

Potomac Torah Study Center
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NOTE: Devrei Torah presented weekly in Loving Memory of Rabbi Leonard S. Cahan z"l, Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation Har Shalom, who started me on my road to learning more than 50 years ago and was our family Rebbe and close friend until his untimely death.

Devrei Torah are now Available for Download (normally by noon on Fridays) at www.PotomacTorah.org. Thanks to Bill Landau for hosting the Devrei Torah archives.

May Hashem protect Israel and Jews everywhere. May Hashem's protection shine on all of Israel, the IDF, and Jews throughout the world. We celebrate the return of our living hostages and mourn those of our people who perished during the last two years. May a new era bring security and rebuilding for both Israel and all others who genuinely seek peace.

I am writing on Thanksgiving day. The parsha, Vayeitzei, focuses in part on Yaakov's love for Rachel and his battles with Rachel's father (Lavan), one of the supreme enemies of the Jewish people. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, z"l, examines love and explains that a society based on love will fail unless it also requires justice as an equally important social focus. As Rabbi Sacks explains, when two individuals love each other, anyone outside that relationship, the lesser loved person, will feel hated. Justice protects the outsider to the love relationship so those on the outside can feel protected and not hated.

One interpretation of history is that those who do not learn from the past will relive the past – especially the trials of difficult times. Yaakov's family over generations failed to temper love with justice. Hagar and Yishmael both felt like outsiders versus Sarah and Yitzhak, and this second class feeling caused hatred between Yitzhak's descendants (Jews) and those of Yishmael (Arabs) that continues today. Giving both the bracha of wealth and power, and the family religious leadership, to Yaakov (with neither to Esav) led to Esav's descendants (Edom, Rome, and Christians) maintaining animosity against Jews for two thousand years. Have Jews treated Esav's descendants without justice? One interpretation of history during the past two thousand plus years is that Christians have felt that Jews have not treated them fairly.

Rivka and Yaakov deceive Yitzhak into giving his bracha of wealth and power to Yaakov rather than Esav. Esav is very upset, cries, and asks his father for a bracha. Yitzhak responds that he does not have another bracha for Esav. He finally comes up with a blessing that when Yaakov transgresses Hashem's mitzvot, Esav may cast aside Yaakov's yoke (27:40). When the Jews are down, Esav's descendants will rise. For much of the past two thousand years, B'Not Esav (Christians) have dominated and often persecuted Jews, just as Yitzhak blessed Esav. In the past sixty years, with the Catholic Church reforms (no longer blaming Jews for killing Jesus), relations between Christians and Jews have improved greatly, and now many Christian groups strongly support Israel and seek positive inter-faith relations with Jews.

Each Torah cycle we study the Avot, our first three generations from whom all Jews are descended. One question is which of our Avot grew the most in personal qualities over his lifetime. Through his long close relationship with Hashem, Avraham learned to trust God completely, to go from internally deriving the fact that there must be some supreme mind who started and controls the universe to learning to believing and trusting in God completely. Yitzhak learned that God gave him wealth and blessings to use to move around and teach other people about Hashem, His unique properties, and

his love for those who obey His mitzvot. Yaakov learned that deception and manipulation ultimately do not provide a path to a satisfying life. Yaakov's taking Esav's bracha from their father only improved his life after he returned the wealth after twenty years living with Lavan. His years trading deceptive tricks with Lavan led to Yaakov marrying two sisters, never having a happy marriage to Rachel, and losing her to an early death. Yaakov redeemed himself by treating Lavan directly and honestly, fighting with Esav's angel, and seeking Esav to return his brother's bracha of wealth and power. All our Avot have lessons to teach us. May we emulate our ancestors as well as possible and teach these lessons to our children and grandchildren. When we relate honestly with others, especially by following Hashem's mitzvot for ourselves and to set examples for others, we set a path to gain respect from our family, fellow Jews, and non-Jews. My beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l, for half a century taught my family and me to learn from our ancestors and to share these lessons with our children – and now with our grandchildren.

Shabbat Shalom,

Hannah and Alan

Much of the inspiration for my weekly Dvar Torah message comes from the insights of Rabbi David Fohrman and his team of scholars at www.alephbeta.org. Please join me in supporting this wonderful organization, which has increased its scholarly work during and since the pandemic, despite many of its supporters having to cut back on their donations.

Please daven for a Refuah Shlemah for Velvel David ben Sarah Rachel; Moshe Aaron ben Leah Beilah (badly wounded in battle in Gaza but slowly recovering), Daniel Yitzchak Meir HaLevy ben Ruth; Avram David ben Zeezl Esther, Avraham Dov ben Blimah; Ariah Ben Sarah, Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Reuven ben Basha Chaya Zlata Lana, Avraham ben Gavriela, Mordechai ben Chaya, David Moshe ben Raizel; Zvi ben Sara Chaya, Reuven ben Masha, Meir ben Sara, Oscar ben Simcha; Miriam Bat Leah; Yehudit Leah bas Hannah Feiga; Miriam bat Esha, Chana bat Sarah; Raizel bat Rut; Rena bat Ilsa, Riva Golda bat Leah, Sharon bat Sarah, Kayla bat Ester, and Malka bat Simcha, and all our fellow Jews in danger in and near Israel. Please contact me for any additions or subtractions. Thank you.

Haftarat Parshat Vayetze: The Divergence of Traditions in Selecting a Haftarah

By Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Blander *
President and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone

Haftarat Vayetze is unique in the curious divergence between how Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews read it, with each reading a different section of the prophecy. Sephardic communities read from Hoshea 11:7 until 12:12, whereas Ashkenazim begin the haftara at 12:13, and read until 14:10. Nowhere else do we find two traditions whose haftara passages sit exactly back-to-back, with no overlap)some Sephardic communities have modified the tradition to include some minimal overlap(. Clearly, the different rites reflect two very different centers of thematic gravity. If we can discern the differences between the themes and content of these two readings, we can learn valuable insights not only into the words of the prophets, but also into the contrasting facets of Yaakov's life, which echo our own complex reality as Jews and as members of society.

The Sephardic reading, which starts earlier in Hoshea's prophecy, does not directly address Yaakov's life events that form the core of our parsha. Instead, it speaks of Yaakov and the major events in his life in broader strokes: "*In the womb he grasped his brother by the heel, and with all his strength he struggled with God*" 12:4(. These two episodes – Yaakov's birth and his battle with the angel – occur in the parashot that precede and follow ours. They are referenced by the prophet here because they both highlight moments of conflict and struggle. Yaakov Avinu's life, from the beginning, was shaped by battles against those stronger than him, most notably Esav; according to the Sages, even the angel with whom Yaakov wrestled was the guardian angel of his older twin)Rashi, Bereshit 32:25(.

This life of struggle often compelled Yaakov to engage in acts of evasiveness and even deception, qualities that, Hoshea laments, were unfortunately passed down to his descendants: “*Efrayim besieges Me with lies, the House of Israel with deception*” 12:1; “*Still the merchant possesses false scales; he loves to exploit*” 12:8. These themes of guile and cunning and their problematic nature stand at the center of our parsha as well, as Yaakov and Lavan strive to outwit one another in their family and business dealings.

These themes are deeply relevant in and of themselves. They are central to our relationship with God, in which honesty and authenticity are paramount – and yet elusive. They are important subjects of contemplation for Jews who, in all ages and contexts, face adversaries, impossible odds, and the tension between integrity and survival. It is therefore these themes that lay at the heart of the ancient decision of many communities to read this first section as the haftara, even though it does not explicitly reference the parsha’s events. Its message calls on us to learn from the failures seen in the Torah and haftara and strengthen our relationship with God and society.

By contrast, the haftara read by Ashkenazic communities begins with an account more directly and obviously related to our parsha: “*Yaakov fled to the lands of Aram, and Yisrael labored to acquire a bride; for a bride he kept sheep*” 12:13. This captures the Torah narrative that we have just read: Yaakov flees his brother’s wrath to stay in Aram and works fourteen years in exchange for the right to marry Lavan’s daughters Rachel and Leah.

But the prophetic message is more subtle than a simple retelling. Yaakov’s diligence in working for his family contrasts sharply with the later faithlessness of his descendants in the Kingdom of Israel. Alternatively, as some commentators have suggested, **God’s providential care for Yaakov during his most vulnerable years stands in jarring opposition to Israel’s ingratitude in times of national prosperity**. This tension stands at the heart of why Ashkenazic communities chose this passage; it anchors the haftara firmly in the parsha’s events, while inviting us to consider the moral and spiritual implications. [emphasis added]

Both customs treat the reader as thoughtful and mature, capable of tracing the connections and drawing meaning from the nuances of the text. In one approach, we consider the attributes of cleverness and guile, their historical use and the price we pay for them. After all, the blessings stolen through deceit are never actually realized, and the use of such deception compromises the integrity of our values.

In the other approach, the events of the parsha serve as a window through which to observe the contrast between Yaakov’s loyalty and his descendants’ betrayal. Both of these lessons, and the interpretive methods behind them, are acutely worth remembering as we hold up our forefathers, their stories and their complex legacies as signposts for our own continuing journey.

* Ohr Torah Stone is a modern Orthodox group of 32 institutions and programs. Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin is the Founding Director, and Rabbi Dr. Brander is President and Rosh HaYeshiva. For more information or to support Ohr Torah Stone, contact ohrtorahstone@otsny.org or 212-935-8672. Donations to 49 West 45th Street #701, New York, NY 10036.

<https://ots.org.il/haftarat-parshat-vayetze-rabbi-brander-5786/>

Vayeitzei: Modeh Ani... I Am Thankful!

By Rabbi Label Lam © 5768

And she conceived again and bore a son, and she said, “This time, I will thank HASHEM! Therefore, she named him Yehuda, and]then[she stopped bearing.)Breishis 29:35(

This time, I will thank: since I have taken more than my share, consequently, I must offer up thanks. – Rashi

It's a little hard to digest the notion that our great matriarch Leah had not been thankful up until this point. HASHEM had already granted her three healthy children prior to Yehudah's birth and even without that there's plenty to be thankful for! What does she mean, "*This time I will thank HASHEM*"?

Rashi must have been troubled by the same question. He offers a little context to her intention. Leah understood there would be 12 children from amongst 4 bearing mothers. That's how it turned out too. When she bore her 4th child, it was apparent that she was disproportionately gifted. When Leah realized that she was a majority shareholder in the production of the Jewish People, it created a cosmic shift in her attitude. Now she is adopting a posture of continuous, non-stop, ever increasing gratitude.

Yehuda, the name, contains the letters of HASHEM's name! Yud and Hey and Vuv and Hey. Only there is a Dalet, which stands for humility and poverty plugged in the middle. Yehuda represents and is the lowly, humble servant who carries The Name of HASHEM through history. His existence, his mere presence is a living constant reminder of the goodness of HASHEM. As a surviving tribe, it is no mistake that we, the Jews, the Jewish people bear the name for all time, Yehudim, Yehudi – hence Jew. That's what a Jew is. The first words we declare upon awaking in the morning is, "*Modeh Ani...*" – I thank, I admit, I acknowledge my indebtedness! My Rebbe simply explained that what we are declaring that what I am is a MODEH!

I am a thanking being, a grateful creature! That is who we are! We are appreciators of HASHEM generosity.

I was launching a 3rd grade class of boys into Davening just this morning. We were talking about this point before pressing the start button and racing past Modeh Ani! I was listing some odd things to be thankful for and giving some practical reasons why our lives would be painfully difficult without for example, elbows! Imagine trying to get a piece of food into your mouth if you could not easily bend your elbow. Now appreciate the elegance and kindliness of the design.

One boy politely detonated a bomb of a question into the middle of this otherwise basic discussion. "*Rebbe, what do we get from all these things that HASHEM gives us?*" He was asking sincerely, and not at all cynically. It was deserving of a real answer. I was taken aback for a moment! I do believe he was truly curious about this arrangement we have with HASHEM. He gives us abundantly and we reflect back many thanks. What's the good? Why? Now I had the opportunity to land a lesson that only became crystal clear to me as I was forced to explain it to a class of 3rd graders.

Picking up a board marker I presented it to this boy, acting as if I was a great and mighty King. What if the King of England gave you this marker!? Would you leave it in your desk? Would you lose it? Would you use it foolishly? "*No!*" emphatically was his and everyone's unanimous answer. "You might even want to bring it home and frame it – treasure it forever! "*What if the King told you to use it, but only for learning and for good things in school? Would you write on the walls of the school with it or scribble on your desk!?* Of course not!"

When we realize that what we have is from HASHEM, we are immediately committed to using it for what it was meant to be used for by the giver.)The gift connects the giver to the receiver, while the "*thanks*" connects the receiver to the giver. It's a hug, a two-way, reciprocal relationship.(So if I realize HASHEM gave me a mouth, can I use it to say bad and hurtful things? No! I must only use it for saying things, like "thanks"! Now let's begin, "*Modeh Ani...*"

Good Shabbos!

<https://torah.org/torah-portion/dvartorah-5775-vayeitzei/>

Vayeitzei: God, Money and Ma'aser

By Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah © 2013

God promises Yaakov many things when God appears to him in the dream of the ladder and the angels: the Land of Israel, future children, Divine protection, and a safe return to his ancestral home. These blessings certainly seem to be extensive and all-encompassing.

It is thus fascinating to see how, when Yaakov arises the next morning and makes a vow to God, he feels a need to translate the promise of God's protection to something more concrete and specific. *"If the Lord is with me and protects me on the path that I am going, and gives me bread to eat and garment to wear..."* (verse 20). Yaakov is clearly anxious about his well-being, and an abstract promise of protection is not sufficient. He needs to know that he will have what to eat and what to wear. That is how he needs to see this promise playing out.

Yaakov is so anxious, in fact, that he vows God that he will do something in return if God keeps God's promise: *"Then this stone will be a house of God and all the You give me, I will give a tenth to You."* (20-22). This vow is troubling for it seems that Yaakov is bargaining with God. If you do this for Me, here's what I will do for you. How many of us haven't, when we were younger, made those types of promises and deals with God? *"If You help me pass this test, I promise I'll be nicer to my little brother."* But as we grow up, most of realize that this is a childish approach to our relationship with God. And yet, here is Yaakov doing exactly that. And to make matters worse, God had already promised this! Doesn't he trust God's promise?

This question intensifies if we read verse 21 in a certain way. After his condition of God giving him food and clothing, verse 21 continues: *"and if I return to my father's house in peace, then Lord shall be for me as a God."* The question is how to translate the Hebrew vav which connects the first half of this verse with the second. Do we translate it as "then" or as "and if." To translate it as "then" would mean that Yaakov is stipulating that only if God fulfills all the promises, will he accept the Lord as God. Even accepting God is part of the deal!

I do not believe that such a reading is correct. The first words of God's promise are: *"I am the Lord, the God of Avraham your father and Yitzchak."* Part of the promise is that Yaakov will continue this chain, and God will also be the God of Yaakov. Yaakov, then, is echoing these words back to God. The translation then would be: *"If You, God, do all these things for me, and if You will act as my God..."* or perhaps, even better: *"If You do all these things, then through that You will be acting as my God..."* Read this way, Yaakov is again translating an abstract promise into the specifics that are immediately relevant to him and regarding which he is most anxious.

But what about his bargaining with God. Isn't this a wrong way to act?

Perhaps he isn't bargaining. There is another way of looking at this. First, we must note that by translating the lofty yet abstract promises into something more mundane and concrete, Yaakov is not sullying them. Quite the contrary. He is bringing God into the world, into the most specific aspects of his life. **Yaakov is saying that he will see God's presence, he will see God acting as his God, in all of the successes that he will encounter during this challenging and arduous journey.** What is a more religious act than seeing God's help in support in our putting bread on the table and clothes on our back? [emphasis added]

What is the proper response to this? How does one acknowledge that God has been there for him? First through words and prayer, and then through actions. The stone will become a place to worship God, and Yaakov will give a tithe of all that he receives. This is not a deal. It is a proper religious response to God's beneficence.

Yaakov is modeling a particular way of relating to our money and our economic success. We must see God in our earning of a living. And we demonstrate that we do by giving a tenth of it back to God. The key word here is "back." It is tithed to

God because it comes from God. The tithing is not giving God something that God needs. It is our demonstrating to God and, more importantly, ourselves that we recognize this as coming from God.

This theme repeats itself later in the story. When after the first fourteen years of labor, Lavan asks Yaakov to give him his terms for continued employment, Yaakov underscores his own success in tending to Lavan's sheep, and then conflates that with God's role: *"You know how I have worked for you and how your flock have fared with me. For the little you had before I came has grown to much, since the Lord has blessed you wherever I turned."* (30:29-30). My work brought success, and it was God who was helping me all along.

Similarly, Yaakov invests much effort in attempting to have the sheep give birth to striped and spotted animals according to Lavan's stipulations. And yet, he sees that his success was all due to God: *"And you know"* – he says to Rachel and Leah – *"that I have worked for your father with all my strength... And the Lord did not allow him to do me harm... God has taken away your father's flock and given it to me."* (31:8-9). It is my effort, but it is God that has been behind it all.

