



“The Five Books of Moses:
Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

Parshat VaYetzei—Missing Idols

Text: Genesis 31

יֵט וְלָבֵן הִלְךְ לְגִזְרֵי אֶת-צִ'אֲנוּ וַתִּגְנֹב רַחֵל אֶת-הַתְּרָפִים אֲשֶׁר לְאָבִיהָ. כִּי וַיִּגְנֹב יַעֲקֹב אֶת-לֵב לָבֵן הָאֲרָמִי עַל-בְּלִי הַגִּיד לוֹ כִּי בִרְחֹ הוּא. כִּי וַיִּבְרַח הוּא וְכָל-אֲשֶׁר-לוֹ וַיִּקֶּם וַיַּעֲבֹר אֶת-הַנְּהָר וַיֵּשֶׁם אֶת-פְּנֵי הַר הַגְּלָעַד. כִּי וַיִּגַּד לְלָבֵן בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי כִּי בָרַח יַעֲקֹב. כִּי וַיִּקַּח אֶת-אֲחִיו עִמּוֹ וַיֵּרֶד וַיֵּרְדוּ אַחֲרָיו דֶּרֶךְ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים וַיַּדְבֵּק אֶתוֹ בְּהַר הַגְּלָעַד. כִּד וַיִּבֹא אֶל הַיָּם אֶל-לָבֵן הָאֲרָמִי בְּחַלְמֵם הַלַּיְלָה וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ הַשְּׁמֵר לְךָ פֶּן-תִּדְבַר עִם-יַעֲקֹב מִטּוֹב עַד-רָע. כִּה וַיִּשַׁג לָבֵן אֶת-יַעֲקֹב בִּיַּעֲקֹב בַּתְּקַע אֶת-אֶהָלוֹ בְּהַר וְלָבֵן תִּקַּע אֶת-אֲחִיו בְּהַר הַגְּלָעַד. כִּו וַיֹּאמֶר לָבֵן לַיַּעֲקֹב בִּמְהַר עֲשִׂיתָ וַתִּגְנֹב אֶת-לִבִּי וַתִּנְהַג אֶת-בְּנֵי תִי כְשִׁבּוֹת חֶרֶב. כִּז לָמָּה נִחַבְתָּ לְבָרְחֹ וַתִּגְנֹב אֶתִּי וְלֹא-הִגַּדְתָּ לִּי וְאַשְׁלַחְךָ בְּשִׁמְחָה וּבְשָׂרִים בְּתִי וּבְכַנּוּר. כִּח וְלֹא נִטְשֵׁתִי לְנִשְׁקֵי לְבָנֵי וְלִבְנֵי תִי עֵתָה הִסְכַּלְתָּ עִשׂוֹ. כִּט יֵשׁ-לֹאֵל יָדִי לַעֲשׂוֹת עִמָּכֶם רָע וְאֵל הִי אֲבִיכֶם אֲמַשׁ אֲמַר אֵלַי לֹאמֵר הַשְּׁמֵר לְךָ מִדְּבַר עִם-יַעֲקֹב מִטּוֹב עַד-רָע. ל וְעֵתָה הִלְךְ הַלְכָתָּ כִּי-נִכְסֵי נִכְסֵיכֶם לְבֵית אָבִיךָ לָמָּה גִבַּבְתָּ אֶת-אֵלֵי הִי. לֹא וַיַּעַן יַעֲקֹב וַיֹּאמֶר לְלָבֵן כִּי יִרְאֵתִי כִי אֲמַרְתִּי פֶן-תִּגְזַל אֶת-בְּנוֹתַי מֵעַמִּי. לֵב עַם אֲשֶׁר תִּמְצָא אֶת-אֵלֵי הִיךְ לֹא יִחִיהַ נֶגֶד אֲחִינוּ הַכָּר-לָךְ מִה עִמָּדִי וְקַח-לָךְ וְלֹא-יָדַע יַעֲקֹב כִּי רַחֵל גִּנְבָתָם. לֵג וַיִּבֹא לָבֵן בָּאֵל יַעֲקֹב וּבָא הֵל לָאָה וּבָא הֵל שְׁתֵי הָאֲמָהוֹת וְלֹא מִצָּא וַיֵּצֵא מֵהֵל לָאָה וַיִּבֹא בָאֵל רַחֵל. לִד וְרַחֵל לָקְחָה אֶת-הַתְּרָפִים וַתִּשְׂמֵם בְּכַר הַגְּמֵל וַתִּשָּׁב עֲלֵיהֶם וַיִּמְשֹׁשׁ לָבֵן אֶת-כָּל-הָאֵל וְלֹא מִצָּא. לֵה וַתֹּאמֶר אֶל-אָבִיהָ אֶל-יָחִיר בְּעֵינַי אֲדֹנָי כִּי לֹא אוֹכַל לָקוּם מִפְּנֵיךְ כִּי-דֶרֶךְ נָשִׁים לִי וַיַּחֲפֹשׂ וְלֹא מִצָּא אֶת-הַתְּרָפִים.

