Themes of Betrayal and Deception in Genesis

by Moshe Dann (December 2014)

There is nothing more devastating than being betrayed by one's family and friends. Even love, though it can help to forgive, cannot erase the memory of such cruelty. Betrayal lingers like a curse, haunting its way into consciousness, injecting its poison of despair and loneliness. Betrayal undermines a fundamental trust in others and in oneself because it raises doubts: How could I have made such a mistake to trust this person? What's wrong with my own ability to evaluate the trustworthiness of another? It strangles one's essential self-confidence.

It is curious that the Bible highlights what seem to be (at least superficially) themes of betrayal and deception, depicting our illustrious ancestors with what appear to be faults, or at least ambiguities, and exposing a striking paradox: what appears to be dishonest, or weak, is a quite authentic process of self-discovery. In fact, that profound struggle for self-awareness by our Patriarchs and Matriarchs – despite its risks and potential for destructiveness – made possible an even deeper fulfillment in human relationships.

What appears to be negative and threatening is really a path of self-recognition. It is the challenge of the paradox that's important, the question that makes us live in anxiety and doubt, but that ultimately transforms and becomes a source of creativity. How do we become authentic? How do we forgive ourselves so that we can be healed and help others?

The beginning of Jewish destiny begins with abandonment and separation. Abraham's father, Terach, took part of his family (Abraham and Sarah, and his nephew, Lot) from their birthplace, Ur-Kasdim, to Charan. Why did they leave? Was it because Sarah could not have children? Was it connected to the untimely death of Haran, Terach's youngest son (and the father of the notorious Lot)? Why didn't Terach take his middle son, Nahor, with him? Did Terach, with divine inspiration, *do tshuvah*?

Afterwards, now divinely commanded, Abraham leaves his father. We do not know if the family remained in contact, nor whose decision it was to separate, but from that moment "in Charan, Terach died." Perhaps it was from a broken heart.

Rashi asks why the Bible mentions the death of Terach before the departure of Abraham. His answer is surprising: so that people should not know that he left his father alone and accuse

him of disrespect. That is why, Rashi explains, the Bible speaks of Terach as “dead” – although in fact he lived 60 more years. The obvious question, why didn’t Abraham take his father along with him, remains unanswered. Perhaps this demonstrates that filial obligations and responsibilities end at the border of personal integrity, that Abraham could not achieve his potential in his father’s home.

But why didn’t Abraham return, especially after the birth of Yitzhak, only twenty-five years later? What pattern of family relations was established? Was this restlessness part of the great spiritual migration that would occupy Abraham’s entire life, exposing himself and his family to danger in order to teach his unique form of ethical monotheism? Was it also to redefine his/our consciousness as “strangers?”

Abraham travels to Egypt, where he seemingly betrays his wife, first in his encounter with Pharaoh, and later with the Philistine king Abimelech, of Gerar. Although Abraham’s excuse was that such deceptions were necessary in order to save both of them, Nachmanides is particularly critical of this decision. Moreover, there is a suspicion that Sarah may have been raped by these foreign rulers. Were these encounters a way of introducing others to a new moral code of behavior, or simply to tell us how vulnerable people were to ruthless rulers?

Abraham reluctantly casts out Hagar and Ishmael (a form of betrayal, since they too were part of his household) at Sarah’s insistence and with G-d’s approval. Yet, with all the poignancy and potential disaster of this event, it propels Ishmael to discover his own distinctive and independent path. Sarah’s decision is based on a clear and present danger to her family’s survival: there must be co-existence, but as separate people.

Sarah, childless among child bearers, finally gives birth to Isaac, and, according to one tradition, when she believes that he was sacrificed by her husband, she dies of heartbreak. Here is yet another seeming instance of betrayal. In her silence, we hear her terrible scream, “How could you (or You) do this to me!” And it resonates forever.

