



SERMON VAYEITZE:¹
RACHEL AND THE HOUSEHOLD GODS

Student Rabbi Gabriel Webber, Saturday 17 November 2018
York Liberal Jewish Community – annual interfaith service

The story of Rachel stealing the household idols belonging to her father Lavan, in Genesis 31, is a strange and perplexing one that is never really explained in the Biblical text. She steals them, Laban looks for them, she fobs him off by claiming to be on her period – and that's the last we hear of the matter.

Then I read a story in the news about how schoolgirls in Leeds were advised before the summer that if they were being taken abroad against their will for a forced marriage, they should hide a spoon in their underwear. It would be picked up by a metal detector, they'd be taken to a private room, and could then tell their story in confidence.²

Why did Rachel secrete the household gods in her saddle-bag? We really don't know. But I decided to imagine³ what might have happened in between the two halves of verse 35...

Rachel said to her father: Do not let upset be in my lord's eyes that I am not able to rise in your presence, for the time of women is upon me.

Lavan replied: So, my daughter. I suppose the gods are hidden in the bundle on which you are sitting?

What...

I am your father. I know when you're lying.



What do I want with your gods? El Shaddai, the God of Jacob my husband, the one true God, is all I need.

I did not suggest that you stole my household gods in order to worship them.

What else would you have me do with them? See how my sons blanch at the sight of you:⁴ children of God having to witness their grandfather scrabbling around tents and beds and soiled linen, desperately searching for figures of iron and bronze in order to pretend that they are the force that breathes life into you! A pathetic sight. Your idolatry embarrasses us! Why should we want to bring it into our homestead?

I have not come to recover my gods.

Then you intend to worship them here, in front of us, a final act of offence towards Jacob as we leave your life for good?

I have not come to worship my gods.

Well, good; for they are not here. I have not your gods.

Yes, you have, and that is why I have come.

My lord speaks in riddles, in words that do not cohere.

I do not need my household gods back. This El Shaddai beloved to your Jacob has provided well for him and for my daughters; that is all I require from a God. My role in life, to bring you up virtuously, to marry you off to a suitable man able to care for you – this role I have discharged, with El Shaddai's blessing. I have no further need of gods of metal.



Then why chase us here, nigh four days' exertion for you? Why speak slander against my husband by charging him with theft? If you care not for your gods, why did you start so when you found them missing?

I started so because of you. Or Leah. Then, I knew not for certain which of you it was. But I knew one of the two of you had taken the gods from our home, and I knew you would not have done so to worship them – nor, you being women of virtue, to sell them on for profit.

I...

Now tell me, my daughter, why you took my gods.

We left in haste.

Go on?

We left in the most frantic of haste. Jacob revealed to us that we would be departing Haran and we had but moments to gather our children and our material possessions, and to begin our journey. You were elsewhere and were to have no knowledge of our departure.

But...?

I was afraid. I was afraid. My sons were in good heart, anticipating a journey of excitement and exploration. Leah would go anywhere so long as she had Jacob with her. But I looked around our home, where I was raised, where I met Jacob, where I had lived and worked and cleaned and ate and bathed...

And you slipped the household gods into the saddle-bag of your camel.

You make it sound so sordid!



Then tell me the innocence of it.

I wanted not the gods as a souvenir. They weighed down my camel, and if Jacob were ever to find me with idols, his anger would be kindled against me. These things are not good. It was not for mere memory that I took... that I stole the gods.

Why, then?

You know why. You know when I lie, when I say words that are not true; so too do you know when I omit to say words that are true.

I want to hear it from your lips.

I stole the gods because I knew you would come after them.

You desired that I should give chase?

I did.

And now you want me to take you back to Haran, to save you from the perilous journey into the unknown which you are undertaking? You wish to be released from the zeal and piousness of that Jacob, who, amiable though he is, can be rather tiresome?

No! No. I love Jacob. How could you think such things?

I simply hear what you say – and what you do not say.

Then hear this! I am staying with Jacob. My husband. My sons.

But you made me chase you here as a precaution, in case you had resolved to leave? In case you had decided, after all, to abandon Jacob? You are fickle and changeable! Why, perhaps the time of women is upon you, after all!



No. I did not bring the gods on my journey to be a souvenir, but... that is why I brought you on yours.

I am a souvenir?

In a manner of speaking, my lord, you are. We left in haste. Like your cousin's late wife,⁵ I had no chance to look back at what I was leaving behind. But it is you I am leaving behind.

One does not leave behind a souvenir. One takes it onward. And upon my life, I will not traverse with you and Leah and Jacob and your menagerie of sons and concubines and your strange unitary God. If you have found content here, I am pleased for you, and your El Shaddai has given you prosperity, and for that I give thanks, but here ends my role.

Yes: here, but not there.

Now you are the one to speak in riddles.

Here ends your role. Here, in Gil'ad, together. Not with you out tending the flocks, and me hastening away under cover of darkness like verminous animals scurrying about. That we must go our separate ways I acknowledge – but let us part knowingly. Let our last meeting be one at which each of us is aware of its nature.

You stole my household gods to prompt me to ride out to you... to say goodbye?

That I did. To get you alone, in this tent, I stole your gods and used them as bait. It was an imposition in a moment of panic, panic at the unknown, and while I recognise that it is unforgivable, I crave your forgiveness.



You did not steal all of the gods, though, did you? You spoke of iron and bronze.
What of the copper figurine?

I saw not the copper figurine when I packed.

Then see it now.

What? Where? How?

Show me the gods of iron and bronze.

Behold, the gods for whom I knew you would come.

I came not for the gods. Continue to empty the saddle-bag, I pray; object by
object.

A comb, sandals, swaddling clothes, my earrings... Why, what is this?

You have not yet brought it above the lip of the bag. Before you allow me to see it,
I will guess as to its construction. Is it of copper?

You surely know that it is of copper. It is the last of your household
gods! How came it to be in my saddle-bag?

You heard my words to Jacob outside. I berated him, truly and from my heart, for
leaving without allowing me to kiss my daughters. So why would you believe that
you are the only one of the two of us who wished to say goodbye?⁶

—*And, having searched, Lavan did not find the household gods.*

Check against delivery.

GW 17.11.18



¹ Genesis 31:17-36

² John Roberts. 'School tackling forced marriage with spoon in underwear' in *Times Educational Supplement*, 9 July 2018: <<https://www.tes.com/news/school-tackling-forced-marriage-spoon-underwear>>

³ Staggeringly loosely inspired by the structure of BBC Radio 4's *John Finnemore's Double Acts*

⁴ Genesis Rabbah 74:8

⁵ Genesis 19:26

⁶ A descendant of Lavan's would later use a similar ruse: Genesis 44:2