

## The Meeting at the Well

By Rav Elchanan Samet

### A. THE THREE STORIES OF THE WELL

As parashat Vayetze opens, we find ourselves in a quiet interlude between two dramatic conflicts in Yaakov's life. Behind us is the story of his acquiring Esav's blessing, at the end of parashat Toldot – a tension-filled, heart-stirring story as a result of which Yaakov leaves his parents' home and goes to Charan. As an appendix to this story comes God's revelation in Beit El, approving Yaakov's journey into exile and promising him protection and a safe return.

Ahead of us – over the course of this week's parasha – is the story of the conflict between Yaakov and Lavan, another dramatic and tension-filled narrative. But prior to the description of Yaakov's arrival at Lavan and as an introduction to it, we have a short scene, twelve verses long (29:1-12), in which Yaakov meets Rachel at the well. What is the role of this cameo in the greater narrative of Yaakov's life?

When Moshe flees from Pharaoh, who wishes to kill him, we are told ([Shemot 2:15](#)), "And he dwelled in the land of Midyan, and sat at the well." This "sitting at the well" led to his marrying Tzipora, whom he helped at that well. Moshe's decision to sit at the well is interpreted thus in [Shemot Rabba \(81:32\)](#):

"Three people found their spouses at a well: Yitzchak, Yaakov and Moshe. Concerning Yitzchak it is written ([Bereishit 24:62](#)), 'And Yitzchak came from the way of the well of Lechai-Roi.' Furthermore, Rivka had met Eliezer at a well. Concerning Yaakov: 'And he saw, behold, a well in the field.' Concerning Moshe: 'And he sat at the well.'"

What is it about a well that made it the site for three of our forebears to find their soulmates?

The answer would appear to be simple: in the living conditions prevalent at the time and the places where these meetings took place, the drawing of water for household purposes was a task relegated to unmarried girls. Therefore the well was a place where young women would frequently be found, and it is only natural that anyone seeking a wife would go to the well for this purpose.

But this explanation applies only in relation to the servant of Avraham: he is the only one among the characters listed in the Midrash who indeed arrives at the well at the time when the young women of the city gather there (24:11), and selects this site deliberately as the right place to look for a wife worthy of Yitzchak (24:13-14).

The well served different purposes during course of the day for different groups of people. At noon, the shepherds would come to water their flocks there, while towards evening, after the shepherds had returned with their flocks to the city, the daughters of the city would come to draw water for household use.

Yaakov and Moshe both arrive at the well during the day, i.e., during those hours when the shepherds are there, and both indeed meet male shepherds there. Moreover, neither Yaakov nor Moshe came to the well with the aim of finding a wife. Yaakov is trying to make his way to the home of Lavan in order to marry one of his daughters (28:2), and only "happens" to see that "behold, there is a well in the field." The arrival of Lavan's daughter Rachel at the well is completely unexpected. Moshe too, it seems, sat at the well in Midyan because it was the focus of the shepherds' activity, and he waited there to find work or some solution to his predicament as a fugitive. The arrival of Re'uel's daughters, and the subsequent events, are equally unexpected from his point of view.

Thus, we come back to our question: why is it that the well serves as a choice site for meeting future wives in these three biblical stories? Let us propose a different answer.

The well serves as a focus of intensive human activity because it is the source of life for the people of the city and for their livestock. Hence it is at the well that we are able to recognize people's social attributes. For Avraham's servant, the well served as a means of testing the character of the woman destined to be Yitzchak's wife; it is through the well that he discovers kindness and conscientiousness in Rivka. In our story, the situation is different: Yaakov demonstrates to Rachel his love for her (as noted in the text only later, in verse 18, but it appears that this love was aroused in him the moment he first set eyes on her at the well, as hinted at in verse 10) by gathering all his strength for her sake in order to roll the great stone off the mouth of the well so that he may water her flocks before those of the other shepherds. Through this act, a bond of love is established between them. Moshe protects the daughters of the priest of Midyan from the shepherds who chase them from the well, and waters their flocks fairly, thereby finding favor in the eyes of Re'uel their father even before they meet face to face. This leads to the marriage between Moshe and Tzipora.

