Rachel's Stealing of the Terafim

Introduction

Escape and Theft

Bereshit 31 describes Yaakov's flight from Lavan's house. In preparation, Yaakov naturally collected his family, cattle, and all of his belongings in order to take them with him to Canaan. Surprisingly, though, the Torah also adds that Rachel took advantage of Lavan's absence to steal ("וַתִּגְנֹב") his terafim ("תְּרָפִים"):

(יח) וַיִּנְהַג אֶת כָּל מִקְנֵהוּ וְאֶת כָּל רְכֻשׁוֹ אֲשֶׁר רָכָשׁ מִקְנֵה קִנְיָנוֹ אֲשֶׁר רָכַשׁ בְּפַדַּן אֲרָם לָבוֹא אֶל יִצְחָק אָבִיו אַרְצָה כְּנָעַן. (יט) וְלָבָן הָלַךְ לִגְזֹז אֶת צֹאנוֹ וַתִּגְנֹב רָחֵל אֶת הַתְּרָפִים אֲשֶׁר לְאָבִיהָ.

The chapter provides neither motivation nor justification for Rachel's actions. Why does Rachel take her father's terafim; for what could she have possibly wanted them? Were her actions spurred by a desire to prevent others from accessing the objects, or is it possible that Rachel wanted them for her own personal benefit?

What are Terafim?

In order to both understand and evaluate Rachel's deed, it would be helpful to be able to ascertain what exactly were the terafim. The contexts of the various appearances of the word in Tanakh[1] suggest two different possible understandings, either idols or an object used for magic and divination. But of what use would an idolatrous object or talisman have been for Rachel? Moreover, in our chapter, while Lavan and Yaakov refer to the objects as "gods" ("אֱלֹהַי", "אֱלֹהֶיךָ"), the narrative voice consistently uses the term terafim instead. Is this difference significant?

The Aftermath

Two later stories might also be of relevance to the discussion:

- **Yaakov's burying of foreign gods** – In Bereshit 35, before fulfilling his vow in Beit El, Yaakov collects "foreign gods" from his family, buries them and cleanses the family from impurity. Do these foreign gods include Lavan's terafim? If so, what does that say about the theft?
- **Rachel's death –** After Lavan's accusation, Yaakov declared that whomever was found in possession of Lavan's gods would not live. Though Rachel escaped this fate by successfully hiding the terafim, her early death leaves the reader to wonder if somehow Yaakov's curse nonetheless came true. If so, does this imply that her actions deserved punishment?

The Approaches page will explore various understandings of Rachel's motives. These have important theological ramifications for how we view the religious persona of Rachel and the religiosity of the Patriarchs' households as a whole.

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[1] Terafim play a role in two other stories in Tanakh: Mikhah's idol in Shofetim 18 and Michal's saving of David in Shemuel I 19. In the former, the word is paired both with other objects of divination and also with

idols. In Shemuel, the story does not identify the terafim's ordinary purpose.

Terafim are also mentioned in numerous verses throughout the Prophets (see, for example, Melakhim II 23:24, Hoshea 3:4, Amos 5:26-27, and Zekharyah 10:2), where they are at times associated with fortune-telling and magic, and at times with idolatry.

Rachel's Stealing of the Terafim

Exegetical Approaches

This topic has not yet undergone editorial review

Overview

Commentators differ both in their understanding of the nature of the terafim and why Rachel decided to take them. According to the Tanchuma, they were objects of divination and Rachel stole them so that her father would not be able to trace the whereabouts of the family as they fled. Bereshit Rabbah, in contrast, asserts that the terafim were actual idols and Rachel removed them in an effort to convince her father not to worship them.

However, not all assume that Rachel's motives were so pure or worthy. Ibn Ezra posits that Rachel had learned idolatrous practices from her father and had not yet totally forsaken them. Alternatively, some modern scholars agree that Rachel took the idols for personal reasons, but they suggest that her motives were economic rather than religious, and that ownership of the terafim testified to inheritance rights.

Personal Survival

Rachel stole the terafim so that her father could not use them to divine the whereabouts of the family when they fled.

SOURCES: Tanchuma #1, Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer #1, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra,[1] Radak, Ramban,[2] Ralbag #2, Abarbanel

What are terafim? According to these commentators, the terafim were used for divination.[3] As evidence, Rashbam points to Zekharyah 10:2 which mentions "terafim speaking" and links them with magicians ("הַקּוֹסְמִים"),[4] and to Hoshea 3:4, which pairs them with the "אֵפוֹד", another object associated with prophecy and fortune-telling.[5] Bereshit 30:27 might provide further support for this reading since, there, Lavan says of himself that he uses "ניחוש".[6]

Etymology of the word – Tanchuma asserts that they are called "תְּרָפִים" because they are a "מַעֲשֶׂה תֹּרֶף", an object of impurity. Ramban, in contrast, suggests that the term comes from the fact that their words are like a weak prophecy (נבואה רפה) and not very reliable.

