

## God and Humans

Up to and including the Akedah, God is portrayed as being surprised by the actions of humans. Here are the instances:

- Expulsion from Eden – Contrary to God's commands, humans eat from the Tree of Knowledge and understand good from bad. To prevent humans from eating from the Tree of Life and gaining eternal life, God banishes the humans and posts a guard to ensure that they cannot re-enter the Garden of Eden.

- Cain kills Abel – Eve bore Cain, a tiller of the soil, and Abel, a keeper of sheep. Both brought an offering to the LORD, but the LORD paid heed to Abel's offering and not to Cain's offering. The LORD warns Cain that "Sin couches at the door, its urge is toward you, yet you can be its master." Cain kills his brother Abel. The LORD condemns Cain to be a ceaseless wanderer of the earth.

- The Flood – "The LORD saw how great was man's wickedness on earth, and how every plan devised by his mind was nothing but evil all the time. And the LORD regretted that he had made man on earth, and His heart was saddened. The LORD said, 'I will blot out from earth the men I created...' " (*Gen. 6:7*) Noah found favor with the LORD. "God said to Noah, 'I have decided to put an end to all flesh, for the earth is filled with lawlessness because of them; I am about to destroy them with the earth. Make yourself an ark...' " (*Gen. 7:13*) Following the flood, Noah built an altar to the LORD and offered burnt offerings to the LORD. "The LORD said to Himself, 'Never again will I doom the earth because of man...nor will I destroy every living being, as I have done.' "

- The Tower of Babel – "Everyone on earth had the same language and the same words....They said, 'Let us build us a city, and a tower with its top in the sky, to make a name for ourselves, else we shall be scattered all over the world.'...The LORD said, 'If as one people and one language for all, this is how they have begun to act, then nothing that they may propose to do will be out of their reach. Let us, then, go down and confound their speech there, so that they shall not understand one another's speech.' " (*Gen. 11*) The LORD scattered them over the face of the earth, and they stopped building the city.

- The Akedah – Following the Akedah (the binding of Isaac), God has no further direct communication with Abraham, or with any other person in Genesis, except in dreams.

## Abraham and the Akedah

No matter how many sermons I hear on how the Akedah (the binding of Isaac) demonstrates the absolute fidelity of Abraham to God, or the humanity of Torah in banning human sacrifice, all I can think about is, “How could he do it? How could Abraham raise a knife to kill his son?” and any sophisticated theological explanation just rolls off me.

Two factual notes:

- The Akedah is not referenced anywhere else in Torah. One would think that if the Akedah were a basic Jewish teaching, it would be cited numerous times (as are Creation, the Exodus, even Korach) to reinforce a point.

- Up to and including the binding of Isaac, God is reported to speak to Abraham 12 times either directly (via angels) or in visions or dreams. After the binding of Isaac, zero times. Since the instructions from God to Abraham and the often repeated promise of descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven inheriting the land of Canaan are so important to the author, we can hardly think that any communication from God to Abraham was unreported. Either God decided not to talk any more to Abraham after the Akedah, or Abraham decided that he would not be receptive to any more messages from God. Since we cannot analyze God's intentions, let's concentrate on what the author may be telling us about Abraham.

Let us review Abraham's actions from the time we meet him until the Akedah. At God's urging, Abram (age 75) sets off for the land of Canaan with his wife Sarai (who is 65), his nephew Lot, and their possessions. Because of famine in the land, Abram and Sarai go to Egypt, where Abram asks Sarai to say she is his sister. The Pharaoh notices Sarai, who is taken into his palace, and Abram is rewarded with slaves and flocks. Pharaoh is then visited by God, who tells him that Sarai is Abram's wife. Pharaoh drives Abram and Sarai back to Canaan with their possessions.

At Bethel, where Abram had erected an altar to God, Abram and Lot decide that they cannot remain together because of the size of their flocks. Given the choice, Lot decides to settle in the Jordan valley, while Abram remains in Canaan. God renews his promise to Abram that his offspring will be as numerous “as the dust of the earth” and that they will inherit the land of Canaan.

Following the War of the Nine Kings, Lot and his possessions were taken from Sodom by the winning king. Abram gathered his household retainers and pursued them north to the area of Dan. There he defeated the captor of Lot and returned Lot and his possessions to Sodom. Abram was greeted by King Melchizedek, “a priest of God Most High,” who said, “...Blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your foes into your hand.”

God appeared to Abram again, and Abram asks God if he can name the children of his servant as his heirs. God assures Abram that his own children will be his heirs and that they will be numerous as the stars of heaven. God tells Abram that his children will be enslaved in a strange land for 400 years but that God will see that they will go free with great wealth. Abram is assured that he will live “to a ripe old age.”

