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## IN GOD WE TRUST OR DO WE? THE FEARS OF ISAAC AND JACOB

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At the beginning of *Parashat Vayetze*, Jacob dreams about a ladder whose base rests upon the ground and whose top is in the Heavens. Angels ascend and descend the ladder and God looms above it. In the dream, God promises Jacob the land given to his forefathers and blesses him. God concludes with a promise to watch over Jacob wherever he goes and bring him back safely to the Land of Israel (Genesis 28:11-15). *Midrash Tanhuma (Parashat Vayetze, 2)* expands Jacob's dream in the following way:

Rabbi Berakhiyah said in the name of Rabbi Helbo and R. S. ben Yosinah: This teaches us that God showed our forefather Jacob the minister [angel] of Babylonia ascending and descending, and of Medea ascending and descending, and of Greece ascending and descending, and of Edom ascending and descending.

The Holy One, blessed be He, asked Jacob: "Jacob, why are you not ascending?"

At this moment, Jacob became frightened and said, "Just as these descend, [perhaps] I too will descend."

The Holy One, blessed be He, replied: "If you ascend, you will not descend."

And he did not believe and he did not ascend (*ve-lo he'emin, ve-lo alah*)...

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: “If you had ascended and had faith in me, you would have never had a descent, but since you did not have faith, your descendants will be enslaved by four kingdoms...

Jacob replied: “Forever?”

He replied [quoting a verse from Jeremiah]: “But you, have no fear, my servant Jacob; do not fear Israel for I will deliver you from far away and your seed from the lands of their captivity.”<sup>1</sup>

The crux of this midrash is the conversation between the Holy One, blessed be He, and Jacob: God tells Jacob (representing the nation of Israel) to climb the ladder to Heaven and even promises that he will not fall like the other nations. Jacob is afraid, does not believe, and does not ascend. The angels in the dream, representing the other nations, go up and down the ladder—gaining and losing power

over the course of history. God seems to be teaching Jacob that in the course of normal human history nations rise and fall. This should be the fate of the Jewish nation as well; however, if Jacob makes this leap of faith and climbs the ladder, the Jewish people will be able to circumvent the vicissitudes of history and always remain ascendant. God is, as it were, offering Jacob and his progeny a shortcut to obtaining eternal ascendancy—an opportunity to trick the norms of fate—without their having to go through the trials and tribulations, the ups and downs of normal history.<sup>2</sup> In the face of God’s offer, Jacob is afraid; he refuses to ascend and he rejects God’s reassurances, as “he does not believe.”

This midrash has often troubled me. Firstly, why was Jacob afraid? Secondly, even if Jacob had misgivings about ascending the ladder, with God’s reassurance that everything would be alright, how could he not climb? How could he “not believe”? How could the grandson of Abraham, who hastened to bind Isaac, whose belief was considered meritorious by God (Rashi on Genesis 15:6), not believe, not trust in God when he received an explicit command to ascend?

Rabbi Mordecai Kornfeld, a contemporary Israeli Torah scholar, was so troubled by Jacob’s

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<sup>1</sup> This article discusses the version of the midrash found in *Tanhuma*. Any differences in the parallel version in *Vayikra Rabbah 29:2* do not impact upon the arguments made herein.

<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Yitzhak Hutner expands upon Jacob’s fear that his progeny would sin and descend: Jacob feared that like any other nation, when the Jewish people became mighty, they would become divorced from their core values and fall. Hashem reassures him that since the Jews do not “finish off their fields”—over farm or overuse the material world—

they will not fall into the trap of wealth and over-consumption. See a summary of this idea at <http://torahdownunder.blogspot.co.il/2011/12/parshas-vayetze-dream-of-ladder.html>.

inexplicable refusal to ascend that he allegorizes the midrash itself. In his Weekly Parasha-Page on *Vayetze* 5758, he explains the midrash not to be referring to events that took place on the night of Jacob's dream. Rather, it is a prophecy allegorically referring to the events that transpired when Jacob eventually did return to Israel and met Esau. He legitimizes Jacob's fear in the midrash by claiming that it refers to Jacob's meeting with Esau, an event in which the Torah explicitly mentions Jacob's fear (*Genesis* 32:7). As Rabbi Kornfeld writes, "[Jacob] did not realize the meaning of his dream until too late. Instead of unabashedly returning to his homeland [safe in the knowledge of God's protection from Esau, because he is afraid,] he makes elaborate plans to flatter Esa[u] and to appease his anger." Rabbi Kornfeld is so shocked at the plain meaning of the midrash—that Jacob would be too fearful to climb the ladder despite God's reassurances—that he must claim that the story in the midrash was an allegory meant to prepare Jacob for his eventual homecoming.

When a midrashic exposition appears surprising, it often pays to examine the text it is expanding upon. Perhaps, there is an anchor in the text which can supply a source or motivation for the midrashic idea. Indeed, in discussing Jacob's ladder dream and its aftermath, the classical commentators note that

Jacob's reaction the following morning to God's promise to protect him seems less than enthusiastic. In the biblical text, Jacob responds to God's promise: "If [*im*] you will protect me... then You will be my God" (*Genesis* 28:20), seemingly indicating that he is not sure that God will be with him. Perhaps Jacob's apparent lack of belief in the Bible itself is reflected in and even compounded by the midrash.

However, before we get carried away by this hypothesis we should note that the midrash itself, in *Genesis Rabbah* 76:2, and later medieval commentators manage to resolve the issue of Jacob's apparent mistrust without damning him for unbelief. They explain that Jacob was right to be afraid because no Divine promise is inviolable—even a righteous man may sin and release God from His oath.<sup>3</sup>

So though at first glance Jacob's conditional response in the Bible seems to be the basis for the midrash, this need not be the case. Indeed, *Tanhuma's* redactor would have been well aware of the exculpatory midrash in *Genesis Rabbah*—a canonical work by his period<sup>4</sup>—so his decision to impute a lack of belief to Jacob in order to expand upon or resolve the verse goes beyond the bounds of necessity and, perhaps, even plausibility (that is to say, beyond the bounds of what we think

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<sup>3</sup> This logic is adopted by Rashi and Ibn Ezra. The rabbis employ the term *shema yigrom ha-het*. Nahmanides explains that the word "*im*"—translated as "if" above—is not introducing a condition, but making a declaration about the future, "when x happens, y will be the case."

