

What Goes Around Comes Around: Parashat Vayetzei

All families have their iconic stories and inside jokes, and this morning I'd like to share with you one of ours. First, you have to imagine the scene: me at age ten with my seven-year old brother, Scott, trudging home from school on a frigid Boston afternoon. Scott is complaining incessantly about the cold – his hands, his feet, his ears, his nose. I am trying my very best to ignore both him and the feeling of numbness that is starting to quickly creep through my fingers and toes. Finally, Scott – a typical second child daredevil and boundary-pusher - stops in front of a quaint-looking brick house, plants his little boots firmly in the snow, and announces that he is going inside to ask the owner for a ride home. I, a quintessential rule-follower and responsible first child, am appalled and argue with him to no avail. I am bossy and shrill but he is stubborn – and in the end, off he goes into this stranger's house while I continue home by myself.

God forbid, there are many utterly horrific ways in which this story might have ended, although the fact that many of you met Scott and his family at my installation two years ago probably takes away a bit of the drama and suspense. But I will tell you that to my ten-year old mind, what truly did happen next was about as devastating as anything I might have otherwise imagined. For the house that Scott selected happened to belong to a kindly older woman, the best friend – in fact – of Scott's first-grade teacher, who invited my brother in for hot-chocolate and cookies and then drove him safely home where he arrived just as my frozen extremities were finally beginning to thaw out. My parents, while certainly not pleased with Scott's behavior, were not nearly as angry as I

thought they should have been and were also none too thrilled with me for having potentially left my poor little brother in harm's way all by himself. The day ended with Scott smug and self-satisfied and me angry and bitter. I was convinced that life is absolutely unfair!

Life is absolutely unfair. And if the characters in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Vayetzei*, could talk to us, I'm sure they would say quite the same. "Hot-chocolate and cookies?!?" – our patriarch, Jacob, would exclaim. "Big deal! What about my brother gaining claim to both birthright and blessing, just because he was born a few minutes before I was?" "Having to walk home in the cold?" – his future wife, Leah, might scoff. "What about having to pretend to be your own sister on her wedding night, all for the purpose of marrying a man who shows you no affection?"

Indeed, it is hard to imagine being stuck in either Jacob or Leah's difficult circumstances. As we remember, Jacob falls madly in love with younger sister, Rachel, and consents to work for her father, Laban, seven years in exchange for Rachel's hand in marriage. When these seven years finally draw to a close, Laban throws a huge wedding feast and, as evening falls, brings his daughter into Jacob's darkened tent to consummate the marriage. But when Jacob awakens in the morning he finds that his new bride is not the lovely Rachel, but rather Leah, her weak-eyed older sister. Jacob is now the husband of a woman he does not desire and Leah is stuck in a loveless marriage.

While Jacob and Leah would undoubtedly argue the unfairness of their plight, commentators throughout the ages have pointed to a certain amount of poetic justice – at least for Jacob, a concept they call *middah k'neged middah* – measure for measure punishment. If we will remember, Jacob is no stranger to duplicity. Having once cheated his own brother, Esau, out of the aforementioned birthright and blessing, misrepresenting himself to his aged father and thumbing his nose at the convention that eldest children should inherit over younger ones, Jacob suddenly finds himself no longer the *tricker* but rather the *trickee* – beaten, in many ways, at his own game. The rabbis of *Bereshit Rabbah*, a collection of midrashim, capture the irony of Jacob's circumstances brilliantly when they imagine the dialogue that might have taken place the morning after Jacob's wedding. They write: "All night long Jacob kept calling his bride Rachel, and Leah answered to the name. In the morning, however, 'Behold it was Leah' (Genesis 29:25). Jacob said to Leah, 'What is this, O trickstress? Did I not call you Rachel all night long and you answered to her name?' She replied, 'Is there a teacher who has no pupils? Did not your father once call you Esau, and you too answered to a name not your own?'"¹ It is no coincidence that Jacob, the one who once misled a dim-sighted father, is now tricked by a weak-eyed woman; that the man who passed himself off as his own brother is now confronted with a woman who does exactly the same. What goes around, comes around – the Bible seems to be telling us. Every once in a while, people do – in fact - get what they deserve.