"לָמָּה גָנַבְתְּ אֶת אֱלֹהָי" – If the terafim were magical objects, it is not clear why Lavan refers to them as gods. Ramban asserts that many people would turn their terafim into gods, much the way the Israelites strayed after the "אֵפוֹד" set up by Gidon.[7] Thus, too, Lavan might have considered the terafim as gods,[8] even if they were not originally intended as such. Radak similarly suggests that Lavan referred to the objects as gods because he trusted in them as one would in the word of God.

"וַיְדַפֵּף אַחֲרָיו" – Considering that Lavan seemed to have no difficulty finding the family even without the use of his terafim, it is questionable how Rachel could really have thought that stealing them would suffice to prevent discovery of the escape.[9]

Why hold onto them? It is not clear why Rachel did not destroy the objects immediately. That would seem to be the best way to ensure that they could no longer reveal any secrets, and perhaps the proper way to deal with impure magical objects.

Belief in magic and divination – This position assumes that Rachel believed in the powers of impure objects (though she never used them herself). Indeed, most of these sources assert that the terafim really did have the ability to speak, reveal secrets, or tell the future, albeit often incorrectly. Ralbag and Abarbanel, in contrast, assert that the magician using the terafim merely imagined it talking,[10] while Ibn Ezra assumes that Lavan's divination was related to his astronomical abilities.[11]

Sitting on the terafim – According to one opinion of the Baalei HaTosafot, Rachel forcefully sat upon the terafim to prevent them from crying out and apprising Lavan of their location. Alternatively, she embarrassed them into silence for they would never reveal that they were so degraded to be sat upon. Ibn Ezra and Ralbag could also more simply suggest that this was just a good way of hiding them from her father.

The "אֱלֹהֵי הַנֵּכָר" buried by Yaakov – According to this position, the foreign gods which Yaakov buries upon leaving Shekhem do not include the terafim (which were used only for divination), and these have no connection to Rachel's actions at all.[12] The foreign gods were taken when the brothers looted Shekhem and were never worshiped by Yaakov's family.

Evaluation of Rachel's actions – These commentators might view Rachel's actions as proper, as she was simply attempting to protect her family. Radak, though, suggests that she should nonetheless not have stolen from her father.

Religiosity of the forefathers – This position views the forefathers as righteous believers in Hashem, and assumes that Rachel would never have taken impure objects for her own use.

Religious Motivations

Rachel took the terafim because they were used in religious rituals. This approach subdivides regarding whether Rachel wanted them for herself, or merely did not want her father to have them.

Preventative

Rachel took the terafim so that her father would no longer worship them.

SOURCES: Bereshit Rabbah, Tanchuma #2, Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer #2, R. Chananel, Rashi, Ralbag #1

What are terafim? These commentators assume that the terafim were idols, worshiped by Lavan. This is supported by the fact that Lavan refers to them as such, asking "לָמָּה גָנַבְתָּ אֶת אֱלֹהָי". In Shofetim 18, the word terafim is connected to the phrase "פֶּסֶל וּמַסֵּכָה", further suggesting that terafim might be a form of idol. According to this understanding, however, it is not clear why idolatrous terafim would be present in the house of David and Michal in Shemuel I 19.[13]

Why are they called terafim? The narrative voice consistently refers to the objects as terafim, while Lavan and Yaakov refer to them as "gods". This suggests that the word terafim might be the Torah's derisive term

for worthless figurines.[14]

Why hold onto them? Ibn Ezra[15] questions why Rachel would not have buried or destroyed the terafim, if they were idols and she did not want her father to worship them. Toledot Yitzchak responds that she feared that she would be seen, and was waiting for an opportunity to dispose of them discreetly.[16]

Would this convince Lavan? Abarbanel wonders why Rachel's taking of one set of idols would prevent Lavan from simply making replacements and continuing to worship. R. Chananel contends that Rachel was trying to convince her father of the worthlessness of idols; if they can be stolen they must have no power.[17]

Sitting on the terafim – N. Sarna suggests that Rachel's sitting on the idols while menstruating reflects her scorning of the objects and her intentional defilement of what her father viewed as sacred.[18]

The "אֱלֹהֵי הַנֵּכָר" buried by Yaakov – According to Rashi and Ralbag, the foreign gods collected and destroyed by Yaakov came from Shekhem and did not include the terafim. Presumably, according to them, Rachel had by that point destroyed the terafim on her own.

