



Jewish Congregation of Marco Island

A CLOSE LOOK AT TORAH

Focus on a question in the weekly portion

November 29, 2025



“Fostering diverse modes of attention to textual details cultivates correlative forms of attention to the world and divine reality”

Michael Fishbane (1943-), *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology*

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מִלֶּדָה הָעוֹלָם,
אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ לְעֶסֶק בְּדַבְּרֵי תוֹרָה:

“Tachometer Torah”



...read down to the red line

Parashat-haShavu'a Stats

Weekly Portion: vaYitzei

Consists of: Genesis 28:10-32:3

Sequence—

in annual Torah cycle: 7th of 54

in Genesis: 7th of 12



A Salient Selection from the Portion -

Genesis 29:30-35

Context: *Genesis, first of the Five Books of the Torah, is an outline of the Creation of the physical universe; a description of the origin of the human family by their respective nations; and an account of Abraham's and Sarah's lineage through their grandson Jacob as the foundation of the Israelite people.*

Content: *having claimed from his father Isaac (through frankly devious means) the first-born right of inheritance he had purchased years earlier from his older twin brother Eisav, Jacob has gone off to The Old Country to find a bride. Infatuated with his beautiful cousin Racheil, Jacob is tricked into first marrying her older sister, Lei'ah... and The Great Baby Derby is off and running.*

29:30] - So [following this second marriage, to the younger sister,] Jacob was intimate with Racheil also— indeed, he loved Racheil more than Lei'ah. And[, as his bride-gift to his uncle,] he went on as a servant for yet another seven years.

29:31] - Now The Eternal One, seeing that Lei'ah was unloved, opened her womb, while **Racheil was infertile**. [29:32] - So **Lei'ah** conceived, and bore a son, whom she named **Re'uvein**— for she declared: “The Eternal One **has seen** my suffering, so that now [that I have borne him an heir] my husband will love me.”

וַיָּבֹא גַם אֶל רָחֵל וַיֵּאָהֱב גַּם אֶת
רָחֵל מִלֵּאָה וַיַּעֲבֹד עִמּוֹ עוֹד שִׁבְעַת
שָׁנִים אַחֲרֹת

וַיֵּרָא יְהוָה כִּי שְׂנוּאָה לָאָה וַיִּפְתַּח
אֶת רַחֲמָהּ וַיֵּרָחַל עֲקָרָהּ וַתַּהַר לָאָה
וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַתִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ רְאוּבֵן כִּי
אָמְרָהּ כִּי רָאָה יְהוָה בְּעֲנִי כִּי עָתָה
יֵאָהֱבֵנִי אִישִׁי

- more over

29:33] - Then **she** conceived again, and bore another son, declaring: “This is because The Eternal One **heard** that I was unloved, He has given me this one also”; so she named him **Shim'on**.

וַתֵּהָר עוד וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַתֹּאמֶר כִּי שָׁמַע יְהוָה כִּי שְׁנוּאָה אָנֹכִי וַיִּתֵּן לִי גַם אֶת זֶה וַתִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ שִׁמְעוֹן

29:34] - Then **she** conceived yet again, and bore another son, declaring: “This time my husband **will become attached** to me, for I have borne him three sons!” Therefore he was named **Levi**.

וַתֵּהָר עוד וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַתֹּאמֶר עֲתָה הַפַּעַם יִלְוֶה אִישִׁי אֵלַי כִּי יִלְדָּתִי לוֹ שְׁלֹשָׁה בָּנִים עַל כֵּן קָרָא שְׁמוֹ לֵוִי

29:35] - Then **she** conceived yet again, and bore yet another son, declaring: “This time **I will praise** The Eternal One,” wherefore she named him **Judah**— **after which she stopped bearing**, and remained, for some time thereafter, as **barren** as her younger sister].

