

Vayetze

In the last chapter of Deuteronomy (V'zot Habracha) 33:4 Moses refers to the Israelites as the Congregation of Jacob. Why not the congregation of Abraham or Isaac, or for that matter of Moses? And yet of all the Patriarchs, Jacob, in his early life, especially in parsha Toldot and the Parsha we read today, has the most unusual life in that he is running from one enemy such as Esau to another exploiter, Lavan. He is tricked by Lavan in regard to his marriage to Leah and has to work an additional 7 years for the woman he is deeply in love with, Rachel. Finally, he works for no money for 6 additional years tending the flocks of Lavan before he finally returns to his homeland. So why then with all these difficult earthly scenarios, are we called the children of Israel and the congregation of Jacob? My goal in this D'var Torah is to try to answer this question.

In the beginning of parsha Toldot, Jacob is referred to as an Ish Tam, a pure man, a simple man, a quiet, plain and straight forward man but that is exactly what he seems not to be.

Most contemporary commentators state that Jacob is a deceiver.

In *Genius of Genesis*, Dennis Shulman, a Rabbi and Clinical Psychologist, depicts Jacob's early years as manipulative, deceptive, and self-absorbed. This concept is clearly not in the text.

Self, Struggle and Change by Norman J. Cohen, Dean of Hebrew Union College, suggests that in the birthright scene, Jacob had been planning this by noting that this relation between the famished Esau and the scheming Jacob had been an ongoing saga and again that there was a theft of the birthright. Again it seems that this brilliant scholar has his own agenda of the narrative which is simply not in the text.

The Beginning of Wisdom (Reading Genesis) by Leon R. Kass, Professor of Social Thought at the University of Chicago has a much more realistic and thoughtful approach to the text which is consistent with what I think is an honest reading of the text. He feels Jacob wants the birthright for the privileges associated with the birthright primarily because he thinks Esau is impulsive, animal-like, and unworthy of the requirements needed to be the responsible head of the Patriarch's family. Furthermore, he approves of the sale of the birthright and bluntly states, "There is NO DECEPTION, FORCE OR THEFT."

Listen to the sentences in Toldot when Esau gives up his birthright for a bowl of Lentil soup in chapter 25 verses 32 through 34.

"And Esau said, "I am at the point of death, so of what use is my birthright to me? But Jacob said "Swear to me first." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. Jacob then gave Esau bread and Lentil stew; (and listen to these verbs), 5 of them;

he ate, and drank and he rose and he went away. Thus did Esau spurn (Hebrew term, Vayeevez et Habchorah) the birthright.

According to Chaim Potok, explaining the P'shat of the verse, these words express the feelings of the Torah. Having finished the broth, Esau does not quarrel with Jacob but goes about his business, with no apparent regard for the sacred institution of the firstborn. So as the Midrash suggests, Esau, for a bowl of soup gave up the whole idea of serving God. For me, it does not sound like Jacob stole the birthright.

Also the taking of the blessing from his father, Isaac, was most likely the urging of Rebecca in fulfilling the oracle from God, the "older shall serve the younger."

Yet the text remains disturbing. Isaac says to Esau “Your brother came DECEITFULLY and took your blessing.” Esau says “isn’t he rightfully named Jacob (supplanter)? He has supplanted me these two times: He took my birthright, and now he’s taken my blessing.” Such accusations are not leveled against any other biblical hero.

Nor does the Jacob story end here. In this week’s parsha, a similar deceit is practiced on him. After the wedding night, he discovers he has married Leah, not as he thought, his beloved Rachel. He complains to Laban.

“What is this you have done to me? Was it not for Rachel that I served you? Why then have you deceived me?” (Genesis 29:25)

Laban replies: “It is not done in our place to give the younger before the firstborn” (Genesis 29:26)

It is hard not to see this as precise measure- for- measure retribution. The younger Jacob pretended to be the older Esau. Now the elder Leah has been disguised as the younger Rachel. A fundamental principle of biblical morality is at work here as suggested by Rabbi Jonathon Sacks: “As you do, so shall you be done to.”

Yet the web of deception continues. After Rachel has given birth to Joseph, Jacob wants to return home. He has been with Laban long enough. Laban urges him to stay and tells him to name his price.

Jacob incredibly embarks on an extraordinary course of action. He tells Laban he wants no wages at all. Let Laban remove every spotted or streaked lamb from the flock, and every streaked or spotted goat. Jacob will then keep, as his hire, any newborn spotted or streaked animals from only unspotted animals.

