

Parashah Vayeitzei continues the complicated story of Jakob. It is a story through which we can learn much about human nature, about channeling desires, and about discernment. It is a story woven of multiple threads and taking place on multiple levels.

Perhaps the most poignant level, and one most of us can readily understand, is the story of family relationships, including a goodly portion of sibling rivalry. One of the main drivers of these dynamics is the attribute of wiliness, a characteristic that is beneficial, occasionally even essential, but one that must be used judiciously, and never maliciously. Jakob, by the very nature of his name, has this propensity, and he knows how to use it. The Hebrew root עקב not only means *heel*, it also forms words meaning deception, overreaching, punishing, and consequence. But there is a reason why Jakob must develop this particular aspect of his personality. Jakob is the quintessential nerd while Esau is the epitome of virility. In a fight, Jakob would be no match against his brother, so he hones a strength that Esau either lacks or chooses not to develop – his intelligence, which obviously includes the ability to survive and prosper in difficult circumstances – i.e. wiliness. Jakob's intelligence ranges from the verbal eloquence he employs to deceive both his father and his brother, the emotional intelligence he needs to serve Laban patiently for 20 years, to an astounding understanding of animal husbandry. Scientists and commentators have puzzled for ages over the story of the three kinds of peeled branches Jakob places in the animals' drinking water. Was Jakob a sort of Leonardo da Vinci in the field of genetics, or was it a miracle from HaShem that his breeding techniques made him immensely wealthy?

But despite his intelligence, Jakob does not have an easy life. After having deceived his brother and father, he flees to the home of his uncle Laban, a master deceiver through whom and from whom he learns much. The first lesson he must learn is that actions have consequences. Jakob the deceiver is deceived himself many times over, starting on his first wedding night, and not only by his uncle, but also by Rachel herself. According to a midrash (Tanchuma Vayeitzei 6), no one was more beautiful than Rachel, and because of this, Jakob was eager to marry her. He sent her many gifts, but Laban gave them to Leah instead. Yet Rachel remained silent. Midrash Eicha Rabbah, Petichta 24 adds: When Jakob proposed marriage, she told him that her father was a deceiver and would not let her marry before her older sister. Jakob answered her, "I am his brother in deceit." Jakob gave Rachel signs so that he would be able to recognize her on their wedding night, but taking pity on her sister, Rachel gave them to Leah so that she would not be disgraced. Sisterly love and loyalty notwithstanding, Rachel eventually becomes jealous of Leah, because while Leah gives birth to four sons (Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah), she is unable to conceive. Echoing her ancestor Sarah, Rachel gives Jakob her servant Bilhah, who bears him sons Dan and Naftali, whereupon Leah, temporarily barren, gives Jakob her servant Zilpah, from whom come sons Gad and Asher. The rivalry continues in the dispute over the *dudaim* Reuben finds and gives to Leah. The *dudaim* plant (Autumn Mandrake) has a pleasing aroma and is thought to have aphrodisiac powers as well as the ability to assist in conception. After some harsh words, the sisters finally agree that Rachel will receive the *dudaim*, and in exchange, Jakob will sleep with Leah that night. This results in the birth of sons Issachar and Zebulun and daughter Dinah for Leah, and finally, in the birth of Joseph for Rachel. From our 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective, we can only imagine what Jakob must have felt at being a pawn in the hands of Laban and his family. Yes, what goes around, comes around!

After 20 years with Laban, Jakob is finally ready to leave. Taking advantage of Laban's absence, he departs with family, livestock, and possessions amid one more act of deception that takes even him by surprise. Rachel has stolen her father's *teraphim* (household gods), and when Laban overtakes them, she delivers a master stroke of cunning by placing the *teraphim* in her camel's saddle, sitting on the camel while Laban searches her tent, and then humbly excusing herself for not standing because she is menstruating! Outwitted by Rachel, Laban and Jakob air their respective grievances and finally form a non-aggression pact. It is noteworthy that Laban tells Jakob, "The god of YOUR father spoke ... 'Beware of speaking with Jakob either good or bad.'" Obviously, Laban and his family are not included in HaShem's covenant (more on this later, especially as Pesach approaches). His acts of deception are purely for his own benefit, and his arguments are the arguments of a master manipulator. By contrast, the acts of deception set in motion when Jakob takes Esau's birthright and brought to brilliant culmination by Rachel, serve to further the covenantal idea. This is judicious, even righteous deception in keeping with HaShem's long-range plan for the greater good of all.

Shabbat shalom!