Evaluation of Rachel's actions – This approach views Rachel very positively. She not only has no idolatrous inclinations herself, but even tries to convert her father to monotheism.[19]

"עִם אֲשֶׁר תִּמְצָא אֶת אֱלֹהֶיךָ לֹא יִחְיֶה" and Rachel's early death – Bereshit Rabbah connects Rachel's premature death with Yaakov's curse. Theologically, though, this is difficult as Rachel was motivated only by positive intentions.[20]

Religiosity of the forefathers – This position assumes that all of the Matriarchs were not only monotheists, but were also proactive in persuading others to desist from idolatry.[21]

Personal Use

Rachel wanted the terafim for her own personal use.

SOURCES: Josephus, Ibn Ezra,[22] R. Yosef Bekhor Shor, Shadal, Hoil Moshe

What are terafim?

- **Objects of divination –** According to R"Y Bekhor Shor and Shadal, they were used to foretell the future, while according to Hoil Moshe they were believed to have powers to bless barren women with children.[23]
- **Idols –** According to Josephus and Ibn Ezra, in contrast, they were household gods.

Why did Rachel want them?

- **Children –** The Hoil Moshe asserts that Rachel wanted more children,[24] and hoped that the terafim would help.[25] He suggests that the barren Michal[26] had terafim in her house for the same reason.
- **Belief in divination –** Shadal asserts that Rachel wanted the terafim because she believed in their divining abilities even though she did not worship idolatry.
- **Worship –** Josephus instead posits that Rachel thought that the idols might protect her, and via them she could obtain pardon from her father if they were pursued.[27] Josephus also relates how, even in his own time, it was a custom for people to take their household idols when emigrating.[28] Ibn Ezra says

more explicitly (and more radically) that Rachel (and the other wives and children) had learned idolatrous worship from her father and had not yet totally forsaken it.

"וַתִּגְנֹב רָחֵל" – The language of "stealing" ("וַתִּגְנֹב") supports the idea that Rachel had taken the idols for her own personal use rather than to save others or convert her father.

"לָמָּה גָנַבְתָּ אֶת אֱלֹהָי" – These commentators differ in their understanding of why the terafim are called gods by Lavan:

- **Perspective of character –** R. Yosef Bekhor Shor posits that in Rachel's eyes the terafim were simply objects of divination, while in Lavan's eyes they were actually gods. Thus, when Lavan speaks, he calls them "gods", but when the text speaks from Rachel's perspective, it writes "terafim".
- **Two terms for the same item** – In contrast, according to Josephus and Ibn Ezra, even Rachel viewed them as gods and would agree with her father's formulation. The narrative voice, though, perhaps chooses to use a more derogatory term when speaking of them. Alternatively, terafim is not a negative term but simply a specific type of idol (household gods). When Lavan talks, though, he chooses instead to highlight the main point of his accusation – how dare you steal my gods!

Why hold onto them? According to this approach, it is clear why Rachel does not get rid of the idols, as the whole purpose in taking them was for their use.

Sitting on the terafim – Rachel sat on the terafim, despite this being an act of denigration, as this was the only way of avoiding detection.

The "אֱלֹהֵי הַנֵּכָר" buried by Yaakov – According to Josephus and Ibn Ezra,[29] Rachel's terafim were among the foreign gods buried by Yaakov outside of Shekhem. According to Ibn Ezra, the other idols taken by Yaakov's family were also taken, not just for their gold, but to worship.

Yaakov's oath in Beit El – When Yaakov first left for Canaan, he took an oath that if Hashem watched over him and returned him safely home, then, "וְהָיָה יי"י לִי לֵאלֹהִים" ("Hashem will be for me a God"). Josephus and Ibn Ezra might suggest that it was only upon his safe return to Canaan, that Yaakov fully accepted Hashem to the exclusion of other gods. Thus, it is only when he goes to fulfill his vow at Beit El that he cleanses his family of idolatry. Until then, Rachel and other members of the family had worshiped other gods as well.

"עִם אֲשֶׁר תִּמְצָא אֶת אֱלֹהֶיךָ לֹא יִחְיֶה" and Rachel's early death – If Rachel really took the idols for her own use, and especially if she worshiped them as idols, it is easy to posit a connection between Yaakov's curse and Rachel's demise. Soon after they are "found" in Shekhem, she dies in childbirth.

