

## A Brief Note on a Story Cycle

*Parsha Vayetzei* describes Jacob's flight from the wrath of Esau to the refuge of *Aram Neharayim* and the safety of Rebecca's kin. There unfolds a comedic interlude; drama that is light in tone and that ends with a happy resolution.

When Jacob arrived at *Aram Neharayim*, he went to the local well where by chance he met and was instantly smitten by Rachel, his cousin, a daughter of Laban. Jacob made a pact with Laban for Rachel's hand. He would work seven years for Laban, and then Laban would deliver Rachel to him. Seven years passed and Jacob demanded his prize. Laban made a feast and that evening brought his daughter to Jacob's tent. However, it was Leah whom Laban delivered to Jacob that night, and not Rachel.

The Torah does not explain how Jacob missed this substitution, but likely he was deceived by Leah's look and feel. Jacob consorted with Leah and did not realize he was with Leah and not Rachel until the morning light. Laban artfully deflected Jacob's anger; "*It is not so done in our place, to give the younger before the first-born*". On Jacob's promise to work for another seven years, Laban agreed to deliver him Rachel. Jacob, who connived with his mother to fool Isaac into believing he was Esau, was victimized into believing that Leah was Rachel. The story cycle appears complete. Except Jacob's charade was countenanced by God, Laban's certainly was not. Jacob would need revenge on his duplicitous father-in-law.

As was want for the patriarchs, Jacob was patient and used his timely wisely. The settled life of a stationary home created the opportunity to raise a large family. Jacob was easily the most prolific of the Patriarchs. Leah though she may have been unloved was very bountiful and gave birth to four sons: Reuben Simon, Levi and Judah. Her sister's fertility was very disconcerting to a barren Rachel, and she offered Jacob her maid Bilhah, who gave birth to two sons. Leah is up to this challenge, and she offered her maid Zilpah to Jacob, who soon had two more sons. Then Leah miraculously became fertile again; she gave Jacob two more sons and one daughter Dinah. Finally the childless Rachel conceived, and Joseph was born.

As Jacob matured, he demonstrated Isaac's business acumen and most importantly, he gained a proficiency in animal husbandry. After twenty years with Laban, Jacob decided to return to the land of Canaan. Jacob sought fair restitution from Laban; Laban, however, was not so inclined. Jacob then proposed an arrangement to cull and separate their flocks, based on colouring. Jacob would take only the off-color animals. Laban sensed an advantage and agreed.

It was now Jacob's turn to deceive his uncle, and through a form of stock raising, that required teasing the animals, he stimulated Laban's entire flock into birthing off-colour offspring: "*And the flocks conceived at the sight of the rods, and the flocks brought forth streaked, speckled, and spotted*". Jacob's flock grew in size as Laban's diminished. Jacob was to return home a wealthy man, with flocks of sheep, camels and donkeys, and his greatest asset, eleven sons. In the end, Jacob overcame Laban's deceit, and Laban suffered a just end.

That left Rachel to settle accounts with her father. Before she departed with Jacob to journey to his home, she stole an idol from Laban, which she hid in her saddle pack. Laban discovered his loss and immediately gave chase. He searches Jacob's entire train until only Rachel's possessions remained to be scoured for his precious idol. Laban entered Rachel's tent, where he found her reclining on her saddle pack. A search of the tent proved fruitless, and as he approached his daughter, Rachel warned him: "*Let not my lord be angry that I cannot rise up before thee; for the manner of women is upon me*". Laban heeded her warning and the idol was never found. The story suggests that she deceived Laban one last time, her revenge for Leah. Now the story cycle was indeed complete. A timeless tale was woven.

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