

Jacob: Merciful or a Loser

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Nobody ever had a worse father-in-law than our patriarch Jacob! Nobody ever had a worse uncle than our patriarch Jacob! And they were one and the same person: Laban.

Jacob and Laban are introduced by Laban's daughter Rachel, after Rachel and Jacob meet at the well—love at first sight. Jacob is a refugee, having escaped the wrath of his brother Esau, who has good reason to want to kill him after some awful trickery on Jacob's part. Laban welcomes his nephew into his home, and Jacob goes to work taking care of Laban's sheep. Laban offers to pay him, asking Jacob what his wages should be. Jacob seeks no monetary salary, but instead that he be given Rachel's hand in marriage. Laban agrees that, after seven years' labor, Jacob may marry Rachel. In the meantime, Jacob lives in the household—not only with Laban and Rachel, but also with Rachel's older sister, Leah.

When the seven years pass, Laban doesn't spontaneously hold up his end of the bargain. Jacob has to demand: The time has come for him to marry Rachel. Laban seems to agree, and he throws a big wedding feast. Jacob then spends the night with the bride, only discovering in the morning that she is Leah, not Rachel.ⁱ

I have never believed this story—and I don't merely mean that it may not be an historical account of events that actually occurred. A good story has to be believable, but this one is implausible! How could Jacob spend the entire night with his first cousin—not the one he intends to marry, but her sister, with whom he has shared a home for seven years—and fail to recognize the ruse until the next morning?

The rabbis offer several explanations of how this subterfuge went unnoticed. In the 19th Century, Rabbi Samuel David Luzatto insisted “that they had marital relations in the dark, and thus he did not recognize her until the morning.”ⁱⁱ I'm not buying it. Even in the dark, Jacob would've known his partner.

More plausibly, *Tosafot*, a 12th century commentary, posits that Laban throws a feast—in Hebrew, a *mishteh*, based on the verb “to drink”—with the goal of getting Jacob so drunk he doesn't know the difference between Leah and Rachel.ⁱⁱⁱ

A Talmudic theory is that Rachel and Jacob knew not to trust Laban, so they came up with a secret set of signals by which Rachel would identify her thickly-

veiled self to Jacob. When Rachel saw that her father was really going to do what she feared, though, she shared the signals with her sister, motivated by the desire to spare Leah the shame of being rejected under the *chuppah*.^{iv}

That's a lovely story about Rachel, but it doesn't solve my problem: Veil or none, Jacob would know the difference between two sisters with whom he has shared a home for seven years.

More than a few sages suggest that karma gets Jacob in the end. After all, he's the guy who put on sheepskin to deceive his father into granting him the blessing intended for his older brother Esau. Now, the trickster gets tricked!^v

None of these explanations is my favorite, which can't be my original idea, though I find it in no traditional source. From the time that he first sees her on that wedding night, however thick the veil, Jacob knows that she's Leah; but he's trapped. Perhaps Rachel has taught Leah the secret code, which doesn't fool Jacob, but signals him that his beloved wants him to along with the ruse. If he complains that he has been given the wrong sister in marriage, he will publicly shame Leah. Since the deception is her father's doing and not Leah's, she is not to blame. Jacob keeps quiet to preserve his new wife's honor.

Jacob is no longer the trickster who would stop at nothing to get what was rightfully his brother's—or even, in this case, his own. Instead, he has grown into a righteous person who values the feelings of another person more than getting his own way.

The moral of the story is a complicated lesson about truth. Earlier in his life, Jacob disregards the truth, lying even to his father to achieve his goals. Now, by contrast, he resists telling the whole truth, at least at first, in order to spare another person's feeling.

We may imagine that honesty is always the best policy. As a student of Mussar, though, I have learned that truth, like all traits, exists on a spectrum. Some people tell too many lies, and other people tell the truth with little regard for others' wellbeing. The tradition teaches us to seek the golden path between being liars, on the one hand; and brutal truth-tellers, on the other.

The great first century sages Hillel and Shammai famously debated the commandment to praise a bride. The rabbis, who were not concerned about sexism, wrangled over what to do if one does not see praiseworthy traits in the bride. In the words of Alan Morinis, Hillel “states that *all* brides should be praised as being ‘beautiful and gracious.’ To that, Shammai retorts: ‘What if a bride limps or is

blind, should one praise her as being “beautiful and gracious?” Has not the Torah told us, “Keep your distance from falsehood?”” Hillel answers with an analogy: “When a person buys an inferior article in the market, should one praise it in [their] presence, or should one find fault with it in [their] presence? It appears to us that one should praise it.”^{vi}

As Morinis admits, “This analogy isn’t one I’d personally try to defend—equating the bride to purchased merchandise”—but still, Hillel is making a valid point about truth. “Hillel tells us that we should not be primarily concerned with how our words correspond to verifiable reality, but rather for the impact our statement will have on another person.”^{vii}

Far from being a stooge when he doesn’t immediately expose Leah, Jacob has found a new level of righteousness he did not possess as a younger man. Having once been a liar who would distort the truth to his own benefit, he now withholds a truth that would achieve his desires but harm another person—in this case, Leah. And he receives a reward: After celebrating the full week of bridal celebration with Leah, he marries his beloved Rachel, too, one man being permitted multiple wives in biblical times.

We, too, can strive for righteousness through truth. Let us, like the maturing Jacob, leave self-serving falsehood behind. At the same time, like Jacob, let us possess the wisdom to know when exposing the truth will hurt others. Then, let us, find balance in our lives—and may we, like Jacob, be known for righteousness.

Amen.

ⁱ The story synopsis in these first two paragraphs is found in Genesis 29:9-25.

ⁱⁱ Luzatto to Genesis 29:25, found in Dr. Rabbi Zev Farber, “How Is It Possible that Jacob Mistakes Leah for Rachel?” *TheTorah.com*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Tosafot gloss on Genesis 29:22, cited by Farber.

^{iv} T.B. Megillah 13b, told by Rashi in his comment to Genesis 29:25.

^v Genesis Rabbah 70, cited by Farber.

^{vi} Alan Morinis, *Everyday Holiness*, Boston: Trumpeter, 2007, p. 167.

^{vii} Ibid.