Sarai, who is barren, asks Abram to cohabit with her maid, Hagar, so that Sarai may have a child via the maid. However, after Hagar became pregnant, Sarai treated her harshly, and Hagar ran away. An angel of God found her in the wilderness and tells her to go back to her mistress and submit to the treatment. The angel says further, ““You shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the LORD has paid heed to your suffering.” Hagar’s son was born when Abram was 86 years old.

When Abram was 99 years old, God again appeared to him and promised that he shall be the father of many nations. He also changes his name from Abram to Abraham and the name of Sarai to Sarah. God institutes the rite of circumcision. He promises Abraham that he will become a father at age 100, with Sarah at age 90, and that the child will be named Isaac. God also blesses Ishmael at Abraham’s request and says that Ishmael will be the father of a great nation.

God appeared to Abraham when he was sitting near the entrance to his tent. Looking up, he saw three men standing near him. He ran inside to tell Sarah to prepare meals for the strangers. They said to Abraham, “Where is your wife Sarah?” He replied that she is in the tent. Then one said, “I will return to you next year, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.” Abraham was 99 and Sarah 89.

The men set out from there and looked down at Sodom. The LORD said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?...The outrage of Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and

their sin so grave! I will go down to see whether they have acted altogether according to the outcry that has reached Me.” The men went from there to Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the LORD. Abraham stepped forward and said, “Will you sweep away the innocent with the guilty?” Then Abraham bargained with the LORD to get agreement that the cities will be spared if ten righteous men are found. After the angels visit the city, they find that only Lot and his family can be spared. Sodom and Gomorrah are destroyed.

Abraham journeyed to the region of the Negev. He said of Sarah his wife, “She is my sister.” King Abimelech had Sarah brought to him, but God appeared to Abimelech and said that Sarah is Abraham’s wife. Abimelech said to Abraham, “What have you done to us?” He gave Abraham sheep and oxen, male and female slaves, and told him to settle anywhere in Abimelech’s land.

Sarah bore the son Isaac to Abraham in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken. Isaac grew up and was weaned, and Abraham held a great feast on the day he was weaned. Sarah saw the son whom Hagar had borne to Abraham playing. She said to Abraham, “Cast out that slave woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.” The matter distressed Abraham greatly, but God said to Abraham. “Whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says, for it is through Isaac that offspring will be continued through you. As for the son of the slave-woman, I will make a nation of him too, for he is your seed.” Abraham took some bread and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar and the child and sent them into the wilderness. When the water was gone, she placed the child under a bush and burst into tears. God heard the cry of the boy, and an angel of God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. God was with the boy as he grew up, and his mother got a wife for him from Egypt.

Abraham and Abimelech disputed over the well of water servants of Abimelech had seized. Abraham gave Abimelech seven ewes as proof that Abraham had dug the well. The place was called Beer-Sheba, for there the two of them swore an oath. Abimelech departed and returned to the land of the Philistines. Abraham invoked the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God, and remained in Beer-Sheba.

And now we come to the Akedah (*Gen. 22*). How old was Isaac at the time of the Akedah? Some rabbinic interpreters have set Isaac's age at 37, his age at the time of Sarah's death. Their justification is that Sarah died from the shock of hearing of the death or near-death of Isaac. This is an example of an interpretation that I do not feel obligated to accept, since it contradicts the plain sense of the text. If Isaac were 37, he would have been a middle aged man, yet the text of the Akedah repeatedly refers to Isaac as "the boy." The dialog between father and son is certainly between adult and child, not adult and adult. Isaac's comments in the discussion are quite rational. We can guess that the Akedah is a tragic variation of a coming-of-age/manhood-by-trial ritual, in which the boy would be 12 or 13. That age is consistent with the mental picture we form of the scene when hearing the story for the first time. The intervention by the angel of God is the final time that God is reported to communicate with Abraham.

At the conclusion of the narrative of the Akedah, Abraham meets the retainers he had left behind and returns to Beer Sheva. We are not told what happens to Isaac. The next time we encounter Isaac is when Rebecca arrives (*Gen. 24:67*). He takes Rebecca into his late mother's tent. Since Sarah died and was buried in Hebron, Isaac must be in Hebron. The distance between Hebron and Beer Sheva is about 30 miles. We are not told how Isaac or Sarah traveled that distance. If we accept that Isaac was 13 at the time of the Akedah, Sarah lived 24 years after the Akedah. We are not told that there was any communication between Sarah and Abraham, Isaac and Abraham, or God and Abraham, or indeed any action at all by Abraham during this period—in contrast to all the reported activity by Abraham in the 38 years from when he arrived in Canaan until the Akedah. Abraham has not made any advance provisions for a burial place. When forced to do so in Hebron, he describes himself as a "resident alien." Isaac is not reported to be present at the burial of Sarah.