Another dream with angels bookends this story. He reports to Rachel and Leah that he lifted up his eyes and saw in a dream that the sheep were mating in a way that ensured his financial success. This phrase *"lifted up his eyes"* then repeats itself, when he states that an angel appeared to him in a dream and told him to lift up his eyes and see the sheep and their mating. It was God who was behind it all.

Now, the phrase *"lift up your eyes"* occurs many times in the Torah, but it is only here that it appears in the context of a dream, and it does so twice. The use of that term here, I believe, is to tell us not what to see, but how to see. Yaakov is saying, I lifted up my eyes. I was able to see that it was God who was bringing about this success. I was able to have a dream, a dream that disconnects us from our physical reality and gives us another vision of things. A dream that allowed me to see that it was an angel, that it was God, who was making me successful.

This type of seeing is what can motivate us to give a tithe. And if we don't yet see this way, giving a tithe can help us lift up our eyes, can help cultivate this way of seeing. Giving a tithe is different than just giving tzedakkah. Giving tzedakkah can sometimes make us feel: *"Look how religious I am. Look how generous I am. I am giving from my hard earned money to a religious cause."* Giving a tithe sends a different message: *"I separate out a tenth of everything I earn because I know that it is not mine. I know that this money is coming from God."* It teaches us the lesson of the verse: *"For from You is everything. And it is from what we receive from Your hand that we have given to You."* (Divrei HaYamim I 29:13).

There is a debate whether Yaakov established the principle of tithing, or whether Yitzchak did. Those that argue that it was Yitzchak point to the midrash that states that when Yitzchak reaped a hundred measures of grain, he gave 10 of those measures as a tithe. Now, the tithing certainly more corresponds to the halakhic tithing of grain that applies in the Land of Israel. But to limit our concept of tithing to the narrow halakhic application would be to undermine the power of this as a religious institution which shapes our entire relationship to money, regardless of what form it takes – grain, sheep, or cash. It is Yaakov's tithing which is explicit in the Torah, not Yitzchak's. And it is Yaakov's tithing which teaches us how we can lift up our eyes, how we can see God in all our successes, how God can also be for us as a God.

Shabbat shalom!

Thoughts for Thanksgiving 2025

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

Israel is in an uneasy cease-fire with Hamas and under constant threat of terrorism and possible war. Anti-Jewish words and deeds have skyrocketed throughout the world. In the United States, we witness anti-Israel and anti-Semitic hatred on the streets, on college campuses, and in the media.

Yes, there are many things that concern us. The “American Dream” isn’t as peaceful and optimistic as it was in past years.

But we are thankful for America. We are thankful to the Almighty for the many blessings showered upon our country.

We are thankful that the nation’s President has stood with Israel and the Jewish People at this time of crisis. We are grateful for the overwhelming support of Israel and American Jewry by the American Congress and many political leaders on all levels of government. We are grateful for the many millions of Americans who stand with Israel and the Jewish People.

For Jews, as for so many others, America has been — and continues to be — a land of opportunity and freedom. The ideas and ideals of America continue to inspire and to give hope. Without ignoring or belittling the many problems facing the country, we must be grateful for its positive values, its commitment to democracy, and its strong opposition to tyrannical nations.

We pray that those who hate Israel and the Jewish People will overcome their hatred...and reach out sincerely for peaceful co-existence. We pray that Israel and the Jewish People will remain strong, idealistic and humane. We pray for peace in Israel, throughout the Middle East and throughout the world. We pray that all good people everywhere will foster love, not hatred; mutual respect, not enmity; kindness, not cruelty.

Realism demands that we see things as they are. Idealism demands that we see things as they can and should be. We must never let realism block out our idealism. We dream of — and work for — better days.

There are worrying trends in American life. Yet we celebrate Thanksgiving with the faith that the American Dream has the power to maintain our country as a bastion of freedom and democracy. The American Jewish community has made — and continues to make — monumental contributions to American life in so many areas. We are grateful for the blessings of America.

In his famous letter to the Jewish community of Newport in 1790, President George Washington wrote: *“May the children of the stock of Abraham who dwell in this land continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants – while everyone shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make him afraid.”* These are words, expressive of the American spirit at its best, for which we can be thankful.

On April 17, 1818, Mordecai Manuel Noah – one of the great American Jews of his time – delivered an address at the dedication ceremony of Shearith Israel’s second synagogue building on Mill Street in lower Manhattan. He closed his talk with a prayer that we invoke this Thanksgiving:

“May we prove ever worthy of God’s blessing; may He look down from His heavenly abode, and send us peace and comfort; may He instill in our minds a love of country, of friends, and of all mankind. Be just, therefore, and fear not. That God who brought us out of the land of Egypt, who walked before us like ‘a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night,’ will never desert His people Israel.”

Happy Thanksgiving.

* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. and rabbi emeritus of the historic Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York City.

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Impasses...and Beyond: Thoughts for Parashat Vayetsei

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

“And Jacob awakened from his sleep and said, surely the Lord is in this place; and I did not know it” (Bereishith 28:16).

Sometimes we reach an impasse and are not sure how to proceed. We face new challenges, unexpected setbacks, daunting choices for the future. We consider this option or that possibility; we consult with others; we think as carefully as we can. But we still feel uncertain. As we agonize over our situation, we admit: I don’t know what to do, I don’t know what’s best.

Our forefather Jacob faced such a crisis, described in this week’s Torah reading. He had to flee his parents’ home for fear that his brother Esau wanted to murder him. He set off to a land he had never been to before, to start a new chapter in his life without a clear idea of how things would unfold. As he was on the road, he went to sleep and had a dream. He envisioned a ladder resting on the ground but reaching to heaven, with angels ascending and descending. When he woke up, he realized he had received a message from God. The Almighty reassured him that he would move forward successfully and receive many blessings.

When we find ourselves in transitional dilemmas, we might draw insights from Jacob’s dream and his encounter with God. The ladder’s legs were on land; i.e. we need to be realistic, grounded in the reality of the world in which we live. The ladder reached the heavens; i.e. we must have great aspirations, a spiritual worldview that transcends the moment. Angels were ascending and descending the ladder; i.e. we must understand that life has ups and downs and that we have the ability to cope with fluctuations if we keep a proper mindset.

When we are at an impasse, we are not likely to receive a prophetic dream as did Jacob. But we can think of our situation as a challenge from God in which the Almighty prods us to be strong, resilient, clear-headed, unafraid. It is as though God places Jacob’s ladder before us and says: will you ascend or descend? Do you have the courage to climb and reach for the heavens?

Personal dilemmas offer us the possibility of personal achievement. **Rabbi Israel Salanter once taught: when most people come to a wall they can’t go through, they stop; when Jews come to a wall they can’t go through, they go through! Perhaps we learned to go through walls by keeping Jacob’s ladder in mind.** [emphasis added]

“And Jacob awakened from his sleep and said, surely the Lord is in this place; and I did not know it” (Bereishith 28:16).

* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. and rabbi emeritus of the historic Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York City.

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Vayeitzei – Good Fences Make Good Relatives

by Rabbi Mordechai Rhine *

May this Dvar Torah be a Zechus Refuah Shileima for Cholei Yisroel

Yakov's mission was a difficult one. He was to leave the holy land and enter a place that was home to people of bad morals. In this place he was to find a wife and build a home loyal to the legacy of his righteous family. The challenge was enormous, especially when we consider that the town's lead cheat and manipulator was Lavan, destined to be Yakov's father-in-law.

Yakov's goal throughout these experiences was to stay true to his values. When Lavan switched the bride, Yakov agreed to work a second set of seven years. When Lavan changed the terms of employment, Yakov calmly navigated the situation. In fact, at the end of the Parsha, Yakov asserts that Lavan changed the terms of agreements tens of times, and Lavan knows full well that he did.

Eventually, Yakov left with his family and wealth, and Lavan chased after him. After a heated conversation, they agreed to build a fence as a symbol of peace between them. They would part ways peacefully and they would not harm each other. The fence would serve as a boundary for each of them. With good boundaries they would each find peace.

Interestingly, the fence-boundary that they created had different terms for Lavan than for Yakov. Lavan declared that the definition of this fence-boundary was that "*I will not pass it in your direction*," at all. Whereas, regarding Yakov's obligation, Lavan acknowledged that the fence-boundary would work differently. Lavan said, "*You will not pass it towards me to do harm.*"

Even Lavan understood that fence-boundaries have a goyish (Lavan) style, and fence-boundaries have a Jewish style. The Lavan style is that once a fence is in place they are cut off from each other, distanced, estranged, and alienated. Whereas the Yakov style fence is that we acknowledge intense differences but still maintain a relationship. As Avraham told Lot, even when they needed to part ways, "*I will be to your right*," available to connect when appropriate. The fence, from Yakov's point of view, would serve as a reminder to be careful not to do harm. But even Lavan acknowledged that Yakov could still cross the fence and relate with him, as long as it was not to do harm.

In our time, it has become very popular to speak of creating boundaries between relatives. When a relationship is difficult, or when a relationship has had a difficult and painful history, people talk of creating boundaries. It could be between parents and children or between people and their brothers and sisters. There are those who pursue boundaries with religious fervor and zeal and create intense boundaries that impose such distancing that close relatives, and their children too, don't relate to each other on any level for years.

As Jews, we look to the Torah for guidance in all areas including how to handle a family fallout. We know of such a fallout: Yosef and his brothers. It wasn't pretty. But eventually they worked hard to bring the family together. This is how it must be in a practical sense as well. Even when we need to create boundaries, we need to create boundaries that are soft

enough to allow for some interaction — boundaries of Shalom, boundaries that leave the possibility to rebuild the relationship. As one wise man told a member of a family that was diligently practicing distancing to keep the family apart: “*You were right, totally right! But enough already!*”

Sometimes the distancing is driven by counsel given by people who just don’t see any other way to provide a family member with peace of mind. Based on their skill set they think that only by cutting off relatives and imposing intense boundaries can peace be achieved. This is sad. To Lavan, the fence was a total separation. But to Yakov and for the tradition of the Jewish people, the fence-boundary was meant to separate them wisely and strategically. Interaction and love are permitted by a Jewish fence-boundary. Amputation of a relationship, and boundaries “*not for good and not for bad*” are rarely appropriate.

Sometimes the people giving counsel have no idea how to hammer out an agreement that allows for healthy interaction. So, it seems simpler to just cut ties. But I assure you, it is not simpler to just cut ties. The toll on the community and the toll on the very people we are trying to protect is very great. Parents, children, and grandchildren are meant to have a relationship, even if it must be guided, limited, and cautious. Siblings are meant to heal even after significant differences.

There is a field of expertise that is becoming more and more needed in the Jewish world as the intense fence-boundaries of the goyishe world become more popular. That field is called relationship mediation. In its business application, mediation enables companies that were competitive and at odds with each other for years to do business with each other or even do a merger. It works in relationships as well. Relationship mediation provides the forward-thinking perspective that we have decades of life ahead of us and we can do better than living apart or advising others to live apart.

For those who look at relationships and think that the only hope is breaking ties, I encourage you to become more familiar with relationship mediation. Mediation is not focused on who is right. Mediation will readily acknowledge that people make mistakes, that there is often a lot of pain, and that there is a need for boundaries. But even people engaged in the greatest of conflicts have been able to step out of relationship hopelessness. By asking both parties to take steps towards reconciliation, people in similar situations have been able to hammer out an agreement or an understanding for healthy boundaries, boundaries of peace.

There is a great difference between a Jewish boundary and a Lavan boundary. Let us do our best to set up Jewish boundaries — boundaries that stop harm from crossing over but make space for expressions of love and healthy interactions.

With best wishes for a wonderful Shabbos.

* Rabbi Mordechai Rhine is a certified mediator and coach with Rabbinic experience of more than 20 years. Based in Maryland, he provides services internationally via Zoom. He is the Director of TEACH613: Building Torah Communities, One family at a Time, and the founder of CARE Mediation, focused on Marriage/ Shalom Bayis and personal coaching. To reach Rabbi Rhine, his websites are www.care-mediation.com and www.teach613.org; his email is RMRhine@gmail.com. For information or to join any Torah613 classes, contact Rabbi Rhine.

Vayeitzei – Silence is Golden

by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer *

When the Torah says Hashem remembers someone, this is an indication that a particular merit of theirs was brought before G-d’s Heavenly throne to sway a judgement in their favor. We find this term in our Parsha when Rochel conceives a child, and the commentaries discuss which merit tipped the scales in her favor. One explanation offered by the Medrash Tanchuma (Vayeitzei 6) is that it was the merit of Rochel’s silence. The Medrash describes how Lavan’s efforts

to have Leah marry Yaakov instead of Rochel began long before the wedding day. Throughout the seven-year engagement, Yaakov would send gifts to Rochel. Lavan intercepted these gifts and secretly gave them to Leah, as though Yaakov had sent them for Leah. Rochel was aware of her father's actions, but chose to remain silent. Through this she acquired a trait of silence which she passed on to future generations, as well. The Medrash describes how descendants of Rochel, including her son Binyomin, King Saul and Queen Esther, each expressed this attribute of silence.

The Medrash asks why Rochel chose to be silent. Rabi Shimon bar Yochai explains that she understood that she if exposed Lavan's treachery, Lavan would retaliate by refusing to let her marry Yaakov under any circumstances. If she was silent, there was still a chance that she could end up marrying Yaakov once Yaakov found out on his own. She, therefore, chose to remain silent to avoid angering her father. The Medrash concludes that G-d told Rochel, "*You were silent. By your life, in the merit of that silence I will remember you.*"

While it is often true that silence can be sign of wisdom, as it appears to be here, one would not think of silence as a sign of righteousness. We certainly would not think of silence as a noble character trait which would be the merit to tip the judgement in Heaven and determine that Rochel should bear children. Why was this silence such a powerful merit for Rochel?

The Alter of Kelm, Rav Simcha Zissel Broide, explains that the trait of silence, when used properly, is an act of great dignity and an expression of true G-dliness. We have a natural tendency to use our words as tools to clarify and correct situations in the world around us. Generally, this is a noble and proper usage of speech. However, there are times when an immediate response can be more damaging in the long run. The trait of silence is the ability to hold back and remain silent, even when you have something worth saying. Thinking before speaking requires a patient and developed mind and a wise and careful personality. In essence, silence under pressure is one of the greatest displays of self-control. It is the ultimate dignity.

The Alter of Kelm notes that developing this G-d-like nobility and dignity is included in the mitzvah of "v'halachta bidrachav" – "*You shall walk in His ways.*")Devarim 28:9(This means that we should strive to come close to G-d by emulating Him. One of G-d's attributes is that He always does things in the best way possible, and always with an eye on the goal. Therefore, this mitzvah requires us to develop this trait of silence, to be aware of when speaking would be harmful and to develop the self-control to remain silent.

This was Rochel's great merit. Rochel recognized Yaakov's righteousness and knew that by marrying him she would play a role in building the Jewish nation. When Lavan began putting Leah in her place by giving Yaakov's engagement gifts to Leah, she was watching her dreams go up in smoke. It would have been so easy to send a message to Yaakov and end her anguish. Yet, she held her tongue and considered the consequences of her actions. This was the merit which guaranteed she would bear children. This silence emulated G-d.

It is easier to recognize the significance of the great achievements that come through our actions and efforts. Recognizing the significance of silence is much more difficult. Yet, this Medrash is teaching us that the nobility and sanctity of silence can sometimes be far greater than any outward action.

* Co-founder of the Rhode Island Torah Network in Providence, RI. Until recently, Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, Bethesda, MD., and then associated with the Savannah Kollel.

VaYetze: Israel, Yaakov, and Esav

By Rabbi Haim Ovadia *

In the past I have written extensively about the struggle between Yaakov and Esav, which eventually led to the sibling rivalry among Yaakov's children, and by extension even to the divide between the Northern and Southern Kingdoms of Israel, or Ephraim and Yehudah, respectively. This approach seems to contradict the traditional view of Esav as reflected in the Midrash and in Rashi's commentary, but it does not diminish the value of Yaakov's legacy and the lessons we learn from his life. In this article I would like to briefly explain how Esav became a villain in Rabbinic literature, and what are my proofs that Yaakov should not have taken the blessing through deception, but my main goal is to explain why we are called Bene Israel and how does that name relate to what Israel experiences now both as a country and as a nation.

Esav of the Torah is not a villain:

In Bereshit, Esav does nothing wrong. He commits no crime. He was ruddy)25:25(, but so was King David)I Sam. 16:12(. He was a hunter, a profession which has negative connotations but is not forbidden, as we can see in VaYikra)17:13(. Esav may be a glutton)25:30(, but that is not a sin, and it is also possible that he asked to gulp the red-red stuff because he was at the brink of fainting and could not speak clearly. Esav sells the right of the firstborn and belittles it, but he is just being practical. The right of the firstborn entitles him to a double portion of the inheritance, and it takes effect only after the father's death. Given the longevity of his ancestors, Esav knew that he might have to wait a hundred years for that inheritance, and because of his dangerous occupation, he felt he would die before that.

When Esav finds out that Yaakov took his blessing, he cries a great, bitter cry)27:34(, and later says that he will kill Yaakov)27:41(, but he never carries out the threat or follows Yaakov to Haran. When people are upset, they tend to make exaggerated statements, and Esav does the same. It does not make him a killer.

