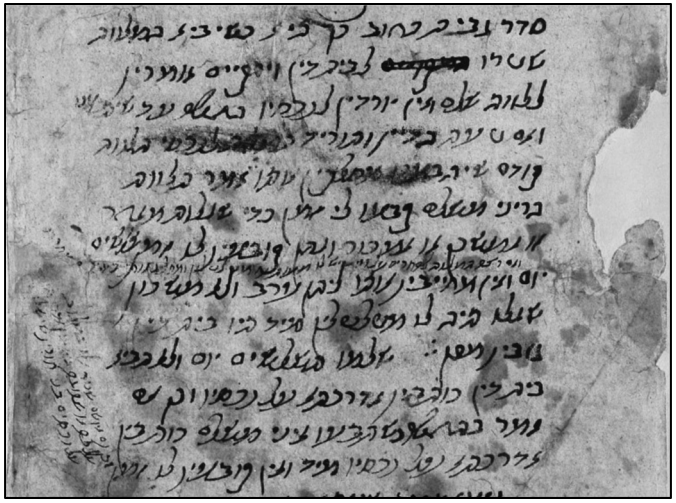
Speaking of Text

A WEEKLY EXPLORATION OF THE JEWISH BOOKSHELF

What Makes a Book "Torah"?

The Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary

In the manuscript age, what distinguished "Torah" from other writing? One of the key answers to this question is that manuscripts were fluid and each copy therefore different from any other, while Torah—as the word of God and the source of Jewish tradition—had to be precise and unchanging. In fact, to assure the fixity of the Tanakh, masters of the text called Masoretes developed a system to freeze the biblical text in an official, unchanging form. For the Talmud, by contrast, there is no such system.



Which is what makes the page pictured here so interesting. This is a page discovered in the Cairo Genizah—in *Maimonides's very own hand*—recording the beginning of the twenty-second chapter of the *Laws of Loans and Borrowers* from Maimonides's great law code, the Mishneh Torah. You can easily see how Maimonides works to formulate and re-formulate the final text: he crosses certain words out (don't confuse this with smudging); he adds certain phrases between the lines. Remarkably, when one compares Maimonides's original formulation, with his own revisions, to the final printed text, the formulation is essentially identical, despite many generations of re-copying in manuscript before the first printing.

What does this teach us? That Maimonides's words were seen as "Torah" from the very beginning. Only this assumption can explain the care with which they were copied. Imagine: the words of a human as "Torah"—now, that's an idea worth exploring! See the full page at www.jtsa.edu/what-makes-book-torah

TORAH FROM JTS

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Vayetzei 5778 **ויצא תשע"ח**

Escaping a Toxic Relationship

Rabbi Lilly Kaufman, Director, Torah Fund of Women's League for Conservative Judaism

Poor Jacob is triply triangulated in Parashat Vayetzei! His boss, Laban, is not only his uncle, Rebecca's older brother, but also his father-in-law, Leah and Rachel's father. Leah and Rachel are bitter rivals, Leah resenting Jacob's love for Rachel, and Rachel wishing for children when God has blessed only Leah with fertility. Complicating this tangle of relationships is the fact that Jacob and Laban work together, and Laban is not a fair employer.

Jacob has now been working for Laban for 20 years, and he still does not possess enough wealth to sustain himself, his wives, and his children. He finally admits his worries to Rachel and Leah:

> And you know that with all my strength I have served your father. But your father has tricked me, changing my salary ten times over, and yet God has not let him do me harm. (Gen. 31:6–7)

Jacob proposes an entrepreneurial innovation that will convert the objects of his labor into portable personal wealth, allowing him and his family to flee Laban's domain. He will genetically engineer spotted and streaked flocks, making some animals easily identifiable as his—and easily removed from Laban's territory. He generously credits heaven with the idea, revealed to him by an angel in a dream in Genesis 31, even though he has already proposed a very similar idea in chapter 30. Jacob displays an entirely new humility in teaching his wives what heaven has to say.

