

Idos

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

When Jacob took his family and fled from Lavan, Rachel stole the teraphim Lavan's household gods. When Lavan pursues them and catches them up he is furious at being betrayed. Why, he asked, didn't you let me know in advance? I would have given you goodbye party, sent you on your way with celebrations, I could have kissed you all goodbye. And by the way, why did you steal my gods?

Jacob had no idea about what Rachel had done. He answered Lavan that he left in secret because he did not trust him not to hold back his daughters and their children. Besides he had no knowledge of any gods in his camp and Lavan was welcome to search his baggage for them.

Lavan went through everything but when he came to Rachel's tent she lay on the camel bags (where the idols were) pretended to be sick and apologized for not being able get up. Lavan did not find the gods and Jacob was furious. Even so in the end they made up, negotiated a treaty and went their separate ways.

Why did Rachel take the teraphim? Was she an idol worshipper? Did she want the security of having them as a kind of good luck token? Didn't she know how offensive this would have been to her husband? Or was it as the Midrash says, to help Lavan break the habit and give up idolatry?

Later on when Jacob arrives home he gathers his family all together and commands them all to destroy the idols they brought with them from Ur. It seems that they had all been influenced by Lavan's family. Even in the most religious of homes, if the external atmosphere is corrosive, it is bound to have some effect.