

The Lesson of Jacob: What Comes Around Goes Around Parashat Vayetze

By Rabbi Jason Miller

I want to share a story with you this morning. It is an extremely sad story about a man named Victor Crawford. Victor Crawford was a successful attorney and politician who lived in Rockville, Maryland. In January 1991, Victor felt a sharp pain in his neck and went to the doctor to have it checked out. At first, it was diagnosed as an inflamed artery. But then, the next year, Victor learned the truth. A biopsy of a lesion in his throat revealed the presence of carcinoma. His physician explained to him that this type of carcinoma was "a textbook case of cancer caused by smoking." He started smoking cigarettes at age thirteen and switched to pipes and cigars later in life. In 1993, metastases were found in his lungs, liver, and pelvic bone. Victor underwent several surgical procedures and received experimental treatments to slow the growth of the remaining tumors, but he did not survive his battle with cancer. Victor Crawford died in March 1996. His widow explained that "there was not one moment during the course of his disease that he was not experiencing or handicapped by pain. Even between his treatments, his pain persisted, and at times increased, especially with the progression of his bone cancer."

This is undoubtedly a sad story. Regardless of the fact that Victor Crawford began smoking when he became a teenager, we must feel a strong sense of grief over his losing battle to lung, liver, and bone cancer. But this is also an ironic story. You see, Victor Crawford was a lobbyist for the tobacco industry. He worked as a contractual lobbyist for the Tobacco Institute during the late 1980s, helping the tobacco industry fight public health efforts to restrict smoking. Is this simply a sad story of a man dying of cancer? Or is this a case of "What comes around goes around?"

Clichés for this type of a story abound. We can say that Victor Crawford got his "just desserts." Or that "he had it coming." I remember when I was a young boy; I went to hit my little brother and missed. My hand instead struck the metal banister. Looking to my mother for an empathetic sentiment for my throbbing hand, I instead heard the words, "Well, God punished you... you deserved it!" Is the story of Victor Crawford a similar story, albeit on a much deeper level? Did Victor get what he deserved? Do we believe that God punished him with death in the 1990s for his work on behalf of the tobacco industry in the 1980s?

Is God that powerful?

Is life that simplistic?

In the Torah, God is that powerful. And in the Torah, life is that simplistic. Let us take a look at our patriarch Jacob. We recall at the end of last week's parsha that Jacob, conspiring with his mother, tricks his father Isaac into bestowing the coveted blessing on him rather than on his older brother Esau. This act of deception seems to go unpunished. Until, that is, in this morning's parsha when lo and behold Jacob "gets a taste of his own medicine." Just as Jacob earlier deceives his father, he is now on the opposite end of deception. His father-in-law Lavan plays the old switch-a-maroo, substituting his older daughter Leah for the object of Jacob's affection, the younger daughter Rachel.

Yes, in the Torah, life is this simplistic. Jacob tricked his father. His father-in-law now tricks him. And consider the irony that just as Jacob duped his older sibling, now Jacob is duped by the older sibling Leah. As if this is not ironic enough, let us not forget that Jacob's mother, whom he loves, is an accomplice to his trickery, and now Rachel, whom he loves, is an accomplice to Leah in her trickery of him. For we learn in the midrash that Rachel helped her sister pull off the charade by giving her signals to convince Jacob that she was really Rachel.

The midrash also teaches us that throughout the night of their wedding, when Jacob would call out Rachel's name, Leah would answer. And in the morning, when Jacob discovered the truth, he chastised

her, calling her a trickster who is the daughter of a trickster. He asked why she would do such a dishonest thing. Her response? "Is this not precisely what you did to your father?" Or, using the cliché, Leah responds, "Hey, that's like the pot calling the kettle black!"

Yes, in the Torah unlike life, the pieces of the puzzle seem to fall neatly into place. The trickster always gets tricked. And we could make the case that such is true for Victor Crawford as well. But in real life, not everyone gets what they deserve. In fact, the majority of us do not. Many executives in the tobacco industry may live long healthy lives. And most thieves might never get robbed themselves to see how it feels. Who can guarantee that a rapist will have a daughter who is raped?

And the same is true with positive stories of irony. We have, I'm sure, heard stories of the philanthropist who gives generously to fight AIDS only to be stricken by the disease himself. Or the Rap Artist who works tirelessly to end street violence and is then killed by gang warfare. It is tough to argue that God is omnipotent when we hear such stories.

We should look to the Torah not as a proof for God's omnipotence, but rather as a lesson for ethical living. For no one can guarantee that Victor Crawford's death was a direct correlation to his work on behalf of the cigarette companies. It is just a coincidence. It is a coincidence, however, which stands to teach us something. It is the lesson inherent in the story of Jacob. The lesson known throughout the millennia as "The Golden Rule." We Jews learn it from the Talmud, *v'ahavta l'rei'acha kamocho* - that what is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow person (Talmud Shabbat 31a). And each of the religions - Christianity, Islam, Brahmanism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism - has their own version of this rule. "Do unto others as you'd have them do unto you." In a world that does not always make sense, these are certainly important words by which to live.

Shabbat Shalom.