



## Rachel: Our Matriarch of Compassion

The third matriarch of the Bible is Rachel. In Jewish tradition, whenever we mention the four matriarchs, we list them in the following order: Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah.

Rachel is unique in that she is defined as much by her death as by her life. We read in Genesis 35:19 that Rachel died “*on the way to Ephrath.*” The term “*on the way*” is relevant to Rachel’s death as well as her life.

In her short life, Rachel was always *on the way*, never quite arriving. Just after we first encounter her, she is *on the way* to marry Jacob. She waited seven years to marry him, but because of her father’s deception, she never had Jacob to herself. Rachel was on the way to start her life with Jacob, but he was stuck working for Laban for seven more years—which turned into 14 years, for a total of 20 years (Genesis 31:38).

Rachel was also on the way to becoming a mother. She waited many painful years—watching her sister give birth to child after child—until she gave birth to her first son, and died during the birth of her second. She never became the mother she dreamed, or the one her sister had been.

After her death, Rachel remained on the way—she was buried on the road, on the way to a different destination. Of all the matriarchs, Rachel is the only one considered to be with the descendants of Israel on their life journeys. Rachel is known for her compassion, and today hundreds of thousands visit her grave and pour out their hearts to her.

This month we will study the life and death of Rachel, discovering the strengths and qualities unique to her, and that exist within us all. Take a look at this matriarch to gain deeper insight into her life and legacy, her role in the story of Israel, and why she has remained a symbol of compassion to this day.



*Jacob was in love with Rachel and said, “I’ll work for you seven years in return for your younger daughter Rachel.”*

— GENESIS 29:18



# A Foundation of Compassion

**W**e are first introduced to the third matriarch, Rachel, when Jacob arrived in Harran in search of a wife. As soon as he saw Rachel, he knew that she was the one. Genesis 29:11 tells us: *“Then Jacob kissed Rachel and began to weep aloud.”* It was a divinely appointed meeting.

As the youngest daughter, it was Rachel’s duty to take the family’s flock to the well. Jacob had his famous dream of angels climbing to heaven and received God’s promise of a homeland and descendants too numerous to count. He arrived at the well with God’s promise: *“I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go”* (Genesis 28:15). With this assurance, Jacob met Rachel (Genesis 29:6). It was love at first sight.

*“Jacob was in love with Rachel”* from the very beginning (Genesis 29:18). Jacob asked Rachel for her hand in marriage, and while Rachel gave her assent, she knew her father was a deceiver. As it was custom for the oldest sister to marry first, Rachel knew Laban would likely try to substitute Leah.

Much is made of Laban’s duplicity, but in Jewish tradition, Rachel’s actions garner the most attention. In our tradition, which Jesus was taught as a boy in synagogue, Rachel and Jacob worked out secret signals to assure that the veiled bride was indeed Rachel, and not Leah.

In an extraordinary act of kindness, Rachel taught Leah the signals, as Rachel couldn’t bear the thought of Leah being disgraced. God did not forget this compassionate act. Centuries later, when the nation of Israel was sent into Babylonian exile, according to Jewish tradition, Rachel interceded on their behalf. Jewish tradition teaches that God wanted to make the exile permanent. All of the patriarchs and Moses appealed to God on behalf of the sinful nation without any success.

Finally, Rachel came before God and said: *“Master of the Universe, I waited seven years to marry my beloved Jacob. When the time of the wedding finally came, my father schemed to switch me with my sister Leah. Jacob suspected this would happen, so together we made up secret signs. But I realized that Leah would be put to shame if the scheme were uncovered, so I had compassion for my sister and gave her the signs. I overcame my own feelings and was not jealous. I allowed a competitor into my home. So if I was able to do it, God, then all the more so You, too, should not be exacting of the idol—the competitor in Your home”* (Midrash Genesis Rabbah, 82:10).

Immediately, God’s mercy was awakened and He said: *“For you, Rachel, I will bring Israel back, as it says: ‘Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for your work will be rewarded...Your children will return to their own land’”* (Jeremiah 31:16).

Rachel’s compassion for Leah has eternal consequences. Her act continues to stand as favor for all Israel, and a resource that we can tap into for all time.



*When Jacob saw Rachel daughter of his uncle Laban, and Laban’s sheep, he went over and rolled the stone away from the mouth of the well and watered his uncle’s sheep. Then Jacob kissed Rachel and began to weep aloud.*

— GENESIS 29:10–11

# A Great and Powerful Love

As much as Rachel loved her sister Leah, it was not easy sharing a husband. To make matters more challenging, Leah bore six sons, while Rachel, like Sarah and Rebekah before her, remained childless.

Rachel's longing for children is revealed in Genesis 30:1 when she said to Jacob, *"Give me children, or I'll die!"* In response, Jacob reminded Rachel that he was not God and could not give her children (v.2). Embittered, Rachel decided to bring another woman into her home. She gave her handmaid Bilhah to Jacob so that she might bear children for Rachel to raise as her own, much like when Sarah gave Hagar to Abraham.

Rachel was willing to do this because having children was more important to her than honor. Rachel's deepest desire was to have children that she could care for and shower with her endless love.

Eventually, Rachel gave birth to Joseph. Tragically, she died giving birth to her second son, Benjamin. With her last breath, Rachel named her newborn "Ben-Oni," usually translated as "son of my affliction." However, the name can also be translated as "son of my strength."

Rachel literally gave her child every last bit of strength that she had so that he might live. Jacob modified the child's name to Benjamin, which means, "son of my right hand," referring to the strength of Rachel.

