JACOB THE THEIF
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So, we come this morning to what I would say is the third act of the Jacob Saga.

Act 1 – The setup was Jacob's stealing of his brother's Esau's birthright

Act 2 – The confrontation – Jacob laboring 20 years for his uncle and then father-in-law Laban for the privilege of marrying his two daughters Leah and Rachel, as well as fathering children with their maid servants Zilpah and Bilah, accumulating a flock and ultimately fleeing from Laban to set off with his family on his own.

Act 3 – The resolution – is this week's story where Jacob encounter's Esau after 20 years, both brother's having amassed wealth and family; meeting in a field of uncertainty, Jacob unsure if his brother still harbors a grudge over the theft of his birthright, dividing his family and possessions out of fear of his brother's retribution.

There is so much in all these acts, so much in these stories of human drama, familial relations, plotting, conniving, duplicity. So many decisions based upon fear and suspicion.

When we read the parasha from two weeks ago, last week and then this week's parasha Vayishlach another connecting thread emerges, the use of the word Ganav, or theft, l'gnov – to steal.

In Act 1 from 2 weeks ago, Jacob stole Esau's birthright. Last week in Act 2 Rachel stole the her father's idols, Jacob stole his father-in-law's heart. Why have you stolen my heart? Lavon asks, Why have you stolen my guts? You stole away by night and you stole the day?

Now there is a literary technique that's used when looking at Torah. Martin Buber introduced the term Leitwort (literally "leading word"; Hebrew, מילה מנחה) to modern Biblical Studies to designate "a word or linguistic root that recurs within a text, a sequence of texts, or a complex of texts in an extremely meaningful manner."

A leitwort signals a kind of theme in a passage lest you miss it. The author is saying, "I'm going to repeat a word again and again and again. And it's up to us to ask why?

At the end of last week's parasha the technique is on full display in chapter 31

Laban's son's gossip that "Jacob has ganav/stolen all that was our father's, and from that which was our father's he has built up all this wealth."

Rachel stole her father's household idols.

And Laban says to Jacob, "What did you mean by keeping me in the dark and carrying off my daughters like captives of the sword?

Again and again in this story, the word ganav echoes for the reader. Why is Torah repeating again and again the idea of theft in this story?

Shmuel Klitzner a Bible scholar living in Jerusalem asks, What's the meaning of this leitwort, this repetition of the word ganav in this context, and he says that it must be connected to the stolen birthright and stolen blessing in Jacob's earlier chapter in his life, both of which Klitzner argues becomes definitional to Jacob, and to his own sense of self.

So, youre remembering his earlier years, in Act 1 when Jacob was full of deception toward his brother and toward his father Klitzner argues that this has left Jacob with a kind of perceived identity of himself as a thief, it's left him in a state of dissociation, and dispossession. These acts of deception that Jacob took in his youth have become the very essence of who he is, or at least who he sees himself to be. And it seems like Jacob is fully identified now with the theft of that blessing and that birthright even after all these years, he just can't shake it.

He thought he could escape it in Act 2 when he ran away from home.

He marries Rachel. And you remember what happens? He wakes up in the morning to realize that it wasn't actually Rachel at all that it was Leah and the Midrash tells us that he accuses Leah, how could you participate in this deception/theft against me and lay with me. According to the Midrash in Beresheit Rabbah, she says, "Is there a teacher without a student? Is there a student without a teacher? You're the Great Deceiver, You're the thief. Don't accuse me of lying and cheating and stealing who are you?"

Jacob is consumed by this label, by his prior bad actions, he just can't shake it, he a cannot escape that everyone sees him as a thief, no matter what he does no matter how honest he tries to be, how he comports himself with honour and integrity; in the eyes of his whole family he is a thief and always will be. That's the fear that grips him as he approaches Esau in this week's parasha. Will his brother see him as everyone around him sees him?

We could spend the whole morning on the reunion of Jacob and Esau, indeed most of my divrei torah on this parasha as I looked through my files did. But there is something else I want to focus on this morning, because of this leitwort, this repetition of the word ganav, this theme of theft.

At the very beginning of the parasha this morning before the reunion with Jacob and Esau, before the horrible rape of his daughter Dinah and the massacre of the men of Shechem. The word ganav is used one more time.

After 20 years away from his family. It's time for Jacob to go back home. He's grown up now. He has four wives. He has many children, and he has amassed a real fortune in his time. away, and he takes leave of Lavon he escaped in the night.

