

Jacob the Deceiver

Introduction

In this week’s Torah portion, *Vayetze*, Jacob falls in love with Rachel at first sight, then makes a strange statement to her:

וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב לְרָחֵל כִּי אֶחָי אֲבִיהָ

Jacob told Rachel that he was her father’s brother. [Gen. 29:12]

But he wasn’t her father’s brother. He was her father’s nephew, her first cousin, the son of his father’s sister Rebecca. So why did he tell her that?

The Talmud explains

The Talmud says: [Megillah 13b; also Bava Batra 123a; Ein Yaakov (Glick) on Bava Batra 8:18]

Was he her father’s brother? Wasn’t he the son of her father’s sister?

Rather, [it means that] he said to [Rachel]: “Will you marry me?”

She said to him: “Yes, but my father, Laban, is a swindler, and you will not be able to outwit him.”

Jacob he said to her: “I am [your father’s] brother in deception.” [That’s what I meant: I, too, can swindle.]

So Jacob admits to being a trickster. He deceives. Several stories in the Torah attest to this:

- He gets Esau to sell him his birthright, because Esau does not understand its value:

What use is my birthright to me? [Gen. 25:32],

thereby “putting a stumbling block before the blind”.

- He fools his father Isaac into believing he is Esau in order to get his blessing.

- He later outwits his wily father-in-law Laban to get more payment for his labor, and then stealthily flees from him with his family.

Rashi defends him, noting that the Torah introduces him as *Esh tam* אִישׁ תָּם – “a mild man” [Gen. 25:27] and concludes that he is “one who is not expert or ingenious in deceiving people”.

His mother Rebecca plays a major role in planning Jacob’s deception:

- When she was pregnant God told her that, of her two sons, “the older shall serve the younger.” [Gen. 25:23]

- She knew her boys and knew Jacob was more suited than Esau for God’s purposes.

- She considered her husband Isaac to be blind not only physically but also psychologically.

- She tells a reluctant Jacob that if he gets caught and Isaac curses him, the curse will be upon her. [Gen. 27:13]

But we are not allowed to obey even our parents when they tell us to do wrong. [Sifra, Kedoshim 1:10]

Does the end justify the means?

The Talmud continues:

[Rachel] said to [Jacob]: “But is it really permitted for the righteous to be involved in deception?”

He said to her: “Yes, [it is permitted to deceive those who deceive] as the verse states, [referring to God]:

עִם-נָכָר תִּתְּבָר וְעִם-עֵקֶשׁ תִּתְּפָל:

With the pure You act in purity, and with the perverse You are wily. [2 Samuel 22:27 and Ps. 18:27]”

Jacob then said to her: “What is the deception [that your father Laban is planning for me]?”

Rachel said to him: “I have a sister who is older than I, and he will not marry me off before her [and will try to give her to you in my place].”

So Jacob gave her certain distinguishing signs [to show him on the wedding day so he will know it’s really her].

When the wedding night arrived, Rachel said to herself: Now my sister will be embarrassed, [because Jacob will ask her for the signs and she will not know them. So] she gave them to her. And this is why the Torah says:

And it came to pass, that in the morning, behold, it was Leah. [Gen. 29:25]

It means that Jacob had seen the distinguishing signs that Rachel had given to Leah [and so assumed Leah was Rachel] and he did not know until now, when it was light outside, that she was Leah. Therefore, Rachel merited that [King] Saul should descend from her.

Rachel also can trick! Then Jacob gets mad at *Leah* for tricking him!
The Midrash says:

The whole of [the wedding] night [Jacob] called [Leah] “Rachel”, and she answered him. In the morning, however, “Behold, it was Leah!” He said to her: “What! You are a deceiver and the daughter of a deceiver!”
She retorted: “Is there a teacher without pupils? Did your father not call you “Esau” and you answered him? So, too, you called me and I answered you!” [Gen. R. 70:19]

Punishment is measure-for-measure

Commentators have argued that, even though there is no overt disapproval of Jacob’s actions in the Torah, Jacob was eventually punished for his deceptions. Judaism teaches that God’s punishment is “measure-for-measure” (*midah keneged midah* -- מידה כנגד מידה).

[Sanh. 90a] As you do to others, so it will be done to you. Bad actions create equal and opposite reactions. What goes around comes around. You reap what you sow. Etc. The Bible says:

Woe to the wicked man, for he will fare ill. As his hands have dealt, so shall it be done to him. [Isaiah 3:11]

The Mishna says:

[Hillel] saw a skull that was floating on top of the water. He said [to it]: “Since you drowned [others, others] drowned you. And in the end, those who drowned you will be drowned.” [Pirkei Avot 2:6]

How did this apply to Jacob?

- He lies to Esau and Isaac; and he is lied to by Laban, Rachel and Leah.
- He deceives Isaac by wearing Esau’s clothing; and his sons deceive him by showing him Joseph’s clothes – a bloody tunic. They tell him: “We found this. Please examine it. Is it your son’s tunic or not?” [Gen. 37:32]
- He causes pain to his father Isaac; and his sons cause him pain.
- He incited his brother’s hatred; and his sons hated their brother Joseph.
- The tension between him and Esau (brothers) is replayed between his two wives (sisters).
- He deprives his father Isaac of his company for 20 years, as he flees from Esau; and he is deprived of his son Joseph’s company for 22 years.
- He deceives and his sons deceive: They deceive him about the death of Joseph, they deceive the men of Shechem over the rape of their sister Dinah, Joseph deceives his brothers about not recognizing them...

So who can you trust? No one, says God through Jeremiah:

Every person must beware of their friends! Do not trust even a brother!
For every brother acts deceitfully (כִּי כָל־אָחֻזְךָ עֶקֶב יַעֲקֹב – *ki chol ach ’akov*)

ya'akov), every friend is base in his dealings. One man cheats the other. They will not speak the truth. They have trained their tongues to speak falsely. They wear themselves out working iniquity. You dwell in the midst of deceit. In their deceit, they refuse to know Me, declares the Lord.
[Jeremiah 9:3-5]

Noteworthy is the use of the phrase “acts deceitfully”, in Hebrew *akov ya'akov*, using the root of Jacob’s name, Yaakov, which means “He who grasps at the heel”. Jacob was called that because he was grasping Esau’s heel when he was born.

“Is it really permitted for the righteous to be involved in deception?”

Rachel asks a very important question. Lying is directly forbidden by the Torah:

Keep far away from a false matter. [Ex. 23:7]

However, tradition allows us to lie for a higher purpose in many instances:

- To save a life [Yoma 84b].
- To keep the peace [Yevamot 65b; also Bava Metzia 87a].
- To make people feel good or spare them embarrassment [Ketubot 16b-17a].
- To appear humble and modest [Bava Metzia 23b-24a].
- To protect yourself from loss or harm [Mishna Nedarim 27b-28a; Sotah 41b; Yevamot 65b and 63a; Sukkah 46b].

Did any of this apply to Jacob? Apparently not.

Conclusion

Later on we will read that Jacob wrestled all night with a mysterious angel who changed his name to Israel: “He who struggles with God”. That’s when Jacob grew from wily deceiver to holy patriarch. This growth is the chief lesson of the story of Jacob. His new name, Israel, became the collective name of the Jews. We are all Israel. Jacob defines us, as it were. We are Bnei Yisrael, the children of Israel. Not of Abraham, not of Isaac, but of Israel. Our growth in life mirrors *his* growth.

Shabbat shalom.