LEHRHAUS Over Shabbat

Vayishlach

Vol. 8, Issue 11 • 18 Kislev 5784 / December 1, 2023

CONTENTS: Lakser (Page 1); Silbermann (Page 11)

Amidst the war unfolding in Israel, we have decided to go forward and continue publishing a variety of articles to provide meaningful opportunities for our readership to engage in Torah during these difficult times.

JACOB, PURSUER OF TRUTH

Gavriel Lakser has taught at a number of yeshivot and seminaries in Israel.

There is no one more intricately linked to the identity of the Jewish people than our biblical patriarch, Jacob. It is his name that is imprinted on God's chosen nation- B'nai *Israel*- just as it is his name that is etched into the land (Eretz *Israel*) given to the Jewish people as an eternal inheritance.

However, upon close inspection of Jacob's character, one wonders whether such an association for the Jewish people is especially complementary. For, in contrast to our patriarchs Abraham and Isaac, who each demonstrate impeccable moral conduct and an unwavering faith in God, Jacob's behavior, on both fronts, appears suspect.

Deception and Fraud

The first two episodes in the Torah involving Jacob reveal him to be a shrewd and cunning figure. First, Jacob tricks his famished older brother, Esau, into selling him his birthright for a bowl of lentils. A couple of chapters later, Jacob is at it again, this time deceiving his father by disguising himself as his older brother in order to procure the blessing of the first-born. Both Isaac and Esau call out Jacob's duplicitous actions, with Isaac acknowledging, "Your brother came with deceit and took your blessing[1]" (27:35), while Esau bitterly notes the aptness of Jacob's name- "This is why his name is called Yaakov, for he has

[1] Translations are my own, except where noted.

deceived me (*va-ya'akveni*) these two times." (27:36)

In fact, divine retribution appears to be at play later in the narrative when Jacob is deceived by Laban, who tricks him into marrying Laban's older daughter, Leah, in place of the younger, Rachel, for whom Jacob had worked seven years. After Jacob realizes he has been duped and accuses Laban of deception, Laban responds with a veiled reference to Jacob's earlier craftiness in usurping the blessing, stating, "Such is not done in *our* place, to give the younger before the older" (29:25-26).[2]

Considering Jacob's less than upstanding behavior, it seems curious that our sages attribute to him the quality of *emet*- truth (*Makkot* 24a).

However, Jacob's ethical shortcomings are not limited to his guile and craftiness. Even when not resorting to trickery, Jacob's interests and motivations in his dealings with others often appear self-serving. For example, after completing his initial seven years of work for Rachel, as Rabbi Yitchak Arama observes (*Akeydat Yitzchak* 25:1), Jacob appears to use coarse language in requesting his reward from Laban- "Give me my wife, for my time is fulfilled, that I may consort with her" (29:21).

After eventually succeeding in acquiring Rachel as a wife, Jacob appears to all but abandon his first wife, Leah. Described in the Torah as the "hated" wife, it is specifically due to Jacob's lack of affection towards her that God has compassion on her and blesses her with children, while Rachel remains barren for many years (29:31).

The devastation Leah feels as a result of her rejection by Jacob is reflected in her selection of names for her first three children; Reuben- "for God has seen my affliction;" Shimon- "because God has heard that I am hated;" Levi- "so this time my husband will become attached to me" (29:32-34).

And yet, even in his relationship with his favored wife, Jacob, at times, demonstrates impatience and a lack of empathy. This is particularly evident as Rachel, feeling anguished due to her barrenness, complains to Jacob and asks him to give her a child, to which he angrily replies, "Can I take the place of God Who has denied you fruit of the womb?!" (30:2)[3]

The Midrash is critical of Jacob's harsh rhetoric:

> The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Jacob, 'Is this the way to answer a woman who is oppressed by her barrenness? By your life! Your children are destined to stand before her son Joseph.' (*Genesis Rabbah* 71:7; translation taken from sefaria.org.il).

[2] See Radak (Genesis 29:26), who sees in Laban's words a direct reference to Jacob's stealing of the blessing from Esau. Nehama Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bereshit* (World Zionist Organization, 1980), 266, also asserts that Laban's deceit of Jacob is payback for Jacob's craftiness in obtaining the blessing.

[3] Translation taken from JPS Tanakh.

Jacob's self-interest is once again on display during his reunification with Esau, where Jacob's appeasement of his brother appears both disingenuous and self-serving. First, Jacob carefully orchestrates a detailed procession of gifts to be presented before Esau (32:14-17), all in order to "gain favor in my lord's eyes" (see 33:8). Then, as he approaches his brother, Jacob prostrates himself no less than seven times in a seemingly excessive display of flattery towards Esau. It appears that Jacob's actions are motivated more by self-preservation than any genuine feelings of remorse for his earlier transgressions, or of sincere affection towards his brother.

