# BOOK REVIEW

*Jacob's Family Dynamics: Climbing the Rungs of the Ladder*, by Gad Dishi (Jerusalem: Devora Publishing Company), 2010, 232 pp. Reviewed by Aharon E. Wexler.

"There is no subject so old that something new cannot be said about it." With this quote from Fyodor Dostoevsky, Rabbi Gad Dishi, holder of the coveted title *Hatan ha-Tanakh la-Tefutzot* (Bible Contest Champion of the Diaspora), opens *Jacob's Family Dynamics*, an aptly titled tour de force and examination of the life of the biblical patriarch Jacob.

Influenced by Robert Alter, Nahum Sarna and Avivah Zornberg, to name just a few, Dishi breaks free from the traditional rabbinic on-spot, word by word commentaries, and offers us a broad thematic look at the biblical Jacob. "*Jacob's Family Dynamics* is a literary biblical commentary that demonstrates how Jacob's character traits and early life experiences leave a visible mark on the ensuing formation of his family dynamic" (p. 2).

Dishi's new and thought-provoking commentary obliges the author to remind us that "the ability and license remains for every person to contribute his share in what he was enlightened about the eloquence of the Torah . . .For since the gate is open, anyone can pass through; the insignificant just like the great" (p. 2, quoting Rabbi Isaac Samuel Reggio). Dishi deftly passes through the gate.

This is of course startling! Who are we to comment on the Torah? Did not Rabbi Zeira say in the name of Rabbah bar Zimona that if the previous generation of scholars were like angels then we are like men, and if they were like men, then we are like asses? (TB *Shabbat* 112b) Did not Rabbi Yohanan warn us that the fingernails of the earlier generations were better than the full bellies of the later generations? (TB *Yoma* 9b) But Dishi is in good company. Rabbi Hayyim ibn Attar, in one of the last rabbinic commentaries to receive canonical status in the *Mikra'ot Gedolot* editions of the Pentateuch, wrote: "You should know that we have permission to explain the implication of the verses after careful study, even though our conclusions differ from the explanation of our Sages. That is because there are 70 faces to the Torah (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 13:16). There is no prohibition against differing from the words

*Rabbi Aharon E. Wexler is an educator in many Israeli post-high school yeshivot and seminaries where he teaches Jewish Philosophy, Talmud, and Jewish History.*

of our Sages except if it changes the *Halakhah*. Similarly, we find that even though the *Amoraim* did not have the right to disagree with *Tannaim* in halakhic matters, still we find that they offered alternative explanations to verses (*Or ha-Hayyim*, Gen. 1:1).

Dishi does just that. He takes the familiar stories of Jacob's life and gives alternate explanations that turn the story over on its head. Taking a fresh look at the text of course is something that every commentator tries to do. But Dishi succeeds where others have only scraped the surface.

Dishi contends "that the more human the patriarchs, the *greater* their character . . . Their personality flaws or misdeeds provide further opportunity to illustrate the principles of specific divine retribution for evildoings and sin and highlight their distinction from the whimsical haphazard behavior of the pagan gods" (p. 5). This, I believe, is what stands out in Dishi's book. Dishi understands that unlike the heroes of other mythologies, the biblical characters are "ordinary people living extraordinary lives, not extraordinary people living imaginary lives" (p. 6). It is because our biblical characters don't walk on water and are indeed so intensely human that we are able to relate to them so very well both in our modern Western world and in the ancient Near East of yesteryear.

By paying close, deep and detailed attention to the nuances of the text Dishi believes that it was never Rebekah's intent that Jacob deceive Isaac by masquerading as Esau; only that Jacob be the one who brings the meal to his father. Dishi connects Isaac's love of venison to the psychological effects of being saved from his binding and Abraham's offering of *it* instead of him on the altar. For Dishi, the very smell and taste of the meat would evoke in Isaac the positive feelings of salvation he felt when he was saved and would serve as a catalyst for the "potent, emotional bond between them" (p. 14), resulting in the bestowal of the blessing. Only after voicing his concern that Esau was a hairy man, while Jacob's skin was smooth, does Rebekah catch on to Jacob's train of thought and help him to carry out *his* plan. After all, if Rebekah had the deception in mind all along, why does she prepare two goat kids instead of the anticipated venison?

With keen psychological insight, Dishi casts Jacob as someone who possesses an inborn aversion to risk, and in this light "Jacob's grasping Esau's heel is not an expression of Jacobs's desire to be first as Esau interprets it, but

rather an attempt to hold on to Esau for security as Jacob fears coming into the world" (p. 21). It is this aversion to risk that characterizes Jacob throughout his life and will help answer some of the poignant questions Dishi raises.

Growing up in Haran with Laban as her brother, Dishi questions whether or not Rebekah's impressive show of kindness, giving water to Abraham's servant and his camels, is entirely altruistic, and introduces a possible profit motive in her helping the stranger. Dishi questions whether or not Jacob's love for Rachel is requited and questions who orchestrated the plan to switch Leah with Rachel. Dishi also casts Laban, not as the mastermind, but only as a participant in the deception.

Other questions asked by Dishi include: Why does Esau not chase Jacob to Padan Aram? Why does Rachel assist in the conjugal switch? Why does Jacob not divorce Leah? Why not charge Laban publicly with deceit? Why the silence after Dinah's rape? Why not bury Rachel in the Cave of Machpelah? These are but a few of the penetrating questions asked by Dishi, some of them implicitly blaming Jacob for his faults. By asking these questions the portrait of Jacob that emerges is someone who has an aversion to risk, is not the best father, nor is he the best husband. Yet the portrait is also of a man who cares deeply for his family and who knows how to adapt himself to new situations. He is a man who can start out penniless, carrying just a stick, and emerges with riches that spill over into two camps. The portrait we see of Jacob is one that allows him to join his fathers Isaac and Abraham as an archetype of the different personalities that Jews throughout the millennia would have to adopt in order to survive in the hostile world of "Esau hates Jacob."

This is an innovative, passionate and very personal work. Dishi admits the lack of objectivity in finding parallels not just between the Bible and Jewish life, but also between the Bible and his own life; yet this is seen as a positive, as the author concludes, "after all, isn't that what it's all about?" (p. 224).

*The reviewer would like to thank Mr. Avner Landes for his valuable input.*