

A Great Silence: The Story of Rachel's Death

By Rav Elchanan Samet

A. THE SILENCE

From the moment Yaakov arrives back in Eretz Yisrael, he is beset by troubles, both while he dwells in Shekhem and when he travels from there to his father in Chevron. But the greatest of all the disasters that befall him during this period is the death of Rachel in childbirth:

(35:16) "And they traveled from Beit-El, and there was a little way left to go before reaching Efrat, and Rachel gave birth and had difficulty in the birth.

(17) And it was, while she was in labor, that the midwife told her: Do not fear, for this too is a son for you.

(18) And it was, as her soul left her (for she died), she called his name Ben-Oni, but his father called him Binyamin.

(19) And Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Efrat, which is Beit-Lechem.

(20) And Yaakov placed a monument upon her grave; this is the pillar of Rachel's grave until today."

Into these five verses, containing fifty-eight words, the Torah squeezes this entire heart-rending event, almost without any direct speech (other than the reassurance of the midwife in verse 17). A great silence envelops this episode – principally because the text refrains from describing Yaakov's emotional response to the death of his beloved wife either indirectly (through a description of his actions) or directly (by quoting his words or prayers directly).

The situation is different in the case of Avraham, whose reaction to the death of his wife, Sarah, in her old age merits a detailed description at the beginning of parashat Chayei Sarah. Unlike Sarah's death, regarding Rachel there is no mention of her husband "coming" to eulogize her and mourn for her, nor are we told that he buried her. In verse 19 we read only that "she was buried," and only at the end of the description does the text reveal that Yaakov placed a monument over her grave.

Of the three forefathers, Yaakov is the one who gives the greatest verbal expression to his emotions. See, for example, the description of Yaakov's reaction to what he believes is the sudden death of his beloved son Yosef (37:33-35). The description contains two extremely emotional utterances, expressing his profound mourning, as well as three different descriptions of prolonged acts of mourning that he performed.

Against this background, Yaakov's silence in our story, and the silence of the narrative itself, is all the more stark. We hear neither a broken-hearted cry nor any description of an act of mourning. What is the meaning of this silence?

B. BURIAL OF RACHEL ON THE WAY – REASON AND SIGNIFICANCE

Why did Yaakov not take Rachel to Chevron, to the family gravesite in Me'arat Ha-Machpela? This question assumes additional force if we understand the literal text as teaching that Rachel was buried not far from Beit Lechem: surely the distance from Beit Lechem to Chevron was short enough to have made this possible?

Our story brings two considerations pertaining to honor for the deceased into conflict: on the one hand, the desire to bury the person in the family gravesite; on the other hand, the need to bury as quickly as possible after death in order to maintain the honor of the corpse. In this conflict, priority must be given to the second consideration. In a hot country like Canaan, the dead were buried at the place where they died.

In this regard, the Halakha is even more strict in the case of a woman than in the case of a man – and especially regarding a woman after childbirth. We learn in the Mishna ([Mo'ed Katan 3:8](#)):

"Women's [biers] are never to be left [in the street], out of honor."

In the Gemara ([Mo'ed Katan 27b-28a](#)), the Amoraim debate which women are referred to in the Mishna:

"Nehardei said: They did not teach (the above) except with regard to a woman after childbirth, but other women may be left (in the street).

Rabbi Eliezer says: Even other women (may not be left), as it is written ([Bemidbar 20:1](#)), 'And Miriam died there and she was buried there' – the (place of) burial is close to the (place of) death."

This teaching by R. Eliezer is brought in [Bereishit Rabba \(82:9\)](#) concerning the death of Rachel:

"And Rachel died and she was buried' – the (place of) burial is close to the (place of) death."

Hence we deduce that Rachel's honor – "the honor of the deceased" – is what necessitated her immediate burial, right after her death and in the place where she died. And this, again, emphasizes how easily things could have been different: only a single day's journey separates the place of Rachel's death, which also became her burial place, from Me'arat Ha-Machpela – the family burial site.

In order to understand properly the significance of Rachel's burial on the way to Efrat, we must go back to parashat Chayei Sarah. The description of Avraham's efforts to purchase a burial ground in order to bury Sarah, his wife, lays the foundation (through contrast) for an understanding of the harsh significance embodied in the burial of Rachel in our parasha.