Indeed, after practically forcing Esau to accept his gift and his mission to garner forgiveness is achieved, Jacob is quite eager to conclude their rendezvous and part ways (33:8-17).

Even as a parent, Jacob pours all his love and affection onto the one son who gives him the most pleasure while, once again, seeming oblivious to the hurt such favoritism was causing his other sons. And while Joseph's own behavior certainly contributes to his brothers' disdain for him, the text states explicitly that it was Jacob's special love for Joseph that initially inflamed that hatred (see 37:4).

In his old-age as well, Jacob's self-concern is apparent. During the seven-year drought, he sends his sons down to Egypt to procure food. Upon their return, they inform him that Shimon has been taken hostage and the only way to win his release is to return with their youngest brother, Benjamin. Jacob's immediate response is not one of concern about Shimon or even of what will be with Benjamin but, rather, one of self-pity:

> It is always me that you bereave! Joseph is no more and Shimon is no more, and now you would take away Benjamin. These things always happen to me! (42:36)[4]

Later, after instructing his sons to travel down to Egypt to purchase grain and being reminded by Judah that they were warned not to return without their youngest brother, Jacob laments, "Why did you serve me so ill by telling the man that you had another brother?" (43:6)[5]

This self-pity is once again exhibited when he is introduced to Pharaoh upon his arrival in Egypt. Responding to Pharaoh's question about his age, Jacob states, "Few and bad have been the years of my life" (47:9). Jacob's victim mentality is critiqued in the Midrash, which states that his lack of appreciation for all the good he had received from God resulted in his lifespan being shortened (*Torah Shleimah* 23, cited in Hizkuni 47:8).

Remarkably, Jacob's self-regard is evident even in his relationship with God. After awakening from his dream of the ladder, in which God promises to shield and protect him during his journey to Haran, Jacob makes the following oath:

> If God will be with me, and if He protects me on this journey that I

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

> am making, and gives me bread to eat and clothing to wear, and if I return safe to my father's house- then YHWH shall be my God. (28:20-21).[6]

Stunningly, Jacob's pledge of fealty to God is conditioned on God first following through on His vow to guard and protect him. This is hardly an expression of faith and trust in God (see *Akeydat Yitzchak*, 25:1). Sure enough, as Jacob prepares for his reunion with Esau, he is overcome with fear and calls out to God to remind Him of His promise to ensure his safe return to Canaan.[7]

Contrast Jacob's unsteady faith in God with the unwavering faith of both Abraham and Isaac whom, following similar promises issued by God, immediately proceed to build an altar to God as an act of thanksgiving (see 14:14-18; 26:24-25). And yet, even after God fulfills His word and returns Jacob home safely, Jacob appears to all but forget God's kindness and has to be reminded by God to uphold his end of the bargain and construct an altar as an expression of gratitude to his protector (35:1).[8]

With so many glaring deficiencies apparent in Jacob's character, we are left to ponder the great esteem in which he is held by the Jewish tradition.

Reformation and Atonement

Let us begin by addressing the question of Jacob's duplicitous behavior. Here, it is essential to distinguish between Jacob's conduct *prior* to his departure from Canaan and that following his relocation to Haran. For, while Jacob's antics of deceit and chicanery in the early episodes of his life are evident, we discover a radical transformation in his actions beginning with his arrival in Haran.

The first point of significance is the fact that Jacob spends 20 years of his life serving Laban while refusing any monetary compensation. And yet, despite receiving no remuneration, both Jacob's work ethic and integrity are impeccable. Note his emphasis, upon requesting his release from Laban, that he had served Laban loyally and honestly and that Laban had profited immensely from Jacob's service, a fact that Laban openly acknowledges (30:25-27).

After Laban pleads with Jacob to stay and work for him longer while offering to pay whatever wages he demands, Jacob reiterates that he has served Laban faithfully and in fact put Laban's needs ahead of his own all those years (30:29-30).

Finally, as Laban continues to press, offering again to compensate Jacob generously to remain with

[6] Ibid. This interpretation follows the view of Ramban. Rashi, on the other hand, reads Jacob's statement about YHWH becoming his God as part of the list of conditions stated just prior; in other words, 'If God protects, nourishes me, returns me home safely, *and* if He becomes a God to me…'

[7] See Malbim (on Genesis 32:8-9), who argues that Jacob's fear of Esau is a reflection of his lack of trust in God Who had already assured Jacob of His protection.

