

CHEAT, TRICK, DECEIVE

A commentary on *Parashat Vayetze*
By Dr. Sam Rodin

Parashat Va'Yetze begins as Jacob leaves his homeland for the first time when his mother, Rebecca insists that he must flee to his Uncle Laban in Mesopotamia as his brother Essav has vowed to kill him. Essav is enraged on discovering that Jacob has deceived Isaac to give him the blessing, which was rightfully Essav's.

So begins Jacob's twenty-year odyssey where he faces many trials and tribulations. It is a journey into exile, both physical and spiritual, during which Jacob himself and the other characters in this family saga deceive and are deceived in turn. It is also the story of Jacob's encounter with G-d and his struggle to overcome his inauthentic self as the trickster and eventually to find his authentic self as Israel (Genesis 32:29). But Jacob has to endure many trials and betrayals in his twenty-year relationship with his double-dealing Uncle Laban. Jacob, the deceiver has truly met his match in his cunning uncle.

Because of this love for Rachel, and in accordance with tradition, Jacob agreed to work for his uncle as an indentured laborer for seven years only to be tricked and to discover that he has married Rachel's old sister, Leah. The trickster who cheated his older brother out of the blessing that was his right, has now been cheated on his wedding night! He has to taste the bitter punishment of having to serve his duplicitous uncle for another seven years before he can marry his true love, Rachel and a further six years to acquire his own flocks and become a man of property.

After twenty years of servitude and humiliation, Jacob secretly takes his opportunity to flee his oppressive uncle with his clan and the wealth he had accumulated. Without telling Jacob, Rachel steals her father's household idols – the G-ds who ensured the

well-being of the family.

Furious Laban and his men pursue Jacob and his kin and overtake them. At Laban's ironic accusation that Jacob is a thief, Jacob challenges Laban to search his encampment for his precious idols, only those were cleverly hidden by Rachel the whole time.

Jacob begins as the cunning trickster, who steals his elder brother's blessing by impersonating Essav and deceiving his blind father. Jacob gets his comeuppance when Laban cheats him by passing off Leah as Rachel after he has served seven years. Leah's impersonation of Rachel shocks Jacob into realizing the wrong he did to his brother and his father by impersonating Essav, Laban

pretends to love his daughters but treats them as chattels that he can sell to advance his own mercenary interests. Rachel deceives Laban by hiding his idols and debasing them.

Through the lies, deceptions, thefts and inauthenticity of all of the characters in this soap opera and their undoing we are dramatically given a lesson in the fatal trap of neglecting fundamental human rights: the right to one's inheritance, the right to be treated honestly and fairly, the rights of employees and employers, the rights of marriage partners, parents and children.



*an 1855 painting by Dante Gabriel Rossetti called the Vision of Rachel and Leah inspired by this passage

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