



Light of Torah

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By Teresa Pirola

The morning after the wedding night

"Then Jacob kissed Rachel, and broke into tears" (Genesis 29:11).

Thus begins the passionate and troubled love affair between Jacob and Rachel.

Jacob has just fled to the land of Haran to escape the wrath of his brother Esau whom he has deceived by stealing his birthright (Gen.27). In Haran he finds his relative Laban and agrees to work for him. Chapter 29 of Genesis tells how Jacob comes to marry both of Laban's daughters: Leah the elder, and Rachel the younger. Let's begin our discussion here by giving particular attention to Jacob's first marriage in Gen. 29:1-29.

"In the morning, look—it was Leah!" (29:25).

Jacob wakes after his wedding night to find himself deceived. He believed he had married and was sleeping with Rachel but instead her older sister Leah has been substituted. Jacob confronts his father-in-law, Laban, and we are sympathetic to his distressed cry: *"Why did you deceive me?" (29:25).*

The Jewish sages who have reflected on this passage over many centuries have long detected a certain divine retribution in this event. After all, wasn't it Jacob who once caused deception and havoc in family life (Gen.27)?

Let's examine our text through the eyes of a 16th century rabbi, Eliezer Ashkenazi. Ashkenazi is particularly interested in Laban's curt response to Jacob's distress: *"This is not done in our region, to give the younger before the firstborn" (29:26).*

Ashkenazi notes two subtleties. First, Laban is an aggressive person, so why doesn't he use a stronger argument, i.e., "It is never done" rather than the milder "This is not done in our region"?

Also, Leah and Rachel have been previously described as 'the elder' and 'the younger' (v.16). Why does Laban describe them as 'the younger' and 'the firstborn'? Why is a different Hebrew word inserted here to refer to Leah? [Note: not all English translations show this difference, translating as 'elder' in both cases. In fact, 29:26 uses the same Hebrew word as found in Gen 27:19 "I am Esau, your firstborn."]

So what is Laban really saying to Jacob? Ashkenazi paraphrases his response this way:

'It is true in your place perhaps such things are done, that the younger is given precedence over the firstborn, and that his portion is taken away and given to another, and the younger is given the name of "firstborn." But such things are not done "in our country to give the younger before the firstborn."¹

In other words, Laban is confronting Jacob with the matter

of Jacob's deception of his elder brother Esau who was robbed of his paternal blessing and inheritance (Gen. 27). Whether or not he is aware of it, Laban is dealing out divine justice.

The Jewish sages are not afraid to acknowledge the weaknesses of even the most chosen and blessed of God's children. They see in the Torah a potent lesson: our actions have consequences. Our flawed decisions do not prevent God's designs from being realized, but neither are we excused from dealing with their aftermath. In Jacob's case, while he caused deception he ultimately became a victim of deception.

A topic for journaling, prayer or sharing:

Think of a poor decision of yours in the past which has had difficult consequences in the present. How have you dealt with this event? What healing has occurred, or still needs to occur? Can you appreciate the hand of God in and through this part of your life's story? •

1. Cited in Leibowitz, 324.

Bibliography: Leibowitz, *Studies in Bereshit* (NY: Lambda.); Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (NY, 2006); Sarna, ed., *JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia, 1989). Scripture: Plaut.