRACLES.** How many miracles can you find in one day? When we open our eyes to everyday miracles, we appreciate God’s hand in our lives, at all times. (1 Chronicles 16:12; James 1:17)
- 4. KNOW THAT YOU ARE LOVED.** As we face challenges and difficulties in our lives, it’s easy to feel abandoned and alone. Never forget that God loves us more than we can ever know. (Deuteronomy 31:6; Hebrews 13:5)
- 5. PRAISE GOD.** When we take the time to thank God, we demonstrate that we appreciate the source of our blessings. (Psalm 34:1; 1 Thessalonians 5:18)



A Model of Thanksgiving

She conceived again, and when she gave birth to a son she said, “This time I will praise the LORD.” So she named him Judah. Then she stopped having children.

— Genesis 29:35

When Leah gave birth to her fourth son, she chose a name that reflected her gratitude to God. Leah named her fourth son Judah (*Yehudah*), declaring “*This time I will praise (odeh) the LORD.*”

The name Judah comes from the Hebrew word *hoda’a*, which means to thank or give praise. Instead of focusing on what was lacking in her life as she did with her first three sons, in naming her fourth son “praise,” Leah chose to focus on God’s goodness that she enjoyed in her life.

According to the *Talmud*, the Jewish Oral Tradition, Leah is considered the first human being to praise God. That statement should give us pause. Surely, Adam gave praised God when he was given another chance after he sinned in the Garden of Eden. Surely, Noah praised God after he and his family were saved from the flood. Abraham and Sarah surely praised God for the incredible miracle of a son in their waning years. The list goes on and on.

So why is that distinction made in Leah’s case? In all other incidents of thanksgiving to God, gratitude was expressed for an unusual occurrence, something miraculous in nature. Leah is the first to thank and praise God for *everyday* miracles, those things that people take for granted because they are common and expected.

Leah was the first to recognize that bringing a child into the world was no less miraculous than the splitting of the sea in the time of Moses. Leah understood that everything in life was a product of God’s intervention, and she praised Him for even the ordinary things.

Leah’s example is a model for us as well. It’s so easy to get caught up in daily life and miss the extraordinary things that happen each day – the sunrise, the stars at night, a dear friendship, the beauty of children’s laughter, or the ability to eat a satisfying meal with family. God’s miracles are everywhere.

Leah was rewarded for praising God. Leah’s son, Judah and his descendants, figure prominently in both the Jewish and Christian tradition. At the end of Jacob’s life, he pronounced the following blessing upon Judah: “*You are he whom your brothers shall praise; Your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; Your father’s children shall bow down before you*” (Genesis 49:8, NKJV).

A royal scepter of kingship was established in Judah’s family line (Genesis 49:10). Israel’s greatest king, David, was a descendant from the tribe of Judah. In the Christian Bible, Jesus’ lineage is traced to “*Jacob the father of Judah*

and his brothers” (Matthew 1:2).

Additionally, Judaism views praise and thanksgiving as essential components of prayer. Ultimately, prayer is about connecting with God. At times, this can take the form of requests, and Leah certainly engaged in those prayers as we saw earlier in our study. However, it is also necessary to praise God so that we can appreciate Who is responsible for the many blessings in our lives.

We find this call to give thanks to God repeated throughout both the Jewish and Christian Bibles. David wrote in Psalm 34:1, “*I will extol the LORD at all times; his praise will always be on my lips.*” In instructing the church in Ephesus, Paul wrote, “*Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving*” (Ephesians 5:4). (See also Job 1:21; Psalm 100:1; Ephesians 5:20, 1 Thessalonians 5:18).

It is critical to thank God by recognizing the all-encompassing role that He plays in every aspect of our lives. Thanksgiving is a way to strengthen our bond with God. Leah had already connected with God through the hardships in her life. When Judah was born, she experienced God in a new way through her blessings.

I recite the following special prayer of praise and gratitude, three times a day, every single day: “We give thanks to You, our God and the God of our fathers . . . our rock . . . our Protector and Saviour . . . Your miracles are with us every day and Your wonders and Your goodness are at all times.”

When I reflect on the miracles that we experience every single day, I continue Leah’s legacy of prayer and praise. And every single day, I thank God and praise Him for the miracle of Christians who love Israel and the Jewish people.

think about it... CONTINUED

4. God sees our suffering – and He also sees any suffering we cause others. Knowing this, how might that change the way you interact with the people in your life?
5. Thanksgiving and praise to God are part of the Jewish prayer service three times a day, every day. How might you incorporate thanksgiving and praise to God more routinely into your life?