Hence, in each one of these three stories, the well highlights the principal trait of one partner in the eyes of the other (or his agent): Rivka's trait of perfect kindness in the eyes of Avraham's servant, Yaakov's love and strength in the eyes of Rachel, and Moshe's trait of justice and moral sensitivity together with a readiness to act as perceived by the daughters of Re'uel and their father.

Our story has parallels to the story of both Rivka and Moshe. Its similarity to the story of Rivka arises from the proximity of the respective places, times and personalities: the location of both stories is at a well somewhere near Charan, with only one generation separating them. In verse 10, Rivka the mother of Yaakov is mentioned three times, seemingly unnecessarily. The text appears to be hinting at the memory of Rivka, who performed an action similar to the one that her son is about to perform. Lavan himself is an active character in both stories, and plays basically the same role in both.

But the similarity between our story and that of Moshe is even greater. Yaakov and Moshe both water the flocks of the women who are destined to be their wives; both require great strength in order to do this: Yaakov needs physical power, while Moshe needs moral strength. Moreover, in both stories the main character, through his actions, waters the flocks of the woman in question before the intended time.

## B. THE UNIQUENESS OF THE WELL IN OUR STORY

However, it seems that in our story even the explanation proposed above for the significance of the well is insufficient. The well in our story is not merely the prop for the events that will take place, nor a mere technical device facilitating the meeting between the two partners. The well in our story is the most important element, and serves as a key word. The word "well" (be'er) appears seven times in these twelve verses, and the text hereby signals to the reader what the hidden essence of the story is, to which our attention should be turned.

The well in our story is unique in that a heavy stone lies upon its mouth. Starting from the third appearance of the key word "well" and until the seventh, the well is constantly mentioned together with the stone that lies upon its mouth. The difficulty involved in rolling the stone off the mouth of the well, and the need to prevail over it, is the central issue in this scene.

Why would the shepherds of Charan place such a heavy stone over the mouth of the well – an act that required them to exert such effort in their work of shepherding, as described in our story? In pasturing regions not blessed with streams, fresh water represents a precious resource belonging to the inhabitants of the city. The water is not freely available, but rather is reserved for the people of the city and their livestock – and even they make sure that its use is fairly divided with mutual supervision. The heavy rock serves as a sort of "lock" for the well, preventing unauthorized and uncontrolled use of its water. The weight of the rock ensures that it is only when all the shepherds of the city are gathered together that they will be able to water their flocks, each ensuring that no one else oversteps his rightful ration of water.

This realistic interpretation serves to clarify the logic of the story, but it does not solve the literary question that still faces us: what is the meaning of the deliberate highlighting of this unique well in our story?

## C. WELL – WOMAN

There are many metaphors for woman both in the Torah and elsewhere, and one of them is a well or spring.

In Mishlei, chapter 5, the wise man warns his listener to distance himself from foreign women, and cleave to the wife of his youth. He entreats him thus:

(15) "Drink water from your own cistern, and flowing waters from your own well,

(16) That your springs may be dispersed outward; streams of water in the broad places.

(17) Let them be yours only, and not for strangers with you.

(18) May your fountain be blessed, and rejoice with the wife of your youth."

In verses 15-17 the metaphor is not yet explicit, but in verse 18 the correspondence of "your fountain" to "the wife of your youth" makes it clear that the cistern of water and the well in verse 15 are likewise images of the wife of a man's youth.

In Shir Ha-shirim, chapter 4, the image of a woman as a source of water appears twice:

(12) "An enclosed garden is my sister, my bride,

a spring shut up; a fountain sealed.

(15) A fountain of gardens, a well of living waters

and flowing waters from Lebanon."

The connection between the well and woman also appears in aggadot of Chazal. Suffice it to mention the "well of Miriam" – the miraculous well that accompanied Israel in the wilderness, and which existed in the merit of Miriam ([Ta'anit 9a](#)). In other cultures, as well, the well serves as an image and symbol of woman.

What is the meaning of this image? The verses quoted above from Mishlei and Shir Ha-shirim provide sufficient answer. The pleasure derived from drinking the cool water of one's well is an image of the love of a man for the wife who is his alone. The well, as a source of "living waters" that give life to animal and plant life, to man and to the earth, is an image of woman who is the source of human life – the mother of children.

