

# The Lost Matriarch: Supplement F

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## Midrash on Jacob's Final Six Years in Haran

### How Is Joseph's Birth Related to Jacob's Return?

And it came to pass, when Rachel had born Joseph, that Jacob said to Laban, Send me away, that I may go to my own place, and to my country. (Gen. 30:25)

When the Bible describes a second event immediately following a prior one, even when they are seemingly unrelated, midrash often presumes that there must be a significant causal relationship. In some way the first event led to the second. Gen. 30:25 presents such a situation in a single verse: Jacob seeks to leave Laban “when Rachel had born Joseph.” Since midrash generally presumes that the principal characters in this story have prophetic knowledge that yet another son remains to be born, it seems odd that Joseph's birth would trigger Jacob's confrontation of Laban in order to return to Canaan before the birth of Benjamin. In order to explain the implied causal relationship between Joseph's birth and Jacob's return, midrash imagines another convenient prophecy: It had been foretold that only Rachel's descendants (or perhaps specifically Joseph) would be able to conquer Esau's descendants.<sup>1</sup> Therefore Jacob could now finally return to Canaan, where Esau and his sons had grown mighty.

This prophecy can be taken at two levels. As a matter of the events recorded in the later books of the Bible, it will indeed be Joseph's descendant, Joshua (of the tribe of Ephraim), who defeats Esau's descendant, Amelek. (Ex. 17:13) But as a moral commentary on the prophecy, midrash observes that only Joseph, who eventually foregoes vengeance upon his brothers despite having them in his power as Viceroy of Egypt, has the moral authority to demand that Esau forego vengeance upon his brother, Jacob, despite Esau having Jacob in his power.<sup>2\*</sup>

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\* Some of the rabbinic commentators shun the common midrashic *derash* process of making inventive interpretations to expand the meaning of the text. Instead, they favor strict *peshat* (plain meaning) interpretation without any fanciful embellishment of the text. Under the *peshat* approach, there was indeed a connection between Joseph's birth and Jacob's readiness to leave Haran, but not one that requires fable-making. According to Rashbam, the connection was simply that Joseph happened to be born at the end of Jacob's first fourteen years in Haran, when Jacob had finally fulfilled the second of his two seven-year contracts with Laban and was therefore free to leave. (Rashbam, *Commentary*, 182) Displaying a curious contrast that hints at a family saga all its own, Rashbam, one of the greatest medieval *peshat* interpreters, was the grandson of Rashi, one of the greatest medieval *derash* interpreters.

## Jacob Negotiates with Laban

And Laban said to him, I beg you, if I have found favor in your eyes, remain; for I have learned by experience that the Lord has blessed me for your sake. And he said, Appoint me your wages, and I will give it. (Gen. 30:27-28)

Jacob's life in exile at Haran began in a negotiation where Laban tricked him into working for seven years to marry Leah, a bride he hadn't chosen. Then Laban got Jacob to agree to labor an additional seven years in order to marry his intended bride, Rachel. Now Jacob ends his sojourn with yet another labor negotiation with Laban. This time, however, the roles of the parties will be reversed.

We've seen how midrash analyzes the circumstances when Jacob first arrived at Haran and met Rachel at the well. The Rabbis conclude that Laban had by then lost his former wealth. Drought had so reduced his flock that it could be tended to by a young girl. Rachel had to bring the small flock to a large communal well for watering because the smaller area wells had dried up. And in contrast to the Bible's earlier introduction of Laban as the brother of Rebekah when Abraham's servant previously came to Haran to seek a bride for Isaac (Gen. 25:29), there is no mention of brothers of Leah and Rachel when Jacob arrives. Midrash therefore concludes that when Jacob first arrived, Laban was poor also because he didn't even have sons (who would have been an economic asset in that agrarian society).<sup>3</sup>

Now, after fourteen years, Jacob has returned Laban to great prosperity. The mere presence of righteous Jacob has caused the waters in the wells of Haran to rise. His shepherd's skills have built up Laban's flock. But Laban now has sons, who are jealous of their brother-in-law's role in Laban's wealth. (Gen.31:1)<sup>4</sup>\*

But circumstances have changed for Jacob, too. He had arrived as a penniless supplicant, fleeing for his life from Esau's wrath, and forced to depend upon family hospitality from his conniving uncle, Laban. Jacob earned his bread by working even in that first month before bargaining for Rachel's bride-price. Now, although he still has not been able to accumulate personal wealth while he worked his two seven-year terms, he does have wives and sons. Moreover, Laban has become economically dependent upon Jacob and upon the prosperity that God has granted to Laban because of Jacob.

