

Feeling for Rebekah:

Matthew 7:2 *“For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.”* - Also see Luke 6:38.

Gary Rendsburg’s book on Genesis offers some of the greatest insights into this inspirational and foundational text.

Currently Chair of the Department of Jewish Studies at Rutgers University, his level of academic scholarship is outstanding, especially in the study of the Dead Sea Scrolls and other ancient Jewish texts. Not only is he an expert in Hebrew, but his understanding and skill in advanced analysis of literature is very impressive.

So while Prof. Rendsburg concedes that Genesis was first written in a very basic Hebrew, he goes on to explain his approach and how he appreciates the great depth of the text.

He writes: *“First and foremost, we will approach the text as a piece of literature, highlighting the many literary devices and techniques employed by the ancient author(s) of the book. In so doing, we will demonstrate that what on the surface may look like rather simple tales are, in fact, the products of great literary sophistication.*

This finding bespeaks not only a remarkably gifted author but also an ancient Israelite audience that could appreciate and understand literature of such high quality and brilliance. We are led to conclude that literature played a central role in the life of ancient Israel, thus establishing at a very early time the notion that the Jews are the people of the book.”

In his book on Genesis Rendsburg highlights the issue of Rebekah’s deception of her husband, Isaac and the justice that she, and her son Ya’acov (Jacob) received for this un-Godly act.

He explains how Genesis 27 informs us of how Rebekah orchestrated the deception of Isaac, (though whether he was really deceived or not is questionable). The deceptive act results in Ya’acov being given the blessing that was apparently meant for his older brother Esau.

Before looking at this episode in a little more depth, the impact of this deception on Rebekah was that her most favoured son, Ya’acov left the family home and travelled far away (to Aram) not to return for 20 years!

It appears that Rebekah died during this 20 years having not seen her son, her most favoured son, again after this fateful day!

Surely she paid a very heavy price. I feel for Rebekah. Yes, what she did was clearly wrong and possibly illustrated a lack of trust that the Almighty would do the right then through her sons. However, the bond between a mother and her children is normally a very, very strong and important one. Even though Ya’acov was a young adult when he left her side, this enforced separation would have seriously diminished both their lives. While Ya’acov could ‘move on’ to a large degree and find the comfort of a wife(s) to comfort, strength and complete him, the loss of his relationship with his mother would have still resulted in unseen costs to his emotional and spiritual growth.

As Rendsburg explains, Isaac said in verse 4, *“in order that my soul will bless you before I die.”*, yet Rebekah quotes this as follows in verse 7: *“so that I may bless you before the LORD before my death.”*

Rendsburg further notes that Rebekah has introduced God into the equation and then he asks: *Is this an example of women’s greater spirituality? Remarkably, though, when Jacob appears before Isaac in verse 19, he refers to the words that Isaac actually spoke to Esau in verse 4, not to the words that Rebekah spoke to him in verse 7.”*

Once Isaac gives the blessing to Ya'acov, he can't reverse it, and even with Esau's pleading for a blessing as well, it can't be the same (or as good).

Rendsburg re-iterates, *"Words spoken have a power unto their own, according to the biblical mode of thinking."*

In many places, when we look closely we see that the Bible continues to re-inforce the concept of 'measure for measure', a concept that Yeshua would also reiterate.

The unspoken message regarding Rebekah's act of deception in this narrative, is that she never gets to see her Ya'acov again. When he returns to the land of Canaan (see Genesis 33-35), he is re-united with Esau and his father Isaac, but there is no mention of Rebekah, or her death, despite the events she orchestrated being so central to the events that led to Ya'acov's leaving for fear of his life. Note also though that the deaths of the other major figures in Genesis are all mentioned - namely Avraham, Isaac, Sarah and Rachel.

So it would seem that Rebekah died sometime during the 20 years of Ya'acov's exile in Paddan Aram (the land of Avraham's birth and the city of Haran, where Rebekah's brother Laban lived).

Rebekah appears to have brought this curse upon herself, as we read that when Ya'acov first objected to impersonating his brother, Rebekah replies: 'may your curse be upon me, my son' - Gen 27:13.

