

December 6, 2008, Vayetzei, Snap Judgements

If you're a reader of old Victorian novels like Eliot and Gaskell and Trollope, or, if you watch modern dramas and sitcoms, and you want to know in such stories who's going to fall in love? The best predictor is who at the beginning of the story hates each other, because the person you hate, somehow, and this shows partly the dexterity, the skill of the author, and partly the truth of life, somehow that person's going to come around to be the person you love.

And that isn't only true of love relationships, though we'll return to that in a moment. But these kinds of judgments in our lives show the same tendency to mature and ripen and grow into something different from the judgment with which we began.

When we see Jacob this morning, we don't like him. This is someone who stole the birthright from his brother, who negotiates with God. He seems like a sort of unsavory character. And I bring this up because there is a certain fashionableness to snap judgments. People trust their intuition. How often are you told to trust your intuition? There's something about that guy I don't like. Trust your intuition. In fact, there was a book written about this, a best-selling book by Malcolm Gladwell called *Blink*, as in, you should make your judgements in the blink of an eye, and then believe me, you should trust them.

Except I want to say two things about that. One is that the people that he quoted by and large whose intuitions were correct were people who had schooled those intuitions. That is, they had learned a great deal about the subject before they had intuitions. So they would show them a piece of art and say, does this seem authentic to you? And they would say yes or no, they would prove to be right, but of course, they'd had years of studying art before they had that intuition. If I showed you a fake Rembrandt, I would say for almost everyone here, we have no intuition about it. We might guess, but that's not the same as an intuition. And that's because you need to train. I'll never have an intuition about nuclear physics, trust me on this, because you have to know something about it.

And the second part of this is we all know something about human nature, but human nature is far too complicated to master. And so you discover that the person that you meet at first may not be the person that you know later.

And to take this example, the Jacob that we meet at the beginning doesn't only change because he does, he changes, he grows. But also like every human being, he unfolds, that is, there are parts of him we don't know, and we only come to discover later on. After all, it's not only Jacob, we have a snap judgment about Esau too. We don't like Esau. He's violent. He threatens to kill Jacob. And yet years later when they meet, Esau falls on Jacob's neck and weeps. And we don't know how to fit that into our intuition because he's not supposed to do that. He's not supposed to cry. He's supposed to kill him. That's what Esau is like. But of course, the time to make a final judgment about human beings is never, we discover things about people after they've passed away that alter our judgment of who they were. We're constantly learning new

things about historical characters that deepen them and change our sense that they're fixed in our minds.

George Bernard Shaw once said that the only person who really knew him was his tailor because every time he went to his tailor, he measured him again. He didn't trust that the measurement he had last time was correct because he knew, there's always Thanksgiving. There could be a new measurement the next time you go to your tailor, Just wait till Hanukkah.

And that brings us to a very perplexing incident that Rabbi Schudenfreni alluded to earlier that occurs in this morning's parsha. Jacob goes to bed thinking that he has married and is sleeping with Rachel, and he wakes up and it's Leah. Now, the rabbis give all sorts of explanations about how this could have happened, going so far as to say, in a sort of folkloric mode, that Rachel was hidden under the bed and she was the one who would talk every time you would ask Leah a question.

But the truth is, there's no way to make this story work. Unless Jacob is an idiot, you got to figure at a certain point, he begins to imagine that the person he's in bed with is not the person he thought he was in bed with. And thereby hangs a beautiful mystical teaching. It says that the story, even though it has some literal components, it's really symbolic. What it teaches is the person you go to bed with is not the person you wake up with.

Now, think about this for a minute. The person you married you is not the person you're married to. The person that you became friends with 20 years ago is not your friend today, because you change and they change. Sometimes that change is terrible. People grow apart. You discover things about the person you thought you knew that you wish you didn't know. You all of a sudden realize that in fact, you thought you were marrying, befriending, coming close to one person, but you, and they have changed in the way that Virginia Woolf explained it. She said, when talking about how she loses friends, she said, well, we change and we forget to tell each other.

But the opposite can also happen. That is, love deepens and it ramifies and it grows and it becomes more beautiful in ways that you didn't expect. Sometimes it happens that each time you see someone, you see them new, you see them different, you see them with a deeper love and a greater understanding.

Stendhal, the great anatomist of love, the French novelist wrote a book called *On Love*, and in it he compared love to the salt mines. He said, what happens is this process of crystallization, which happens in the mines in Salzburg, you get these branches and around them they form salt crystals and what are really normal, everyday branches become extremely beautiful because they have these crystals around them. But of course the inside is still a branch. And he said, that's what happens with love, is we encrust the beloved in all these beautiful images so that we will say to someone else, isn't that the most beautiful person you've ever seen? And of course, the other person who has not endowed our beloved with all these wonderful characteristics, says, she seems very sweet, seems lovely, really seems lovely. Charles Lamb,

in one of his essays said something like that. He said, when other people talk of their spouses and their dogs, I agree.

So that's what happens. What happens is that gradually over time, the salt drips away and you see the person. And sometimes it is a beautiful revelation and sometimes it's disturbing. So we see Jacob over time and Jacob becomes better. We see Lavan and Lavan becomes worse. And neither of those conclusions could we have confidently predicted if all we did was read the very beginning of the story.

So one of the things that Torah wants to teach us is don't judge people too quickly. Don't know them too well, too fast. Don't assume that because you're sure, you're right. Think of all the times you met someone and liked them or didn't like them. But gradually as you got to know them, your view changed. *Dan lekaf zekhut*, give them a chance, not forever and ever and ever. There is a limit and life is short, and you have to choose who you will draw close to and who you will keep at a distance. But don't judge too fast. Don't assume that your intuitions are always right, even though they will sometimes prove to be right.

It's not uncommon for couples to come to my office and say, rabbi, do you believe in love at first sight? And the truth is, I do and I don't. I believe in infatuation at first sight that sometimes leads to love, but you can't really love someone if you don't know them. And knowing someone takes time and it takes work, it takes work on the part of the other person, and it takes work on your own part if you would give yourself to be known.

And so we can see Jacob differently when at the very beginning of his discussions as it were with God, when he says, if you do this for me and you do that for me, and you do the other thing for me, then as our bat mitzvah taught us this morning, then God, we got a deal, but only then there are at least two ways to see it. One is, this is a conniver. Someone who wants to extract the best deal from God, somebody we shouldn't trust.

But there's another way to see it that I think we understand as we get to know Jacob better. Here's someone who's scared. Here's someone who's vulnerable. Here's someone who's away from home for the first time. Here's someone who knows that his brother hates him and he fooled his father. Here's someone who's alone in the world and for the first time thinks maybe God will protect him. In other words, the more we think about Jacob, the more we are inclined to revise our quick judgments, to complicate them, to ramify them, to make them deeper.

And then we have to think of ourselves. How often we too have asked for assurances where there are no assurances for promises, for things that can't be promised, for the certainty of love and goodness and fidelity and health and success. When all those things, all those things, for all the hard work and effort that we may make, they're all partly a product of luck.

So we see Jacob in a different way and maybe ourselves as people trying to negotiate a difficult and perilous world, trying to find others to do it with us, hopefully willing ourselves to open our souls and to judge others carefully, slowly and kindly. You can make snap judgments, but if you

do, you'll never know Jacob. You may not know the people around you. And because each of us is mirrored in others, you will never know yourself. Shabbat shalom.