

JACOB'S CHOICE IN GENESIS 25:19 – 28:9

PINCHAS KAHN

A major theme of *Parshat Toldot* (Gen. 25:19-28:9) is the development of the family of Isaac and Rebekah. These passages cover the birth of the twins, Esau and Jacob; Jacob's purchase (manipulatively?) of the birthright from Esau; Rebekah's guidance of Jacob in the deception of Isaac in order to receive the blessings; the flight of Jacob from a vengeful Esau into the hands of Laban, a master of guile. The unfolding pattern, beyond mere narration, is of deception, and suggests a *parsha* enveloped in ethical issues. The introductory two verses (19-20) appear at first glance to be simple narrative.

וְאֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדֹת יִצְחָק בֶּן-אַבְרָהָם אֲבִי יִצְחָק הוֹלִיד אֶת-יִצְחָק:
וַיְהִי יִצְחָק בֶּן-אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה בָקָחַתוּ אֶת-רֵבֶקָה בַּת-בְּתוּאֵל הָאֲרָמִי
מִפְּדַן אֲרָם אֵחָת לְבִן הָאֲרָמִי לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה.

*And these are the generations of Isaac, **Abraham's** son; **Abraham** fathered Isaac. And Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah for his wife, the daughter of Bethuel the **Aramean** of Paddan-**aram**, the sister to Laban the **Aramean**. [author's emphasis]*

These innocent-sounding sentences are a fulcrum. They come after earlier events that have indications for the future, and simultaneously herald not only the major theme of the ensuing *parsha*, but also the Torah's concern about the ideological direction to be taken in the future by the "chosen community," the children of Abraham. The language used in these two introductory sentences reflects two conflicting value systems, a conflict that will be explored in the Torah and seen in the life of Jacob.

It becomes apparent, first of all, that these texts embody a series of redundancies. It is a purpose of this paper to clarify a conceptual issue of significance that is suggested by these redundancies. Verse 19 gives Abraham's name twice, order to emphasize his paternity of Isaac. Immediately following, in Verse 20, we are reminded of what we already know about the family

Pinchas Kahn attended Yeshiva University, received his Ph.D. in Psychology in 1961, and was a supervisor of psychologists at the NYC Board of Education and a clinical psychologist in private practice. He received his smicha from Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary in 1956 and was the rabbi of Young Israel of Mapleton Park, Brooklyn, NY. He made aliyah in 1993, is retired in Jerusalem and busy learning and teaching.

connections of Isaac's wife, Rebekah. *Aramean* is mentioned twice and the name Aram, the root term, is inserted between them to emphasize her geographic and cultural origins. The juxtaposition of these two verses seems to pose the question: Which cultural inheritance will be the source of the value system to be followed by the children of Isaac and Rebekah? With these repetitions as an introductory headline, as it were, the *parsha* establishes the main concern of the events about to unfold.

The primary issue, posed by the first sentence repeating Abraham's paternity of Isaac, had previously actually been foreshadowed, before the destruction of Sodom. At that time, God considered the advisability of informing Abraham of His plans.

וְה' אָמַר הַמִּכְסָּה אֲנִי מַאֲבְרָהִם אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי עֹשֶׂה:
 בּוֹ כָּל גּוֹי הָאָרֶץ: וְאַבְרָהָם הָיָה לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל וְעֲצוּם וְנִבְרָכוּ
 בֵּיתוֹ אַחֲרָיו וְשִׁמְרוּ דֶּרֶךְ בָּנָיו וְאֵת כִּי יַדְעֻתִּיו לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר יִצְוֶה אֶת
 דָּבָר עָלָיו. אַבְרָהָם אֵת אֲשֶׁר ה' לַעֲשׂוֹת צִדְקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט לְמַעַן הָבִיא ה' עַל
*And the Lord said, 'Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do;
 Seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and
 all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him?
 'For I know him, that he will **command his children and his household
 after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and
 judgment;** to the end that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which
 He has spoken of him' (18:17-19).*

In stating that Abraham shall command his children after him to *keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment*, God established the ideal and goal of the future covenantal community. The emphasis is on the concepts "ideal" and "goal." Even if the people will stumble along the road, there is an ideal and a goal, a "way of the Lord" that is the path of ethics.