At the time of the patriarchs, Canaanite property owners buried their dead in family burial caves within their own properties, in which the bones of that family would be gathered over several generations. There were also individuals buried far from inhabited areas: these were members of nomadic, landless tribes, who buried their dead at whatever time and in whichever place a family member would die.

Had Avraham so wished, he could have buried Sarah in such a "nomadic" grave, in the open area on the outskirts of Chevron, with no need to conduct negotiations with the children of Chet or to pay four hundred shekalim for a gravesite. But he went to all this effort to purchase a gravesite in order to give Sarah a respectable burial, worthy of the wife of the man to whom God promised the entire land.

The circumstances of Rachel's death, as explained above, forced Yaakov to bury her in a nomad's grave at the side of the road, thereby awarding her burial a lower status than that given to his grandmother Sarah.

In the last verse describing Rachel's death and burial, we read of Yaakov's efforts to "make up" for this: "And Yaakov placed a monument over her grave..." (20). Yaakov seeks thereby to enhance the importance of Rachel's grave, so that it should not be like a regular nomadic grave, to which no attention is paid. The text confirms that Yaakov's efforts were successful: "... that is the pillar of Rachel's grave UNTIL TODAY."

But there was another deficiency related to Rachel's burial that Yaakov was unable to repair, not even by means of this monument. In my shiur on Chayei Sarah, I noted that the completion of the act of Sarah's burial is to be found only in the description of Avraham's own burial at her side (25:7-10). Rachel's story ends differently, for Yaakov was buried – in accordance with his will – in the grave of his fathers, in Me'arat Ha-Machpela.

C. BINYAMIN

The silence of Yaakov at the time of Rachel's death, and the silence of the narrative itself, remain unexplained. This silence seems to cover up a great perplexity, an emotional ambivalence resulting from an internal contradiction.

We noted above that the text makes no mention of Yaakov's emotional reaction to the death of his wife - not even indirectly, by describing his actions. This is not quite accurate. Two of Yaakov's actions are actually described. The first is, "And Yaakov placed a monument over her grave" – an act whose significance was explained above as an attempt to make up for the necessity of burying her at the roadside.

Yaakov's other reaction, as described in the text, is of great importance to our question:

(18) "And it was, as her soul left her (for she died), that she called his name Ben-Oni, BUT HIS FATHER CALLED HIM BINYAMIN."

Calling her son "Ben-Oni" was the last act in Rachel's life; calling him "Binyamin" was the first action that Yaakov took after Rachel's death. These few brief words – "But his called him Binyamin" – the story with a significance that we have so far ignored: it is, in fact, the story of a birth. The focus on Rachel's bitter fate – the dark side of the event – makes us forget that there is also a brighter side: this birth added to the family a healthy son in Yaakov's old age – the twelfth son. This is not a conclusion to be taken for granted: in a difficult birth, in which the mother loses her life, it is not uncommon for the fetus, too, to die before reaching the light of day.

Perhaps the words of the midwife – "Do not fear, for this, too, is a son for you" – should be interpreted differently than does the Rashbam. Rashbam imagines the midwife's words as continuing thus:

"When you prayed to God, "May God add for me another son," HE DID NOT WISH FOR YOU TO DIE, but rather accepted your prayer.' She meant to reassure her."

But the midwife's intention may have been different: "Do not fear YOUR APPROACHING DEATH – for this, too, is a son for you; he will emerge safe and healthy into the world, as you prayed." Indeed, she "meant to reassure her," but not by trying to cover up the fact of her impending death. Rather, she means to highlight the comfort contained within this tragic episode. It is through Rachel's blood – the blood of childbirth and her lifeblood, slowly ebbing away – that her son will live.

A similar intention is reflected in the words of the "women standing by" the wife of Pinchas, in a similar situation:

(I [Shemuel 4:20](#)) "AND AT THE TIME OF HER DEATH the women standing about her spoke: Do not fear, for you have given birth to a son!"

But in both instances it becomes clear that, from the mother's point of view, this is no consolation: she has given birth to a son, but she will not be his mother. Therefore Pinchas's wife "did not answer, nor did her heart take notice" of the words of these women; she calls the child "Ikavod" (honor is gone). Rachel, too, manages – "as her soul is leaving her" – to name her child "Ben-Oni" ("son of my affliction"), a name reflecting her bitterness of spirit and her great distress.