[8] See *Akeydat Yitzchak* (25:1).

him, Jacob reluctantly acquiesces but, nevertheless, remains adamant against accepting payment for his services. Instead, he suggests an arrangement that squarely puts himself at a disadvantage. He will return and herd Laban's flock while asking as compensation only those sheep and goats with unusual markings on their coats. The purpose in setting these unusual conditions is to make it abundantly clear that he has conducted himself with full transparency and honesty in tending Laban's herd. He states:

> In the future, when you go over my wages, let my honesty toward you testify for me: if there are among my goats any that are not speckled or spotted, or any sheep that are not dark-colored, they got there by theft. (30:33)[9]

Clearly, throughout his stay with Laban, first and foremost on Jacob's mind is his moral integrity and honesty.

It is only after perceiving Laban's hostility and suspicion towards him- despite having served Laban honorably- that Jacob (with God's encouragement) determines to secretly depart for Canaan. Nevertheless, Jacob's attentiveness to his integrity is, once again, front and center as he first consults with his wives on the matter, stating, "As you know, I have served your father with all my might," while Laban "cheated me, changing my wages time and time again (31:6-7).[10]

It is in consideration of Jacob's last point to his wives that makes his honesty that much more remarkable. For, despite his father-in-law's constant scheming and treachery, Jacob never allows himself to resort to similar tactics.

After learning of Jacob's clandestine departure, Laban sets foot after him and, upon catching up to him, accuses Jacob of deceit and thievery (31:27, 30). Perhaps, in part, due to his sensitivity to the nature of the charges and the fact that he did in fact depart in a secretive fashion, Jacob is initially restrained in his response to Laban's allegations. However, to Laban's charge of theft, he (having no knowledge that Rachel had stolen Laban's idols) is passionate and firm in declaring his innocence, going so far as to declare, "With whomever you find your gods, he shall not live" (31:32). When Laban's accusations of thievery are (prematurely) proven false, Jacob explodes with pent-up fury:

> Your ewes and she-goats never miscarried, nor did I feast on rams from your flock! That which was torn by my beasts I never brought to you; I myself made good the loss… Of the twenty years I spent in your household, I served you fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for your flocks; and you changed my wages time and time again! (31:38-41)[11]

[9] JPS Tanakh translation.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

Having gone the extra mile to conduct himself with utmost transparency and loyalty while in the service of the fraudulent Laban, Jacob simply cannot bear such accusations of deceit and guile. And the fact that Laban does not contest his claims once again confirms Jacob's integrity in the matter.

Later in the narrative, after Jacob's sons, Shimon and Levi, employ "deceit" (34:13) in avenging the rape of their sister, Jacob's newfound passion for honesty once again comes to the forefront. Scolding Shimon and Levi for their scheme, Jacob remarks, "You have dirtied me, making me foul among the inhabitants of the land…" (34:30)[12]

And Jacob never forgets Shimon and Levi's craftiness. Even on his deathbed, as he blesses each of his sons, he once again condemns their actions from many years prior (49:5-7).

Thus, while there is no denying the fact that Jacob employs craftiness in his early years, he appears to do everything in his power to atone for those transgressions later in life.

In fact, according to Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Jacob's reuniting with Esau in chapter 33 is essentially the story of Jacob's atonement for his stealing of the first-born blessing. Rabbi Sacks beautifully highlights the fact that, in presenting a gift to Esau, Jacob states, "Please take my *blessing* which was brought to you…" (33:11). The "blessing," argues Rabbi Sacks, is *the* blessing (see 27:28) that Jacob deceitfully stole from his older brother (Jonathan Sacks, *Essays on Ethics* (Maggid Books & Orthodox Union, 2016), 22).

In Pursuit of the Transcendent and the Substantive

Let us now turn our attention to the question of Jacob's egocentrism and selfishness. Once again, without disputing the fact that Jacob is at times motivated by self-serving interests, it is important to recognize that in all of his pursuits, regardless of his motivations, there is a relentless passion on his behalf for the substantive and enduring things in life.

Consider the birthright and the blessing of the first-born. As Ramban (25:34) points out, the birthright did not involve any material benefit. Its significance was mostly symbolic and any practical function it had would only take effect following the death of Isaac. Abarbanel argues, specifically, that the birthright inheritance was the land of Israel promised through the Abrahamic covenant (Isaac Abarbanel, *Perush Abarbanel al Hatorah,* Bereishit (Tel-Aviv: Hapoel Hamizrahi, 1984), 299). Esau demonstrates through his behavior that all but the immediate physical pleasures in life were not worth waiting for in his eyes. And clearly, based on his choice to settle in Edom, the land promised to his father and grandfather held no special significance for him.

