

Rachel and Jacob

I love my husband dearly, but I am not blind to his imperfections, neither am I blind to my father Laban's faults. In many ways they are very like each other. They say that a woman falls in love with a man who is like her father, and in my case this would appear to be true.

I had grown up with stories of my father's sister Rebekah, and how she had met at the well one day, the servant of Abraham, my great uncle, sent to find a wife for his master's son Isaac. Rebekah was determined to leave Aram Naharaim, and was happy to leave her family and friends to go with this unknown servant to marry a man she had never met. It is the fate of women to leave their families and to go the families of their husbands to live. I have always known this, but for me, in the end it did not make the leaving any easier, particularly given the very odd circumstances of my leaving.

I first met Jacob, yes, at the well. I had brought the sheep to water them, but as usual the men who were there first with their flocks, refused to uncap the well, until we could water our flocks together. I am not strong enough to move the large stone on my own, so I always have to wait for them to remove it, then of course they are already there, so their flocks get to the water first, and mine have to wait until they had finished. On this day, there was a stranger talking with the waiting men as I led my sheep towards the water. He must have asked the men a question, because they all turned round to look at me, and one pointed at me. The stranger ran down the track and launched himself at me, and gave me a hug, much to the amusement of the watching shepherds. Then he began to weep over me. It took me some while to understand what he was saying, but eventually I managed to work out that he was my cousin Jacob, and he had come looking for my father; and now he had found me; and he was really happy.

Once he had calmed down a bit, he looked around, and asked what I was doing there. I pointed out the well, and told him I was waiting for the stone to be removed from the top of the well so that I could water my sheep.

'Don't worry, I can do that' he said, and leapt forwards to heave the stone off. I expected the other shepherds to stop him, as this was not part of our local practice, but they seemed so astonished that they just stood there as Jacob expertly herded my sheep forward, and let them drink. While they were drinking he drew water for us all to drink, and went round and filled everyone's beakers chatting all the time about his



adventures on the way from his home to here. When my sheep were replete, he helped the men with their sheep while I headed off home with mine, so that I could tell my father Laban all about my cousin Jacob. Father hurried out to meet him, and greeted him warmly. We ate a fattened calf that night, and as we all sat around eating Jacob told us about, well, everything really, or nearly everything.

Father is not one to let a pair of hands be idle for long, and just because Jacob was his long lost nephew that was no reason not to work for his food. I had seen how good he was with the sheep, so I suggested he help me with them. Father looked at me speculatively, but I just looked blandly at him. I was however delighted to have Jacob's presence in my life. It is quite a lonely job watching over the sheep, and as a woman in a man's world, it was only the thought of what my brothers might do to them that kept the men in check when I was around. After a month we both knew that we wanted to marry, so Jacob went to Father. Jacob told him that he had left home in a bit of a hurry, and had no animals with which to pay for a wife, but he would work for him for seven years to pay for me. Father agreed. Sometimes those seven years seemed a long time, at other times, time passed rapidly. Under Jacob's expertise the flock of sheep grew rapidly, and my father was well pleased with Jacob when he went back to him to remind him of his promise. I should have known something was up when a shifty look came into father's eye, and he promised we should be married when I came back from taking a message to one of our shepherds who was several days journey away.

When I came back I discovered that in my absence Father had tricked Jacob into marrying Leah. He said it was because it was our custom not to allow a younger sister to marry before an older sister, so he had to marry Leah off before he could see me married. No one else had offered for Leah, because of her weak eyes, so Jacob had to marry her if he was going to marry me. If he was that sure of tradition, he could at least have brought Jacob in on it, and given him a choice. Jacob and I were furious at the way we had both been tricked, but father was immovable, and my brothers reinforced my fathers words. Eventually father backed down a bit and agreed that if Jacob continued to sleep with Leah for the rest of the bridal week, and agreed to work another seven years for me, We could be married now as well. So in the space of seven days Jacob had two wedding feasts, and everyone was happy. Father gave Leah and I servants of our own, now that we were married women. To Leah he gave Zilpah, and to me he gave Bilhah.

It wasn't long before it was obvious that Leah was pregnant. Jacob was delighted, and I tried hard not to be jealous, but I never thought that I would not become pregnant as well. Leah gave birth to a son whom they named Reuben. Jacob loved Reuben, but it did not stop him from loving me more than Leah, and with that I had to be content. Leah soon became pregnant again, and gave birth to another son, Simeon, after him came yet another son whom she named Levi, then came Judah. Jacob now had four sons. I was so jealous that I could scarcely look at her self-satisfied face. After the birth of Reuben I had become pregnant, but the child had died within me, then I

became pregnant again, and gave birth to a daughter. How I longed to give Jacob a son as Leah had. In desperation I gave my servant Bilhah to Jacob, and she became pregnant and gave birth to a son who we named Dan. While I had another daughter, Bilhah had another son, who we named Naphtali. Leah in the meanwhile had given her servant Zilpah to Jacob, as she had stopped having children. Zilpah had born a son they named Gad, and then another named Asher. Leah became pregnant again and again had a son they named Issachar, and then another, named Zebulun.

By now Jacob was the proud father of ten sons and I was only the mother of daughters. I could not believe that despite not giving him a son, Jacob still loved me, and loved me more than any of his other wives, but he kept reassuring me that he did. Then Leah gave birth to a daughter, named Dinah, and Yahweh seemed to remember me, and at last I gave birth to my first son whom I named Joseph, and this son of all his sons and all his daughters is his favourite.