But the truth is that although the idea of a woman dying in childbirth is heartrending, and despite the profound sadness in the birth of a child who will never know his mother, the birth of a healthy baby is nevertheless always positive, signifying new, fresh life and growth. On the practical level, too, the attention of those present is divided between the need to take care of the burial of the mother and the immediate need to care for her child.

The ambivalence characterizing an event such as that described in our parasha finds expression in Halakha. In the Shulhan Arukh ([Orach Chaim 223:1](#)), R. Yosef Karo writes (following a beraita in [Berakhot 59b](#)):

"If one's wife gives birth to a son, he recites the blessing 'ha-tov ve-ha-metiv,' and she must also recite it."

This follows the halakhic principle (formulated earlier on in the Shulhan Arukh, 222:1) that "for good tidings that are good only for the person himself, he recites the blessing 'she-hechyanu;' if they are good also for others, he recites 'ha-tov ve-ha-metiv.'" The Rema adds as follows:

"And if his wife died in childbirth, he recites the blessing 'she-hechyanu,' for there is no benefit here for others."

The Mishna Berura comments on the Rema:

"But (in the tragic event of his wife's death in childbirth) he must first recite the blessing 'Dayan ha-emet' for her passing...."

This is a halakhic illumination of Yaakov's situation: he must recite "Dayan ha-emet" for the death of his beloved wife Rachel, immediately followed by the blessing of "she-hechyanu" for the birth of his son. Calling his son "Binyamin" is Yaakov's blessing of "she-hechyanu," as will be explained below.

Thus far we have described the essential ambivalence characterizing the event of a birth where the mother dies but the infant is born alive. However, this does not address the uniqueness of our story. The birth of Binyamin was unlike the birth of Yaakov's other sons. All of his other sons were born within a very short period of time, while he lived in Charan. Many years have passed since then (his last six years in Charan, and two more years since his return to Canaan), without any further children being born into the family. And now Rachel falls pregnant and is about to give birth to the "son of his old age," a

brother to Yosef, who will be the last of his sons, after a long break. Most importantly, this son will be the only one born in Canaan. The anticipated birth arouses great hopes for the growth and expansion of Yaakov's household in their destined land, as promised to him by God.

These hopes are not dashed by the actual birth – after all, Binyamin is born alive and healthy – but they are tinged with great sorrow for the death of his mother. The mourning and joy intermingled, the life that has ended, sprouting a new life coming into the world – these create a complex psychological reaction, which finds expression in silence.

The only crack through which we are able to peek into this complexity inside Yaakov is the name he gives to his son – Binyamin. What is the meaning of this name, and how does it relate to the name given to the same child by Rachel? Ramban proposes a surprising hypothesis concerning this exchange of names:

"It seems to me that his mother called him 'Ben-Oni,' meaning to say, 'Son of my mourning'... but his father converted the 'Oni' to mean 'my strength,' as in, 'My power and the beginning of my strength (oni)' ([Bereishit 49:3](#))... Therefore he calls him Binyamin, or 'Son of strength,' for the right side (yamin) is the seat of might and success... HE WANTED TO CALL HIM BY THE NAME GIVEN TO HIM BY HIS MOTHER, for so it was with all his sons: they were called by the names given to them by their mothers. SO HE CONVERTED IT INTO GOODNESS AND STRENGTH."

All the complexity of the situation, and all of Yaakov's inner contradictions, are symbolized in this name according to the Ramban. On the one hand, the name expressed Yaakov's desire not to show disrespect to Rachel and her right to give a name to her son, just as his wives gave names to all their other sons. On the other hand, the name given by Rachel expresses her mourning, while Yaakov relates to the birth of this son with hope and joy. Although the name selected by Rachel can also be understood in a positive way – since "on" in the Torah means both mourning and power – the inspiration for Rachel's selection will always bring to mind the negative connotation, and therefore Yaakov ensures the positive significance of the name by "converting it into good." The dual significance in the name "Ben-Oni," and its dual formulation – reflecting Rachel's and Yaakov's respective intentions – is remarkably representative of the situation as a whole.

Despite all this, Rashi's explanation for the name "Binyamin" seems simpler:

"It seems to me that, since he alone (of all the sons) was born in Canaan, which is to the south when a person comes from Aram Naharayim... Binyamin means 'son of the south,' echoing the expression, 'North and yamin (south) – You created them' ([Tehillim 89:13](#))."

