

PATRIARCHAL HISTORY: ACTION AND REACTION

JEFFREY M. COHEN

Jacob's hurried flight from his father-in-law Laban's home (Gen. 31) occasioned a double family crisis. Unknown to Jacob, his wife Rachel, in her zeal to rid her father of his idolatrous practices, steals the *terafim*, the miniature idols worshipped by him (31:19). Laban vents his spleen on Jacob on account of that, and also because Jacob had not told him in advance of his decision to leave so that he could have sent his daughters and grandchildren off in a grand manner and kissed them goodbye (vv. 27-28).

The Torah appears to vindicate Laban's sense of outrage through its employment of the phrase '*Vayyignov Yaakov et lev Lavan* [literally: And Jacob stole the mind of Laban].' That is, he deceived him *by not telling him that he was about to flee* (31:20). This particular idiom "to steal [the mind]" is clearly employed in order to create a dual link with Laban's second charge: Namely, '*Lamah ganavta et elohai* [Why did you **steal** my gods]?' (v. 30). The same verb is used to describe Rachel's action: *Vatignov Rachel* [And Rachel stole] rather than the equally suitable *Vatikah Rachel* [And Rachel took]. Thus, Jacob is cast in the role of a serial deceiver: Previously of his father and brother, and now a perpetrator of a double deception on his father-in-law.

However, things are rarely black and white, and we have to put Laban's anger into its proper context. First, Jacob had, a while earlier, already alerted Laban to the fact that he was preparing to leave his home and employ:

And it came to pass, when Rachel had borne Joseph, that Jacob said unto Laban: 'Send me away, that I may go to my own place, and to my country. Give me my wives and my children for whom I served thee, and let me go' And he [Laban] said: 'Appoint me thy wages, and I will give it' (30:28).

It was thus clearly understood between the two that the ensuing arrangement on the speckled and spotted sheep, the agreed settlement of account, meant that Jacob would then make good his departure. The fact that Jacob

Jeffrey M. Cohen is rabbi emeritus of the Stanmore Synagogue in London. He is the author of several books, the most recent of which are 1001 Questions and Answers on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur (1997), Issues of the Day (1999), Let My People Go: Insights into Pesach and the Haggadah (2002), and 500 Questions and Answers on Chanukah (2005).

had to flee suggests that Laban had clearly failed to face up to that fact, and had initiated a process of delaying tactics and obstruction. Furthermore, if we go back to the early period of Jacob's arrival at Laban's home, we find that Laban was the one who "stole the mind" of Jacob, by bringing the heavily-veiled Leah to the bed chamber instead of Rachel. So we have here a web of domestic deceit, with Laban, the deceiver, being in turn deceived by Jacob.

Nevertheless, however much Laban may have deserved what Jacob did to him, and however much, at an earlier time, Jacob may have been entitled to the firstborn's blessing that he extracted, yet those acts of deception could still not be morally justified. Perhaps to underscore this, as the story unfolds we find Jacob being punished by becoming the victim of an act of deception uncannily similar to the one he had perpetrated on his father. At some future time this was crystallized into a proverb about fathers eating unripe grapes and the teeth of children being set on edge (Jer. 31:28; Ezek. 18:2). That pattern of fateful retaliation was described graphically by Hillel when he saw a skull floating on the water: "Because you drowned others they have drowned you; but the end will be that those who have drowned you will themselves be drowned."¹ Hillel was certainly not commending that unstoppable spiral of violence. He was merely commenting on its inevitability in the light of the patterns of violence he had witnessed.

That pattern was already discernible in the lives of the matriarchs and patriarchs. Jacob had behaved furtively, and, by means of subterfuge and deception, he had extracted from his father the firstborn's blessing. He did it by colluding with his mother, Rebekah, to deceive her husband, Isaac. In a telling re-run of that situation, Jacob, like his father before him, becomes the victim of a deception by his wife Rachel, who behaves furtively and steals something from her father behind the back of Jacob, her husband. The Torah once again employs vocabulary that forces us to make that episodic linkage: *And Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen them* (31:32) – just as Isaac had not known that Jacob was stealing his brother's blessing.

Thus, linkage is not only created through the similarity of fateful events, but also through the vocabulary employed to describe those events and to reinforce the underlying points of contact. A shared *leitmotif*, such as the repeated use of the verb "*lehakkir* [to recognize]," provides a clear illustration of this device in the patriarchal narratives.

After Laban alleged that Jacob had stolen his gods, the outraged Jacob retorted: '*Hakker lekha mah immadi* [See if you recognise anything of your own among my possessions]' (31:32). That identical verb had previously been employed in the story of Jacob's deception of his father: *V'lo hikiro* [And he (Isaac) did not recognize him] (27:23).

Again, when the brothers came running to their aged father, Jacob, and asked him to identify the blood-stained shredded garment to determine whether it was indeed Joseph's coat of many colors, they used that same phrase, laden with bitter family association: '*Hakker-na* [recognize please]' . . . *Vayyakirah* [And he recognized it] (37:32-33).

