

# Interpersonal Relationships



4

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2. WRJ Mission Statement: Women of Reform Judaism (WRJ) strengthens the voice of women worldwide and empowers them to create caring communities, nurture congregations, cultivate personal and spiritual growth, and advocate for and promote progressive Jewish values.

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# 4 - Interpersonal Relationships



## connection to original sourcebook

This overlay expands the topic of the original lesson on intimate, personal relationships to focus on the unique nature of women's relationships. The texts we will use for this lesson come from *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*. This overlay focuses on a relationship that for the Women of Reform Judaism is often most important, that of sisterhood and sisterly love. The texts below focus on the relationship between Leah and Rachel, perhaps the two most important sisters in the Torah.



## facilitator notes

- There are three different texts used here. We begin with the Torah story of the marriage of Leah to Jacob, then on to a 5th century midrash on this passage, written in the voice of Rachel, then a modern poem written in the voice of Leah. Each passage sheds new light on the nature of the sisters' relationship.
- It is recommended that you read each text aloud and discuss before moving on to the next text.
- This series of text studies should take approximately 30 minutes.



## introduction

While many are familiar with the story of how Laban, the father of Rachel and Leah, tricked Jacob into marrying his older daughter first, how much thought do we give to the how this trickery must have felt to the sisters and what it did to their relationship?

With the publication of the *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* in 2008, Women of Reform Judaism created a remarkable tool that, in the words of its editor, Dr. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, “[brings] the women of the Torah from the shadow into the limelight, from their silences into speech, from the margins to which they have often been relegated to the center of the page - for their sake, for our sake and for our children's sake. The commentary includes translation and several sections of commentary which provide new insight and new inspiration to seekers of Torah. Our texts are drawn from the Torah verse, the Post-Biblical Interpretation and Voices, which contains creative responses to each Torah portion, mainly in the form of poetry.”



## text

Now Laban had two daughters; the elder was named Leah, and the younger was named Rachel. Leah's eyes were weak, but Rachel was beautiful of form and of face. Jacob was in love with Rachel so he said, "I will work for you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel"... So Jacob labored seven years for Rachel; yet in his love for her they seemed to him but a few days... So Laban invited all the people of the place and made a feast. In the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to [Jacob], who made love to her... In the morning, look - it was Leah! And [Jacob] said to Laban, "What have you done to me? Wasn't it for Rachel that I [agreed to] serve you? Why did you deceive me?"

*Genesis 29:16-25*



## conversation

- Why do you think Laban felt the need to substitute Leah for Rachel?
- Given the description of the two sisters, how do you think they may have felt about each other?
- Do you think Rachel and Leah were complicit in the deception? If so, why do you think they would agree to it?
- Based on your understanding of what may have transpired between the sisters, what does that imply about their relationship?

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## introduction

This text draws from the midrash *Eichah Rabbah*, a rabbinic commentary on the Book of Lamentations, most likely composed in the 5th century. While the book is a collection of comments on Lamentations, it begins with 36 proems, or preliminary comments, on other biblical verses. The text is cited by Dvora Weisberg in her comments on this parasha.



## text

Midrash *Eichah Rabbah*, proem 24, explains that Rachel was a willing – albeit unhappy – partner to Laban’s plan. In this midrash, Rachel recounts her version of the events of Genesis 29. Aware that her father was plotting to deceive Jacob, she warned her future husband of Laban’s plans. Jacob and Rachel agreed upon a sign to allow Jacob to distinguish between the sisters. But then, Rachel changed her mind, realizing that if Laban’s plan failed, Leah would be shamed. Instead of thwarting her father's plot, Rachel aided her sister in the deception:

“That evening my sister took my place with Jacob and I taught her the signs I had given him so that he would think that she was Rachel. I also hid under the bed upon which they lay, and when Jacob spoke to my sister, I responded while she was silent so that he would not recognize her voice. In this way, I showed kindness to my sister; I did not act on my jealousy and saved her from disgrace.”<sup>2</sup>



## conversation

- According to this text, what was Rachel’s initial plan? How does this plan make you feel about her? What does it make you think about her relationship with Leah?
- What would you have done if you were in Rachel’s position?
- How do you think Leah might have felt about Rachel’s new plan?
- What new insight does this text provide regarding the relationship between the sisters?
- From this text, how would you describe the relationship between the sisters?

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<sup>2</sup>Dvora Weisberg in, Eskenazi, Dr. Tamara and Weiss, Rabbi Andrea, *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*, URJ Press, New York, 2008, page 177.



## text

**Leah to Her Sister** by Sherry Blumberg

My eyes are weak  
But my body is strong  
I'm not afraid to work  
I have worked and will work  
And someday will bear children  
My eyes are weak  
By my resolve is strong  
I shall have my due  
First to be married  
First to bear children  
Yet I'll not be as loved as you  
My eyes are weak  
But my love is strong  
For I have loved you  
You shall become a legend  
I will always be second  
Even in memory and in prayer



## conversation

- What new insight does this text provide regarding the relationship between the sisters?
- From this text, how would you describe the relationship between the sisters?
- Consider the relationship you have with your own sisters or women friends who are like sisters. How do you show your love for them?
- Do you find it is easier to be in friendships with men or women and why?
- In your own life, what have you found to be the unique benefits and gifts of female friendships and sisterhood?



## links to additional information

- For more on the Women's Commentary: <http://www.wrj.org/torah-womens-commentary-0>
- For more on this portion in the Torah:  
WRJ Study Guide for parashat *Vayeitzei*, the study guide for this parashah:  
<http://www.wrj.org/sites/default/files/WTC%20Study%20-%20Vayeitzei%20-%20new.pdf>  
URJ commentary of parashat *Veyeitzei*: <http://www.reformjudaism.org/sisterhood>



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