**"The theme of deception in the book of Bereshit"**
by Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M Cohen

## PART II

We ended Part One (last week) with a reference to the episode of Jacob posing as his brother in front of his father, Isaac, aided by the camouflage of Esau's clothing. We commented how, decades later and 'measure-for-measure,' Jacob's sons were made to suffer the identical experience. This occurred when they were tormented by a Joseph who kept his identity from them for an agonisingly long period, hiding behind the camouflage of the robes and uniform of an Egyptian Grand Vizier. This may be viewed as an exemplification of the divine attribute of *poked avon avot al banim – 'He visits the sins of the fathers upon the children, upon the third and fourth generation'* (Ex. 20:5-6; 34:6-7; Nu. 14:18).

We find this principle at work in relation to another participant in the Jacob-Esau episodes. Jacob's deception of his father succeeded only as a result of the collusion of his mother, Rebecca. The rabbis did not hide their view that she was to some extent tainted by her inherited traits; and hence their explanation of why the Torah states *Vayei'ater* ***lo*** *Hashem*, that God accepted '*his* [Isaac's] prayer,' given that they had both offered up prayers for a child (Gen. 25:22). The reason, say the Rabbis, was because Rebecca, being the righteous offspring of sinful parents, did not have the same merit as Isaac, the righteous offspring of righteous parents. Though they didn't spell it out, the implication is clearly that, having been exposed to malevolent paternal influences, it is understandable how Rebecca resorted to deceit of her husband by suggesting to Jacob that he disguise himself in Esau's clothes.

In an ironic re-run of that episode, Jacob - like his father Isaac before him - becomes the victim of a deception by *his* wife, Rachel, who also behaves furtively by stealing something from her father behind the back of Jacob, her husband. The Torah once again employs loaded vocabulary to forge a strong link between the episodes: 'And Jacob did not know that Rachel *had stolen* them' (31:32) – just as Isaac had not known that Jacob was bent on stealing his brother's blessing!

The 'measure-for-measure' principle is reinforced by the shared *leitmotif* of the repeated use of the verb *lehakir,* 'to recognise. Thus, after Laban alleged that Jacob had stolen his idols, the outraged Jacob retorts, ***haker*** *lecha mah immadi* – 'See if you recognise anything of your own among my possessions' (31:32). That identical verb had previously been employed in the story of Jacob's own deception of his father - *v'lo* ***hikiro*** – 'And he [Isaac] did not recognise him' (27:23) - and it is continued when the brothers came running to their aged father, Jacob, and asked him to identify the blood-stained and shredded garment to determine whether it was indeed Joseph's coat of many colours. They use that same phrase, laden with bitter family association: ***haker****-na*, 'recognise (identify), please'…*Vay****yakir****ahh*, 'And he recognised it' (37:32-33).

It is not coincidental that the Torah places the episode of Judah and Tamar (chap. 38) immediately following the latter episode. *Rashi* quotes the explanation that Judah was demoted as leader by his brothers when they saw the unremitting anguish of their father at the sight of the coat, and they blamed Judah for having suggested that Joseph be sold, rather than safely returned to his father.[5] However, against the backcloth of the recurring motif of disguise and deception that we have been tracing, it will be seen that this episode is contextually in its most appropriate position.

The parallels are once again striking, with domestic injustice as the core theme. Tamar is the injured party, deprived, much like Esau, of a familial status, one which was rightly her due by reason of her erstwhile position as wife of the firstborn. She is kept in limbo, growing older but with no levirate marriage, status, and recognition, in prospect. So, she resorts to a deception almost identical to the one perpetrated some generations earlier within her father-in-law's family. It was thus a deception that he would "recognise," and perhaps accept as morally justified in the circumstances.

Tamar would certainly have been regaled with the details of that family saga and of Jacob and Rebecca's employment of disguise and deception. So, Tamar re-enacts the identical circumstances: She disguises herself - this time in the gaudy clothes of a harlot - and entices Judah to sleep with her, demanding as a surety, until payment of her price, his signet, belt and staff. At the denouement of the episode, she confronts her father-in-law with the words, redolent in his family with echoes of deceit and retribution, *haker na*, 'Recognise [these objects], if you will…' (38:25). It is that shared *leitmotif*, we suggest, that informs the juxtaposition of those two accounts: the hoodwinking of both the aged Jacob and his son, Judah. It also represents the exemplification of the 'visiting of the sins of the fathers upon the children, to the third generation'- encompassing Rebecca, Jacob, and Judah.

The sages account for the brothers' failure to recognise Joseph on the grounds that he had left them as an immature stripling, not yet endowed with a beard, whereas, at the time of reunion, his appearance would have been changed dramatically.[6] *Rashbam* adds the extra and significant factor of Joseph now being dressed in royal robes.[7] This also throws into relief the role of clothing as a medium of concealment and deceit in all the

above episodes, and underlines the Talmudic comment on the phrase, '*And he* [Isaac] *inhaled the smell of his* [Esau's] *begadav* (clothing)'(27:27): 'Do not read *begadav*, but *bogdav* ('those who would deal treacherously with him').[8]

Just as the above episodes were characterised by subterfuge, leading, ultimately, to recognition and disclosure, so, one of the stages of Joseph's subterfuge was to have his silver cup hidden in Benjamin's sack and to charge him subsequently with theft. Ironically, this also has strong echoes of his and Benjamin's mother, Rachel, who hid her father's idols inside the cushion of her camel. Thus, the identical subterfuge of the mother was later visited upon her younger child.

The rabbis state, *Ma'aseh avot siman lebanim*, 'the actions of the fathers are a sign for the children.'[9] Rabbi Samuel David Luzatto (1800-1865) views that as the essential meaning of the divine attribute of 'visiting the sins of the fathers upon the children, even to the third and fourth generation' (Ex. 20:5; Nu. 14:18; Deut. 5:9), namely, that God invests the offspring with the same 'unworthy traits of character' as those possessed by their parents. Psychology expresses this in terms of the bruised becoming a bruiser; the abused becoming an abuser; the victim a victimiser. We offload our best and worst traits as an emotional legacy to our offspring.

In the liturgy, this concept is dramatically, if not cynically, presented by the author of the *Eileh Ezkerah* elegy of the Ten Martyrs recited in the Musaph service of Yom Kippur. Their deaths at the hands of the Romans are explained there as being an expiation for the sale of Joseph by his brothers some thirteen hundred years earlier![10]

The Torah does not hide the fact that there is a heavy price to pay for deceit. It is a boomerang which inevitably rebounds in the face of subsequent generations to hurt those we love most. That it was recorded in the Torah's account of the lives of the revered patriarchs of our people is a tribute to the veracity of a tradition – unique among the other main religions – that does not idealise its primogenitors, let alone make saints of them. It presented them as humans, who struggled with their own personal demons, while, at the same time, searching for help and inspiration from the God with whom they sought to walk.

---

**NOTES (cont.)**

5. See Rashi on 38:1

6. See Tal. *Bav. Metz.* 39b; *Rashi* on 42:8.

7. See *Rashbam* on Genesis 42:8.

8. Tal. *San.*37a.

9. See Mid. *Ber. Rab*. 48:7; Tal. *Sota* 34a.

10. See Jeffrey M Cohen, *Prayer and Penitence* (N.Y: Jason Aronson, 1994), pp. 226-229.