וַתֵּהָר עוד וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַתֹּאמֶר הַפַּעַם אֲוֹדָה אֶת יְהוָה עַל כֵּן קָרָאָה שְׁמוֹ יְהוּדָה וַתַּעֲמֹד מִלֵּדָת

adjective **עֲקָרָה** “barren; infertile” ← verb ע-ק-ר “to uproot”

- A Biblical Motif -

Judges 13:2ff the long-infertile wife of Mano'ach is informed she will birth Samson

I Samuel 1:2 the long-infertile Hannah becomes mother of the prophet Samuel

Isaiah 54:1 Jerusalem, described as an infertile woman, assured of population growth

Job 24:21 a murderer is described as deserving

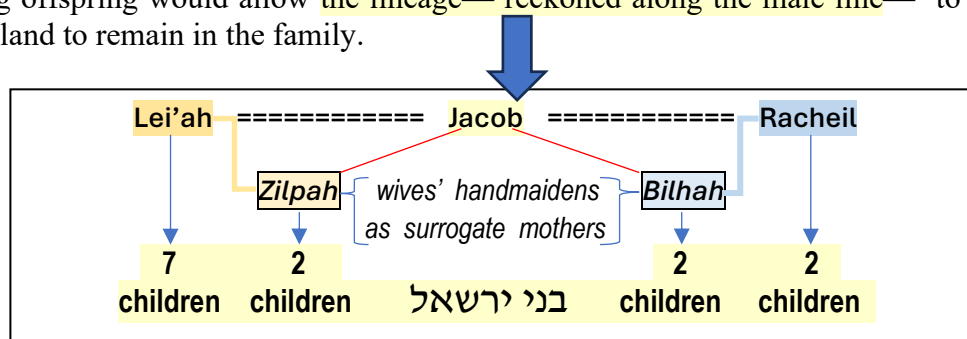
רָעָה עֲקָרָה לֹא תֵלֵד וְאֶלְמָנָה לֹא יִיטִיב
marriage to a barren woman, who bears no child,
and denying any good to his widow.

A1) Genesis 11:30 -	A2) Genesis 25:21 -	A3) Genesis 29:31 -
וַתְּהִי שָׂרַי עֲקָרָה Now Sarai was infertile ; subsequently changed to Sarah – Genesis 17:15 אֵין לָהּ יֶלֶד she had no child.	וַיַּעֲתֵר יִצְחָק לַיהוָה לְנִכְחַ אֲשֶׁתּוֹ Isaac beseeched The Eternal One on behalf of [Rebekah], כִּי עֲקָרָה הָיָה for she was infertile.	וַיִּפְתַּח אֶת רִחְמָהּ [God] opened [Lei'ah's] womb, וְרָחֵל עֲקָרָה while Racheil was infertile .

B) Carol Meyers (1942-), “Another View” – in Tamara Cohn Eskanazi (1951-), *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary* - The theme of **barrenness** is emphasized in the story of the ancestors, beginning with **Sarah**, the first matriarch; and it recurs in the next two generations, with **Rebekah** (25:21) and then **Racheil** (29:31). **The idea of a barren woman giving birth highlights the importance of the offspring**, calling attention to God’s role in the child’s birth—and, thus, to the significance of the child.

At the same time, the presence of the **barrenness** theme in matriarchal narratives signifies **the values and concerns of an agrarian people**. Most Israelites were self-sufficient farmers, requiring a team of people to work the land; having offspring therefore meant survival. It also meant the opportunity to raise an heir who would intimately know and maintain that parcel of land.

In light of the great importance of land as inheritance, **barrenness** was a grave problem. Like other ancient peoples, the Israelites solved this problem by allowing for adoption or polygyny. A householder could take a second wife, or secondary wife (a servant or a concubine), and the resulting offspring would allow the lineage—reckoned along the male line—to continue, and the land to remain in the family.



C) Tamara Cohn Eskanazi (1951-), *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary* - Genesis 11:30 - “Now Sarai was **infertile**” - fertility stands out as a paramount concern in Biblical tales, starting with Genesis 1:28.

Sarai’s lack of children will become the pivot around which the stories from Genesis 12 to 21 revolve. In Genesis 16:2, Sarah will attribute her condition to God. However the narrator nowhere suggests that God **afflicted** her with such a condition, or that it is a stigma. Fertility of the **barren** woman becomes a symbol of God’s special blessing, **without implying in the other direction that lack of fertility is a punishment**.

Genesis 1:28 -

וַיְבָרֶךְ אֱלֹהִים
וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם אֱלֹהִים

So God blessed humanity,
telling them:

פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת
הָאָרֶץ

“Be fertile and increase,
filling the earth.”

