

Shabbat Parashat VaYeitzei
What Goes Around Comes Around

In last week's *parasha*, we became reacquainted with the story of Rivka and Yaakov's usurpation of Eisav's firstborn blessing. Mother and son conspired to trick Yitzhak into giving his blessing to the younger of his two twin sons, Yaakov. After having succeeded in this coup, Yaakov "runs away from home" to escape the murderous and vengeful wrath of his older brother - who had sworn to kill him for what he had done - at the behest of his now terrified mother. Rivka instructs Yaakov to flee to Haran, the home of her older brother Lavan, who we first met when Avraham's servant Eliezer went searching for a wife for Yitzhak. All these years later, Lavan has a home, flocks and family of his own - including two daughters named Leah and Rahel.

Yaakov arrives in Haran and almost immediately encounters his cousin Rahel at the communal well (recall this literary motif from two weeks ago) with Lavan's flocks. Yaakov heroically rolls the well stone off the well by himself, waters Lavan's flocks and then embraces and kisses Rahel, breaking into tears. Rahel runs back home and returns with Lavan, who greets Yaakov and invites him home. After living with and working for Lavan for one month, Lavan asks him what he desires in exchange for his labor. Yaakov asks for Rahel's hand in marriage. Lavan stipulates that Yaakov will need to work for seven years in order to "earn" Rahel's hand and Yaakov takes the deal. At the end of the seven years, Yaakov comes to ask Lavan for Rahel and a wedding ensues, only the bride was LEAH...Yaakov had been fooled! He agreed to work yet another seven years in order to have Rahel as his wife as well.

When one examines these two vignettes side-by-side, a revealing reality is unveiled. Just as Rivka conspired to undermine her son Eisav and reward Yaakov, so too does her brother (yes, her brother!) Lavan conspire to undermine Yaakov in his employment and marital agreement. We can look at these vignettes and feel vindicated knowing that Yaakov got a taste of his own medicine. This is no coincidence. When one looks at the narrative of the Bible, one will find that this means of "punishing" an individual - by making him/her suffer the exact type of injustice that s/he inflicted upon another - is normative. Look even further along in this week's *parasha* and one will see that Lavan does not escape unscathed for his deceitful treatment of Yaakov; he too is tricked when Yaakov "genetically engineers" Lavan's flocks in order to increase his share of their joint sheep based on the separation agreement he and Lavan put into place after Yaakov's twenty years of service. In addition, when the laws of "compensation" are first revealed in the Torah, we find the teaching of "an eye for an eye; a tooth for a tooth." Therefore, as we can see, "what goes around comes around" is a consistent theme in the *Tanakh* (Hebrew Bible). The Rabbis picked up on this phenomenon and found many more instances of it, actually giving it a name "*midah k'neged midah*," "measure for measure." Both traditional and modern biblical commentators use this motif to explain many events in the biblical narrative.

It is important to point out that by no means do the Rabbis and tradition promote the practice of *midah k'neged midah* as a means of exacting justice for wrongs done. They take the teachings of "an eye for eye..." and interpret them to be in reference to monetary compensation for damages, not a literal "exchange." The Rabbis also go out of their way to make it almost impossible for capital punishment ever to be executed as a result of the requirements necessary for warnings to an offender and the rules for testing potential witnesses. The Rabbis emphasize peaceful resolution of conflict and differences and seem to buy into the common phrase we parents often tell our children, "Two wrongs don't make a right," yet they cannot ignore what they find in the biblical text. However, when one approaches the Bible, it is important to do so with as much background information as possible, and an awareness of the motif of *midah k'neged midah* will help an individual to understand events more clearly by being able to view them through this particular lens. It can also provide a new research topic for those looking for new insights into the text or a new way to be able to engage the Bible, which we take pride in reading repeatedly over the course of our collective lifetimes.

Shabbat Shalom,
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