The next event, presumably shortly after the death of Sarah, is Abraham's instructions to his servant. The instructions are for the servant to find a wife for Isaac among Abraham's kin in Haran, rather than among the Canaanites, but under no circumstances should the servant take Isaac back to Haran. Isaac is not a participant in the discussion. Abraham apparently has had no contact with Isaac, and he believes that Isaac is not capable of finding a wife for himself, even among the local people. In answer to the servant's reasonable question of what to do if the potential wife for Isaac refuses to move to Canaan,

Abraham's response is that the servant is no longer obligated to carry out the instructions. Since Isaac apparently cannot search for a wife on his own, the question remains of how God's promise to Abraham to be the father of multitudes would then be fulfilled. In the event, Rebecca does consent to follow the servant. However, Abraham's open-ended instructions suggest that he has only a faint and garbled recall of his many visions of God's promises to him. Of the twofold promise of descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and inheriting the land of Canaan, the land appears to be the issue that is clearest in his mind. He is adamant about the fact that Isaac cannot leave the land, even to find a wife. Yet Abraham's grandson, Jacob, does exactly that without violating the covenant. Abraham makes no attempt to ask God's guidance in this crucial matter and leaves the outcome entirely in the hands of the servant (and God).

When the mission is successful and the servant returns with Rebecca, there is one final omission in the narrative. In contrast to the elaborate going-away festivities for Rebecca staged in Haran by Rebecca's brother Laban, there is no welcoming party in Canaan for the new daughter-in-law, the agent for fulfilling God's promises to Abraham. In fact, Abraham is not present to meet her. The text says only that Isaac was alone in the field and that he took Rebecca into his late mother's tent. We are free to surmise that Abraham has started a new life with Keturah and that he has no contact with Isaac, Rebecca, or his grandsons Esau and Jacob, then or in the future.

My conclusion on the Akedah in human terms, not necessarily theological terms: The Akedah was as devastating for Abraham as for Isaac and Sarah. As a result of faithfully following the commands of God, as he understood the commands, Abraham completely alienated the three people he loved—Ishmael, Isaac, and Sarah—and destroyed any semblance of family life. Following the Akedah, consciously or otherwise, he cut off all direct communication with God. One can even speculate that during the period between the Akedah and Sarah's death (24 years, if Isaac is 13 at the time of the Akedah), Abraham was asking himself whether he was certain that he had actually heard and understood the word of God. Abraham's instructions to his servant suggest that by the time of Sarah's death the entire period leading up to the Akedah had become a distant memory to him. As soon as he honorably could—after the death of Sarah—he fulfilled his last obligation to Isaac (as he understood it) and then severed all remaining ties to Isaac. It is significant that

in his next opportunity to create a family life with Keturah, he is resolutely conventional and makes careful practical provisions for his children's inheritance.

I cannot comment on the theological interpretations of this interpretation, except to speculate that the other main participant in the drama, God, may also have regretted the damage caused by His direct intervention in human affairs. Following the Akedah, God accomplishes His ends by more subtle and indirect methods. Perhaps the second chance given to Abraham to create a family (with Keturah) is God's way of compensating Abraham with at least a period of undramatic, conventional family life, following the triumphs and disasters culminating in the Akedah.

So what is my answer to the question of, "How could Abraham do it?" My answer is that for the rest of his life Abraham was asking himself the same thing.

## Laban and Jacob

The Torah portion V'Yatzei includes most of the important events of Jacob's early adulthood—Jacob's dream, his meeting at the well with Rachel, the marriages to Leah, Rachel, and the two handmaidens, the birth of twelve children, and the hasty departure of the entire entourage in advance of pursuit by Laban, Jacob's father-in-law. With all this material on Jacob—entire books have been written on Jacob's dream alone—it is not surprising that commentary on this portion focuses on Jacob and his dysfunctional family. Now for something completely different: I will focus on Jacob's father-in-law, Laban.

I have several reasons for bringing Laban out of the shadows and into the foreground:

- Laban is a major force in Jacob's life, and looking at the world through the eyes of Laban helps us to get a more rounded picture of Jacob.
- By assembling the story of Laban, we have an example of how Genesis teaches lessons in moral and ethical behavior through the lives of the characters, rather than by explicit laws and commandments.
- Recreating the fully human, well rounded, and consistent picture of Laban from bits of dialog and description scattered over many verses is a fascinating exercise, but more important it gives us the occasion to recognize the literary genius of the author (or authors) of Genesis.
- Finally, I personally have a great empathy with Laban—Laban the father, grandfather, and business owner with his son-in-law in the firm. I do not say that I would make the same business decisions as Laban, but I can put myself in his place and understand his thinking—a rather remarkable statement considering the fact that this was written 2500 years ago in a different world.