When Yaakov returns from Haran, Esav comes towards him with four hundred men, but does not attack him. Yaakov prepares himself for an attack, sends Esav generous gifts, and speaks to him in a subservient manner. Esav does not seem to care much about the gifts and even suggests accompanying Yaakov and protecting him. Years later, when there is not enough room for Esav in Canaan because of Yaakov, he moves to Se'ir with his family and flocks. In conclusion, though Esav's character and profession are perhaps not ideal, he is not a criminal or a sinner, and he has never attacked his brother Yaakov.

The vilification of Esav:

If that is so, how did Esav become a villain? It was a historical process. Esav became identified with the people of Edom, or Se'ir, on the other side of the Jordan River. That nation gradually grew hostile towards Israel, and this attitude was the reason for the negative treatment of Esav by Malachi)1:3(. During the Maccabean period, the people of Edom were forced to convert to Judaism, but later sided more with the Roman invaders. The most famous, or infamous, of these collaborators was Herod the Great, who persecuted and massacred the rebellious zealots of the Galilee.

The next step was the identification of Esav with Rome, both because of Herod's association with Rome and because of the red color which featured in the Roman armor and insignia. Thus, the animosity of the nation of Edom, Herod's cruelty, and the Roman oppression each added a layer to the negative image of Esav. The culmination of this process was when the Roman Empire became Christian. Since that moment, Esav represented Christianity, which has been a bitter enemy of the Israeli nation for almost two thousand years.

Midrashic interpretations, written at the height of the first conflict between Christianity and Judaism from the 1st to the 3rd centuries CE, have made Esav a murderer, rapist, robber, thief and a sworn hater of Yaakov. Rashi, writing in Europe under the darkening clouds of the imminent crusades, cast Jews and Christians in the roles of Yaakov and Esav. His goal was to inspire his readers and listeners and give them hope. Just as Yaakov defeated Esav with the power of prayer, so the oppressed Jews of Germany and France will overcome the deep hatred and the might of their "host" nations.

When we ignore the biblical character of Esav, and instead focus on his Midrashic personality, we can easily claim that taking the blessing from Esav was the right thing to do, but a careful reading of Yaakov's life following his deception of Yitzhak proves the opposite.

The consequences of taking the blessing:

When Esav finds out what Yaakov has done, he plots to kill him, and Rivka decides to save Yaakov by sending him away to Haran. She tells Yaakov "*Listen to me and flee to my brother Lavan*" 27:43(. This is the same formula she uses to convince him to take the blessing: "*Listen to me!*" 27:13(. Rivka's certainty that her advice is correct has turned into an urgent need to whisk her son to a safe place, and she uses the same words to express both.

Yaakov deceived Yitzhak by pretending to be someone else in order to get something which was not his, and he was deceived by Leah in the same exact manner. The sibling rivalry between Rahel and Leah will extend to their children and will haunt Yaakov for years to come.

When he complains to Lavan, Lavan tells Yaakov that the younger one cannot be given before the firstborn)29:26(, reverberating the same terms the Torah uses earlier to describe Yaakov and Esav)25:23 and 27:19(.

Yaakov spent twenty years in Lavan's house, away from his family)30:41(. His mother passed away while he was on his way to Canaan, and she probably had not seen him since the day he fled to Haran. Years later, the rivalry between Leah's and Rachel's children leads to the selling of Yosef. As a result, Yaakov does not see Yosef for at least twenty-two years)37:2, 41:46, and 44:6(.

Yaakov deceived his father with clothes and a slaughtered goat, and he is deceived by his sons, after they lost Yosef, with the same items)37:31-33(.]emphasis added[When Yaakov entered his father's tent, Yitzhak did not recognize him)27:23(. The Hebrew root of recognize – nun, khaf, resh, becomes a key word in the saga of Yosef and his brothers)37:33, 38:25-26, 42:7-8(, starting with the chilling message of Yosef's brothers to Yaakov: "*Please recognize, is this your son's robe or is it not?*")37:32(.

When Yaakov is told by his sons that Shimon is held captive in Egypt until they bring Binyamin to the viceroy, Yaakov responds "*You have berefted me, Yosef is gone, Shimon is gone, and now you will take Binyamin as well? It all came upon me*")42:36(. Yaakov echoes two statements of his mother. The first is when she sent him to get the blessing and he refused for fear that his father would find out that he was an impostor and would curse him. Rivka responded, "*your curse will be upon me*")27:13(meaning that she will carry the burden of the curse and the consequences. Yaakov now says, as if speaking to his mother, it wasn't upon you, it all came upon me. The second is when Rivka sends Yaakov to Lavan and says, "*I do not want to be bereaved of both of you in one day*")27:45(. Now Yaakov says that he is going to be bereaved not of two, but of three sons.

So Why Are We Bene Israel?

Now that we see that the biblical narrative very strongly suggests that Esav was not a wicked person and that Yaakov should not have deceived Esav and Yitzhak in order to get the blessing, we might ask why was Yaakov chosen to be the father of the nation and not Esav, and why are we called Bene Israel, after Yaakov's second name, and not Bene Yaakov. The answer is that though Esav's actions are not evil and not even delinquent, they are not the actions which breed leadership and progress. Esav is an opportunist who chooses the easy way out. He does not dwell too much on the past or contemplates the future, and he lives the moment. This is why Esav belittles the right of the firstborn. It is a right which might benefit him in the distant future, and he does care about it now. This is also why Esav, though very angry at Yaakov immediately after the blessing was taken, never chases him to Haran. Once Yaakov is gone, Esav returns to his routine. This is why when Yaakov returns from Haran and send an amazing offering to Esav, along with a subliminal apology, Esav is not impressed. He has whatever he needs at the moment, and he does not care about Yaakov's transgression twenty years ago.

And this is why Esav decides to move away from Yaakov and find new pastures. At an older age he became a shepherd like Yaakov, and it is easier for him to move than to fight over the land. We might think that carelessness is a great character trait, and it is true that sometimes we should be able to let go of grudges and hard feelings, but it could also lead to apathy and indifference. That apathy later led to the refusal of the nation of Edom to provide safe passage to the newly freed Israelite slaves, and it is for that apathy that the prophet Ovadiah 1:11(rebukes the nation: “*You stood idly by when foreigners looted Yaakov.*”

Yaakov, on the other hand, never rests. Yaakov wrestles, not only with Esav and with the world, but with himself as well. The key verse to understand this character trait of Yaakov is Genesis 32:29.

Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven/contended/fought with beings divine and human and have prevailed/won.

All translations understand the last word, which in Hebrew is derived from the root Yakhal (Yod, Khaf, Lamed), as winning or prevailing, which is synonymous to triumph, victory. The one translation which takes it to the extreme is the interpretive Totah Yesharah by Chaskel Kahane, who bases his translation of this verse on the commentaries of Rashi and Sforno:

And he said: “Your name will no longer be called ‘Jacob,’ which carries the implication of crookedness, but the Eternal will appear to you at Bethel and change your name to ‘Israel,’ meaning ‘superior’; for you have prevailed against angels and men and have triumphed. Your children will be called the Children of Israel, which name will carry the implication that their nation is the champion of the Almighty.

There is a different way to read the verse, however. The root Yakhal appears in the bible almost two hundred times in the significance of being able, with the exception of three or four places where it means to win. According to Avraham Even Shoshan’s concordance, our verse is not among these exceptions. This enables to read the verse as saying that Yaakov will be called Israel because he was able to struggle with the human and the divine. Yaakov does not always win, but he is always willing to wrestle, both physically and spiritually.

To be Israel is to wrestle!

This brings us to the way the State of Israel and those who see themselves as part of the Jewish People behave and are seen around the world. The identity and trajectory of the State and the nation are defined by our willingness and ability to wrestle and struggle, to question and analyze. We make a lot of mistakes along the way, but we keep moving forward. In Israel, that struggle was felt over many decades in the attempts to establish a democratic country, based on moral values, and assure that it will not be a dictatorship or an oppressive regime. It pushed Israel to make decisions, legislate laws, and reach agreements which other countries would never have considered.

As Jews, we keep wrestling with ethical and moral dilemmas. We do it during the High Holidays, in our daily prayers, and every time we study Torah. Even those Jews who do not consider themselves observant refer to this narrative and strive to bring justice to the world. The factions within Israel and the Jewish People could at times be worlds apart, but they are all part of the ongoing process of the evolution of Am Yisrael.

Esav or Edom, on the other hand, have fallen into a state of disrepair because of the attitude of carelessness or opportunism. As an individual, and later on as a nation, Esav did only what benefited him. There was no struggle, no questions, no attempt to grow, and where there is no growth, there’s decline. We are Bene Israel because we struggle, and because we struggle, we will also prevail.

Shabbat Shalom.

* Judaic faculty, Ramaz High School, New York; also Torah VeAhava. Until recently, Rabbi, Beth Sholom Sephardic Minyan)Potomac, MD(. Faculty member, AJRCA non-denominational rabbinical school(.

Many Devrei Torah from Rabbi Ovadia this year come from an unpublished draft of his forthcoming book on Tanach, which Rabbi Ovadia has generously shared with our readers. Rabbi Ovadia reserves all copyright protections for this material.

A Bissel of Torah from a Tiny Jewish Community: Shalom from the Holy Land of Israel!

By Rabbi Natanel Kaszovitz

Auckland, New Zealand Hebrew Congregation *

I've just returned from the AKO Kosher Conference in Yerushalyim, where kosher agencies from around the world came together to share ideas, support one another and strengthen the work we all do for our communities.

It was a privilege to be there on behalf of Kosher Kiwi and to see how even a small community like ours in Auckland is connected to a much larger Jewish story.

In this week's Parsha, the Torah tells of Yaakov's)Jacob(journey away from home. Even as he travels far, he holds onto who he is and builds a meaningful future from wherever he finds himself.

In many ways, that message speaks to us here in New Zealand – living proudly as a Jewish community, even at a distance from the major centers, yet very much part of the wider Jewish world.

I'm really looking forward to being back together and celebrating our upcoming simchas – Dasha's Bat Mitzvah on Friday night and Jace's Bar Mitzvah on Shabbat day. Hope to see everyone at Shul! And a huge thank you to everyone who helped Avital and the family while I was gone.

B'Ahavat Yisrael.

Shabbat Shalom.

]Editor's note: If you became Rabbi of the only synagogue in a small, isolated Jewish community, at what level would you direct your Shabbat message? [

Bridging the Generations: The Holocaust and Its Legacy: The Holocaust Centre of New Zealand is hosting the annual International Holocaust Remembrance Day commemoration on January 25, 2026, in Auckland. Created in 2005 by the United Nations, 27 January -the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau - is International Holocaust Remembrance Day, which honours and remembers the victims and survivors of the Holocaust. This year's commemoration is dedicated to strengthening the crucial link between the past and the future, empowering younger generations to carry the torch of remembrance and responsibility.

B'Nai Akiva: AHC has an active chapter of B'Nai Akiva and is looking for a venue for this year for its 20 active members.

* Rabbi Kaszovitz, an Israeli ordained at Ohr Torah Stone, previously served as Rabbi in Nairobi, Kenya. He became Rabbi of Auckland Hebrew Congregation in September 2025. Rabbi Moshe Rube, whose remarks I previously posted in this space, is in the process of starting a new Rabbinic position in Australia. Rabbi Rube is waiting for his visa to enter Australia, when he will be able to start his new position. I plan to use this space to include messages from Rabbi Kaszovitz and Rabbi Rube going forward.

Rav Kook Torah

Vayeitzei: The Rivalry between Rachel and Leah

Jacob did not have an easy life. He loved Rachel but was tricked into marrying her sister Leah. And when he finally married Rachel, his home suffered from rivalry between the two sisters.

This strife was not limited to Jacob's household. It continued on in future generations: in the struggle between Rachel's son Joseph and Leah's sons; and in the conflict between King Saul, a descendant of Rachel, and David, a descendant of Leah. Why did Jacob need to endure so many obstacles when setting up his family — complications that would have such a long-term impact on future generations of the Jewish people?

The Present versus the Future

We live in a divided reality. We continuously deliberate: how much should we live for the moment, and how much should we work for the future? We must constantly balance between the here-and-now and the yet-to-come. This dilemma exists across all levels of life: individual, familial, communal, and national.

God's original design for the world was that the entire tree, even the bark, would taste as sweet as its fruit (Gen. 1:11). In other words, even during the intermediate stages of working toward a goal, we should be able to sense and enjoy the final fruits of our labor. When the world is functioning properly, the present is revealed in all of its glory and serves as a suitable guide toward a loftier future. In such a perfect world, our current desires and wishes do not impinge upon our future aspirations.

But the physical universe is fundamentally flawed. The earth failed to produce trees that taste like their fruit. We endure constant conflict between the present and the future, the temporal and the eternal. As individuals and as a nation, we often need to disregard the sensibilities of the present since they will not lead us toward our destined path.

Rachel and Leah

Jacob's marriage to two sisters, and the ongoing rivalry between them, is a metaphor for this duality in our lives.

Like all things in our world, Jacob's home suffered from a lack of clarity. Jacob should have been able to establish his family on the basis of an uplifted present, blessed with integrity and goodness. He should have been able to marry and set up his home without making calculations with an eye to the future. The natural purity and simple emotions of his holy soul should have sufficed.

Rachel, whom Jacob immediately loved for the beautiful qualities of her soul, is a metaphor for the simple and natural love we feel for the revealed present. Jacob felt that Rachel's external beauty was also in harmony with the unknown realm of the distant future.

But God's counsel decreed that the future destiny of the people of Israel belonged not to Rachel, but to Leah. Leah would be the principal matriarch of the Jewish people. Yet this future was so profoundly hidden that its current state — in Leah — was hidden from Jacob.

This concealed quality of Leah is embedded in the very foundations of the Jewish people. Because of the legacy of Leah, we can raise our sights afar, skipping over the present circumstances, in order to aspire toward a lofty future. Just as

Jacob found himself unexpectedly wed to Leah, so too, the path of the Jewish people throughout history does not always proceed in an orderly fashion. The future often projects its way into the present so that the present time may be elevated and sanctified.

Two Kings and Two Messiahs

The rivalry between Rachel and Leah, the conflict between the beautiful present and the visionary future, also found expression in the monarchy of Israel. The temporary reign of Saul, a descendant of Rachel, struggled with the eternal dynasty of David, a descendant of Leah. 2

Even in the Messianic Era, the divide between Rachel and Leah will continue, with two Messianic leaders: the precursive redeemer, Mashiach ben Joseph, a descendant of Rachel, and the final redeemer, Mashiach ben David, a descendant of Leah.

Nonetheless, we aspire for the simpler state in which the present is uplifting, and by means of its light, the future acquires its greatness. For this reason, Rachel was always honored as Jacob's primary wife. Even Leah's descendants in Bethlehem conceded: "*Like Rachel and Leah who both built the house of Israel*" (Ruth 4:11), honoring Rachel before Leah.

Footnotes:

]1[Six of the twelve tribes of Israel, including those designated for spiritual and political leadership (Levi and Judah), were born to Leah.

]2[Saul, who is described as "*the most handsome young man in Israel, head and shoulders above the people*" (1 Sam. 16:2), was a natural choice for king. And yet God chose to appoint David — a simple shepherd boy whose leadership qualities even his own father failed to see — as the true king of the Jewish people. As God explained to the perplexed prophet Samuel: "*Look not upon his appearance, or the height of his stature, for I have rejected him. For it is not as man sees [that which is visible] to the eyes; the Lord sees into the heart*" (1 Sam. 16:7).[

)*Sapphire from the Land of Israel.*) Adapted from *Ein Eyah* vol. IV, pp. 44-46. (

https://ravkooktorah.org/VAYETZE_65.htm

Vayeitze –Time for Love, Time for Justice (5775, 5782)

By Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, z"l, Former Chief Rabbi of the U.K.*

Judaism is supremely a religion of love: three loves.

"*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.*"
Deut. 6:5

"*You shall love your neighbour as yourself.*" Lev. 19:18

"*You shall love the stranger, for you were once strangers in a strange land.*"]1[Deut. 10:19

Not only is Judaism a religion of love. It was also the first civilisation to place love at the centre of the moral life. C. S. Lewis and others pointed out that all great civilisations contain something like the golden rule: Act toward others as you would wish them to act toward you.]2[or, in Hillel's negative formulation: Don't do to others what you would hate them to do to you.)Shabbat 31a(This is what Game Theorists *call reciprocal altruism* or tit-for-tat. Some form of this altruism,)especially the variant devised by Martin Nowak of Harvard called "generous"(has been proven by computer simulation to be the best strategy for the survival of any group.]3[

Judaism is also about justice. Albert Einstein spoke about the "*almost fanatical love of justice*" that made him thank his lucky stars that he was born a Jew.]4[The only place in the Torah to explain why Abraham was chosen to be the founder of a new faith states,

"For I have chosen him so that he will instruct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just." Gen. 18:19

So why this combination of justice and love? Why is love alone not enough?