The repetition of Abraham's paternity of Isaac raises the issue of the transmission of Abraham's charge of ethics to the next chosen generation. God's predictive statement earlier about Abraham now becomes manifest in Isaac. But will the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment, be the guiding goal of Isaac's children after him? Or, asks Verse 20, will the source of future values be ones that are radically different, values represented by Rebekah's fami-

ly, by *Bethuel the Aramean of Paddam-aram* [and] *Laban the Aramean*? Phonemically, these place-names sound like the word *ramai* [רמאי] which means "to deceive." The question posed by the repetition of these place-names in Verse 20, then, is: What role might deceptive behavior play in the emerging family of Isaac?

The evocation of the term *ramai* in "Aram" and "Aramean" in this verse becomes a reality in future events. This echo will eventually define a pattern of behavior in the culture of Aram that will affect the family in Canaan. For instance, Jacob later finds himself in Laban's house and works seven years for the right to marry his beloved Rachel. After the wedding, to his dismay,

וַיְהִי בַבֹּקֶר וְהִנֵּה-הִיא לֵאָה וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-לָבָן מַה-זֹּאת עָשִׂיתָ לִּי הֲלֹא בְרָחֵל
עַבְדְּתִי עָמָד וְלָמָּה רָשִׁיתָנִי ?

*And it came to pass, that in the morning, behold, it was Leah; and he said to Laban: 'What is this that you have done to me? Did not I serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you **deceived** me?'* (29:25)

Later still, in a further complaint about the deception visited upon him by Laban, Jacob, attuned to a different culture, complains both to his wives (31:7) and to Laban himself (31:41) that:

... וַתִּחַלֵּף אֶת-מִשְׁכָּרְתִּי עֶשְׂרֹת חֳנִיִּם

'... and you have changed my wages ten times.'

The relationship of the term *Aramean* to a culture of deception is thereby established and clear. The Torah is interested in exploring this cultural phenomenon in the light of ethical norms.

The opening verses of this *parsha* can therefore be seen as a formulation of a basic question: Which set of ethical practices will the family to be raised by Isaac and Rebekah follow -- those of Grandfather Abraham, or those of Grandfather Bethuel and Uncle Laban of Aram?

The text proceeds to plot the unfolding of this issue. No doubt Rebekah, welcomed into the tent of Sarah, had long ago abandoned the Aramean culture of deceit. She probably had begun to defect from the way of deceit of her father and brother when she was a mere girl. This may be the inference to be drawn from an exchange in the previous chapter between Rebekah's relatives and Abraham's servant, who had come to Aram to find a wife for Isaac. After

the future marriage is agreed upon, the servant requests that he be allowed to take Rebekah and return to his master (Abraham) immediately.

And they said, We will call the girl, and inquire at her mouth.

And they called Rebekah, and said to her, 'Will you go with this man?'

And she said, 'I will go' (24:58).

By emphatically stating her willingness to leave her family immediately she is signaling her abandonment of Aramean culture and her readiness to embrace Abraham's teachings. This choice on Rebekah's part, however, turns out to be anything but simple. Ethical complexity will presently become evident.

Cultural values inexorably are internalized in the members of the culture, and may affect a person's behavior and thinking even when the individual is unaware of the process. They have a lasting quality even after the person has rejected them. In Rebekah's case, the Aramean culture of deceit appears to have been almost automatically rekindled as ethically appropriate when confronted with what appeared to be a greater good. When it becomes evident to Rebekah that Isaac is going to give the blessings of Abraham to Esau rather than to Jacob, she perceives a danger to the very continuation of the chosen community and of Abraham's teachings. In a classic example of the ends justifying the means, Rebekah urges Jacob to disguise himself as Esau in order to deceive Isaac and receive the blessings.