[12] Sforno (Genesis 34:30) attributes Jacob's anger to the fact that the inhabitants of the land will accuse him of breaking their trust. In fact, Hamor and Shechem had assured the people of the city that Jacob and his children were honorable people and could be trusted to keep their side of the bargain and give over Dinah to Shechem as a wife once the Shechemites circumcised themselves (34:21).

For Jacob, however, the birthright was particularly meaningful because of its symbolism and its enduring qualities. Similarly, his deep attachment to the land of Israel is evident from his demand of Joseph to make an oath promising to return Jacob to Canaan for burial following his death (47:28-31). As such, Jacob was clearly the more appropriate recipient of the birthright.

So too, the first-born blessing was not of great importance to Esau due to its less-than imminent application.[13] And although it is quite apparent from the text that Esau is anguished at having the blessing taken from him, as R. Arama posits (*Akeydat Yitzchak*, 25:1), it is not the loss of the first-born blessing that so angered Esau; it was the manner in which it was taken from him; through cunning and deceit. The truth is that Esau would have been happy with *any* blessing from his father whom he adored. This is evident from his plea to Isaac for another blessing despite the fact that the first-born blessing had already been allocated (27:38).[14]

Indeed, when Jacob wants to restore the blessing into Esau's possession, Esau seems to genuinely have no interest in recovering it- "I have plenty. My brother, let what you have remain yours" (33:9).[15] Esau sees no value in the blessing because, for him, there is no greater blessing than the worldly material wealth that he has already accrued.

That yearning for the substantive is, once again, evident with Jacob's courtship of Rachel. While his passionate kiss of Rachel strikes us as a scene out of a romance novel, the tears that flow from Jacob's eyes reveal a far deeper affection; that of a man who has just discovered his spiritual soul mate.[16] As such, his curt remarks to Laban about consorting with his wife are more likely representative of his genuine desire to build a family and a future with Rachel rather than an expression of any sort of lustful urges.

This, in turn, sheds new light on Jacob's neglect of Leah. Jacob saw Rachel as his true soul-mate, and it was this awareness that precipitated his disregard for Leah. This in no way excuses Jacob's behavior. However, it does show that his actions are motivated by truth and not merely greed and selfishness. In his eyes, he was meant to be with Rachel and therefore, as far as he was concerned, his relationship with Leah would take secondary importance. Contrast Jacob's enduring love for one woman to Esau's marriage to multiple women in order to satisfy his base physical lusts.

Recognizing that he and Rachel were destined for union, Jacob anticipated the special role their

[13] Sforno (Genesis 27:29) explains that the blessing was for the inheritance of future kingdoms.

[14] According to Malbim, Esau's statement "Bless me too, father" expresses his desire for an independent blessing, not related to the one given to Jacob. He wasn't interested in the spiritual blessing that Jacob receives but, rather, a worldly blessing of material wealth (Genesis 27:34).

[15] According to Rashi, Esau's statement, here, is a confirmation of Jacob's right to the blessing.

[16] See Abarbanel (*Perush Abarbanel al HaTorah, Bereishit,* 320) and R' Hirsch (Genesis 29:11), who each state that Jacob's kiss was not of a lustful or sexual nature.

future offspring would have in transmitting forward the Abrahamic covenant.

So too, Jacob's special love for Joseph was not of a superficial nature. Rather, Jacob intuited that Joseph had prophetic wisdom as well as unique leadership qualities.[17] Note that, while scolding Joseph for the self-glorifying message in his dreams, Jacob, nevertheless, does not dismiss those dreams as mere folly; rather, he "kept the matter in mind" (37:11). As Rashi comments, Jacob anticipated the coming to fruition of those dreams at some point in the future.

Sure enough, Joseph's dreams prove revelatory. He is elevated to the second most powerful position in the mighty Egyptian empire and, just as his dreams foretold, his family does bow down before him. Most importantly, throughout his rise to stardom he never forgets the fact that God is behind all of these events and that he merely serves as a receptacle in executing the divine plan.

And so, once again, we find that Jacob's seemingly self-regarding actions are, in fact, rooted in truth and virtue. Again, Jacob's noble motives do not necessarily translate into correct actions. For example, while Jacob correctly perceived the crucial role that Rachel and her children would play in securing the covenantal blessing, he failed to recognize the significant contributions Leah's offspring would make. In fact, it would be Leah's son, Judah, who would emerge as the leader among Jacob's children with Joseph playing a more utilitarian role in assisting Judah's evolution into the leader he would eventually become.