Our parsha contains a gripping passage of only a few words that gives us the answer. Recall the background: Jacob, fleeing home, is taking refuge with his uncle Laban. He falls in love with Rachel, Laban's younger daughter, and works for seven years so that he can marry her. A deception is practised on him, and when he wakes up the morning after their wedding night, he discovers that he has married Rachel's elder sister Leah. Livid, he confronts Laban. Laban replies: "*It is not done in our place to marry the younger before the elder.*")Gen. 29:26(He tells Jacob he can marry Rachel as well, in return for another seven years of work.

We then read, or rather hear, a series of very poignant words. To understand their impact, we have to recall that in ancient times until the invention of printing there were few books. Until then most people)other than those standing at the bimah(heard the Torah in the synagogue. They did not see it in print. The phrase *Keriat ha-Torah* really means, not reading the Torah but proclaiming it, making it a public declaration.]5[

There is a fundamental difference between reading and hearing in the way we process information. Reading, we can see the entire text – the sentence, the paragraph – at one time. Hearing, we cannot. We hear only one word at a time, and we do not know in advance how a sentence or paragraph will end. Some of the most powerful literary effects in an oral culture occur when the opening words of a sentence lead us to expect one ending and instead we encounter another.

These are the poignant words we hear:

"And he]Jacob[loved also Rachel." Gen. 29:30

This is what we expected and hoped for. Jacob now has two wives, sisters, something that will be forbidden in later Jewish law. It is a situation fraught with tension. But our first impression is that all will be well. He loves them both.

That expectation is dashed by the next word: "*mi-Leah*," "*more than Leah.*"

This is not merely unexpected. It is also grammatically impossible. You cannot have a sentence that says, "*X also loved Y more than Z.*" The "*also*" and the "*more than*" contradict one another. This is one of those rare and powerful instances in which the Torah deliberately uses fractured syntax to indicate a fractured relationship.]6[

Then comes the next phrase and it is shocking.

"The Lord saw that Leah was hated." Gen. 29:31

Was Leah hated? No. The previous sentence has just told us she was loved. What then does the Torah mean by “hated”? It means, that is how Leah felt. Yes she was loved, but less than her sister. Leah knew, and had known for seven years, that Jacob was passionately in love with her younger sister Rachel, for whom the Torah says that he worked for seven years,

“but they seemed to him like a few days because he was so in love with her.” Gen. 29:20

Leah was not hated. She was less loved. But someone in that situation cannot help but feel rejected. The Torah forces us to hear Leah’s pain in the names she gives her children. Her first she calls Reuben, saying,

“It is because the Lord has seen my misery. Surely my husband will love me now.”

The second she calls Shimon,

“Because the Lord heard that I am not loved.”

The third she called Levi, saying,

“Now at last my husband will become attached to me.” Gen. 29:32-35

There is sustained anguish in these words. We hear the same tone later when Reuben, Leah’s firstborn, finds mandrakes in the field. Mandrakes were thought to have aphrodisiac properties, so he gives them to his mother hoping that this will draw his father to her. Rachel, who has been experiencing a different kind of pain, childlessness, sees the mandrakes and asks Leah for them. Leah then says: *“Wasn’t it enough that you took away my husband? Will you take my son’s mandrakes too?”* Gen. 30:15(The misery is palpable.

Note what has happened. It began with love. It has been about love throughout. Jacob loved Rachel. He loved her at first sight. There is no other love story quite like it in the Torah. Abraham and Sarah are already married by the time we first meet them. Isaac had his wife chosen for him by his father’s servant. But Jacob loves. He is more emotional than the other patriarchs; that is the problem. Love unites but it also divides. It leaves the unloved, even the less-loved, feeling rejected, abandoned, forsaken, alone. That is why you cannot build a society, a community or even a family on love alone. There must be justice-as-fairness also.

If we look at the fifteen times the word “love,” *ahavah*, is mentioned in the book of Genesis, we make an extraordinary discovery. **Every time love is mentioned, it generates conflict.** Isaac loved Esau but Rebecca loved Jacob. Jacob loved Joseph, Rachel’s firstborn, more than his other sons. From these came two of the most fateful sibling rivalries in Jewish history. [emphasis added]

Yet even these pale into insignificance when we reflect on the first time the word love appears in the Torah, in the opening words of the trial of the Binding of Isaac: *“Take now your son, your only one, the one you love...”* Gen. 22:2(Rashi, following Midrash)itself inspired by the obvious comparison between the Binding of Isaac and the book of Job(, says that Satan, the accusing angel, said to God when Abraham made a feast to celebrate the weaning of his son: *“You see, he loves his child more than You.”*)Rashi to Genesis 22:1(That, according to the Midrash, was the reason for the trial, to show that Satan’s accusation was untrue.

Judaism is a religion of love. It is so for profound theological reasons. In the world of myth, the gods were at worst hostile, at best indifferent to humankind. In contemporary atheism, the universe and life exist for no reason whatsoever. We are accidents of matter, the result of blind chance and natural selection. Judaism’s approach is the most beautiful I know. We

are here because God created us in love and forgiveness, asking us to love and forgive others. Love, God's love, is implicit in our very being.

So many of our texts express that love: the paragraph before the Shema with its talk of "great" and "eternal love"; the Shema itself with its command of love; the priestly blessings to be uttered in love; *Shir ha-Shirim*, the Song of Songs, the great poem of love; Shlomo Albaketz's *Lecha Dodi*, "Come, my Beloved," Eliezer Azikri's *Yedid Nefesh*, "Beloved of the Soul." If you want to live well, love. If you seek to be close to God, love. If you want your home to be filled with the light of the Divine Presence, love. Love is where God lives.

But love is not enough. **You cannot build a family, let alone a society, on love alone. For that you need justice also.** Love is partial, justice is impartial. Love is particular, justice is universal. Love is for this person not that, but justice is for all. Much of the moral life is generated by this tension between love and justice. It is no accident that this is the theme of many of the narratives of Genesis. Genesis is about people and their relationships, while the rest of the Torah is predominantly about society.]emphasis added[

Justice without love is harsh. Love without justice is unfair, or so it will seem to the less-loved. Yet to experience both at the same time is virtually impossible. Niels Bohr, the Nobel prize winning physicist, once discovered that his son had stolen an object from a local shop. He realised that he could have two separate reactions to the situation: he could view his son from the perspective of a judge)justice(or through his perspective as a father)love(, but he could not do both simultaneously.]7[]emphasis added[

At the heart of the moral life is a conflict with no simple resolution. There is no general rule to tell us when love is the right reaction and when justice is. In the 1960s the Beatles sang "*All you need is love.*" Would that it were so, but it is not. Love is not enough. Let us love, but let us never forget those who feel unloved. They too are people. They too have feelings. They too are in the image of God.

FOOTNOTES:

]1[See also Leviticus 19:33-34.

]2[C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, New York, 1947.

]3[See for example Martin Nowak and Roger Highfield, *Super Cooperators: Altruism, Evolution and Mathematics*)or, *Why We Need Each Other to Succeed*(. Melbourne: Text, 2011.

]4[Albert Einstein, *The World As I See It*, New York: Philosophical Library, 1949.

]5[This has halachic implications. *Keriat ha – Torah* is, according to most Rishonim, a *chovat ha-tsibbur*, a communal rather than an individual obligation)unlike the reading of the Megillah on Purim(.

]6[The classic example is the untranslatable verse in Gen. 4:8, in which Cain kills Abel. The breakdown of words expresses the breakdown of relationship, which leads to the breakdown of morality and the first murder.

]7[Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*)Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986(, p. 51.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE: Questions to Ponder

]1[Is it wrong to love some people more than others?

]2[How is justice universal?

]3[What statement are we making in the prayer *Avinu Malkeinu*)“Our Father, Our King”(, said on the High Holy and fast days?

<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vayetse/time-for-love-time-for-justice/> Note: because Likutei Torah and the Internet Parsha Sheet, both attached by E-mail, normally include the two most recent Devrei Torah by Rabbi Sacks, I have selected an earlier Devar.

Why Did Rachel Steal Laban’s Idols?

By Mordechai Rubin* © Chabad

Toward the end of Parshat Vayeitzei, we encounter the intriguing episode in which Rachel secretly takes her father’s “*teraphim*.” While her father is tending his flock in the field, her husband, Jacob, decides it’s time to finally leave Laban’s home. On the way out, Rachel clandestinely removes her father’s most prized possession — his collection of idols — and takes it with her.

The question arises: What was Rachel’s motive? What did she hope to achieve by taking the *teraphim*? And did she believe her father would overlook the theft? This episode becomes even more perplexing considering that it ultimately led to her untimely death, since Jacob placed a curse on whoever had taken the *teraphim*, not knowing it was his beloved wife.¹

Here we explore various explanations given by the biblical commentators.

1. To Help Her Father - Rashi)Midrash Rabbah(

The classic commentator Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki)Rashi(explains that her intention was to “*separate her father from idol worship*.² Clearly, according to Rashi, despite how poorly her father had treated Jacob, she still hoped for him to repent. Removing his idols would perhaps spur him on towards the path of return.

This explanation is based on Genesis Rabbah, which reads as follows:

Her intentions were for the Sake of Heaven. She thought to herself “*Why should I leave this old man in his corruption? This is why the verse made a point of mentioning that ‘Rachel stole teraphim that were to her father.’*”)The verse can be read to mean that she took them as a benefit to her father.(³

2. So That Laban Would Lose Faith in Them - Rabbeinu Chananel

A similar explanation is offered by Chananel ben Chushiel, who passed away in 1055, when Rashi would have been 15 years old. He writes that Rachel hoped that the loss of the idols, and the very fact that it was possible to steal them in the first place, would prove to Laban how completely worthless and powerless his gods were.⁴

3. To Prevent Laban From Discovering Jacob’s Plan to Flee - Rashbam

Rashi’s grandson Rabbi Samuel ben Meir, known by the acronym Rashbam, gives an alternate reason to the one cited by his grandfather. He explains — seemingly based on *Midrash Tanchuma* 5 — that one of Laban’s idols had the ability to communicate accurate information, and Rachel feared it would inform her father of her husband’s plan to flee.⁶ Others suggest that she was concerned Laban would be able to trace their exact route by utilizing this magical item.⁷

4. To Enable G d to Appear to Laban to Warn Him - Meshech Chochmah

Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk (1843–1926) offers a unique explanation.⁸ He writes that G d does not reveal Himself in a place of idol worship. Rachel therefore removed the idols from Laban's possession so that G d could appear to Laban and warn him against harming Jacob, which is indeed what happened.⁹

5. Because She Wanted Them - Bechor Shor

Perhaps the most surprising explanation is found in the work of the 12th-century French Tosafist, Rabbi Joseph ben Isaac Bechor Shor. He writes that Rachel actually desired them for herself.¹⁰ This is in line with the many early commentaries who explain that using these teraphim did not innately constitute idol worship. Rather, it depended on the mindset of the individual utilizing them. If the individual believed that the teraphim themselves held power and put their faith in them, that would be considered idol worship. However, if one merely believed that it was a tool or an oracle through which the Divine communicated then that would not be considered idolatry.¹¹ Rachel believed that G d had imbued these teraphim with a particular power and she therefore took them to utilize them, without there being an issue of idolatry.

6. It Had Cosmic Significance - Arvei Nachal

The 18th-century Chassidic master Rabbi David Solomon Eibeschutz (1755 - 1813) assigns this episode a mystical element. Basing himself on the works of Rabbi Isaac Luria¹² — commonly known as the Arizal (1534-1572), the architect of Kabbalah as we know it today — he asserts that Rachel wanted to accomplish something of profound cosmic importance. This is based on the Kabbalistic idea that all holy things have their opposing energy in the forces of impurity.¹³ These teraphim were in fact the unholy counterpart to the "*Urim and Thummim*" — a piece of parchment inscribed with the explicit Name of G d which was inserted into the High Priest's breastplate, giving the stones embedded in the breastplate the power to reveal the Divine will. Rachel wished to redeem the holy spark enclosed within Laban's teraphim. By taking them, she was able to stem the unholy energy that flowed through these teraphim while they were under her father's control.

Generally, the sparks of holiness trapped within something profane can be released by acts of mitzvot, in such a case the holiness overpowers the forces of impurity and liberates the spark of holiness. However, in the case of the teraphim — which served as the source of power for the forces of impurity — the sparks could not be redeemed in the normal manner. This explains why Rachel stole the teraphim in a stealthy manner — only through such covert action, undertaken at great personal risk, could she subdue the forces of evil and redeem the spark of holiness.¹⁴

While each of the above explanations is true in some sense, due to the famous Midrashic adage that there are "70 'faces' of the Torah,"¹⁵ the favored classic approach as cited by Rashi is that she took them to encourage her father's repentance. This is in line with Rachel's character — constantly putting herself on the line for the benefit of others. Just as she saved Leah from embarrassment by giving her the secret signals she and Jacob had predetermined before their marriage, here she took her father's idols to prevent him from sinning. This ultimately led to her early death from the curse Jacob unwittingly pronounced upon her,¹⁶ which in turn led to her being buried on the side of the road — the only one of the matriarchs not to be interred in the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron — again the ultimate act of self-sacrifice.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Genesis 31:32.

2. Rashi, Genesis 31:18.

3. Genesis Rabbah 74:5.
4. Rabbenu Chananel 31:18.
5. Tanchuma Vayetze 12.
6. Rashbam Genesis 31:18.
7. Abarbanel, Ibn Ezra, ibid.
8. Meshech Chochmah ibid.
9. Genesis 31:24.
10. Bechor Shor ibid.
11. See Nachmanides, Abarbanel, ibid.
12. Etz Chaim, Gate of Leah & Rachel, chapter 3.
13. See Likkutei Amarim Tanya, Chapter 6.
14. Arvei Nachal, Shabbat Hagadol, Derosh 3, Hakdama 2.
15. Bamidbar Rabbah 13:15.
16. Genesis 31:32.

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Vayeitzei: You Are Being Pursued

by Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky *

He [Laban] took along his kinsmen and pursued him for the distance of a seven-day journey, catching up with him at Mount Gilead.)Gen. 31:23(

There are aspects of our Divine mission that G-d has explicitly commanded us to do; these are the Torah's commandments, some of which apply to all humanity and some of which apply only to the Jewish people. It is our task to find out what these obligations are and how to fulfill them, and then to actively carry them out.

In addition, however, there are aspects of our Divine mission that are implicit rather than explicit. G-d does not articulate these challenges explicitly; instead, He presents us with opportunities and hopes that we rise to the occasion, taking the Divine cue.

In this context, we are taught that while Jacob was living with Laban, Jacob proactively fulfilled all of the Torah's explicit instructions.

In contrast, Laban's pursuit of Jacob symbolizes how G-d "pursues" us, presenting us with further opportunities to fulfill our potential.

Thus, we are entirely justified in feeling as though we are being pursued in life; G-d is "chasing" after us, constantly providing us with opportunities for spiritual growth and for disseminating Divine consciousness to others.

* — from *Daily Wisdom #3*

* An insight by **the Lubavitcher Rebbe** on parashat Vayetzei from our *Daily Wisdom #3* by Rabbi Moshe Wisnfsky.

Gut Shabbos,

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** Rabbi Friedman's posting did not arrive by my printing deadline, so I am running an archive submission.

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Covenant and Conversation

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l

The Birth of the World's Oldest Hate

"Go and learn what Laban the Aramean sought to do to our father Jacob. Pharaoh made his decree only about the males whereas Laban sought to destroy everything."

This passage from the Haggadah on Pesach – evidently based on this week's Parsha – is extraordinarily difficult to understand.

First, it is a commentary on the phrase in Deuteronomy, Arami oved avi. As the overwhelming majority of commentators point out, the meaning of this phrase is "my father was a wandering Aramean" - a reference either to Jacob, who escaped to Aram [Aram meaning Syria, a reference to Haran where Laban lived], or to Abraham, who left Aram in response to God's call to travel to the land of Canaan. It does not mean "an Aramean [Laban] tried to destroy my father." Some commentators read it this way, but almost certainly they only do so because of this passage in the Haggadah.

Second, nowhere in the Parsha do we find that Laban actually tried to destroy Jacob. He deceived him, tried to exploit him, and chased after him when he fled. As he was about to catch up with Jacob, God appeared to him in a dream at night and said: 'Be very careful not to say anything, good or bad, to Jacob.' (Gen. 31:24). When Laban complains about the fact that Jacob was trying to escape, Jacob replies: "Twenty years now I have worked for you in your estate – fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for some of your flocks. You changed my wages ten times!" (Gen. 31:41). All this suggests that Laban behaved outrageously to Jacob, treating him like an unpaid labourer, almost a slave, but not that he tried to "destroy" him – to kill him as Pharaoh tried to kill all male Israelite children.

Third, the Haggadah and the Seder service of which it is the text, is about how the Egyptians enslaved and practised slow genocide against the Israelites, and how God saved them from slavery and death. Why seek to diminish this whole narrative by saying that – actually – Pharaoh's decree was not that bad, Laban's was worse. This seems to make no sense, either in

terms of the central theme of the Haggadah or in relation to the actual facts as recorded in the biblical text. How then are we to understand it?

Perhaps the answer is this. Laban's behaviour is the paradigm of antisemites through the ages. It was not so much what Laban did that the Haggadah is referring to, but what his behaviour gave rise to, in century after century. How so?