In a poignant dialogue between Jacob and his mother Rebekah, this issue is confronted.

And Jacob said to Rebekah his mother, 'Behold, Esau my brother is a hairy man, and I am a smooth man; My father perhaps will feel me, and I shall seem to him as a trickster [חַתָּנֶטֶן – synonym for "deceiver"], and I shall bring a curse upon me, and not a blessing.' And his mother said to him, 'Upon me be your curse, my son; only obey my voice, and go fetch me them' (27:11-13).

And in truth, when Isaac discovers the fact of Jacob's behavior, he tells Esau,

בָּא אָחִיךָ בְּמַרְמָה וַיִּגָּח וַיִּשְׁלַח בְּרַכְתֶּךָ

*'Your brother came with **guile**, and has taken away your blessing' (27:35).*

The Hebrew מַרְמָה [*mirmah* – "guile" or "deceit"] is a form of the word *ra-mai* (רָמָה) which is echoed in the second of the two introductory verses of this *parsha*.

By introducing deceptive behavior as possibly defensible in certain situations, the Torah presents a further ramification of generalizing from this incident. Is it truly possible to take an extreme, unambiguous position against deceptive behavior? The Torah now goes on to explore the complexity of the mores of deceit beyond Jacob's deceitful behavior in relation to the blessings.

The immediate problem appears to be to what degree Jacob, grandson of Abraham, has internalized the practice of deceit. If he did not succumb entirely to the Aramean cultural values of deceit, he at least embraced his mother's rationalization of ends justifying means. Rashi comments on the statement of Jacob to Rachel when he arrived in Paddam-aram and met her for the first time:

And Jacob told Rachel that he was her father's brother [i.e., kinsman] and that he was Rebekah's son; and she ran and told her father (29:12).

Rashi wonders why he tells her not only that he is Rebekah's son, but that he is also "her father's brother." He then quotes a midrash in answer:

ומדרשו, אם לרמאות הוא בא, גם אני אחיו ברמאות, ואם אדם כשר הוא,
גם אני בן רבקה אחותו הכשרה

If cunning [רמאות – "deceit"] would be required, then he was her father's brother; while if honesty was required, then, he was the son of the pure Rebekah.¹ According to this midrash, while not acknowledging Rebekah his mother as a source of deceit, Jacob is prepared, if necessary, to practice the deceit/cunning of Laban, her brother.

Years later, Laban agrees to a complicated method of compensation for Jacob's service involving spotted and striped sheep and goats. Jacob, fooled once already on his wedding night, feels himself being manipulated once again. In response, he resorts to placing spotted and striped strips of wood at the watering hole to encourage the birth of goats similarly marked. If this can be considered a form of cunning or deceit, it would appear, then, that Jacob has adopted the values of his mother, that deceit is acceptable when necessary ends justify the means.

Does the Torah take a position with regard to this behavior? I would suggest that it does. While not openly reacting to the cunning/deceitful behavior, perhaps in recognition of the complexities of real life situations, the Torah does, nevertheless, imply a position regarding ideal behavior. When Jacob

flees from Laban with his family and enters Canaan, he struggles with a mysterious man/angel who eventually changes Jacob's name.

וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא יִעֲקֹב יִשְׁמָךְ עוֹד שְׁמֹךְ כִּי אִם יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי שָׁרִיתָ עִם אֱלֹהִים וְעִם אֲנָשִׁים וַתִּנָּכַל

And he said, 'Your name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel; for you have contended with God and with men, and have prevailed (32:29).

The juxtaposition of the names "Jacob" and "Israel" is loaded with meaning and ethical implications. Actually, Esau intuited the meaning of his brother's name when Isaac designates Jacob's behavior as cunning/deceitful.

