

MORASHAH

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Parashat HaShavuah Series

Parashat Vayetzei

ONE WHO HIRES CRAFTSMEN, AND THEY DECEIVE EACH OTHER, THEY HAVE NO VALID CLAIM AGAINST EACH OTHER, BUT ONLY COMPLAINT. IF A MAN HIRED A DONKEY DRIVER OR A WAGON DRIVER TO BRING LITTER BEARERS AND PIPERS FOR A BRIDE OR A FUNERAL, OR LABORERS TO TAKE HIS FLAX FROM THE SOAKING POOL, OR ANY MATTER WHICH CAN NOT BE DELAYED, AND THEY RETRACTED, IF IT WAS A PLACE WHERE NONE COULD BE HIRED FOR A LIKE WAGE, HE MAY HIRE OTHERS AT THEIR EXPENSE OR HE MAY DECEIVE THEM. (MISHNAH, BAVA METZIA 6:1)

When studying the stories of the Patriarchs, and especially those of Jacob, we frequently run into two equally difficult approaches. One, the direction of the traditional commentaries, based on the Midrash, is that nothing negative really happened. Jacob stole Esau's birthright? No, Jacob was conceived first and it belonged to him! (Rashi) Similarly, when asked by Isaac "Who are you, my son?" Jacob's reply is to be understood "I am (who I am, and) Esau (is) your first born!" This is borne out neither by the text nor the traditional cantillation, which indicates that Jacob was, in fact, claiming to be Esau.

The other approach, seen in the Hertz Chumash and in the works of most modern writers, is "How Scripture respects not persons, and clearly reveals the failings of our greatest leaders". The problem is this: if our forefathers committed so many misdeeds, why do the rabbis urge emulation of them? Why do we call God "The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob"? Wouldn't we do better to invoke "The God of Lincoln, Gandhi, and Mother Theresa"?

Yes, it's wonderful to point out the failings of otherwise great people (Lincoln at one time suspended the Bill of Rights), but it seems that, according to this view, our Patriarchs are hardly the kind of people we would want to claim as the founders of our Nation and our Faith!

A third view was advocated by the late Rabbi Norman Frimer. He saw Jacob as the moral man in an immoral situation. Whether in his dealings with his brother, or, as in this week's Parshah, his father-in-law, he was the potential victim. In Christian terms "If a man smite thee on the cheek, turn to him the other.... ." Jacob should have endured the abuse in silence. He would have been a noble hero, albeit a hero incapable of fulfilling his mission.

We read in the above Mishnah that if one hired musicians for a wedding at a certain agreed-upon price, and then, upon arriving at the wedding, they wish to extort a higher price, one may deceive them. One may agree to their extortion, and then pay only the original, agreed-upon wage. The alternative is either a society in which agreements are meaningless, or a wedding spoiled due to lack of music. Jacob was therefore a paradigm of how we are to survive as a people: honesty when dealing with honest people and situations, subtlety when dealing with criminals; surviving despite hostile environments, while maintaining a focus on our mission. Jacob never took what was not his, but made sure that his ethical standard would not be so high as to risk the survival of his children as a people.

Shabbat Shalom.

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