We can start at the *end* of the story of Laban and then go back through the text to show that Laban's tragic conclusion was the result of his life-long actions. The portion I will quote is the final speech of Laban, before he is separated forever from his children and grandchildren. Jacob, his wives, children, and flocks, have secretly fled from Laban and are about to leave Haran and enter Edom. Laban and his sons pursued and caught up to Jacob, and now the two men confront each other and air their grievances. Laban accuses Jacob of stealing his household gods, which Jacob denies indignantly, saying whoever stole the gods will die, a vow he will regret. (Unknown to Jacob, Rachel has



stolen the gods, which she hides from Laban's search.) Laban then delivers the following speech:

"The daughters are my daughters, the children are my children, and the flocks are my flocks; all that you see is mine. Yet what can I do now about my daughters or the children they have borne? Come, then, let us make a pact, you and I, that there may be a witness between you and me."...So they took stones and made a mound....And Laban declared, "This mound is a witness between you and me this day...May the LORD watch between you and me, when we are out of sight of each other. If you ill-treat my daughters or take other wives besides my daughters—though no one else be about, remember, God himself will be witness between you and me."  
*Gen. 31:43-50*

How did Laban get to this juncture in his life—on the verge of outright war with his son-in-law, alienated and about to be separated from his daughters and grandchildren, and losing a major portion of his business? Let's see how the text of Genesis brings him to this point.

The first mention of Laban is on the occasion of the arrival of Abraham's servant at the well, the community meeting place. The servant is hoping to find a bride for Isaac. The servant prays that the maiden whom God has intended for Isaac will identify herself by offering to water his camels. Rebecca appears and fulfills the terms of the prayers exactly. Then she says that she is the daughter of Abraham's kin, and the servant decks her out with gold rings and bracelets, precisely specified in the text to weigh a total of 20.5 shekels. Rebecca runs to the house and relates all these events. Then Laban, Rebecca's brother, appears on the scene. (In reading Genesis, it is important to be alert to the introductory description of a new character, because that first snapshot often provides the basis for all future actions of the character.) Here is Laban's introduction:

Laban ran out to the man at the spring—when he saw the nose-ring and the band on his sister's arms...He said, "Come in, O blessed of the LORD, why do you remain outside?"  
*Gen. 24:29-31*

The camels are unloaded, and the servant is brought into the house for a feast. The servant soon returns with Rebecca.

Now let's skip ahead to the next meeting at the well, which is described in Gen.29:2-14. The main characters in this scene are Jacob, the son of Rebecca, and Rachel, the daughter of Laban. Jacob has fled from his home after his mother warned him that his

brother Esau was planning to kill him. One can imagine his appearance after spending time on the run in the wilderness. Obviously he brings no camels and no gold rings. The locals gathered at the well point out Rachel with Laban's flock. Jacob gives her a big kiss and waters his uncle's flock—the first example of Jacob donating unpaid labor to his uncle. Rachel runs home with the news, and Laban runs to greet Jacob and takes him into the house. Laban says, "You are truly my bone and flesh." He does not describe Jacob as "Blessed of the LORD."

The next sentence in the text is:

When he had stayed with him a month's time, Laban said to Jacob,  
"Just because you are my kinsman, should you serve me for nothing?  
Tell me, what shall your wages be?" *Gen 29:15*

So now we find that Jacob has been working for Laban without pay for a month, and when Laban finally gets around to discussing pay he asks Jacob to make the first proposal. By this negotiating tactic, Laban is taking full advantage of the fact that Jacob has no alternative employment. If the weaker party in a negotiation is forced to make the first proposal, he is certain to low-ball the suggestion, for fear that asking too much will antagonize the stronger party and risk losing the deal completely. As Laban expects, Jacob does come through with an offer which is very favorable to Laban's business, if not to his family dynamics—seven years of unpaid labor for the right to marry Rachel. We are not told that Rachel was consulted in this matter.

If the author of Genesis were inclined to moralize, he could point out that Laban has already violated two precepts of the Holiness Code--Do not withhold the wages of the hired man overnight, and When gleaning the fields leave the corners for the poor (which can be interpreted to mean: When in a position of strength, don't press your advantage to the maximum). And, as we know, Laban is soon to violate the precept, Do not put a stumbling block before the blind. After Jacob completes his seven years of labor, Laban organizes the wedding. Jacob finds, after the fact, that he has married Leah, not Rachel. When Jacob complains to Laban, Laban replies, "It is not the practice in our place to marry off the younger before the older," an implied rebuke to Jacob for deceiving his father and receiving the blessing intended for his older brother Esau. Laban then responds, "Wait until the bridal week for this one is over and we will give you that one too, provided you serve me another seven years." So Laban has traded two daughters for 14

years of labor by Jacob at subsistence wages. The author leaves unsaid what damage these transactions have done to the lives of Leah, Rachel, and Jacob, and what will be the future relations between Laban and the families of his daughters.