¹⁹ Meanwhile Laban had gone to shear his sheep, and Rachel stole her father's *terafim*-idols. ²⁰ Jacob kept Laban the Aramean in the dark, not telling him that he was fleeing, ²¹ and fled with all that he had. Soon he was across the Euphrates and heading toward the hill country of Gilead.

²² On the third day, Laban was told that Jacob had fled. ²³ So he took his kinsmen with him and pursued him a distance of seven days, catching up with him in the hill country of Gilead. ²⁴ But God appeared to Laban the Aramean in a dream by night and said to him, "Beware of attempting anything with Jacob, good or bad."

²⁵ Laban overtook Jacob. Jacob had pitched his tent on the Height, and Laban with his kinsmen encamped in the hill country of Gilead. ²⁶ And Laban said to Jacob, "What did you mean by keeping me in the dark and carrying off my daughters like captives of the sword? ²⁷ Why did you flee in secrecy and mislead me and not tell me? I would have sent you off with festive music, with timbrel and lyre. ²⁸ You did not even let me kiss my sons and daughters good-by! It was a foolish thing for you to do. ²⁹ I have it in my power to do you harm; but the God of your father said to me last night, 'Beware of attempting anything with Jacob, good or bad.' ³⁰ Very well, you had to leave because you were longing for your father's house; but why did you steal my gods?"

³¹ Jacob answered Laban, saying, "I was afraid because I thought you would take your daughters from me by force. ³² But anyone with whom you find your gods shall not remain alive! In the presence of our kinsmen, point out what I have of yours and take it." Jacob, of course, did not know that Rachel had stolen them.



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³³ So Laban went into Jacob's tent and Leah's tent and the tents of the two maidservants; but he did not find them. Leaving Leah's tent, he entered Rachel's tent. ³⁴ Rachel, meanwhile, had taken the *terafim*-idols and placed them in the camel cushion and sat on them; and Laban rummaged through the tent without finding them. ³⁵ For she said to her father, "Let not my lord take it amiss that I cannot rise before you, for the period of women is upon me." Thus he searched, but could not find the *terafim*-idols.

Context:

Fleeing for his life, and on a mission to find his soul-mate, Yakov heads for Haran. At his night camping spot, he has a vision of a ladder connecting heaven and earth. He perceives sacred presence, and agrees that he will be loyal if God will provide his basic needs: safety, food and clothing.

Jakob falls in love with Rachel by a well, where he rolls the stone-covering off, waters her family's flock, and kisses her. Jakob's uncle Lavan deceives Jakob by making him work for seven years to marry Rachel, and at the last moment substitutes his older daughter, Leah. Jakob serves Lavan another seven years for Rachel whom he loves more than Leah who has soft eyes. Leah, her woman servant Zilpah, and Rachel's, Bilhah, bear children with Jakob, whom the women name.

Jakob negotiates an agreement with Lavan to settle the matter of his wages. Using rods at the watering troughs, Jakob mysteriously finesses the birth of sturdy streaked, speckled, and mottled goats and sheep—the types that Lavan had agreed would go to Jakob.

At God's bidding, and with Rachel's and Leah's consent, the entire clan departs from Lavan's pastures with their wealth. Lavan catches up to them and scolds them for stealing away without his blessings, and for taking his *terafim*-idols. They resolve their enmity by parting company forever.