It is not coincidental that the Torah places the episode of Judah and Tamar (Ch. 38) immediately following the latter episode. Rashi quotes the explanation that Judah was demoted as leader by his brothers when they saw the unremitting anguish of their father at the sight of the coat. They blamed Judah for suggesting that Joseph be sold, rather than returned safely to his father.² However, against the backcloth of the recurring motif of disguise and deception that we have been tracing, it will be seen that this episode is contextually in its most appropriate position for quite another reason.

The parallels are once again striking: The underlying cause of the discord is a domestic injustice. Tamar is the injured party, deprived, much like Esau, of a familial status, one which was rightly due to her by reason of her erstwhile position as wife of the firstborn. She is kept in limbo, growing older while no levirate marriage was contracted and no recognition accorded. So she resorted to a deception almost identical to the one perpetrated earlier within her father-in-law's family. It was thus a deception that he would "recognize," and perhaps accept as morally justified in the circumstances.

Tamar would certainly have heard of Jacob and Rebekah's use of disguise and deception, and she re-enacts the circumstances. She disguises herself in the guise of a harlot, and entices Judah to lie with her, demanding his signet, cord and staff as a surety for payment of her fee. At the denouement of the episode, she confronts her father-in-law with the words, redolent in his family with echoes of deceit and retribution, '*Hakker na* [Recognize, if you will] . . .' (38:25). It is this recurring *leitmotif*, we suggest, that informs the juxtaposition of the two accounts, already similar thematically: the hoodwinking of the aged Jacob and of his son Judah.

Once more, in the story of the arrival of Joseph's brothers in Egypt, the objective of the double employment of the "*hakker*" *leitmotif* in succeeding verses is obvious: *Vayyar Yosef et echav vayyakireim* [And Joseph saw his brothers and recognized them] (42:7); *Vayyaker Yosef et echav v'heim lo hikkiruhu* [And Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him] (42:8).

The sages account for the brothers' failure to recognize Joseph on the grounds that he had left them as an immature stripling, not yet endowed with a beard, whereas at the time of reunion his appearance would have changed dramatically.³ Rashbam adds the extra and significant factor of Joseph now being dressed in royal robes.⁴ This also throws into relief the role of clothing as a medium of concealment and deceit in all these episodes, and underlies the comment in the Talmud (Sanhedrin 37a) on the phrase *And he* [Isaac] *smelled the smell of his* *begadav* [clothing] (27:27): "Do not read *begadav*, but *bogdav* [those who would deal treacherously with him]."

In all the above situations there is a single connecting theme, namely disguise, subterfuge and ultimate recognition and disclosure. And it is the verb "*hakker* [to recognize]" that serves as the link tying all those situations together, and teaching the simple lesson that we reap as we sow. Jacob's deception left its mark on the next generation, with his other sons inflicting a similar deception on him. Just as Jacob had used Esau's clothing to deceive his father, so his sons employed the blood-stained and ripped coat of many colors to convince him that Joseph had been slain by a wild beast. That trait of deception was again employed by Tamar to deceive Judah and by Joseph in keeping his identity from his brothers when they came down to Egypt, using it to his advantage to further his plan to get his family down to Egypt and to fulfil the destiny of his dreams.

Significantly, one of the stages of Joseph's subterfuge was to hide a silver cup in Benjamin's sack and to charge him with theft. It is more than significant that Benjamin was the son of Rachel, who had stolen her father's idols and hidden them. Thus, the subterfuge of the mother was later visited upon her child.

The rabbis in Sotah 34a state "*Ma'aseh avot siman lebanim* [the actions of the fathers are a sign for the children]." By that they meant that history repeats itself. The episodes we have compared also demonstrate how that prin-

ciple applies in the domestic context: How ethical or unethical, moral or immoral, conduct has a tendency to repeat itself, with children picking up their parents' bad traits far more easily than their good traits, and finding themselves caught up in similar predicaments and situations.

NOTES

1. *Pirkei Avot* 2:7.
2. See Rashi on 38:1.
3. Talmud *Bava Metzi'a* 39b.
4. See Rashbam on Genesis 42:8.



RESPONSES

FROM RABBI HAYYIM HALPERN'S BOOK TORAH DIALOGUES

1. Rashi and others do not take the command to count by head literally. They believe that here too the census was done by means of a half-shekel coin as in Exodus. Abravanel feels that counting heads was not prohibited and that the passages relating to the census, for example in II Samuel 24, have been misunderstood.
2. After the Golden Calf incident (Ex. 32) Moses melts and grinds the image into powder, mixes it with water, and makes the Israelites drink the potion. The traditional commentaries generally regard the drinking in Exodus as a device for detecting guilt as it appears to be here with the *Sotah*.
3. The Torah declares that we may be distracted by our eyes and hearts to perform shameful acts. The *tzitzit* recall the commandments and our sacred responsibilities.