After 12 children have been born to Jacob and his two wives and two handmaidens, Jacob asks leave of Laban to return to his homeland with his wives and children, plus compensation for the increase in value of Laban's flock which resulted from Jacob's efforts. Laban repeats the old bargaining tactic and says, "Name the wages due from me and I will pay you." This time, however, the balance of power has shifted, and Laban has been away from day-to-day operations too long to recognize this change. Jacob is ready with a complicated proposal, based on contingent future values of the flock, which he knows will benefit him far more than any simple profit sharing arrangements would do. As soon as the deal is agreed, Laban hides a portion of the flock. However, based on Jacob's insider knowledge and advice from God in a dream, Jacob in a few years is able to acquire the major portion of the flock.

Then Jacob hears that Laban's sons, his brothers-in-law, are threatening harm because he has unfairly stolen their inheritance, exactly repeating the problem between Jacob and Esau which caused Jacob to flee to Haran in the first place. Once again Jacob flees, only this time he brings with him four wives, 12 children, and a large flock of livestock. Laban and his sons pursue Jacob's party and catch up with them just as they are to leave Haran. After heated discussion with Jacob, Laban decides to cut his losses. He delivers the eloquent final speech, which we read earlier, and Laban and his sons return home. Jacob enters Edom to resume his life filled with near-violent family confrontations.

I think it is fair to say that the character of Laban, a minor character in the complex and sophisticated story of Jacob and his descendants, is fully formed, consistent, and believable—a remarkable piece of writing considering that Laban appears only briefly and episodically in one phase of Jacob's life. In common with all the actors in Genesis, Laban is neither all good nor all bad, which is to say that he is fully human. As signaled by his first sentence, his primary love is material wealth, and family follows far behind. He repeatedly strives for maximum advantage in business, willingly sacrificing his relationships with his son-in-law and daughters to achieve that goal. In the end, he loses most of his wealth and all of his family. We may conclude from Laban's final speech that

he regrets the choices he has made. I think we can also conclude that the story of Laban has uncanny contemporary relevance. We may recognize in him an employer, a co-worker, a family member, even ourselves. While Genesis does not put forward explicit commandments or codes of behavior—after all, God’s covenant with the patriarchs is only the land of Canaan and a multitude of descendants—we can derive from Genesis countless lessons in moral and ethical behavior by attention to what the author tells us about the actions of the characters and the consequences of those actions.

If we can build a psychological profile of Laban from a few scattered passages incidental to the Jacob story, just think how we could do even more so (as the rabbis would say) for Jacob, Esau, Rebecca, Sarah, or Abraham. The book of Genesis is endlessly fascinating sacred literature. What a privilege it is to read it every year.

## Joseph and Judah

The episode of Judah and his daughter-in-law Tamar is often portrayed as “interrupting” the on-going story of Joseph, particularly the imprisonment of Joseph after his dealings with Potiphar and the wife of Potiphar. Perhaps the two episodes are set side-by-side in order to illustrate the contrasting personalities of the two progenitors of kings.

**Judah** marries a Canaanite woman who bears three sons. When the oldest is grown, Judah arranges a marriage for him with Tamar, but the son dies before he has fathered an heir. Judah then instructs his second son to marry Tamar, but the first child from that marriage will be an heir to the first son. The second son refuses to father the heir to the first son, and the second son dies. Judah instructs Tamar to wait in her father's house for the third son to grow up. However, Judah worries that the third son might die like his brothers, and he does not arrange the marriage with Tamar, even though the third son has grown up. A long time later, Judah's wife dies. Following the mourning period, Judah goes to his sheepshearers in Timnah. Tamar is told, “Your father-in-law is coming to the sheepshearing in Timnah.” Tamar takes off her widow's garb, covers her face with a veil, and wrapping herself up sits down on the road to Timnah. Judah comes by and believes she is a prostitute, since he did not recognize Tamar. He says, “Let me sleep with you.” She says, “What will you pay for sleeping with me?” He replies, “I will send a kid from my flock.” She says, “You must leave a pledge until you have sent it, your seal and cord and staff.” (Robert Alter says this is the equivalent of turning over all his credit cards.) He sleeps with her, and she conceives. She returns to her father's house and puts on her widow's garb. About three months later, Judah is told, “Your daughter-in-law has played the harlot, and she is with child from harlotry.” Judah says, “Bring her out, and let her be burned.” Tamar sends a message to her father-in-law, “I am with child by the man to whom this seal and cord and staff belong.” Judah says, “She is more in the right than I, since I did not give her to my third son.” He was not intimate with her again. (*Gen. 38*)

**Joseph** was taken to Egypt by the Ishmaelites, who sold him to Potiphar, the chief steward of the Pharaoh. The LORD was with Joseph and made him successful in everything that he undertook. Potiphar made Joseph his personal attendant and put him in charge of the household. The LORD blessed the house for Joseph's sake. Joseph was well-built and handsome. The master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, “Lie with me.” He refused, saying, “With me here, my master gives no thought to anything in this house, and

all that he owns he has placed in my hands....He has withheld nothing from me except yourself, since you are his wife.” As much as she coaxed Joseph, he did not yield to her request. One day, he came into the house to do his work, and none of the household help were there inside. This raises the question (with me, anyway), How many household help were absent on that particular day? Since Potiphar was chief steward to the Pharaoh, the drawing from “Daily Life in Ancient Egypt” could represent Potiphar’s house. The help (slaves) included;

- Gardeners

- Food preparation

- House cleaners

- Personal attendants for principals

- Attendants for children

- Administrators (such as Joseph)

- TOTAL: 50 (?)

