



The Courage of the Matriarchs Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah (or should it be Leah and Rachel?)

The Jewish people continuing to exist even today is nothing less than a miracle. We have survived so much, including many despots who have committed their lives to annihilating us (Pharaoh, Haman, Antiochus, Herod, Hitler, etc.). And if we go back into the stories of our Matriarchs, three of them – Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel – all might have signaled the end of the line for the Jewish people because at some time in their lives each of them was barren and unable to have children.

Leah, on the other hand, was quite fertile. Our Torah reports that she was the mother of six sons and one daughter. And yet we are left with an impression that perhaps she was not a content person, despite her being what is called in modern Israeli Hebrew ‘ברוכת ילדים’, ‘blessed with children.’

Please study the sections of the book of Breisheet (Genesis) which share with the reader/listener the thoughts and feelings of the barren and blessed women. Have in mind as you read these sections the one compelling question: Who of these women had the most courage or resilience? We will convene after Hevruta time and have a discussion surrounding that question as well as a few more points to consider.

Genesis 16:1-6 (Sarah)

1. Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar. 2. And Sarai said to Abram, "Look, the LORD has kept me from bearing. Consort with my maid; perhaps I shall have a son through her." And Abram heeded Sarai's request. 3. So Sarai, Abram's wife, took her maid, Hagar the Egyptian—after Abram had dwelt in the land of Canaan ten years—and gave her to her husband Abram as concubine. 4. He cohabited with Hagar and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was lowered in her esteem. 5. And Sarai said to Abram, "The wrong done me is your fault! I myself put my maid in your bosom; now that	א. וְשָׂרַי אִשְׁתֹּ אַבְרָם לֹא יָלְדָה לוֹ וְלֵהָ שִׁפְחָה מִצְרִית וּשְׁמָהּ הָגָר: ב. וּתְאֹמֶר שָׂרַי אֶל-אַבְרָם הִנֵּה-נָא עֲצָרְנִי יְהוָה מִלָּדֶת בֶּן-נָא אֶל-שִׁפְחָתִי אוּלַי אֲבִנָּה מִמֶּנָּה וַיִּשְׁמַע אַבְרָם לְקוֹל שָׂרַי: ג. וַתִּקַּח שָׂרַי אִשְׁתֹּ אַבְרָם אֶת-הָגָר הַמִּצְרִית שִׁפְחָתָה מִקֶּץ עֶשֶׂר שָׁנִים לְשִׁבְתֹּ אַבְרָם בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַתִּתֵּן אֹתָהּ לְאַבְרָם אִישָׁהּ לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה: ד. וַיָּבֹא אֶל-הָגָר וַתְּהַר וַתֵּלֶד כִּי הָרְתָה וַתִּקַּל גְּבִרְתָּהּ בְּעֵינֶיהָ: ה. וּתְאֹמֶר שָׂרַי אֶל-אַבְרָם חֲמָסִי עָלֶיךָ אָנֹכִי נָתַתִּי שִׁפְחָתִי בְּחִיקֶךָ וַתֵּלֶד כִּי הָרְתָה וְאֶקַּל בְּעֵינֶיהָ
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she sees that she is pregnant, I am lowered in her esteem. The LORD decide between you and me!" 6. Abram said to Sarai, "Your maid is in your hands. Deal with her as you think right." Then Sarai treated her harshly, and she ran away from her.	יִשְׁפֹּט יְהוָה בֵּינִי וּבֵינֶיךָ: ו. וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָם אֶל־שָׂרִי הִנֵּה שִׁפְחָתְךָ בְּיָדִי עֲשִׂי־לָהּ הַטּוֹב בְּעֵינֶיךָ וְתַעֲנֶנָּה שָׂרִי וְתִבְרַח מִפָּנֶיךָ:
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Genesis 25: 19-28 (Rebecca)

