

The story of how Lavan switches out Leah for Rachel is a well-known narrative. It is told pretty simply; Jacob loved Rachel and wanted to marry her. But on their wedding day Lavan puts Leah in Rachel's place and Jacob marries her instead. He wakes up the next morning next to the wrong sister, and is rightly upset, saying 'what is this you have done to me!' Lavan gives the tawdry excuse that the older sister has to be married off before the younger. For that reason, he has effectively facilitated what would today no doubt be considered the assault of both Jacob and Leah, one of whom is with a woman he didn't intend to marry, and the other of whom is sleeping with someone who thinks he is with someone else. Neither state is a particularly welcome one and we can understand Jacob's anger.

You may recall how the ruse played out. Rachel and Jacob knew that Lavan might try something so the midrash teaches they developed some simanim, or signs.

Maybe something like a passcode. Rachel, is that really you under the veil? And she would give the key code and Jacob would know. So when he asked, the woman in the veil gave him the simanim, the signs, the passcode, and for the purpose of the story that was sufficient to convince Jacob that Rachel was there next to him. So what happened?

The classic explanation is that Rachel did not want to embarrass her sister. Say they get to the chuppah, Jacob asks his question, and the woman there does not know the answer. The wedding is called off right then and there and that is something that no one gets over very quickly, if ever. The sacrifice of Rachel here is significant - so strong is her desire to save her sister from public shaming that she is willing to risk never being married to Jacob; she doesn't know that her father's response will be to promise her to Jacob for more years of his work. She could have been setting aside her dreams for the sake of her sister and for that selflessness she is, from the perspective of

the text, eventually rewarded not only with marriage but with children.

There are two stories of a kind of password or sign that I want to share. One I've heard many times and you may have as well. The second took place this week and it was so powerful and in a way shocking and debilitating that I wanted to make sure you knew about it as well. The fact that it became known in the week where we read about this narrative of the passwords of Jacob, Rachel, and Leah is one of those connections of Torah and our times that I will leave for you to consider.

The first is a Holocaust narrative, or better a liberation narrative. You know of course that many children were - in Rachel like fashion - selflessly given up by their parents and put in the care of either non-Jewish neighbors, orphanages, or schools that would take them and raise them as if they were their own, and obviously like they were not Jewish children. So when these schools and orphanages were combed following the war trying to find

the Jewish children how do you do that - some had scarcely any memory of their birth parents, let alone their Jewish identity. What would the passcode be to find the Jewish children? Sh'ma Yisrael. Those looking knew that no matter what, Jewish parents would have tucked their kids into bed at night saying the Sh'ma. They certainly did not hear it in the orphanage. So any child who joined in, heck probably even any child that knew to cover their eyes, could be rescued, redeemed, and perhaps even reunited with parents or family. Sh'ma is one Jewish passcode.

Here's the second. As you know Israel has set up humanitarian corridors and held fire so that civilians could go to zones of Gaza where they would more likely be safe. The main corridor is to evacuate non-combatants from northern Gaza and allow them to flee toward southern Gaza. This is by no means convenient for Gaza's residents. It is by all means well beyond what other countries in this same situation would consider doing.

Recently, as a mass of humanity utilized this corridor to evacuate an area that was likely to soon be subject to IDF operations, Israeli soldiers made an announcement to the passing crowd. Here is how it was reported:

“Announcements are being made in Hebrew, in the hopes of locating any hostages who are being smuggled into the southern half of Gaza. One such announcement declared: “If there are any children here who speak Hebrew, run to us, al tifchad, don’t be afraid.”

There is much that has been upended about our, and especially our brothers and sisters in Israel’s expectations about what normal life would entail. Many thought the army would come much quicker than it did on October 7th. I guarantee you the army expected that of itself as well. Many are seeking to evaluate whether the government was distracted from security affairs by the so-called judicial reform controversy. Many are asking whether attention was paid to the Jews living on the West Bank over adequate border security for those living near Gaza due to the outsized political power of the settler movement

represented in the pre-war cabinet. I'm not weighing in on any of those, only pointing out some of the open-ended questions that the conclusion of this war, may it be soon and successful, will bring in its wake.

But one additional and rather wrenching question is how is it possible that in Israel we would need, even for a moment, a keyword that would help to identify hidden Jewish children who were violently and mercilessly swept from their homes and are now the subject of Israel's most important military and diplomatic effort since its founding. That keyword or phrase is *al tifchad*, don't be afraid. No children were recovered from that simple but profound effort, and it represents all of our most fervent prayer and plea, which is simply stated: Bring Them Home. All of them. Now. We will be able to tell them when they do return where they belong that we prayed for them, supported those working tirelessly for their release, and were thankful for when any of them were or will be reunited with their loving families. May their fear be lessened in what we hope is their certain knowledge that

we are with them. And may we never again need a secret sign to find missing Jewish children, but instead see them laughing, playing, learning, and growing in an Israel at peace.

Shabbat shalom.