<sup>4</sup>By the time *Tanhuma* was redacted in the medieval period, *Genesis Rabbah* was a canonical work. Though not

every Master of the Midrash in Antiquity knew what every other one had said, it is extremely unlikely that the *Tanhuma* redactor would have been ignorant of this line of thinking.

it plausible for Jacob to do or say).<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, even if this verse was the midrash's basis, Jacob's hedging his belief in the Divine promise to protect him found in the Bible is far less problematic than his fear, followed by his absolute refusal to follow an explicit Divine command, in the midrash. So the fear in the verse does not provide a solid enough justification for the midrash's audacious claim.

Another candidate for the midrash's textual anchor is the verse with which the *Tanhuma* midrash ends: "But you, have no fear, [*al tira ve-al tehat*] my servant Jacob...I will deliver you from far away" (Jer. 30:10). While any literal reader of this verse would identify "my servant Jacob" as a term of affection for "the people of Israel," the midrash, always attuned to other possible layers of interpretation, identifies "my servant Jacob" as the patriarch Jacob and even posits that this verse refers to his actions when he was at the foot of the ladder.

How does the midrash manage to relocate this verse to the foot of the ladder? Curiously, there is a very promising linguistic anchor in the verse for doing so. Jeremiah's advice, *al tira ve-al tehat*, seems repetitious, as it literally means "do not fear and do not fear." I would like to suggest that the midrash picks up on this superfluity. Furthermore, it also notices that the word *tehat* sounds very much like the Aramaic word *nahat*, to descend. The presence

of fear and descent in this verse about Jacob echo strongly in the midrashic imagination. Where else in Jacob's life might we find these elements?

Ultimately, the Masters of the Midrash come up with an answer. The superfluity, the fear, and the phonological association of *tehat* with *nahat* prompt them to read this verse as hinting at what happened in Jacob's ladder dream. God told Jacob not to fear ascending as he would not descend, saying, quite literally, *al tira ve-al tehat*. "If you are not afraid of ascending, you will not descend," or, alternatively, "Do not fear ascending and then you will not have to fear descending." Rereading the verse in Jeremiah this way to expand the biblical story elsewhere is a time-honored, homiletical technique. However, knowing how the Masters of the Midrash accomplished their sleight-of-hand, does not explain how they could make the audacious claim they do regarding Jacob's unbelief! On a personal note, my own experience on the Temple Mount may suggest a different resolution to our conundrum. Perhaps the midrash is using the word *yira* to denote "awe" and not "fear." When I first ascended the Temple Mount—the very place where tradition teaches us that Jacob had his ladder dream<sup>6</sup>—I was struck by a sense of holiness that prompted the very words Jacob had spoken when he awoke from his ladder dream to rise unbidden to my lips: "Surely the LORD is in this place; and I knew it

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<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Yehuda Herzl Henkin describes *peshat* commentary as restricting itself to "the necessary, the plausible, and the minimal." Midrash, in contrast, expands upon the verse unnecessarily, implausibly, and maximally. *Equality Lost: Essays in Torah Commentary, Halacha, and Jewish Thought* (Urim Publications, 1999). Our midrash here is a case in point since instead of resolving the problem

linguistically as Nahmanides does by re-reading the word "*im*," it chooses to present a dramatic interplay between God and Jacob that makes Jacob's lack of belief even more difficult to understand—though, perhaps, true to character, as we will see below.

<sup>6</sup> *Hullin* 91b, Rashi on Genesis 28:11.

not... How full of awe is this place! this is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven” (Genesis 28:16-17). The words perfectly expressed the surprise and awe I felt at suddenly being at the gate of heaven.

Tellingly, the words I skipped in the above verses describe Jacob’s mood: “and he was afraid.” Jacob’s fear or awe, in this case, like Moses’ when God speaks to him from the burning bush (Exodus 3:6), and like Manoah’s when he realizes that the man he has spoken to is an angel (Judges 13:22), may have led him to recoil in surprise. Perhaps, his stubborn refusal to ascend reflects this awestruck backwards movement: his sense of his own personal unworthiness, and of any human-beings essential unworthiness. He quite simply cannot bring himself to accept God’s words and ascend; the midrash recognizing this all-too-human reaction explains that Jacob “could not believe,” no matter what the consequences might be.

While this explanation speaks to me, the rabbis elsewhere do seem to recognize an ongoing problematic pattern of Jacob’s fearfulness giving rise to the lack of belief or trust that may be reflected in our midrash. For instance, even though the midrash in *Genesis Rabbah* does legitimize Jacob’s fear following the ladder dream, the Gemara in Berakhot 4a questions another event in Jacob’s life that seems to indicate his apparent lack of belief. The Gemara asks why after God has explicitly

promised to protect Jacob wherever he goes (Genesis 28:15), Jacob is afraid before he meets Esau (Gen 32:7). In this case, the Gemara again explains Jacob’s fear by citing the possibility that his sins subsequent to God’s promise may have abrogated it. This Gemara uses the rabbinic phrase “*shema yigrom ha-het*” to explain this idea: Jacob might have lost the merit of miraculous Divine intervention if he sinned after the promise was made.<sup>7</sup>

Could this notion explain all the occasions on which Jacob is fearful? I think not. Jacob’s fear at meeting Esau is unique because it reflects the depths to which he had sinned against Esau: “conscience makes cowards of us all.” Even though God had promised to protect him *after* he had sinned against Esau, it was natural for him to fear that other subsequent sins might vitiate God’s protection when it came to such grievous transgressions. Even more importantly, he might have been particularly afraid that a subsequent transgression he *knew* he had committed against Esau—marrying Esau’s intended, Leah<sup>8</sup>—could have abrogated God’s gracious promise of protection. The midrash even relates that Jacob explicitly fears Esau’s wrath over such a betrayal (*Tanhuma*, ed. Buber, *Vayetze* 12): “When I stole the blessings, Esau sought to kill me. Now, when I take his intended wife, he will leave Mahalath, the daughter of Ishmael [whom he had married], and he will come to me and say: ‘Was it not enough for you, that you took my birthright and

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<sup>7</sup> This concept is also utilized by the midrash to explain Avraham’s fear after he won the battle against the four kings.

