

Parsha Ponders

Vayeitzei | Nov 23, 2023 | 11 Kislev 5784

*See, my son*¹

ותהר לאה ותלד בן ותקרא שמו ראובן כי אמרה כי-ראה יקוק בעניי כי עתה יאהבני אישי

Leah conceived and gave birth to a boy. She called his name “Reuven”, for she said: “Since Hashem saw (“*Ra’ah*”) my suffering, for now my husband will love me”²

Yaakov and his wives were in an uncomfortable predicament. Yaakov intended to marry Rochel, but was tricked by his father-in-law Lavan and ended up marrying her sister Leah. Afterwards Yaakov married Rochel as well, and a love triangle ensued. Rochel was Yaakov’s primary wife, and Leah felt rejected. At the same time, Rochel was barren, and Leah immediately conceived³. She gave birth to a son, and named him “Reuven”, a contraction of “*Reu*” (see) and “*Ben*” (son). She said the reason for this name is that Hashem saw (“*Ra’ah*”) her suffering, for now her husband will love her, having given him a child.

Curiously, we have the following teaching⁴ from our Sages: Rabbi Elazar says that Leah said, See (*Reu*) the difference between my son (*Ben*) and my father-in-law’s son, Eisav. My father-in-law’s son, even though he intentionally sold his firstborn birthright to Yaakov, nevertheless, the Torah says⁵ he hated Yaakov. My son, on the other hand, even though the firstborn birthright was taken away from him and given to his younger brother Yosef⁶, nevertheless, he didn’t bear jealousy towards him. More than that, he saved Yosef from the hands of his brothers’ plot⁷.

The obvious question on this teaching is it seems unnecessary. The intent appears to be to explain why Leah named Reuven the name that she did. It explains the significance of the *Reu* and the *Ben*. Why was this teaching necessary? The Torah already told us why she named him Reuven. It was because Hashem saw her suffering! What’s the point of giving a different reason than what the Torah says⁸?

The renowned Vilna Gaon provided the following explanation: Our Sages were bothered by a different question. With regards to the other sons of Yaakov, each of them has an explanation behind their name. When the parents named their child, they first related the reasoning behind the name, and only afterwards said the name. For example, Leah said that Hashem “heard” (“*Shama*”) that she felt hated, so she named her son “Shimon”⁹. Leah said that after having three kids, her husband will now have to accompany (“*Yilaveh*”) her, so she named her son Levi¹⁰.

With Reuven, they first declared his name, and only afterwards the reasoning. Why is he different? This inconsistency tipped off our Sages. It must be that even without what Leah said, that Hashem “saw” her

¹ Based on Shemen HaMor Mor V’Ahalos p. 23b (Warsaw 5632 ed.), by Rav Avraham Beirish Flamm, and Devar Eliyahu Likkutim to Berachos loc. cit., both brought in Toras HaGra to Genesis 29:32

² Genesis loc. cit.

³ See Ibid 49:3 with Rashi (quoting Yevamos 76a and Bereishis Rabbah 99:6) and Sifsei Chachamim. See also Magen Avraham to Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 240:9

⁴ Berachos 7b

⁵ Genesis 27:41

⁶ I Chronicles 5:1

⁷ Genesis 37:21

⁸ Maharsha ad. loc. says that the reason the Torah gives is insufficient, as it doesn’t explain the *Ben* of Reuven. This begs the question why the Torah gives the reason it gives (Eitz Yosef ad loc.)! This issue will be addressed in a different below. See also Ein Yaakov ad. loc.

⁹ Genesis 29:33

¹⁰ Ibid v. 34

affliction, it was fitting to call him Reuven. The reason for the name must have been a different one. It was the one that our Sages shared, that Leah was proud of the difference between Reuven and Eisav. “See” the difference between my “son” and the son of my father-in-law.

However, we can still ask, why didn’t Leah say this reason for naming Reuven? Why did she state the reason about Hashem seeing her affliction, and now about seeing the difference between her son and Eisav? A *Midrash* relates¹¹ that when Yaakov was deceived into marrying Leah, he had second thoughts about the marriage. Leah was worried he would divorce her. In order to reassure Leah, Hashem made her conceive right away, and kept Rochel barren¹². This way, Yaakov wouldn’t be so quick to leave Leah for Rochel. If he wanted a lot of kids, he would stay with her.

Once Reuven was born, Leah had a prophetic vision¹³ that Reuven would be greater than Eisav. He wouldn’t get jealous that Yosef would become the new firstborn, unlike Eisav. The problem with this vision is it showed that Rochel would eventually have kids. She wouldn’t remain barren, and would give birth to Yosef. To secure her status as the principal child bearer, Leah kept this prophecy to herself. She said instead a different reason for the name, that of G-d seeing her affliction. We see this alluded to in the verse itself, which says, “for she said”, something that doesn’t appear with the other sons of Yaakov¹⁴.

With this insight from the Vilna Gaon, we have witnessed a glimpse of the wisdom of our Sages. We can now better appreciate how they unlocked the depths of the Torah, with their exacting analysis of the verses.

Good Shabbos

¹¹ Bereishis Rabbah 71:2

¹² Genesis 29:31

¹³ Cf. Ein Yaakov *loc. cit.*, who suggests that she didn’t really realize the significance of this name. Rather, Hashem caused her to name him something which would reflect a future reality

¹⁴ Shemen HaMor and Devar Eliyahu *loc. cit.* Penei Yehoshua *ad. loc.* says that he heard this explanation in the name of a great Sage. Perhaps he intended Rav Flamm. Or it could be he intended the Tzlach *ad. loc.*, who also says this. They were all contemporaries. The Penei Yehoshua and Tzlach are brought by Eitz Yosef *loc. cit.*