

Rabbi Ira F. Stone
Temple Beth Zion-Beth Israel
Shabbat Vayishlach 5764
December 13, 2003

Jacob's Intrigue

Our response to Jacob is that he is consistently intriguing; by which I do not only mean that he is consistently engaging in intrigue, although that is true also. Rather, I mean that he is an intriguing, an engaging character. What makes him so intriguing and engaging is that he is so much like us. More so than Abraham and Isaac, much more so than Abraham and Isaac, we can see ourselves in Jacob. In this regard he is more like the characters of Sarah, Hagar, Rivka, Rachel and Leah. Generally speaking, the characters with whom it is easier for us to identify with in Genesis, if not in the rest of the Tanach, are the women. The women in the Tanach are human; spirited, flawed, grand and vulnerable. These most human of characteristics are found in no man as much as they are found in Jacob. Perhaps this is what is meant by the enigmatic phrase that informed us that Jacob is an *ish tam*, a tent dweller. Jacob's religious development is therefore of particular interest to us because it is a model of our religious development in ways that are not comparable to Abraham or Isaac. That they are more comparable to the religious development of Sarah, Rivka, Rachel and Leah is an interesting fact which I didn't think of soon enough to pursue this morning, but I reserve the right to return to the question. Of course, it goes without saying, that as women the course of that development is somewhat limited by the patriarchal prejudice of the tradition. Yet it seems clear that the characteristics of humanity are primarily located in the women characters in Bereshit and that is a topic worth pursuing at some point. For now, let us be satisfied to recognize that the Torah goes out of its way to demonstrate that while those characteristics are most often found in women they can also be found in men as is proved by the character of Jacob. He too is spirited, flawed, grand and vulnerable and most importantly his religious education is accomplished in the course of his coming to terms with his vulnerability, plumbing the depths, as it were, of his own pain, and, as we will see, coming to take responsibility for the welfare and, ultimately, the suffering of others.

Before I go any further, let me make clear the context out of which I want to speak this morning. Two weeks ago I gave a talk, copies of which are available in the office regarding my experience at the latest meeting of the Chancellor's Cabinet of which I am a member. That is a group of about 50 Rabbis who meet annually with Chancellor Ismar Schorsch of JTS to discuss issues of the moment for Conservative Judaism and the larger Jewish community. In that talk I shared the fact that I had gained the insight that what helped to make the survival of Conservative Judaism somewhat problematic was its lack of a current *aggada*, that is a narrative by which to provide a context for its specific approach to issues of *halacha*, or Jewish law. After reviewing a series of failed or outmoded *aggadot* that have animated the movement over the years, I suggested that *Musar* might serve as an *aggadah* for contemporary Conservative Jews. I defined *Musar* as addressing three points:

1. That human personality is shaped by the tension between the *Yetzer Ha-ra* and the *Yetzer ha-tov*, that is the necessity at every moment to choose between our Good and Evil inclination.
2. That this choice is made possible by a commitment to *halacha*. That is, that our *faith* is that we have a law which reflects the Divinity implicit in making this choice.
3. That the Divinity of this choice is measured by the impact of our choice on the good of another, our neighbor, the other human being; those closest first, those furthest away in the course of time until time itself is transformed into Messianic time. This measuring standard, in turn, helps us to refine number 2 (our faith in the law) by number 1 (our choosing the good over the evil) and this is the ongoing project of Jewish life.

In order to articulate such an *aggadah* we need to make it central to how we interpret Torah on an ongoing basis. We need to articulate how a *Musar* interpretation “sounds,” so to speak and we need to articulate how it can serve as motivational for Conservative Jewish practice in particular. That might entail my bringing up this introductory material regularly for awhile, until it becomes second nature and that in turn might limit the time we have to accomplish both of the tasks I've just mentioned. For today, I will attempt to do both.

I want to focus on two statements that Jacob makes one from last week's *parasha* and one from this week. I want to incorporate into these statements an interpretation of Rashi, and then I want to derive a *Musar* message from this interpretation and a specific motivational connection to living life as an observing Conservative Jew.

The first statement, from last week's *parasha* is as follows:

Then Jacob vowed a vow, saying if God will be with me on this way that I am going; and he will give me bread to eat and clothes to wear; and I will return in peace to my father's house, and the Lord will be a God to me.