It is an offer that speaks simultaneously to Laban’s greed and his ignorance. He seems to be getting Jacob’s labor for almost nothing. He, Jacob, is demanding no wages. And the chance of unspotted animals giving birth to spotted offspring seems remote.

Jacob knows better. In charge of Laban’s flocks, he goes through an elaborate procedure involving peeled branches of poplar, almond and plane trees, which he places in their drinking water, the result is that they do in fact produce streaked and spotted offspring.

How this happened has intrigued not only the commentators—who mostly assume that it was a miracle, God’s way of assuring Jacob’s welfare, but also scientists. Some argue that Jacob must have had an understanding of genetics. Two unspotted sheep can produce spotted offspring. Jacob had doubtless noticed this in his many years of tending Laban’s flocks.

However it happened, the result was dramatic. Jacob became rich: “In this way the man grew exceedingly prosperous and came to own large flocks, and maidservants and menservants, and camels and donkeys (Genesis 30:43)

Inevitably, Laban and his sons felt cheated. Jacob sensed their displeasure, and having counsel with his wives and being advised to leave by God, departs while Laban is away sheep shearing. Laban eventually discovers that Jacob has left, and pursues him for seven days, catching up with him in the mountains of Gilead.

The test is fraught with accusation and counteraccusation. Laban and Jacob both feel cheated. They both believe that the flocks and herds are rightfully theirs. They both regard themselves as the victim of the other's deceitfulness. The end result is that Jacob finds himself forced to run away from Laban as he was earlier forced to run away from Esau, in both cases in fear of his life.

So the question returns. What kind of man was Jacob? He seems anything but an *ish tam*, a straightforward man. And surely this is not the way for a religious role model to behave—in such a way that first his father, then his brother, then his father-in-law accuse him of deceit. What kind of story is the Torah telling us in the way it narrates the life of Jacob?

Again, the brilliant Rabbi Sacks compares Jacob to the African-American stories written by Joel Chandler Harris at the end of the 19th century. The tales of Uncle Remus and Brer Rabbit. "Such figures represent the creative way the slave community responded to the oppressor's failure to address them as human beings created in the image of God. They have a fragile body but a deceptively strong mind. Using their intelligence to outwit their stronger opponents, they are able to deconstruct and subvert, in small ways the hierarchy of dominance favoring the rich and strong. They represent the momentary freedom of the unfree, a protest against the random injustices of the world."

Rabbi Sacks suggests that is what Jacob represents in his early phase of life. He enters the world as the younger of twins. His brother is strong, ruddy, hairy, a skillful hunter, a man of the open country, and loved more by his father Isaac. Jacob is quiet, a scholar and must confront a father who loves him less. Then he finds himself at the mercy of Laban, a possessive, exploitive and deceptive figure who takes advantage of his vulnerability. Jacob is the man who—as almost all of us do at some time or other – finds that life is unfair.

Jacob represents a refusal of the weak to accept the hierarchy created by the strong. His acts are a form of defiance, an insistence on the dignity of the weak (*vis-a vis* Esau), the less loved (by Isaac), and the refugee (in Laban's house). In this sense he is a microcosm of what, historically, it has been like to be a Jew over 2 millennia.

But the Jacob we see in this parsha is not the figure whom, ultimately, we are called on to emulate. We can see why. Jacob wins his battles with Esau and Laban but only at the cost of eventually having to flee in fear of his life. Quick-wittedness is only a temporary solution.

It is only in the next parsha, after wrestling with the angel of Esau, that he receives a new name and a new identity—Israel, "because you have struggled with G-d and with men and have overcome." As Israel, he is unafraid to contend with people face to face. He no longer needs to outwit them by clever, but ultimately futile, stratagems. His children will eventually become the people whose dignity lies in the unbreakable covenant they make with G-d.

To answer the question I posed at the beginning of this Drash, I believe that we are called the congregation of Jacob or the children of Israel because throughout Jewish history we have been looked down on as pariahs, yet we refused to internalize that image, just as Jacob refused to accept the hierarchies of power or affection that condemned him to be merely second best. The Jewish people, like Jacob, relied not on physical strength, but on qualities of the mind. In the end, though, Jacob must become Israel because it is not the quick-witted victor but the hero of moral courage who stands tall in the eyes of humanity and G-d.