Jacob asks Laban for permission to leave with his family. Just as Laban did when Jacob first arrived (Gen. 29:15), Laban asks Jacob to name the wages he wishes for staying and continuing to work for Laban. This time, however, the negotiation displays some subtle but crucial differences. Apparently, Laban no longer has the upper hand in this negotiation. He

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\* When Jacob first arrives in Haran, the Bible makes no mention of any sons in Laban's family. Midrash therefore presumes that the sons who are mentioned later must have been born after Jacob's arrival. Modern commentary notes that, in this setting, when Jacob married both of Laban's only full daughters, he would have become the heir apparent to his father-in-law's wealth. The resulting tensions after Laban later had direct heirs would provide motivation for the sons' resentment of Jacob. (Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 195) This antipathy of Jacob's younger brothers-in-law offers still another variation on the theme of sibling rivalry between older and younger that is the principal motif in the life of Jacob and his family.

acknowledges having received God's favor because of Jacob's presence. Moreover, Jacob seems to have learned his lesson about bargaining with Laban. The first time, Jacob tried to be precise in his wording of the terms of his agreement, but he allowed Laban to control the delivery of the contract price (his bride), which permitted the wedding night switch. This time, Jacob again states the contract terms with precision. The difference is that now Jacob will be the one to control how the contract is performed.

Jacob proposes that he continue to tend to the flocks but be allowed to keep all of the animals born with spotted or streaked color markings. Then (following a plan he will later attribute to God, Gen. 31:4-13), Jacob maximizes the production of animals bearing color markings by placing streaked rods in front of the sturdy members of the flock while they were mating.

In an echo of the Rabbis' hostility to the concept of magic that was expressed in their discussions of the mandrakes incident, some of the comments here scoff at the idea that displaying striped rods to breeding animals could affect the coloration of offspring. These commentaries instead conclude that Jacob's spotted and streaked animals increased because of God's miraculous intervention that determined the markings of the herd's progeny. But why then would Jacob have used the rods if they didn't affect the herd? One commentator suggests that Jacob did this simply to create the appearance of sorcery, because the pagan Laban would fear and respect the powers of sorcery.<sup>5</sup>

An alternative interpretation accepts the story that the rods caused the markings of the offspring, but draws an interesting conclusion. If Jacob's display of the striped rods to breeding animals affected the coloration of their offspring, this shows that what parents see and think during intercourse has consequences. The same should be true for humans, which is why the Rabbis declare that during human intercourse husbands and wives should be thinking only of each other.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, the mechanism that Jacob uses to gain advantage over Laban with the flocks is directly related to the mechanism that Laban previously used to gain advantage over Jacob. When Laban substituted Leah for Rachel in the wedding tent, Jacob thought that the woman he was having intercourse with was someone else.

Based upon this connection, midrash is able to defend Jacob's manipulation of the animal breeding as being the appropriate instrument of divine justice for Laban's past dealings, on the principle of measure for measure. The commentators further defend Jacob on the grounds that, as expressed later in the text, Laban tried to achieve an unfair advantage over Jacob during the final six years of working for the agreed wages (keeping the streaked and spotted animals) by repeatedly changing the terms and circumstances of their agreement. (Gen. 31:41) Jacob's manipulation of the rods would therefore be further justified by the need to defend against Laban's unfairness.<sup>7</sup>

## **God Finally Commands Jacob to Return**

And he heard the words of Laban's sons, saying, Jacob has taken away all that was our father's; and from that which was our father's has he gotten all this honor. And Jacob saw the countenance of Laban, and, behold, it was not toward him as before. And the Lord said to Jacob, Return to the land of your fathers, and to your family; and I will be with you. (Gen. 31:1-3)

There was no time limit specified in Jacob's new contract with Laban, but the text tells us that several circumstances arose to signal the time for his return to Canaan after six more years of laboring for his father-in-law. He heard his brothers-in-law, Laban's sons, expressing their resentment that Jacob had become prominent and wealthy by taking what should have been Laban's. And because of his success in selectively breeding the flocks, Jacob also saw a change in Laban's attitude toward him.

The final stroke was, in a sense, the conclusion of an earlier negotiation. When Jacob first fled from Esau, he had his Ladder dream at Bethel where he negotiated with God, promising to follow God on condition that God protect him and return him to his homeland. (Gen. 28:20-21) Although God did show Jacob favor and protection in Haran, God had not made any verbal response to Jacob's conditional promise until this point. Now God finally accepts the rest of the contract that Jacob negotiated at Bethel, speaking once more to Jacob and telling him to return to his homeland.

## Notes to Supplement F

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- <sup>1</sup> The prophesy of Joseph overcoming Esau: Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 3a, 78-9; *Midrash Rabbah*, Gen. 73.7; Rashi, *Commentaries*, v. 1, 335, n. 25; Ronson, *Women of the Torah*, 146; Townsend, *Midrash Tanhuma*, 189.
- <sup>2</sup> Joseph's moral authority over Esau is because Joseph foregoes vengeance while in a position of power: Townsend, *Midrash Tanhuma*, 190; Weissman, *Midrash Says*, 297.
- <sup>3</sup> Laban had no sons when Jacob arrived at Haran: Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 3a, 79.
- <sup>4</sup> Laban's sons are in economic conflict with Jacob: Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 3a, 89.
- <sup>5</sup> God was responsible for Jacob's increased flock; the striped rods were just to impress Laban: Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 3a, 88; *Midrash Rabbah*, Gen. 73.10.
- <sup>6</sup> The striped rods repeat the theme from Leah's wedding night concerning the importance of mental state while having intercourse: Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 3a, 84.
- <sup>7</sup> Jacob's manipulation of the contract using selective breeding was justified by Laban's contract changes: Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 3a, 87.