But Lavon his father-in-law pursues him, similarly to the way that the Egyptians will pursue the Israelites when they take leave of their enslavement in Egypt years. Later. But then something really strange occurs. Lavon catches up to Jacob after pursuing him for seven days and says to him, “What have you done Jacob? He says “lama ganav elohai”. Why did you steal my gods with you? Why did you take my idols?”

Now Jacob responds to Lavon 's accusation, and if you see this through the lens of Jacobs unshakable identity as a thief you hear the pain and frustration in his voice. The treachery and dishonesty of his youth stalks him even now into his wealth of adulthood and all he has accomplished and acquired honestly, righteously.

Triggered by this accusation, Jacob says to Laban, “Search my camp. I didn't take your idols, even more he declares, “anyone who is holding on to these stolen objects, these idols stolen from your home, let them die.”

Now Lavon will go on to search Jacob's camp. And he'll do a pretty thorough search but he will not find those idols because as you may recall, Rachel, Jacobs beloved wife, and Lavon’s youngest daughter is sitting on them in the saddle of her camel and she refuses to get up. Jacob doesn’t know this of course, Rachel took them of her own accord, but still the proclamation is made.

Eventually, these two camps depart from one another. But the story doesn't actually end there. Because at the very end of this week’s parasha, after the renunion of the brothers, after the horrible rape of Dinah, we learn that Rachel is in fact going to die. She's going to die, a tragic, premature death. And it's going to happen on the next stage of their journey on their way home. We're this morning in chapter 35, verse 18, that Rachel dies in childbirth. It's tragic. This is Jacob's beloved wife, the one who he's put himself into forced servitude to Lavon for many, many years in order to be with and now she's dead. And it's doubly tragic because there's no way to read this story, to hear again the word ganav and not recall the declaration that Jacob made, “whoever is holding your stolen idols, that person will not live.”

So what happens here? Why did Jacob make such a rash proclamation, we don't have a death penalty for stealing. So, this isn't even the proper punishment for theft of your father's idols.

For the whole of this week’s parasha this early encounter with Laban consumes him, its what is in his mind when he confront Esau,

For 20 years he tried to outrun it, tried to be a mensch. But when Lavon comes to him with the repeated suggestion of theft, and thievery. And that immediately triggers in Jacob, the mindset of a thief. He believes even now that he's nothing more than the worst thing he ever did. And the worst person he ever was, he's triggered by the accusation, he becomes reactive, guilty in his own eyes. So he shouts out this proclamation. Lo ye'heyeh. I'm not a thief. Whoever's a thief is going to die. And as a result, is beloved Rachel dies.

And I wonder if we're not a little bit like that, too? Consumed, self-defined by our worst action, our greatest lapse in judgement, our greatest personal failing.

I once counselled a man, he had everything. But he was tortured. He was tortured because he was consumed with the awareness that at his essence, he would always be seen as the guy he was when he struggled most in his life when he was failing, when he had broken a trust placed on him. He was failing and he was struggling and sinking and no amount of evidence to the contrary could convince him that he was no longer that person. And I said to him but what if you're just not that guy anymore?

He cried and broke down in my office and said to me, "Rabbi it doesn't matter what I do, this thing it follows me everywhere, it lives on on the internet, in the memory of my family, the friends that I had but have now abandoned me, it becomes known by my new friends and then that is how they see me. Don't you see Rabbi? He said, I will always be that person.

Rav Dov Soloveichik teaches that there are two ways to walk on a pathway toward tshuvah to our transformation. One of them is to try to blot out the evil of our past the goal is utter annihilation of our previous story. The problem with this is that there's nothing left to return to. This is erasure, disappearance, total disconnection with who you once were. But there's another way not by annihilating evil or trying to disappear it but by acknowledging it, and then rectifying it and even elevating it and this kind of repentance doesn't entail making a clean break with the past, or obliterating our memories of the past. It allows a person to see that the past is part of our story. It's part of what made us who we are, but it's not our whole story. It's not necessary to blot out the past. We don't have to pretend that it never happened, because then we have nothing to build a foundation on.

Instead, according to Rav Soloveichik what we are to do is to attach ourselves to the memory of what went wrong. And then find within that memory, not shame, but a desire for holiness, a desire for healing because there is a way to heal through acknowledging our mistakes, but it requires us to be willing to revisit the memories of those ways. And then he says to turn those memories into vessels for holiness.

It's not just Jacob who struggles with this, we all struggle with this, with being defined by our worst moment, not our best actions.

But we can change this, we can allow our failings to be part fo our story, part of the person we have become for the better.

Two tablets