

Parsha Vayeitzei

By Patrick Beaulier

*So Jacob rose, and he lifted up his sons and his wives upon the camels. And he led all his livestock and all his possessions that he had acquired, the purchase of his acquisition, which he had acquired in Padan aram, to come to Isaac his father, to the land of Canaan. Now Laban had gone to shear his sheep, and [meanwhile] Rachel stole her father's teraphim. Jacob concealed from Laban the Aramean by not telling him that he was fleeing. (Genesis 31:17-20; emphasis added).*

The great thing about a long, dense Torah portion like Vayeitzei is that one has a lot of stories to draw from. Do we talk about Jacob's dream of a ladder to heaven? Do we talk about the spiritual meaning of Jacob's uncle Laban, and his trickery? Do we wax poetic about Rachel and Leah, the last two matriarchs of the Jewish tradition? Or perhaps we talk about Jacob running from Laban's, and somehow magically tie this all together in a philosophical tapestry that would make Martin Buber's head spin.

I am going to do the opposite of all this. Because although a lot happens in Parsha Vayeitzei, I am most interested in one line: Rachel stole her father's teraphim (31:17).

Why is this, single line important? For me, it is because Genesis 31:17 is the first overt mention of an idol in the Torah. While we project an anti-idolatry philosophy on Abraham, and have a midrash teaching that Abraham and Sarah were idol smashing hooligans for Hashem, the Torah does not blatantly express the existence of idols until this sneaky passage. Rachel's theft of the teraphim is like a rare bird in a rainforest: had we not known to look for it, it would have completely passed us by, and perhaps we would have lost out on an amazing opportunity to see something truly magical.

What are teraphim? Robert Alter in his translation of the Torah says, "teraphim are small figurines representing the deities responsible for the well-being and prosperity of the household" (pg. 169). These are like the idols, which Hindu and Jainist families keep in altars at home. Interestingly, these same types of home altars to Asheroth and YHVH have been found in archeological settlements in Israel (see *The Bible Unearthed* by Israel Finkelstein).

Of course, this is not the only interpretation of teraphim. Rabbi Goldie Milgram teaches that the teraphim were also used as divination tools, like the ephod that was used during Temple worship. The harsh reality; however, is that we do not know exactly what the teraphim are. But given the Torah's track record with idolatry, we can only assume that these were Laban's idols, no matter what their use.

What does Rachel want with Laban's deities? Rashi suggested that Rachel, by stealing from Laban, intended to separate her father from idolatry (Gen. Rabbah 74: 5). Perhaps she was going to dispose of it somewhere, like an enraged family member who finds guns, drugs or some other destructive article among a family member's possessions, and steals them for their own good. Call it the first intervention in humanity's history.

The story of the Jewish people's campaign against idolatry begins with Gan Eden, a time when there was no idolatry, only God and people. What arose as idolatry was a worldview that the "powers" of the world could be manipulated to bring about the results that early humans needed: rain, the harvest, animals, sunlight, etc. It was almost a science: needed rain? Offer a sacrifice to the rain god. Needed stronger children? Offer your first child to Molech. And if one did not get the desired outcome from the sacrifice, it was because the gods were angry, or because the method of sacrifice was not right. It was not a theological issue: it was a practical one. Perhaps this is why so many gods in pagan cultures are so similar. It does not matter if one calls the wine god Bacchus or Dionysus: the wine powers are the wine powers, no matter the title, and all that matters is that the vines grow after the best grapes are offered up to the divinity which controls it. Call it "pagan universalism" if you will.

The unique gift of the Jewish people was the insight that idolatry did not work. And while the Hebrews struggled with this issue themselves, the Hebrew Bible ultimately teaches the wrongness of idolatry over any other value, even the value of human life itself.

Idolatry, from the perspective of the Bible, is not defined by a set creed, but rather by the observation of what idolaters do. These forbidden activities include: making any graven image for oneself or others (Exodus 20:4; 20:20), bowing down to those idols or worshipping them in whatever customary manner (20:5), sacrificing children to them (Leviticus 18:21), as well as sorcery and fortune telling (19:26; 19:30).