Repentance? R"Y Rock[30] suggests that, on her deathbed, Rachel realized that she was being punished for taking and believing in the terafim[31] and she confessed via the name she called her son: "בֶּן אוֹנִי". He posits that the word "אוֹנִי" is related to "אָוֶן", sin or falsehood. Rachel finally realized that, "הַתְּרָפִים דִּבְּרוּ אָוֶן".

Evaluation of Rachel – According to this position, Rachel is blameworthy. She is perhaps even punished for her actions, though she may have repented at the end of her life.

Religiosity of the forefathers – This approach challenges the assumption that all of our ancestors were pure monotheistic believers, and it raises the possibility that for some of them, monotheism was the result of a religious journey. See also Avot and Mitzvot.

Economic Advantage

Possession of the terafim was evidence of Yaakov's rights to Lavan's inheritance.

SOURCES: Modern scholars[32]

What are terafim? This position assumes that the terafim were household gods, and their ownership testified to inheritance rights.

Ancient Near Eastern parallels – This reading is based on Ancient Near Eastern adoption documents found in Nuzi. There it is stated that if one adopts a son, he shall be heir upon the father's death. If, however, natural sons are later born to the father, they will split the inheritance with the adopted son and the natural son will receive the household gods. Otherwise the gods are taken by the adoptee. On this basis, some have suggested that Yaakov had been adopted by Lavan, who afterwards bore his own sons. Thus, Rachel took the terafim to ensure that Yaakov would nonetheless retain the main inheritance portion and leadership of the family.

Difficulties – M. Greenberg[33] questions this theory on several grounds:

- The adoption text does not seem to condition receiving the inheritance on ownership of the idols, but rather implies the opposite; he who inherits them obtains possession of the household gods.
- The fact of ownership is not what is stressed, as much as the act of transference of the gods. It is the bequeathing of the idols which symbolically transfers title and inheritance, showing all whom the father has chosen.[34]
- The context of the story, Yaakov's flight from Lavan and move to Canaan, suggests that the family had no intentions of returning to inherit Lavan's estate.[35]

"וַתִּגְנֹב רָחֵל" – The use of the term "stealing" supports the possibility that Rachel was motivated by self-interest.

Why hold onto them? In order to prove possession, Rachel had no choice but to keep the family idols.

Sitting on the terafim – According to this approach, Rachel held no reverence for the gods, while Lavan did. As such, sitting on them proved an excellent way to hide them.

The "אֱלֹהֵי הַנֵּכָר" buried by Yaakov – According to this position, it is unclear whether the terafim were included in the foreign gods buried by Yaakov. It is possible that, by this point, Rachel realized that they would never return to Charan and handed over the terafim.

Evaluation of Rachel – Some might negatively evaluate Rachel's actions, claiming that stealing for personal gain is always wrong, while others might suggest that Rachel felt cheated by her father and was simply trying to retrieve what was rightfully hers.

Religiosity of the forefathers – This approach views the forefathers as monotheistic in their beliefs, yet willing to maintain possession of idols if they also served a non-idolatrous purpose.

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[1] This is his opinion in his regular commentary. He offers an alternative in his Additional Commentary ("שיטה אחרת") on Bereshit 35. See below.

[2] Ramban speaks of the terafim's role in divination, but he does not explicitly state that Rachel stole them so that they could not reveal the location of the escaped family. However, this seems to be his import.

[3] The commentators differ regarding what they think the terafim constituted and how they worked. Tanchuma and Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan) describe an elaborate process including a dead person, spices, names of impure spirits, and candles. Ibn Ezra and Ralbag, looking to the story of Michal's saving of David (Shemuel I 19), suggest instead that they took the form of men, but do not think that they were an actual person.

[4] See also Shemuel I 15:23 and Yechezkel 21:26 which similarly associate the terafim with "קֶסֶם" and divining.

[5] Ramban further points to the story of "פסל מיכה" in Shofetim 18 in which terafim are also mentioned together with the "אֵפוֹד", and the people of Dan explicitly talk of divining whether they will succeed on their way. See also Melakhim II 23:24 where they are connected to "הָאֹבוֹת וְהַיִּדְּעֹנִים".

[6] Compare the similar "theft" of Yosef's goblet which was used for divination – "וְהוּא נַחֵשׁ יְנַחֵשׁ בּוֹ".

[7] See Shofetim 8:24-27.

[8] In Yaakov's speech he also refers to them as gods, "עִם אֲשֶׁר תִּמְצָא אֶת אֱלֹהֶיךָ לֹא יִחְיֶה", probably because Lavan had done so.

[9] These commentators might respond that even if the plan was not fool-proof, it bought the family time and was better than nothing.