Rendsburg goes on to explain: *"All this is accomplished in the most subtle fashion in the narrative. Nowhere does the reader hear a statement, in Aesop-like fashion: "And the moral of the story is: Don't deceive your blind father/husband." The reader must figure this out without any guidance from the author. As we have seen before, the reader is invited to participate in the act of storytelling by being an attentive listener.*

Another example of this occurs in the Bible in the extended narrative of King David in 2 Samuel 11-1 Kings 2. In response to the death of Uriah and other innocents, David glibly said, "the sword eats this one and that one" (2 Samuel 11:25). As a result of this line, three of David's sons (Amnon, Absalom, and Adonijah) die by the sword in subsequent chapters (2 Samuel 13 through 24, and in the first two chapters of the Book of 1 Kings)."

Similarly, Ya'acov receives his punishment, his 'measure for measure' when he thinks he is marrying Rachel after working for her father for 7 years and hyet wakes to find he has married her older sister Leah.

Note the irony when he complains to Laban *'What is this that you have done to me?...Why did you deceive me?'* (Gen29:25), and Laban replies: *'It is not so done in our place, to give the younger before the first-born.'*

Here we see Ya'acov being punished for in a sense, doing the very same thing, in having placed himself (the younger brother) before his older brother (Esau, the firstborn). This is a 'quid pro quo' or 'measure for measure' punishment, dealt by the hand of an agent of God, rather than the Almighty Himself.

And even more 'appropriate' punishment was to come for Ya'acov when we read the story of his being tricked (another 'quid pro quo') into believing his favoured son Yosef is dead (Gen 37).

So, to repeat, both Rebekah and Ya'acov suffer as a result of their deception. Yet, I feel Rebekah paid the greatest price. As far as we can tell from the Biblical narrative, she totally lost her relationship with her favoured son. She clearly paid a heavy price. We may imagine that the outcome was exactly as desired by God to bring into existence the 12 sons who would form the 12 Tribes of Israel, but we can't know how the Almighty's purposes would have transpired if this deception had not occurred. We can be sure though that His will would still be done.

And so, along with the ethical lesson to be learned here regarding 'measure for measure' and the corresponding issue of (falsely) judging others, I think we should also reflect on the message that God's Will, will be done, without us needing to force the issue, especially through some action that is not fully compliant with His Torah.

For further reflections on the issue of 'measure for measure' I have pasted an old article of mine on this topic below:

An Eye for an Eye or Measure for Measure?

Case Study 1: Samson, Boaz and the line of King David and Yeshua:

Most are familiar with the basic story of Samson, the amazing Israelite whose hair appeared to give him amazing strength, but who was ultimately undone by a woman (as all men are!).

The Talmud/Midrash gives a fascinating back story though. Samson's name properly transliterated is Shimshon which in Hebrew is 'tov may sheesheem' meaning 'better than 60'. Why would his parents have named him 'better than 60'?

The story of Samson (Shimshon) takes place soon after the story of Ruth, according to Midrashic sources. Ivtzan (Ibzan) was a judge shortly before Shimshon. The Gemara and Talmud (Bava Batra 91a) identify Ivtzan/Ibzan as Boaz, who married Ruth.

In Judges 12: 8--10 we read: "After him, Ibzan of Bethlehem led Israel. He had thirty sons and thirty daughters. He gave his daughters away in marriage to those outside his clan, and for his sons he brought in thirty young women as wives from outside his clan. Ibzan led Israel seven years. Then Ibzan died and was buried in Bethlehem."

Apparently following local custom, Ibzan/Boaz made feasts when he married his children off. The custom was for guests to reciprocate and invite their former hosts to the feasts for their own children's marriages. Ibzan/Boaz did not invite Manoach (who would become father of Shimshon/Samson and who was married to a niece of Boaz) to his feasts.

The Talmud argues that because Boaz was aware that Manoach and his wife were barren, they could never reciprocate and invite Boaz to their children's weddings. So 60 times, Manoach and his wife miss out on these great festive occasions and are left at home humiliated.