For Joseph to have selected a time when no household help was present must have required a certain amount of pre-planning on his part. Then, when no one else is present, to have been close enough to Potiphar’s wife so that she was able to remove his cloak calls into question his motives. Since she had already come on to him, was he testing his own resolve? We are not told. (*Gen. 39*)

**Joseph** has already been presented as a risk taker. At age 17, he tends flocks for the sons of the handmaidens and brings bad reports of them to his father, Jacob. He twice tells his brothers his dreams, even though the dreams present Joseph as lording over the brothers. The brothers hated him. Jacob then asks Joseph to visit Leah’s sons, who are

tending flocks, and bring back word of them. Joseph says, "I am ready." (*hineni*) It is clear that the brothers wish to do him harm, yet he still undertakes the assignment. As he demonstrates once again with Potiphar's wife, he has not yet learned to temper his brilliance with good judgment.

**Judah** is slow, often getting matters wrong the first time, but eventually coming to the correct conclusion. He is the ring leader in selling Joseph to the Ishmaelites and presenting Jacob with the bloody, torn cloak, for Jacob to draw his own conclusions. Eventually, he offers himself as hostage in place of Benjamin, exactly the correct approach to Joseph (and perhaps the longest single speech in Torah). (*Gen. 44*) In the case of Tamar, Judah first says, "Bring her out, and let her be burned," but when faced with facts he says, "She is more right than I."

Perhaps Torah is telling us that, for survival, the Jewish people need both the brilliant risk taker and the slow methodical leader who eventually gets matters right.

## Joseph and His Brothers

Why does Joseph conceal his identity from his brothers when they first come to Egypt for food? Since being sold to the Ishmaelites by his brothers, Joseph has had plenty of time to review his situation—time with Potiphar, in prison, seven fat years, and a few lean years. He is capable of subtle and intricate planning, and he assumes that everyone thinks the same way; in other words, he is a conspiracy theorist. He knows the brothers will be compelled to come to Egypt for food as the lean years take hold. The questions he has that must be answered before he reveals his identity are:

- Did they kill Benjamin, his only full brother? They discussed killing Joseph when he was thrown into the pit. On their first trip to Egypt, Benjamin is left behind with Jacob. As far as Joseph is concerned, nothing happens until they produce Benjamin.

- Would they abandon Benjamin, in the same way that they abandoned Joseph?

- Was Jacob part of the plot to get rid of Joseph?

The first question is answered when Joseph sees that Benjamin has accompanied the brothers on their second trip to Egypt. Joseph then arranges an elaborate plot to set Benjamin up to be abandoned. His divining goblet is smuggled into Benjamin's sack, and the brothers are escorted back to answer for it. They deny having taken the goblet, and they say that if the goblet is found in any one's sack that individual should be punished. The goblet is found in Benjamin's sack, and Joseph says that Benjamin shall be his slave. This sets the stage for Judah's speech, in which he offers himself in place of Benjamin, citing that his father's gray head will go down to Sheol in grief if Benjamin does not return. Judah's speech satisfies Joseph, and he reveals himself to the brothers.

The third question is left unanswered. Jacob was aware that Joseph brought back bad reports of his time with the brothers who are sons of the handmaidens. He is also aware that all the brothers are angry because of Joseph's dreams. Yet he still sends Joseph to report on the brothers who are sons of Leah, despite the fact that they are some distance away and could very well get rid of Joseph, one way or another. Since Joseph has had plenty of time to think about the sequence of events that led to his being brought to Egypt, he surely must be questioning the role of the stranger, who does not even ask his name, who says, "You must be looking for your brothers. They went to Dothan." Who was the stranger? Was he planted by Jacob? I think that Joseph suspects Jacob was part of the



plot to eliminate himself, but he is reluctant to confront Jacob. That would explain why, when he achieved eminence in Egypt, he did not attempt to communicate with Jacob.

## **Good Story**

Wait! We have not yet discussed the theme of the articles left behind:

- The household gods stolen from Laban by Rachel
- The “coat of many colors” taken by the brothers from Joseph and presented blood-stained to Jacob
- The seal and cord and staff left by Judah in the hands of Tamar
- The cloak left by Joseph in the hands of the wife of Potiphar
- The divining goblet smuggled into Benjamin’s sack

Taken together, the objects left behind are a recurring theme that ties together the multi-generational story.

