VAYETZE: Rachel’s Segula for Having Children

Rachel was Yaakov’s beloved wife, and she had no children. Her sister Leah already had four: Reuven, Shimon, Levi and Yehuda. Rachel said to Yaakov: “Give me children, or else I will die” (Bereshit 30:1).

One day, during the wheat harvest, Reuven came back from the field with some plants called dudaim and brought them to his mother. According to Radak, Reuven was about seven years old. A little boy bringing flowers to his mom.

Rachel saw them and asked Leah for them. The sisters made a deal: Rachel would keep the dudaim, and in exchange Leah would spend that night with Yaakov.

What were the dudaim?

The *dudaim* are mandrakes. The root of this plant looks like a small human body (like a fetus). That is why, since ancient times, people believed it helped women get pregnant. This is the plant Reuven brought home from the field. And this was its reputation.

It is the first “segula” in the Torah. Radak explains why Rachel wanted the dudaim: □□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□ □□□□ □□□□□□□□ □□□□□, “she thought that what people said was true.”

And he explains that it was not. He points out the irony: Rachel kept the dudaim and did not get pregnant. Leah gave them away and got pregnant. The Torah tells us why:

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“And God listened to Leah, and she conceived and bore Yaakov a

fifth son” (30:17).

“Listened” means that Leah had prayed. According to Radak, the Torah counts Leah’s sons, the fifth and the sixth, to show that through her Tefila she merited being the mother of half the tribes of Israel.

Rachel’s son

Years went by. Leah had Yissachar, Zevulun and Dina. Rachel still had no children. When she finally conceived, the Torah says nothing about plants:

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“And God remembered Rachel, and God listened to her, and He opened her womb” (30:22).

Radak explains that HaShem heard all the Tefilot Rachel had prayed during those years. There was no shortcut. Yosef was born through Tefila.

The red string

Today, thousands of years later, many people are still looking for something like the dudaim. One of the best-known examples is the red string. It is wound seven times around Rachel’s Tomb in Bet Lechem, cut into pieces and worn on the wrist. Some wear it against the *ayin hara*, others as a *segula* to have children.

One of the oldest sources that mentions tying a red string is the Tosefta (Shabbat 7:1). So the red string does have a precedent in Talmudic literature! But guess what? It appears in a list of superstitious practices of the pagan nations (*Darkhe HaEmori*).

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“One who ties a red string on his finger… this is one of the ways of the Amorites.”

The irony is hard to miss. People look for a segula to have children at the tomb of Rachel, the very woman whose story teaches that the segula did not work.

Tefila

People who look for “segulot” are not fools. They are desperate. They are suffering, just as Rachel was suffering, which is why she asked her sister for the dudaim. When you want something desperately, you look for something concrete to hold on to: a plant, a string, a list of names.

A “segula” promises results without having to stand before HaShem. Tefila demands more. You have to speak, ask, ask again, and accept that the answer may take years.

The *dudaim* withered in Rachel’s tent. The children came through Tefila.