Bava Batra 91a relates that as a punishment, Ivtzan/Boaz saw all 60 of those children die in his lifetime.

Thus, when in her old age, Manoach's wife gives birth, she and her husband, Manoach name the child 'Better than 60' i.e. Shimshon/Samson.

So the arrogance and petty-mindedness of Ibzan/Boaz results in a 'eye for an eye' type of consequence. The measure he receives as a consequence for his lack of charity though seems harsh to us.

However, perhaps such suffering also helped develop the great character of this man, so that when Ruth arrived he acted with great kindness, restraint and consideration towards her. Ultimately, he was greatly rewarded with his lineage giving rise to King David and the Messiah!

It appears that Boaz is a fairly old man when Ruth arrives in Bethlehem (possibly still with several wives, but probably no sons left). Note that the Tanakh quotes Boaz as stating to Ruth (who was clearly still quite young): "May you be blessed by the LORD, my daughter. You have made this last kindness greater than the first in that you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich." (Ruth 3:10).

If the Jewish commentary is correct then, Obed (the father of Jesse/Yishai, the father of King David) becomes the heir of Boaz's wealth and position.

Now consider Shimshon/Samson though. The Talmud also explains that God has treated Shimshon measure for measure. Shimshon misuses his eyes to chase Gentile unbelievers --- Philistine women, and is ultimately blinded by the very same Philistines (see Sota, p9).

So now you may be a little better prepared to reconsider the 'eye for an eye' texts in the Tanakh (Ex 21:24; Lev 24:20; Deut 19:21) and not take them as totally literal declarations.

While there are also some contextual issues to consider here, the crucial issue is that the Jewish people never took this text as totally literal.

The sages and Rabbis took this as 'measure for measure' and interpret the verse simply: *"Full compensation must be paid for the loss of an eye, a tooth, a hand or a foot."*

No Jew/Israeli ever had his eye punched out, or tooth punched out, or hand or foot cut off, by the judges and local Sanhedrin. The words used are merely a Hebrew idiom (another example of the Hebraic mindset), meaning that fair and reasonable compensation is to be paid to the injured person in proportion to the damage caused.

--- The story of Samson & Boaz related here is one of a great many very interesting stories related by Yossi Maimon in *'Discover The Land Of Israel: A guided Tour In Biblical Israel With Talmud and Midrash'*.

Case Study 2: Three darts for three hearts

King David's son Absalom/Avshalom (meaning father of peace) rebel's against his father so that he can become King of Israel. He uses deceit to win his Kingship but is ultimately paid back measure for measure.

To quote Yossi Maimon: *"Avshalom used his attractive appearance as a tool to manipulate and control the people of Israel. Now his hair is being used, measure for measure, to hang him on a tree (2Samuel 14:25---26; 18:9,10)...."*

Why was Avshalom struck in the heart with three darts? The Talmud tells us that the three darts are, measure for measure, for the three hearts Avshalom betrays. (Sota 9)

First Avshalom steals his father's heart, when he tricks him into writing a letter for the people to help him, though he is really planning to use the letter to turn the people against his father.

The second heart he steals is the heart of the elders of Israel --- using his father's letter deceptively.

The third heart he steals is the heart of the common people of Israel. When the people are about to be judged by King David, Avshalom tells them that they will not be treated justly and only if he were the judge, would they receive justice.

When any man had a suit which should come to the king for judgment, Avshalom said to him: "See, your matters are good and right, but there is no man authorized by the king to hear you. If I were judge in the land, every man who had any suit or cause might come to me and I would do him justice!"

So Avshalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel. (2 Samuel 15).

These few examples may help you appreciate that the 'eye for an eye' commandment in the Tanakh, was not and is not understood in a totally literal sense. While it is still a very important and relevant instruction from the Almighty (Torah = divine instructions or teaching), it was always understood in terms of equity, or fairness, and to also have a degree of context sensitivity.

Therefore, we can see that Yeshua was declaring most clearly and succinctly that the understanding of 'measure for measure' was a correct interpretation of Torah when he stated: *"... and with the measure you use it will be measured to you."*

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