19. This is the story of Isaac, son of Abraham. Abraham begot Isaac. 20. Isaac was forty years old when he took to wife Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean. 21. Isaac pleaded with the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD responded to his plea, and his wife Rebekah conceived. 22. But the children struggled in her womb, and she said, "If so, why do I exist?" She went to inquire of the LORD, 23. and the LORD answered her, "Two nations are in your womb, Two separate peoples shall issue from your body; One people shall be mightier than the other, And the older shall serve the younger." 24. When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. 25. The first one emerged red, like a hairy mantle all over; so they named him Esau. 26. Then his brother emerged, holding on to the heel of Esau; so they named him Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when they were born. 27. When the boys grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the outdoors; but Jacob was a mild man who stayed in camp. 28. Isaac favored Esau because he had a taste for game; but Rebekah favored Jacob.	יֵט וְאֵלֶּה תוֹלְדֹת יִצְחָק בֶּן־אַבְרָהָם אַבְרָהָם הוֹלִיד אֶת־יִצְחָק: כ. וַיְהִי יִצְחָק בֶּן־אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה בְּקַחְתּוֹ אֶת־רֵבְקָה בַּת־ בְּתוּאֵל הָאֲרָמִי מִפַּדָּן אֲרָם אֲחֹת לָבָן הָאֲרָמִי לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה: כא. וַיַּעֲתֵר יִצְחָק לַיהוָה לִנְכַח אִשְׁתּוֹ כִּי עֲקָרָה הִוא וַיַּעֲתֵר לוֹ יְהוָה וַתֵּהָר רֵבְקָה אִשְׁתּוֹ: כב. וַיִּתְרַצְצוּ הַבָּנִים בְּקִרְבָּהּ וַתֹּאמֶר אִם־לִּי לָמָּה זֶה אֲנֹכִי וַתִּלְדָּ וַתִּדְרֹשׁ אֶת־יְהוָה: כג. וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה לָהּ שְׁנֵי גֵימִם [גוֹיִם] בְּבִטְנֶךָ וּשְׁנֵי לְאֻמִּים מִמֶּעֶיךָ יִפְרְדּוּ וְלֹאִם מְלֹאִם יִאָמְצוּ וְרַב יַעֲבֹד צָעִיר: כד. וַיִּמְלְאוּ יָמֶיהָ לֵלֶדֶת וַהֲגִהָ תוֹמָם בְּבִטְנָהּ: כה. וַיֵּצֵא הָרֹאשׁוֹן אֲדָמוּנִי כָּלֹ כְּאֲדָרֶת שֹׁעָר וַיִּקְרְאוּ שְׁמוֹ עֵשָׂו: כו. וַאֲחֵרֶיכֹ וַיֵּצֵא אֹחִיו וַיְדֹ אַחֲזֵת בְּעֵקֶב עֵשָׂו וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ יַעֲקֹב וַיִּצְחָק בֶּן־שָׁשִׁים שָׁנָה בִּלְדֹת אֲתָם: כז. וַיִּגְדְּלוּ הַנְּעָרִים וַיְהִי עֵשָׂו אִישׁ יָדָע צֹיד אִישׁ שֹׂדֶה וַיַּעֲקֹב אִישׁ תָּם יֹשֵׁב אֹהֶלִים: כח. וַיֹּאֲהֵב יִצְחָק אֶת־עֵשָׂו כִּי־צֹיד בָּפִיו וְרֵבְקָה אֹהֶבֶת אֶת־יַעֲקֹב:
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Genesis 29:31-35 (Leah and Rachel)

<p>31. The LORD saw that Leah was unloved and he opened her womb; but Rachel was barren. 32. Leah conceived and bore a son, and named him Reuben; for she declared, "It means: 'The LORD has seen my affliction'; it also means: 'Now my husband will love me.'" 33. She conceived again and bore a son, and declared, "This is because the LORD heard that I was unloved and has given me this one also"; so she named him Simeon. 34. Again she conceived and bore a son and declared, "This time my husband will become attached to me, for I have borne him three sons." Therefore he was named Levi. 35. She conceived again and bore a son, and declared, "This time I will praise the LORD." Therefore she named him Judah. Then she stopped bearing.</p>	<p>לא. וַיֵּרָא יְהוָה כִּי־שְׂנוּאָה לֵאָה וַיִּפְתַּח אֶת־רַחֲמָהּ וַרְחֵל עֲקָרָה: לב. וַתֵּהָרֵם לֵאָה וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַתִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ רְאוּבֵן כִּי אָמְרָה כִּי רָאָה יְהוָה בְּעֵינָי כִּי עָתָה יֶאֱהָבֵנִי אִישִׁי: לג. וַתֵּהָרֵם עוֹד וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַתֹּאמֶר כִּי־שָׁמַע יְהוָה כִּי־שְׂנוּאָה אָנֹכִי וַיִּתֶּן־לִי גַם־אֶת־זֶה וַתִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ שִׁמְעוֹן: לד. וַתֵּהָרֵם עוֹד וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַתֹּאמֶר עָתָה הִפְעַל יְלֹנָה אִישִׁי אֵלַי כִּי יִלְדָּתִי לוֹ שְׁלֹשָׁה בָנִים עַל־כֵּן קָרָא־שְׁמוֹ לֵוִי: לה. וַתֵּהָרֵם עוֹד וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַתֹּאמֶר הִפְעַל אֹדָה אֶת־יְהוָה עַל־כֵּן קָרָאָה שְׁמוֹ יְהוּדָה וַתַּעֲמֹד מִלֵּדָת: </p>
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Genesis 30:1-5 (Rachel)