We may now propose that in each of the three stories of meetings between future spouses that take place at the well, the role of the well is symbolic: the appearance of the woman at the well in each case represents the appearance of the human character together with her inanimate symbol – the well of water. In each instance, the symbol aids our understanding. In the acts performed at the well, and in the connection of the personalities who act around it, the Torah reveals in advance the type of relationship that characterizes the couple in question. Thus the story of the meeting at the well symbolically represents, in each of the three stories, what will happen later on in the lives of the man and woman who are now meeting one another and who are about to build a family together.

Rivka, who runs to and from the well several times in order to water the ten camels of Avraham's servant, demonstrates not only her trait of kindness, but also the trait of activeness in the framework of the future family whose foundation is formed at the well. The stance of the servant, passive and amazed at the energy he is witnessing, is an expression of the passivity of Yitzchak in their family life. Yitzchak allows Rivka to run the family and to be the deciding figure in any matter of importance – including the decision of who will receive Avraham's blessing, and her urging of Yaakov and sending him to Lavan in Charan.

Midrash Shemot Rabba notes a different encounter pertaining to Yitzchak and Rivka that is related to a well: Yitzchak is revealed to Rivka for the first time, as she reaches Canaan, as he "comes from the way of the well of Lechai-Roi." Their present encounter complements the encounter with Yitzchak's agent at the well in Charan, and it is of great importance in completing what was revealed already then, for now Rivka meets her intended groom himself. The encounter is described as follows (24:62-65):

"And Yitzchak came from the way of the well of Lechai Roi... and Yitzchak went out to meditate in the field towards evening...

And Rivka lifted her eyes and she saw Yitzchak, and she fell from the camel.

And she said to the servant, 'Who is this man, who is walking in the field towards us?'

And the servant said, 'He is my master.'

And she took the veil and covered herself."

The Netziv senses the clear psychological import this first encounter, and its significance for her future relationship with Yitzchak:

"And Rivka lifted her eyes and she saw Yitzchak' – while he was still standing and praying, and appeared then like a very awesome angel of God. As explained in [Bereishit Rabba \(60:14-15\)](#), she saw his hands outstretched in prayer, therefore she was most startled and 'she fell from the camel' – out of fright and fear, although she did not yet know who it was that she was afraid of... Out of fear she asked the servant, 'Who is this man?' – who so startles and frightens me... When she heard that he was her [intended] husband, 'she took the veil and covered herself' – out of fear and shame, as someone who understood that she was not worthy of being his wife. And from then on, the fear was established in her heart. She was not with Yitzchak like Sarah was with Avraham, or [like] Rachel was with Yaakov – for they, when they had some matter to bring to them, had no fear of speaking up before them. But this was not so with Rivka. All this is the background to the story that will take place in parashat Toldot, where Yitzchak and Rivka are divided in their views (25:28). In any event, Rivka could not bring herself to present her opinion to Yitzchak openly, for she knew the truth... and likewise in the incident of the blessings."

The two meetings with Rivka around a well point to her dual relationship with Yitzchak: on the one hand – admiration and shame, arising from her recognition of their great disparity in spiritual stature; on the other hand – the active, decisive behavior of a woman who believes that she understands reality better than her husband does, and is therefore forced to direct him in her own way. Only this rare combination of these two types of relationship could facilitate the dramatic events of the story taking the blessing from Esav, and the steering of Yitzchak to bless Yaakov.

The weakness of the daughters of Re'uel (Tziphora among them) when faced with the shepherds at the well of water, and the appearance of Moshe to save them, reveal the type of relations that will prevail in the future between Moshe and Tziphora. Moshe did not save Re'uel's daughters with a view to marrying one of them (in contrast to Yaakov, whose actions at the well were intended to improve his chances to win Rachel's hand). He acted in this way out of a character trait that was revealed in him already in Egypt – the urge to save the downtrodden from the oppressor. It was this quest for justice that caused Re'uel to take note of him and to give him Tziphora as a wife. Moshe's marriage in this story is therefore a secondary consequence of the revelation of his characteristic as leader and savior. Indeed, later on Tziphora disappears from view, and Moshe devotes all his being to the salvation of the oppressed from the oppressor – to take Israel out of Egypt. Even when Tziphora and her children rejoin Moshe together with Yitro, she does not become his mate in the full sense of

the word. The meeting at the well – which was actually not a real meeting at all – foreshadows all of this.