<sup>8</sup>See BavaBatra 123a; *Tanhuma*, ed. Buber, *Vayetze* 12. While this was not literally a sin, it was certainly another instance in which Jacob appropriated that which was meant for Esau.

my blessing, you have also taken my intended?” Even though, according to this midrash, Jacob tried to prevent this from happening by requesting Rachel’s hand-in-marriage, Laban tricked Jacob into marrying Leah, and Jacob wound up marrying and, more problematically, remaining married to Esau’s intended.<sup>9</sup>

Accepting that in Esau’s case there might be a unique reason for concern, as reflected in *Berakhot 4a*, our original questions on the midrash regain their urgency: Why is Jacob afraid and why does he refuse to believe despite God’s reassurance? I would like to suggest that the midrash feels comfortable in ascribing this fear and resultant refusal to ascend to Jacob because the Bible describes Jacob as an intrinsically fearful person on several occasions. Thus, in Gen. 31:31, we find Jacob telling Laban that he was afraid that Laban would “take his daughters by force”; in Gen. 32:7 we find Jacob “greatly frightened; in his anxiety...” of Esau, and even though Esau might be a special case, let’s remember that God had just saved Jacob from Laban (Gen. 31:29, 42) and instructed angels to meet

him at the borders of Canaan (Gen. 32:1)—actions that should have confirmed God’s continued support;<sup>10</sup> and in Gen. 42:3 God reassures Jacob “Fear not to go down to Egypt...I Myself will also bring you back,” thus implying that Jacob was afraid. Indeed, perhaps these verses form the context for the prophet Jeremiah’s reassurances to the Jewish people, one of which the midrash already cited: “But you, have no fear, my servant Jacob...I will make an end of all the nations among which I have banished you” (Jer. 46:28); “But you, have no fear, my servant Jacob...I will deliver you from far away”(Jer. 30:10).

While the Bible does seem to characterize Jacob as fearful, the first time this occurs is following the ladder dream. Curiously, his fearfulness is not mentioned when he steals the blessing from Isaac. Surely Jacob must have been terrified when he walked into the tent and deceived his father! We must ask why this fear is only first mentioned in the Bible when Jacob reacts to his ladder dream and then several times later in his life? Did something happen when he stole the blessings that turned this apparently brave, stolid man into one prone to fear,

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<sup>9</sup> Although the Bible explicitly attributes Jacob’s desire to marry Rachel to his love for her (Genesis 29:18), this midrash clarifies that he specifically asked to marry Rachel, the younger daughter, because he knew that Leah was promised to Esau. According to this midrash Jacob had initially intended to divorce Leah (Gen. Rabbah 96:31, [ed. Theodor-Albeck, MS. Vatican, p. 1241]). He ultimately chose not to because she was extremely fertile, forcing him to exclaim, “Will I divorce the mother of these?” (Gen. Rabbah 96:31 [ed. Theodor-Albeck, MS. Vatican, loc. cit.]). Curiously, God’s decision to make Leah extremely fertile (Gen. 29:31-34) tested Jacob’s resolve not to cross the line again where his brother was concerned. Jacob, for better or for worse, failed the test. The translation of *Tanhuma*, ed. Buber, above and the sources cited in this footnote are taken

from Tamar Kadari “Leah: Midrash and Aggadah,” *Jewish Women’s Archives*, Encyclopedia. Accessed at <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/leah-midrash-and-aggadah>, December 1, 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Of course, Jacob may have felt that God’s recent salvation was precisely the reason for him to be concerned. Like Abraham following the battle against the four kings, he might have been afraid that he had used up all his merits (Rashi, Genesis 15:1), but even if this were the case, the angels meeting him do seem to imply that God is still on his side. Someone less prone to fear would have been reassured by this escort.

and did the Bible picking up on this change, forevermore characterize him as a fearful man?

I would like to suggest that Jacob, like Isaac his father before him, suffered a very serious trauma, which led to this fear or anxiety. Isaac was traumatized by his father binding him to the altar on Mount Moriah,<sup>11</sup> with the midrash suggesting that his blindness was caused by the tears of the angels falling into his eyes.<sup>12</sup> Jacob, I would argue, was traumatized by his theft of the blessings and, in particular, by Isaac's reaction to this theft. As the Torah relates, at first, Jacob was only concerned about not getting caught and cursed for his troubles, but when Jacob, who barely made it out before Esau arrived (Gen. 27: 30, 33), heard Esau enter the tent and cry out in great pain, and then, quite possibly, heard Isaac's "very violent trembling" (Gen. 27:33) and painful declaration, "Your brother came with guile and took away your blessing" (Gen. 27:35), he could not fail to be traumatized by the emotion in his father's voice. Jacob became fearful both of what he had done and of others tricking him because he had tricked Isaac and Esau.

We are all familiar with the notion that certain character traits are passed on from father to son, thus a nervous father is likely

to raise a nervous son. Turning to Abraham's family, as an example, let us look at intergenerational trust issues. Do these track from generation to generation? If so, might the parallel process of transmitting anxiety explain why Jacob's trauma at stealing the blessings is so immense? Would someone else have been less prone to be traumatized by the event?

