

Karma: Parashat Vayetzei

Do Jews believe in karma? This question was put to me a few years ago by one of my Hebrew High students, a young woman who had been studying Hinduism as part of her school's religion curriculum. I will admit that I needed a brief refresher on the concept, and my student was quick to explain that karma is an idea which emphasizes cycles of cause and effect, affirming that our actions of today directly impact the rewards and/or penalties that we reap in the future with beneficial effects deriving from past beneficial actions and harmful effects from past harmful ones. More colloquially karma is the notion that "what goes around comes around." It is a belief which posits that people ultimately get what they deserve.

To be honest, I had never before considered Judaism's position on karma and tried to answer my student's question as best as I could on the spot – talking about our tradition's affirmation that actions have consequences and pointing to texts like the second paragraph of the *Sh'ma* which indicate that good behavior will be rewarded in kind and poor behavior will be punished. At the same time, I shared with my student that the idea of karma was hard for me personally to accept as the world seems full of too many examples of righteous suffering for me to believe that individuals truly get what they deserve. I still stand by these answers and hope that they were, in some way, helpful to my student. But perhaps I'll have to drop her an email one of these days to continue our conversation. For after reading our Torah portion this week, I have become more confident than ever that Jews *do*, indeed, believe in karma – at least in certain moments.

Today we read *Parashat Vayetzei*, the story of our ancestor Jacob's journey from the home of his parents' to that of his uncle, Laban. In an infamous scene, Jacob falls madly in love with Laban's younger daughter, Rachel, and consents to work for seven years in exchange for her hand in marriage. When the 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, for whom he has been toiling so many long years, but rather Leah, her weak-eyed older sister. The unfortunate newlywed goes on to become *s'nuah* – utterly unloved by her husband.

Commentators throughout the ages have pointed to a certain amount of poetic justice in the story of Jacob's deception, a concept that the rabbis identify not as "karma" but rather as *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 both birthright and blessing, misrepresenting himself to an 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 on the book of Genesis, capture the irony of Jacob's situation 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?' As the rabbis cleverly point

out, Jacob's righteous indignation at having been duped is sorely misplaced. Or as any good believer in karma will tell you: he got exactly what he deserved.

Sadly, the cycle of duplicity inaugurated by Jacob in his dealings with Esau and continued in our *parasha* through the deceitful behavior of Laban does 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, this narrative contains a note of poetic justice as the Etz Hayim Humash points out when it writes, “Jacob, who had deceived his father with goatskins and borrowed clothing is deceived by his children with stolen clothing and goat's blood.” The boy who takes advantage of his father's blindness grows up to be the man tricked in the dark; the son who undoes his brother using animal skins turns into the father duped by instruments of the same. What goes around comes around, this cycle of stories seems to claim. Or in the words of Biblical scholar Nahum Sarna, “The perpetrator is now the victim, hoist with his own petard.”

It now seems clear to me that Judaism *does* embrace some version of karma – believing, at least in certain situations, in a kind of cosmic justice. But as emotionally satisfying as this may be (most of us do, after all, want to believe that life is fair and people ultimately get what they deserve) I wonder how *spiritually* satisfying it is, whether it really helps us to lead better, more productive lives. What is it that we are to take away from these stories – illustrations of misguided characters perpetuating their foibles forward throughout the generations? What is the lesson that these narratives are meant to convey?

Sarna argues that the entire cycle of Jacob's life is meant to express moral condemnation, that his entire biography is a testament to the dangers of duplicity and its terrible consequences. Jacob's life begins in struggle – as he and Esau tumble back and forth in their mother's womb – and ends in unremitting tragedy as he witnesses the rape of daughter Dinah, the death in childbirth of beloved wife Rachel, and the incessant fighting of his twelve sons eventually leading to the exile of favorite child Joseph. In contradistinction to patriarchs Abraham and Isaac who are described as dying *b'seivah tova* – at a “ripe old age,” the Bible recounts that the years of Jacob's life were *mi'at v'raim* – few and difficult. In Sarna's words, “An explicit denunciation could hardly be more effective or more scathing than Jacob's unhappy biography.” The karmic nature of Jacob's existence serves – perhaps hyperbolically at times – to demonstrate how damaging deceitful behavior can be, not only for an individual but also for a family as well.

While I find Sarna's understanding of these texts to be a helpful one, there is an additional element of Jacob's story which I also find meaningful and that is the patriarch's capacity for change. Jacob's name ultimately turns from *Ya'akov* – related to the Hebrew word for deception – to *Yisrael* – related to the word for struggle – and in my mind this latter appellation could hardly be more appropriate. Jacob does not totally abandon his lesser ways when his name changes – we still see him slyly plotting before his reunion with Esau and carelessly picking favorites amongst his children and grandchildren. But gone is the overtly duplicitous behavior that characterized his younger years. He has overcome – and perhaps even learned from – his earlier mistakes.

Author Sara Yocheved Rigler, a Jewish expert in Vedanta Indian philosophy, explains that one of the primary differences between Hindu karma and Jewish measure for measure punishment has to do with this notion of changeability. She writes, “Karma is inexorable; a misdeed once committed is, as they say in India, like the tusks of an elephant. It can never be retracted. Judaism, on the contrary, teaches the concept of *teshuva*. *Teshuva* means that a person can regret and change his/her mode of conduct, and when s/he does, the past actions are spiritually erased.” While Jewish tradition may affirm that our deeds have consequences, that what we do today effects what happens tomorrow, it also affirms that we can change the course of our present and thus effect the course of our future, *even* when entrenched in patterns as deep-seated as Jacob’s. Perhaps the message of these stories is not how many times Jacob’s duplicity is perpetuated forward but rather that *even* after being perpetuated forward many times, Jacob is still able to make this cycle stop. Individuals, says Judaism, are not controlled by past choices. When we find ourselves in a pattern that we do not like, we have the power to change it.

By the time we reach the end of Jacob’s life, he is a changed man – reconciled with Esau, living in harmony with all twelve sons, coming to be buried alongside Leah, the wife once characterized as unloved. We may not imagine that all traces of the former Jacob are completely erased yet here we see a different sort of man – one who struggles with his vices, rather than succumbing to them completely, a man truly worthy of the name *Yisrael*. It has often been noted that the Jewish people invoke not Abraham or Isaac in self-reference but rather Jacob, calling ourselves *B’nai Yisrael* – the children of Israel. We, too, know what it is to struggle with imperfection. We, too, affirm that we have the strength to change our behavior and perhaps even our destiny.

What goes around may come around, but only if we let it. Wishing us a week filled with the strength to change patterns that need changing and the blessings that come in the process.

Shabbat Shalom!

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