Laban begins by seeming like a friend. He offers Jacob refuge when he is in flight from Esau who has vowed to kill him. Yet it turns out that his behaviour is less generous than self-interested and calculating. Jacob works for him for seven years for Rachel. Then on the wedding night Laban substitutes Rachel for Leah so that to marry Rachel, Jacob must work another seven years. When Joseph is born to Rachel, Jacob tries to leave. Laban protests. Jacob works another six years, and then realises that the situation is untenable. Laban's sons are accusing him of getting rich at Laban's expense. Jacob senses that Laban himself is becoming hostile. Rachel and Leah agree, saying, "he treats us like strangers! He has sold us and spent the money!" (Gen. 31:14-15). Jacob realises that there is nothing he can do or say that will persuade Laban to let him leave. He has no choice but to escape. Laban then pursues him. Were it not for God's warning the night before he catches up with him, there is little doubt that he would have forced Jacob to return and live out the rest of his life as his unpaid labourer. As he says to Jacob the next day: "The daughters are my daughters! The sons are my sons! The flocks are my flocks! All that you see is mine!" (Gen. 31:43). It turns out that everything he had ostensibly given Jacob, in his own mind he had not given at all.

Laban treats Jacob as his property, his slave, a non-person. In his eyes Jacob has no rights, no independent existence. He has given Jacob his daughters in marriage but still claims that they and their children belong to him, not Jacob. He has given Jacob an agreement as to the animals that will be his as his wages, yet he still insists that "The flocks are my flocks."

What arouses his anger, his rage, is that Jacob maintains his dignity and independence. Faced with an impossible existence as his father-in-law's slave, Jacob always finds a way of

carrying on. Yes, he has been cheated of his beloved Rachel, but he works so that he can marry her too. Yes, he has been forced to work for nothing, but he uses his superior knowledge of animal husbandry to propose a deal which will allow him to build flocks of his own that will allow him to maintain what is now a large family. Jacob refuses to be defeated. Hemmed in on all sides, he finds a way out. That is Jacob's greatness. His methods are not those he would have chosen in other circumstances. He has to outwit an extremely cunning adversary. But Jacob refuses to be defeated, crushed or demoralised. In a seemingly impossible situation Jacob retains his dignity, independence, and freedom. Jacob is no man's slave.

Laban is, in effect, the first antisemite. In age after age, Jews sought refuge from those - like Esau - who sought to kill them. The nations who gave them refuge seemed at first to be benefactors. But they demanded a price. They saw, in Jews, people who would make them rich. Wherever Jews went they brought prosperity to their hosts. Yet they refused to be mere chattels. They refused to be owned. They had their own identity and way of life; they insisted on the basic human right to be free. The host society then eventually turned against them. They claimed that Jews were exploiting them rather than what was in fact the case, that they were exploiting the Jews. And when Jews succeeded, they accused them of theft: "The flocks are my flocks! All that you see is mine!" They forgot that Jews had contributed massively to national prosperity. The fact that Jews had salvaged some self-respect, some independence, that they too had prospered, made them not just envious but angry. That was when it became dangerous to be a Jew.

Laban was the first to display this syndrome but not the last. It happened again in Egypt after the death of Joseph. It happened under the Greeks and Romans, the Christian and Muslim empires of the Middle Ages, the

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European nations of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and after the Russian Revolution.

In her fascinating book *World on Fire*, Amy Chua argues that ethnic hatred will always be directed by the host society against any conspicuously successful minority. All three conditions must be present.

The hated group must be a minority or people will fear to attack it.

It must be successful or people will envy it, merely feel contempt for it.

It must be conspicuous or people will not notice it.

Jews tended to fit all three. That is why they were hated. And it began with Jacob during his stay with Laban. He was a minority, outnumbered by Laban's family. He was successful, and it was conspicuous: you could see it by looking at his flocks.

What the Sages are saying in the Haggadah now becomes clear. Pharaoh was a one-time enemy of the Jews, but Laban exists, in one form or another, in age after age. The syndrome still exists today. As Amy Chua notes, Israel in the context of the Middle East is a conspicuously successful minority. It is a small country, a minority; it is successful, conspicuously so. Somehow, in a tiny country with few natural resources, it has outshone its neighbours. The result is envy that becomes anger that becomes hate. Where did it begin? With Laban.

Put this way, we begin to see Jacob in a new light. Jacob stands for minorities and small nations everywhere. Jacob is the refusal to let large powers crush the few, the weak, the refugee. Jacob refuses to define himself as a slave, someone else's property. He maintains his inner dignity and freedom. He contributes to other people's prosperity, but he defeats every attempt to be exploited. Jacob is the voice that says: I too am human. I too have rights. I too am free.

If Laban is the eternal paradigm of hatred of conspicuously successful minorities, then Jacob is the eternal paradigm of the human capacity to survive the hatred of others. In this strange way Jacob becomes the voice of hope in the conversation of humankind, the living proof that hate never wins the final victory; freedom does.

Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Can One Really Come Home Again?

"If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and clothing to wear, so that I shall come back to my father's house in peace, then the

Lord shall be my God and I shall erect a monument." (Genesis 28:20–21)

What does it really mean 'to return whole, in peace, (beshalom) to one's parents 'home? Is it really possible to 'come home 'again? The Torah portion of Vayetze speaks volumes about parents, adult children and what it really means to come home.

Rabbi Yeshoshua Baumel, in his collection of halakhic inquiries called *Emek Halakha*, writes the following fascinating responsum. A certain individual vowed to give a hundred dollars to a local synagogue if his son came back 'beshalom – 'usually understood to mean whole-alive, in one piece, from the war. As it turned out, the son returned very much in one piece; the only problem was that he brought along his gentile wife, whom he'd married in France, as well as their child. The father now claimed that the conditions of his vow had not been met since the forbidden marriage constituted a breach of the 'beshalom. 'The synagogue rabbi and board of trustees disagreed, claiming that as long as the son had returned home from the front without a war wound, the father owed the hundred dollars. Both parties agreed to abide by Rabbi Baumel's ruling.

Rabbi Baumel ruled that the father was required to pay the money to the synagogue. He ingeniously based his ruling on a Mishna in the little known Tractate *Tvul Yom* (Chap. 4 Mishna 7), where we learn that if a person vows to give wine or oil from his cistern as an offering to the priests (*teruma*), but stipulates 'let this be a heave-offering provided that it comes up whole (*shalem*); then we take his intention to have been that it be safe from breakage or from spilling, but not necessarily from contracting impurity. 'As Rabbi Baumel explains, apparently according to a sage of the Mishna who determines the normative halakha, the concept of 'shalom' only refers to physical wholeness, without a breakage of spilling; in the instance of ritual impurity, the loss is not in the physical essence of the object but is rather in its religio-spiritual quality, and this latter defect cannot be considered a lack in 'beshalom. 'Moreover, the son's 'impurity' may only be temporary, since the possibility always exists that his wife may undergo a proper conversion (*Emek Halakha*, Chap. 42).

I believe that we need not go all the way to a Mishna dealing with heave offerings in order to define the words 'to return to one's father's home beshalom. 'Our biblical portion deals with the patriarch Jacob, setting out on a dangerous journey far from home, who also takes a vow saying that if God protects him and he returns to his father's house in peace beshalom, he will then erect a monument to the Lord. The definition of 'beshalom' in the

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context of Jacob's vow might shed more direct light on the question asked of Rabbi Baumel, and might very well suggest a different response.

It should be noted that although Jacob leaves his Uncle Laban's home and employ at the conclusion of Chapter 32 of the book of Genesis, he wanders all over the Land of Canaan until the end of Chapter 35, when he finally decides to return to his father's house. Why doesn't he 'go home 'immediately? Is the Bible telling us that Jacob himself understood that he had not yet achieved the 'in peaceness' of his vow, and that until Chapter 35 he was not yet ready to return? I would submit that Jacob was waiting for the peace which comes from his being accepted by his father, the peace which comes from a loving relationship between father and son. Without this sense of parental acceptance, no child can truly feel whole.

Indeed, no one in the Torah has more problematic relationships than Jacob. He has difficulty with his brother, with his father-in-law, with his wife Leah, and with his sons. But the key to all his problematic relationships lies in his problems with his father, Isaac. Unless he repairs that tragic flaw, unless he feels that his father has forgiven him for the deception which haunts him throughout his life, he knows that he will never be able to 'return to my father's house in peace.'

Thus, we can read the series of events that begins with Jacob's departure from Laban at the end of Chapter 32 and his reunion with his father three chapters later as a crucial process in Jacob's development vis-a-vis his paternal relationship. It begins with a confrontation between the brothers in which Jacob bends over backwards to appear subservient to Esau, repeatedly calling him my master; plying him with gifts, urging him to 'take, I pray, my blessing – 'all to the end of returning the fruits of the deception to the rightful biological first-born. Then, the Bible records how Jacob attempts to start a fresh life in Shekhem, only to have to face the rape of his daughter, Dina. His sons, Shimon and Levi, deceive their father and sully his name by destroying all the male inhabitants of the city. And then in the very bloom of her life, Jacob's beloved Rachel dies in childbirth, as a result of her having deceived her father and stolen the household gods. It certainly seems as though Jacob is being repaid in spades for his having deceived his father, Isaac!

Then we encounter the worst betrayal of all, the terrible act of Reuben having usurped, or interfered with, the sleeping arrangements of his father. Whether we understand the words literally, that Reuben actually had relations with his father's concubine, Bilha, or whether

we follow the interpretation of the Midrash, that Reuven merely moved his father's bed from Bilha's tent to the tent of his mother, Leah, after the death of Rachel, it was a frontal desecration of the father-son hierarchy, a son's flagrant invasion of the personal, private life of his father.

Until this point, Jacob's life is a steady accumulation of despair. But this act of Reuven's is the worst humiliation of all. Just knowing that Reuven even contemplated such an act could have led Jacob to lash out; fathers have responded violently for much less.

We now find one of the most striking passages in the Torah – not because of what it says but because of what it does not say. The literal reading of the biblical text records that Reuven went and slept with Bilha, his father's concubine. 'And Yisrael heard about it... (vayishma Yisrael)' (Genesis 35:22). Not only does the biblical sentence end here, but what follows in the parchment scroll is a complete break in the Torah writing. It is not just a gap of white space that continues on the same line, but it is rather a gap which continues until the next line, a *pe'tuha*, which generally signals a complete change in subject and a new beginning. Yet the cantillation for the last word before the gap, "Yisrael", is not a *sof pasuk* (period), as is usually the case before such an open space between texts, but is rather an *etnahta* (semi-colon), indicating a pause, but not a total interruption from the previous subject. I would suggest that between the lines the Torah is telling us that Jacob heard of his son's deception, is enraged, may even be livid with anger, but holds his wrath inside, remains silent – and thinks a great deal, perhaps amidst tears.

Undoubtedly, we would expect to find the verse after the long space (of Jacob's ruminations) telling us that Jacob banishes his scoundrel son, Reuven, disinheriting him from the tribes of Israel. Much the opposite, however. The text continues by presenting us with an almost superfluous fact. 'Now the sons of Jacob were twelve' (Genesis 35:23) – including Reuven. Then come four verses listing all the names of the twelve sons, at long last followed by the verse, 'And Jacob came unto Isaac his father to Mamre, to Kiryat Arba, which is Hebron...' (Gen. 35:27).

We are given no details about this ultimate reunion between son and father, Jacob and Isaac, bringing to a close more than two decades of separation and alienation. Apparently now – and not before – Jacob is finally ready to come home. But why now? Is it not reasonable to assume that the last event which the Torah records, the cause of understand- able tension between Jacob and

his son, Reuven, is the most significant reason for Jacob's reconciliation with his father Isaac?

I would suggest that the blank space following Jacob's having heard of his son Reuven's indiscretion might have begun with rage, but it concluded with resolve for rapprochement. Jacob thinks that Reuven's arrogance is beyond contempt, but can a father divorce himself from his son? What do I gain from banishing my own flesh and blood? Is it Reuven's fault that he acted the way he did? Am I myself not at least partially to blame for having rejected my first-born Reuven in favor of the younger Joseph? Perhaps he was trying to tell me – albeit in a disgraceful and convoluted way – that he was my rightful heir? Or perhaps he was acting out his belief that Leah, and not a servant of Rachel, deserves to be the primary wife and mother, yielding the rightful first-born son. Such does Jacob agitate within himself. And he decides at last that if he can and must forgive his son for his deception towards him, it is logical to assume that his father, Isaac, who was also guilty of preferring one son over the other, must have forgiven him for his deception as well.

Now, finally, Jacob is ready to return to his father's home in peace... He has made peace with his father because he believes his father has made peace with him. Finally, he can make peace with himself.

When does a son return to his father *beshalom*? Only when the father accepts the son, and the son accepts the father, in a personal and emotional sense as well as in a physical one.

So, does the father in our responsum have to pay the money to the synagogue? Only if he is ready and able to accept his son and his new wife *beshalom*. And that depends on the father and on the son in all the fullness, complexity and resolution of their relationship – past, present and, only then, future.

The Person in the Parsha **Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb**

One Revelation or Two?

Quite some time has gone by since we celebrated the holiday of Sukkot. Frankly, there is much about that holiday that I have already forgotten. But one memory remains etched in my mind, one biblical phrase that was part of the Sukkot service that continues to haunt me.

I refer to the words of the Book of Kohelet/Ecclesiastes, a work which inspires me, and occasionally confounds me, all year long but especially when we read it in the synagogue on the Shabbat of the Intermediate Days of Sukkot/Shabbat Chol HaMoed.

Likutei Divrei Torah

This year, there is this one verse which caught my attention and hasn't vanished with the passage of many weeks. It reads:

"Do not hasten your lips, do not hurry your heart to make a vow in the presence of God—for God is in heaven while you are here on earth; so, let your words be few." (Kohelet 5:1-2)

That short phrase, "[He] is in heaven while you are here on earth," troubled me. Is the Master of the Universe so very distant from me? Was I not taught the He is close to us all? Do we not recite the verse in Ashrei three times a day which reads:

"The Lord is close to all who call on Him, to all who truly call on Him. He fulfills the will of those who revere Him; He hears their cry and saves them. The Lord guards all who love Him..." (Psalms 145:18-20)

This question brings us to this week's Torah portion, Vayetze (Genesis 28:10-32:2).

But first, a point of information, which may be familiar to many of you, but which is vitally important for all who study Torah. It is this: the Torah generally alludes to the Master of the Universe with one of two appellations: either Elokim on the one hand, or the Tetragrammaton YKVK, which we pronounce Ado—nai. I will refer to the former as the "Almighty" and the latter as the "Lord."

The earliest rabbinic commentators are keenly aware of this duality and generally understand that there are two aspects to the divine, "Almighty" being the term used to express His *din*, or tendency toward strict judgement, versus "Lord," representing His *rachamim*, or His tendency toward boundless compassion. So-called Bible critics have rejected this rabbinic approach and explain the duality very differently, but that is not a subject for this column.

In this week's parsha, we have several examples of the use of both terms for the divinity, occasionally in the very same verse. I will share with you one man's approach to the use of two very different terms, Elokim and YKVK ("Almighty" and "Lord"). It is an approach which stands within the traditional rabbinic approach, with some variation. It is the work of a fascinating and brilliant Jewish scholar of the twentieth century named Rabbi Mordechai Breuer. Rabbi Breuer was a major Torah scholar who developed a methodology known as "multiple perspectives"/*Shitat HaBechinot*, and who is responsible for the recovery and publication of what is generally considered the most accurate extant edition of Tanach (Keter Yerushalayim). He passed away in 2007. He applies his framework to this

week's parsha in his two-volume commentary on Sefer Bereshit, the Book of Genesis, entitled *Pirkei Bereshit*.

Here is one of the passages that he chooses to analyze:

"Yaakov left Be'er Sheva and journeyed toward Haran. In time he chanced upon a certain place and decided to spend the night there, because the sun had set. He took some stones from the place and put them under his head, and in that place lay down to sleep. And he dreamed: he saw a ladder set upon the ground, whose top reached the heavens. On it, angels of Elokim/Almighty went up and came down. The Lord//YKVK stood over him there and said, 'I am the Lord//YKVK, the God of Avraham your father, and the God of Yitzchak. The land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants. Your descendants shall be like the dust of the earth... Through you and your descendants, all the families of the earth will be blessed. I am with you. I will protect you wherever you go...'" (Bereshit 28:11-15)

Note that both appellations for the divine are used in the same verse, first the "angels of the Almighty" climbing and descending the ladder, and then "the Lord" standing above—not the ladder—but above Yaakov himself (see Rashi).

Thus, asserts Rabbi Breuer, Yaakov lies down to sleep with no spiritual intentions at all. The sun sets, he's tired, and arranges some stones around him to protect him from the local wildlife. Perfectly mundane situation.

Then comes the dream, with not one revelation but two. First the angels of the Almighty, the aspect of the divine that is distant from, although not always absent from, mankind, the "transcendent" aspect of the divine, the Almighty who dwells in the heavens and who comes down to earth for a brief visit but then scrambles back up the ladder. This assures Yaakov of some degree of divine assistance on his journey into the unknown. One revelation.