According to the midrash Abraham was delivered into Nimrod's hands by none other than his father Terah. Nimrod then proceeded to throw Abraham into the fiery cauldron. Ishmael was exiled by his father Abraham (albeit at Sarah and God's behest). Isaac was bound on the altar by his father Abraham, and Jacob mistrusted his father to the degree that he felt compelled to trick him and steal the blessings. Jacob was repeatedly cheated by his proxy father figure, Laban. Jacob even expressed fear of his older brother Esau—the family breadwinner and seemingly destined heir. Any armchair psychologist would tell you that trusting one's father in these households was a loaded proposition; clearly this distrust was passed down from father to son. It would be no surprise if Isaac's anxiety and fearfulness at almost being slaughtered at the hands of his father was also transferred to Jacob over the course of their lives;<sup>13</sup> however, it took the trauma

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<sup>11</sup> Jewish tradition relates that the Temple was built on the site of the *Akedah*, on Mount Moriah. Clearly, the Temple Mount is another gateway to the Heavens. Cf. *m. Ta'anit 2:4*  
<sup>12</sup> *Genesis Rabbah* glossing Gen. 27:1. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg artfully picks up on Isaac's trauma in A. Zornberg, *The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis* (Philadelphia/Jerusalem: JPS, 1995), 156 ff. She suggests that the *Akedah* triggered Isaac's "awareness of death," as demonstrated by his repeated references to death

at the beginning of Gen. 27. This awareness henceforth fills every moment of his life. Following this exposition, Zornberg discusses the effect of the *Akedah* on Isaac's family, particularly Esau, who I might add would be termed "the identified patient," 160 ff.

<sup>13</sup> Indeed, Avivah Zornberg makes this claim, felicitously stating: "what cripples him [Jacob] is his sense of his father's crippling...[he] remains profoundly absorbed by his father's trauma" (*Ibid.*, 238).

of Jacob's theft of the blessings to instill a full-blown case of anxiety in Jacob.

Recent scientific research—admittedly still in its infancy and some quite controversial<sup>14</sup>—on intergenerational and/or epigenetic transfer of trauma supports such a triggering of inborn or environmentally produced traits and suggests a number of ways it can occur. As *Lost in Transmission: Studies of Trauma Across Generations* summarizes: “what human beings cannot contain of their experience—what has been traumatically overwhelming, unbearable, unthinkable—falls out of social discourse, but very often on to and into the next generation as an *affective sensitivity* or a *chaotic urgency*.”<sup>15</sup> As Dr. Mary Castelloe notes: “Psychic legacies are often passed on through unconscious cues or affective messages that flow between adult and child. Sometimes anxiety falls from one generation to the next through stories told.”<sup>16</sup>

So whether the theft itself was the entire traumatic source of Jacob's fear (as the *Akedah* may have been

Isaac's) or whether Jacob's fearfulness preceded his theft of the blessings, but was triggered into something much more devastating by this act,<sup>17</sup> following this event Jacob is characterized as fearful, in general, and especially fearful of engaging in further behavior that mimicked his theft of the blessing, in particular. Perhaps Francine Shapiro, creator of Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) Therapy, best expresses the two types of trauma Jacob may have undergone. He may have experienced small-“t” trauma—“an accumulation of lesser or less pronounced events that exceed our capacity to cope and cause a disruption in emotional functioning,” or he may have experienced one big-“T” trauma—“a deeply disturbing or debilitating event” that leaves its psychological scar.<sup>18</sup> On the one hand, Jacob may have heard the the family story of the *Akedah* many times and/or implicitly intuited Isaac's abiding fear

on a daily basis (both small-“t” traumas). On the other hand, he may have been radically traumatized in *Toldot* in the process of stealing the blessing (a big-“T” trauma). Either way, the small-“t” or big-“T”

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<sup>14</sup> The basic claim of epigenetics is that “trauma can leave a chemical mark on a person's genes, which then is passed down to subsequent generations. The mark doesn't directly damage the gene; there's no mutation. Instead it alters the mechanism by which the gene is converted into functioning proteins, or expressed. The alteration isn't genetic. It's epigenetic.” Benedict Carey. “Can We Really Inherit Trauma,” *New York Times* (December 10, 2018). Accessed online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/10/health/mind-epigenetics-genes.html>.

<sup>15</sup> *Lost in Transmission: Studies of Trauma Across Generations*, edited by M. Gerard Fromm (Karnac Books, 2012).

<sup>16</sup> Molly S. Castelloe. “How Trauma Is Carried Across Generations: Traumatic events can be passed onto the next generation.” *Psychology Today Blog*, May 28, 2013. Accessed at <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-me-in-we/201205/how-trauma-is-carried-across-generations>

<sup>17</sup> Jacob's description as a *yoshev ohalim*, a bookish type who did not go out hunting, may suggest a certain anxiety on his part about “biting off more than he could chew.”

<sup>18</sup> Elyssa Barbash. “Different Types of Trauma: Small ‘t’ versus Large ‘T’” *Psychology Today* March 13, 2017. Accessed at <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/trauma-and-hope/201703/different-types-trauma-small-t-versus-large-t> on December 1, 2019.



traumas may have triggered a genetically or epigenetically induced tendency to fear that became full-blown after the theft of the blessings.

The midrash, picking up on this characterization, seems to propose that Jacob's fear of taking a shortcut to success—avoiding the rocky road of life by engaging in trickery or guile, like stealing the blessings—is so extreme that he refuses to take any further dubious shortcuts, even if God guarantees that they are the right thing to do. He is no longer willing to listen to a future “Rebecca” commanding him to trick others and take shortcuts, and he is not willing to climb the ladder so he and his progeny can escape the vicissitudes of history and always remain ascendant. He prefers that he and his descendants gain their blessings through the appropriate, normative channels.

