

Jacob's duplicity and its consequences

So there we were, sitting at the kitchen table: me and my younger siblings, Mark and Jill. I must've been no older than 10, and, being the oldest, I decided it was time to set the record straight. So I posed the question that I'm sure has been asked by countless children throughout the centuries: "Mommy, who's your favorite? Which one of us do you love best?" My mother hesitated for a moment, looked at each one of us and then said, matter-of-factly, "Your father." That shut down that argument. I imagine my mother thought that she was either being extremely clever or brilliantly diplomatic, and perhaps she was both. In any case, I never forgot that conversation.

Years later, when my own children asked me the same question, I simply shot back, "Whoever made their bed this morning." I thought that bestowing the honor of "favorite child" was the perfect incentive for getting my kids to do their chores. Thankfully, they are all best friends, which, if not a miracle, is truly a blessing.

Things didn't work out as well for Jacob and Esau. When Rebekah becomes pregnant with twins, God tells her (Genesis 25:23): "Two nations are in your womb, two separate peoples shall issue from your body; one



D'VAR TORAH

By Cantor Sheri Allen

Parashat Toldot

people shall be mightier than the other, And the older shall serve the younger."

This last phrase sets off a series of events that will change the course of our ancestors' lives, but the verse might not be as straightforward as it seems. Rabbi Daniel Nevins points out that "the problem is that this prophecy is ambiguous, especially in its final clause, *v'rav ya-avod tza-ir*. Richard Elliot Friedman suggests that this could mean either 'the elder shall serve the younger,' or 'the elder, the younger shall serve.'"

Rebekah obviously chooses to interpret it according to translation No. 1, and takes on the responsibility of making sure that this oracle is fulfilled. So, she devises a plot that would rival any soap opera. She tells Jacob, her favorite, younger son, to hunt some game, disguise himself in his brother's clothing (complete with attachable animal skins to resemble his hairy brother), bring his father his favorite meal and snag the blessing in the process. When Jacob attempts to protest, she shuts him down.

And the plan succeeds. Sort of. Isaac, although blind, is suspicious enough to ask, "Which of my sons are you?" And Jacob, acquiescing under pressure, plays along

and deceives as well, replying, "I am Esau, your firstborn; I have done as you have told me." And after touching him, Isaac still has his doubts: "The voice is the voice of Jacob, yet the hands are the hands of Esau." But he goes ahead and bestows the blessing anyway. And when Isaac and Esau discover that Jacob has deceived them both, they react with shock, tears and anger. Jacob is forced to flee to escape the wrath of his brother, who has vowed to kill him.

We are left with many questions. Was Jacob an unwilling player in his mother's game of deception? Did Isaac not recognize his own son? Was Rebekah justified in her actions?

I wonder what would've happened if Rebekah had gone to Isaac and revealed her own revelation? Perhaps Isaac would've gone back to God to either affirm, deny or clarify the Divine pronouncement. No deceit necessary. Rebekah suffers heavy consequences for her actions. She witnesses the emotional pain of her husband and the wrath of her son Esau, and must send her beloved Jacob away. She is truly left alone.

And what of Isaac? He is clearly doubtful when Jacob tries to pass himself off as Esau. Perhaps he really did suspect that Jacob wasn't who he said he was but wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt and thus decided to give him his blessing anyway — only to find out that he was, indeed, deceived.

Jacob pays a price for his duplicity as well. For in a biblical "what goes around comes around" chain of events, Jacob is later tricked by his father-in-law into marrying the wrong girl, and then, later, is tricked by his own sons into thinking that his favorite son Joseph is dead.

One can say that this was cosmic payback. But perhaps Jacob consciously decided that, after being duped, he would not fight back or cry foul, because he had done the same thing years ago. Maybe this was his way of rejecting hypocrisy, acknowledging that he made a mistake all those years ago and accepting that it was now time to atone for it. Rabbi Abigail Treu states, "The important thing is that Jacob outgrows the behavior we see and dislike. We don't need to pretend that Jacob never lied; we realize that Jacob did lie and cheat, and that he successfully struggled to abandon those behaviors. That is what makes him worthy of being our patriarch."

Our ancestors weren't perfect. And we don't need to defend them. What we do need to do is learn from them, their struggles, their pain and their ultimate striving to truly hear and follow God's voice — the voice that never let them stop striving for holiness.