Isaac is brought by his father to Mt Moriah as an offering to G-d, and there are indications that both were more than willing participants in what may have seemed to be a tragic mistake. Both individuals acted with perfect faith. But was there a moment when Isaac wondered if his father was doing the right thing? Was there a moment when Abraham wished that G-d would stop him before it was too late? What kind of spiritual strength (or blindness) does it take to kill one’s own child, even for a holy purpose? Abraham had questioned and argued with G-d when the inhabitants of Sodom were about to be killed; why does he not hesitate to carry out G-d’s command, which may have seemed like betrayal of everything he had lived for? Torn between love

and faith, between his own will and that of following the will of G-d, Abraham becomes the first man of integrity; he and his son overcome instinct and ego and become transcendent together. Both, nevertheless, are deeply wounded by this event.

Isaac (like his father) appears to betray his wife by exposing her to the danger of being raped by Abimelech, and is cheated out of his water rights by the Philistines. Yet, he is not a man of confrontation. He takes risks and resides among them, however, in order (we assume) to teach them about G-d. Isaac's "blindness" to (refusal to accept) Esau's evil prompts a desperate trick. Isaac appears to be betrayed by his wife, Rebecca, and his son, Jacob when they deceive him in order to get the blessing that would ensure the survival of the Jewish people.

It is clear, however, from hints in the text that Isaac knew exactly what was happening: Esau was a killer, whose rage threatened everyone and in order for anyone to survive, a subtle stratagem had to be employed. They had to maintain the fiction that Easu had a moral claim to his birthright. Afterwards, Esau again betrays his parents by marrying inappropriate women. Jacob escapes and has no contact with his parents for 21 years. Isaac is left with a house full of "shikses."

Jacob's confrontation with himself begins when he leaves his parents' home. Alone, at night, he dreams of angels and ladders, and G-d, who now reveals Himself. That was his first moment of self-consciousness, expressed clearly when he says, "`Surely the Eternal is in this place and I didn't know it.' And he was filled with fear." This is the first instance of retrospection and introspection in the Torah – and it came out of self-doubt. It is precisely that newly awakened self-awareness, his unique ability to understand and appreciate what has happened to him that determines the course of his life. That event, however, was only the beginning of Jacob's struggle to discover his essence.

Jacob is betrayed by his father-in-law/uncle, Laban, who tricks him into marrying Leah, instead of Rachel. But Leah and Rachel are also implicated, because the ruse could not have been accomplished without their consent. Clearly these Matriarchs understood Jewish destiny at least as well as their husbands. Confounding Jacob's passion turns into the birth of the Jewish people.

Jacob uses genetic breeding (divine power) to obtain a large herd of sheep and goats, and, although there is no question that he had been exploited by Laban, and was entitled to his wages, Laban felt tricked and cheated. The family, it would seem, has a conspiratorial nature.

Rachel deceives her father when he searches for hidden idols which she had stolen, again, it

may be argued for a good purpose. What would Jacob have done had he discovered his wife's fraud? Do the ends justify the means?

Having escaped from Laban, Jacob then struggles heroically for his Existence/ Authenticity with an angel who cripples him. In the process, a new aspect of his identity emerges, from Jacob (who also struggles with his brother), to Israel (who consciously engages G-d). He emerges a survivor, scarred, haunted by his vulnerability and weakness, yet willing to risk everything to discover who he is. The need to discover himself is, therefore, the essence of his personality, his inner nature and the reason he fights altogether; it gives him the courage and integrity to confront a world filled with evil. Despite the risks, it is part of his Aliyah.

At last he encounters his twin brother, his Other Self, Esau, and eventually enters Eretz Yisrael. He does not, however, return immediately to his father, but moves first to Shechem where he purchases a piece of land and settles. Later, his daughter, Dina, is kidnapped and raped. In response, two of Jacob's sons, Shimon and Levi, trick the inhabitants into circumcising themselves, and then slaughter them. Although there was no alternative to this ploy in order to rescue Dina, Jacob may have felt betrayed by his sons, and rebuked them harshly. We do not know, in fact, whether or not he approved of what they did. At least publicly, he put himself on record; in private he may have felt differently. Did he, perhaps, blame himself for what happened?