That Jacob's reluctance to engage in trickery or shortcuts even came into play when God spoke to him in the midrash, still seems difficult to understand. Perhaps it is related to the Abrahamic trust issues mentioned above. Perhaps Jacob was afraid to trust a God who was willing to allow him to skip the que. Perhaps, he feared that listening to God and ascending was failing the test. He must have been well aware of the test God gave Abraham at the *Akedah*, which seemed to have been cancelled at the very last second—where passing the test might have meant objecting to God's command, in the first place, or completing the task despite the angel's order to cease and desist. Jacob refers to God as “the God of my father...the Fear of Isaac” (Gen. 31:42). Perhaps, his intense fear of not doing the

right thing ultimately stems from his relationship with an inscrutable God, who is similar to his inscrutable father.

As many have noted, the biblical story of Jacob's life seems to stress the punishment he received for tricking his father: His uncle Laban tricked him and gave him Leah, instead of Rachel—rubbing the salt in Jacob's wound by noting that “in our place” we do not give the younger before the older (Gen. 29:26), and ultimately this led to Jacob's ten sons tricking him and selling Joseph into slavery. The trick Laban played on him (and Rachel's apparent complicity) must have made it quite clear to Jacob that those who engage in dissembling and trickery will be punished in kind. So even if he had neither been fully traumatized by his theft of the blessing and Isaac's reaction nor developed a full-blown guilty conscience over stealing the blessing until he had dealings with Laban (though I have argued that he most probably did), Laban's trickery would have pierced any residual denial and forced him to face his problematic behavior. The secondary trauma of Laban's behavior would have reinforced the primary trauma of the theft of the blessing and increased his anxiety surrounding trickery and shortcuts.

Indeed, one might further postulate that when Jacob realized the culture of dissembling and trickery that his mother, Rebecca, had come from in Haran, he might have had an epiphany. Most commentators agree that he had never been overly keen on tricking Isaac, he had trusted his mother's advice and done so. Perhaps, when he met Laban and realized that

his mother's instincts to cheat might have been based on the way matters had been handled in her father Betuel's household—and not solely on her prophetic insight into his need to receive the blessings—he suddenly, figuratively speaking, was seized with very violent trembling of his own, realizing that this mode of behavior was not Abrahamic at all.

Indeed, Jacob seems to have learned to abstain from trickery for his life can be read as an attempt to flee a life of trickery, to become a paragon of truth, of following the normative path. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks masterfully demonstrates, Jacob comes clean and returns all three components of the blessing he stole to Esau (wealth, mastery, and land) when he meets him again (Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant and Conversation*, Toldot 5775). Jacob himself prays to God, stating that he is not worthy of “all the loving-kindness and all the truth” God had bestowed upon him (Gen. 32:11), while he sojourned in Laban's house. Jacob berates his sons for tricking the city of Shekhem and destroying Jacob's local reputation (Gen. 34:30). Jacob, ironically, rebukes Laban for constantly changing his wages (though he does reluctantly even the score by genetic manipulation, whose success he tellingly imputes to God, not to himself

[Gen. 31:42]). Jacob maintains that he had no choice but to flee from Laban's house and certainly did not steal the household idols (Gen. 31:31-32). Finally, in Gen. 47:9, he tells Pharaoh the truth—he has had a hard and relatively short life—instead of praising the power and beneficence of his family God.<sup>19</sup> He even refuses to believe that the brothers harmed Joseph, preferring to turn a blind eye to their trickery.

Thus, perhaps Jacob did not climb the ladder in the midrash even though God told him to because he could not allow himself to trust God's reassurances or to take a shortcut, to cleverly bypass the normal course of human history *again*. Having done so once and already perceived some of the evil such a course had wrought, he could not allow himself to repeat this mistake. He was traumatized, fearful of, and obsessed with not being Jacob the trickster again, no matter what his mother or father figures—Rebecca or God—might tell him to do. Indeed, he names his father's God—“the Fear of Isaac” (Gen. 31:42). Perhaps, in doing so, he is expressing his difficulty in trusting God and projecting his fear of the ever-looming punishment for tricking Isaac onto God.<sup>20</sup> Or, perhaps, he is labeling Isaac's God as the source of his trauma and anxiety, which led to these actions.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *Genesis Rabbah* 95:9 (ed. Theodor-Albeck) notes this faux pas and criticizes Jacob harshly. In the footnotes *ad locum* Theodor cites additional complementary midrashim.

<sup>20</sup> Curiously, it is Moses who is brutally straightforward with Pharaoh who could climb up the ladder at Sinai and climb back down and allow human history to continue in its course. Indeed, Moses is the quintessential man of truth who struck the Egyptian taskmaster, rebuked the fighting Hebrew

slaves, and finally asked to see God's face, without any thought of the consequences to himself.

<sup>21</sup> In this essay, I have focused on the biblical antecedents and psychological dynamics supporting the midrash's reading. However, setting the midrash in its historical context or the history of contemporaneous ideas might also bear fruit. Some might suggest that this trope was ascribed to Jacob by the rabbis in order to berate the lack of faith or to bolster the faith of those in their own day who were afraid to “climb the

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## SHADES OF WHITE: A FRESH LOOK AT LAVAN'S RELATIONSHIP WITH YAAKOV

*Yitzchak Etshalom attended Yeshivat Kerem B'Yavne, Rabbi Isaac Elhanan Theological Seminary and Yeshivat Har Etzion before receiving Semicha from the Chief Rabbi of Yerushalayim, Rabbi Itzhak Kolitz.*

*Parashat Vayeitzei* (Bereishit 28:10-32:3) is one Masoretic parashah, one single story that traces Yaakov's years in exile. This story has two central characters—Yaakov and Lavan. Important as Rachel and Leah may be, they play secondary roles throughout much of the narrative. From Yaakov's first moments in Haran he is associated with Lavan,

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ladder.” Indeed, God’s reaction to Jacob’s refusal to ascend—dooming his descendants to exile—supports the notion that the midrash is rebuking those Jews who are living or who lived in the Holy Land who do not or did not try to take back the Temple Mount (where Jacob’s dream occurs according to the midrash) and rebuild the Temple. In fact, the historical context of this midrash might be Bar Kokhba’s rebellion, which Rabbi Akiva famously supported and others did not. Vayikra Rabbah goes out of its way to attribute the midrash to Rabbi Meir who was Rabbi Akiva’s student. While we do not know R. Meir’s politics, the connection is suggestive.

