

"JACOB AS EDUCATOR"

After fourteen years of working for his father-in-law Laban, Jacob decides that the time has come to leave and return to his homeland. He now has eleven sons and a daughter from his two wives and the two handmaidens. And so he confronts Laban who seeks to restrain him; Laban knows when he has a good thing going for him.

The question we must ask is: why just then? Of course, the obvious answer is that the terms of his contract with Laban have come to an end. He has served seven years for Leah and another seven for Rachel (whom he thought he was marrying in the first place). Yet the Torah implies that some other consideration is involved here:

And it came to pass, when Rachel had borne Joseph, that Jacob said to Laban, "send me away, that I may go to my own place and my own country" (Gen. 30:25)

The Torah connects Jacob's decision to leave with the birth of Joseph. But what does Joseph's birth have to do with this decision? True, this is Rachel's first child, but if Jacob had some prophetic premonition about the size of his family, why did he not wait for the birth of Benjamin, and thus the full family of the patriarch?

I suggest that Jacob's decision, so important in his own life and for the furtherance of his divine mission, was occasioned not by his formal contract with Laban and not by the filling out of the contours of his family, but by something far more significant religiously and psychologically. What prompted Jacob's move was his concern for the spiritual education and welfare of his two wives, the daughters of Laban.

Jacob knew that he was at a turning point in his life. Whatever the economic problems and opportunities that presented themselves to him as Laban's employee, there were far greater pressures that were building up. On the one hand, he knew that eventually he must confront his brother Esau who had sworn to kill him. That was good reason for postponing any decision to leave Laban's household. Even though he knew that as time went on and his own possessions increased and his family grew he would prove a more tempting target for Esau, and his own mobility would be decreased, nevertheless it was safer to stay put with Laban and risk his deceitfulness than face Esau and his murderous vengeance.

On the other hand, however, Jacob had to be prepared to pay for every extra day in Laban's employ with the coin of real religious risk. Laban was an idol worshipper and his daughters had been raised in the same polytheistic faith. What commended them as proper mates for the son of Isaac and the grandson of Abraham was the quality of lovingkindness (רחם) and the moral probity that had so concerned Abraham when he sent his servant Eliezer to look for a wife for Isaac. These attributes, which Eliezer found in Rebecca, sister of Laban, were the ones that commended Rachel to Jacob. But we have no record of any special spiritual achievements of the two sisters in their pagan home. Their religious coming-of-age had to await their marriage to the future third patriarch of Israel.

It was, then, Jacob's task to educate his wives in the ways of the One God who had sought out Abraham and promised him the blessings of posterity and a homeland for his descendants as the major elements of their covenant with the Creator. He must be not only husband and provider and protector, but also teacher and spiritual mentor. It was his responsibility to raise them up as devout worshippers of the One and thus prove worthy of being matriarchs, along with his mother and grandmother, of the people he was helping to found in accordance with the divine promise.

Now, the longer he stayed on with Laban, the more difficult his mission loomed before him. He had to wean them away from their idolatrous bias even while they continued to live in the same environment, exposed to the same influences, comfortable in the heathen ways--the only ones they ever knew. For such a wrenching change in outlook, in world-view, in religious conception, it was necessary that their entire setting be changed, that he remove them from the pernicious influences of their polytheistic father and all his household. The longer he stayed on, then, the more impossible his task became.

The assignment would have been difficult enough for Jacob had he had to contend with the spiritual education--or, better, rehabilitation--of one wife. But Jacob had two wives, hence two pupils, who needed his ministrations. Any experienced teacher knows that no two people possess the same learning curve. Every individual is singular in the way he or she responds to instruction, in the rate of learning, in the receptivity and resistance to new ideas, in the tendency to waver and retrogress. In his two wives, Jacob experienced in miniature the dilemma of almost all teachers as they wrestle with heterogeneous student bodies. The problem becomes more acute when the scene of such education is not a classroom but the entire gamut of experience from the tent to the field, from the hearth to the sheepfold.

Indeed, an analysis of the third and fourth parshiyot of Vayetzei (especially 29:32 to 30:25) may yield insights into Jacob's pedagogical problem and help us understand why he left Laban when he did.

The key to the solution lies in the names that they gave to their children and to the children of their handmaids. A simple device will serve to decode Jacob's dilemma for us: whether or not the Name of God was used in naming the children, and which divine Name was invoked.

In analyzing our verses in this manner, we must bear in mind, of course, that the name אלקים can be both sacred (if referring to the One God) or profane (representing the idea of power or authority or, if referring to a deity in general, a pagan god). The Name 'ה, however, is specific for the One God, the universal Creator of heaven and earth, the transcendent Holy One of Israel. The first of these two divine Names, when used in the context of the early history of Israel, and especially when uttered by people whose entire upbringing was pagan, must be taken as referring to the deities popular in the Near East of that period. The second, the ineffable Tetragrammaton (שם בן ד'), is unmistakably "Jewish," a sure sign of the faith of Israel.

Let us now trace, separately, the spiritual development of the two sisters, the wives and students of Jacob.

