

Vayetze: Davening with Six Imahot

Congregation Netivot Shalom

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In Vayetzi, we and Jacob meet the four daughters of Laban. Yes, four-- go argue with Rashi. When it ends, Jacob leaves with 12 children by those four women: our matriarchs, Rachel and Leah, and their half sisters, Bilhah and Zilpah. Who are not matriarchs.

I have a request for you. For the rest of this drash, will you suspend your intellectual brain, the part of you that analyzes and compares and judges? Instead, as I talk, note how your body feels.

Here is Bilhah's story:

There are 18 lines in the Five Books of Torah that mention her. Her status in Jacob's household is described using four labels, social categories that have been translated in many ways.

In this parsha, Laban gives her to Rachel as an amah-- handmaiden. She becomes an isha, a wife, when Rachel sets her free to be married to Jacob.

Later, when he goes to meet his brother Easu, she is a shifchah, a maid (perhaps enslaved?), and Jacob puts her and Zilpah at the front of the household with their children. When Reuben moves her bed from Jacob's tent (a reasonable translation I think), she's called a secondary wife-- pilghesh.

We do know more about Bilhah than her status and progeny. Midrash tells us that she looked like a mountain while pregnant. After Rachel's death Bilhah took her place as wet nurse to Benjamin, her breasts miraculously filled with milk. She raised him and Joseph as her own. Joseph treated her sons as brothers. And Jacob moved Bilhah's bed to his tent. She cared for him when he was ill and was with him as he died. Fearful of Joseph's reaction and knowing his relationship with her, Jacob's sons asked Bilah to be the messenger and tell Joseph his father was dead.

Bilhah's story in the Torah ends with the counting of her lineage. Because she married Jacob lovingly, her children are in the list of Jacob's descendants as "persons in all," just like the children of her sisters Rachel and Leah.

But on Shabbat, the blessing for your daughters is for them to be like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah. When we sing at the Seder table, six are the books of the Mishnah. Four are the mamas. In the opening blessing of the Amidah, the blessing of our ancestors, there are four Imahot.

Why?

There's rabbinical precedent for recognizing the six matriarchs. And after the deaths of Rachel and Leah, the Zohar tells us that the Shekhinah passed from their households to Bilhah's. That wasn't enough? Reasons for excluding them shift like Bilhah's status. Their souls were not as lofty as their sisters, they didn't accept Jacob's G-d as their own. There's a real, uncomplicated reason why there are not six. Bilhah and Zilpah are not counted as equals.

That speaks to me as a person not always counted as an equal by my fellow Jews. It's sadly remarkable how included I am in our community. Elsewhere, and as a 'Shul Hopper' I've been in many 'elsewheres' of the Jewish world, I may be present but only partially acknowledged, often excluded.

That's because I exist in a halachic liminality, as a woman, a Reform convert, patrilineal and thus the wrong half, and a lesbian married to a non-Jew.

Elsewhere, they decide I am not a Jew.
Here, I'm on the bimah.
Like Bilhah, I exist even if some exclude me.

I went to Wellesley College, an all women's college. When we sing 'America the Beautiful,' written by an alumna and lesbian, you'll hear this "Crown thy good in SISTERHOOD." Davening with Six Imahot feels like that moment. Solidarity connects us to every other woman past, present, and future as we scream, demanding our place as equals.

The reason why Jews still exist as a people is that we are empowered to persist. Empowered because we make our own minhagim (customs), melodies, languages, and prayers. We live our lives with a Jewish compass- navigating 'now' with our past to guide us.

Is Six Imahot okay? Did I read the compass wrong and an iceberg of radical social justice looms before me? Am I a feminist adding women to liturgy because of my secular values? I am not authoring a responsa, my practice is not halachic, this is not

about Jewish law. My compass guides me through choppy waters on course to claim my place, to demand inclusion. For myself and all who are denied theirs.

Bilhah has been excluded, present but only partially acknowledged, not an equal.

Her name means “to become alarmed.” Alarmed: a feeling in your body that makes it hard to accept anything new. Midrash tells us that as an infant, Bilhah would be unsettled, difficult, upset when it came time to feed her- she would not nurse.

What have you been feeling in your body? Come talk to me after kiddush-- come share with me how the idea of six equal matriarchs feels for you.

I invite you to consider including Bilhah and Zilpah. For me it comes like sweetness on my tongue, love and gratitude and awe for the women who led us here. Sisterhood.

Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah, Zilpah, and Bilhah.

Sweetness.