Alternately, one might suggest that the harshness of this midrashic indictment implies that it is polemicizing with another tradition: a mystical tradition, stemming from the Hekhalot literature that sees Jacob not only ascending to the Heavens but becoming like a god. Indeed, Elliot R. Wolfson in *Along the Path: Studies in Kabbalistic Myth, Symbolism and Hermeneutics* (SUNY, 1995) devotes an entire chapter, “The Image of Jacob,” to a discussion of Jacob’s iconic role

and their immediate relationship only concludes in the last verses of the *parashah*. His relationship with Lavan, more than with anyone else, defines Yaakov's time in Haran. Consider his words to Esav—*im Lavan garti...* "I have sojourned with Lavan" (Bereishit 32:5).

The Midrash has trained generations of Jews, from their first Passover Seders, to look at Lavan with a jaundiced eye, and as the “bad guy” in his relationship with Yaakov; he was, after all, “worse than Pharaoh.” Not knowing of the moon-cult prevalent in those days in Haran (so that we could make the Lavan-Levana connection—see Loewenstamm in *Encyclopedia Mikraita* 4:421), sharper ears have noted the irony of such a deceptive man being named “white.” The Midrash picks up on this irony and, already at the point of Lavan's first mention in the text, suggests an interpretation of his name as an adjective. R. Yitzchak reads “Lavan” as an adjective describing his

in various mystical texts (including Hekhalot Rabbati) as “the link that connects heaven and earth... for he [Jacob] is in both places insofar as he is below but his image is engraved above” (18), as “a god in the lower entities” (22), and as a demiurge (30). From a mystical point of view, as Wolfson demonstrates, Jacob truly ascended the ladder and inhabits or spans the divine (and earthly) realms. Echoing this, Shamma Friedman has also remarked that “It is not surprising then that Jacob/Israel as God’s chosen, was portrayed in rabbinic teachings as bearing the divine image in a unique sense, including exact facial features, the ‘spirit and image’ of his Creator.... This is indeed the original meaning of the legend that Jacob’s icon was engraved upon the Divine throne.” (Overview of Shamma Friedman “Anthropomorphism and Its Eradication” in *Iconoclasm and Iconoclasm*, edited by Willem van Asselt, Paul van Geest, Daniela Müller, and Theo Salemink [Oxford UP, 2007], pp. 157-178). So perhaps, our midrash is making a point: there is no way that Jacob would have even ascended to Heaven, let alone become god-like and stayed there.

physical beauty—“*paradoxus*”—a splendidly white man. Dissenting is R. Berekhya, who sees it as a description of his inner character: He was *meluban b'resha*, meaning that his evil was transparent and obvious (Bereishit R. 60:7).

As a result of how Lavan is developed Midrashically, making him the "Aramean who tried to destroy my father" (but see Rashbam and ibn Ezra at Devarim 26:5 for the "Peshat" reading), even his earliest actions are eisegetically viewed with cynicism. For example, when we first meet him, Lavan runs to greet Avraham's slave and we read this action as driven by his greed and venal interest rather than hospitality (cf. Rashi at Bereishit 24:29). Similarly, when Yaakov first arrives in Haran, Lavan's warm greeting and embrace is read as a surreptitious search for hidden gold and jewels (cf. Rashi at Bereishit 29:13, following Bereishit R. 70:13). We are, therefore, not surprised to find him turning on Yaakov at the end of their relationship, treating him as an arch-enemy.

However, if we take a straightforward look at the story as it unfolds, reading the text on its own terms (with a bit of help from period texts), a different picture may emerge—one that does not alter our final assessment of Lavan, but which may illuminate how his relationship with Yaakov unfolded. Although I have no interest in rehabilitating Lavan's reputation, we may be able to see his actions in a more favorable light and more clearly understand his motivations.

## I. Yaakov's Arrival

When Yaakov first arrives in Haran, the first member of his extended family that he meets is Rachel, who is tending her father's flock (29:6). Rachel is, at the time, a young girl; we could safely assume that she is seven years younger than marriageable age. After all, her father Lavan agrees to give her hand in betrothal to Yaakov, who would only marry her seven years later, having worked off this debt. That means that for the next seven years, Rachel would be unavailable to any other man, yet not married to Yaakov and unable to begin bearing children.

It is important to note that in the ancient world—and, in some parts of our world today—girls were married close to or at the onset of puberty. This is for several reasons, including the need to have as many children as possible to help with the household estate, as well as the relatively high mortality rate of both young children and mothers during childbirth. There was no good reason to "waste" childbearing years; perhaps, as a result, there was no place in society for a woman over the age of 12-13 outside of the context of her marriage. Adolescence was not recognized as a legitimate period of transition, and pursuit of both education and vocation were limited, for the most part, to the first few years of one's life (if at all, in the case of education).

According to the social norms of the time, it stands to reason that Lavan would not enter his daughter

into a relationship in which she would be unable to contribute to the family for seven potentially productive years. It therefore seems that Rachel is, indeed, a young girl when Yaakov arrives in Haran and meets her. This is significant chiefly because it demonstrates that Lavan has neither sons nor wealth—each of which will change dramatically over the years in which Yaakov works with him. These changes will subsequently affect the relationship between Lavan and Yaakov.