#### D. RACHEL'S WELL

The most dramatic symbolism of the future bond between man and woman is to be found in the story of Yaakov and Rachel's well. This well is unique in that Yaakov finds it sealed up with a huge boulder, such that it is impossible to draw water from it, and this is the decisive fact in the story. The symbolic significance of this fact is that the connection to Rachel, who is about to appear at the well (and thus to blend in to her symbol), will not be a natural and simple one, but rather will require enormous effort in order to uncover the well and to draw its waters – to make Rachel into Yaakov's wife and the mother of his children.

Even the three flocks of sheep, lying at the well with no possibility of their shepherds being able to remove the stone from its mouth, have symbolic significance: three factors will impede the full realization of the bond between Yaakov and Rachel: the seven years of labor for Rachel, the exchange of Leah for Rachel at the end of those seven years (forcing Yaakov to serve Lavan for an additional seven years for Rachel), and Rachel's prolonged state of barrenness (which introduces tension into her relationship with Yaakov – 30:1-2).

When Rachel, shepherding her father's sheep, appears before Yaakov, he senses that marrying this woman who has just arrived has been the purpose of his long journey from Be'er Sheva to Charan. And from that moment he is determined that this will be his wife, that it is with her that he will establish his family, and that no impediment will stand in his way to achieving this – even if he will be required to expend great efforts and to overcome great obstacles.

(10) "And it was, when Yaakov saw Rachel, the daughter of Lavan, brother of his mother...

And Yaakov approached and rolled the stone from upon the mouth of the well."

The symbolic significance of this act is that Yaakov is destined to gather more strength than he has at hand, and will ultimately succeed in prevailing over all the obstacles, making Rachel his wife and the mother of his children. His love for Rachel is what gives him the strength to roll the heavy stone "like someone pulling a cork out of a bottle" (Rashi, based on [Bereishit Rabba 70:12](#)). This insight of the Sages is reminiscent of the first obstacle in Yaakov's path towards Rachel:

(20) "And Yaakov worked for Rachel for seven years, and they were IN HIS EYES LIKE A FEW DAYS, FOR HIS LOVE FOR HER."

At the well the weight of the stone disappears and it becomes like a "cork," and in the labor of seven years the length of time disappears and seems like a few days; both phenomena result from Yaakov's great "love for her."

The connection between Yaakov's act in rolling the stone and watering Rachel's flock, and the development of their relationship, is revealed in the text both prior to Yaakov's act and thereafter. Prior to it we are told (v.10), "And it was, WHEN YAAKOV SAW RACHEL... and he approached... and rolled the stone from upon the mouth of the well." This shows us Yaakov's motivation for his act, and the source of the strength that he displays. Following his act, we read, "AND HE WATERED (va-yashk) the sheep of Lavan, the brother of his mother. And Yaakov KISSED (va-yishak) Rachel..." This play on words hints that the watering and the kiss were related. In the wake of his success in the huge effort required to roll the stone, the watering becomes possible, and in the wake of the watering, the kiss becomes possible. In the words of the Radak: "Since she saw that he had done all this for her, she accepted his kiss."

In the continuation of verse 11 – the verse that begins with Yaakov's kissing of Rachel – we are told, "And he lifted his voice and wept." What was Yaakov weeping about? His weeping comes at the seemingly most inappropriate moment – after his act of great heroism, and after kissing Rachel! Should he not, at this moment, be experiencing great joy?

A perception of the event described here as a symbolic signal of the future may explain his tears. Yaakov intuitively senses the general symbolic significance of his actions. After succeeding in concentrating an immense effort to roll off the stone and to draw water from the well, he realizes how much suffering and pain are destined for him in his real future. His weeping bursts forth because his heart tells him how bitter his future trials will be concerning his relationship with Rachel.

Three times in this scene the rolling of the stone from the mouth of the well is mentioned: first, in the narrative description in verse 3; second, in the words of the shepherds in verse 5, and third, in the description of Yaakov's act in verse 10. In each of these places we also read that after rolling the stone, the sheep are watered. But in the first source there is an additional detail that is not repeated again in this scene:

(3) "...And they watered the sheep, AND RETURNED THE STONE BACK TO ITS PLACE UPON THE MOUTH OF THE WELL."