Indeed, the tribe of Judah would ultimately transcend Joseph in rank; while Joseph lives out his days in Egypt and never receives a tribal blessing (*that* goes to his children Ephraim and Menashe), it is the tribe of Judah that leads the conquest of the land of Israel in Joshua's time. Similarly, it is the tribe of Judah that goes on to produce Israel's most esteemed king (David), and it is the tribe of Judah that endures the long exile that follows the destruction of the Temple and the dissolution of the Israelite monarchy. In this sense, Judah has a much more enduring legacy than that of Joseph. Nevertheless, Jacob's special affection for Joseph cannot be attributed to trivial interests.

Perhaps, Jacob's zeal for the sublime is no more pronounced than in the episode in which he wrestles with the mysterious man/angel (32:25-30). Jacob's stubborn insistence on receiving a blessing from the angel demonstrates his passion for the transcendent and the spiritual. His demand to know the angel's name reflects his deep yearning for knowledge of God. Nevertheless, even in seeking out his Creator, Jacob is combative and unrelenting.

Jacob's obsession with life's deepest spiritual truths is reflected in the text's characterization of him as "*ish tam, yoshev ohalim*"- "a pure man, a dweller of tents" (25:27). Indeed, R. Hirsch

[17] The text states that Jacob loved Joseph because Joseph was his "*ben zekunim*." Onkelos translates *zekunim* as "wise," meaning that Jacob's affection for Joseph was due to Joseph's great wisdom. Indeed, the Talmud (*Kiddushin* 32b) states that "*zaken*" is an acronym for "*zeh koneh hokhmah*"- "this (one) who acquires wisdom."

characterizes Jacob as of a single-minded nature; that his interests and pursuits were directed towards contemplating the deeper questions in life. For Jacob the philosopher, all the answers he could possibly seek could be discovered within the four walls of the home. He had no regard for life's fleeting pleasures to be explored in the outside physical world (S. R. Hirsch, *The Pentateuch*, vol. 1, (New York: Judaica Press, 1971), 426-427).

It is in this regard that Jacob is the *ish emet throughout* his life.

A Solitary Figure

Jacob's desires for the essential and substantive things in life reveals another aspect to his selfish tendencies. The truth is that Jacob simply does not trust these matters in the hands of others. He doesn't trust Esau with the birthright, or his father in disseminating the blessings. He is also not confident that Joseph will ensure that Jacob's bones are returned to Israel for their final resting place without imposing an oath upon him. He doesn't even have complete faith that God will carry out His oath to protect Jacob and return him home intact as he prepares for his reunion with Esau.[18] Despite God's promise to protect him, Jacob is extremely fearful of Esau and is meticulous in preparing for all possible scenarios in anticipation of their reunion, thus demonstrating less than perfect faith in God's promises.

Jacob's self-reliance may be attributed, at least in part, to his experiences during his formative years. In contrast to Isaac, who had everything provided for him by his adoring parents and who never had to compete for his parents' attention (his brother, Ishmael, was banished from the home when Isaac was still a young child),[19] Jacob was in constant rivalry with his twin brother, even having to compete with him for his parents' affections. As such, Jacob learned from a young age to look out for his own interests, to never depend on others, and to always trust his own instincts and judgments.

This might help explain the absence of God in Jacob's life until he is about to depart for Haran. For, it was only then, perhaps for the first time in his life, that Jacob found himself in a predicament beyond his control; he was about to embark on a dangerous journey to unfamiliar territory and without many resources at his disposal. It is only at this moment of uncertainty and need that God first appears to Jacob in a dream to let him know that He will be with him and protect him on this journey.

In fact, based on his reaction upon awakening from his dream, it appears that Jacob had no awareness of God's worldly presence until that moment:

> And Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "In truth, God is in this

[18] Calling out to God in fear of his brother, Jacob reminds God of His promise to protect and sustain him (see 32:13).

[19] See Gavriel Lakser ,"Isaac, the Eternal Optimist," *The Lehrhaus,* (December 3, 2020), located at https://thelehrhaus.com/scholarship/isaac-the-eternal-optimist/.

place and I did not know it!" (28:16)

Indeed, both R. Arama (*Akeydat Yitzchak,* 25:1)) and R. Hirsch (*The Pentateuch*, 462) argue that the concept of a personal God was first introduced to Jacob through this dream. R. Arama states that, while Jacob unquestionably believed in God, he did not have an awareness of *hashgahah peratit*, of God's personal providence. The angels ascending and descending the ladder, thus, represent that direct bond between the divine and the earthly, a connection that Jacob had not perceived until that moment.