Stories about barren women subordinate the role of human beings and fertility, and instead **highlight God’s role**. This first mention of Sarah/Sarai, portraying her as a **barren** woman, contrasts with the Bible’s final mention of Sarah, invoking her as a message of hope for a “**barren**” people in exile:

הַבֵּיטוּ אֶל אֲבִרְהָם אֲבִיכֶם
look to Abraham, your father,
וְאֶל שָׂרָה תְּחַלְלֶנָּה
and to Sarah, who brought you forth [Isaiah 51:2].

- more over

D) Ellen Frankel (1951-), *The Five Books of Miriam: A Woman's Commentary on the Torah* -

Our daughters lament - Poor Lei'ah! To win a husband by deceit, and thereby lose him!

Lei'ah responds - It was not deceit, but sorrow, that brought me to Jacob's bed. For **I had no wish to spoil my dear sister's happiness**. But it was revealed to me that God had betrothed me to Isaac's older son, Eisav, whereas the two younger children, Jacob and Racheil, had been betrothed to each other. Knowing how wicked Eisav was, I wept until the decree was changed On High, **so that I, too, could marry Jacob**. But **my eyes were weakened** by my abundant tears.

Jacob never loved me as he loved my sister; but The Merciful One, sensing my heartache, "saw that I was unloved and opened my womb." And God closed up Racheil's womb, providing me with company for my misery. However, fertility without love couldn't ease my pain, nor could my sister's barrenness fulfill my own longings.

Hagar the Stranger comments - Watching the two sisters vie with each other for a place in their husband's heart, we understand **how difficult is the burden of dependence in a relationship**. They both wait upon Jacob's favor and God's grace, and then the heartache begins all over again with their children.

Genesis 29:17 -

וְעֵינֵי לֵאָה רְכוּת

Now Lei'ah was weak-eyed,



וְרַחֵל הָיְתָה יָפֹת תִּצָּר וְיִפְתַּ מְרָאָהּ

while Racheil was fair of form and face.

E) Rivkah Lubitch (1968-), "Racheil, a Mother of Mamzeirim" – in Tamar Biala, *Dirshuni: Contemporary Women's Midrash* (2022) - At that moment [that, according to Midrash Lamentations Rabbah 24, the Matriarch was pleading for her descendants as Jerusalem fell and the Temple burned], Racheil leaped up before The Holy And Blessed One and declared: "I married Jacob, and became my sister's rival, before you had written in your Torah 'you shall not take a woman and her sister, to lay bare her nakedness in her sister's lifetime' [Leviticus 18:18]. And I bore two sons for Jacob— Joseph and Benjamin— before you had written in your Torah 'no mamzeir will enter God's community [in marriage' - Deuteronomy 23:1]."

Racheil: she was a mother of mamzeirim. Thus it is written: "**Racheil weeps for her children**, refusing to be comforted for her children, **for they are no more**" [Jeremiah 31:14]. That text says "her children" twice: once for those who are in exile, and once for those excluded from the community as *mamzeirim*.

- "Refuses to be comforted"— these are the *mamzeirim*, of whom it is said "They have none to comfort them" [Ecclesiastes 4:1];
- "for they are no more"— Racheil saw that in the future the *mamzeirim* would be forbidden to enter the community of God [in matrimony, leaving them without issue] as if they were no more.



Racheil Weeping
by Jacob Steinhardt, c. 1943

- continued

The Holy And Blessed One said to her: “still your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears” [Jeremiah 31:15].

- ‘Still your voice from weeping’— for your children in exile;
- ‘and your eyes from tears’— for the *mamzeirim*, of whose tears it is written: “and lo the tears of the oppressed, for whom there is none to comfort them” [Ecclesiastes 4:1].

“‘For **there is recompense for your deeds,**’ says the Lord, ‘and they will return from hostile lands’ [Jeremiah 31:15]— these are the children who return from exile; ‘and there is hope for their end, and the children will return to their borders’ [*loc. cit.*]— **these are the *mamzeirim*, who in future days will once again be able to enter the community of God** [in matrimony].”

Now Jeremiah found solace in this teaching, as he had been fearful for the *mamzeirut* of his own son Ben-Sira, who [according to the 8th-century *Alphabet of Ben-Sira*] was conceived by Jeremiah’s own daughter from his seed, when she immersed after him in the same *mivkah*. Thus he prophesied: “in those days it will no longer be said ‘the parents ate sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge,’ for **each shall be held to account for his own sin**; anyone who eats sour grapes, it is his **own** teeth that should be set on edge!” [Jeremiah 31:28-29].