Does this mean that we can believe whatever we want, as long as our behavior is not idolatrous? Some people suggest that is what Judaism is all about. One slogan, “deed versus creed” is meant to be a catch all for modern, progressive Judaism. We do not care what you believe, as long as you act in a Jewish way.

While this is lovely and ecumenical in a way that it accepts the many variations on Jewish identity, I firmly disagree with it. The Bible actually gives a small window into the theological nature of idolatry toward the end of the Torah in Parsha Haazinu. During the famous seventy line song Moses delivers before dying, Moses talks about “demons, no-gods, gods that they knew not, [and] new gods that came up of late, which your fathers dreaded not” (Deut. 32:17). Moses argues that

the future worship of these deities will be a disasterous moment for the Hebrews in the Promised Land, and I have to agree with him.

Getting back to the teraphim, we are left wondering: if Abraham's descendents are the first family of monotheism, then what is Laban (or anyone, for that matter) doing with these teraphim, regardless of their use? A more traditional person could argue that Laban had assimilated and was off derekh Torah (ironic, since the Torah does not exist yet – but we will leave that theological mind game alone). Laban was a shepherd, and would have encountered pagans who could have taught him that fertility statues could help in yielding a better flock. Rachel, who is somehow a better monotheist due in large part by her husband Jacob, was just following God's orders.

So if Rachel is going to throw the idols in a dumpster somewhere, why does the Torah simply say she "stole them"? Why not, "and she stole them and tore them down"? Why would the Torah omit a very valuable lesson: that idols are bad and that we should smash them.

I would offer this interpretation: Rachel did steal her father's idols, but she did not dispose of them. Rachel, I believe, was an idolater. Her concept of the world and how it operates fell in party line with her surroundings. She took her father's teraphim because she was leaving behind her home, and she needed her father's deity to act as a good luck charm. It is the same line of thinking as some people who

carry chamsah keychains, car mezuzahs, Magen David necklaces or any of the other icon fetishes that we think nothing of.

As a matter of fact, I would argue that the Torah could be an idol. Even progressive Judaism, which claims to have reimagined Judaism outside of tradition, still holds dearly to practices it otherwise does not relate to. Notice how we parade the Torah, dressed as a Temple priest, and we kiss it: imagining ourselves kissing the face of God through the words that were spoken to Moses “face to face”. If we drop the Torah, we must fast or give tzedakah. If one letter of one word of the Torah is not written perfectly, then the Torah is invalid for any worship and must be repaired by a person with a strong enough moral fiber and technical skill to do such a thing. It’s the same job that Abraham’s father Terah had, building idols for his community, only somehow it is better when an Orthodox Jew does it.

Rachel took Laban’s idol. And we, as modern Jews, have carried it ever since.

So, am I suggesting that we go around smashing Buddha statues and tearing down our Torah arks? No. What I am suggesting is that we open our eyes to the ways in which we carry the past into the future, and somehow excuse it away. As I said earlier, we not known to look for these moments of clinging to idolatry, it would have completely passed us by, and perhaps we would have lost out on an amazing opportunity to learn something important. The important lesson is that, if the first family of God can be idolaters, then so can we. Look for the places in your life where

you steal away society's idols for yourself. Look for how you crave these security blankets, which the Jewish tradition teaches are hopeless. Search for hope, not in the failed technology of idolatry, but in the promise that the journey of life that you are on, the same journey that Rachel was on, does not require a broken relic of the past, but a radical abandonment of oneself to the joys of the future.

Additional Sources:

Five Books of Moses (Robert Alter, 2004).

<http://reclaimingjudaism.org/teachings/walking-torah-through-feminist-eyes-part-ii-applying-traditional-sources>

Dictionary of the Jewish Religion. (pg. 96).

Chabad.org: Rashi on Parsha Vayeitzei