Why is this young girl herding the flock? In Tanakh narratives, we are accustomed to seeing young girls as water-drawers (e.g. Bereishit 24, 1 Shmuel 9:11-13). They only appear as herders in a circumstance in which there are no boys in the family (e.g. Shemot 2). The reasonable conclusion is that Lavan has no sons at this point, so his daughter is tending his flock. In addition, we may conclude with fair certainty that Lavan's estate is not large and that the family is not wealthy. Living in a herding environment, if they were indeed wealthy they would have a large flock, with more sheep than one young girl could handle. It is also reasonable to posit that if they were of means the family would be able to hire herders to control the grazing, rather than use their own children for that task.

The picture of Lavan's household, as we see it now, is that of a man with two young daughters, living on a relatively small estate. From all appearances, it seems that at the time when Yaakov first arrives, there is no wife/mother in the family. When Yaakov's first meeting with Rachel ends (with that famous kiss), she runs to her *father's* house to report

what happened. In contrast, in the parallel story one generation earlier, Rivkah ran to her *mother's* house to report about the wealthy, thirsty stranger with gold jewels. We never do hear about Lavan's spouse—but this appears to change at some later point, as we will see further on.

When Yaakov first arrives at the house, Lavan acts hospitably towards him, taking him in (Bereishit 29:14); it seems from Lavan's words to Yaakov that the latter immediately went to work herding Lavan's flock. (We would assume that, at this point, Rachel is relieved of these duties.) After the first month, Lavan says: "Indeed, you are my brother—shall you work for me for nothing? State your fee!" (v. 15). In other words, Yaakov has been working for Lavan without recompense (except for room and board). As stated above, a straightforward read of the verses (without prejudice regarding Lavan) presents him in a positive and somewhat charitable light. Yaakov's answer shifts the conversation from straight wages to marriage—"I will work for you for seven years for Rachel, your younger daughter" (v. 18). Lavan is agreeable and Yaakov goes back to work, and the seven years go by quickly—"they were as a few days in [Yaakov's] eyes, due to his love for her" (v. 20).

## II. The Marriages

Even if we were ready to view Lavan with equanimity until this point, it is usually the marriage scene that sets our blood boiling against him. Yet again, however, a careful reading of the text presents Lavan in a positive light. In this case, it may even mar our view of Yaakov.

When the time is up, Yaakov approaches Lavan and says: "Give me my wife that I may come unto her (i.e. have relations with her)" (v. 21 – see Beresihit R. 70:18 re: this coarse wording). At no point in this brief demand (!) does Yaakov mention Rachel by name. Lavan gathers the people of the area and makes a feast. He gives Leah (with Zilpah as a handmaid) to Yaakov, who doesn't realize until morning!

Before going further, two points about that night must be explained. First of all, Yaakov's inability to recognize that he married Leah and not Rachel, in spite of the already noted physical differences between the sisters, tells us something about Yaakov's behavior during the intervening seven years. Evidently, Yaakov had little to do with either Leah or Rachel during that time, and wasn't familiar enough with Rachel to be able to tell that he married another woman. This seems a bit odd on the face of it, as seven years is a long time and, on a small estate, we would think that the people would see each other often. We will address this further on.

The second point is that the irony of Yaakov being fooled about a younger/older child in the dark was not lost on the *baalei ha-nidrash*. In Bereishit Rabbah (70:19), a long Midrashic passage telling the details of that fateful night concludes with a stinging statement: "Behold, she was Leah!: [Yaakov] said to her: 'Deceptive one, daughter of a deceptive one—all night, I called out "Rachel" and you responded to me!' [Leah] answered back: 'Is there a barber without students? Wasn't your father calling out "Esav," and you responded to him?'"

This last question drives home a point which is a variation on the subtle rebuke Lavan delivers to Yaakov when he complains about the switched bride: "Such is not done in our place, to give the younger one before the older" (v. 26). On an overt level, Lavan is reprimanding Yaakov for not having paid attention to—or, perhaps, deliberately ignoring—the customs of a region where he has lived for seven years: younger daughters are not married off before their older sisters.

Parenthetically, this point can teach us a bit more about the family. Leah was not much older than Rachel, such that when Yaakov first arrived, they were both pre-marital age, and it was assumed that by the time the seven years were complete, Leah would have been married. Lavan is excoriating Yaakov for his insensitivity to local custom and, perhaps, to Leah herself. Underneath this rebuke is another, delivered through this pointed Midrash. "Perhaps in your place, you substitute the younger for the older and steal their rightful place in the family, but we don't do that here!" Note that Yaakov has no comeback to this rebuke. One way or the other, he accepts it.

Lavan's subsequent agreement, allowing Yaakov to marry Rachel after the seven-day celebration with Leah, seems a bit odd. Why would he want both of his daughters to be married to the same man? This is putting all of his eggs in one basket. What if something happens to that one son-in-law or if he proves to be less than trustworthy? In addition, as the story bears out, having two sisters married to the same man is a recipe for disharmony. We will

revisit this issue below.

### III. Departure

The text is silent about Yaakov's relationship with Lavan throughout the childbearing narratives until the birth of Yosef. At that point, Yaakov approaches Lavan and asks permission to return to his home, a strange request indeed. Why does Yaakov need Lavan's permission to leave at all? The result of this request is an interim agreement for Yaakov and Lavan to split the flock and to have all sheep born with specific markings go to Yaakov. The agreement is struck and Yaakov is successful in getting his spotted flock to out-reproduce Lavan's flock, and Yaakov becomes wealthy—all of which should be good news for Lavan, as this wealth will be enjoyed by his daughters and grandchildren.

The beginning of chapter 31 introduces heretofore unheard-from characters into our narrative—and that is the catalyst for the sea change in the relationship between Yaakov and Lavan.

And [Yaakov] heard the words of Lavan's sons saying: 'Yaakov has taken all that belongs to our father, and from our father's possessions has created all of this wealth. [Immediately:] And Yaakov saw that the face of Lavan was no longer with him as it was in the days before. (31:1-2)

This verse is enough, on its own, to support our basic thesis: the relationship between Yaakov and

Lavan was a good one until now. But what changed things?