I have a book of Yiddish stories titled, God Loves a Good Story. One can picture God (after the Akedah) leaning back and enjoying letting the humans work out their own destinies, with a few helpful hints from God. Genesis is a Good Story.

## Joseph's Tomb

Jacob arrived safe *[from his encounter with Esau]* in the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan,.....and he encamped before the city. The parcel of land where he pitched his tent he purchased from the children of Hamor, Shechem's father, for 100 kesitahs.

*(Gen 33:18-19)*

Dinah, the daughter whom Leah had borne to Jacob, went out to visit the daughters of the land. Shechem, son of Hamor the Hivite, chief of the country, saw her, and took her and lay with her by force. Being strongly drawn to Dinah daughter of Jacob, and in love with the maiden, he spoke to the maiden tenderly. So Shechem said to his father Hamor, "Get me this girl as a wife."

....Jacob's sons, having heard the news, came in from the field. The men were distressed and very angry, because he had committed an outrage in Israel, by lying with Jacob's daughter, a thing not to be done.

And Hamor spoke with them, saying, "My son Shechem longs for your daughter. Please give her to him in marriage. Intermarry with us: give your daughters to us, and take our daughters for yourselves. You will dwell among us, and the land will be open before you; settle, move about and acquire holdings in it....Jacob's sons answered Shechem and his father Hamor—speaking with guile because he had defiled their sister Dinah—and said to them, "We cannot do this thing, to give our sister to a man who is uncircumcised, for that is a disgrace among us."

Their words pleased Hamor and Hamor's son Shechem...."These people are our friends; let them settle in the land and move about in it....But only on this condition will the men agree to dwell with us and be as one kindred: that all our males become circumcised"....

On the third day, when they were in pain, Simeon and Levi, brothers of Dinah, took each his sword, came upon the city unmolested, and slew all the males. They put Hamor and his son Shechem to the sword, took Dinah out of Shechem's house, and went away. The other sons of Jacob came upon the slain and plundered the town....all their wealth, all their children, and their wives, all that was in the houses, they took as captives and booty.  
*(Gen. 34:23-29)*

Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die. God will surely take notice of you and bring you up from this land *[Egypt]* to the land that He promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob....When God has taken notice of you, you shall carry up my bones from here."  
*(Gen. 50:34-35)*

The bones of Joseph, which the Israelites had brought up from Egypt, were buried at Shechem, in the piece of ground which Jacob had bought for 100 kesitahs from the children of Hamor, Shechem's father, and which had become the heritage of the Josephites.  
*(Joshua 24:32)*

Jacob, Joseph's father, bought the site from Hamor, presumably with the idea of settling there. Following the events described above, Jacob moved south to the land in which his father Isaac had lived. To claim that Jacob's purchase of the land was legitimate requires:

- 1) The belief that land claims in Canaan were virtually perpetual—at least 450 years elapsed between when Jacob purchased the land and Joseph was buried there.
- 2) To consider the purchase valid, one must assume that the testimony of the purchaser is correct, because the seller and all his potential witnesses were killed by the sons of the purchaser.

The claim that the particular location in Shechem is the site of Joseph's tomb is questionable. The earliest search for Joseph's bones occurred in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century C.E., approximately 1600 years after the death of Joseph. The present "Tomb of Joseph" was erected in 1868. There is no archeological evidence that the tomb contains any elements earlier than 1868. The tomb is located in Nablus, a Palestinian town in the West Bank, noted for resistance to Israeli control. Any Jewish pilgrimage to Joseph's Tomb requires a guard of Israeli troops and invariably sparks a riot.

The claim that this site contains the bones of Joseph is extremely dubious, and the account in Genesis of the slaying of the sellers is, to say the least, embarrassing. My suggestion: Allow the "Tomb of Joseph" to gather dust for another 100 years, without drawing attention to it. Perhaps in that period of time technology will advance to permit determination whether the tomb actually contains the bones of Joseph.

## Rebecca

We first encounter Rebecca when Abraham's servant arrives at the well in Nahor. When the women come to draw water, the servant prays that a maiden will offer him a drink from her jar and also will offer to draw water for his camels. Rebecca fulfills these prayers perfectly (and shows her take-charge mode). The servant then decks out Rebecca with a gold nose ring (one-half shekel in weight) and two gold arm bands (ten shekels in weight). The servant announces to Rebecca that, on behalf of his master Abraham, he "...has been guided on his errand by the LORD to the house of his master's kinsman." Rebecca runs and tells all this to her mother's household. Her brother Laban runs out to see the servant and, struck by the nose ring and gold bands, he says, "Come in, O blessed of the LORD."

