

Vayetse D'var Torah – Dec. 3, 2022

By Akiva Holzer

Bilhah and Zilpah as Imahot?

Who knows 4?

Shabbat shalom! My name is Akiva Holzer.

Let's start with a question: Who knows 4?

As my favorite version goes, "four are the mommas", or more conventionally: "Arbah Imahot" - Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah.

Much of today's parsha Vayeitzei is about the birth of Jacob's children, essentially the "becoming" of Rachel and Leah as matriarchs of our people.

However, today I would like to focus on two other women who unfortunately get much less attention – Rachel's and Leah's "handmaids", Bilhah and Zilpah.

What do we know about Bilhah and Zilpah?

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We know that Laban gave his maidservants Zilpah and Bilhah to his daughters Leah and Rachel as their shifchot – female slaves. Rashi cites a midrash that Bilhah and Zilpah were also Laban's daughters from a female slave.

Since Rachel was barren and envious of the children her sister Leah had birthed for Jacob, she gave Bilhah to Jacob as a wife, saying "Here is my maid Bilhah. Consort with her, that she may bear on my knees and that through her I too may have children." Bilhah had two sons, Dan and Naftali.

Leah, who had already borne 4 sons but apparently still insecure about her place in the family, said "two can play at that game", and gave *her* handmaid Zilpah to Jacob as a wife. Zilpah had 2 sons, Gad and Asher.

Bilhah's and Zilpah's children account for 4 of Jacob's 12 sons, and their progeny account for about 1/3 of B'nai Yisrael when the census is taken at the beginning of the book of Numbers.

Since there was definitely intermarriage among the 12 tribes, even though the tribes of Bilhah and Zilpah's children are among the lost 10 the chances are very good that many of us are descended from one of them.

The fifth commandment is “Honor your father and mother.” Why then do we not honor Bilhah and Zilpah in the same way as Rachel and Leah? Why are Rachel and Leah included in the Imahot, but not Bilhah and Zilpah?

Imahot in the Torah

Neither the word “Imahot” nor the phrase “Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Leah” ever appear in the Tanakh. However, the concept of the imahot definitely exists both in Talmudic, and midrashic sources. The word “Imahot” appears 76 times in the literature, and the individual matriarchs are named 15 times.

Traditions of 6 Imahot

There are midrashic traditions in which Bilhah and Zilpah are counted among the Imahot. However, these are primarily in the context of commentators trying to see how many different symbolisms they can find for the number 6, not halachic pronouncements.

Talmudic definition of 4 Imahot

The Talmud is definitive that there are only 4 Imahot, in two places: in M’schet S’machot, and M’schet Brachot (which seem to be retellings of very similar material):

“We confine the term ‘our father’ to the three Patriarchs, and the term ‘our mother’ to the four Matriarchs.”

While there are often differing opinions given in the Talmud, there are none here. I can only assume that there was not significant disagreement.

Imahot in the Amidah

I think it is impossible to discuss the Imahot without considering the context we most often encounter them: the first blessing of the Amidah.

Of course, inclusion of the Matriarchs in the blessing long known as “Avot” is a relatively recent innovation, and one that is still a source of some disagreement.

I’d like to review some of the arguments that were made because I think they are relevant to our consideration of Bilhah and Zilpah.

T’shuvah in support of adding Matriarchs to Amidah – Rabbi Joel Rembaum

The major T’shuvah approved by the Rabbinical Assembly Committee for Jewish Law and Standards in favor of adding the Imahot to the Avot blessing was written by Rabbi Joel Rembaum, now the Rabbi Emeritus at Temple Beth Am in Los Angeles. He argued that “significant ideological and communal developments and

trends have always been represented in our prayers". "...it is appropriate that the prayer that expresses the unity, commitment, and lofty aspirations of the Jewish people, the Amidah, be modified so that it can speak to all members of our congregations, male and female alike."

More specifically, "The Avot blessing functions as an affirmation of the covenantal bond between God and his people, and given the Matriarchs' role in the development of that relationship, allusion to them in this blessing is most appropriate."

