

# Undeserved Blessings

Parasha Vayetzai 5779

## Keshet Israel

November, 19 2018

I don't think there's a better parsha to celebrate a birth than Vayetzai – filled as it is with births and baby namings. And we're glad that here at KI we're able to join in to the theme of this parsha with our own celebration of a new baby born to X.

One of the strong themes of this parsha, which is then picked up by later sources in the Jewish tradition, is that names are important. For more mystical thinkers, names are important as destiny, they are a quasi-prophecy as to the person's direction in life. For less mystically inclined types, names are important in that the lessons they remind us of and the people they recall play a role in our development. Either way the parsha makes clear that the founders of the Jewish people put a lot of thought into their children's names.

The name Yehuda (Judah), Leah's fourth son, is explained in the Torah as follows.

וַתֵּהֵר עוֹד וַתֵּלֶד בֵּן, וַתֹּאמֶר הַפֶּעַם אֹדֶה אֶת יְהוָה עַל כֵּן קָרָאתָ שְׁמוֹ, יְהוּדָה; וַתַּעֲמֵד, מִלְדֹת

And she conceived again, and bore a son; and she said: 'This time will I praise the LORD.' Therefore she called his name Judah; and she left off bearing. (Bereishis 29:35)

Yehuda, who would become the father of the royal house of Israel, was named because of the deep gratitude his mother felt for having had another son. His name in Hebrew literally means to thank God.

The Talmud (Berachot 7b) has an interesting perspective on all this:

מִיּוֹם שֶׁבְּרָא הַקֶּב"ה אֶת עוֹלָמוֹ לֹא הָיָה אָדָם שֶׁהוֹדָה לַהֲקִיב"ה עַד שֶׁבָּאתָה לֵאמֹר וְהוֹדֵתוּ שְׂנֵאמַר: הַפֶּעַם אֹדֶה אֶת ה'

Says the Talmud, from the day of creation and on no one had ever expressed gratitude to God, until Leah thanked Him for Yehuda. This is a very strange statement: Did not Noach, and Avraham and Sarah, and Yitzchak and Rivka ever thank God? Is it possible that none of the great figures who preceded Leah ever do something as basic as thanking God?

Leah does not even seem to be so grateful to God. In fact, it took her until her fourth son to thank God! She did not thank him for the first three, whose names reflected her hopes to become a more beloved wife, and now she is singled out for her gratitude to God!

Rashi explains (in Berachot and less clearly on the Torah), and this theme is developed by Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz, that Leah thanked God for something specific, which had never been done before. Here's the context for her thanks: The matriarchs were prophetesses and they knew that Yaakov would have twelve tribes with four wives – in other words, each wife should have three sons. Leah had three sons and assumed she had been given her share of blessings. But then something unexpected happened. Leah had a fourth son.

After having a fourth son, Leah realized she had now been given more than her share, and this precipitated a

new type of gratitude in her. Until now she had thanked God, so had her predecessors, but there was always a sense that they were also getting something they perhaps deserved. This time Leah thanked God with the full understanding that she did not deserve this gift – she had been given more than her fair share, an earned and undeserved gift. This immense feeling of gratitude was something new in human history. Every other gratitude was sincere but mixed with the feeling that it was earned somehow. Leah invented the gratitude of God, which was completely unearned.

When we think about any baby, a new life, we have a tendency to imagine that it's an earned gift, we have somehow deserved it. We're good people and plan to have a good home, and all the other rationalizations we use to explain why we should be given a child. But Leah was in fact correct: any child is an unearned gift. Any life God chooses to entrust in our care, to give us the opportunity to love and mold and watch grow, is far beyond anything we could hope to have earned. It's a completely unearned and undeserved blessing.

We can work to be worthy of our children, in retrospect we may deserve having been given the opportunity – but the blessing of a child, of new life, is so overwhelming and having been taught so by Leah, we must not lose sight of that. As a community we have been fortunate to welcome a number of new babies these past few months, with more on the way, and we hope to continue! It's a tremendous blessing for each of us to watch this process continue to unfold and to play a part in it.