



Jacob: Our Patriarch of Truth

The third and final patriarch of the Jewish Bible is Jacob. In one of the most famous Bible stories, Jacob dreamt of a ladder rooted on earth and reaching to heaven. When Jacob looked up, God said, *“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. Each patriarch’s attributes are planted in their descendants: Abraham, kindness; Isaac, strength; and as we’ll discover in this study, Jacob, truth.

But while Jacob is an equal member of the patriarchs, he also stands alone. God’s people are named after Jacob. Jacob was given a new name after he struggled with a stranger, identified in the Bible as *“a man”* (Genesis 32:24). After the struggle, 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.

And 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. Although Isaac continued Abraham’s legacy, other nations claim Abraham as their father. Isaac was the father of Jacob, but also Esau. But Jacob fathered 12 sons who became leaders of the 12 tribes of the nation of Israel.

So let’s take a fresh look at the life of Jacob and his contribution to the nation of Israel. We will look at Jacob from a Jewish perspective and see why truthfulness is considered his prevailing characteristic. We will discover how Jacob fought to remain true to God’s will for his life. And 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.



This Fellowship Study was completed shortly before Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein’s sudden death in February of 2019. 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 Fellowship Study that Rabbi Eckstein wrote.



Jacob: Committed to Truth

Jacob is the only one of the patriarchs or matriarchs mentioned in the Bible before he was born.

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.

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"* (Genesis 25:27). In Hebrew, the verse 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*, revealing Jacob's nature. The word *ish* means "man." To understand the word *tam*, we need to look in the Bible where this term described a person.

The first time we come across this description is in reference to Noah: *"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 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 *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. When it came to dealing with Jacob, there were no hidden agendas. What you saw was what you got. Jacob's nature was transparent and truthful with his words, thoughts, and actions.

In contrast, Esau was in the words of the Jewish translation, "a cunning hunter." Esau was a "man of the open country." Jacob, in contrast, was "content to stay at home among the tents." While Esau concentrated on action and physical exertion, 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.

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 reaching his full potential.

But, 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).



Photo: wikimedia.org/Matthias Stom, c. 1640s

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

Truth in Obedience

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 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.

One idea 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—that the older one would serve the younger (Genesis 25:23). Jewish tradition teaches that Esau was an immoral and unethical person, a fact that only Rebekah recognized. Esau sold his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of stew, and Scripture tells us that, *"Esau despised his birthright"* (Genesis 25:34). 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 contradicting his natural inclination by deceiving his father?

With the help of his mother Rebekah, Jacob was able to do what felt unnatural 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).



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— GENESIS 25:23

A Model of Integrity

In life, how a person behaves 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 was completely honest in 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 tending Laban's sheep. In fact, Laban had enjoyed great prosperity 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 that he had worked diligently, despite Laban treating him badly: *"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"* (31:6-7). In spite of Laban's dishonesty, Jacob kept his integrity and did his job to the best of his ability.

And when Laban confronted Jacob, 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"* (Genesis 31:38-39). Jacob upheld his honesty even when it cost him.

In contrast, Laban was deceptive and dishonest, even doing business with his own son-in-law. Before Jacob began working for him, Laban had very few sheep (Genesis 30:30). Laban's dishonesty reaped few rewards. But 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. 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.

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. 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).



I have been with you for twenty years now. our 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

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?**



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)