וַיֹּאמֶר בָּא אֶחָיִךְ בְּמַרְמָה וַיִּקַּח בְּרִכְתֶּךָ:
וַיֹּאמֶר הֲכִי קָרָא שְׁמוֹ יַעֲקֹב וַיַּעֲקֹבֵנִי זֶה פַעַמַּיִם אֶת בְּרִכְתִּי
לָקַח וְהִנֵּה עַתָּה לָקַח בְּרִכְתִּי

And he [Isaac] said, 'Your brother came with cunning, and has taken away your blessing.' And he [Esau] said, 'Is not he rightly named Jacob? For he has supplanted me these two times; he took away my birthright; and, behold, now he has taken away my blessing' . . . (27:35-36).

The term "supplant" means: supersede through scheming or treachery (Webster's Dictionary). The Ibn Ezra thereby notes that the word וַיַּעֲקֹבֵנִי means deceitful [מרמה]. The sentence can thereby be translated : *And he [Esau] said, 'Is not he rightly named Jacob [meaning deceit]? For he has deceived me these two times, etc.'* [See also Onkelus]

Esau's word play is based on the fact that the name Jacob in Hebrew stems from the root AKV which has two meanings: "Heel" (because Jacob seized the heel of Esau) and, "Supplant, deceit, cunning". Thus, we now understand Esau's outcry which is a play on the double meanings of Jacob."

The name *Israel* [יִשְׂרָאֵל], on the other hand, stands in opposition to *Jacob* and its association with deceit. It appears to be related to the name *Yeshurun* [יֵשׁוּרֻן] derived from the word *yashar* [יָשָׁר], meaning "to be straight." (That name makes its appearance in Deuteronomy 33:5,26). Indeed, the Midrash Rabbah (Genesis §77:1) associates the verse in Deuteronomy with our verse in Genesis, noting the change of name to Israel [יִשְׂרָאֵל]. The message of the angel to Jacob, embedded within the words of the angel himself, becomes clearer: *And [the angel] said, 'Your name shall be called no*

more Jacob, but Israel; for you have contended with God and with men, and have prevailed. Jacob /Israel's goal for cultural values is not to be deceitful, but rather to be straight.

The Midrash speaks not of having prevailed over God, but having struggled with an angel, probably the angel of Esau. In other words, allegorically, Jacob has struggled with evil. He has also struggled with man, namely with the evil within himself, and prevailed. Thereby, his name can now be changed from Jacob to Israel, signifying his defeat of the tendency to deceitfulness, and his commitment to being ישר, straight. In effect, the conflicting value systems reflected in the introductory sentences of *Toldot* are embodied in Jacob himself. Ultimately, Jacob extricates himself to choose the value system established by Abraham inherited through Isaac.

It is significant that Jacob must become Israel before "the children of Israel" can enter the Land of Israel. Many generations later, 40 years after the Exodus from Egypt, when the descendants of Jacob are about to enter the Promised Land, the name Yeshurun, from which Jacob's concomitant name is derived, is uttered as an eschatological feature of the people's future:

וַיְהִי כִּי שִׁשְׁנֵי מֵלֶךְ בְּהַתְאַסֵּף רָאשֵׁי עַם יִחִיד שְׁבִטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:
אֵין כָּאֵל יִשְׁשֻׁרִן רֹכֵב שָׁמַיִם בְּעֶזְרָךְ וּבְגִאֲוָתוֹ שְׁחָקִים

And he was king in Yeshurun, when the heads of the people and the tribes of Israel were gathered together. There is none like the God of Yeshurun, Who rides upon the heaven in your help, and on the sky in His excellency (Deut. 33:5, 26).

For both Jacob and for his children after him, entering the Land of Israel demands the termination of deceit, and an exclusive commitment to the values of Abraham who fathered Isaac.

NOTES

1. (*Midrash Rabbah* Genesis, §70:12 (13); also *T. Bavli: Bava Batra*: 123a).