



Jacob: Our Patriarch of Truth



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This Limmud study was completed shortly before Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein's sudden death in February. Rabbi Eckstein's passion and vision was in sharing the Jewish roots of Christianity. It is in that spirit we share with you the last Limmud that Rabbi Eckstein wrote.

The third and final patriarch of the Jewish Bible is Jacob. In one of the most famous Bible stories, Jacob dreamt of a ladder that was rooted on earth and reached toward heaven. According to Jewish tradition, when Jacob looked up the ladder to heaven, God showed him a three-legged throne and told him, “*You are the third leg.*” As we read in Scripture, God told Jacob, “*I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying*” (Genesis 28:13).

Jacob completes the trilogy of Abraham and Isaac. In Deuteronomy 32:9, we read, “*For the LORD's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted inheritance.*” However, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, the preeminent Jewish commentator on the Bible (11th century, France), translated the latter part of the verse differently. The Hebrew word *chevel* can mean “portion,” as it is often translated in this verse. However, it can also mean “cord.” Rabbi Yitzchaki explained that Jacob, along with Abraham and Isaac, represents a rope made of three strands.

The power of a three-stranded cord is echoed in Ecclesiastes 4:12: “*Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.*” Together, the three patriarchs form an unbreakable bond — a three-stranded cord — between God and His people. Moreover, the three-stranded cord is embedded in the spiritual DNA of God's people. The attributes of each patriarch is planted into their descendants — Abraham, kindness; Isaac, strength; and as we shall discover in this month's *Limmud*, Jacob, truth.

However, while Jacob is an equal member of the patriarchs, he also stands alone. God's people are named after Jacob solely. Jacob was given an additional name after he struggled with a stranger, only identified in the Scriptures as “*a man*” (Genesis 32:24). After an epic struggle that lasted until dawn, Scripture tells us that the man said, “*Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel*” (Genesis 32:28).

The Jewish people are not known as the

children of Abraham, nor the children of Isaac. God's people are the children of Israel. As the prophet Hosea wrote, “*Yet the Israelites will be like the sand on the seashore, which cannot be measured or counted. In the place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' they will be called 'children of the living God'*” (Hosea 1:10).

In addition, Jacob is the only patriarch who the nation of Israel can claim exclusively. Abraham was the father of Isaac, but also of Ishmael and the children he had with his second wife, Keturah (Genesis 25:1; 4). Although Isaac continued Abraham's legacy, other nations claim Abraham as their father. Isaac was the father of Jacob, but also of Esau, who separated himself from the house of Abraham when he married Canaanite women (Genesis 26:34), and became the father of the Edomites (Genesis 36:9). However, Jacob fathered 12 sons, who became leaders of the 12 tribes who formed the nation of Israel. Only the people of Israel can claim Jacob as a forefather.

For those familiar with the biblical account, Jacob may appear an odd choice for this particular honor, and even odder as the patriarch known for truthfulness. Most biblical commentators paint Jacob in an unflattering light, stealing the birthright and blessing that rightfully belonged to Esau as the firstborn.

In our study, we will take a fresh look at the life of Jacob and his contribution to shaping the nation of Israel. We will look at Jacob from a Jewish perspective and see why truthfulness is considered Jacob's prevailing characteristic. We will discover how Jacob fought to remain true to God's will for his life. The Christian Bible affirms that role in the book of Romans: “*Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls—she was told, 'The older will serve the younger'*” (Romans 9:11-12).

Together, let us grow in our understanding of the man from whom emerged a nation and a people, Israel, and of the enduring lessons his life has for Christians and Jews.



Jacob: Committed to Truth

The boys grew up, and Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country, while Jacob was content to stay at home among the tents. Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob.

— Genesis 25:27-28

Jacob is the only one of the patriarchs or matriarchs mentioned in the Bible before he was born. Describing Rebekah's pregnancy with the twins Jacob and Esau, the Bible says: *"The babies jostled each other within her"* (Genesis 25:22). Because the "jostling" in her womb was so extreme, Rebekah went directly to God for an explanation (Genesis 25:22), and received the following prophetic explanation: *"Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger"* (Genesis 25:23).