Once again, Jacob's passions and desires are for the most meaningful things in life. His interests are never indulgent or trivial; his concerns are for the future of his progeny, for transmitting forward the covenantal blessing, and for knowledge of life's deepest spiritual truths. And it is specifically due to the weightiness of these matters that Jacob is so territorial and competitive in his quest to achieve those objectives.

To be sure, Jacob does come to recognize his ultimate dependence on God and the fact that it is God who sustains and protects him during his years away from home (see 30:30, 31:5, 31:9, 31:42, 32:11, 33:11). However, it seems that it is simply in Jacob's DNA to remain solitary, and to proceed on his journey of spiritual discovery with the least amount of assistance and interference as possible. Yes, Jacob is the *ish emet*, but he is also the *ish boded* (solitary man).

Jacob's fierce independence in his search for truth is expressed in the name assigned to him by the angel of God with whom he wrestles: *Israel*. Meaning "to struggle with God," *Israel* testifies to Jacob's unrelenting drive for acquiring life's deepest and most enduring truths on his own terms and without interference.

And remarkably, Jacob's desire for autonomy is accommodated by God. One indication of God's acquiescence to Jacob's desire for independence is when, during his dream at Beit El, God tells Jacob that He will not abandon him *until* He fulfills His promise to return him home safely (28:15). The implications are that, upon securing Jacob's return to Canaan, God *will* depart from him. Indeed, God's appearance to Jacob at Beit El upon the latter's return to Canaan is the last communication God has with Jacob aside from one obscure episode of night visions (46:2-4).

In truth, *most* of God's communication with Jacob during his life is of an indirect nature, through the medium of dreams. This, in contrast to Abraham and Isaac, whose experience of God's communication appears in the text to most often be while fully lucid. But, once again, God's relative remoteness from Jacob is in accordance with Jacob's wishes and is tolerated by God, perhaps, due to the fact that Jacob's stubborn independence is geared entirely in the pursuit of matters of sanctity and holiness.

Conclusion

In the world of myths and fairy tales, our heroes take on an aura of purity and perfection, thereby, providing man an escape from the very real world so rife with cruelty and suffering. The Torah, in contrast, presents us with the real experiences of truly remarkable but fallible individuals through

whom we can learn practical lessons on self-improvement, and how to lead a good, if imperfect, life.

For the modern Jew, Jacob is, perhaps, the most relatable of the biblical patriarchs. Indeed, the nation of Israel shares many attributes with its namesake. Like Jacob, the Jewish people have always been passionate about the essential and enduring things in life. While the great empires throughout history were primarily concerned with promoting their own glory and indulging their appetite for physical pleasure, the Jew's interests have always transcended the material and the here and now. We have produced some of the world's greatest contributors in the fields of science and medicine, education and philosophy, as well as leading the way in pursuing the cause of justice and lending a voice to the weak and the oppressed.

But, also like Jacob, the Jews have struggled in their relationship with God, often preferring to toil independently and without God's partnership while in pursuit of those holy endeavors. It is in this sense that we are a people that dwells apart, not only from the nations of the world (Numbers 23:9), but from He who uplifted us and designated us as 'Chosen.' We teach the nations the sanctity of life and, in doing so, provide a dwelling place for God on earth. And yet, ironically, we are often unwilling to share common space with our Creator as we promote His message to the world. It is in this sense that there is a no more suitable progenitor to the Jewish people than our patriarch, Jacob.

Editor's Note: The following article was originally published in November 2018.

Jacob's Silence and the Rape of Dinah

Ari Silbermann is the Director of Education at Ohr Torah Stone's Amiel Institute.

Jacob lived in tension, in concealment, and in flight. He entered into the world clinging to his brother and dwelled inside, in tents. His most important encounters take place at night and, to borrow Auerbach's phrase, he is a character 'fraught with background.'

He conceals things from his blind father under animal skins and things are concealed from him. He stumbles on a hidden "gateway to heaven," and fights a mysterious man, not knowing his name.

We learn that he was *tam* – perfect, simple, unblemished – but he is occupied his whole life with efforts to retain Esau's blessing. He overcomes his *demons* yet gains a limp - a blemish. With all this seemingly behind him, he arrives at Shechem unblemished, whole. And then he experiences headfirst the rape of his daughter, Dinah. The rape of Dinah and pillaging of Shechem (Gen. 34) is a difficult story with an unclear ending. Was Jacob right to criticize Simeon and Levi, or were they right to defend their sister's honor? Until Jacob's contrary blessing of Simeon and Levi, in which Jacob states that he wishes not to enter their council and that they be scattered in Israel (Gen. 49:6-7), their rhetorical question, 'Shall our sister be made a whore?' lingers, powerfully asserting that the brothers may have been right... It is a story of rape, power, and violence, and much ink has been spilled in trying

