

The Lost Matriarch: Supplement G

Midrash on Laban's Pursuit of the Family

Laban Overtakes Jacob

And Jacob outwitted Laban the Aramean, in that he did not tell him that he fled. (Gen. 31:20)

And it was told to Laban on the third day that Jacob had fled. And he took his brothers with him, and pursued after him seven days' journey; and they overtook him in the Mount Gilead. (Gen. 31:22-23)

The text tells us that Laban was away from home with his flock, and that Jacob fled with his family without telling Laban. Midrash goes on to tell us that the reason Rachel stole Laban's instruments of divination (the *teraphim*) was to keep her father in the dark about the family's flight. Yet the Bible specifies that after three days, Laban was told of Jacob's leaving. In order to make sense of how Laban learned of the escape, and why this happened after three days, midrash ties the text to the earlier midrashic story that upon Jacob's initial arrival in Haran, the presence of his righteousness ended the drought there and caused the wells to be full and flowing throughout his stay with Laban. Now, says midrash, Laban's servants who were responsible for watering the flock waited at a well for three days, expecting it to replenish as it had for the last twenty years. When the well failed to fill up, they came back and told their master, Laban, who immediately understood that Jacob must have left.¹

Here again we can see an example of the literary device, popular in the Bible and midrash, of "bookending" a story segment by repeating an opening motif to mark the conclusion of an episode. Jacob started his stay in Haran by having Laban trick him at the beginning of his first work contract; now Jacob leaves by tricking Laban at the end of his final work contract. Laban was unaware of Jacob's arrival until another person (Rachel) told him; now he is unaware of Jacob's leaving until other people (his servants) tell him. According to midrash, Haran's dry wells started flowing as soon as Jacob arrived; now they stop flowing again once he leaves. When Jacob arrived, Laban's flock had been decimated by drought; now Jacob leaves with much livestock, so that Laban's wealth is once more sharply reduced. At the first wedding, Midrash tells us how Laban enlisted the help of the townspeople to trick Jacob into marrying Leah in order to keep him in Haran and bring prosperity for Laban and the community for an additional seven years; now Laban enlists the help of "his brothers" (which midrash reads as referring not to his relatives but to those same townspeople) to pursue Jacob and bring back the family and

wealth.² We can see that the process of midrash-making thus entails much more than isolated acts of imaginative storytelling. The tales of midrash are not random, but follow and expand upon the Bible's overarching literary structure and style. This is accomplished by creating inventive literary responses to the subtle clues that can be discovered behind each word of the text.

Laban Searches for the *Teraphim*

It is not clear from the text just what Laban intended to do when his pursuing armed band caught up with Jacob, but Laban himself provides a clue to his purpose when he finally meets with his son-in-law. Laban makes a pointed reference to his ability to forcibly overcome Jacob ("It is in the power of my hand to hurt you," Gen. 31:29). However, God had promised to protect Jacob in the return to his homeland, and His divine intervention now deflects Laban's intent. During the pursuit, God appears to Laban in a dream and commands him not to interfere with Jacob. Therefore, when Laban overtakes Jacob's camp the next day he does no more than hypocritically chide his son-in-law for sneaking away before Laban could kiss his daughters and grandsons goodbye and send them all away with a festive party. The disingenuous posturing in Laban's speech is evident. We've heard from those daughters whom he claims he wants so much to kiss goodbye. Their response to hearing Jacob's plan to leave Haran was to accuse their father of wrongfully appropriating the wealth that should have been theirs and their children's. And of course, the last festive party that Laban gave for Jacob was the wedding feast, which turned out to be a vehicle for Laban's deceptive manipulation rather than honest celebration.

Laban's farewell kisses for his family provide another instance of the "ambiguous kiss" motif in Jacob's life. In addition, Laban's kisses also create another bookending of an episode in the family story. At the beginning of Jacob's sojourn in Haran, there was a first kiss: Jacob kissed Rachel. This might have been an innocent family kiss, but some commentators accept that it was a true romantic kiss. This first kiss marked the start of Jacob's two decades of struggles with Laban. Now, at the end of Jacob's stay in Haran, there is a second kiss: Laban kisses Rachel, Leah, and the family. This might have been an affectionate family kiss, but some commentators find that it was a mere charade by an unloving and manipulative father. This second kiss marks the end of Jacob's struggles in Haran, and his ultimate victory over Laban.

Rachel Defeats Laban's Search

Now Rachel had taken the teraphim, and put them in the camel's saddle, and sat upon them. And Laban searched all the tent, but found them not. And she said to her father, Let it not displease my lord that I cannot rise up in your presence; for the custom of women is upon me. And he searched, but did not find the teraphim. (Gen. 31:34-35)

Rachel committed a very bold act when she stole her father's *teraphim*. Now she takes even bolder action to avoid having them found with her. When Laban starts searching the camp, Rachel hides the *teraphim* in her camel saddlebag and sits on them. When her father searches her tent, she tricks him from finding the *teraphim* by telling him that she cannot get up because she is menstruating.

The Rabbis are immediately faced with a repeat of the interpretive challenge that confronted them with the story of Jacob's misleading statements to his father in the tent of blessing. For that earlier story, we've seen how midrash has to work hard to try to uphold Jacob's piety in the face of his deceiving Isaac. (See *Supplement B: Midrash on Jacob's Blessing Episode*.) Now, just as in the tent of blessing and the wedding tent, Jacob's story turns on another deception in another tent. (Jacob has indeed proved to be a man who lives in tents, as he was first described in Gen. 25:27.) So the Rabbis must work just as hard to try to make proper sense of this new tent story—the search in Rachel's tent.