Even before he was born, Rebekah knew in her heart that her younger son (Jacob) had been given a greater destiny to fulfill than the older son (Esau). This prophecy would become the defining force in Jacob's life.

In the following verses, we learn that, although the two were twins, the brothers were polar opposites: *"Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country, while Jacob was content to stay at home among the tents"* (v. 27.) In the original Hebrew, the verse literally translates as "The boys grew; and Esau was a cunning hunter, a man of the field; and Jacob was an *'ish tam,*' dwelling in tents."

Jewish commentators struggled with the meaning of *ish tam*, suggesting answers that, in turn, reveal the innate nature of Jacob. The word *ish* is easy enough to translate, meaning "man." To understand the word *tam*, however, we need to look to other places in the Bible where this term described a person.

The first time we come across this description in the Bible is in reference to Noah. We read: *"Noah was a righteous man, blameless (ish tam) among the people of his time"* (Genesis 6:9). Job was described similarly: *"In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. This man was blameless (ish tam) and upright"* (Job 1:1). We find the same word used in Deuteronomy 18:13, when Moses commanded the people to *"be blameless before the LORD your God,"* and again in Psalm 18:23, *"I have been blameless before him and have kept myself from sin."*

While the popular teaching about Esau and Jacob typically casts Jacob in the role of the deceiver, the Hebrew definition of *tam* tells us another story. Although the modern definition of the Hebrew word *tam* is "simple," the biblical meaning implies something more. The word *tam* tells us that Jacob was wholesome, blameless, and pure. He was "simple" in the sense that he was true, through

and through. When it came to dealing with Jacob, there were no hidden agendas. What you saw was what you got. Jacob's nature was to be completely transparent and truthful with his words, thoughts, and actions.

In contrast, Esau was *"a skillful hunter,"* or in the words of the Jewish translation, *"a cunning hunter."* Esau was a *"man of the open country."* Jacob, in contrast, was a tent dweller, *"content to stay at home among the tents."* While Esau concentrated on action and physical exertion — how he appeared on the outside — Jacob's focus was internal. Jewish tradition teaches that Jacob stayed inside his tent so that he could study God's ways and God's truth. If Jacob was a man of introspection, dedicated to discovering the truth, then Esau was the man of physicality, living impulsively in the moment.

The true nature of the two brothers becomes evident in the memorable exchange in chapter 25. Esau had returned from hunting in the field and asked that his brother give him something to eat right away. His brother replied, *"First sell me your birthright"* (v. 31). Instead of refusing such a terrible offer, Esau immediately agreed, even agreeing to swear an oath to Jacob. There was no deceit or trickery here.

In fact, we read, *"So Esau despised his birthright"* (v. 34). The Scriptures clearly put the onus on Esau for his actions, not Jacob. This interpretation is further affirmed in the Christian Bible, when the author of Hebrews called Esau *"godless"* for selling his birthright for a single meal (Hebrews 12:16).

We are all born with certain tendencies and personality traits. It is what a person chooses to do with what he or she has been given that really counts. Esau could have used his skills to inspire others like his grandfather Abraham. Jacob could have remained content to lead a quiet life, never striving to better himself and never reaching his full potential.

However, Jacob chose the harder path. He chose to work on himself and to grow from his trials. As we will see, Jacob was tested many times in his life. Yet, he always remained committed to seeking the truth and living the truth as best as he possibly could. As it is written in Micah 7:20, *"You will give truth to Jacob and mercy to Abraham, which You have sworn to our fathers from days of old"* (NKJV).



Truth in Obedience

Jacob said to his father, “I am Esau your firstborn. I have done as you told me. Please sit up and eat some of my game, so that you may give me your blessing.” — Genesis 27:19

As we have already seen, Jewish tradition unequivocally associates Jacob with the attribute of truth. Just as Abraham is connected with kindness, and Isaac the paradigm of strength, Jacob’s defining characteristic is truth. As we read in Micah 7:20 (NKJV), “*You will give truth to Jacob and mercy [loving-kindness] to Abraham . . .*”

The glaring problem with this characterization is that Jacob comes across as a master deceiver in the Bible when he tricks his father Isaac into giving him Esau’s blessing. Could there be any act more deceptive than that?