But then the Lord appears, not attached to the ladder at all, but standing above Yaakov with rachamim, compassionate and reassuring. This is the "immanent" aspect of the divine. The Lord carries a much more encouraging message guaranteeing Yaakov not only a successful journey but a safe return to his homeland in the Land of Israel and promises him all the blessings that He promised Yaakov's ancestors. He reveals to him not only that he will have many descendants but that these descendants will bring blessing to all of humanity throughout human history. A second revelation and a much more magnificent one.

We can generalize from this analysis to our own personal relationship with the divine, as well as for the relationship of the Jewish people with the divine during the entire course of our diaspora.

Our people, at this very moment, are beset by enemies from many quarters. Every day brings unspeakably tragic losses of life and limb and dispossession. Yet there are silver linings in every cloud, and if not miracles then near miracles occur daily. Is the Master of the Universe in the mode of din or harsh justice? At times, it certainly seems so. But does He also display His other aspect, that of profound compassion? Yes, He does, and we can only hope for the time when "He who makes peace in His high places will bring peace to us and to all of Israel" and to the entire world.

Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Thanking Hashem Must Also Include a Plea for the Future

The pasuk in Parshas VaYetzei says, "She conceived again, and bore a son and said, 'This time I will give thanks to Hashem, 'therefore she called his name Yehudah, then she stopped giving birth.'" (Bereshis 29:35). Before Rochel had even one child, Leah already had four sons. The Ibn Ezra notes here that the fact that she stopped giving birth was a punishment for not asking for more children. Somehow, thanking Hashem for the birth of Yehudah indicated that "I am now happy with what I have, I do not need any more children."

This comment of Ibn Ezra requires analysis. What was Leah supposed to say after having four sons? In fact, Chazal comment that there was no one who expressed gratitude to the Ribono Shel Olam until Leah came along and said (after the birth of Yehudah) "This time I will thank Hashem!" Chazal praise her for giving thanks, so how can this be interpreted as some kind of aveira (sin)?

The answer to this question lies in a Rambam. The Rambam (Hilchos Berochos 10:26) writes a rule: "A person should always cry out for his future needs, asking for mercy and giving thanks for what he received in the past, and thanking and expressing gratitude according to his ability." In other words, a person always needs to not only thank the Ribono Shel Olam for what he was already given. He must always also ask for his future needs. Our thanks must include a bakasha (request) that Hashem continue giving to us in the future.

Gratitude that just expresses "thanks" and stops there is incomplete gratitude. This is because the word *hoda'ah* in Hebrew means more than just giving thanks. *Hoda'ah* also means admitting (as in the term *modeh b'miktzas* (partial admission) or as in *ho'da'as ba'al din k'meah eidim dami* (the admission of a debtor

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is equivalent to the testimony of a hundred witnesses)). In the ethical world of the Torah, *hoda'ah* needs to include two components: I thank You and I admit that I cannot exist without Your help in the future. If that second component is missing – the fact that I am cognizant of my desperate need for Your ongoing help – then something is missing from the expression of thanksgiving.

In practical terms, imagine that I just won the big prize in the Powerball lottery. I just won 450 million dollars. By all rules of nature, I will not need another penny in my life. In such a case, it is inappropriate to turn to Hashem and say "Ribono Shel Olam – I have it made! Thank you! Yasher koach. Now I don't need You anymore. See You later." No! I need to thank you, Ribono Shel Olam, for the \$450,000,000, and also ask "Please don't forget me, Ribono Shel Olam, in the future, either. I will need You in the future as well, and I readily admit that fact."

With this idea in mind, we can gain new insight into the structure of the daily *Shemoneh Esrei*. We come to Hashem with a long list of our requests (all the "intermediate berochos") and then we say "Modim anachnu lach" (We thank You). Period! Why doesn't *Shemoneh Esrei* end there? The answer is because thank you needs to include a *bakasha* for the future as well. What is that *bakasha*? *Sim shalom* (grant peace). Why peace? Because "the Almighty found no vessel worthy of holding blessing for Israel other than *shalom*" (Uktzin 3:12). I need this receptacle to receive His blessing. That is why *Shemoneh Esrei* needs to end with this "tz'aka al ha'asid" (request for the future). Our *tz'aka al ha'asid* is for the biggest *beracha* of all – the blessing of peace. That is why *Shemoneh Esrei* does not end with *Baruch Kel ha'hoda'os*, but rather with *Hamevarech es amo Yisrael ba'shalom*.

Even the Midas Hadin Needs to Acknowledge Rochel's Zechus

Finally, Rochel had her own child! "G-d remembered Rachel; G-d hearkened to her and He opened her womb." (Bereshis 30:22). The Medrash asks "What is this reference to remembering?" The Medrash answers that the Ribono Shel Olam remembered Rochel's silence so as not to embarrass her sister when their father Lavan pulled the deceitful "switch," at the time of Yaakov's wedding. Not only did Rochel keep quiet, she actually gave a secret sign to her sister whereby Yaakov would think that he was marrying Rochel that night, and would not protest the marriage.

There is a word that should jump out at us twice in this aforementioned pasuk: The pasuk uses the word "Elokim" to represent the Ribono Shel Olam. However, seemingly, it should not say "Vayizkor Elokim" (using the

Divine name of midas hadin (judgment)), but rather, it should say "Vayizkor Hashem (yud-kay-vov-kay; using the Divine name of rachamim (mercy and compassion)). In fact, this pasuk uses the name Elokim not once, but twice: "Vayizkor Elokim es Rochel" and "Va'yishma eileha Elokim" Is this not a misuse of the name Elokim, which always connotes the midas hadin?

The answer is that the pasuk is teaching the power and great zechus (merit) of "shtikah" (silence). The fact that Rochel kept quiet and let her older sister get married is so great that even the midas hadin needs to say "It is time now for you too to have a child." That is why the pasuk uses the name Elokim.

And what is the great zechus? The great zechus is the sensitivity displayed towards an older sister. Rochel was terribly worried that now that Leah married cousin Yaakov, she herself was going to wind up with Yaakov's twin brother Eisav. This was going to ruin her life. Rochel wanted Yaakov as a husband more than anything. Nevertheless, to prevent the pain and humiliation of her sister, Rochel kept silent. The zechus of that sensitivity was so great that it even overwhelmed the midas hadin, such that Elokim recognized the need to reward Rochel.

I saw the following true incident in the sefer Me'Orei Ohr:

A girl in Bnei Brak got engaged. The father of the kallah went to look for an appropriate apartment for the new couple. Lo and behold, he found the perfect apartment in Bnei Brak. It was a beautiful apartment. The price was right. It had everything that they could want. It would be a 50-50 partnership so the father of the kallah called the father of the chosson and invited him to come to see the apartment. The mechutan came. He liked the apartment and he was ready to join the deal.

The last step was to get the kallah's buy in. This, after all, was the place where the new couple would live. The kallah saw the apartment. She was happy. It was everything she had dreamt of. Fine. They walked out of the apartment and the kallah said to her father, "I can't do it. I can't take this apartment." The father was flabbergasted: "But you just told me inside that it was a beautiful apartment. The price is right. Why can't you take the apartment?"

The kallah explained that she couldn't take the apartment because she had a friend with whom she went to seminary who lived in that same building and she was not yet engaged. Not only was she not engaged, but she had an older sister, who was also not engaged yet. "If I will move into this beautiful apartment with my

beautiful chosson and beautiful parents and beautiful machutanim and everything is wonderful, every time this girl sees me, her heart will drop, and even if her heart will not drop, the heart of her older sister will drop! I can't take this apartment."

Her father said, "That is a beautiful thought, but come on – you need to be practical!" These people are ehrliche Yidden, so what did they do? They went to Rav Chaim Kanievsky to pose the question to the gadol hador: Is the kallah right? Should they give up the apartment just because it will make her seminary friend and the friend's older sister feel bad? Rav Chaim Kanievsky sat there and thought and thought. This was not Rav Chaim's normal mode of operation. He was usually very quick and terse with his answers. But this shaylah gave him great pause. Finally, he deferred the question. He said "Ask Reb Leib Shteinman," as if to say "This shaylah is above my pay grade."

The father of the kallah and the mechutan then went to Rav (Aharon) Leib Shteinman and they told him over the shaylah. They also told him that Rav Chaim deliberated at length and could not come to a resolution. Rav Leib Shteinman also thought at great length and finally he advised them not to take the apartment. It was not worth causing pain to another girl, and especially to the older sister.

The two mechutanim, who were businessmen but were also ehrliche Yiden, were not about to argue with the gadol hador. They then asked, "Is it okay if we buy it as an investment and at the appropriate time, we will have what to do with it?" Rav Shteinman gave them the okay to buy it as an investment.

They made arrangement for the young couple to live elsewhere, and then on the very night that this kallah got married, the older sister of her seminary friend became a kallah. Then, within a few months, the friend also became a kallah. Both sisters got married and then after both sisters got married, the original couple moved into that original apartment...and lived happily ever after.

Dvar Torah: Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

How Do You Respond to Your Dreams?

The book of Bereshit (Genesis) could easily be given the subtitle "The Book of Dreams," as there are many significant dreams within it. However, it is only in relation to two of these dreams that the Torah uses a particular verb: "Vayyikatz" — "he woke up from his dream." Clearly, the Torah is inviting us to compare and contrast these two occasions.

The first is in Parshat Vayetzei, when Jacob had the extraordinary vision of the ladder. The Torah tells us, Vayyikatz Yaakov — Jacob

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woke up. What was his response? He immediately declared, "Achen yesh Hashem bammakom hazzeh" — "I feel, and I know that Hashem is in this place." Jacob then translated his dream into action by declaring, "Vehayah Hashem li Lelokim" - "The Lord will be my God for the rest of my life."

Now, let's look at the second "Vayyikatz," found in Parshat Miketz. King Pharaoh had a dream just as monumental as Jacob's, a dream through which God was sending a message to him personally, and through him, to all of civilisation. It was about the seven lean cows and the seven healthy cows. How did Pharaoh respond? The Torah says, "Vayyikatz...Vayyishan vayachalom shenit" — "He woke up, and then he went back to sleep and had another dream."

The Torah is surely teaching us how to respond to our dreams. And it's not just the dreams we have at night, but the messages that our experiences convey to us, the inspiration we derive from what we see and hear.

So, how do we respond? Do we change our lives accordingly and become a blessing for our environment as a result? Or, like Pharaoh, do we simply turn over and ignore what we see and hear?

Ohr Torah Stone Dvar Torah

"This Place" – On Revelation, Exile, and Journey - Rabbi Azi Horvitch

The life of Yaakov is far from the ideal we might envision. If asked to outline the perfect life, we would likely not choose to be forced out of our family home, work in a hostile environment, or marry the sister of the woman we love against our will. Yaakov's life journey is fraught with challenges and tribulations. He himself attests to this when he tells Pharaoh, "The years of my life have been few and difficult."

Indeed, the title of this portion, Vayetze ("And he left"), encapsulates its essence: Yaakov leaves in every sense. He leaves his comfort zone, the familiar and familial, and the intellectual pursuits of his earlier years. By embarking on this journey, Yaakov follows in the spiritual footsteps of his grandfather Avraham—not necessarily in terms of destination, as his path leads back to Haran, in the opposite direction of Avraham's journey, but in spirit: leaving his land, birthplace, and father's home to venture into the unknown. Years later, Yaakov will return—transformed into a profoundly different man.

It's not hard to imagine Yaakov's emotions as he flees his home with no companion – loneliness, anxiety, and fear likely filled his heart.

And then, God reveals Himself to Yaakov. Just as he is about to leave the land, God reassures him with promises first made to Avraham, now directed toward Yaakov. Beyond these timeless promises, God also offers encouragement and makes yet another promise:

"I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you..."

Upon awakening, Yaakov realizes: "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it."

But what is "this place"?

At the outset of the story, when Yaakov arrives at "the place," the Torah deliberately keeps the location ambiguous. It repeats the term *makom* (place) three times without specifying what or where this place is:

"He came to the place and spent the night there because the sun had set. He took one of the stones of the place, put it under his head, and lay down in that place."

The ambiguity seems deliberate, inviting the reader to wonder: what is this place? Even at the conclusion of the narrative, the Torah does not disclose its identity, leaving room for various interpretations by the sages.

I would like to suggest that an answer to this can be found in the verses themselves. Alongside the repeated reference to the place, another word recurs in Yaakov's awakening speech: "this" (in Hebrew, "zeh").

"And Yaakov awoke from his sleep and he said: Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it."

"And he was afraid, and said: 'How full of awe is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.'"

What is the "this" in question?

The word "zeh" points to the immediate, the tangible, the here and now. It does not refer to something distant or abstract but to what is present, visible, and real.

By leaving the place unnamed, the Torah avoids limiting God's presence to a specific location. God's revelation to Yaakov is encapsulated in this profound moment: You are leaving the Land of Canaan, yet I am with you. Though you embark on a long journey into exile, know that "I am with you". This assurance transcends physical geography or specific locations. Wherever you are—this place, your current moment, your here and now—is where I will be with you.

Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch expresses a similar idea:

"Indeed, there is no need to seek God in the heavens; rather, wherever a sinless person rests his head—that is where God is! This is Yaakov's first thought. Then he adds, 'And I did not know! I did not know that God's glory dwells in this world—together with mankind!'

This revelation of God to Yaakov, conveyed through this profound understanding, empowers Yaakov with the confidence not merely to endure and persevere through his hardships but to fulfill his destiny as the Patriarch whose name defines an entire nation. A nation that, like Yaakov, will repeatedly and often unwillingly embark on journeys into exile and step into the unknown. A nation that will have to discover and embrace God's presence in every place it inhabits.

It is important to emphasize that God's promise does not detract from the singular sanctity of the Land of Israel—a land distinct from all others, perpetually under God's watchful care. In the same divine revelation, God reassures Yaakov of his eventual return "to this land," the very land promised to him. The strength of this promise lies in its timing: it is given just as Yaakov is about to embark on an involuntary journey. This assurance acts not only as encouragement but also as a charge: sanctify My name wherever you may be. Make My presence known at each station of your journey and in every location you traverse. Transform every "Luz," whether personal or national, into a "Bet-El"—a place imbued with holiness and Divine presence.

The internalization of God's promise—that He is with us wherever we are—is what sustains us. It is deeply rooted within us and gives rise to the hope for the ultimate redemption.

Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

Rabbi Ahron Lopiansky - Singular Focus

Yaakov Avinu sets out on his personal journey. After Hashem appears to him in a dream and tells him that He will be with him, Yaakov goes on to Aram Naharayim to find his bashert. The Torah tells us that he came to a field where everyone was grazing their sheep. The stone covering the well was extremely heavy, and it needed the joint efforts of all the shepherds to uncover it. Yaakov walked over and rolled over the stone himself. The rest of the story of Yaakov's shidduch and the family he builds follows from here.

At first glance, it seems that this was a feat of great strength; he was stronger than all the other shepherds combined, and therefore was able to remove this stone all by himself. We don't, however, find any other stories describing Yaakov as a strong man. He is not

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like Shimshon who is described in terms of his strength; this is the only story in Chumash about his strength. Why is it of any importance? Also, it appears that this feat is supposed to serve as the prelude to his marriage. How is this feat of strength meant to convey any type of prerequisite for his marriage?

As is well known, the three Avos are the building blocks of Klal Yisroel. They are not three discrete great individuals who together simply pooled their resources and thereby created Klal Yisroel. Each and every one of the Avos had a unique attribute which was a critical layer of the foundation of Klal Yisroel. Not only did each one have a unique attribute, but there was an order in which these foundation stones had to be put down. Avraham was the foundation, Yitzchak was the continuation, and Yaakov's attribute was the capstone that completed the foundation. What were these attributes?

Avraham's attribute was chessed / kindness, as is widely known. Kindness is the first step man takes in order to transcend his selfishness and physicality and bring out the divine elements latent in him. It expresses Hashem's unbound and unconditional love for us. Yitzchak is the second step, and is an embodiment of middas hadin, the attribute of "law" or "boundaries". This means that things given gratis are deficient, and only that which is earned is truly good. Thus, the entire corpus of Torah obligations and restriction, reward and punishment, are all part of this attribute. These two attributes are both essential, and yet pulling in opposite directions. This is true as well of many other attributes that tend to have two opposite poles that pull in different directions. So long as it remains that way, no good can possibly come out of it, because there is just a constant battle between conflicting directions. We therefore understand the critical need for the final piece of that foundation, and that is Yaakov's ability to bring together the different conflicting forces and focus them to a central goal. He takes both chessed and din and decides how much of each is needed in order to accomplish what is meant to be accomplished. The final product incorporates everything into it.

This is meaningful doubly. First of all, it is impossible to get something done if there are conflicting elements pulling at all sides and all times. Secondly, and perhaps more important, is the fact that our core belief is that Hashem is One. That means that everything in avodas Hashem needs to come together as one. Hashem has an extraordinary multitude of attributes with which He expresses Himself in the world, yet in totality it is one objective. So too, we Israel, whose job it is to reflect the divine in this world, need to express all the

different facets of avodas Hashem, as seamless parts of one purpose.

Yaakov is about to marry two women who must be integrated in a way that they all become one seamless family. Yaakov is the only one of the avos to have two wives of equal standing that must find their rightful place in the family. This is unlike Yitzchak who had but one wife, and Avrohom, whose other wife was sent off at some point.