At the very beginning of her career as a mother, Leah uses the Tetragrammaton:

And Leah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Reuben, for she said, "Because 'ה has looked upon my affliction; for now my husband will love me" (29:32)

Likewise for Leah's second son:

And she conceived again and bore a son and said, "Because 'ה has heard that I am hated, He has therefore given me this son too" (29:33)

The third son's name bears no reference to the Deity:

And she conceived again and bore a son and said, "Now this time will my husband be joined to me because I have borne him three sons" (29:34)

Why the omission of the divine Name in naming Levi, son number three? It is possible, of course, that Leah's faith is wavering and her trust in God is weakening. More likely it

is simply that the theme that dominates Levi's birth is the mutual love Leah hopes to realize between herself and Jacob; the Deity is, as it were, irrelevant to an emotional situation which is dependent upon the free will of both participants and is not directed by God who can give or withhold conception but who neither causes nor deters love between two humans. (Compare the question posed by many commentators on the Talmud as to why the commandment to love God is counted amongst the 613 commandments when it is obvious that love cannot be commanded.)

The fourth son too contains an allusion to the Tetragrammaton:

And she conceived again and bore a son and she said, "This time will I praise 'ה." Therefore she called his name Judah; and she left off bearing (29:35)

At this point, the narrative turns to Rachel who, envious of her sister's fertility and distressed by her own childlessness, asks Jacob to take her handmaid Bilhah to wife, that Rachel may have at least the biblical equivalent of an adopted son. Bilhah gives birth and Rachel names the child Dan because:

And Rachel said, "אלקים has judged me and has also heard my voice and has given me a son" (30:6)

The next child that Bilhah bears, Naphtali, is likewise named by Rachel, and again the Tetragrammaton is noticeable by its absence (30:8). A somewhat equivocal term is used--נפתולי--which may refer either to wrestling with the Deity or as mighty wrestling or striving.

The Torah now shifts back to Leah. Her own fertility apparently diminished, she offers Jacob her handmaid, Zilpah, who bears two children, both named by Leah. The first is called Gad (30:11) and the second Asher (30:13). In neither is the Deity invoked at all--by any Name.

Leah then regains her fertility and she bears a fifth son:

And Leah said, "אלקים has given me my hire, because I gave my handmaid to my husband," and she called his name Issachar (30:18)

Finally, Leah gives birth to her sixth son, Zebulun, and here again the name אלקים is invoked, with no mention of 'ה (30:20).

At long last, Rachel's turn comes.

And she conceived and bore a son, and said, "אלקים has taken away my reproach." And she called his name Joseph, saying, "May 'ה add to me another son." (30:23, 24)

If we now take the use of the Tetragrammaton as an indication of how well the two wives of Jacob had learned their lessons in Jewish monotheism from their husband-teacher, we discover that the two "learning curves" of Leah and Rachel have intersected at this point.

Leah was apparently a quicker learner than her sister. The Name 'ה came to her readily, and her invocation of the Tetragrammaton at the birth of her very first child indicates that she absorbed Jacob's teachings early on. Her religious loyalty remained firm when her second son was born and, as mentioned above, her third son's name may indicate momentary wavering or be of no consequence as an index of her new monotheistic beliefs. At any rate, by the time she bore Judah, her fourth, the Tetragrammaton was back on her lips.

However, after "she left off bearing," presumably a period of a few years, a change seems to have come over her. No divine name graces the names she gives her handmaid's two children, and her own two sons, born afterwards, are named with the mention of אלקים alone, not the Tetragrammaton. This may well indicate a warning sign of a lapse into paganism, or a loss of the sense of the personal presence of God and its displacement by the more impersonal אלקים. At any rate, the very ambiguity of this Name indicates that it is a step backward. Leah is apparently on a downward slope religiously. The early lessons of monotheism seem to be losing their grip on her, and Jacob has every right to suspect that Leah's regression is a sign that her early training in Laban's home is reasserting itself, probably because of the continuing influence of Laban and his people in the very same home in which she had grown up. If Leah was to recapture her religious integrity, it was imperative that she be wrenched out of this spiritually noxious environment.

At the very same time, Rachel was undergoing a completely different kind of learning process. She was slower to pick up the religious teaching of Jacob--perhaps because she was very young?--and the signs of her resistance to Jacob's instruction are evident in the names she gave to her handmaid Bilhah's two sons. Only the name אלקים is used--a name that, as mentioned, can apply equally to pagan deities and to the creative but impersonal aspects of the One God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Jacob has not yet succeeded in fully converting his beloved Rachel to the faith of his fathers. Laban's influence still appears to predominate. However, after a period of time--indeterminate from the text--God remembers Rachel and she gives birth to Joseph. In naming him, Rachel reveals that her learning growth is an upward curve: slow to learn, she is nevertheless an apt student who eventually absorbs her lessons and applies them appropriately. For here the Tetragrammaton is proudly uttered, and the sign of Rachel's acceptance of the God of

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as her personal Deity is emblazoned in the verse that tells us of the reason for Joseph's name.

Hence, a particularly opportune moment presents itself to Jacob. The pressure to pull Leah out of the pagan ambience is very real; she must leave soon, before she relapses completely to the heathenism of her father's house. At the very same time, Rachel has finally come of age spiritually; she has now revealed that she has arrived at true faith in 'n. Jacob knows that such conversion is never a sure thing unless the surroundings are entirely different, unless the sapling of Rachel's faith can be transplanted to a much safer and richer soil.

The lines cross at this point. Jacob's worry about Leah coincides with his new confidence in Rachel, symbolized by her naming of Joseph.

We now understand the relevance of the birth of Joseph to Jacob's decision to announce to Laban his desire to leave:

And it came to pass, when Rachel had borne Joseph, that Jacob said to Laban, "Send me away, that I may go to my own place and my own country."

Jacob has the sure instincts of a gifted teacher and these, coupled with his acute sense of timing, lead him to cut off his relations with Laban at this particular time.