And that is the secret of the matter between Jacob and Racheil. For Racheil said to Jacob “bring me children— and if not, I die!” [Genesis 30:1 - by which she was saying:] “You think that if you come to me you will be punished with excommunication, and that your children will be *mamzeirim*— yet I think that if you don’t come to me, so that I don’t have children, that will be my death.”

Note by Tamar Biala, editor -

Lubitch is suggesting that the tears of the oppressed are also the tears shed by *mamzeirs*, who must pay for the sins of their mothers or fathers although they themselves are blameless. The rabbinical court invokes the power of the Torah to drive them away, and only God offers consolation. Jeremiah's words of consolation promise that in a brighter, more just future, children will not be punished for their parents' sins.

עשרה יוחסין עלו מבבל

F) Mishnah Qiddushin 4:1, 4:3 - Ten relationship statuses returned from Babylonian exile:

1	Aaronide priests;	“Twelve-Tribes” Jews	כהני
2	[all other] Levites;		לווי
3	[other] Israelites;		ישראלי
4	those of impaired priesthood [Leviticus 21];		חללי
			גרי
5	converts;		וחרורי
6	manumitted slaves;		ממזרי
7	<i>mamzeirs</i> [= those born of adulterous, incestuous, or other forbidden unions];		נתיני
8	Gibeonites [Canaanites granted treaty citizenship in Israel - Joshua 9];		שתוקי
9	those of uncertain paternity [whose Tribal status thus cannot be determined];		ואסופי
10	and foundlings [whose parentage on <u>either</u> side is unknown].		

- more over

כהני לויי וישראל מותרים לבוא זה בזה

[Of this hierarchy of status within the Jewish community,] Aaronide priests [1], Levites [2], and Israelites [3] may all intermarry;

לויי וישראל חללי גרי וחרורי מותרים לבוא זה בזה

Levites [2], Israelites [3], impaired priests [4], converts [5], and manumitted slaves [6] may all intermarry;

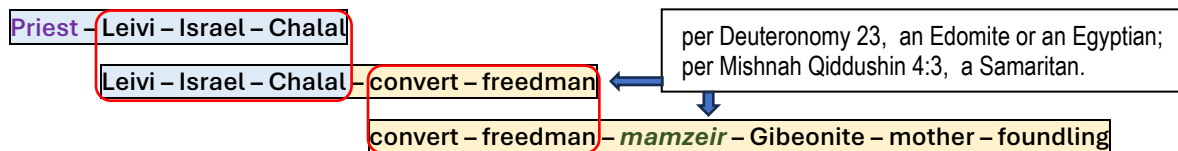
גרי וחרורי ממזרי ונתיני שתוקי ואסופי כולם מותרין לבוא זה בזה

converts [5], manumitted slaves [6], *mamzeirs* [7], Gibeonites [8], those of uncertain paternity [9], and foundlings [10] may all intermarry.

כל האסורים לבוא בקהל מותרים לבוא זה בזה

All those of whom Deuteronomy 23 says that “they may not enter the congregation of The Eternal One” may all intermarry.

Permitted intermarriages – per Mishnah Qiddushin 4:3



ישראל שנשא גיורת בתו כשרה לכהונה

G) Qiddushin 4:7 - An Israelite man who marries a converted woman, his daughter is eligible to marry into the priesthood [because she acquires from her father Twelve-Tribes status as an Israelite],

וגר שנשא בת ישראל בתו כשרה לכהונה

while a converted man who marries an Israelite woman— his daughter is eligible to marry into the priesthood [because in such a case, since the identity of “proselyte” is not genetically conveyed, the Twelve-Tribes status as “Israelite” devolves from the mother’s side].

H) Tamar Biala (1969-), *Dirshuni: Contemporary Women’s Midrash* - Lubitch asserts that Racheil was barren not because she suffered from a biological condition, but because her husband avoided sleeping with her knowing that any children born to their union would be *mamzeirim*. Racheil understands that this would be the case, yet prefers to give birth to *mamzeir* children because she felt that not having children would be tantamount to death.