Yaakov would have twelve children, each and every one of whom needed to be integrated seamlessly into Klal Yisroel. This, despite the various rivalries and frictions described in the parshios. This was unlike the children of Avrohom and Yitzchak, only one of which were a continuation of their legacy. The task of Yaakov, then, was to take disparate elements and place each one such that they become part of a greater whole which has one, and only one, clear and sharp focus.

My rebbi, Rav Chaim Shmulevitz, explained that Yaakov's feat of rolling off the stone was not a feat of great strength. He would reference the piyyut, "yichad libo, v'gallal even mei'al pi beer - he gathered his heart together, and rolled the stone off the well". This means that Yaakov focused his entire self on that task and was thereby able to roll the stone off the well.

This teaches us that we can do tremendous things so long as we focus all our energy on the task. In martial arts of various kinds, such as karate, a person can deliver an extraordinarily powerful blow provided that he focuses all his energy on one spot. The same is true of a laser beam, and so on. Thus, Yaakov's feat was not one of expressing strength but rather expressing the integration of many disparate pieces into one most sharply focused element.

When we say kriyas Shema we proclaim the unity of Hashem. We start by saying "Hear, Israel." According to one opinion, "Israel" is referring to Yaakov Avinu, who is called Yisroel. The reason why it is Yisroel which we call upon is that the understanding of Hashem being one is reflected in the actions and accomplishments of Yaakov. In his life he was able to take the various disparate elements of avodas Hashem - i.e. Avrohom and Yitzchak, his two wives, his twelve children - and bring them together in a way that instead of just adding to each other, they integrated and focused together to establish Malchus Shomayim.

We too, could accomplish so much more if we were able to precisely pinpoint a singular goal, and focus all our resources to achieving that goal.

Mizrachi Dvar Torah

Rav Doron Perez

Never Run Away From Challenges

Many Jews left South Africa over the years, for various reasons – the problems of apartheid, security, and other reasons – to live in other countries, including many who made Aliyah. One of the community leaders in South Africa said to me: "I have been all around the world and I want to share with you what I have found – all those who were unhappy in South Africa are unhappy in their new countries. The people who were happy in South Africa are happy in their new country."

Meaning, if you run away from somewhere, you take your unhappiness with you. We take ourselves wherever we go. If you run away from your challenges in one place, you will find the challenges in another place and you will have taught yourself that when challenges come you run away. We should never run away from, we should run towards something else.

That's why we see that initially Ya'akov was running away – but if the salient sentiment is running away, then you often spend your life running away from your problems. But then we are told that Ya'akov left Be'er Sheva and went to Charan. Rashi famously comments on the seeming superfluous words that Ya'akov left Be'er Sheva – why do we need to know where he left from? He says that because after he left, Be'er Sheva was never the same again. Ya'akov's presence was lacking, his contribution, and the light he brought to the city. Even though he was not leaving Be'er Sheva, rather going towards Charan – but the place wasn't the same afterwards because of the impact that he had.

May we always make an impact wherever we are, always leaving every place much better for us having been there.

Torah.Org Dvar Torah by Rabbi Label Lam

That Ladder of Potential

And he dreamt, and behold a ladder was standing towards the earth and its head was striving towards the heavens and angels of Elokim were going up and down on it. And behold Hashem is standing upon it... (Bereishis 28:12-13)

This is the ladder of human potential. It depicts the full range and spectrum of a human being from earth to the heights of heaven. The Rambam spells it out clearly in the 5th Chapter of the Laws of Teshuvah. "Free will is granted to all men. If one desires to turn himself to the path of good and be righteous, the choice is his. Should he desire to turn to the path of evil and be wicked, the choice is his."

Likutei Divrei Torah

For many years my wife and I would go to the shul of Rabbi Gissinger ztl. in Lakewood to be with some close relatives and friends. I was always called upon to give a women's Shiur, Shabbos afternoon. One time I received a call in the middle of the week from Rabbi Gissinger himself. He had a request. There was a group of men in the shul making an elaborate Kiddush for completing SHAS, not with the regular Daf Yomi cycle, and he was asking me if I would speak to the congregation before Musaf and after Krias HaTorah. For some foolish reason, maybe because I did not have the courage to decline, I said yes. I immediately began to regret my decision. This is LAKEWOOD. There were many Talmud Scholars in the audience. Who am I to speak at a Siyum on SHAS!? I was overwhelmed by the task and feeling woefully inadequate for many good reasons. "Why do I get myself into these situations!?" became my mantra. Then an idea woke up in my mind.

The Shabbos arrived and this is what I shared. I recalled the famous first encounter between Rabbi Yochanan and Reish Lakish in the Talmud. It was a peculiar circumstance. Reb Yochanan was a beautiful man and a great sage and Reish Lakish was a notorious bandit. Reish Lakish noticed Reb Yochanan bathing in a river and so with incredible athleticism he leaped across the river in a single bound to essentially mug the sage and steal his possessions. Reb Yochanan's immediate response was not to cry "THEIF" but rather he said aloud to Reish Lakish, "CHEILCHAH L'ORAISA!" "Your power, your prowess is for Torah!"

He saw all of that raw brute masculine strength and decried that it is wasted on cheap crimes when it could be used for Torah. Reish Lakish retorted cleverly, "Your beauty is for a woman!" Reb Yochanan delivered the perfect answer that proved him wrong. He showed him that given the proper motivation he could do it. He said, "If you think I am beautiful, I have a sister who is even more beautiful, and if you learn Torah, I will give you her hand in marriage. Reish Lakish acquiesced and the rest is history. They became lifelong study partners. It's hard to turn a page in the Talmud without meeting up with Reb Yochanan and Reish Lakish.

Years ago, I went to get a haircut in a local barber shop. I was waiting my turn and looking into a Sefer. In walked a man in his mid-90's with his grandson, who told him that he will be back soon. It was Rabbi Aronson, who wrote one of the oft-used commentaries on Shekalim. I heard that he had learned in Slobodka. I asked him about the Sefer I was learning, Tanna D'Bei Eliyahu and we started talking. I asked him if it's true that he learned in Slobodka. He nodded "yes". I asked him if

he saw the Alter from Slobodka and he excitedly told me, "Of course!" The Alter from Slobodka stood up some of the greatest sages and Roshei Yeshivah, many of whom rescued and rebuilt American Jewry, including Reb Hutner, Reb Ruderman, Rabbi Davis, Reb Dovid Leibowitz, Reb Aaron Kotler, and Reb Yaakov Kaminitzky, just to name a few. I asked him if he was there when Reb Yaakov and Reb Aaron were there. He said, "I was there the day they arrived!"

Now here I was telling these Lakewood Chevra that I was talking with someone who was in Slobodka the day Reb Aaron Kotler arrived. We were witnessing the river of history turn. Then I said, "That must have been a big celebration!" He looked at me with astonishment. I explained, "Two great Tzadikim like that showing up!" His response was stunning, "Tzadikim? They were bochurim! Nobody saw anything!" Then he said emphatically, "The Alter, he saw something" What did he see? "CHEILCHAH L'ORAISA!" "Your prowess is for Torah!" And so, they aspired and so they climbed to the very top of that ladder of potential.

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Rabbi Yissocher Frand <ryfrand@torah.org>

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Rav Frand

By Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Vayeitzei

Lavan's Super-fast Travel Was Part of the Divine Plan

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly portion: #1358 – I've Davened Maariv; Other Minyan Still Davening Mincha – Can I Answer Kedusha? Good Shabbos!

Yaakov suspects that he will have trouble if he lets his father-in-law know that he is about to leave. Therefore, Yaakov picks up his entire family and leaves without telling Lavan (Bereshis 31:21). On the third day, Lavan finds out that Yaakov has run away and chases after him, finally catching up with him on Har Hagilad. Rashi comments that although Yaakov was a six day's journey away from Lavan, Lavan caught up with him in a single day. In other words, in one day, Lavan travelled the distance that it took Yaakov and his family a week to travel. Rashi explains that Lavan accomplished this through the concept of "kefitzas haderech" (a Divine shortening of the way).

The Ohr Hachaim asks why Yaakov was not granted this miraculous attribute of "kefitzas haderech" to allow him to allude his pursuing father-in-law? According to Chazal, Eliezer had kefitzas haderech on the way to find a wife for Yitzchak. Likewise, Yaakov had kefitzas haderech on his way to Charan twenty years earlier. Why, now, when Yaakov could have really been helped by kefitzas haderech, was he not granted that mode of Divine transportation? On top of that, why is Lavan the Arami granted kefitzas haderech?

The Ohr Hachaim answers with a fundamental insight into how we understand hashgacha pratis (Divine providence) and how we understand history. Of course, the Ribono shel Olam knew exactly what He was doing, as He always does. The Ribono shel Olam, in fact, wanted Lavan to catch up with Yaakov. He wanted the interaction between Yaakov and Lavan to occur because this meeting laid the groundwork for the eventual salvation of Klal Yisrael.

Lavan catches up with Yaakov and protests to him: "Why did you steal my gods?" (Bereshis 31:30) Yaakov, not knowing that Rochel had taken these 'terafim' assured Lavan that his claim was a false one and to buttress his denial he said that anyone who stole those 'terafim' will die! Because of that, the Medrash says, Rochel died prematurely. The Ohr Hachaim says that the Divine plan was for this meeting and for this dialog between Yaakov and Lavan to occur. Why?

Yaakov's statement during this dialogue caused Rochel to die soon afterwards, causing her to be buried there "on the road to Efras, which is Beis Lechem." (Bereshis 35:19). Why? All of this happened so that when Klal Yisrael would be going into Galus Bavel (the Babylonian exile), they would pass Rochel's gravesite in Beis Lechem and she would cry for her children and persuade the Ribono shel Olam to bring Klal Yisrael back from galus. (exile). As the moving Medrash at the beginning of Eicha says, all the giants of Jewish history came to the Ribono shel Olam and begged for the welfare of their exiled nation – Avraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov, Moshe – but none of them were answered. Only in Rochel's zechus (merit) – the zechus of saving her sister from embarrassment by sharing with her the secret identification code she arranged with Yaakov — did the Ribono shel Olam grant that the "Children will return to their borders" (Yirmiyahu 31:16). In the zechus of that self-sacrifice, the mercy of the Ribono shel Olam was aroused and He promised to eventually redeem his children from galus.

Rochel's burial at the very spot where Klal Yisrael was destined to pass on their way to Galus Bavel happened through Yaakov unwittingly cursing her when Lavan charged him with having stolen his gods. And the entire dialogue only happened because Lavan was granted kefitzas haderech to catch up with Yaakov, who did not have kefitzas haderech at that time. Therefore, something that at the time appeared as a tragedy

and an inexplicable application of Divine Logic, turned out to be an essential component of the future salvation of the Jewish nation.

There is an incredible teaching of the Rokeach (Elazar ben Shmuel Rokeach (1685-1742); Chief Rabbi of Amsterdam) in a sefer called Galyei Razah: Yaakov Avinu was supposed to live to be 180 years old, just like his father Yitzchak, however he only lived to age 147. Thirty-three years were somehow chopped off of Yaakov's intended lifespan.

The Rokeach says that Yaakov lost those 33 years because when he and Lavan made this "peace treaty," erecting a pile of stones, the two protagonists named the pile of stones differently. Yaakov called it "gal" and Lavan called it "yegar sahadusa" (Bereshis 31:47). Then when the next pasuk starts with "vihamitzpa," the Rokeach uniquely interprets that as Yaakov also naming it "mitzpa," which according to the Rokeach, is an Aramaic word. (Other meforshim disagree with both points.) The Rokeach says that this is the only Aramaic expression in all of Chumash. According to the Rokeach, there was some form of Divine irritation with Yaakov Avinu for causing Aramaic to sully the pure lashon hakodesh (holy tongue, i.e. – Hebrew) that appears throughout the Torah. The gematria of the proper Hebrew name "gal" that Yaakov originally used is 33. Therefore, Yaakov lost 33 years of his life, because of this incident with Lavan.

Consider what happened: Rochel died because of this incident with Lavan. Yaakov himself lost 33 years of his life because of this incident with Lavan. What a tragedy! The righteous suffer! The Ohr Hachaim Hakadosh is explaining that this is the way the Ribono shel Olam set the stage for Rochel to cry for her children and guarantee their return from galus.

That which at the time appeared to be a terrible tragedy, was the Ribono shel Olam manipulating the strings of history. This is the story of history. So many times, incidents occur throughout history that seem to be incredible tragedies. This does not only happen in history but also in individual people's lives.

I once heard from Rav Simcha Zissel Brodie, the Chevron Rosh HaYeshiva, who heard from Rav Mordechai Epstein that it is well known that the day of the Spanish Exile (when the Jews had to leave Spain in 1492) was the very day Columbus set sail for the "New World." At that time, Spain was at the height of their power. Imagine how the Jews felt that day:

Ferdinand and Izabella were the worst of the worst. They gave Spanish Jewry the choice of converting to Christianity or banishment from the country. As we know, as a result of the fact that Columbus set sail for America and opened up a "New World," eventually the United States of America emerged, which has been the refuge of Jews from throughout the world since the end of the 19th century. There are many in our audience for whom were there not America, their parents would have had no place to go. We are here because there was an America.

At the time, it seemed so unjust and so wrong and yet, it was also the Ribono shel Olam manipulating historical events to prepare for something that would happen three or four hundred years later. That is the story of Yaakov and Lavan. That is why Lavan had kefitzas haderech and Yaakov did not have kefitzas haderech. The Ribono shel Olam wanted this encounter to happen. As a result, Rochel died early. As a result, she had to be buried by Beis Lechem, and as a result when Klal Yisrael were marching into galus, Rochel cried for her children, and as a result, her children returned to their borders.

The ways of Hashem are far beyond our comprehension. "For My thoughts are not your thoughts and your ways are not My ways." (Yeshaya 55:8). At the end of all days – "Hashem will be the King over all the land; on that day Hashem will be One and His Name will be One." (Zecharia 14:9) Then we will all understand it. Until then, we must just have faith that Hakadosh Baruch Hu is always acting in our best interests and in the best interests of Klal Yisrael.

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Vayetzei

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The main character in this week's parsha, aside from our father Yaakov, is Lavan of Aram, who becomes the father-in-law of Yaakov and the grandfather of the twelve tribes of Israel. Lavan is portrayed as a devious, scheming and duplicitous person. He is narcissistic in the extreme, only interested in his own selfish wants, even sacrificing his daughters to fulfill his scheming goals.

In the famous statement of the rabbis, the Hagada of Pesach teaches us that Lavan was a greater and even more dangerous enemy of Jewish survival than was the Pharaoh that enslaved Israel in Egyptian bondage! Lavan is portrayed as wishing to uproot all Jewish existence for all time. Pharaoh threatened Jewish physical existence by drowning the Jewish male infants in the Nile. But even then the Jewish people could have survived and limped along through the female line of Israel (which is often even a stronger bond than the male line.) However Lavan intended to destroy Yaakov and his descendants spiritually. He tells Yaakov that the "sons of Yaakov are my sons and the daughters of Yaakov are my daughters and all that Yaakov possesses, physically and spiritually all belong to me." In Lavan's eyes the Jewish people and their faith and vision and goals are to be non-existent. Only Lavan is entitled to life and success. Everyone else, especially a conscience laden family such as that of Yaakov, is only entitled to become part of Lavan's world or they are to be eliminated.

The selfishness of Lavan knows no bounds. The rule of the rabbis that one is jealous of the success of all others except that one is never jealous of one's own children and students ironically finds its own exception in the case of Lavan, who remains jealous and inimical even of the success of his own children and grandchildren. It is interesting to note that after his role as it appears in this week's parsha, Lavan disappears from the biblical scene. In attempting to destroy Yaakov and the Jewish people, Lavan in essence destroys himself and is not granted any positive mention of eternity in the Torah. Such is always the fate of the attempted destroyers of Israel.

History is littered with the bones of those who came to eradicate Jews and Judaism from the world. Some used the devious tactics of Lavan (such as Napoleon and his sham Sanhedrin which was intended to "modernize" and assimilate the Jews of Europe and the attempt of the Marxists to create a Marxist Jew who no longer would be a Jew or a believer, among other such examples) while others used the more direct methods of Pharaoh to physically enslave, terrorize and eliminate the Jewish people.

All have failed in these nefarious endeavors. Lavan's selfishness is his own undoing. Much of the hatred directed towards the Jewish people and the State of Israel is still based on jealousy and selfishness. It dooms the hater to eventual extinction and disappearance. Thus the lesson of Lavan's eventual fate, of his being erased from the eternal book, is part of the great morality play which is the narrative of this week's parsha.

Shabat shalom.

Rabbi Berel Wein ZT"ל

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Encountering God

Vayetse

It is one of the great visions of the Torah. Jacob, alone at night, fleeing from the wrath of Esau, lies down to rest, and sees not a nightmare of fear but an epiphany:

In time he [Yaakov] chanced upon a certain place [vayifga bamakom] and decided to spend the night there, because the sun had set. He took

some stones of the place and put them under his head, and in that place lay down to sleep. And he dreamed: He saw a ladder set upon the ground, whose top reached the heavens. On it, angels of God went up and came down. The Lord stood over him...

