

## **“But as for me, when I came from Paddan, Rachel died on me in the land of Canaan on the road... and I buried her there on the road to Efras.” (48:7)**

Earlier, Yaakov *Avinu* had asked to be buried in the *Meoras Ha'Machpeilah*. In all fairness, how could Yaakov expect Yosef to do something for him which he himself had not done for Yosef's mother, Rachel? Sensing that this might be bothering Yosef, the Patriarch explained his actions: It was not his choice to bury the Matriarch on the road, when they were only a short distance from *Bais Lechem*. Hashem had commanded him to bury her there in preparation for the future, when she would be a source of solace to the Jewish People being led into captivity, following the destruction of the first *Bais HaMikdash*. They would be hungry, despondent, and so afraid of what the future would bring. When passing Rachel's grave, her *neshamah*, soul, would weep on their behalf. She would entreat the Almighty to have mercy upon His children. The *Navi Yirmiyahu* (31:14 ff.) so movingly relates the “dialogue”: *Kol b'ramah nishma*, “A voice is heard on high, the sound of lamentation...Rachel weeping for her children... (G-d replied to her) ‘Withhold your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for your work will be rewarded,’ says Hashem... ‘there is hope for the future... and your children will return to their border.’”

Throughout the generations, Rachel's tomb has been the location to which the Jewish People have turned to pray, to receive solace and hope. Whether the supplications are national or personal, the address of “Mama Rachel” is where countless people go to soothe their hearts and beseech Hashem for themselves and others. We wonder why? What attributes of Rachel's grave have engendered such popularity? While the graves of many *tzaddikim*, righteous persons, in *Eretz Yisrael* are considered holy sites – and, as such, are visited by thousands – something about Rachel's Tomb compels Jews of all stripes and beliefs to gravitate to this site.

I write this on the *yahrtzeit* of Rachel *Imeinu* and, after thinking about the question, I realize that the answer is in the excerpt cited above and the *pasuk* in *Yirmiyahu*: *Rachel mevakah al ba'neha*, “Rachel cries for her children.” It is because of the cries of a mother – a mother who is sensitive to the needs of **all** of her Let us face it, who were the first Jews to pass by Rachel's gravesite? They were not *rabbonim*, *roshei yeshivah*, *bonei Torah*, *bnos Torah*. They were not the spiritual elite – because then there were none – or very few. The Jews who were exiled from *Eretz Yisrael*, survivors of the destroyed Temple, were idol worshippers, thieves and malcontents who did not get along with one another – hardly Jewish/spiritual nobility. Yet, a mother is a mother to **all** of her children, regardless of their conduct. On the contrary, the ones who are challenging usually receive a greater manifestation of love. Rachel wept for them then, and she continues to do so today – whether they are *roshei yeshivah*, *rebbetzins*, or alienated Jews looking for a “return address” for their spiritual lives.

Yosef understood his father's message. As the one son who grew up away from home – in the dungeons of Egypt and in a country notorious for its decadence and moral turpitude – he was

acutely aware of the importance of a common address for all people, where they can turn to pray and seek a sense of comfort and hope. A mother's love transcends a child's most iniquitous behavior and finds a place in her heart for his return. While all the *Imahos*, Matriarchs, have this title, Rachel was the one buried on the side of the road, to be present one day for her children. Her self-abnegation and sensitivity to the feelings of her sister Leah, primed her for her future role as "Mother Rachel," the address for all Jews.

Interestingly, many of us journey to Rachel's Tomb without realizing its true significance. The following story, which crossed my desk recently, is well worth sharing. One of the most distinguished personages of *Yerushalayim's* Old *Yishuv*, Jewish settlement, about one hundred years ago, was *Horav David Biederman, zl*. A scion of an illustrious rabbinic and *chassidic* family, he was a devout individual who was recognized as a *tzaddik*, righteous person, among *tzaddikim*. His primary concern in life was living up to the expectations of his Creator.

One day, *Rav David* decided to undertake the long, arduous journey from *Yerushalayim* to *Kever Rachel*. While today this is not considered much of a trip, a century ago it took one complete day by donkey! He set out early, following the *vasikin*, sunrise, *minyan*. On the way, he contemplated what were the proper prayers to recite and for whom. *Rav David* was concerned lest he forget something. After all, this was too difficult a journey to just have to return.

When he finally arrived at the Tomb, he saw that he was not alone. A young woman with a number of children in tow had arrived earlier, and she was basically "setting up shop" there. She had spread out a blanket on the stone floor of the domed chamber, laying her youngest child down to sleep. She began to prepare dinner for her family.

*Rav David* was incredulous. Her actions were demeaning this holy site. Had she no respect? Did she fail to realize where she was? How could she involve herself in such mundane matters while at *Kever Rachel*? Rather than keep these questions pent-up within himself, the sage approached the woman, and, in a less-than-amicable tone, demanded an explanation.

The weary mother turned to the venerable sage and said, "I think that our Mama Rachel would be pleased that we are eating and resting here."

"Wow!" *Rav David* was floored. He suddenly felt faint and queasy as a result of the realization that **he** had for decades been making the journey to Rachel's Tomb and had not even begun to understand its significance. Here, this simple, unschooled woman had a deeper perception than he had of the true holiness of Rachel's Tomb. What had he been doing all these years? What had he been thinking? Now, he understood why *Rachel mevakah al ba'nehah*, "Rachel weeps for her children": Her desire is only that we have some relief, some comfort in life, some peace of mind, so that we can better serve Hashem. Is that not what every Jewish mother wants for her child?

From that day on, whenever *Rav David* made the trip to Rachel's Tomb, he brought along food to

share with the others who were visiting their “mother,” entreating her to intercede on their behalf.

There is no dearth of inspirational “Jewish mother” stories. The following vignette, which has previously found its place in these pages, is a favorite: It was the time to elect a Chief Rabbi for *Yerushalayim*. The candidate who was being endorsed was *Horav* Chaim Yaakov Levine, an erudite scholar, whose father *Horav* Aryeh, had achieved eminence as the *Tzaddik* of *Yerushalayim*. The initiative was underway to elect *Rav* Levine. However, the candidate wanted to know who else had been nominated for the position. When he learned that *Horav* Betzalel Zolty was also a candidate, he demurred, asserting that under no circumstances would he run. A number of distinguished *rabbanim* attempted in vain to get him to reconsider. Nonetheless, he absolutely refused. It took some time, but he finally related his reason.

*Rav* Chaim Yaakov had heard from his revered father, *zl*, that once while walking through the small alleyways of Old *Yerushalayim* he chanced upon a woman who was darning socks by the light of a small torch. In today’s society where nothing lasts and change is a way of life, mending socks seems to be a strange way to earn a living – certainly not a profitable one. Usually, someone who was quite poor would do this to “supplement” their income. “Why are you doing this,” asked *Rav* Aryeh, “and especially with so little light?” “I am a poor widow,” she replied, “and with the few coins that I make, I am able to pay a *rebbe* to learn Torah with my orphaned son.” The woman continued her work, as tears rolled down her face onto the socks she was repairing.

“Do you know who this widow was?” *Rav* Chaim Yaakov asked. “She was the mother of *Rav* Betzalel Zolty! Is it possible to estimate the value of that righteous woman’s tears? Can you imagine the effect of those tears? There is no question in my mind. *Rav* Zolty should become *Rav* of *Yerushalayim*. His spiritual growth was catalyzed on a field irrigated with a widowed mother’s tears.”