Explorations:

As they prepare to leave, Rachel takes her father's *idols-terafim*. In a cunning ploy, she hides them beneath her in the camel saddle, claiming to Lavan who is looking for them that she is menstruating. Why does our Jewish matriarch take the *idols-terafim*, and what is the connection between the *idols-terafim* and menstruation?

Commentators theorize about what the *terafim* are. One idea is that the *terafim* are a copper time-telling device ([lbn Ezra](#)). Some say that the *terafim* are divided into a table of hours and enable astrological initiates to reveal knowledge from the stars. Another idea relates to a verse in the prophet Zecharia stating that the *terafim* spoke.

This tradition is explained in barbaric detail in [Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer](#) (36) and in [Tanchuma-Yelamdenu](#).



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Why did she steal *the terafim*? So that they would not tell Lavan that Yakov is fleeing with his women and flocks, because the *terafim* speak, as it says, “the *terafim* spoke delusion” (Zecharia 10:2). You say they have eyes and they do not see [referring to Psalms 115, 135], it is all the same matter. But why are the *terafim* called *terafim*? Because they derive from persecution and impurity. And how did they make them? They brought a human firstborn, slaughtered him, salted him with salt and spices, wrote on a gold amulet the name of an impure spirit, and placed the amulet with sorcery under his tongue. They set him on the wall, lit before him candles, and prostrated themselves before him, and he would speak to them in a whisper. This is the meaning of “the *terafim* spoke delusion”. Accordingly, Rachel stole them, in order to uproot idolatry from her father's house. (*Tanchuma, VeYetzei 12*)

Traditional commentaries seek to avoid the possibility that Rachel wanted the *terafim* for her own religious worship, or because she was attached to them. Growing up with Lavan might have disposed Rachel to the practices of her home. Therefore, sages aim to contain the suspicions that our matriarch practiced idolatry, and to prove Rachel a monotheist with educating motives. They mainly espouse two different explanations for Rachel's theft of the *terafim*. The first explanation, stated in *Tanchuma* for example, is that Rachel wanted to end her father's idolatry, and therefore removed his idols from his home. The second explanation is that Rachel knew how capable a sorcerer Lavan was. By stealing the *terafim*, she wanted to prevent her father from being able to discover which way they were fleeing. In either case, why would she not have disposed of them on the way? Midrash *Tanchuma* goes on to state that Yakov condemns Rachel to death by his statement to Lavan that with whomsoever he finds the idols, that person will not live (Gen. 31:32). Yakov did not know that Rachel had stolen the *terafim*; he will mourn Rachel's premature passing for the rest of his days.

The midrash about the talking heads is very different from a tidy notion of clay and stone idols. It portrays strange witchcraft-like practices involving human sacrifice, the manipulation of dead children's body parts, and divination thought by scholars to have been prevalent. In the opinion of one researcher, Geoffrey Dennis, by describing a menstruating woman sitting on *the terafim* the Torah mocks and delegitimizes such pagan objects and rituals (*The Encyclopedia of Jewish Myth, Magic and Mysticism*, p. 258). According to Leviticus, menstrual blood is a potent source of impurity. The impurity passes to whatever is below a menstruating woman by the contact of sitting (Lev. 15:20). This is precisely the position that Rachel adopts on her camel with the *terafim* beneath her.

In her contemporary midrash, a best-selling novel, *"The Red Tent"*, Anita Diamant tells these biblical chapters from the perspective of Leah's daughter, Dina. She explains the purpose and use of the *terafim* in a graphic and erotic scene: an outdoor women's ritual celebrating the onset of menses. The ritual begins the very evening that Dina gets her period for the first time. Rachel and all the mothers kiss and hug Dina when she shares the news. Here is the scene in full:

It was nearly dark, and my ceremony began almost before I realized what was happening. Inna [a midwife] brought a polished metal cup filled with fortified wine, so dark and sweet I barely tasted its power. But my head soon floated while my mothers prepared me with henna on the bottoms of my feet up to my sex, and from my hands they made a pattern of spots that led to my navel.

They put kohl on my eyes (“So you will be far-seeing,” said Leah) and perfumed my forehead and my armpits (“So you will walk among flowers,” said Rachel). They removed my bracelets and took my robe from me. It must have been the wine that prevented me



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from asking why they took such care with paint and scent yet dressed me in the rough homespun gown used for women in childbirth and as a shroud for the afterbirth after the baby came.