According to Rashi's understanding, the name Binyamin is not a "translation into good" of the name given to him by Rachel. Yaakov, it seems, intended to give him this name even before Binyamin was born and Rachel died. If we venture a daring step further, it is possible that he even suggested this name to Rachel during her pregnancy. Ramban comments that "All of his sons were called by the names given to them by their mothers," and so it is possible that Yaakov did in fact ask Rachel to call the son destined to be born by this name. But when the birth turned out to be so difficult, and Rachel realized that her life was ending, she exchanged the name for another: not "son of the south" – the son born after returning from north of Canaan, but rather the son of Rachel's suffering. "But his father called him" – as he had intended all along – "Binyamin."

The formulation of the text, "She called his name Ben-Oni, but his father called him Binyamin," hints at the contrast between the twonames. If we follow the Ramban's interpretation, we understand this quite clearly: the contrast is between the two meanings of the word "on." But what is the contrast according to the interpretation of Rashi? To Ramban's comment that it was the matriarchs who named the sons in Yaakov's family, we may add further that almost all the reasons for these names turn on their personal battles within the family, and reflect their personal experiences. "Binyamin" is the first name that is given to a son of Yaakov that expresses not his mother's experience, but rather the circumstances of his birth in Canaan. The name selected by Rachel follows the usual pattern of reflecting an event in the life (and death) of the mother – and perhaps here even more powerfully (because of the possessive case: ben oni – son of MY suffering). By giving his son the name "Binyamin," Yaakov makes him the only one of the sons whose name is given by his father, and which expresses a general (rather than personal) message: "God has made expansion for us and we have been fruitful IN THE LAND."

D. TWO MONUMENTS

In this shiur we have attempted to understand Yaakov's response to the death of Rachel and the birth of Binyamin, based on the limitations of a single, brief narrative unit (35:16-20). But in order to understand Yaakov's silence – which, according to our hypothesis, expresses a powerful emotional ambivalence – we must read this section in its context, i.e., as part of the story of his journey from Shekhem to Chevron in chapter 35 as a whole.

The event preceding Rachel's death in this story is God's revelation to Yaakov in Beit El – the second revelation to Yaakov in that same place. He is told, inter alia:

(11) "... be fruitful and multiply!

A nation and a congregation of nations will
come from you

And kings will come out from your loins."

Yaakov's reaction to this second revelation is an action which is likewise performed for the second time:

(14) "AND YAAKOV PLACED A MONUMENT in the place where He had spoken to him..."

From Beit El, Yaakov moves on to the next stop, the place where Rachel goes into labor on the way to Efrat, close to Beit Lechem. As opposed to the divine promise he had received at his previous stop, here he experiences the tragedy of Rachel's death. Yaakov's reaction to this event is described in words that echo his reaction to the revelation in Beit El:

(20) "AND YAAKOV PLACED A MONUMENT over her grave..."

When Yaakov leaves Eretz Yisrael on his way to Charan, we find juxtaposed in his life a wondrous revelation in Beit El – following which he places a stone monument in that place – and the meeting with Rachel at the well, where he has an inkling of the difficulties that will beset his life with her. There, too, we noted the tension between the revelation and the highly symbolic episode that immediately follows it - an event that severely limits the promise in Beit El with regard to his relationship with Rachel. But there, corresponding to the stone monument that Yaakov set up in Beit El, stood the great stone upon the mouth of the well, which Yaakov managed to roll off so that he could draw water for Rachel's flocks. Here, the stone has returned to its place upon the mouth of the well, and has become the monument upon Rachel's grave "until today."

The great difference between these two monuments, and between what stands behind each of them, is likewise a reason for Yaakov's great silence. His torn consciousness will ultimately express itself, decades later, returning to this episode on the way of Efrat, this time quite explicitly:

(48:7) "And I, when I came from Padan, my Rachel died in Canaan on the way, a short distance from where you come to Efrat, and I buried her there on the way of Efrat, which is Beit Lechem."

What does Yaakov mean by this, and how does this shed light on our question? Hopefully we will return to this discussion in parashat Vayechi.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish.)

Visit our website: <http://etzion.org.il/en>