Sadly, the cycle of duplicity inaugurated by Jacob in his dealings with Esau and continued in our *parasha* through the deceitful behavior of Rachel, Leah, and Laban does

¹ Bereshit Rabbah 70:19

not end there. Years later Jacob's own children will move this cycle another turn forward when they, too, engage in acts of deception – telling their father that his beloved son, Joseph, has died, torn apart by a wild beast. Again, the narrative contains a note of poetic justice as Jacob, who once tricked his father with animal skins and stolen garments, is now deceived by his children through purloined clothing and goat's blood. The boy who took advantage of his father's blindness grows up to be the man tricked in the dark; the son who undid his brother using guts and garb turns into the father brought low by instruments of the very same. We all get our just desserts, this cycle of stories seems to proclaim. Or in the words of Biblical scholar Nahum Sarna, "The perpetrator is now the victim, hoist with his own petard."²

In her book, The Blessing of a Skinned Knee, author Wendy Mogel tells a different kind of *middah k'neged middah* story when she writes of a burgher named Shmuel, whose elderly father kept spilling soup on the table-cloth because of his trembling fingers. One evening, the old man dropped an expensive tea-cup where it fell to the floor and immediately shattered. "From now on you will eat in your room," declared Shmuel. "Here is a wooden bowl for you to use instead – something you cannot break." The next day, Shmuel came home and saw his young son on the floor trying to carve something out of a block of lumber. "What are you doing?" Shmuel asked the little boy. "It's for you, Dad," the son explained, "You can use it to eat in your room when you get old and your hands get shaky just like Grandpa's have."

² JPS Torah Commentary on Genesis (Sarna), p. 397

While the particulars of these dysfunctional relationships in the book of Genesis and in Mogel's story of the burgher may be unique, and perhaps a bit extreme, the message they convey is one of great truth. As hard as we may fight them, patterns tend to exist in families with children learning from their parents' example, both good *and* bad, and coming to pass on similar behaviors and character traits to their own children. Children learn not only from watching the way in which they, themselves, are treated but also by watching the way in which their parents treat others – from their own parents and siblings to strangers on the street. The stories of the book of Genesis remind us of things we already know – that we must act in the way that we wish others to act, that “do as I say, not as I do” rarely proves effective, that the best way to raise good and decent children is to model goodness and decency in our own lives. The world may not always be fair – at least not the way I had wished it would be as a ten-year old – but there is often a connection between the way that we speak and act in the world and the way that others speak and act towards us in return. The stories of our patriarchs and matriarchs remind us to make these choices wisely.

The months of November and December are special – and sometimes stressful – times, when many of us will join with our extended families more regularly than we do throughout the rest of the year. We may be reminded of old hurts or thrust back into painful family dynamics; we may struggle with loved ones or revert back to being people we once were rather than the people we are today. Perhaps the difficult stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs are read at this time of year to remind us that neither parents nor children are ever perfect and that every family has its challenges. Perhaps, too, these

stories remind us that history will almost certainly repeat itself if we let it. It is up to us to break the patterns we wish our children not to inherit.

Every time we pass a certain brick house in Lexington, my family has a little laugh – remembering a cold winter afternoon long ago. Life probably wasn't fair back then and certainly my brother caught a very lucky break. Yet I still believe, as does our Torah, in the principle of *middah k'neged middah* – in a world that may not always be completely just but in which people often get back that which they put out, for good and also for ill.

This Shabbat of *Parashat Vayetzei*, may we do our best to make right choices, for ourselves and to serve as models for those whom we love.

Shabbat Shalom!

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