

Everybody knows that modern English has two sets of roots – an older Germanic core, with a Latinate overlay which accrued following the Norman conquest. The older, Germanic words tend to be short, simple, earthy words dealing with everyday things and basic family relationships. Words dealing with abstract concepts, the power structure, and broader social relationships tend to be Latinate.

I'm always reminded of this when I read the early stories in the Bible, the stories of Abraham, Sarah, Lot, Hagar, Isaac, Rebecca, and all the rest. These are old stories, and they reflect concrete, earthy concerns: family relations, childbearing, husbandry. The props in these stories are equally earthy: stones, water, blood, meat. These simple stories, with their minimalist settings, are about fundamental human emotions and experiences – life in the raw.

Today's parashah contains the second act in the story of Jacob, following his deception of Isaac and Esau over the blessing: his journey to Haran, his marriage to Leah and Rachel, their rivalry, the birth of 11 sons and one daughter, his up-and-down relationship with Laban. Various elements of this story have troubled commentators over the years. For instance, how, they ask, is it possible that Jacob realises only in the morning that the bride he'd taken to bed in the night was Leah and not Rachel (Gen. 29:21–24)? Some commentators have argued that Jacob couldn't see clearly in the dark. According to Radak (R. David Kimchi, ca. 1160–1235), this episode teaches not only that sexual relations should be conducted in the dark, but that the two partners shouldn't speak during intercourse. Others suggest Jacob was too drunk to know who he was in bed with. Taking another tack, various midrashim suggest that Rachel and Leah collude to deceive Jacob, either to pay him back for his behaviour toward Esau, or (in a more feminist reading) to punish him for treating his marriage purely as a business arrangement with Laban. Some of these midrashim point out that Jacob never seems to speak with either sister after his initial meeting with Rachel at the well, and so in the dark would not readily know who was who by either appearance or voice.

In a modern reading in TheTorah.com, Rabbi Zev Farber proposes that, indeed, Jacob barely interacted with either Leah or Rachel before the wedding night, but he adds a twist: Laban never told either of the sisters about Jacob's expectations. Thus, both Leah and Rachel believe the promised bride was to be Leah, the elder. Three people are fooled that night, not one.

But while Rabbi Farber's reading has logic, I think all these explanatory readings, his included, actually spoil the story. When the biblical storytellers wanted us readers (or listeners) to know details, they gave us details. We're certainly given full particulars about Jacob's clever stratagem to outwit Laban when the latter seeks to shortchange him by removing from his herds the streaked, speckled and spotted livestock (Gen. 30: 31–43). When we're not given details in a story, it's because the details aren't the point. The point of the wrong-bride-in-the-bed story is that Jacob, the deceiver, must be deceived. How this is brought about is immaterial.

The minimalist, earthy, "Germanic" stories (to use my linguistic metaphor) that we read during this part of the liturgical year don't need a lot of detail, because they're not meant to be realistic. As I said above, these stories are about fundamental human experiences. They're about families. They're about what happens at the core of life. That's what gives them their power – and that is why they've endured.