

Parashah Thirty
Genesis 31:3–32:2; Jeremiah 30:10–16; James 4:1–12

Notes by Tim Hegg

When we read the story of Jacob, we are reminded of the words of Paul as he reflected upon the history of Israel : “Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come” (1Cor 10:11). The life situations that confronted Jacob seem all too familiar to us! Struggles in relationships, economic problems, employers that just don’t understand, and so on. But even more we resonate with Jacob because, like him, we realize that some of the pickles into which we get ourselves are the result of our own bad choices. “What goes around, comes around.” Yet we also recognize that Jacob has changed, and that his deceptive ways are a thing of his past. Is there ever a time when the past can stop impacting the present?! In a way, we feel for Jacob: he has been a faithful worker, yet it seems that he continues to find himself in precarious situations. He has faithfully discharged his duties toward his father-in-law, yet Laban has done everything possible to get rich off of Jacob's toil and talent.

Here we see the intervening hand of God. And we learn an important lesson: *God is concerned about His children, and He cares for them.* He has been watching out for His chosen one, and in this story, He turns Laban's trickery against him, and Jacob comes out the richer. Moreover, when the relationship “heats up,” God gives divine guidance to Jacob through a dream, assuring him of divine help and guidance.

Consider the phrases in v. 5: “... but the God of my father has been with me.” What a consolation! Jacob has learned the all important lesson of the presence of God in his life. And note v. 7: “God did not allow him to hurt me.” Jacob recognized God's unwavering faithfulness to him, and believed that He had only his good in mind. Yet had not Jacob experienced much grief and toil in his relationship with Laban? How could he say that God had not allowed Laban to hurt him? In learning the walk of faith, Laban had acquired a new perspective on life. Instead of focusing on the troubles of the past, he was now recognizing God’s faithfulness, Who had given him the ability to stand above his circumstances and ultimately to win the battle.

But this was after 14 years! Faith brings patience—the victory may be years away! The question that comes to us is simply whether we are willing to trust God’s promised that He would always be with us, and would never leave or forsake us. Are you willing to trust your situation into the hands of God, and await His solutions to your troubles—to seek His way of victory?

Another lesson we learn from the life of Jacob, and perhaps particularly from this *parashah*, is that *God is owner of everything.* In v. 9 an amazing statement is made about God: “Thus God has taken away your father's livestock and given them to me.” The story before us is all about “taking”—Laban takes Jacob's wages; Jacob takes Laban's heart (translated “deceive”); Rachel takes the *teraphim* (household idols); Laban charges Jacob with taking his daughters and family away, and Laban's sons accuse Jacob of taking away their father's wealth. In each case the one charges the other with “stealing,” and indeed, in the case of the household idols, the Scripture itself charges Rachel with this unlawful act (v. 19).

But what about God? On what basis does He have the right to take what belonged to Laban and give it to Jacob? Why isn't this considered “stealing”? The answer is obvious. In the final reality, all things belong to God. He is the owner or possessor of all things. Thus, He has the right to take from

one and give to other, for in truth He is the One who has given us all things in the first place.

There is a ready application for us in this truth: we should always be alarmed when our grip on *things* causes strains in our relationships with *others*. And isn't this often the case? Aren't most disputes in our neighborhoods, work place, homes, and even our communities, traceable to the question of who owns what? In fact, this is why our Apostolic portion was chosen to accompany our Torah *parashah*:

What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.

Our Torah *parashah* is a ready reminder that a solution to materialism is close at hand: God is the real owner of all, and He has every right to take from one and give to the other. Our perspective ought to be one of thankfulness for whatever we have, because we know this is a gift from the Almighty.

Another important fact we learn from this passage is that *God has a major concern for the Land of Israel*. This is the first instance in the Torah where the Land is referenced to individuals: “Return to the land of your fathers” (v. 3). Why is the Land so important? Why not just take whatever is available and let the fighting stop? Why has there always been a tug-of-war over the narrow strip of Land which we call Israel?

Many answers can be given to this question, and many of them are good. But I think the ultimate answer to the question of why this particular land is so important is simply this: God promised it to Abraham and his descendents (Gen. 15:18-21). Like all of God's promises, this one forms the battle ground for Satan and his workers. And why not? If any promise of God can be thwarted, the universe will cease to exist, for the very existence of the universe depends upon God, and He cannot lie (Tit 1:2). If one promise of God were to fail, then He would cease to be God, and the universe would likewise cease.