Strangely, Jacob did not bury Rachel in the Cave of Machpelah, where Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Rebekah were buried. Scripture tells us *"Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem)." Hebron, where the cave is, is not far away from Bethlehem. Why would Jacob bury the woman he loved most in such a way?*

Jewish tradition teaches that Rachel wanted to be buried on the side of the road. The Bible helps us understand why. In Jeremiah 31:15, the prophet offered hope to the exiled children of Israel, writing, *"This is what the LORD says: 'A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.'" Rachel watched Israel being led in chains past her grave, and ever the mother, she wanted to be with her children at their most difficult time.*

In the Christian Bible, this same verse is repeated in Matthew 2:18, describing the sadness of the mothers of Bethlehem as their sons were killed. Who better than Rachel, the mother of the exiled children of Israel, to understand the depth of sorrow and weeping of these mothers?

Rachel's tearful pleas were successful. God answered, *"Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for your work will be rewarded... They will return from the land of the enemy"* (Jeremiah 31:16), promising that the children of Israel, Rachel's children, would one day be restored and reunited in their homeland.

Rachel teaches us there are times we need to give up on things we might want for the sake of others. Jesus, who would have been taught about Rachel's sacrifice, echoed this principle in John 15:13: *"Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends."*

When we love God and His children, we have the strength to make any sacrifices we are called upon to offer.



*So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem).*

— GENESIS 35:19

# A Mother for All Time

Of the four matriarchs in the Bible, only one is considered by the Jewish people to be THE mother—Rachel, who is affectionately referred to as “Mama Rachel.” Although she only gave birth to two of the 12 brothers who formed the nation of Israel, Rachel is considered the mother of all Israel. Ironically, Rachel achieved in death what she could not achieve in her life—being a mother of many.

Why is Rachel placed above the rest?

Rachel, who suffered so much, feels the pain of her children. She waited to marry the love of her life only to have him taken away. She felt the painful sadness of being childless. She lost her life giving birth to her second child, missing the pleasure of watching her sons grow up.

Rachel knew the pain of suffering. Today, you will find many people crying and praying at Rachel’s Tomb. They pray to God that Rachel will intercede on their behalf, and God will send a miracle. And miracles do happen. The following is a true story that took place in Israel:

In 2008, Rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu, formerly the Chief Rabbi of Israel, was released from the hospital after a life-threatening illness. The elderly rabbi insisted on going to Rachel’s Tomb, praying there three times.

Shortly after, Israel went to war. A group of Israeli soldiers had been charged with cleaning out areas around Gaza City. When the soldiers approached the first building, they saw an old woman dressed in black yelling at them to go away because there was danger there.

The soldiers didn’t want to take any chances so they went to their next target. They were surprised to see the same exact woman with the same warning as before. The soldiers moved on to the third target, and this time they were stunned to find the same old woman waiting for them. Again, she warned the soldiers of danger. Realizing this was no ordinary woman, a soldier asked her name. She answered, “Rachel.”

It was discovered that each building where this woman appeared was booby-trapped. Had the soldiers entered they would have lost their lives.

Rabbi Eliyahu’s son, also a rabbi, wondered if the story was connected to his father’s visit to Rachel’s Tomb. The younger Rabbi Eliyahu shared the story with his elderly father and asked, “Should we believe it?” The older Rabbi Eliyahu answered, “It is true.” Then he explained, “When I went to Rachel’s Tomb I told her: ‘Rachel, a war is on! Don’t withhold your voice from crying (based on Jeremiah 31:15-17). Go before God, and pray for the soldiers, who are sacrificing themselves for the nation of Israel, that they should strike—and not be stricken.’”

In Song of Songs 8:6, we read, “*for love is as strong as death.*” Indeed Rachel’s love for her children supersedes time and place. The love we share with others does not disappear once a person is gone. A mother is always a mother, a husband remains a husband, and a friend remains a friend. We are all part of a chain that stretches all the way back to the matriarchs and beyond. Though our lifetimes may be separated by thousands of years, we are connected for all time by the faith and compassion that has preceded us.



*This is what the LORD says:*

*“A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping,*

*Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.”*

— JEREMIAH 31:15

# Think About It

1. **Jewish tradition teaches that when Israel was exiled, many great figures of the past prayed on their behalf.** Only Rachel's prayer was answered because of the compassion she showed Leah. Why do you think compassion might be a virtue above all others?
2. **Who are the people in your life who "gave up" time, possessions, honor, or other things so that you could grow up with all the opportunities you were given?** How did those sacrifices specifically help you?
3. **Where in your life can you give up something so that someone else can thrive?**
4. **Rachel displayed great compassion and empathy in her life.** How can we bring those two virtues into our everyday living?
5. **What lessons do we learn from Rachel's life about achieving goals?** About what defines our lives?



# Apply It

1. **Show compassion.** Rachel was the model for compassion toward others, during her lifetime and beyond. Look for ways you can model compassion in your life. (Psalm 145:8-9; 1 Peter 3:8)
2. **Take less, give more.** Just as Rachel made sacrifices for others, we are also called to give up things like money, time, or the spotlight for the sake of others. Consider what you might sacrifice today for someone you love. (Genesis 44:33; John 15:13)
3. **Show appreciation.** So many people have given up something for our sake—teachers, parents, family, friends, co-workers, and so on. Let them know you notice and that you are grateful. (Deuteronomy 24:13; Philippians 1:3)
4. **Listen lovingly.** Visitors often take their difficulties to Rachel's Tomb and pour out their hearts. Sometimes the greatest gift you can give someone is listening to his or her problems in a loving way. (Job 21:2; Luke 8:18)
5. **Enjoy your journey.** Sometimes we are so caught up in reaching our goals that we fail to appreciate the process of getting there. As they say, "Life's a journey, not a destination." (Ecclesiastes 9:9; 1 Timothy 6:17)



Photo: Carlo Francesco Nuvolone, c. 1645-1650

