Hannah, Rachel, Leah and Woody

By Ilene A. Serlin

It was a coincidence that I read the story of Jacob and Rachel and Leah on the train en route to New York, since I was taken immediately upon arrival to a late night showing of Hannah and her Sisters, Woody Allen's latest.

So, what do these two stories have in common?

According to scholar and kabbalist Adin Steinsaltz, Leah was the "wife of Jacob's youth," while Tabei was his first love and a constant source of unfulfilled desire. While Rachel represented a romantic dream, it was Leah who bore Jacob's sons. But when Rachel finally bore a son in the Promised Land, it resulted in her own death.

Rachel symbolized a woman who seemed to have good looks, charm, intelligence - everything - but was somehow fundamentally empty. Her emptiness allowed men to project their idealized images onto her, and so the remaining a shadowy anima figure. She inspired a feeling of strong yearning, which is a constant archetype of the human soul and a component of passion.

Rachel's death was also tied to the stealing of the household gods, for Jacob had uttered a curse that the stealer of the household gods would die. Rachel conducted herself through charm rather than through responsibility, it seems that love which sets itself beyond bounds of restraint and obligation brings disaster.

By contrast, Leah's love, which was founded upon duty and family stability, prospered and produced the house of David and the lineage of Israel. Furthermore, it was Leah who was buried beside Jacob in the cave of Machpelah. If Rachel pointed to the archtypal truths of unfulfilled yearning and exile, then Leah pointed to the truths of stability, proper boundaries, and home.

This story could be read to symbolize the Hebrew truth that the romantic love of passion and unfulfilled desire is not the "true" love. The more ordinary earthly love of Jacob and Leah, and manifest through their sons, shows the truth of a love which is founded upon familial commitment and responsibility, and which results in the stability and continuity of the tribal nation through history.

The themes of romantic versus familial love, and reality versus illusion, are certainly echoed in Hannah and her Sisters. In fact, with the symmetry of a Shakespearean comedy, Hannah and her Sisters ends with each person finding the appropriate partner, and it results in birth, celebration, and continuity of the entire clan.

The right partner is known not by unfulfilled desire or frustrated yearning, but by solid companionship and regeneration through offspring. Broken marriages, inappropriate age and status differences, and broken rules are replaced with right conduct, symmetrical age and status relationships, and new vows.

The end of Hannah and her Sisters is marked not by passionate satisfaction, but by a kind of contentment in which every element has found its right place. The rightness applies not only to the partners, but also to the underlying question of religion in the film.

This religious theme runs throughout Woody Allen's perpetual search for truths of the world's great thinkers. One of the most delightful images in the film comes when Woody Allen, after exploring the Hare Krishna's and trying to convert to Catholicism, makes a totem pole of artifacts: a picture of Jesus Christ, a cross, a topping of Wonderbread and a giant jar of mayonaise. It seems to me that any Jew (or non-Jew) must realize that this is the ultimate non-ethnic food, and is therefore impossible for Woody Allen to consume. He cannot consume and digest Wonderbread, just as he cannot consume and digest Catholicism.

As echoed in the scene with his parents, Woody Allen must offer the Pebble Tabernacles Jew, and that his search and balance must somehow take place within the context of his own tribe. It is not necessary that he literally marry a Jewish woman, but only that he find contentment within the stable structure of family and tribal continuity.

Although he may feel the yearning for, and flirt with the illusion of romantic love, Woody Allen nevertheless does not choose a love which is like the Christian ideal of aesthetic love, or the medieval notion of idealized chivalrous and ephemeral love.

Instead, he chooses the earthly Hebrew love of food, family, commitment and generativity. And with this choice, Hannah and her Sisters ends on a clear note of balance and contentment for the individual and for the tribe.

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