

## We Are One

By Rabbi Joshua (integratively known as The Hoffer) Hoffman

The nineteenth century Orthodox Jewish historian, Rabbi Zev Yavetz, whose 14 - volume work *Toldos Yisroel* remains the most comprehensive work on Jewish history written from an Orthodox viewpoint, once wrote an essay outlining his approach and the central thesis in that work. He wrote that the underlying theme of Jewish history, running as a thread throughout the centuries and millennia, is that of the unity of the Jewish people. Although the Jews have interacted with and contributed to the welfare of their host nations throughout the various exiles they have endured, they retained their essential unity, which set them off from the other nations and enabled them to endure (for a discussion of R.Yavetz's essay, see the Hebrew journal *Chatted*, volume 20, 1981). I believe that parshas Vayeitzei sets the scene for the creation of that unity which has accompanied us throughout this long trek.

As parshas Vayeitzei begins, Yaakov is fleeing from his brother Eisav, who is bent on killing him, and on his way to the house of Lavan, where he has been sent to find a wife and start his family. Before he leaves the land of Canaan, he stops to pray at the site of the future Temple, as the rabbis have explained. He then takes stones from that place, goes to sleep, and has a prophetic dream. He dreams of a ladder reaching from the earth till the heaven, with God standing above it. God tells Yaakov that He has given the land to him and to his descendants afterward. The midrash says, that in this dream, the twelve stones that Yaakov had placed around his head coalesced into one. The message was that he was about to embark on his mission of raising a family of twelve sons who would unite as one. It is significant that it was in connection with this vision of the stones uniting that God informed Yaakov of His gift of the Holy Land. The Zohar in parshas Emor says that the Jewish people is truly united only in the Eretz Yisroel, as is implied in the verse, "and who is like Your people Yisroel, one nation in the land." (Shmuel 2, 7 : 23). Rashi cites the midrash that when God promised the land to Yaakov and his descendants, He folded the entire land into a package four cubits in size, and placed it underneath Yaakov. I believe this midrash is symbolic of the idea that in order for Yaakov to unify the family that he would create, their connection to the Holy Land must always be born in mind. Armed with this message, Yaakov went on his journey, leaving the Holy land and going to the house of Lavan.

Yaakov ultimately spent twenty years in the house of Lavan, marrying his two daughters, Rachel and Leah, as well as taking their maidservants, Zilpah and Bilhah, and raising his family. The Zohar tells us that Rachel and Leah represented two different approaches to the world, both of which were necessary for the creation of the Jewish people. Rachel, who is described in the Torah as having outward beauty, represented the 'almah deisgalia' - the revealed world, while Leah represented the 'alma deiskasia' - the hidden world. In his work *Oros HaKodesh*, Rabbi Avraham Yitzchok HaKohen Kook writes that these two approaches played themselves out in Jewish history through Rachel's son Yosef and his descendants, and Leah's son Yehudah and his descendants. Elsewhere he explains that the approach of Yosef was to be involved with the outside world and endeavor to spread holiness through that involvement. The approach of Yehudah, on the other hand, was to be totally dedicated to and involved in the holy, and to spread holiness in the world in

that way.

As Yaakov's family developed, there was a tension between the two different approaches toward spreading holiness in the world. We read, for example, that after Leah has given birth to four children and Rachel is still barren, the Torah tells us that Rachel was jealous of Leah and demanded children from Yaakov. Although the rabbis tell us that Rachel was jealous of the good deeds of Leah, and that she used this jealousy as a spur to have children, still, on an ideal level, it is better that there should be no jealousy at all between people. Rav Kook elaborates on this point in his ethical work Musar Avicha, in relation to the statement of the rabbis which actually has halachic ramifications - that 'jealousy among scholars increases wisdom'. Rav Kook explains that this statement is not an endorsement of such jealousy, but, rather, an acknowledgment that, unlike other types of jealousy, this type does have some positive effect. Still, on an absolute level, even such jealousy is not desirable. A similar idea can be found in the writings of Rabbi Avraham Yaffan, and traces itself back to the medieval authority Rabbeinu Yonah. Ultimately, writes Rav Kook, some special souls will appear, within whom the two approaches are harmoniously united, applying each one as needed.

The harmonious union of Rachel and Leah is represented, I believe, by the selfless act of Rachel in giving to Leah, on her wedding night, the signs that she and Yaakov had established in order to avoid a switching of the sisters. After Rachel finally gives birth to her first son, Yosef, Yaakov decides that it is time to leave Lavan's house and return to the Holy Land. Rashi cites a midrash that Yosef was Eisav's nemesis, and that once he was born, Yaakov was able to return home. Another midrash, not cited by Rashi, relates that Yaakov had a vision that Eisav would only fall at the hands of a descendant of Rachel. Rabbi Mordechai Rogov explains in his commentary Ateres Mordechai, that in order to overcome Eisav, the Jewish people must be united. In fact, when Yaakov and his family later descend into Egypt, the company of seventy people they constitute are referred to in the Torah as 'shivim nefesh' - seventy souls - using however the singular form for the word 'soul'. Rashi - citing a midrash - explains that they were all united by the fact that they served one God. Eisav's household, on the other hand, is referred to in the plural - as souls - because they had no such unity. Rabbi Rogov writes that this unifying factor had to come from Rachel, who showed such devotion to her sister Leah, although she was her rival for the affection of Yaakov. When she delivered Yosef, Yaakov was ready to return with his family to the land of Canaan, where, as the Zohar says, the nation is truly united.

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