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“Jacob loved Rachel; so he answered ‘I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel’. Laban said ‘Better that I give her to you than I should give her to an outsider. Stay with me.’ So Jacob served seven years for Rachel and they seemed to him but a few days because of his love for her. ..And Laban gathered all the people of the place and made a feast. When evening came, he took his daughter Leah and brought her to him; and he cohabited with her...When morning came there was Leah! So he said to Laban ‘what is this you have done to me?’ Laban said ‘It is not the practice in our place to marry off the younger before the older...’” (Genesis 29:18-26)

Throughout Genesis there is a sense that there are no real absolute standards when it comes to ethical behavior. It appears as though Genesis is conflicted between the necessities for an absolute standard as opposed to situational ethics. The creation story makes the case for absolute standards as does the crime and punishment of Cain. Noah, however is treated by our traditional commentaries on a relative scale. He was a “tzaddik”, a righteous man compared to those of his generation. Perhaps he wouldn’t have been deemed a “righteous one” had he lived in another generation, in the generation of Abraham; yet God goes to extreme measures in His desire to enforce standards.

Jacob is another example of one practicing situational ethics, and it appears as though the text treating the episodes of Jacob is struggling with Jacob’s choices. Jacob, in his desire to fulfill his mission, tricks his brother Esau twice. The first time when he holds back his food until Esau sells him his birthright and the second time is when he tricks his father into giving him the blessings of the first born by passing himself off as Esau. One can’t help but wince at the commentaries who try to pass off these behaviors as acceptable and necessary due to the need to carry out God’s will. The text has difficulty with it and suggests that he who lives by deceit shall himself be deceived.

A clear example of this is the “switch and bait” technique used by Laban when negotiating the marriage of his daughters. Laban’s comment that “Such is not done in

our place, giving away the younger before the firstborn”, reminds us of Jacob’s ruse in tricking Esau out of his birthright. The comparison goes further when considering the following: as Jacob fooled his blind father, so too was he fooled by his dim sighted wife, Leah, in a dark wedding tent. There is a beautiful midrash that interprets the story as follows: After Jacob realizes in the morning that he slept with Leah he rebukes her by saying ‘why did you answer when I addressed Rachel?’ Leah responded according to the midrash ‘is there a teacher without a pupil?...When your father called you Esau did you not say ‘here I am’? So did you call me and I answered.

Later on when Jacob wishes to leave Laban with his family he deceives his father-in-law again. The text, not being comfortable with this, points to the deception of Jacob’s own children. In the Dina story the clan of Hamor is deceived by Shimon and Levi. Later Jacob is deceived in to believing that Joseph has been killed by a wild animal. As Jacob used a hairy animal skin to steal the blessings, his sons in turn used a hairy goat to deceive Jacob by dipping Joseph’s coat in its blood.

To counter the situational ethics encountered in our text and the obvious dissonance expressed we are commanded in Deuteronomy to pursue justice. While deception and the weakness of human nature maybe man’s natural state we are thus commanded to pursue justice because that is not our natural state.