The answer is straightforward: the appearance of "*bnei Lavan*." In the intervening years, while Yaakov was becoming a mighty herder and father of a dozen children, Lavan was also blessed with sons (perhaps with a new wife). These sons had grown up and are now agitated that this outsider stands to inherit their estate. (I am working under the assumption that Yaakov spent significantly more than 20 years in Haran and that these boys were born after he married Leah and Rachel. See *Between The Lines of the Bible, vol. 1* chapter 16.) Blood being thicker than water, Lavan favors their position and no longer looks at Yaakov with a friendly eye. This leads to Yaakov, with God's explicit command (v. 3) and his wives' reluctant agreement (v. 16), to sneak his family out of Lavan's home and to head south to the Gilead mountains and to his own home.

Importantly, one odd event occurs just before the family sneaks away. Rachel steals her father's household gods (*teraphim*) (v. 19) and then hides them when her father catches up with Yaakov and inspects all of the tents to find these idols (v. 34). What motivates Rachel to steal them, and why is Lavan so angry about that theft that it becomes the focal point of his *riv* (dispute) with Yaakov?

One final point: During that dispute at Gilead, Lavan utters a seemingly odd declaration—"The girls are my daughters, the boys are my sons..." (v. 43). What is he claiming here about his daughters

and grandsons? In addition, when he and Yaakov make their separation agreement, Lavan makes Yaakov swear that he will not marry any other women "in addition to my daughters" (v. 50). We understand his interest, but by what right does he make this demand?

#### IV. From The Archives

Over the past two centuries, numerous archives have been unearthed from ancient libraries and royal courts throughout the Middle East, chiefly in Iraq (Mesopotamia) and Egypt. These documents have revealed countless details about marriage and divorce, religious practices inheritance—every area of life as it was lived then. These archives, which famously include the Code of Hammurabi, the Sennacherib Prism and other "famous" finds, are of great interest to the student of Tanakh, as they have the potential to illuminate much about both narrative as well as legal texts in the canon.

In 1926, Professor Cyril John Gadd published a text found in the archives of Nuzi, an ancient city near Kirkuk, in modern-day Iraq (*Revue d' Assyriologie* XXIII, 1926, pp. 126-127). It is a contract in which a man with no sons adopted another man as his heir. The contract stipulated that the new "heir" was to care for his new "father" for the duration of his life. If the "father" subsequently had sons, then they would divide the estate equally with the adopted heir—but only the natural son would inherit the father's household gods. One of the conditions of the "adoption" was that the heir was to marry the paterfamilias' daughter, and was forbidden from marrying any other woman; if he did so, he would forfeit the "father's" property. (see Prof. Cyrus

Gordon's application of this find to our story in BASOR [the Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research] #66, April 1937, pp. 25-27).

Taking this contract in hand and reading the story in a straightforward manner, the relationship takes on a very different hue and, perhaps, the *Biblical* Lavan (as opposed to the *Midrashic* Lavan) can be better understood. Let's trace the relationship through again, keeping the contractual background in mind:

When the two first meet, Lavan has no sons and sees Yaakov as his adopted "heir." Yaakov's desire to marry one of the daughters only makes that all the more convenient. When, seven years later, the older daughter remains unmarried, Lavan brings her to Yaakov and they are married. Yaakov's insistence on marrying Rachel may have been a request on his part to be able to divorce Leah, but from Lavan's perspective, this is a perfect solution. Both of his daughters – his only children – will marry his heir who will inherit the estate, which continues to grow through Yaakov's diligent work.

Although it may be Yaakov's desire to return to Canaan and rejoin his parents (and claim his Divinely promised land), that catalyzes a subtle change in the relationship (we might posit that, at this point in time, Lavan's sons have already been born and that Yaakov realizes that the terms of the contract will soon change). The full-blown conflict that comes to a head at the standoff at Gilead only comes when Lavan's sons come of age. In the meantime, Yaakov is still able to remain there comfortably. That all changes when Lavan's sons



grow up and begin agitating for their portion in a future inheritance and complaining about Yaakov's portion. Lavan's claims, "the daughters are my daughters etc.," are actually anchored in Mesopotamian contracts, as we see from the Nuzi archives.

We can also understand Rachel's theft of the *teraphim* in this light and Lavan's great agitation about it; she was taking a token which served as a claim on the estate—a title deed, as it were. Perhaps she had hopes that the family or the next generation would return and be able to stake a claim to the now successful estate and wrest it from her younger brothers.

#### V. Back To Lavan

The *ba'alei ha-midrash* taught deep and enduring lessons, many of them by presenting Biblical characters in "caricature light," as completely pure and noble or completely devious and evil. A careful read of the Midrashic corpus reveals that nearly all Biblical characters are presented with greater nuance and shading than commonly thought. To bring two examples, Esav's honor for his father, expanded and detailed in the Midrashim, as well as rabbinic rebukes of Yaakov beyond what the text states, demonstrate that even the Aggadic tradition presents textured characters, heroes with flaws and fallen sons with redeeming and even exemplary qualities.

Nonetheless, the overwhelming approach of a traditional student is to read the stories with the caricature in mind. To paraphrase Rashbam (at [Bereishit 37:2](#)), we are so accustomed to reading text

through the lens of the Midrashim, which teach the most important and enduring lessons, that we overlook "Peshat," the straightforward read of the text.

Stripping away the Midrashic overlay of Lavan's demonic personality and reading the story on its own terms, against a 2nd millennium BCE Near Eastern background, we see that the "good/evil" divide that is usually assigned to Yaakov and Lavan, respectively, may have to be reassessed. Is every move that Lavan makes clearly driven by greed and murderous intent? Hardly. Is every step that Yaakov takes motivated by altruism and honor? Perhaps, and perhaps not. As we watch our Bereishit heroes grow, we also see them adjusting after their errors and learning from their mistakes. And as we see our Midrashic villains develop, we have to be cognizant that the story that the Tanakh tells about them is far more nuanced and shaded.

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