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Why Jews are literally 'the people of Thanksgiving'

By Aviya Kushner

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Thanksgiving has always been a holiday Jews are very comfortable with. While it may seem like the reason behind the love is that Thanksgiving is secular, as opposed to other widely celebrated holidays that are explicitly religious in nature, the deep reason is probably etymological. Jews are linguistically rooted in gratitude, and the word for Jew in Hebrew — *Yehudi* — is directly tied to the word for thankfulness, or *hodaya*.

This etymological connection might also explain the behavior of American Jews abroad, who often go to great lengths to celebrate Thanksgiving; this week my social-media feeds were filled with photographs of turkey for sale in Jerusalem, with multilingual signs explaining that turkey is for *chag ha'hodaya*, or Thanksgiving in Hebrew.

Here is the case for Jews as the people of gratitude, not just the people of the book. The word *Yehudi*, or Jewish in Hebrew, comes from the Bible, and specifically, from the matriarch Leah's name choice for her son — *Yehuda*. The Jewish people are, literally in Hebrew, "*Yehudim*," the Judahs. This is one of those connections that is difficult if not impossible to hear in translation, because Bible translations almost always transliterate names instead of translating them. It's one of the great

losses of the Bible's move from Hebrew into English.

Yehuda is rendered as Judah in English, so the gratitude that is the meaning of his name is lost to an English reader. But what does come across in translation — loud and clear — is Leah's gratitude for what she has. She may be the less-loved sister, but she is the more fertile one. And so Leah famously says, in Genesis 29:35, *ha'paam odeh et Adonai v'al ken karah shmo Yehuda*. Roughly translated, it's "this time I will thank (odeh) God and therefore will call him [my son] Judah (*Yehuda*)."

That *odeh* means "I will thank," so the specific reason for the name *Yehuda* for her new son is Leah's gratitude. Now for a less-rough translation of the original Jewish Thanksgiving passage, here is Genesis 29:35 in The Jewish Publication Society translation from 1985:

She conceived again and bore a son, and declared "This time I will praise the Lord." Therefore she named him Judah. Then she stopped bearing.

"To thank" often becomes "praise" in English translation, and interestingly, Leah's emphasis on gratitude is repeated in other texts — like the Psalms and the prayers. Generally, what people are thankful for is God, and from that, gratitude for everything else flows. The attitude of gratitude is repeatedly praised.

We are so used to the formation "praise

the Lord" — which is, of course, popular in Christian communities as well — that we might not think about the Hebrew roots of it, how praise is actually gratitude, and how gratitude is Leah's gift to us, memorialized forever in the name *Yehuda* and in the term *Yehudi* — Jewish, and *Yehudim* — Jews. We carry that gratitude in the name of our people.

It's also easy to make a case that Judaism itself is pro-gratitude, and once you look for examples of it, you see it everywhere in Jewish texts. Consider Psalm 92, which has often been set to music. Here are verses 2-3 of that Psalm, in The Jewish Publication Society translation:

*It is good to praise the Lord
To sing hymns to your name, O Most High,
To proclaim Your steadfast love at daybreak
Your faithfulness each night*

Well, that "good to praise the Lord" is *tov l'hodot l'Adonai* in Hebrew, with *l'hodot* representing the infinitive of the verb Leah used. It is good to thank God, and in translation, it is good to praise God. If the Psalms aren't emphatic enough about the benefits of gratitude, the prayers hammer it home. The daily *Shmoneh Esrei* prayer includes a segment on all the living thanking God, called *v'chol hachayim yoducha selah*, and of course, that prayer makes it into the machzor or holiday prayer book as well.

Here is a translation from the machzor published by The Prayer Book Press,

compiled and edited by Rabbi Sidney Greenberg and Rabbi Jonathan D. Levine. I picked up this machzor in Iowa, but it is used in many Conservative congregations. The translation is interesting because it preserves the "thank" in *yoducha* in the prayer's first line, though later in the prayer, it goes with "praise" for another word from the same root:

May all living creatures always thank You and praise You in truth. O God, You are our deliverance and our help. Praised are You, beneficent Lord, to whom all praise is due.

All these repeated prayers, Psalms and songs are a kind of gratitude-is-good indoctrination. That idea is where Jewish values and American values meet on this one day, Thanksgiving. Both Thanksgiving and the Psalms float the concept that it is not just about being grateful, but that the act of being grateful is good for you. That gratitude is something to celebrate. And so, if a holiday offers a chance to eat well and be thankful, Jews — the people of gratitude, "the people of Thanksgiving" — are all over it.

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