The rival wives immediately accept Jacob's assessment, acting with uncharacteristic unity to oppose their father:

> Have we still a share in the inheritance of our father's house? Surely, he regards us as outsiders, now that he has sold us and has used up our purchase price. Truly, all the wealth that God has taken away from our father belongs to us and to our children. Now then, do just as God has told you. (31:14–16)

These women retroactively see their weddings as commodifying transactions, made by Laban in exchange for a good laborer. They articulate an extra-legal idea: that their father's ill-treatment allows them to seize their inheritances on their own timetable and without Laban's knowledge. This is a more radical claim than that of the daughters of Zelophehad, who sought to lawfully inherit their father's portion after his death, in Parashat Pinehas (Num. 27:1–11). Rachel and Leah's claim is strikingly similar to the Israelite slaves' action, generations later, when they abscond with Egypt's gold, silver, and clothing as they depart (Exod. 12:35–36).

Laban, for his part, displays a rare incompetence for a petty family tyrant. He utterly neglects the interests of his own daughters, perhaps believing he can oppress Jacob forever. He forgets to build up his own clan, securing no loyalty among his children and instead causing their deep financial insecurity. Is it any wonder that his daughters jump at the chance to grab what is theirs and leave him behind?

The Rabbis critique Laban. In Deuteronomy 26:5 we find a ritualized summary of Jewish history, to be recited in the Land of Israel by farmers bringing first fruits to the High Priest on Shavuot. Every farmer must make a formal declaration of personal gratitude to God for the fruits of the land, framing his agricultural success in a broader historic and national context. The farmer speaks the memorized words, beginning *Arami oved avi*—in its plain meaning, "my father [perhaps referring to Abraham, or to Jacob] was a wandering Aramean."

The Midrash, however, defines the "father" here as Jacob but interprets *oved* as meaning "sought to destroy." The Aramean is not our patriarch but Laban, who so severely mistreated Jacob. Laban's persecution of Jacob becomes part of the official public record of Israelite persecution and redemption. It is to be the defining story of the new, productive Israelite, who finds connection to God through the honest work of his hands. If only

Jacob could have lived to see this immensely positive cultural adaptation of his life story!

This tradition is found in the Passover Haggadah, so that Jews, for all time, can tell the Exodus story, finding its origins in Jacob's exploitation by his father-in-law. Exploitation is to be opposed at whatever level of society it occurs, whether in the nuclear family or on the international political stage.

It may surprise some readers of Bible that family separation is employed as the problem-solving strategy in the Jacob-Laban story. In fact, it is a common technique of dispute resolution in early chapters of the Bible. In Lekh Lekha (Gen. 13:1–13), Abram separated from Lot, his nephew and sole heir, after their dispute over grazing land, but their real clash was over conflicting values. At stake was the future of their family's spiritual commitments: to worship God, as Abram wished, or to incline towards Sodom and Egypt, as Lot did. In Vayetzei, as in Lekh Lekha, the biblical hero is much better off putting distance between himself and a toxic family member who does not share his values.

In case we thought, mistakenly, that family separation would only be used to solve disputes over immoveable property such as land, the Jacob-Laban story comes to teach that separation may be necessary even when the object of dispute is portable property. More than land or sheep or goats, ethics are what these leaders inherit and what they will leave to their children.

Jacob's eventual break from Laban rehearses for us the act of removing ourselves, with heaven's help, from the presence of those who would take unfair advantage. It is the pivot point between two God-Egypt clashes, of great consequence but differing scale: the familial Abram-Lot dispute in Genesis, and the national and cosmic Moses-Pharaoh clash in Exodus. What begins in the realm of family becomes, centuries later, the liberating political stance of Moses and the Israelites in Egypt.

Jacob, though a trickster himself in his youth, earned the right to leave the exploitive Laban. According to the Midrash (*Shir Hashirim Rabbah* 7:1), his escape is celebrated in heaven: "Six hundred thousand angels rejoiced and danced when Jacob our father departed from Laban's house." The angel who gave Jacob his escape plan in a dream must have been dancing too.

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