What is the symbolic significance of this detail? There is no mistaking it: Rachel will indeed be Yaakov's wife and the mother of his children, even though it will involve many trials and tribulations, but she is destined to die at a young age. The stone that made drawing the water so difficult will be rolled back onto her grave, as a gravesite monument at the side of the way:

(35:19-20) "And Rachel died, and she was buried on the way of Efrat, which is Beit Lechem.

And Yaakov placed a monument upon her grave; this is the gravestone of Rachel until this day."

Perhaps Yaakov cried here over this too, for his heart perceived the future, as described in Midrash [Bereishit Rabba \(70:12\)](#):

"Why did he weep? For he saw that she would not be buried with him."

The whole story of the joint life of Yaakov and Rachel – including Rachel's premature death – is all compressed into these few verses, describing the encounter between them at the well. The description of this meeting, with its idyllic atmosphere, contains profound and detailed symbolism, foretelling the future.

#### E. THE WELL AND GOD'S PROMISE AT BEIT EL

Why is this symbolic forecast of the lives of Yaakov and Rachel necessary? For what purpose does the story tell us in advance what will happen, why is the message conveyed through a symbolic code, and for whom is the message intended?

It would seem that the message is intended for Yaakov, and the fact that we – as readers of the story – receive it is only secondary. In the uplifting revelation to Yaakov at Beit El, when he exiles himself to Charan, he is told, *inter alia*:

(25:15) "And behold, I am with you, and I shall guard you wherever you go."

With this Divine promise in hand, Yaakov sets off, and immediately we are told of his encounter with the shepherds of Charan, who know Lavan and assure Yaakov that all is well with him, "And behold, Rachel his daughter is coming with the sheep." Everything unfolds as it should: Yaakov's path is prepared for him, and even before reaching his destination his appointed wife appears, like a Divine hint that the promise is being fulfilled – "And behold, I am with you." How does Yaakov imagine the continuation of these events? It appears that he expects no special difficulties: he will present himself to Lavan, his mother's brother, will ask him for Rachel's hand in marriage and will pay the dowry, as accepted, through his labor.

This is, in fact, how things turn out – until they become complicated: Lavan turns out to be a trickster, and after seven years of labor and expectation he gives Leah to Yaakov. Yaakov does end up marrying Rachel, but as a second wife, and again he is forced to labor for seven years. Now Yaakov's household contains two wives who are sisters and rivals. Only after lengthy years of barrenness does Rachel finally conceive and bear Yosef, but a few years later, when Yaakov returns to Canaan and is journeying from Beit El to Chevron, city of his forefathers, Rachel dies on the way, in childbirth with her second son. Yaakov must bury her at the roadside, without being able to bring her to the family grave site in Chevron.

There is no real contradiction between this unfortunate story and God's promise to Yaakov, "And behold, I am with you and I will protect you wherever you go," but there is certainly tension between them. It appears that in all matters concerning Yaakov's marriage and the building of his family, everything is

complicated and difficult, and God presents him with trials and tribulations time after time. This tension between the encouraging promise given to Yaakov at Beit El and the events as they unfold with regard to his relationship with Rachel, may give rise to doubts in Yaakov's mind – as well as in ours, as readers the story.

In order to avoid this dissonance in Yaakov's consciousness and in order to prepare him psychologically for the difficulties of life that lie ahead, so that he may gather his strength for the tests that await him on the path to realizing his love for Rachel, Yaakov is given an early, encoded warning about his future life with her. When, later on, he is faced time after time with crises and tests, Yaakov – and we – will know that all this was forecast in advance, and that God, Who promised "Behold, I am with you," also provided the other side of the coin – in the encounter with Rachel at the well, and in the symbol of the great stone at its mouth. This knowledge itself will give Yaakov strength to stand up to the tests he will be facing.

Why was it necessary for Yaakov to suffer so much in order to win his beloved Rachel as a wife and as the mother of his children? And why does such a tragic thread weave through their life together? This is a mystery. Even Chazal teach that the finding of a mate is as difficult as "the splitting of the Red Sea" ([Sanhedrin 22a](#); Tanchuma, Ki Tisa 5). From Yaakov's life we may conclude that sometimes the match is as difficult and heavy as a great stone over the mouth of the well.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

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