Over the centuries much has been written by Jewish commentators explaining this incident. To reference them all would take an entire book. We will look at one idea that is widely accepted in the Jewish community: Rebekah and Jacob were faithful to the “real” truth – the truth that Jacob was the son God had chosen to carry on the covenant: “*Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger*” (Genesis 25:23).

Truth is not as black and white as we might think. It is dangerous to think that we can justify all kinds of lies, but sometimes, albeit rarely, not telling the truth is the right thing to do. We see this with the Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, who lied to Pharaoh about why the Hebrew women continued to give birth to baby boys because they “*feared God*” (Exodus 1:15-19). In Joshua 2, Rahab lied to the king of Jericho about the whereabouts of the Israelite spies because she knew that God had given the Israelites the land (Joshua 2:1-11). This is the lens through which many hold the behavior of Rebekah and Jacob.

Consider that Rebekah, not Isaac, received the prophecy regarding her twins while she was pregnant, that the older sibling would serve the younger one (Genesis 35:23). Jewish tradition teaches that Esau was an immoral and unethical person, a fact that only Rebekah correctly recognized. We know that Esau sold his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of stew, and Scripture plainly tells us that, “*Esau despised his birthright*” (Genesis 25:34). In addition, right before Isaac conferred his blessings, Esau married two Canaanite women who were a “*source of grief for Isaac and Rebekah*” (Genesis 26:35).

The deception suggested by Rebekah went against Jacob’s grain. As a man of truth, this was the last thing he wanted to do. Only once his mother promised to take responsibility for the repercussions did Jacob heed the voice of his mother (Genesis 27:12-13).

Judaism teaches that the three patriarchs were tested in the areas where they were strongest. Abraham, whose trait was kindness, was tested with offering his only son as a sacrifice to God (Genesis 22:2). Isaac, who had immense strength, was tested in being compliant while he could have fought back as he was offered as a sacrifice (Genesis 22:6-8).

In both instances, the patriarchs were tested to see if they could repress their natures and beliefs in order to fulfill the will of God. Similarly, Jacob whose natural tendency was to be truthful, was tested with truth. Could Jacob follow what he knew to be God’s will even if it meant that what he had to do contradicted his natural inclination by deceiving his father?

With the help and encouragement of his mother Rebekah, Jacob was able to do what felt unnatural and uncomfortable for the sake of God’s will. Jacob understood that the only truth in the world is God’s truth – not what we see, not what we think, but what we know with absolute certainty to be the will of God.

As Jesus taught in the Christian Bible, “*Blessed ... are those who hear the word of God and obey it*” (Luke 11:28).

apply it...

- 1. LIVE AUTHENTICALLY.** Mean what you say and say what you mean. God loves sincerity and other people do, too. (Proverbs 8:7; James 5:12)
- 2. SEEK TRUTH.** In a world full of lies, it can be difficult to know what is really true, but that should never hold us back from seeking it with all our heart. (Jeremiah 29:13; Matthew 6:33)
- 3. CHOOSE TO GROW.** It is much easier to be happy with who we are and forgo the hard work of becoming better. However, if we are to become the people that God created us to be, we must always continue growing. (Psalm: 92:12; James 1:3-4)
- 4. COMMIT TO HONESTY.** Since it is commonplace for people to fall into falsehood, Judaism recommends taking extra precautions to minimize the chances. (Exodus 23:7; Ephesians 4:25)
- 5. WORK WITH INTEGRITY.** It is very appealing to cut corners or blur the lines of truth when conducting business. However, as spiritual descendants of Jacob, we must adhere to the highest standard of integrity. (Psalm 32:2; 1 Peter 3:9-11)



A Model of Integrity

“I have been with you for twenty years now. Your sheep and goats have not miscarried, nor have I eaten rams from your flocks. I did not bring you animals torn by wild beasts; I bore the loss myself. And you demanded payment from me for whatever was stolen by day or night.” — Genesis 31:38–39

In life, how a person behaves when it comes to ethics and honesty reveals his or her true character. In fact, Jewish tradition teaches that people will be judged according to how they dealt with others specifically in their business affairs.