Jacob journeys on to Bet El, building an altar there and, for the second time, his new name is honored, and the Covenant reaffirmed. Rachel dies, and is buried "on the way," near Bethlehem, in what may have seemed (at least to Joseph) as irreverent to Rachel's honor. Afterwards, his son, Reuven, interferes in Jacob's bedroom arrangements, perhaps even violating an intimate relationship with the remaining wives and is severely chastised. Jacob then moves on to Mamre/Hebron, where he arrives in time to see his father before he dies. Both sons bury their father in a final act of cooperation and conciliation.

Jacob, rearing Joseph alone, favored him more than his other sons, not only because he was still grieving for Rachel, Joseph's mother, but because they were both dreamers. Favoritism, however, causes intense sibling rivalries. In light of Joseph's ultimate role in saving his family, Jacob's preferences may be justified. But Jacob did sow the seeds of future problems.

Joseph was betrayed by his brothers when they sell him, although they believed they were right, since Joseph had betrayed them. They then lied to Jacob about the disappearance of Joseph. Did Jacob know what happened? Is that why he didn't question his sons?

Joseph was betrayed by Potiphar's wife, who falsely accuses him of trying to seduce her. Imprisoned unjustly, he meets Pharoah's wine taster who promises (and then forgets) to help him. Joseph has no contact with his father for about 24 years until he brings his entire family into Egypt, thus setting the stage for slavery and exile. Why doesn't he send a message to his father? Although seemingly insensitive, this was necessary for future redemption and freedom, a direction which determines the course of Jewish history.

Jacob's own assessment of his life (in response to Pharoah) is characterized by a sense of overwhelming failure and pain: "Few and evil have been the days of my life, and I have not attained the position of my fathers." He reflects the bitter disappointment of the dreamer who envisioned so much more than he was able to accomplish. But he does not lose faith, in himself, in Jewish history, and in the promise of Jewish destiny. His poignant words are not a condemnation of his life, but a testimony to his process of Becoming. He has not only endured each test, he has prevailed, and strengthened his belief.

Jacob's final act – blessing his children – reflects insights he gained about them throughout his life. Each son stands at the head of a tribe; together they comprise the future of the Jewish people. But they are also on the threshold of slavery, ironically, just as they are feeling "at home." Their potential is yet unrealized and the future uncertain.

What appears as dysfunction, perfidy, and deception in the Biblical narrative is rather an archetype for a process of an unfolding awareness of self. It is complicated because we, like Jacob, exist in a world of paradox – where evil appears to be good, and good, evil – confusing and threatening to our notion of the world and who we are.

Jacob's struggle is distinctive (from his predecessors) in that he dreams – an awareness of (or vehicle to apprehend) self and purpose that no one else had. Previous patriarchs spoke to G-d, but did not initiate it; Jacob dreams that connection. His struggle to Become goes beyond his father's terrifying blindness and his grandfather's simple faith. He needs to discover the world in a different way, combining elements of the past with an engagement of the world, thrilling and dangerous, but ultimately transcending.

Deceptions threaten to break Jacob – and he must develop his ability to see beyond what is happening, into the future, to create a sense of self that is integrated, that has taken on the world and still brings blessings to it. He stands in an existential loneliness that is different from that of his predecessors, perhaps because his own struggle is so much more complex. It is precisely this powerful tool of introspection that Joseph develops into visionary dream interpretation.

In each succeeding generation faith becomes more difficult and complex. Abraham breaks with his past; Isaac struggles to overcome his sense of victimization; Jacob struggles for self-consciousness, for authenticity in a world of deception. Jacob must, of necessity, confront the paradox in which deception appears as truth, love as hate, creativity as destruction – all of which combine energies that can create a transcendent being. It is the only way that Jacob can find meaning and purpose. But it is also a life of self-doubt and pain. And Jacob changes – unlike almost anyone else in Tanach, except King David.

The past constantly haunts Jacob. He is often on the verge of despair, of losing everything; he is broken, wounded. Yet, that shattering confrontation allows for the discovery of his unique path to G-d. Out of his pain emerges a path towards real self-examination, and authenticity.

It is precisely his ability to maintain his integrity in the face of radically changing circumstances that transforms him and creates a new identity.

Only in that struggle for self can one create meaning; only from profound doubt can one approach true faith. Jacob's struggle, therefore, is the first recorded crisis of human existence. That is why he, and we are called Israel.

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