<p>1. When Rachel saw that she had borne Jacob no children, she became envious of her sister; and Rachel said to Jacob, "Give me children, or I shall die." 2. Jacob was incensed at Rachel, and said, "Can I take the place of God, who has denied you fruit of the womb?" 3. She said, "Here is my maid Bilhah. Consort with her, that she may bear on my knees and that through her I too may have children." 4. So she gave him her maid Bilhah as concubine, and Jacob cohabited with her. 5. Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a son.</p>	<p>א. וַתֵּרָא רָחֵל כִּי לֹא יִלְדָּה לְיַעֲקֹב וַתִּקְנָא רָחֵל בְּאֲחֹתָהּ וַתֹּאמֶר אֶל־יַעֲקֹב הִבְהִילִי בָנִים וְאִם־אֵין מִתָּה אָנֹכִי: ב. וַיַּחֲרֹאֶף יַעֲקֹב בְּרָחֵל וַיֹּאמֶר הֲתַחַת אֱלֹהִים אָנֹכִי אֲשֶׁר־מִנַּע מִמֶּךָּ פְּרִי־בֶטֶן: ג. וַתֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה אֲמַתִּי בִלְהָה בֹּא אֵלַיָּה וַתֵּלֶד עַל־בְּרָכִי וְאִבְנָה גַם־אֲנֹכִי מִמֶּנָּה: ד. וַתִּתֵּן־לוֹ אֶת־בִּלְהָה שִׁפְחָתָהּ לְאִשָּׁה וַיָּבֹא אֵלַיָּה יַעֲקֹב: ה. וַתֵּהָרֵם בִּלְהָה וַתֵּלֶד לְיַעֲקֹב בֶּן: </p>
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Rachel and Leah are unable to put their competitive side away in favor of establishing peace in the home. As a result, they continued to fight for the love and virility of their husband Jacob. The episode of the mandrakes is an excellent case in point:



Genesis 30:14-17;22-24 (Leah and Rachel)

<p>14. Once, at the time of the wheat harvest, Reuben came upon some mandrakes in the field and brought them to his mother Leah. Rachel said to Leah, "Please give me some of your son's mandrakes." 15. But she said to her, "Was it not enough for you to take away my husband, that you would also take my son's mandrakes?" Rachel replied, "I promise, he shall lie with you tonight, in return for your son's mandrakes." 16. When Jacob came home from the field in the evening, Leah went out to meet him and said, "You are to sleep with me, for I have hired you with my son's mandrakes." And he lay with her that night. 17. God heeded Leah, and she conceived and bore him a fifth son.</p>	<p>יֵד. וַיֵּלֶךְ רְאוּבֵן בְּיָמֵי קְצִיר־חֲטָיִים וַיִּמְצָא דּוֹדָאִים בַּשָּׂדֶה וַיָּבֵא אֹתָם אֶל־לֵאָה אִמּוֹ וַתֹּאמֶר רַחֵל אֶל־לֵאָה תִּנִּינָה לִּי מִדּוֹדָאֵי בְנֶךָ: טו. וַתֹּאמֶר לָהּ הִמָּעֹט קִחְתִּיךְ אֶת־ אִישִׁי וְלָקַחְתְּ גַּם אֶת־דּוֹדָאֵי בְנִי וַתֹּאמֶר רַחֵל לָכֵן יִשְׁכַּב עִמָּךְ הַלַּיְלָה תַּחַת דּוֹדָאֵי בְנֶךָ: טז. וַיָּבֵא יַעֲקֹב מֶרֶה־שָּׂדֶה בָּעֶרְבַּ וַתֵּצֵא לָאָה לִקְרָאתוֹ וַתֹּאמֶר אֵלַי תָּבוֹא כִּי שָׂכַר שְׂכָרְתִּיךְ בְּדּוֹדָאֵי בְנִי וַיִּשְׁכַּב עִמָּה בַּלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה: יז. וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶל־לֵאָה וַתֵּהָר וַתֵּלֶד לְיַעֲקֹב בֶּן חַמִּישִׁי:</p>
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Genesis 30:22-24 (Rachel)

<p>22. Now God remembered Rachel; God heeded her and opened her womb. 23. She conceived and bore a son, and said, "God has taken away my disgrace." 24. So she named him Joseph, which is to say, "May the LORD add another son for me."</p>	<p>כב. וַיִּזְכֹּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת־רַחֵל וַיִּשְׁמַע אֶלֶיהָ אֱלֹהִים וַיִּפְתַּח אֶת־רַחֲמָהּ: כג. וַתֵּהָר וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַתֹּאמֶר אֶסְף אֱלֹהִים אֶת־ חַרְפָּתִי: כד. וַתִּקְרָא אֶת־שְׁמוֹ יוֹסֵף לֵאמֹר יִסְף יְהוָה לִּי בֶן אַחֵר:</p>
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Questions to Consider:

- Returning to the introductory question: Which of the Matriarchs seems to you to have the most courage? The most resilience? The least courage or resilience?
- For whom does the text want its reader to have the greatest empathy? Leah, Rebecca, Rachel or Sarah? Please bring scriptural proof if you can to support your answers.
- Where are the Patriarchs in these stories? Can you find Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the narrative and share how you feel they handled these times of crisis that were being experienced by the women in their lives?
 - Does the text wish to influence your feelings regarding these men in any particular way? Please elaborate if you can.
- Please rank the four women in terms of 'who had it best' – 1 being the best off and 4 being the worst off.