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THE WHEEL OF FORTUNE

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In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman ז"ל אהב בן פנחס ז"ל
who loved and supported Torah learning.

VAYETZEI

THE WHEEL OF FORTUNE

When a President begins his term, he typically has a pretty high approval rating. As time passes however, his ratings will fluctuate up and down.

We are seeing the same scenario now with the current administration.

As a general rule, the lives of all public servants rise and fall with the polls—when poll results are good, then life is good, and when poll results are bad, then life is, well, otherwise.

Life has its ups and downs—and for a president, those ups and downs come very swiftly and very sharply. But we already know about these ups and downs from our weekly Torah portion, which is really the story of everyone's life.

Anyone who looks carefully at this week's Torah portion will see that it contains every element of life.

Let's start with the example of the story of Rochel and Leah. Our Patriarch Yaakov arrives in Charan with the goal of getting married to Rochel. As Rashi quotes from the Talmud, "Everyone would say, 'Rivkah had two sons and Lavan had two daughters—the older son for the older daughter and the younger son for the younger daughter.'" That's why Leah & Rochel would ask every traveling visitor from Canaan how their destined mate was doing...

To Rochel, they would say, "Ah Jacob – what a special young man! So educated...he was the valedictorian of his class, everyone speaks so highly of him – he'll certainly go far in life!" And Rochel would beam with pride.

But Leah, she would hear a different story. "Who Esau, well... he's not exactly known for his concern about safety and value of life. When he's on his motorcycle, the whole town shakes!" And Leah would cry her eyes out...

Nu? Her cries helped, and G-d heard her prayers. She succeeded in shaping her destiny and ultimately marrying Yaakov, not Eisav.

Still, it was Rochel who was always considered to be the anchor of the household. As Rashi puts it at the end of the Torah portion, when Yaakov summoned Rochel and Leah, why did he put Rochel before Leah? “Because she was the anchor of the household because of whom Yaakov had become involved with Lavan in the first place—and even Leah’s children admitted as much.”

We even see this in the Torah’s verses themselves: “And Yaakov also loved Rochel, more than Leah... And G-d saw that Leah was spurned...” Additionally, when Leah had her first son, she said, “Now my husband will love me...” and when she had her second, Shimon, she said, “G-d heard that I had been spurned...” and so on.

Now here, the wheel of fortune suddenly began to turn: Rochel started getting jealous of her sister. Until now, Rochel had been #1—and suddenly, everything changes and she found herself asking Yaakov to pray for her to have children!

Rashi tells us what Rochel was so afraid of: “She was afraid of becoming Eisav’s lot—maybe Yaakov would divorce her because she had not yet given him any children, and even the evil Eisav thought the same thing when he heard that she had not yet had any children...” Rashi further comments in the next verse: “I,” meaning, Rochel, “had become an object of scorn because I had been barren and they would say about me that I would end up in Eisav’s lot...”

For the same reason that Leah thought that she would need to marry Eisav, now Rochel was afraid of the same thing! Rochel, how had been sure of her position in Yaakov’s household, was suddenly now worrying about the same thing that Leah had worried about years earlier.

When we really look at the story of Rochel and Leah, we all can relate to it.

We all have moments when we think, “That will never happen to us! Not in a million years!” And then, all of a sudden, it does.

Afterwards, we find ourselves asking, “Where will we get the strength to stand strong and not give up in tough times like those that affected Rochel and Leah?”

About this very problem, we read in the beginning of our Torah portion that Yaakov, while on the road to Charan from the Holy Land, stopped at the location of Mt. Moriah, where the Temple was later built, to pray the Maariv night service, as Rashi tells us.

Now, we all know that Avraham established the morning Shacharis prayer, Yitzchok established the Minchah afternoon prayer and Yaakov established the night Maariv prayers.

Shacharis symbolizes the beginning of the day, when the sun rises and we are fresh, happy, in good spirits and have the whole world going our way. Thus, Shacharis symbolizes when life is good and everything is going the way it should.

This is also symbolized by the life of Avraham, who progressed from level to economic level throughout his life, constantly getting richer and always having kings and royalty court his attention.

Maariv, on the other hand, which was established by Yaakov, is recited at night—when it's dark and cold and we're tired and can't see the road ahead. This symbolizes a reversal of fortune, when things are not exactly going our way. At such times, a person cannot see the light at the end of the tunnel and feels isolated and depressed—like Yaakov, whose entire life was one long chain of misfortune. As Yaakov himself said to the Pharaoh: "My years have been few and hard," referring to his troubles with Eisav, Lavan, his daughter Dinah, sons Yosef and Shimon and so on. Why, even in the womb, he had trouble with his twin Esav!

To all this, Judaism responds that one should not pray and thank G-d only when things are going well, rather, even when one undergoes the dark trials of the night, when the sun sets on you and you feel lost—that's exactly when we are taught to recite the Maariv prayer. That's exactly the time one needs to connect to G-d and ask for His help—and to trust that G-d will help.

The Maariv prayer will keep you from giving up and losing faith, G-d-forbid, reminding you that good days are still to come.

After all, in reality, everyone prays throughout the day—because there are "morning" moments every day and "night" moments every day. And by praying, one trusts in G-d, which gives him or her the strength to turn night into day.

In the merit of our praying Maariv, meaning, trusting in G-d when life gets dark, G-d grants us the merit of reciting yet another prayer: the Musaf prayer. "Musaf" means "addition."

Now, didn't we just say that the three Patriarchs established our prayers? Where did Musaf come from? However, the commentator Rokanti (or, as some pronounce him, Riknati) explains that Musaf symbolizes a fourth Torah figure: Yosef, the son of Rochel.

In this week's Torah portion, we read how Rochel added a prayer to have another son when Yosef was born. She prayed, "Yosef Hashem li bein acheir"—"May G-d add to me another son." It is this prayer that we add on holidays and days of joy—meaning

that when a person has faith in G-d on bad days, he or she will merit many happy days on which he or she can offer the Musaf prayer.

My friends, let us hope and pray that all our days be happy, bright and sunny days, filled with all of G-d's blessings!

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