Parashah Twenty-Eight

Genesis 29:31–30:13[12]; Isaiah 60:10–22; Romans 11:25–36

notes by Tim Hegg

God's Mercy & Grace in a Fallen World

The Torah text that is before us this Shabbat contains one enigma after another. What are we supposed to learn from the actions of Leah and Rachel, not to speak of Jacob? Is this really how God intends His people to act? Can we derive anything from this passage which will help us in our times to live out family life as God desires?

As we read this story, we should be first of all struck with God's over-arching grace and mercy. Within a period of three generations, God's covenant people have reaped the rewards of their selfish dispositions. Deception, lies, vying for prominence—all of this has led to broken and misunderstood relationships. Brothers flee from brothers, wives jockey for affection from a husband they share, children live out lives of jealousy and "me-first" decisions: a complete picture of the "dysfunctional family!" Yet these are the patriarchs and matriarchs! These are the people by whose name we bless our children on erev Shabbat.

Typically, the Sages never talk this way. Convinced that the "pious deeds of the Patriarchs" contribute to the nation's own covenant standing, the ancient Rabbis do all in their power to put a righteous construction on our forefathers. In some ways they are right: we should see in their lives moments of grandeur, of faith, of reaching out to the One true God in acts of clear and honest trusting. But if one is able to take off the rose-colored glasses of tradition and "face the music," one sees in these patriarchs and matriarchs all the stuff of fallen humanity. If one is brutally honest, these people are, like us, sinners saved by God's grace!

What is more, the Torah text which Moses gives us does not read at all like the commentaries of the Sages. Instead of finding ingenious ways to make it appear as though the scoundrel acts of Jacob (for instance) are really pious deeds, Moses paints the picture with true strokes of grays and blacks—letting us know that even those who fill the "Hall of Faith" (Heb 11) could give into selfish and sinful desires.

Here, then, is the first big lesson we are to learn: ultimately, if God gives His blessings, it is first and foremost because of His great and abundant grace. Those who say "the Torah has no place for grace" have simply not read the Torah with opened eyes! Here is a family, smitten with the consequences of deceit and generational sin, which is nonetheless blessed by God—not once or twice, but time and time again. This is not to be construed as teaching that God blesses disobedience, or that He fails to bless obedience. Surely the Torah teaches us that God blesses His children when they obey Him, and withholds blessing when they do not. But that is not the primary lesson we learn from this *parashah*. What we learn here is that God's covenant plans, including His blessing upon His chosen ones, come to pass because of His sovereign design and will, not because anyone deserves or earns His grace.

Jacob, Leah, and Rachel will all reap the negative fallout from their selfishness and disobedience. The hatred (which is just another name for self-centeredness) displayed between the rival wives is very well taught to the children, so much so that they will eventually turn upon their younger brother Joseph, and treat him like so much merchandise to be sold to passing merchants. And then they lie to their aged father in such a convincing way that he mourns the loss of Joseph, believing that he actually had been killed. Moreover, so hard were their hearts that had it not been for the almost unbelievable providence which

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forced them to confront the missing Joseph, Jacob would have never found out the truth. The brothers were willing to take their lie to the grave and leave their father having never known what really happened. The hurt, pain, and tearing of lives is the clear result of their disobedience. In the face of their obvious sin, Jacob and his family forfeit the joy and blessing which could have been theirs had their choices been God-honoring rather than self-centered.

Yet even by all of this, God's plan is not overturned. In spite of all that goes against His ways, God still blesses, and brings about His purposes for the nation—for the seed of Jacob.

But there is a second important lesson we should learn from this *parashah*. We might be tempted to interpret the passage in a wrong way. It appears at first reading that God somehow agrees with the selfish and sinful acts of Leah and Rachel, because it is through their conniving that God gives them children. Note 30:1ff—Rachel sees that Leah is winning in the game of children. Since she is not having any success in getting pregnant, she gives Jacob her handmaid, Bilhah, and Jacob takes her as yet another wife (or concubine) and has children by her! Leah, not to be one-upped by her rival, gives Zilpah to Jacob, who likewise bears his children. In the rising furor of the contest, the rival wives are buying time with Jacob through barter, (using aphrodisiacs – the Hebrew דּוּדָאִים, "mandrakes, love-fruit" may be related to דּוֹד, "beloved"), and the text says (30:17) "God hearkened to Leah"! Is God giving His approval for all of this by granting the selfish request of the competing wife?

Here, then, is the second important lesson: God gives children as a blessing, but in giving children, He may not be saying anything about the circumstances into which the children come or the means by which they are conceived. Consider children conceived through aggression or violence—*they still are from God's hand, and they are still an incredible blessing.* Children represent a new generation and thus a new hope that God will be honored and His ways lived out. Children are a new beginning in the midst of a generation gone wrong. Rather than God blessing the evil acts of Leah and Rachel, the giving of children may be God's way of "starting over." Of course, we know the end of the story! Eventually, the sons whose births we read of here become the heads of tribes that make up the nation of Israel—God's chosen, God's first-born.

This idea of children being God's way of giving a new beginning is hinted at in the names of the children. Though they are given from one perspective, their names are somehow prophetic of God's plan to build the nation:

בן + ראה = רְאוּבֵן = God provides (sees) a son
ון + שמע = שִׁמְעוֹן (emphatic) = God has (really) listened
י + לוה = לֵוִי (plus 1st person poss. suffix) = my connection
ידה = יהוּדָה (in hif. means "to praise") = "Let Him be praised"
דָּנַנִי = דִּין = דָּן "to judge" = "God has made His judgment"
פתל = נַפְתָּלִי "to wrestle" = "I've wrestled and won"
[באגד ק=בגד כ=], גד + בָּא = גַּד = "fortune has come" (note the *qere/ketiv*)
אשר = אַשֵׁר, "blessed"
שכר = יִשָּׂשׂכָר "hire" שׂשׂ = שׂ + שׂ = יֵשׁ – "there is my hire"
זבל = זְבֻלוּן "to endow" + ון (emphatic) = "good endowment"
אסף = יוֹסֵף "gather" / יסף "add" = "added another (son)"

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The names of the children carry the story of their beginnings. Some of the names reflect life lived out before HaShem, and some, the struggle between rival members of the family.

Thus the names tell the whole story: God is working out His plan, yet doing so through the imperfect lives of His children. In the end, the name of each son reminds us of God's willingness and ability to take the failures of mankind and turn them to the praise of His glory.

In all of this, we learn yet another lesson, and it is the limitless store of God's mercy. As mothers and fathers, we strive to raise our children in the ways of HaShem. We greatly desire that they experience the blessings of obedience, and side-step the woes that sin inevitably brings. We train, we encourage, we discipline, and we pray. We spend sleepless nights tossing and turning, wondering what will become of our children, who must go through the phases of testing and learning, of submitting and struggling: the phases of faith in order to learn how to "walk." Yet in all of this we are left up to God's mercy. It is only by God's mercy that we are not consumed! We therefore seek and trust God's mercy for us, for our children, and for our children's children. And there is no greater display of God's mercy than that He should reveal to our children the truth of Messiah Yeshua—that He should become not only their Savior, but also their example of walking humbly and righteously before HaShem. May the record of our families be told in generations to come, that we sought and found God's mercy!

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