Satan has attempted to stamp out Israel in order to overturn God's promise that she would endure forever. This is the primary basis of anti-Semitism. Satan tried to prevent Messiah from coming, from doing His redeeming work, and will no doubt attempt to prevent Him from coming again. And you can count on this: Satan will continue to do all in his power to tear the Land away from Israel, for the simple reason that God gave it to her.

Always, as in our Torah section today, God leads His chosen ones back to the Land. Always He puts the Land as the center of their attention and prayers. In all ages, at all times, every one who is genuinely part of Israel is on his or her way to the Land. And so it will be—in the world to come Yeshua will reign, not just anywhere, but in the Land, the place where God has put His name, heart, and eyes forever.

We should not be surprised, then, as war continues to rage in the Land and Israel's enemies (both within and without) try desperately to take possession of the real estate that God gave to the descendants of Jacob. We, however, must take the same position as God takes: the Land belongs to Israel. We should also pray continually that God will guard the Land and keep it for His chosen people.

We are also struck with another interesting part of our text, and that is the readiness that Jacob has to respond to God. We hear him saying, “Here am I” (הִנְנִי, *hineini*). The term itself draws our minds back to the *Akedah*, the binding of Isaac in Genesis 22, where we encountered that small word, “*Hineini*,” several times. In fact, it is found there three times on the lips of Abraham—twice when he is given those awful instructions to sacrifice his son, and once when the *malach 'adonai* (“Angel of the Lord”) calls to him to stop the downward thrust of the knife. In the repeated “*Hineini*,” Abraham had become accustomed to responding to the Lord with a willing heart to obey.

We see the same of Jacob in our text. When, in the dream, the Lord calls to Jacob, he responds with the same הִנְנִי, “Here am I.” This word (translated by the phrase “Here am I” in the English) is more than just a casual reply. It is a response of willingness. Our normal answer to someone when they call is something like “what do you want?”, often shortened to merely “what?” *Hineini*, on the other hand, signals not only that one has heard, but more, that one is anticipating the call and is eager to obey. “Here am I”—ready to do whatever you ask; “Here am I”—attentive for your instructions; “Here am I”—anxious to act as your servant.

What is it that keeps us from such a ready response? Jacob was certainly in the midst of his own troubles—it wasn't as though he was leading a stress-free life! So we can't say that the stress and cares of life in general keep us from hearing and responding with “Here am I” to the Lord. What is it then? It is the attachments our hearts have to the world—to finding ways to fulfill our longings which exclude and replace God. Jacob had gathered great wealth. He had been intellectually creative and had worked hard to gain the flocks he now possessed. Furthermore, he had no doubt become powerful along with his wealth. After all, to entertain the idea of leaving Laban must have taken not only courage, but a recognition that he could withstand retaliation from Laban once he did leave. Yet Jacob, in the midst of this struggle and his material success, still hears God and responds with “Here am I.”

This is an important lesson for us to learn. It is not the troubles of life, nor the successes we may enjoy, which numb us toward God. It is our perspective toward them. If we really think the more money, the more things, the more worldly comforts, the less stress, or “having it my way” will fulfill the soul-longings we have, then we will pursue these things with all our heart, soul, and might. And when we do, we will be numbed to the call of God when He invites us to find, once again, our fulfillment in Him. We need to recognize that our ultimate fulfillment exists in knowing Him, and that both the troubles we encounter in this fallen world, along with the many joys we may have, come as a means to that end, and nothing more. “The Lord gives, the Lord takes away—Blessed be the name of the Lord.”

This does not mean that we fail to engage in genuine sorrow when bad times come our way, or when that which is precious to us falls away from our grasp. But what it does mean is that we have come to understand and embrace the truth that God is the owner of all things, and so we have learned to hold our possessions with a loose grip, ready and willing to give them back to the One who gave them to us in the first place. And in holding our possessions with an “open-handed” policy, we will avoid the numbing affect that the love of material possessions brings. We will be ready to hear the voice of HaShem and we will be able to respond “*Hineini*, Here am I.”