Jacob, as a model of truth, was completely faithful and honest in all his business dealings. The Bible records the honorable way that Jacob worked for Laban three times: First, after Jacob fulfilled his 14-year agreement to work for his father-in-law and wanted to return to his homeland (Genesis 30:25-29); second, when 20 years later, Jacob told Rachel and Leah that the time had come to leave their father’s home (Genesis 31:4-16); and third, when Laban confronted Jacob as he fled with his entire family (Genesis 31:38-42).

In each instance, there is a common theme: Integrity.

In Genesis 30, Jacob informed Laban that he had given his all while employed to tend Laban’s sheep. In fact, Laban had enjoyed great prosperity over those 14 years due to Jacob’s efforts. As Jacob told Laban, *“You know how I have worked for you and how your livestock has fared under my care. The little you had before I came has increased greatly, and the LORD has blessed you wherever I have been”* (vv. 29-30). Jacob had worked hard, and it showed.

When Jacob tried to return to his homeland a second time, he explained to his wives in Genesis 31 that he had worked diligently for Laban, despite Laban treating him badly. Jacob said, *“You know that I’ve worked for your father with all my strength, yet your father has cheated me by changing my wages ten times. However, God has not allowed him to harm me”* (vv. 6-7). In spite of Laban’s dishonesty, Jacob maintained the highest level of integrity and did his job to the best of his ability.

Finally, when Laban confronted Jacob as he fled, Jacob declared: *“I have been with you for twenty years now. Your sheep and goats have not miscarried, nor have I eaten rams from your flocks. I did not bring you animals torn by wild beasts; I bore the loss myself. And you demanded payment from me for whatever was stolen by day or night.”* Jacob upheld the greatest standard of honesty even when it cost him dearly.

In contrast, Laban was deceptive and dishonest, even when conducting business with his own son-in-law. Scripture tells us that before Jacob began working for him, Laban had very few sheep (Genesis 30:30). Laban’s dishonest way of conducting business reaped very few rewards. However, Jacob, who worked with integrity, was blessed by God and prospered.

Jacob knew that God intended for him to return to *“the*

land of your fathers” and that God was with him (Genesis 31:3). He knew that it was God who had enabled him to prosper and succeed despite Laban’s attempt to cheat him. As Jacob told Laban, *“If the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, had not been with me, you would surely have sent me away empty-handed”* (Genesis 31:42).

Jacob understood that man does not succeed because of schemes and swindles intended to make money at the expense of others. Rather, people are successful when they recognize God as the source of all blessings and work according to His ethics, even when it is difficult to do so.

As King Solomon, the wisest man to ever live and rule Israel, wrote in Proverbs 10:9, *“Whoever walks in integrity walks securely, but whoever takes crooked paths will be found out.”* And as Paul wrote to the church at Corinth in the Christian Bible, *“Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, with integrity and godly sincerity. We have done so, relying not on worldly wisdom but on God’s grace”* (2 Corinthians 1:12).

Jacob’s commitment to truthfulness, integrity, and obedience to God were the “secrets” of his success. His life serves as a reminder for how we should conduct ourselves today in our places of business, in our communities, and in our homes. As Solomon wrote, *“He [the LORD] holds success in store for the upright, he is a shield to those whose walk is blameless [tam]”* (Proverbs 2:7).

think about it...

1. Take a self-inventory. What are your most dominant character traits? How can you use them in serving God? In serving others?
2. Who do you most identify with in Jacob’s story? Why? Who do you admire the most in the story? Why?
3. How are the attributes of each patriarch – Abraham’s kindness, Isaac’s strength, and Jacob’s commitment to truth – evident in your life? Of the three attributes, which would you like to develop more?
4. How can parents, grandparents, and caregivers encourage children to embrace their natural tendencies and channel them in positive ways?
5. Why do you think Judaism maintains that a person’s honesty in business dealings reveals his or her true character?