T'shuvah against adding the Imahot directly into the Avot blessing – Rabbi David Golinkin

An opposing view was offered by Rabbi David Golinkin, president of the Schechter Institutes in Jerusalem, who in his own T'shuvah argued that adding Matriarchs to the Avot blessing "contradicts Biblical theology... and also attempts to rewrite biblical history."

Golinkin cited the *Mekhilta*, a tannaitic midrash to Exodus, saying that the phrase "God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob" was used because it is a direct quote from Exodus 3:15:

"And God said further to Moses, "Thus shall you speak to the Israelites: יהוה, the God of your fathers' [house]—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you: This shall be My name forever, This My appellation for all eternity."

Golinkin argued "This opening verse of the *Amidah* reflects a fundamental belief of the entire Bible – that God made a covenant with the Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. On the other hand, the phrase "God of Sarah, God of Rebecca, God of Rachel, and God of Leah" is *not* biblical Hebrew because God did *not* make a covenant with the Matriarchs."

Patriarchal Worldview in Biblical and Rabbinic times

The rejoinder to this literal, textualist approach is that it fails to account for the societal context: that in biblical and Rabbinic times a "patriarchal worldview" prevailed, as stated by Dr. Einat Ramon, the first Israeli-born woman to be ordained a rabbi and the first woman to head a Conservative rabbinical school. She wrote "it was assumed that a woman, as a person and a religious personality, were inferior to a man and therefore severely limited in her ability to encounter and experience her similarity to God."

The limited role of women in the Torah is obvious, as with rare exceptions we only hear mention of women and their stories when they are necessary to illuminate the stories of notable men. Whether one believes that the Torah was written by people, and that this exclusion was due to editors' bias; or that the Torah is the literal word of God, that needed to be palatable to a male-dominated society; it is not difficult to imagine that the p'shat of the Torah might understate the importance of the Imahot's relationships with God and their role in the covenant. In fact, there are midrashim that claim the Imahot were included in the covenant with God.

Dr. Ramon gave a variety of examples of how the Rabbis' patriarchal worldview denegated and downplayed women. However, she wrote "the clearest expression of the Sages' patriarchal orientation appears in Mishnah Horayot 3:7, where it is stipulated that when a man and a woman both face mortal danger, "the man takes priority over the woman with reference to one's duty to preserve life."

My take-away here is that one of the major arguments for inclusion of the Imahot in the Amidah is that their significance was likely understated in the Torah and by the Rabbis due to patriarchal bias in the societies of the times.

The Talmud's reasoning for codification of the Avot and Imahot

Let's now return to the case of Bilhah and Zilpah.

Although it may be obvious that Bilhah and Zilpah are excluded from the Imahot because they were concubines – the context of the gemaras in both S'machot and B'rachot makes it explicit. – in S'machot, the passage just before the definition of the Imahot reads: "We do not call male and female slaves 'Father So-and-so, Mother So-and-so'."

In B'rachot, the definition of Imahot is followed by this passage: "What is the reason for this exclusivity with regard to the Patriarchs?... the reason the sons of Jacob are not called patriarchs is beyond Jacob, they are not significant enough to be referred to as patriarchs." By implication, Bilhah and Zilpah are likewise excluded as not significant enough.

Talmudic attitude toward slaves

Other passages surrounding these show a clear rabbinic bias against slaves. I'm going to combine and paraphrase the material from S'machot and B'rachot here.

"One does not eulogize slaves and maidservants."

When Rabbi Eliezer's maidservant died, his students entered to console him. When his attempts to avoid them failed, he confronted them: "what does one say about [slaves] when they die? Just as we say to a person about his ox or donkey which died: May the Omnipresent replenish your loss, as the connection between a master and his slave is only financial in nature." Or, as stated more crassly in S'machot, "We do not receive condolence for slaves because they are reckoned as animals."

There is, unfortunately, much more where that comes from, with pronouncements from such g'dolim such as Rav Yehuda, Rambam, and my namesake Rabbi Akiva that leave me very uncomfortable.

Do these statements make me respect these great rabbis less? No, they do not – because it seems to me that those attitudes were part of the worldview common in that society. Here is the parallel: just as the argument was made that a patriarchal worldview led to the Imahot's significance being understated in the Torah, I believe that the then-common worldview led to Bilhah and Zilpah's significance being minimized because they were slaves.

