

PARASHAH TWENTY-NINE

GENESIS 30:22–31:2; 1SAMUEL 1:1–11; ACTS 13:16–41

Notes by Tim Hegg

We have in our text this Shabbat a most interesting story of Laban's mistreatment of Jacob. The manner in which he mistreats his own son-in-law betrays Laban's true heart, while the response of Jacob is a model for integrity. As would often be repeated in the history of Jacob's family, their success would engender anger in those communities among which they sojourned. Even in modern times the world is not concerned about Israel as long as she remains impoverished. But whenever she rises to economic success, she is persecuted!

Our narrative begins with a most important notice: "God remembered Rachel." As in the Noah story (8:1) so here—God's "remembering" is covenant language meaning "God was loyal to the covenant." God remembered Rachel, not because He had previously forgotten her, but because now in His all encompassing providence He had decreed that she should conceive and bring forth Joseph. Joseph would play a very strategic role in the salvation and deliverance of Israel and would be used of God to demonstrate His faithfulness to Israel and his offspring. In this opening phrase the reader is reminded that within all of the tangled web of life's circumstances, God is working out the promise He made to Abraham—the covenant promises of blessing.

The birth of Joseph was a turning point in the life of Jacob and his family. Somehow, the birth of Joseph signalled it was time for Jacob to leave Laban and return to the Land. Jacob's request to Laban is: "Grant me leave (שְׁלַחֲנִי) that I may go to my place and to my land." The inclusion of both "place" and "land" is significant. Jacob not only wants to return to his home, but also to his land. He has seen that God's promises are worked out in accordance with His covenant, a covenant which contained as one of its central themes the gift of the Land. As Jacob began to raise up the generation which would follow him, he realized the need to plant them in the Land in which God had promised to bless them. Furthermore, he had fully discharged his duties to Laban, and was completely free in conscience to go his separate way. With respect to his father-in-law, however, he asks permission. Jacob has clearly undergone some changes in his life! The former deceiver now acts with exceptional integrity, doing what was righteous even to his own hurt (cf. Ps 15:4).

Laban, the master of deception, however, attempts to keep Jacob with him in order to continue to prosper through his work. We know, of course, that ultimately Laban took advantage of Jacob, for in the next *parashah*, when Jacob accuses Laban of deceit, Laban does not deny it. It was evident to all that Laban had taken advantage of Jacob for his own selfish gain.

In spite of the fact that Jacob wanted to leave, he gives in to his father-in-law's wishes, and forms an employment contract with him. It seems highly probable that Laban intended to impress Jacob by his claim that he had "learned through divination" that his success was really due to Jacob's presence there. It seems equally likely that Jacob was not impressed! One can only speculate what Jacob's thoughts were: did he feel sorry for Laban, realizing that if he were to leave, Laban would suffer real economic loss? Or did he see an opportunity to build his own economic base in order to sustain his family when he finally did leave? Whatever might have been his motivation, it is clear that Jacob had learned to live by faith. In the arrangement which he contracts with Laban, his success is dependent entirely upon circumstances out of his control. Somehow Jacob has learned the valuable lesson that success comes from living righteously and entrusting the outcome to HaShem. Of course, I mean by this, "success" as God measures it and not by man's standards.

Yet in the midst of such faith Jacob also teaches us a very important lesson, namely, *true faith does not negate human effort*. Jacob could have simply "sat on his hands," reasoning that since he had entrusted the future to God, he could just sit and wait for things to happen. But he didn't. Like all true people of faith, after entrusting the future to God's almighty hand, he set himself to accomplishing all within his power to be successful in his work.

The arrangements he makes with Laban are of such a nature as to entirely prove his integrity. In other words, he was wise in his dealings. The Sages, when commenting upon this passage, note the text of 2 Sam 22:27, "with the pure You show yourself pure, and with the perverted you show Yourself astute (literally, 'twisted')," and reason that we too, like God, should be careful when we make dealings with those we know lack integrity. Jacob makes sure that Laban could never turn the tables and accuse him of deceit. Thus, Jacob contracts to work for Laban, his wages being the off-colored animals of the flock, while Laban would retain the pure or monochrome sheep and goats. In order to assure that Jacob did not inbreed with those animals

already belonging to Laban, the off-colored ones were separated and removed “a 3 days journey” from Jacob. Thus, any off-colored one which resulted from breeding the flocks which remained with Jacob would clearly be of the Lord’s doing.