What are we to make of the *Teraphim*, the “household gods” that appear in our text? It is an interesting and somewhat troubling aspect of our *parashah*, Rachel stealing the *Teraphim*. We should first start by trying to understand what the word *teraphim* means. The Sages derive the meaning of the term from several roots: Ramban derives the word from רָפָה, *raphah*, “weak” (cf.

Ex 5:17). Others derive the word from the root תָּרַף, *taraph* (cf. Jastrow, p. 1701) and תּוֹרְפָה, *tor-phah*, meaning “weak,” “to decay,” and by analogy, “obscene,” “obscenity.”

What exactly were these? The Targumim translate the term with “idols,” and v. 30 has Laban referring to them as his “gods.” In 2Ki 23:24 *teraphim* appear together with *gillulim* (pellets of dung) and *shikkustsim* (detestable things) in a list of idolatrous abominations outlawed by King Josiah of Judah. (It was common for the those who penned the sacred text to substitute derogatory terms when referring to idols.) Most scholars consider them to have been household gods, and some have noted a parallel from the finds at Nuzi, indicating that household gods were somehow attached to the rights of inheritance. This, however, does not fit our narrative, for Rachel is leaving her inheritance behind, and Jacob is clear about not taking a thing from Laban which he has not rightfully earned.

The Sages (primarily Rashi) suggest that Rachel had taken the *teraphim* in order to destroy them, hoping to rid her father's house of idols. Rashi basis this upon the fact that the *teraphim* are not referred to again in the subsequent narrative.

Whatever may have been the motive behind Rachel's stealing of the *teraphim*, we may make the observation that here, once again, we see the clear mixing of things that essentially differ. If Rachel's motivation was to take them in order to destroy them, then well and good. But what was Laban doing with them in the first place? Apparently he had not fully espoused the faith of Abraham—he was still clinging to the idolatrous ways of the nations. And if Rachel's motivation for stealing them was hopefully to rid her father's house of this spiritual blight, then she had forgotten an all-important truth: idolatry is first and foremost a matter of the heart. The external objects may be removed, but the heart still has them and still bows to them. What is more, the idolater will always find something to replace the objects which have been taken. Like trying to kill weeds by only picking the flowers, so trying to eradicate idolatry by removing the idols fails to deal with the root issue—the heart. In reality, the only “cure” for idolatry is the God-given gift of repentance.

That Laban was, indeed, an idolater seems clear from the oath ceremony that occurs in the covenant with Jacob. Stones are gathered as marker—a kind of monument to the promise that each would make not to harm the other. When it comes time for the oath (31:53), Laban swears by “the God of Abraham, and the god of Nahor . . . , the god of their father.” In response, Jacob swears only by “the Fear of his father, Isaac.” It is curious that in nearly all of the English translations, the word “God” is capitalized in each case (the CJB, based upon the JPS, as a happy exception, as is the NET translation). But it seems clear that the father of Abraham and Nahor, that is, Terach, did not worship the One true God! Laban still recognizes gods other than Adonai, and takes an oath by them. But Jacob does not: he swears only by the “Fear of his father Isaac.” Jacob had come to believe that there was only one true God, the God of Abraham and Isaac, and the fact that He refers to God as the “Fear” of Isaac means that he recognizes only one God Who is to be feared (=obeyed). He therefore demonstrates his commitment to the truth of monotheism, and gives no credence to the pagan notion of other gods.

The passage ends with yet another encounter with the Divine Presence, represented in the “angels of God” (מַלְאֲכֵי אֱלֹהִים, *mal'chei Elohim*). The plural construction is found only here and in Gen 28:12, the “ladder dream” in which the “angels of God” ascend and descend upon the ladder. Thus, the unique construction functions as book ends to the re-establishment of the covenant to Jacob. God had promised His presence to Jacob, affirming it by the presence of His angels both at the beginning and end of Jacob's time with Laban. God's protection of His chosen one is secure.

All of these lessons, then, are given for our own encouragement and strength. The God Who is the owner of everything, Who is faithful to His word and covenant, and Who orders all things according to the counsel of His own sovereign will, is the God we know and serve. His presence with us guarantees our success, as the *haftarah* to this Torah portion makes so plain. He calls us, then, to trust in Him, and to cast ourselves upon Him and His faithfulness. We must take Him at His word, even in the midst of a fallen world, and we may rest assured that He will bring to pass all that He has promised. “If God is for us, who can be against us?”