Before dinner that evening, the servant says, "The LORD has greatly blessed my master, and he has become rich: He has given him sheep and cattle, silver and gold, male and female slaves, camels and asses. And Sarah, my master's wife, bore my master a son in his old age, and he has assigned to him everything he owns...." (*Gen. 24:34-36*) [No mention is made about Abraham's marriage to Keturah or his provisions for Keturah's sons.] Laban says, "The matter was decreed by the LORD; we cannot speak to you bad or good. Here is Rebecca before you, take her and go, and let her be a wife to your master's son, as the LORD has spoken." The next morning the servant says, "Give me leave to go to my master." After suggesting that the servant delay leaving for ten days, Laban asks Rebecca, "Will you go with this man?" She says that she will, and Rebecca and her maids mount camels and follow the servant.

Her arrival and the greeting by Isaac are anti-climactic. There is no party to celebrate the successful completion of the servant's mission. Abraham is not present, despite the fact that Rebecca will be the progenitor of the myriads that God has promised to Abraham. We are told only that Isaac was walking alone in the field when he saw the camels approaching. Rebecca saw Isaac, and alighting from the camel she said, "Who is that man walking in the field toward us?" The servant said, "That is my master." The servant told Isaac all the things he had done. Isaac then brought Rebecca into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he took Rebecca as his wife. We are not told what happened to the camels.

Isaac pleads with the LORD because his wife was barren. The LORD responds, and Rebecca conceives. Esau and Jacob begin their sibling rivalry in utero. The children

struggled in the womb, and Rebecca inquired of the LORD. The LORD answered her: “Two nations are in your womb....One people shall be mightier than the other, and the older shall serve the younger.” When the children were born, the younger brother, Jacob, emerged holding the heel of the older brother, Esau.

After another brother/wife episode, Isaac became very wealthy because the LORD favored him. He acquired flocks and herds and a large household. He quarreled several times with the people of Abimelech, king of the Philistines, over wells his men have dug. Finally he moved to Rehoboth, where his men dig a well that is not disputed. The LORD appeared to him in Beer-Sheba and said to him, “I am the God of your father Abraham. Fear not, for I am with you, and I will bless you and increase your offspring for the sake of my servant Abraham.” Isaac built an altar there and invoked the LORD by name. Abimelech and his men came again to Isaac, but this time to make peace. They said, “We now see plainly that the LORD has been with you....”

The two boys grew up. Esau was a skillful hunter, but Jacob was “a mild man” who stayed in camp. Isaac favored Esau, and Rebecca favored Jacob.

Once when Jacob was cooking stew, Esau came in from the open, famished. And Esau said to Jacob, “Give me some of that red stuff to gulp down, for I am famished.”...Jacob said, “First sell me your birthright.” And Esau said, “I am at the point of death, so of what use is the birthright to me?” But Jacob said, “Swear to me first.” So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. Jacob then gave Esau bread and lentil stew, he ate and drank, and he rose and went away. Thus did Esau spurn the birthright.  
(Gen. 25:29-34)

Eight sentences, which paint the picture of both young men—Esau impulsive and not thinking of the future, Jacob calculating and future-oriented. In Hebrew, he ate, drank, rose, went away are single words—Esau is a living verb.

When Esau was forty years old, he took to wife Judith, daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and Basemath daughter of Elon the Hittite; and they were a source of bitterness to Isaac and Rebecca. (Gen. 26:34-35)

Isaac was old, and his eyes were too dim to see. He called Esau and asked him to hunt game and prepare a dish that he liked, so that he could give Esau his blessing. Rebecca overheard the conversation and prepared the dish that Isaac liked. She dressed Jacob in Esau's clothes and covered Jacob's hands and neck with skins from two kids that Jacob slaughtered. When Jacob approached Isaac, Isaac was not completely convinced that he was Esau. “Are you really my son Esau?” he asked. In any case, he gave Jacob the

blessing of the first born. After Jacob left Isaac and Esau arrived, Isaac said, "Who are you?" Esau replied that he was Esau, the first born. When Isaac was convinced, he said that Jacob had already received the blessing of the first born. At Esau's tearful request, he also gave a blessing to Esau, which reads in part, "...by your sword you shall live, and you shall serve your brother; but when you grow restive, you shall break his yoke from your neck." Esau vowed to kill his brother Jacob. The vow was reported to Rebecca, who told Jacob to flee to Haran, to her brother Laban.

Rebecca's final words to Jacob are, "Let me not lose you both in one day!" That is, of course, what happened. Neither Esau nor Jacob are reported to have spoken to Rebecca again. Although Isaac's death is noted—he died at age 180 and was buried by Esau and Jacob—Rebecca is never mentioned again. What did she gain by managing Jacob to get the blessing of the first born? What, in fact, did Jacob gain by persuading Esau to give up his birthright? Jacob flees to Haran with nothing but the clothes on his back, and there he is insulted by his uncle Laban who tells him that in Haran the older sibling gets married first. Rebecca is pictured as the competent, take-charge person, particularly in contrast to her husband Isaac. Yet, in the end, her competence leads to domestic disaster. One hesitates to think what her life with Isaac was after Esau and Jacob departed.