

THE FOLLY OF IMPETUOUS SPEECH: FOUR BIBLICAL INCIDENTS

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THE FORBIDDEN FRUIT

The Bible has vivid examples of how *Death and life are in the power of one's tongue* (Prov. 8:21). They are found as early as the story of the forbidden fruit. Adam had already heard God's command: '*But of the tree of knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat*' (Gen. 2:17). After God fashioned the woman as the man's partner in life, it seems that Adam added an extra restriction to the Divine command. According to a midrash,¹ it was Adam who informed his wife that she was neither to eat the fruit **nor touch it** since she tells the serpent that God told them '*. . . You shall not eat of it or touch it, lest you die*' (3:3). When the serpent cajoled her to eat the forbidden fruit, the woman first touched it – which did not violate God's command. Seeing that no harm instantly befell her, she must have inferred that her husband lied to her, not only about the prohibition against touching it but also about the Divine proscription against eating it. Hence she ate of the fruit and shared it with her husband. With this action the two sealed their Divine sentence and were summarily expelled from the Garden of Eden, even as they became aware of their nakedness and mortality.

If there is a chief cause in this chain of events, it may very well be Adam's adding for his wife a prohibition never imposed by God. Perhaps he thought that if he could get his wife to refrain from touching that fruit he would insure that she would not eat from it. But, in calling upon his wife to avoid even the touching of the forbidden fruit Adam spoke unwisely, and the result was expulsion from the Garden. Had Adam conveyed to his wife the exact Divine injunction without adding an extra hedge around it, the two of them might still have enjoyed a long, if not eternal, life in the Garden. Adam, however, did not keep his *lips from speaking deceit* as the Psalmist would one day teach humanity (34:14), for "a man has to bear the responsibility for what his mouth utters" (Metsudat David).

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REBEKAH'S ADVICE TO JACOB

We see the same lesson when Rebekah tried to prevent Isaac from conferring his birthright blessing on Esau, their elder son, and make him confer it rather on Jacob, the younger of the twin sons. Instead of trying to persuade her husband that Jacob, rather than Esau, deserved the blessing, she resorted to a subterfuge. She sent Jacob to fetch her *'two choice kids . . . so that I may prepare from them savory food for your father, such as he likes; and you shall take it to your father to eat, so that he may bless you before he dies'* (Gen. 27: 9-10). The smooth-skinned Jacob feared that his blind father would by touch distinguish him from the hairy Esau. He expressed his concern to his mother, that this whole act of mummery would end up with *'a curse on myself and not a blessing'* (27:12). Rebekah, seeking to allay Jacob's consternation and to assure him that her plan would not be botched, said to him: *'Let your curse be on me, my son, only obey my word'* (27:13). Little did she know!

Indeed, when Esau learned that his brother had stolen his blessing from him, he threatened to kill Jacob for the wrong he did him. Jacob was forced to run far away from his mother's home, replacing it with her brother's house in Haran. The blessing Rebekah finagled for Jacob became her own curse even as she courted it herself. At that very moment when Jacob left home, Rebekah supposed that their separation would be just for *a short while* to allow time for Esau's anger to cool. When that happened, Rebekah would bring Jacob back from Haran. But she lost her son for good. By the time Jacob returned home two decades later, Rebekah was already dead. A tongue is often a person's worst foe.

RUSH WORDS OF JACOB AND RACHEL

Rachel, Rebekah's niece and daughter-in-law, was also jinxed by gratuitous words; hers and her husband Jacob's. Envious of her sister Leah who bore children to Jacob their shared husband, Rachel desperately beseeched him: *'Give me children, or I shall die!'* (30:1). Rachel did not ask for one child only; her burning desire was to give birth to and raise more than one child. While Sarah gave birth to one child and Rebekah had only one pregnancy (though giving birth to twins), Rachel had to contend with the fecund Leah. While Rachel was pregnant with Benjamin, her second son, her husband de-

cided to leave his wives' birthplace in Paddan-aram (Haran) and return home to Canaan to his father Isaac. He decided to leave without bidding farewell to his father-in-law, fearing trouble if Laban were to learn of the departure of his most successful shepherd along with both of his daughters and their children. But Laban wanted to say goodbye to his daughters and grandchildren, so he set out to overtake Jacob. In fact, Laban also wanted to retrieve his household gods that Rachel had stolen from him. Laban did not know who had taken his idols, and accused Jacob of the theft.

Jacob, not knowing of Rachel's action, wanted to display utter disbelief that any member of his family would do such a thing. Over-confident about the rectitude of his family, Jacob answered Laban's charge: *'Anyone with whom you find your gods shall not live'* (31:32). Though Laban did not find his gods, the victim of Jacob's rash call for the death of the thief was to be his beloved wife Rachel. Rachel who desired so much to bear and bring up more than one child, who preferred death to childlessness, would die in the childbirth of her second son. Rachel seems to have died a second death when Jacob – for reasons that the Torah does not give – opted to bury her on the way to Bethlehem rather than in the family's sepulcher in the nearby cave of Machpelah, where he would many years later be interred next to Leah.

Rachel's impetuous words expressing her wish to die if she did not bear a child, and Jacob's equally reckless words condemning to death the one who stole Laban's gods, presaged Rachel's fate. In Hebrew law theft is a violation of property rights, and would never incur the death penalty. Is it possible that the Psalmist was contemplating both Rachel and Jacob's misspoken and gratuitous words when he said: *Set a guard, O Lord, to my mouth* (Ps. 141:3); lest I be granted that which I have asked for?

JEPHTHAH'S VOW

Such a tragic outcome indeed befell the Israelite judge or chieftain Jephthah, who led the battle against the Ammonites who troubled his fellow Gileadites. Before he took on the enemy

Jephthah made a vow to the Lord, and said, 'If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, then whoever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return victorious from the Ammo-

nites, shall be the Lord's to be offered up by me as a burnt offering' (Jud, 11:30-31).

To be sure, Jephthah expected a domestic beast, that he would offer to God in gratitude. He surely did not anticipate that his daughter, his only child, would be the first to meet him upon his triumphant return home. Believing he had no escape from the oath he had made to God, and that consequently his daughter must be sacrificed, Jephthah went on to blame her for his egregious folly: *'Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low; you have become the cause of great trouble to me'* (11:35). To blame his daughter for coming out of the house to greet her heroic father was blatantly shirking his own responsibility for this terrible tragedy. Indeed, it evinced his ignorance in understanding the Torah. Firstly, Jephthah blundered just by taking an oath using God's name, invoking the Divine name needlessly. Furthermore, Jephthah could have redeemed his daughter from becoming a burnt-offering by providing in her stead a proper sacrificial animal; surely, had a donkey or dog "greeted" him first upon his return home he would have done so. But Jephthah, rather than owning up to his folly in twice making hasty speeches, first with the oath and second with his cruel words to his daughter, preferred to blame her for the calamity he himself had inflicted.

This whole sorry episode demonstrates that a person must use discretion and think about his words before speaking them, lest he suffer adverse consequences for his verbosity. The Bible is a testament to this fundamental truth.

NOTES

1. Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews, Volume 1* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1937).