Z'chut Imahot

Okay, so you may be thinking that Rabbinic bias against Bilhah and Zilpah for their status as slaves doesn't prove they are worthy of being included as Imahot. Perhaps the fact that they are in fact the ancestresses of a third of the nation in the desert isn't sufficiently persuasive. After all – like the Avot, there is a common belief that the Imahot had "z'chut" - significant virtue sufficient to sway God's actions.

Now the Torah gives direct evidence of the special status of Sarah and Rebecca, because the text tells us that God speaks directly to both. We also hear the story of Rebekah's hospitality when she generously drew water for Avraham's slave and all his camels – and how she then agreed to go travel far from her family to marry Isaac, a man she had never met.

For Rachel and Leah, though, there are no such details in the p'shat. So, of course, our sages filled in with midrash. There are a number of these, involving varying degrees of apparent inventiveness.

However, one major and often quoted midrashic source explaining "z'chut imahot" is quite troubling:

"It was for the sake of Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah that the Holy One, Blessed be He, redeemed the Israelites from Egypt. As a reward for Sarah, who

seized Hagar and got her into Abraham's bed... As a reward for Rachel, who seized Bilhah and got her into Jacob's bed. As a reward for Leah, who seized Zilpah and got her into Jacob's bed.” (Seder Eliyahu Rabbah 25)

I want to call your attention to the word “seized”. Lest there be question about what is implied here, the Hebrew word is “t'fusah”. The noun form of this word, “t'fusah”, is defined by Jastrow as “the outraged woman, as opposed to m'fusah, the seduced.”

Let's be blunt: our sages credit the Matriarchs for repeated sexual assault of their own maidservants. And they believed that the virtue of these acts was the motivator that led God to redeem the children of Israel from Egypt. **This** is their z'chut!

I don't know about you, but this does not sit well with me. I prefer to propose my own midrash:

Maybe, Bilhah and Zilpah were virtuous, loyal servants to their half-sisters Rachel and Leah. Loyal enough that they would consent to be used as pawns in the tit-for-tat motherhood competition between rival sisters. Loyal enough that they would readily submit to become concubines to Jacob, knowing that the best scenario is that their mistresses would be counted as mothers to their children while they would be largely ignored and forgotten; or, as happened to Hagar their mistress could change her mind at any time, leading the children to be disavowed, disinherited, and banished into the wilderness. Or perhaps enslaved as Bilhah and Zilpah were themselves by their own father. In my mind, selfless loyalty like that is z'chut. Z'chut sufficient to earn Bilhah and Zilpah a place in the ranks of the Imahot. The kind of z'chut that may well convince God to show similar loyalty to us despite our collective transgressions.

Conclusion

Returning to Rabbi Golinkin's responsum, he states that changing the formulation of the statutory prayers is permissible for two reasons only, if one also has halachik sources and liturgical precedents to support a change:

1. In order not to recite something patently false
2. In order not to actively offend.

Well, I'm offended. I am offended by the Rabbis' attitude about slavery. I'm offended about what passes for z'chut with at least some of our sages. And I'm offended by the exclusion of two mothers who were slaves but who were also ancestresses to a third of B'nai Yisrael.

Now, I respect those who value “Keva”, which translates as “fixity” or “establishment”, and feel that the text of the Amidah is sacrosanct and should not be changed.

But if you are among those who favor the inclusion of the Imahot, please ask yourself the following question: if it is wrong to exclude women who were limited in their significance by their society and the Rabbis, is it not also wrong to continue the exclusion of two mothers simply because they themselves were born to the wrong mother?

Our ideology no longer agrees with the views of the Talmudic rabbis about slavery. And if we choose to modify the Amidah in a way to express our “lofty aspirations” we should not reflect those views.

My intent here is to start a conversation in our Kahal, not to provoke unilateral action. So while I hope that I have been persuasive today, I do not encourage our leaders to make any liturgical changes until there is an opportunity for community study and discussion.

I will close, though, by saying that at my seder this year, I will have a different answer to “who knows six.”

Shabbat Shalom.

Source Sheet

Sefaria Source Sheet: Bilhah and Zilpah as Imahot? By Akiva Holzer

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