The method Jacob employs to help produce the off-colored animals is mysterious. Old folklore held that characteristics of the offspring could be determined by what the animals saw while mating. This, of course, cannot be what the text means. The Torah does not engage in folklore! The text does indicate that Jacob engaged in selective breeding (v. 40). Some have suggested that Jacob simply used the rods as a diversion to disguise his real method, i.e., selective breeding of the monochrome animals in order to isolate the recessive gene which produced the off-colored ones. Such animals could have been selected by what is known as heterosis, or hybrid vigor. Others have noted that the three plants that Jacob put in the watering troughs were used in the ancient world for medicinal purposes, and contain toxic substances. They could have had the effect of hastening the onset of the estrous cycle in the animals and heightened their readiness to copulate. Whatever the answer, 31:10ff indicates that God was the One who gave Jacob instruction through a dream, and that he was doubtlessly given insight into the breeding measures which would, in the end, bring him great wealth.

The reaction of Laban’s sons is common: “Jacob has taken all that was our father’s, and from that which was our father’s he has built up his own wealth.” The success that God had granted Jacob is, in the hearts of his enemies, turned against him. All of Israel’s enemies, throughout the ages, have always credited Israel’s success to ill-gotten gain. When HaShem blesses Israel, the nations call it debauchery. In the eyes of the nations, God never gets the credit for Israel’s success. We may grant that the world is unable to see this, but such should not be the case in the Church. If there is any group of people that should long and pray for Israel’s success, and rejoice when Israel is blessed, it should be the people of God who have been gathered into the family of God by His mercy.

Jacob’s hard work has been blessed by God and he has gained the wealth needed to support his growing family. In light of the meaning of Joseph’s name (“added to”), Jacob is preparing for an enlarged family by working hard to gain economic stability. But he has not done so in a deceitful way. Having committed himself to the God who can do all things, he walks with integrity even among those who

would deceitfully use him. He maintains his word, and entrusts his economic future to God. The result is blessing on two fronts: economic and spiritual. Jacob has grown in his understanding of HaShem and has proven to his family and to families that would follow him, that trusting God is a way of life for the righteous.

Once again, as often, we have in this passage a demonstration of the meaning of “trust” (בַּחַר, *bachar*) and “faith” (אֱמוּנָה, *'emunah*). All too often in our times these two words are considered to describe a mental process by which a person “agrees with God” or “says ‘yes’ to God” —in other words, that “trusting” and “believing” simply involve an inward thought process. But while it is true that there is an inward thought process which initiates the response of “trust” or “belief,” both words are regularly represented in the Scriptures as demonstrated by obedient actions. It is surely a Biblical axiom that one cannot be said to have “trusted” in God, or to have “believed” or “have faith” in God until one’s actions coincide with His character and instructions. For example, we may say that we trust God to supply our needs. Then we are confronted with the test of the Shabbat (cp. Ex 16:4). For though in the world’s society the Shabbat is one of the most lucrative days for commerce, God commands His people to cease from common work on that day and to rest. Thus, the issue of faith is brought to the fore. In honoring the Shabbat, I cease from the work that might otherwise bring me an economic advantage and trust God to supply my needs. We might call this the “manna principle.” Will the extra manna I gathered on Friday continue to meet my needs on the Shabbat? God promised it would! Or do I show my lack of faith (obedience) by going out on the Shabbat to gather more manna? Of course, if I do go out on the Shabbat to gather more manna, I discover none exists. In seeking to supply my own needs by disobeying God, I lose twice: my labors come to nothing and I forfeit the rest that comes from obeying God.

May we be so willing to put our lives—our economic endeavors, our goals and plans, in God’s hands, seeking always to work and live with full integrity, exercising faith that leaves the outcome to HaShem. If He has promised to meet all of our needs, then we can trust Him to do so! Moreover, living on the basis of faith produces a thankful heart, for we are constantly reminded that our lives are guarded by the Almighty Who orders all things well.