

A Brief Note on Jacob's Comeuppance

One of the lingering questions, unresolved from last week's parsha, is Jacob's role in the deception practiced on Isaac. Admittedly Rebecca had acted in accordance with a divine dictate; God had taken her into His confidence about Jacob's role in His plan to realize the Covenant He had made with Abraham. Jacob's behaviour though was not driven by obedience to God; it is explained though by agreeing to Jacob's self interest in becoming his father's, and more importantly, his grandfather's heir.

Parsha Vayetzei [1] begins Jacob's tale, when fear of Esau's wrath caused him to flee his father's home and seek refuge in the lands of Rebecca's kin, in the camp of his uncle Laban. There he fell head over heels for his new-found cousin Rachel: "*And Jacob kissed Rachel, and lifted up his voice, and wept*". Jacob then sought her hand in marriage. Laban appears agreeable and a bargain is reached that required Jacob to provide Laban with seven years of labour. For a man so besot, the days passed quickly: "*So Jacob worked seven years for Rachel and they seemed to him a few days because of his love for her*".

What then followed is the most farcical episode described in the Torah. Leah, Rachel's older sister, finds her way into the wedding bed. Jacob, previously celebrated for his wisdom and judgement, does not notice the switch and consorted with Leah, thus in effect becoming wed to her and not Rachel. In the morning, Jacob noticed it was Leah that he had spent the night with and angrily confronted Laban: "*What is this you have done to me.... Why have you deceived me?*" However, upon his promise to labour a further seven years for his father-in-law, Jacob is given Rachel. Later, Laban robbed Jacob of his rightful wage, more than earning his repute as a selfish, sly and wicked man.

On the surface, the narrative appears almost light-hearted; presenting at its heart an almost ludicrous tale of swapped identities that strikingly mirrored Jacob's own deception of Isaac and at the same time delivered a healthy dose of poetic justice. Yet such view posed challenges. For example, how could Jacob spend the entire night with a woman, believing her to be his wife; a woman he had seen and thought of probably daily through seven years of service to her father? What of Rachel and Leah's complicity in the sordid affair? Importantly, these notions would appear to conflict with the heroic reputation ascribed to the Patriarchs and Matriarchs, especially in literature and liturgy. And, there is the simple tale, now reminiscent of a primitive French farce, and not the recitation of important history.

The nature of the narrative has been addressed in a number of ways. Rabbi Elazar's interpretation, which was later transcribed in the Talmud, Tractate Megillah, sanitized Rachel of any responsibility for the deception. Rachel and Jacob had been very aware of Laban's deceitful character and that he would do anything to marry off Leah, an older daughter, even if it required deceit. To guard against that threat, they exchanged a secret password. However, before their defence could be employed, Rachel unilaterally gave Leah the password, preferring to shield her sister from shame rather than her husband from pain. Another interpretation propounded that Jacob was not fooled and had discovered the deception right away. Indeed, this was all part of some divine plan that required Jacob and Leah to mate. Perhaps a good thing; she proved much more fertile than her sister.

An intensely honest interpretation of the event was recorded in *Genesis Rabbah*. It imagined an irate Jacob confronting Leah in the morning, calling her a liar and a daughter of a liar. Leah's response was casual but very direct, accusing Jacob of hypocrisy. After all she reminded him, having regard to the way he had deceived his father, he should be the last to complain.

Parsha Vayetzei, Shabbath December 2, 2006

1. Literally, *he departed*.