The word used here for Laban's searching (*va-yimasheish*) means “feeling around” and is related to the words for feeling previously used twice in the blessing episode: once when Jacob feared that his father would feel him and discover that he was not Esau (Gen. 27:12), and again when Isaac was deceived because he felt the hairy goat skin that Rebekah placed on Jacob. (Gen. 27:22) This textual linkage, if read in the context of the midrashic belief that Jacob's curse on the thief of the *teraphim* is what brings an early death to Rachel, reinforces for the reader that God's justice will once again proceed measure for measure. Jacob deceived Isaac in order to obtain the blessing by having his father feel but not find out. Jacob will soon pay for this by the loss of his beloved Rachel following another father being deceived through feeling around (searching) without finding.³

The Rabbis are not certain whether Rachel was lying to her father when she claimed that she could not arise because she was having her period. Midrash points out that she would not have been talking about a physical inability to rise—menstruating women certainly can get up and walk. But her statement would have been a powerful deterrent to her father, because in that culture, menstruation was considered extremely contaminating. To avoid even chance contact with men, women having their monthly periods would typically be isolated from the men in a separate tent. Laban would certainly not have approached Rachel while she was in that state.⁴ And Laban would not have appreciated (although we readers know) that the contamination was even stronger: If Rachel were indeed menstruating while she was sitting on Laban's household gods, that situation would constitute an incredibly defiant act of intentional defilement.

On the other hand, if Rachel were lying in order to trick Laban, a contemporary commentator notes that her choice of that particular ruse would carry a strong note of irony. Unlike Leah's almost continuous childbearing, presumably Rachel had despaired for years because of what seemed to be her never-ending monthly menstrual periods that signified her continuing barrenness.⁵ Another contemporary commentator calculates that Rachel must certainly have been deceiving Laban when she claimed to be menstruating, since she would already have been pregnant with Benjamin.⁶

If Rachel were lying, however, midrash labors to salvage her righteousness. Perhaps deceiving her father is no more than morally justified payback to Laban for his orchestrating the great deception at the wedding of Leah and Jacob.⁷

But the real moral defense of Rachel in the midrash comes from the story of God's miraculous participation in deceiving Laban. According to several versions of this story, Laban did search Rachel's saddlebags, but God changed the idols into goblets. This miraculous

transformation protected Rachel from the humiliation of having her theft discovered by her father.⁸

By taking this dramatic action in order to save another from embarrassment, God emulates important actions taken by Leah, Rachel, and Jacob in the story. And the decision of the midrash to specify goblets as the objects into which Laban's *teraphim* were divinely transformed in Rachel's saddlebag may not be arbitrary. Besides being household gods, *teraphim* are described as being used for divination. Later in Genesis, Joseph will pretend that the goblet he hides in Benjamin's saddlebag was his divining cup (Joseph and Benjamin being Rachel's two sons). (Gen. 44:2) As a literary matter, the second story of Joseph's goblet in his brother's saddlebag seems to be a sort of reworking of the earlier one for Rachel, perhaps in order to reach a satisfactory resolution of the moral uncertainty remaining from the earlier story.

These midrashic tales relate how God's divine intervention and participation with Rachel enabled the deception of her father in the tent of the *teraphim*. This recalls the previous commentaries describing how similar divine participation enabled Jacob to deceive his father in the tent of the blessing. It is noteworthy that the intervening deception in a tent—the deception of Jacob in the wedding tent—receives no such midrashic story of God's active involvement. According to various commentaries, the wedding deception resulted exclusively from the actions of Laban, Leah, and Rachel, although some of these individuals may have acted from lofty or at least understandable motives. For the wedding episode, the commentators see God's role as limited to eventually punishing culpable acts (Laban), rewarding righteous ones (Rachel), and compassionately intervening to save Leah's marriage by permitting her to conceive.

Taken together, these linked stories of Jacob obtaining the blessing and Rachel hiding the *teraphim* provide a powerful gloss on the Fifth Commandment to honor your parents (Exod. 20:12; Deut. 5:16). Midrash does not read this commandment as an absolute. For example, Jews are not permitted to blindly obey a parent if that would violate a significant ethical law of behavior.⁹ This *halachah* (law of behavior) may be derived in part from the lesson of Laban's daughters that it is sometimes justified to deceive even a parent in the interests of greater morality.

Notes to Supplement G

¹ How Laban learned Jacob had left: Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 3a, 95; Ginzberg, *Legends of the Bible*, 178-9; Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 2nd ed., 292.

² Laban pursued Jacob with the townspeople: *Hachut Hameshulash* 614 [citing Sforno]

³ Laban feels around but is fooled, just as Isaac did: R. E. Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah*, 107.

⁴ Rachel's statement to Laban that she is menstruating: Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 3a, 100; Nachmanides (Ramban), *Commentary on the Torah*, 387-8.

⁵ Rachel's claim of menstruation has special significance for a long-barren woman: R. Alter, *Genesis*, 172, n. 35.

⁶ Rachel wasn't menstruating because she was already pregnant with Benjamin: R. E. Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah*, 107.

⁷ If Rachel was lying about menstruating, it was justified: R. E. Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah*, 107.

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- ⁸ God defeated Laban's search by changing the *teraphim* into goblets: Ginzberg, *Legends of the Bible*, 179; Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 2nd ed., 292; *Midrash Rabbah*, Gen. 74.9; Tuchman, *Passions of the Matriarchs*, 302.
- ⁹ Ethical limits on obeying the Commandments: Talmud *Yevamoth* 5b.