

Jacob is from Mars, Rachel is from Venus...Some Things Never Change!

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This past Monday night, Mia, Nessa, Ezra and I bundled up and went outside to stand in our driveway and observe a magnificent night sky. It was cold and crisp, the way a good fall night should be, and there wasn't a cloud to be seen in the sky. Just to the left of our basketball hoop just below the tip of the crescent moon were two brilliant heavenly bodies...two bulbs shining more brightly and seemingly much closer than any of the array of stars in the sky. This is what astronomers call a "planetary conjunction," and people since antiquity have tried to interpret either doom or prosperity from these intriguing sites. On Monday night it was Jupiter and Venus sparkling in the sky, and they tell us this won't happen again until November 18, 2052...Mia will be 51, and I'll be 78, and God-willing I'll see it again with my grandchildren or great-grandchildren! But I'm getting ahead of myself...

To prove to you that Torah is everywhere, even though the Torah says *lo bashamayim hi*, that it is not in the heavens, I was thinking about Torah precisely while looking at the heavens...at Jupiter and Venus...really more Venus than Jupiter. I was thinking of that book that John Gray wrote, Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus. The book was a wild bestseller, and it makes a variety of claims about the critical differences between the ways that men and women think; their unique emotional needs; their idiosyncratic approaches to problem solving, self-esteem, and communication. I don't recall why Gray picked those two planets in particular, and I think they may have been random. It's as if to say, men and women are so different, they might as well be from different planets. But, Gray claims, if you understand the opposite sex, then you could experience what amounts to a planetary conjunction—namely, getting along better, communicating more effectively, and enjoying a happier marriage...which hopefully is something you enjoy more than once a half century!

What does all of this have to do with *parashat Vayitzei*? Well, for all of father Jacob's lovey-dovey romance with Rachel, and his chivalrous nearly two decades of servitude to win her hand in marriage from her father Laban--when he finally has married the woman of his dreams, he crashes and burns in a way that makes us readers just cringe. He may be romantic, but when it comes to being a sensitive guy, he just doesn't get it. The episode I am referring to begins in Genesis chapter 30. Similar to her predecessors Sarah and Rebekkah, Rachel finds herself confronted with infertility. To make matters worse, her older sister Leah, also Jacob's wife, is popping out babies like an assembly line...Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah... Rachel experiences this unfettered fertility with great pain and anxiety about her own inability to provide her husband with children. She approaches Jacob exasperated and says: "Give me children, or I shall die!" Jacob is put-off by this challenge and barks back, "Can I take the pace of God, who has denied you the fruit of the womb." Oy vey Jacob...too much time in the hot sun, shepherding Laban's sheep must have accounted for that sorry excuse for empathy! We all know that what he should have said was something like¹:

"My darling Rachel, I love you and adore you, whether you give me children or not."

Or:

"My sweet Rachel, who I have loved for so long, don't tie your ultimate worth to childbearing; you are important and significant in your own right."

Or:

"Rachel, my love, I know this is painful and confusing. Let's take on this challenge together...you have my unconditional support and affection."

But no...Jacob misses the boat...big time. The Torah reports that Rachel supplies Jacob with her maidservant Bilha, with whom Jacob has two more children, Dan and Naphtali. At least they are technically in Rachel's column, even though she didn't actually give birth to them (remember, she *does* name them). Three more children are born to Leah: Issachar, Z'vulun, and Dinah before Rachel herself finally conceives, giving birth to Joseph. But just imagine how this woman, who was the apple of Jacob's eye, is now sidelined, while her older sister, who Jacob admittedly did not love as much as her,

¹ The idea that Jacob could have said so many other, more appropriate and comforting things was inspired by the d'var Torah of Rabbi Haim Ovadia, which appeared in the LA Jewish Journal on December 3, 2008.

becomes the matriarch of the clan. Jacob, it seems, can't seem to come up with the right words to comfort her.

According to Dr. Gray, men like Jacob value themselves through achievement. Men like to solve problems, to fix things. When the problems are too big to solve, men have a clever little switch in their brain that allows them (us!) to turn it off, to think of something else, to move on. Like the crazy basketball hoop that Sari bought for Mia last year. It has a thousand pieces, requires tools I have never even heard of, and had an instruction manual longer than a Dickens novel. This project clearly threatened my manhood, my ability to achieve results, and I promptly forgot about that thing for months, until my stepfather—the alpha male engineer—came to the rescue. A woman's sense of self, says Gray, is derive self through her feeling and the quality of her relationships. Women are known for their intuitiveness, their sixth sense of what others need, and how to give of themselves to help. And while men harbor an inner fear of not being good enough or competent enough to solve problems, women have a deep, dark fear of being unworthy of being loved, cherished, or validated in their feelings.²

John Gray could be Rashi as far as I'm concerned because I feel that his work sheds a whole new light on the desperation of Rachel and the inscrutability of Jacob. Why does he fail to comfort her or support her in the crisis of her infertility...why does he say, 'Hey take it up with God, it's not me who's making this happen to you!'? If I read this according to Gray the answer is that he knows that he can't solve her problem. The Torah tells us they have been intimate, with no result. He can't figure out what else he can possibly do to solve the problem—which, again, is what all males want to do—so he retreats, with aggravation and diffidence.³ Rachel, by claiming that infertility is like death, is begging for reassurance that her husband loves her, even as she fears this predicament makes her unlovable.

² Prewett, Geoffrey. Book Review of Men are From Mars, Women are From Venus, for The Department of Physics, The Ohio State University, 2003

³ This conclusion is inspired by the d'var Torah of Rabbi Haim Ovadia, which appeared in the LA Jewish Journal on December 3, 2008.

There is nothing in the text that brings closure to this episode. It seems to just go away. The Midrash, however, doesn't let Jacob off so easily. The dissention and rivalry between his sons, and the ultimate humiliation of Leah's sons bowing down to Rachel's son, Joseph, in Egypt is understood to be pay back for Jacob's insensitivity. The larger lesson, though, is for this text to remind all of its readers throughout time that men and women communicate differently. And that the more we can learn about each other's unique emotional needs, and what makes us tick, the better positioned we will be to offer the right kinds of support and emotional reinforcement we need. Gray says that there is a certain paradox in marriage...just when we feel safe with our partners, our deepest fears have a chance to rise to the surface. As columnist, author, and radio show host Dennis Prager says: Happiness is attainable only when we control our nature, not when nature controls us.⁴ Had Jacob exerted more control over his male nature to solve every problem or run for the hills, he would have been able to be more empathetic and loving. Had Rachel reined in the superlatives a bit and expressed more clearly her disappointment she may have communicated more effectively. Perhaps she might have seen her self worth as even greater than her ability to produce offspring.

In describing the relationship between us and God, my teacher Rabbi Neil Gillman likened it to Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers who reportedly said, 'When we get it together it's ecstasy, but sometimes, he's on the ceiling and I'm on the floor.' As we do the dance called marriage and partnership, let's all try to remember that men and women alas are not the same. And that the most successful relationships are the ones where both partners labor not to change one another, but to understand one another...this, it seems to me, is what true love really means.

⁴ Prager, Dennis. "Why Are So Many Women Depressed?" Townhall.com, June 24, 2008.