

“Our Wider Purpose”

By Rabbi David Wolpe

Rachel is devastated by her barrenness and cries out to Jacob, “Give me children or I shall die!” Jacob retorts sharply to Rachel’s outburst. Why?

The renowned R. Isaac Arama explains: In the creation story woman is given two names — *Ishah* (Woman) and *Hava* (Eve). The first name teaches that, like a man (*Ish*), a woman has all the possibilities and responsibilities of bringing wisdom and goodness into the world. The second name, Hava, is additional, the potential of actually bearing children, for Hava means “mother of all life.”

What Rachel does not understand, writes Arama, is that inability to bear children does not leave women without a function, but rather leaves them still with the most important function: “A woman who is deprived of the power of childbearing will be deprived of the secondary purpose in life and left with the ability to do evil or good like the man who is barren.”

Rachel thinks that she should die because childbearing is what she was created to do. But her possible tasks in this world are far wider, and her potential far greater, than she yet knows. Jacob is distressed that she should imagine she has been created solely to bear children.

This quintessentially modern insight is included in Arama’s great work on the Torah, *Akedat Yitzkhak*, first published in 1522.