

Dear Friends,

GENESIS 29: 15-17

Who remembers Laban, Rebekah's brother? He's the one whose eyes lit up when Rebekah came home with valuable gifts given to her by Abraham's servant who was seeking a wife for Isaac. Years have passed since then. Laban's looking a lot older, but inside he hasn't changed at all. Far away, Rebekah has had two sons, Esau and Jacob. While here Laban has had two daughters, Leah and Rachel. I wonder if Laban day dreamed about some rich person turning up with precious things wanting to marry one of his daughters.

Then one day Rachel arrives home, flushed and excited. She says "I met this stranger at the well. He was sooooo strong. He moved the huge stone ... you know the one that seals the well's mouth, and he moved it all by himself. Then he got water for all of the sheep. And then and then and then"

Rachel's cheeks go bright red. She can't quite bring herself to say what happened next, at least not to her Dad, maybe later to Leah. What had happened next was the stranger had kissed her.

She goes on "And we're family. He's Jacob. Rebekah's son".

Laban rushes to the well to meet him. Is he remembering the stranger who turned up with ten camels? Is he wondering if there will be more gifts? He's rubbing his hands at the prospect. But then he turns the corner and sees ... just Jacob. He looks around for any sign of camels, or other displays of wealth, but no, just a worn-out Jacob. All Jacob has is his staff. Laban is disappointed. But he can make something of it. He's heard of Jacob's strength. He can put that to work. He's sensed immediately that there's something between Jacob and Rachel. He can exploit that. Laban is good at finding ways to make things work together for his own good. The first words we hear him speak are to Jacob. He says, "Surely you are bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh". At one level, they are family. At another, they are alike in character. Both of them are tricky. Both of them are deceivers. There may be trouble ahead. Which of them will end up with the upper hand?

And what about Leah and Rachel? The name Leah means "cow" and Rachel means "ewe". I'll give a bit of the story away in advance by saying that children will be born to both of them. They together with their servant girls will be the Mothers of Israel. The tribes that descended from Leah tended to farm cattle, while those from Rachel tended to farm sheep.

Rachel is described as being fair of form and fair of appearance. Jacob was not alone. All the boys seemed to fall for Rachel. Leah by contrast is described as having weak, soft or tender eyes. Sparkling eyes were all the rage and eye make-up had been developed so that women could give their eyes a glow. This does not

seem to have been considered as Leah's best quality. We today would prefer not to make judgements about people based on their appearance.

In the Talmud, which goes back to the second century there is a story about what happened to Leah's eyes. It tells how one day she was listening to a group of people who were doing a bit of matchmaking. They were talking of how Rebekah had two sons, Esau and Jacob, while Laban had two daughters, Leah and Rachel. It would therefore be natural for Leah to marry Esau and for Rachel to marry Jacob. The oldest marry each other and the youngest marry each other.

Leah was curious and asked "What's Esau like?"

She was given the answer "He's a wicked man, a highway robber".

This isn't actually what it says in Genesis, there he is described as a skillful hunter, a man of the field. Whatever, the match does not really appeal to Leah.

She says "What about the brother, what's he like; what does my sister get?"

They say "He's a simple man. He lives in tents."

This is pretty much what Genesis does say about Jacob. He is described as being "gentle", or even as someone with "integrity". We have already wondered if these descriptions are exactly accurate. Leah looks at the options and thinks she's getting a raw deal. So, she weeps and weeps until her eyelashes drop off. Which is why her eyes become weak or soft.

As we've heard, Esau has married two Hittite women. So, Leah has been saved from that particular fate. But now Jacob has turned up and is clearly smitten by Rachel. And Laban is plotting how to get what he can for himself out of the circumstances that have arisen.

The key players are getting themselves in place. They stand as though they are at the four points of a compass. Laban and Jacob opposite each other. Leah and Rachel opposite each other. Each is waiting to see who will make the first move. Each is waiting for a chance to take an advantage. Each is waiting for one of the others to blink.

God bless you,

Tony