They were so kind to me, so funny, so sweet. They would not let me feed myself but used their fingers to fill my mouth with the choicest morsels. They massaged my neck and back until I was as supple as a cat. They sang every song known among us. My mother kept my wine cup filled and brought it to my lips so often that soon I found it difficult to speak, and the voices around me melted into a loud happy hum. Zebulun's wife, Ahavah, danced with her pregnant belly to the clapping of hands. I laughed until my sides ached. I smiled until my face hurt. It was good to be a woman!

Then Rachel brought out the teraphim, and everyone fell silent. The household gods had remained hidden until that moment. Although I had been a little girl when I'd seen them last, I remembered them like old friends: the pregnant mother, the goddess wearing snakes in her hair, the one that was both male and female, the stern little ram. Rachel laid them out carefully and chose the goddess wearing the shape of a grinning frog. Her wife mouth held her own eggs for safekeeping, while her legs were splayed in a dagger-shaped triangle, ready to lay a thousand more. Rachel rubbed the obsidian figure with oil until the creature gleamed and dripped in the light of the lamps. I stared at the frog's silly face and giggled, but no one laughed with me.

In the next moment, I found myself outside with my mother and my aunts. We were in a wheat patch in the heart of the garden—a hidden place where grain dedicated to sacrifice was grown. The soil had been tilled in preparation for planting after the moon's return, and I was naked, lying facedown on the cool soil. I shivered. My mother put my cheek to the ground and loosened my hair around me. She arranged my arms wide, “to embrace the earth,” she whispered. She bent my knees and pulled the soles of my feet together until they touched, “to give the first blood back to the land,” said Leah. I could feel the night air on my sex, and it was strange and wonderful to be so open under the sky.

My mothers gathered around: Leah above me, Bilhah at my left hand, Zilpah's hand on the back of my legs. I was grinning like the frog, half asleep, in love with them all. Rachel's voice behind me broke the silence. “Mother! Innana! Queen of the Night! Accept the blood offering of your daughter, in her mother's name, in your name. In her blood may she live, in her blood may she give life.”

It did not hurt. The oil eased the entry, and the narrow triangle fit perfectly as it entered me. I faced the west as the little goddess faced east as she broke the lock on my womb. When I cried out, it was not so much pain but surprise and perhaps even pleasure, for it seemed to me that the Queen herself was lying on top of me, with Dumuzi her consort beneath me. I was like a slip of cloth, caught between their lovemaking, warmed by the great passion.

My mothers moaned softly in sympathy. If I could have spoken I would have reassured them that I was perfectly happy. For all the stars of the night had entered my womb behind the legs of the smiling little frog goddess. On the softest, wildest night since the separation of land and water, earth and sky, I lay panting like a dog and felt myself spinning through the heavens. And when I began to fall, I had no fear.

Anita Diamant, *The Red Tent*, pp. 171-3



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Like the story about the *terafim* in Tanhuma, this rich and provocative tale explains the reason for Rachel taking the *terafim*, and an important element of the biblical text that the traditional midrashim ignore: the connection between the *terafim* and menstruation. Both the Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer/ Tanchuma and Anita Diamant midrashim tell stories of the practices in the home where Rachel grew up. Sages did not hesitate to recount the idolatrous tradition about the *terafim*, even as they also tried to distance Rachel from them. The gory account of the *terafim*-talking heads contradicts Jewish tradition prohibiting child sacrifice from the time of Avraham's binding of Yitzchak. The author in Tanhuma tells and chastises a practice that involves the murder of a child, associating it with Lavan, a character who finds little favor in the eyes of the sages. By contrast, Anita Diamant's story celebrates a practice with the *terafim* that loves and honors the life of a child.