By now Jacob had worked more than 14 years for my father, and had acquired two wives, two concubines and 11 sons. He now asked my father for some proper wages. Father just kept on about him being family, and not needing wages, but Jacob had no mind to become my fathers servant, and on his death see all the family wealth distributed to my brothers. Eventually Father agreed that Jacob could have a portion of the sheep flock that he had helped build up over these last 14 years. He agreed that he could have all the speckled sheep in the flock. While Jacob and I feasted with father to celebrate the deal, father had my brothers go and separate out all the specked sheep, and hide them with one of our goat flocks in the hills. Jacob and I were furious when we discovered what he had done. I thought Jacob was going to hit him, but after one of my brothers stepped in to protect father, Jacob got himself under control. He turned to go, but turned back to warn father that Yahweh had seen what father had done, and would pronounce judgement on him. That year most of the remaining flock gave birth to speckled lambs. Father was furious. Arbitrarily he changed his mind and said that Jacob could have all the striped lambs the next year. So the flock gave birth to striped lambs. Father was beside himself when we brought the flock back home at the end of the lambing season.

By this time all of us could see that father was never going to voluntarily let us and our flocks ever leave Aram Naharaim. There was always going to be some reason, some excuse why we could not go. So Jacob, Leah and I made our plans. We waited until we knew father was going to be away inspecting some of the flocks, we quickly packed all our belongings onto our camels and donkeys, and set off as quickly as we could. We were never going to be moving fast, as sheep can only be herded so quickly, and we had to reach water at the end of each days travel. Having so many young children was difficult as well. The babies were strapped in baskets slung from the sides of the donkeys, but Reuben and Simeon were old enough to know what was going on, and to get quickly bored with the constant amount of walking we had to do each day.

Eventually the day came that we had hoped to avoid when father, our brothers and some of our servants caught up with us camping in the hills of Gilead. I don't know what they expected to do to turn us back, but they had come in enough numbers to take Leah and I back by force. Father played the innocent father to Jacob;

‘Why did you run off without even telling me or letting me say goodbye to my daughters and grandchildren?’

Jacob was honest with him ‘Because I was afraid that you would stop us, and keep Leah and Rachel by force.’

‘Well, I could have done that, and I was prepared to do that when I found you, but Yahweh has appeared to me in a dream and told me that I should leave you alone. So give me time to say goodbye to my daughters and grandchildren and I will return to my home, leaving you to return to your own county in peace. There is just one thing. You really should not have robbed me off my household gods when you left.’

At this I froze, particularly when Jacob swore that he had not taken them, and that if anyone in his party had, then he would put them to death himself. He didn't know that I was hiding them beneath the cushions I was sitting on. Father set his servants to search our camp, but I gently said that I could not get up as it was my time of the month and I was unclean, so they left me alone. Eventually father gave up his search, and a very relieved Jacob ordered a feast. While the feast was being prepared, Jacob and father set up a stone as a covenant between them. Father made it forcibly clear again, that the only reason Jacob was still in one piece was because of Yahweh, but if he should ill-treat either Leah or I, or any of our children, he, Laban would face the wrath of Yahweh, and take personal pleasure in teaching him, Jacob a lesson. It was an idle threat, and father knew it, as Jacob had always been a good, and fair husband to the both of us.

On the last part of our journey to Jacob's home land, Jacob became more and more quiet. Then one morning I awoke to find Jacob rolling around the tent in agony, with his hip out of its socket. I called a couple of our strongest men to help manipulate it back into place. Even when they had it back, walking for Jacob was agony. When eventually I had given him some herbs to help the pain, he told me that he had spent the night wrestling with one of Yahweh's angels. It had been an even fight, and Jacob had acquitted himself so well that he had managed to wrangle a blessing from the angel, whose name he said was Penniel. Penniel had also changed Jacob's name to Israel, as he had struggled with Yahweh and won. Just as light came up over the horizon, Jacob had loosed his grip on the angel, who had touched him on the hip, and dislocated it, which is how I had found him that morning.

Jacob, no I must call him Israel now, had one last thing to tell me on that journey, and that was that on his journey to Aram Naharaim, he had had a dream where he saw a ladder with the angels of Yahweh ascending and descending. Israel climbed the ladder, and at the top was Yahweh. He talked to Yahweh, who promised him that if he faithfully followed him, he would give him the land where he now, to him and his descendants for ever. Israel had set up a pillar to remember the site, which he named

Beth-el. The house of God. He had known all of the time he was working for my father that things would work out, from my becoming his wife, to the birth of Joseph, to the growth of the flocks. Now he was worried because he had to face his brother, and make reparation for all the wrong that he had done to him. He should have been his brother's servant, as he was the younger son, but he had stolen his father's blessing which gave him authority over his brother.

I tried to argue him out of his position, so did Leah. Neither of us wanted to be the servants of Israel's brother. When at last we were within a days journey of Esau, Israel set up our procession so the herds and herdsmen went first, then Zilpah and Bilhah with their children, then Leah and hers, then I and mine. Israel went on ahead of us. Esau came to meet us with all of his servants. When he saw that it was his brother, he rushed forward and hugged him, then stood back to look at the procession coming towards him. When Israel said that everything he could see was his, and he was now giving them to Esau to make up for the injustices he had subjected him to, Esau just brushed him aside, saying he had more than enough flocks and women of his own thank you. We were all really glad to hear that. Israel had us get down from our travelling animals, and be introduced to Esau, leaving Joseph and I to the last. We had a huge feast when we all finally met up with all of Esau's wives and children.

We have lived in the land of Israel's birth for a while now. I am recording my story now, as I too have now had a dream from Yahweh. I am carrying one last child, another last son for Israel, whom he will name Benjamin, but I will not live to see him grow up. One of the servants will suckle him, and he will call her mother, but this is what Yahweh wills for me. I have told Israel of my dream and he is distraught, but I am reconciled knowing that I will soon be climbing the ladder my beloved Israel has seen and climbed, and I will find myself in the presence of Yahweh. There I will find rest and peace after the toils and tribulations of this life.