to understand or justify the actions of Dinah's brothers in response. Many modern writers have noted that in focusing on the brothers' reaction to Dinah's rape rather than on her own experience and reaction, we perpetuate the silence enveloping Dinah.[1] She is taken against her will, her brothers negotiate *about* her and defend her, yet we don't hear from Dinah herself. Although some modern writers have tried to reconstruct her experience,[2] they face a genuine challenge in doing so.[3] It might be possible to find a window into Dinah's experiences through another largely silent character in the story, namely her father Jacob. In this article, I will attempt to understand Jacob's passivity, and in so doing, attempt to reconstruct Dinah's experiences.

Although Jacob does play a role in the story, he is mostly passive. His sons negotiate and hatch a scheme; Simeon and Levi slaughter the Shechemites while they are in pain, and his sons pillage the city – all seemingly against Jacob's wishes. Whereas Dinah's silence is implied, the text highlights that 'Jacob heard that he [Shechem] had defiled his daughter Dinah; but since his sons were in the field with his cattle, Jacob kept silent until they came home (Gen. 34:5).' This verse implies that he spoke with his sons about the incident after they returned from the field, but the order of events is blurred by Gen. 34:7 which describes his sons hearing about the incident *before* their return, 'Meanwhile Jacob's sons, having heard the news, came in from the field.'

Jacob's silence is sharpened by the negotiation scene, in which Shechem and Hamor leave the city to 'Take for me this girl as a wife.' (Gen. 34:4). Genesis 34:6 describes Shechem and Hamor coming to speak with *Jacob*. Instead of the negotiations taking place with Jacob alone, his sons return in the next verse and we have an encounter between the two families – fathers and sons. Shechem and Hamor refer to Dinah in Gen. 34:7 as 'your daughter', and in Gen. 34:8 refer to intermarrying between 'daughters'. Although *bat* may refer to a young woman and not daughter in the strict sense,[4] the use of the term at the very least suggests that Jacob is part of the conversation. Indeed, in Gen. 34:11 Shechem addresses Dinah's 'father and her brothers,' but only Jacob's sons respond (Gen. 34:14-17).[5] Thus, at every stage, Jacob seems to be present but silent.

Jacob's silence here can be contrasted with his strong reactions to another event. Gen. 37:34-35 describes his response upon identifying Joseph's

[1] Caroline Blyth, "Terrible Silence, Eternal Silence: A Feminist Re-Reading of Dinah's Voicelessness in Genesis 34," *Biblical Interpretation* 17, no. 5 (September 2009): 483–506.

[2] See Blyth and, for a popular example, see Anita Diamant, *The Red Tent* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2010).

[3] Meir Steinberg, "Biblical Poetics and Sexual Politics: From Reading to Counterreading," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111 (1992): 480.

[4] Cf. Ruth 2:8.

[5] Although the brothers too use the term 'our daughter' in Gen. 34:17, there is a wider usage at play here and actually a wider interplay of the term together with 'our sister' throughout the story. For instance, Dinah goes out to see the 'daughters of the land,' and the brothers mimic Shechem and Hamor's deal of intermarrying with each other's daughters.

bloodied coat:

> Jacob rent his clothes, put sackcloth on his loins, and observed mourning for his son many days. All his sons and daughters sought to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, saying, "No, I will go down mourning to my son in Sheol." Thus his father bewailed him.

Yet the same Jacob who is distraught when his son, Joseph, is supposedly killed is silent when his daughter, Dinah, is kidnapped, degraded, and defiled.[6]

Jacob's silence has been read in different ways: as a delaying tactic allowing his sons to return and help him, as R. Hirsch suggested, or as the mark of a wise man in the face of the wicked, as *Midrash Tanhuma* suggests. Or perhaps it was a combination of both of these factors, or, as Malbim explains, Jacob understood that rushing out to fight could not help, since Dinah had already been defiled.

Still, Jacob's passivity and silence remain puzzling. Why does the Torah not share with us Jacob's feelings or plans? Why did he not negotiate himself, instead allowing his sons to do so in his place?

The question of Jacob's passivity also ties in to how Jacob responds to the massacre perpetrated by his sons. He says, "You have brought trouble on me, making me odious among the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites and the Perizzites; my men are few in number so that if they unite against me and attack me, I and my house will be destroyed." (Gen. 34:30b) Does Jacob's pragmatic critique, which seems to be lacking moral censure, imply that he agreed in principle with their actions?[7]

The fact that these questions persist has a lot to do with the silence surrounding Jacob throughout the narrative. According to *Midrash Sekhel Tov*, the plene spelling of *ve-heherish* indicates Jacob's complete and total silence.