Anita Diamant's bold midrash describes a women's sublime rite—caring, sensitive, and arousing. She connects the ritual to Jewish tradition through biblical allusions—to the verse from Ezekiel we recite at *brit milah*-male circumcision: “In your blood live, in your blood live” (16:6). The midrash celebrates women's lives, bodies, and extraordinary community. Perhaps Anita Diamant intends to address a very difficult problem with women's status in ancient Israelite society having to do with virginity. She proposes to end virginity in the embrace of loving women at the beginning of a girl's fertile period. This act, as real as our creative imagination, removes the pretense for much scrutiny, stigma, and cruelty to which women have been and continue to be subject in relation to virginity. To what extent we can interpret this fantasy to be compatible with Jewish visions of faith is an open challenge. In the next parasha, we will encounter Yakov trying to rid his household of foreign idols, perhaps the *terafim*,

ב וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב בְּאֵל-בֵּיתוֹ וְאֵל כָּל-אֲשֶׁר עִמּוֹ הִסְרוּ אֶת-אֱלֹהֵי הַנֶּזֶר אֲשֶׁר בַּת כְּנָם וְהִטְהַרוּ
וְהִחְלִיפוּ שָׂמַל תֵּיכֶם.

Gen. 35:2 So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, "Rid yourselves of the alien gods in your midst, purify yourselves, and change your clothes."

Questions for Discussion:

- The rabbinic and the contemporary explanations of the *terafim* in Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer/ Tanchuma-Yelamdenu and Anita Diamant reflect about the content, meaning, and qualities of religious life in the early generations of the Jewish people. Compare and contrast these rituals and their objects—evaluate the methods, purposes, values, and implications of both. How do life and death play a role in them?
- How do you understand Rachel's theft and what is her faith? Explain.
- The contemporary midrash addresses a piece missing from male-centered religious life; the public Jewish life-cycle rituals have long excluded girls and women—*brit milah*, *bar mitzvah* are the birth and puberty milestones. The birth of a girl baby, menarche, hymen-shedding, giving birth, breast-feeding, weaning, and menopause—all life-cycle milestones—are formally ignored. There are no corresponding blessings or events. In the recent period, many communities have instituted rituals to welcome baby girls, and to



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celebrate b'not mitzvah. How do you and your community relate to these innovations? How, if at all do you consider that other women's life-cycle landmarks ought to be marked and/or celebrated among Jews? What are your criteria for incorporating elements of women's life-cycle rituals, practiced and imagined, from different cultures?

- Throughout many generations and cultures, women have practiced rituals that affirm women's embodied spiritual lives, and give dignity to fertile experience. These have been mainly erased by dominant Western societies that, to a large extent construct women's bodies to fulfill male demands for beauty and sex. How do you respond to Anita Diamant's intimate ritual and what if any relevance does it have for you, your family, and your community?

Study Links:

- Read [“Yahweh vs. the Teraphim: Jacob's Pagan Wives in Thomas Mann's Joseph and his Brothers and in Anita Diamant's The Red Tent”](#) by Vladimir Tumanov.
- For a contemporary Jewish approach to menarche celebration, [click here](#); for a non-Jewish menarche ritual in the context of a matriarchal non-violent ideology, [click here](#) and [here](#).
- Many contemporary attitudes consider menstruation to be a sickness, a pathology. Drug companies are currently marketing hormones for profit that eliminate menstruation altogether, without regard to the long-term identity, cultural, or health implications. Read [this](#) critical review of a controversial book, *Is Menstruation Obsolete?*

Summary of Issues:

Prompted by Rachel's theft of her father's idols, we explore challenging intersections between pagan and Jewish culture in midrashim relating to family rituals. We consider possibilities to express the religious significance of women's fertile lives.

Methods & Observations

There are different kinds of midrash, often with rigorous rules, some seeking what they consider “plain” or plausible meanings of the text, others, more fanciful ones. Midrash comes to fill in missing pieces, to smooth ruptures and apparent incompatibilities or contradictions, to seek out fuller meanings of the Torah. These meanings are interpreted from grammatical irregularities, from repetitions or missing letters, and more subtly, from hints or allusions to divine secrets. Neither classical nor contemporary midrash purports to express *history*. Questions about the historicity of the Torah have not been systematically addressed until the modern period. Midrashim give us access to the values, concerns, beliefs, and fantasies of the authors, by what they say, and by what they left unsaid.

In this parasha, we observe how selectively authors of midrash choose the issues they feel compelled to address. While menstruation is not on the radar of traditional commentators, a contemporary midrash tackles the topic with passion.

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