[10] He objects to the possibility that anything not given a mouth by God could actually talk.

[11] He does not explain the exact connection between the use of the terafim and reading the stars.

[12] See Ibn Ezra who makes this point explicitly ("חלילה חלילה שישכב הנביא עם עובדת אלהי נכר").

[13] See Ramban who asks this, and responds that maybe not all terafim were worshiped.

[14] Cf. Tanakh's use of "בשת" instead of "בעל".

[15] See also R. D"Z Hoffmann.

[16] However, if she thought her actions were justified, it is not clear why she should have minded if she were found out. Toledot Yitzchak might suggest that Rachel, nonetheless, feared that her stealing would be frowned upon.

[17] He points to the similar speech of Yoash (Gidon's father), who responds to the destruction of the Baal's altar by telling the people: if he is a god let him avenge the destruction.

[18] See N. Sarna, Understanding Genesis, (New York, 1970): 200-202.

[19] In fact, she is reminiscent of Avraham, as painted by the Midrash, who destroys the idols of his father to convince him and others not to worship them.

[20] One might, nonetheless, claim that the words of a prophet carry power, and therefore Yaakov's words, unintentionally and without justification, led to Rachel's demise. Bereshit Rabbah similarly writes, "וְהָיָה כְּשִׁגְגָה הַיּוֹצֵא מִלְּפָנֶיךָ הַשַּׁלִּיט".

[21] Cf. Bereshit Rabbah, Rashi, and others regarding Bereshit 12:5.

[22] This is Ibn Ezra's opinion as found in his "Additional Commentary" (compiled by a student of his in England) and also in Yesod Mora 2:12. In his regular commentary (Bereshit 35:2), he rejects this

interpretation; see above. See A. Mondschein, "שיטה שלישית לפירושו של ר' אברהם אבן עזרא לתורה?", אור ליעקב (Jerusalem 5757): 177-178, who suggests that Ibn Ezra may not have intended this interpretation for public consumption.

[23] All three distinguish between pure idolatry and divination, with Shadal asserting that the terafim were really just a form of lottery, and as long as one did not think that the answer given stemmed from foreign gods, the action would not be considered idolatrous. Hoil Moshe, in contrast, maintains that, though less problematic, the act still falls into the general category of עבודה זרה.

[24] See her prayer after the birth of Yosef, "יֹסֵף יְיָ לִי בֵּן אַחֵר".

[25] This might be similar to her desire for the mandrakes (דּוּדָאִים) found by Reuven, also believed to have fertility powers.

[26] Some have suggested that Michal was barren based on Shemuel II 6:23: "וּלְמִיכַל בַּת שָׁאוּל לֹא הָיָה לָהּ יֶלֶד עַד יוֹם מוֹתָהּ". It is possible, though, that the verse means from this point on Michal had no more children.

[27] See also M. Greenberg, "Another Look at Rachel's Theft of the Teraphim", JBL 81:3 (1962): 239-248, who elaborates on this approach.

[28] For other Biblical cases of people taking their gods with them into exile, see Yeshayahu 46:1 and Amos 5:26-27.

[29] See also Jubilees 31 and Seikhel Tov.

[30] See his article, לדמותה של רחל, דף קשר, שמות תשנ"ח, 635, and more recently, נדרו של יעקב ותרפיה של יעקב.

[31] He does not go so far as to say that Rachel worshiped them as idols, but rather that she believed in their magical abilities and wanted to use them for that purpose. See also A. Bazak, "גלה כבוד מישראל אל הלקח ארון הא-להים - בין רחל לאשת פנחס" in Megadim 28 (1998): 9-18, who also develops the idea that Rachel sinned in taking the terafim for her own personal divination.

[32] See scholars such as H. H. Rowley, J. Bright, S. Smith, E. A. Speiser, C. H. Gordon, and A. Draffkorn, all referenced in M. Greenberg, "Another Look at Rachel's Theft of the Teraphim", JBL 81:3 (1962): 239-248.

[33] See his article cited in the above note.

[34] As such, if the gods were already given to one of Lavan's own sons as a sign of inheritance, Yaakov's later possession of them would be meaningless except to implicate him as a thief.

[35] On the other hand, Rachel and Leah's words, "הַעוֹד לָנוּ חֵלֶק וְנַחֲלָה בְּבֵית אָבִינוּ" might suggest a frustration with the fact that they were not receiving their due (rather than expressing a lack of desire to share in their father's inheritance). In addition, even though the family was heading to Canaan, it is not clear if Rachel would have thought that the move needed to be permanent.