This response that Jacob has, often characterized as his first prayer, and often criticized as reflecting a less mature religious consciousness because it appears to be conditional, that is, if God does all these good things for me then I will serve God, has, I believe, been misunderstood. For while it begins as a conditional statement it does not end as one. This needs to be noticed. Jacob's so-called first prayer is, indeed, a profoundly moving one precisely because in the course of his prayer he is changed. Unquestionably Jacob begins his prayer conditionally. The "if" of his statement is real. He begins prayer as most of us do: with no certainty of its efficacy. In fact he and we are skeptical. He begins his prayer as most of us do: equally uninformed as to how to evaluate its efficacy. He and we both initially look to change in our material circumstances to validate or invalidate our notion of prayer. But with it all, Jacob begins to pray. That is how we are as Conservative Jews. We are skeptical and uncertain but we engage. Unlike our compatriots on the right, we do not know the value of the act in advance and unlike our compatriots on the left and beyond the border, those who have given up on religious life altogether, we are still drawn, still, if nothing else, hopeful amid our skepticism. Our prayers are hesitant but we engage. And the promise of Jacob's vow is the promise of Conservative Judaism's commitment to the practice of daily prayer amid the skepticism: in the process we will be change. For there is now "then" statement in Jacob's vow. If such and such ought to be followed by a then. Instead, we find an "and." As Jacob prays he is overwhelmed by the full meaning of the dream he has had just prior to his prayer. He realizes the foolishness of his setting criteria for God's response. He recognizes both that he must take responsibility for the future and that he is not alone. The fact that he has articulated his fear, his dependence on others brings home to him the place in which his security and the

presence of God will be displayed. It is in his dependence on others for his food and clothing, both before and in the future, his loyalty to his father's vision and his desire to return to it that transform his prayer from a vow into a prayer. Before he can utter the "then" of his vow, he affirms his encounter with God.

This first prayer of Jacob is often compared with his second prayer recited in this week's *parasha*. But once we have understood the meaning of Jacob's first prayer the second is less interesting. It is a continuation rather than something new. Instead I'd like to focus on the following interchange between Jacob and Esau at their famous reunion. After Jacob and Esau embrace Esau asks: "Who are these to you?" A somewhat difficult construction in the Hebrew for what we would have expected, the simple question "who are these?" Rashi glosses the verse as: Who are these to be for you? Some commentaries on Rashi suggest that he is merely making more explicit the fact that what Esau is asking is whether these children and woman with Jacob are family or slaves? But I do not agree with these commentators. It does not make sense that Esau would not have know of Jacob's marriages and expect him to have children. Rather, I suggest that Esau is asking, as glossed by Rashi: Who are you to deserve these? Esau is still angry that Jacob stole his blessing. These children are the fruit, as it were, of this blessing. Esau is saying: Who are you, the youngest son, to have such a bountiful harvest of blessings. Remember Esau is armed. Keep in mind that the embrace between the brothers and their weeping reunion is dotted in the text of the Torah to indicate, perhaps, the falseness of their demonstration. "Who are these to be for you?" or "What gives you the right to have all these possessions?" is a question that Esau not only would ask but he is perfectly capable of acting upon the answer. Would Jacob answer: "These are mine." Of "these are the fruits of 20 years of my labor and sweat, what would prevent Esau the stronger from taking them away from Jacob just as Jacob once took away Esau's blessing? But that is not what Jacob answers: "He said: The children that God's graced your servant with." This is the answer that prevents Jacob's murder by Esau: The acknowledgement that these people represent the grace of God in Jacob's life. His taking responsibility for them, his labors and suffering on their behalf is seen by Jacob as an act of God's grace and faced with that grace Esau is powerless and turned away. This is a key to a *Musar* understanding of this verse. If in the first verse we saw the growth of Jacob via his engagement in the power of

the words of prayer, in the second instance we see his growth demonstrated by his acceptance of the responsibility of family life not as either a reward or punishment but as an act of grace. He understands that he has precisely become more human on the basis of this accumulation of responsibility and that humanity is the expression of the presence of God in the face of which ruthlessness and lawlessness are powerless. This too is part of our Conservative understanding of the meaning of our Jewish lives. We understand that the obligations that we take on, even the ritual obligations, the obligations to our history and to our family, are the stuff by which we fashion our humanity. It is the only answer to oppression, lawlessness, ruthlessness, to evil that is available to us. And as we engage in prayer in order to be transformed rather than because we are already certain of transformation, so we accept our obligations not because we are already convinced of God's grace but because only in accepting those responsibilities can we hope to experience that grace.