I believe that part of the answer to these questions lies in reading Jacob as a secondary victim. Others have assumed that the traumatic nature of the rape affected Dinah and would have led to her fate as a silenced rape victim... As Caroline Blyth writes,

> By being denied the opportunity to share her experiences with her family and community, by being faced only with social disgrace, devaluation, and shame, Dinah suffers perpetually the fate of the silenced rape victim, isolated, stigmatised, and deprived of a supportive audience.[8]

---

[6] Cf. 2 Sam. 13:21 and David's reaction to Tamar's rape by Amnon.

[7] Cf. Ramban to Gen. 34:13 for his approach to these issues. Notably, Jubilees 30 has Jacob taking part in the action against the Shechemites.

[8] Blyth, "Terrible Silence, Eternal Silence," 505.

Whether her exclusion from the story is related to this we cannot know. However, Jacob's silence is pronounced because it takes place in the narrative and I suggest that it stems from secondary trauma.[9]

One significant element of trauma is the silence surrounding it. Judith Herman writes in the introduction to her classic study, *Trauma and Recovery*, that, 'the ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness. Certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word unspeakable.'[10]

At times, the silence surrounding rape is even more difficult because the event often takes place in private, in a way that protects the perpetrator and can lead the victim to blame or question themselves.

In traumatic events, and particularly rape, there can also be secondary victims. Researchers note that, following a sexual assault, family and friends may experience emotional distress, including shock, helplessness, and rage, which can parallel the response of the victim. They too may feel violated, guilty, devalued, and may engage in self-blame. As Herman chillingly formulates,

> Witnesses as well as victims are subject to the dialectic of trauma…it is even more difficult to find a language that conveys fully and persuasively what one has seen. Those who attempt to describe the atrocities that they have witnessed also risk their own credibility. To speak publicly about one's knowledge of atrocities is to invite the stigma that attaches to victims.[11]

Jacob has no power, no ability to act, and few options. When Joseph is supposedly taken by a wild animal, there is no stigma at play and so he is free to mourn publicly. But in our case, Jacob does not say anything because he has undergone the trauma of having his daughter raped and kidnapped. He is powerless to stop what is going on, a shepherd in a field he bought from the Hittites, his daughter in their palace, his sons away from home. In many ways, Jacob mirrors Dinah; his silence is also her silence. As his sons negotiate on Dinah's behalf, they are also negotiating for Jacob. Perhaps like Dinah, Jacob is shocked into silence by the violence committed against his daughter.

The story in Gen. 34 ends with Dinah's silence, and with Jacob's. A silence which too often accompanies the victims of violent crimes and their families. As research has shown, secondary victims may experience feelings similar to the

[9] It is important to note that we need to be cautious in using modern Western psychology to address issues in the Biblical text. Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* is an extreme case in point and should serve as a warning.

[10] Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence -- From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (Basic Books, 2015), 1.

[11] Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 1.

direct victim, including feelings of guilt, devaluation, and anger.[12] The shock of a father who questions whether he was to blame, who feels guilty over his inability to act, who may want to act and negotiate on behalf of Dinah but is simply unable to do so.

Just as some traditions blame Dinah for 'going out,'[13]others blame Jacob, either for not fulfilling his vow (*Kohelet Rabbah* 5:1), or for his over-cautious treatment of Dinah when meeting Esau.[14] I believe that these sources are best read as expressing Jacob's and Dinah's thoughts of self-blame, as they are roiled by the concern that each of them did not do enough to prevent this horrible event from occurring.

Although Dinah's voice is not heard in the narrative, Jacob's silence is evidence of his trauma and may also offer a window into Dinah's pain. Perhaps trying to understand Jacob – and by extension Dinah – can be a starting point which begins to break the silence.

[12] See for instance P. N. White and J. C. Rollins, "Rape: A Family Crisis.," *Family Relations* 30 (1981): 105. In this sense, the violent response of the brothers is also a characteristic response. Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 65 notes that such reactions can sometimes hamper the ability to discuss the trauma. She brings the following testimony of a rape survivor and her husband's reaction, " 'When I told my husband, he had a violent reaction. He wanted to go after these guys. At the time I was already completely frightened and I didn't want him exposed to these people. I made myself very clear. Fortunately, he heard me and was willing to respect my wishes.'" Quoted by Lewis Herman from "If I can survive this…." (Cambridge, MA, Boston Area Rape Crisis Center, 1985). Videotape.

[13] *Gen. Rabbah* 80:1.

[14] *Gen. Rabbah* 76:9.