

# Bilhah & Zilpah בִּלְהָה / זִלְפָּה

When Rachel saw that she had borne Jacob no children, she became envious of her sister; and Rachel said to Jacob, “Give me children, or I shall die.” Jacob was incensed at Rachel, and said, “Can I take the place of God, who has denied you fruit of the womb?” She said, “Here is my **maid** Bilhah. Consort with her, that she may bear on my knees and that through her I too may have children.” So, she gave him her **maid** Bilhah as concubine, and Jacob cohabited with her. Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a son. And Rachel said, “God has vindicated me; indeed, God has heeded my plea and given me a son!” - so she named him Dan. Rachel’s **maid** Bilhah conceived again and bore Jacob a second son. And Rachel said, “A fateful contest I waged with my sister; yes, and I have prevailed” - so she named him Naphtali. When Leah saw that she had stopped bearing, she took her **maid** Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as concubine. And when Leah’s **maid** Zilpah bore Jacob a son, Leah said, “What luck!” so she named him Gad. When Leah’s **maid** Zilpah bore Jacob a second son, Leah declared, “What fortune!” meaning, “Women will deem me fortunate!” so she named him Asher. (Gen 30:1-13)

While Israel stayed in that land, Reuben went and lay with Bilhah, his father’s **concubine**; and Israel found out. Now the sons of Jacob were twelve in number. The sons of Bilhah, Rachel’s **maid**: Dan and Naphtali. And the sons of Zilpah, Leah’s **maid**: Gad and Asher. These are the sons of Jacob who were born to him in Paddan-aram. (Gen. 35:22-26)

This, then, is the line of Jacob: At seventeen years of age, Joseph tended the flocks with his brothers, as a helper to the sons of his father’s **wives** Bilhah and Zilpah. (Gen 37:2)

Jacob set out from Beer-sheba. The sons of Israel put their father Jacob and their children and their **wives** in the wagons that Pharaoh had sent to transport him; and they took along their livestock and the wealth that they had amassed in the land of Canaan. Thus Jacob and all his offspring with him came to Egypt: he brought with him to Egypt his sons and grandsons, his daughters and granddaughters—all his offspring: ...these were the descendants of Zilpah, whom Laban had given to his daughter Leah. These she bore to Jacob—16 persons...these were the descendants of Bilhah, whom Laban had given to his daughter Rachel. These she bore to Jacob—7 persons in all. (Gen. 46:5-7, 18, 25, 26)

And the [brothers] appointed [the sons of Bilhah as messengers] to Joseph to say: Your father commanded before his death, saying: This you shall you say to Joseph, ‘Forgive, I urge you, the offense and guilt of your brothers who treated you so harshly.’ Therefore, please forgive the offense of the servants of the God of your father.” And Joseph was in tears as they spoke to him. (Genesis 50:16)

Bilhah, Ezem, Tolad....The sons of Naphtali: Jahziel, Guni, Jezer, and Shallum, the descendants of Bilhah. (I Chronicles 4:29; I Chronicles 7:13)

## Hebrew Language and Biblical Context

בלה (*bala*) = to wear out or to trouble  
זלף (*zalaf*) = a drop; to drip, or sprinkle.

young girl, unmarried, also: young servant girl = (*na'arah*) נערה  
handmaiden, maid(servant) = (*ama, shif-cha*) אמה, שפחה  
concubine, unofficial wife (*no ketubah*) = (*pilegesh*) פלגש  
woman, official wife (*with ketubah*) = (*eesha*) אשה

## Classical Midrash

### A compilation of classical midrash from Tamar Kedari:

When Rachel realized that she was barren, she emulated Sarah and gave Bilhah to Jacob, saying: "Just as this one was built by her rival wife, so, too, shall I be built by my rival wife" (*Gen. Rabbah*). Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah and he even loved Rachel's handmaiden Bilhah more than Zilpah, Leah's handmaiden (*Gen. Rabbati*). After Rachel's death Bilhah took her place, raising Joseph and Benjamin as if they were her own children (*Gen. Rabbah*). The newborn Benjamin needed a wet nurse and Bilhah's breasts miraculously filled with milk, even though she had ceased giving birth several years previously, and she was thus able to nurse the infant. It is said that Joseph treated Bilhah's sons as brothers, and not as the sons of a handmaiden (*Tanhuma*). Bilhah also took Rachel's place in Jacob's tent (*Gen. Rabbati*). She was close to him until his dying day and served him when he fell ill (*Pesikta Rabbati*). Bilhah was the one who informed Joseph that his father was ill. His brothers also knew of this special affinity between Joseph and Bilhah, and after Jacob's death they asked her to go and speak with Joseph on their behalf, since they feared his vengeance for their base treatment of him. (*Tanhuma*)

Now all the wives of Jacob, Leah, Rachel, Zilpah, and Bilhah, united their prayers with the prayer of Jacob, and together they beseeched God to remove the curse of barrenness from Rachel. On Rosh Hashana, the day where God sits in judgment upon the inhabitants of the earth, God remembered Rachel, and granted her a son. And Rachel said, "God has taken away my reproach," for all the people had said that she was barren because she was not a pious woman. Now that God had listened to her and opened her womb, such idle talk no longer had any basis. - *Legends of the Jews*

Lavan said, "if you ill-treat **my daughters** or take other wives besides **my daughters**—though no one else be about, remember, God will be witness between you and me." The phrase "my daughters" is written twice, referring once to Leah and Rachel and the second time to the handmaids, because Bilhah and Zilpah were also his daughters from a concubine. - *Rashi on Gen. 31:50*

And they brought their offering before the Eternal, six covered wagons” (Num. 7:3). Six corresponding to the six Matriarchs – Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Leah, Zilpah and Bilhah.

- *Bemidbar Rabbah* 12:17

Six – for the six days of creation [before Shabbat]. Six for the six matriarchs: Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah. - *Song of Songs Rabba, Esther Rabba*

Regardless of whether we view ourselves as Sarah’s or as Abraham’s heirs, Ishmael and offspring are included in our inheritance...the most convincing proof that we are correct is found in Gen. 21:13 where God promises that the son of the slave-woman (Hagar) will develop into a nation. It is important to note that the Torah does not refer to Ishmael as Abraham’s son but as *Hagar’s* son. Thus, the Torah emphasizes that Ishmael remains a slave, seeing that he is the son of a slave. If you wanted to see further proof of this look at the way the Torah describes the sons of Zilpah, i.e. Leah’s slave-woman, and the sons of Bilhah, i.e. Rachel’s slave-woman. You will observe that when the Torah described those women giving birth (Genesis 30:5) that the sons are attributed to Jacob, not to their respective mothers. This means that because Jacob slept with them in order to establish a legal bond, they became free women. In the reports of the births of all the four sons of Zilpah and Bilhah, the Torah was careful to emphasize this point.

- *Or HaChayim* (18 cent. North Africa)



### Tomb of the Matriarchs (Tiberias, Israel)

According to tradition, the following Biblical women are buried here: Bilhah, Zilpah Yocheved (mother of Moses), Zipporah (wife of Moses), Avigail (one of King David’s wives), and Elisheva (Aaron’s wife)



What do YOU think about including Bilhah and Zilpah as “official” matriarchs in our tradition?

Based on our study today, what are the arguments for or against this that you find most compelling?