This conundrum calls our attention to a painful reality: women are faced with a harsh dilemma, when their husbands deny them a divorce while they themselves go on to remarry and have a new family. These women cannot remarry, and face the risk of losing out on their fertile years.

In the bold and provocative *midrash* Lubitch presents us, Jacob understands his wife’s distress and agrees to her request. God’s comforting assurance that Racheil’s lost sons will be restored to their mother’s embrace legitimizes the sense of injustice inherent in the laws of *mamzeirut*, and serves to embolden those who fight for change.

Experimental Formula for Nullification of a Marriage

כל דמקדש אדעתא דרבנן מקדש ואפקעינהו רבנן לקדושין מיניה

Since a man **betroths** only on the authority of the rabbis, in this case it is the rabbis who **annul** his betrothal for him [Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 3a]

Initial formulaic clause (date and place of convened *Beit-Din*, and names of complainant wife and her husband), followed by itemization of husband's abuse or other neglect of his marital duties, including his filing of civil divorce papers as measure of intent.

ידוע היטב כי אסור לנו או לכתוב גט, או למסרנו לגרושה על ידי שליח, כי אם כפי בעלה המגרש אותה.

It is well known that we are forbidden to write out a divorce decree, or to dispatch it to the wife by means of a messenger, without the husband's express authorization to do so [Shulchan Aruch, *Even haEzer* 120:1].

אבל עד עכשיו מנע שמשון הנ"ל מלצאת בידי חובתו לגבי שושנה אשתו הגרושה הנ"ל, במסירה לה את גטה המגיע לה כדת משה וישראל, ועתה עבר שמשון הבעל הנ"ל למושב חדש במקום אחר, ולא ידוע איפה הוא - ולכן אי אפשר או לבקש ממנו או לכפותו למסור לאשתו את גטה.

However, thus far her former husband Shimshon has refused to acquit his obligation to issue Shoshana her *get*, to which she is entitled "in accordance with the laws of Moses and Israel"; and now it is discovered that Shimshon has removed to a new location in another community, and his whereabouts are unknown so that it is impossible either to request him or to compel him [Shulchan Aruch, *Even haEzer* 154:3] to deliver her *get* to his ex-wife.

ברור מהתנהגותו של שמשון הבעל הנ"ל בנוגע לשושנה אשתו הנ"ל שלא התכוון לארשה לו "לעולם ובצדק ובמשפט ובחסד וברחמים ובאמונה", ושלא היה בלבבו לצאת בידי חובתו לפי שטר-הכתיבה "לותיכי כארח כל ארעא."

Moreover, it is apparent from Shimshon's behavior as regards his aforementioned wife Shoshana that he had no intent of betrothing her "eternally and righteously, justly and kindly, compassionately and faithfully" [Hosea 2:21-22], nor of fulfilling his obligations according to the marriage contract "to live with you in universal custom."

ובכן עבר על איסור חז"ל שאסרו לישראל לשאת אשה ודעתו לגרשה, ונשא אותה בתואנת שוא.

He has accordingly transgressed the prohibition of our Sages, who forbade a Jewish man to marry a woman with the intent of divorcing her [Shulchan Aruch, *Even haEzer* 119:1], and it must be construed that he married her under false pretenses.

לכן כדי שלא תהיה בת ישראל חוי"ש לעגונה, הננו מודיעין לכל מי שהענין נוגע בו לגבי הבעל שמשון בן [פלוגי] המכונה [פלוגי] שקנינו מבוטל, וקדושיו מופקעין, ונשואיו מבוטלין.

Therefore, in order that a Jewish woman not (which Heaven forbid!) become a grass widow, we hereby declare to all interested parties that, as regards Shimshon, **his acquisition is void; his betrothal is invalidated; and his marriage is nullified.**

ולגבי אשתו הקודמת שושנה בת [פלוגי] המכונה [פלוגי] הננו מודיעין לכל העולם כי מהיום הנה והלאה איננה אשת איש, כי אם אשה פנויה אשר מותרת לכל אדם - ובראיה בזה באנו על החתום מטה.

And in regard to his former wife, Shoshana, we hereby declare that from this day forward **she is no longer a married wife but rather a single woman, free to remarry whomever she wishes**— in validation whereof, we have affixed our signatures below.