

Our Forefather Jacob Teaching by (Bad) Example

Aaron Steinberg | BronfmanTorah | Parshat Toldot 2015

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What is the point of the book of Genesis? Why include so many stories about our ancestors? These past few weeks of Torah readings have been full of births, deaths, travels, property management, and many other seemingly mundane activities. Sure it's easy to find meaning in the more dramatic stories like Abraham nearly sacrificing Isaac, but why have this book about a few individuals when the rest of the Torah is about an entire nation? Why all of the soap opera drama?

Commentators addressed this question, and actually came up with a principle that attributes great meaning to these stories. I'll let [Nahmanides](#) take over from here:

אומר לך כלל תבין אותו בכל הפרשיות הבאות בענין אברהם יצחק ויעקב, והוא ענין גדול, הזכירוהו רבותינו ולכן יאריכו הכתובים בספור המסעות בדרך קצרה, ואמרו (תנחומא ט) כל מה שאירע לאבות סימן לבנים וחפירת הבארות ושאר המקרים, ויחשוב החושב בהם כאלו הם דברים מיותרים אין בהם תועלת, וכולם באים ללמד על העתיד, כי כאשר יבוא המקרה לנביא משלשת האבות יתבונן ממנו הדבר הנגזר לבא לזרעו:

This teaches you a general principle that in the chapters of the forefathers (*Avot*), with regards to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob - and this is a major principle - the Rabbis remind us that **everything that occurs to the ancestors is a sign for the descendants**. Therefore the Torah expands on the travels, digging of wells, and other events that one might think are extraneous to the Biblical story. They all come to teach you about the future, for everything that happens to those three is a hint at what will be destined for the children. (Commentary on Genesis 12:6)

Whatever happens to the Mamas and the Papas through the Bible is a סימן - a symbol or indicator for the Jewish people. So when Abraham argues with God to save Sodom, he is teaching us to speak truth to power, and stand up for every human life. When Rachel allows her older sister to marry the man she loves, we are urged to consider the most extreme forms of selflessness and consideration of another person's emotions.

In a lecture on this topic, [Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik](#) explains the concept as follows:

"In studying their life experiences... during our impressionable childhood and throughout our adult years, we absorb [the Avot's] values and nuances of feeling into our Jewish consciousness. 'Every Jew should ask himself, when shall my deeds be like those of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob?' (Tana D'bei Eliyahu Rabba 25)

"That which we know from our Avot forms the bedrock of our Jewish mindset. We know our Avot mostly through stories which tell us of their self-sacrifice, their generosity and their complex characters. Whether we talk about Abraham arguing

with God for the city of Sodom or his welcoming guests; whether it is Rebekah watering camels of a stranger in town or Jacob tricking his father; whether it is Leah's dedication to her husband or Rachel's tears; the very lives of our Avot - in all their human complexity - lead the way for us in terms of morality and goodness. That is why they too are Torah."

And that's what becomes so troubling in this week's Parasha. ([Click here for a 3-minute video recap.](#)) Jacob swindles Esav out of his birthright in exchange for a bowl of lentils. Jacob later dressed up as Esav to trick his father (with the help of his mother Rebekah) and steal the blessing intended for his brother.

What lesson are we possibly to learn from forefather Jacob? How can we apply this principle of maaseh avot siman lebanim to actions most of us would not feel proud to emulate?

I was recently watching an episode of [The Walking Dead](#), and reflected on how extreme circumstances can cause people to act in unexpected ways. The show

follows a loose group of wanderers in a zombie-infested world who are forced to shed whatever lives they lived previously, and adapt to new harsh realities. This is the only way to survive. They have chosen to fight for the only thing they believe matters, and have rationalized that anyone in their way can be killed.

As the group's de facto leader Rick Grimes says in Season Five, "We do what we need to do, and then we live... This is how we survive: We tell ourselves that we are the walking dead." Through the very act of survival, and the endless sloggng along and struggle against the living and the undead, these human characters realize they have been forever changed – they have lost their humanity and have become the walking dead.

For whatever reason, Rebekah is convinced that Jacob is the son who will fulfill the covenant between God and Abraham – whose children will number like the stars in the heavens. She has also determined that ensuring this status is so vital that sacrifices must be made. She guides Jacob on a path of deception and coercion to get what she believes he deserves.

But just like Rick and his crew of zombie killers, Jacob's deception and trickery remains with him. For the rest of his days he is a victim of deception, and someone who is untrusting even of his own family:

1. Jacob labored seven years for Laban to earn the right to marry Rachel, only to find out that her sister Leah was sent to his tent instead on the wedding night. The next morning as Jacob protests, his new Father-in-law replies, "[It is not done so in our place, to give the younger before the first-born.](#)" Jacob's is hoisted by his own petard when the reversing of birth order rights is thrown back in his face.
2. Once Jacob leaves Laban, 14+ years later, Jacob is terrified that Esav will launch an attack against his family. He is ever suspicious that his brother will attempt to destroy him. Even when their eventual meeting proves to be benign, he refuses to travel together in fear of a surprise attack.

3. Later in life, Jacob's favored son Joseph is sold into slavery by 10 of his brothers. To hide their misdeed from their father, the brothers dip Joseph's coat in animal blood and tell him that he was killed by wild animals. Just as Jacob tricked Isaac with a piece of clothing (dressing up as Esav) so too do his children deceive him in the same way.
4. Finally, after being reunited with Joseph, and moving with his entire clan to Egypt, Jacob makes a final request of Joseph that he be buried back in Canaan. So untrusting has Jacob become, and so vulnerable is he in this request, that he begs Joseph to "deal with me with **loving-kindness and truth**; do not bury me now in Egypt." Even Joseph can't simply be trusted to fulfill his father's dying wish! We will never know if the promise Yosef makes to him at that moment provides him with adequate comfort as he passes away.

Jacob's story is a cautionary tale. In life it is not always clear what is right and what is wrong. Whether as individuals or groups, we regularly make morally dubious decisions when we feel there is a greater good at service. We wage wars in the name of peace, infringe on civil liberties in the name of security, censor some to protect others, and lie to those we love in order to "protect" them.

Ultimately, no one can judge as to whether the decision we make is correct. Perhaps we know the truth in the depths of our souls, and perhaps God is watching in judgment. The lesson of Jacob, the סימן these stories come to teach us is that, right or wrong, the decisions we make and actions we take can stay with us for as long as we live.

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