Gen. 28:11-13

Then Yaakov awoke from his sleep and said, "Truly, the Lord is in this place - and I did not know it!" He was afraid and said, "How full of awe is this place! This is none other than the House of God, and this the gate of the Heavens!"

Gen. 28:16-17

On the basis of this passage, the Sages said that "Jacob instituted the evening prayer." The inference is based on the word *vayifga* which can mean not only, "he came to, encountered, happened upon, chanced upon" but also "he prayed, entreated, pleaded" as in Jeremiah, "Do not pray for this people, nor raise up a cry for them, and do not plead with Me... [ve-al *tifga bi*]" (Jeremiah 7:16).

The Sages also understood the word *bamakom*, "the place" to mean "God" (the "place" of the universe). Thus Jacob completed the cycle of daily prayers. Abraham instituted *shacharit*, the morning prayer, Isaac initiated *Mincha*, the afternoon prayer, and Jacob was first to establish *Arvit*, also known as *Maariv*, the prayer of night-time.

This is a striking idea. Though each of the weekday prayers is identical in wording, each bears the character of one of the patriarchs. Abraham represents morning. He is the initiator, the one who introduced a new religious consciousness to the world. With him a day begins.

Isaac represents afternoon. There is nothing new about Isaac – no major transition from darkness to light or light to darkness. Many of the incidents in Isaac's life recapitulate those of his father. Famine forces him, as it did Abraham, to go to the land of the Philistines. He re-digs his father's wells.

Isaac's is the quiet heroism of continuity. He is a link in the chain of the covenant. He joins one generation to the next. He introduces nothing new into the life of faith, but his life has its own nobility. Isaac is steadfastness, loyalty, the determination to continue.

Jacob represents night. He is the man of fear and flight, the man who wrestles with God, with others and with himself. Jacob is one who knows the darkness of this world.

There is, however, a difficulty with the idea that Jacob introduced the evening prayer. In a famous episode in the Talmud, Rabbi Joshua takes the view that, unlike *Shacharit* or *Mincha*, the evening prayer is not obligatory (though, as the commentators note, it has become obligatory through the acceptance of generations of Jews). Why, if it was instituted by Jacob, was it not held to carry the same obligation as the prayers of Abraham and Isaac? Tradition offers three answers.

The first is that the view that *Arvit* is non-obligatory according to those who hold that our daily prayers are based not on the patriarchs but on the sacrifices that were offered in the Temple. There was a morning and afternoon offering but no evening sacrifice. The two views differ precisely on this, that for those who trace prayer to sacrifice, the evening prayer is voluntary, whereas for those who base it on the patriarchs, it is obligatory.

The second is that there is a law that those on a journey (and for three days thereafter) are exempt from prayer. In the days when journeys were hazardous – when travellers were in constant fear of attack by raiders – it was impossible to concentrate. Prayer requires concentration (*kavanah*). Therefore Jacob was exempt from prayer, and offered up his entreaty not as an obligation but as a voluntary act – and so it remained.

The third is that there is a tradition that, as Jacob was travelling, "the sun set suddenly" – not at its normal time. Jacob had intended to say the afternoon prayer, but found, to his surprise, that night had fallen. *Arvit* did not become an obligation, since Jacob had not meant to say an evening prayer at all.

There is, however, a more profound explanation. A different linguistic construction is used for each of the three occasions that the Sages saw as the basis of prayer. Abraham "rose early in the morning to the place where he had stood before God" (Gen. 19:27). Isaac "went out to meditate [lasuach] in the field towards evening" (Gen. 24:63). Jacob

“met, encountered, came across, chanced upon” God [vayifga bamakom]. These are different kinds of religious experience.

Abraham initiated the quest for God. He was a creative religious personality – the father of all those who set out on a journey of the spirit to an unknown destination, armed only with the trust that those who seek, find. Abraham sought God before God sought him.

Isaac’s prayer is described as a *sichah* (literally a conversation or dialogue). There are two parties to a dialogue – one who speaks, and one who listens and, having listened, responds. Isaac represents the religious experience as conversation between the word of God and the word of humankind.

Jacob’s prayer is very different. He does not initiate it. His thoughts are elsewhere – on Esau from whom he is escaping, and on Laban to whom he is travelling. Into this troubled mind comes a vision of God and the angels and a stairway connecting earth and heaven. He has done nothing to prepare for it. It is unexpected. Jacob literally “encounters” God as we can sometimes encounter a familiar face among a crowd of strangers. This is a meeting brought about by God, not man. That is why Jacob’s prayer could not be made the basis of a regular obligation. None of us knows when the presence of God will suddenly intrude into our lives.

There is an element of the religious life that is beyond conscious control. It comes out of nowhere, when we are least expecting it. If Abraham represents our journey towards God, and Isaac our dialogue with God, Jacob signifies God’s encounter with us – unplanned, unscheduled, unexpected; the vision, the voice, the call we can never know in advance but which leaves us transformed. As for Jacob, so for us. It feels as if we are waking from a sleep and realising, as if for the first time, that “God was in this place and I did not know it.” The place has not changed, but we have. Such an experience can never be made the subject of an obligation. It is not something we do. It is something that happens to us. *Vayifga bamakom* means that, thinking of other things, we find that we have walked into the presence of God.

Such experiences take place - literally or metaphorically - at night. They happen when we are alone, afraid, vulnerable, close to despair. It is then that, when we least expect it, we can find our lives flooded by the radiance of the Divine. Suddenly, with a certainty that is unmistakable, we know that we are not alone, that God is there and has been all along but that we were too preoccupied by our own concerns to notice Him. That is how Jacob found God – not by his own efforts, like Abraham; not through continuous dialogue, like Isaac; but in the midst of fear and isolation. Jacob, in flight, trips and falls – and finds he has fallen into the waiting arms of God. No one who has had this experience, ever forgets it. “Now I know that You were with me all the time, but I was looking elsewhere.”

That was Jacob’s prayer. There are times when we speak and times when we are spoken to. Prayer is not always predictable, a matter of fixed times and daily obligation. It is also an openness, a vulnerability. God can take us by surprise, waking us from our sleep, catching us as we fall.

Rabbi Eliezer Melamed

The Commandment of Writing a Torah Scroll

Revivim

The commandment upon every Jewish male is that he write for himself a Torah scroll * Fulfilling this commandment cannot be done using tithe money * Even one who inherited a Torah scroll from his fathers is commanded to write the Torah himself * Our Sages saw that in order to uphold the Torah among Israel it was necessary to permit writing down the Oral Torah * Today the practice is to fulfill the commandment of writing a Torah scroll in partnership * A woman too may study from the sacred Torah scroll

A Question About the Commandment of Writing a Torah Scroll

A question signed by a married couple: “Thank God, we find ourselves today in a good financial situation that allows us to invest for our future, as well as for our children. We are careful, as much as possible, to give a tithe of our money, and thank God, we see blessing in this. Now we find ourselves facing a dilemma regarding the commandment of writing a

Torah scroll, whose cost is about 200,000 shekels. On the one hand, it is a commandment, and therefore, one may not use tithe money to fulfill a commandment. On the other hand, there are quite a few conditions and opinions in the matter, among them that a person must have enough available money to obligate himself to fulfill the commandment (it seems to me that in this, we meet the condition). The question: Does this commandment obligate today as in the past, when writing a Torah scroll was intended for the sake of Torah study? Does helping children with housing take precedence over this? They are not in a problematic financial situation, but perhaps helping them precedes the commandment of writing a Torah scroll?”

Another question: “In owning a Torah scroll, is there perhaps the appearance of pride, and a status symbol for people able to invest in such a thing? We also thought that perhaps we would purchase a small Torah scroll (a “travel edition”) and keep it at home with the willingness to serve as a free-loan fund for groups traveling on vacation in Israel or abroad. For placing another scroll in a synagogue’s ark does not seem to us like the fulfillment of the commandment itself.”

A: Fortunate are you that you merit discussing questions of a commandment. Indeed, as you wrote, the question is complex, and we will clarify it from its foundations. First, what is the commandment, and does it obligate today? But before all, I will preface, as you wrote, that fulfilling this commandment cannot be done using tithe money.

The Commandment of Writing a Torah Scroll

It is a commandment for every Jewish male to write for himself a Torah scroll, as it is said:

“And now, write for yourselves this song, and teach it to the Children of Israel; put it in their mouth, so that this song shall be for Me a witness against the Children of Israel” (Deuteronomy 31:19).

Many Torah scholars interpret that the “song” we were commanded to write is the ‘Song of Ha’azinu’, stated further on in the Torah. But since it is forbidden to write excerpts of the Torah, in order to write the ‘Song of Ha’azinu’, one must write the entire Torah (Rambam, Laws of Torah Scroll 7:1; Sefer Mitzvot Gadol, Rosh, Meiri, Beit Yosef, and more). And why was the commandment stated in this way? To teach us that the ‘Song of Ha’azinu’ expresses the entire Torah, the covenant God made with Israel, whose meaning is that the word of God is revealed to the world through the people of Israel, such that the history of Israel is the history of the revelation of God’s word in the world.

Indeed, the entire Torah is also called a “song,” because besides the things written in it plainly, there are hidden within it, great and immeasurably deep ideas. Thus, one can also explain that the commandment to write the song refers to the whole Torah, which is called a “song” (see the teachings of Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda, Talmud Torah, p. 294). Even one who inherited a Torah scroll from his fathers is commanded to write the Torah himself (Sanhedrin 21b), because through writing the Torah for himself, he merits to connect personally to the Torah, and through contemplating the Torah scroll that he wrote, he will be further strengthened in fulfilling the commandments written in it.

The Permission to Write the Oral Torah

Nevertheless, we must remember that originally it was permitted to write only the Written Torah, that is, the books of the Tanakh. And God commanded that every Jewish male write for himself the Torah in ink on parchment according to the laws of writing sacred texts, and the learned wrote also the Prophets and Writings, and in these books, they studied all the days of their lives. And writing down the Oral Torah was forbidden, in order that it remain alive in the hearts, and preserved in memory. But after the generations diminished, and the matters of the Oral Torah expanded and multiplied with many opinions, and the nation began to disperse into various exiles, the Sages of Israel saw that in order to maintain the Torah among Israel, it was necessary to permit writing down the Oral Torah. Thus, the Mishnah was written, and after it, the Jerusalem Talmud, the Babylonian Talmud, the Midrashim, commentaries, and halakhic rulings—until most study was conducted in books of the Oral Torah. Since they permitted writing the Oral Torah, they permitted also writing the Tanakh in simple script, not on parchment—initially by hand, and later in print.

The Dispute Among the Early Authorities

Because even the study of the Written Torah is conducted in books that are not a Torah scroll written in ink on parchment, and most study takes place in books of the Oral Torah, the question arose whether there remains a commandment to write a Torah scroll, when in practice, people do not usually study from it.

According to Rambam (Laws of Torah Scroll 7:1), even after study began to take place from other books, the commandment remained in force. That is, the essence of the commandment is to connect to the Torah as it was given at Sinai, and as our Sages said (Menachot 30a), that anyone who writes a Torah scroll “Scripture considers it as if he received it from Mount Sinai.”

According to the Rosh (Laws of Torah Scroll 1), the commandment to write a Torah scroll is so that Jews can study the Torah and fulfill its commandments. When all study was conducted in the sacred Torah scroll, naturally the scroll would wear out within one to three generations. And since the Torah commanded each person who is able to write a Torah scroll, all Jews had the possibility to study Torah. One who could write would merit to study from the scroll he wrote, and others studied from scrolls remaining from previous generations. But from the time writing the Oral Torah was permitted, the commandment is fulfilled by purchasing the books from which Torah is actually studied, and there is no commandment for a person to write a Torah scroll (Derisha YD 274:4; Shach 5).

Practical Halakha According to Both Opinions

In practice, the halakha follows both approaches, as ruled in the Shulchan Aruch (Yoreh De’ah 274:1–2). In section 1, it is ruled that it is a commandment for each person to write a Torah scroll according to its transmission from Sinai, and even one who hires a scribe to write for him fulfills the commandment. And in section 2, it is ruled that it is a commandment for every Jew to purchase for himself the foundational Torah books so he can study from them.

The Custom Today: Fulfilling the Commandment in Partnership

Today the common practice is to fulfill the commandment of writing a Torah scroll in partnership, in such a way that many people take part in funding the writing of the Torah scroll. After its completion, they dedicate it to the synagogue for Torah reading, with the stipulation that the scroll remain theirs, and thus they continue to fulfill the commandment with it, all their lives. Although there is a dispute about whether the commandment can be fulfilled in partnership—some poskim say it cannot be fulfilled in partnership (Beit Yehudah YD 23; Pele Yoetz “Sefer”; Ruach Chaim [Palagi] 274:6; Aruch HaShulchan 11). And some say it can be fulfilled in partnership (see Pitchei Teshuvah 274:1; Da’at Kedoshim 274:1; Shoel U-Meishiv I:266; Nefesh Chaya YD 75; Igrot Moshe YD I:163).

But since some hold that today there is no commandment at all to write a Torah scroll (Rosh, Derisha, Shach), one may rely on the authorities who allow fulfilling the commandment in partnership. And this is preferable, for otherwise the sacred scrolls would multiply, and since most would not be used, there is concern that they may be degraded for lack of a respectful place to keep them. Additionally, since this is a very expensive commandment, one who cannot afford it is not obligated (Rosh, Laws of Torah Scroll §1); and in Igrot Moshe (YD I:163), it is calculated that a person should not spend more than a tenth of his available money on this commandment.

A Wealthy Person Who Wishes to Fund the Writing of a Torah Scroll
Therefore, a wealthy person who can easily fund the writing of a Torah scroll, and knows of a synagogue that lacks a Torah scroll, has grounds to fulfill the commandment according to all opinions and fulfill it without partnership, and fund the writing of a Torah scroll for that synagogue. Likewise, a wealthy person who wants to have a Torah scroll in his home, in order to honor it and to read from it occasionally the weekly portion twice (shnayim mikra), has grounds to beautify the commandment according to all opinions, and hire a scribe to write a Torah scroll for him.

Answer – Guidance

Since you are able to fulfill the commandment without partnership, and you intend to designate for the Torah scroll a respectful place in your home, and to study from it from time to time the weekly portion, and in addition, to lend it for communal needs of Torah reading, you have the commandment to write it. And you need not fear pride. On the contrary, out of humility that everything is by the grace of God, it is fitting for a person to take pride in the commandments he fulfills.

Since you ask as a couple, I will add that although a woman is not obligated to write a Torah scroll, a woman who funds the writing of a Torah scroll fulfills a mitzvah. And since you are a couple, you are considered a single unit, and you both fulfill the commandment together. Regarding the question of what is preferable—helping children with their welfare needs, or writing a Torah scroll—this is your personal decision. For as I explained, the commandment can be fulfilled in partnership, and thus, as with many decisions—such as whether it is better to expand the home, or take a vacation, or donate to a mitzvah cause—this is a personal decision. For after you give a tithe of your money, and sometimes even a fifth, you are not obligated to add more giving.

Is It Preferable for a Person to Study from the Sacred Torah Scroll in His Home?

I will add that although some poskim hold that after printing Chumashim was permitted, it is preferable to study from printed books, and not to treat the sacred Torah scroll lightly by opening it for regular study. Moreover, the Torah scroll has no vowel points, and studying from it is more difficult (Perishah YD 274:8; Shach 5). However, on the other hand, it is implied from all who hold that every person is commanded to write for himself a Torah scroll, that there is a virtue in studying from the sacred Torah scroll. And it seems that from Torah scrolls dedicated to a synagogue, it is not proper for a private individual to study. But one who has a Torah scroll in his home—there is an advantage in studying from the scroll that belongs to him.

A woman too may study from the sacred Torah scroll, for there is no prohibition for women, even during their menstrual period, to touch the Torah scroll or to kiss it (Shulchan Aruch YD 282:9). Indeed, men and women alike, out of respect for the Torah scroll, must be careful not to touch the parchment with bare hands, but to roll it only using the wooden rollers. And if it is necessary to adjust the parchment, one wraps the hand with a cloth for that purpose (Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 147:1).

Parshat Vayetze: May We Bargain with God?

Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin is the Founder and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone

“If God will be with me...from all that God gives me I shall tithe.” (Genesis 28:20–22)

Let’s make a deal. God, you restore my health and I’ll donate \$100,000 to the new wing of my local hospital. Or, let’s put it another way:

“If God will be with me, and guard me on this road that I am going, and give me bread to eat, and garments to wear, and restore me in peace to the house of my father, then the Lord will be for me as God, and this stone which I have made a monument will be a House of God, and from all that God gives me I shall tithe.” (Gen. 28:20–22)

Is Jacob’s conditional vow, in its standard format of an if clause followed by a then clause, the way to engage with the Almighty? Is it proper to say, If God will do such and such, then He will be my God? Is such an exchange an authentic expression of divine service, or is it an attempt at divine manipulation? And, if making a deal with God is not proper religious conduct, what are we to make of Jacob’s conditional vow?

To help us address these questions, we need to consider a discussion in the Talmud where the Sages address a similar issue:

“If a person says, ‘I will give this sela [monetary gift] to charity so that my son may live,’ he is a complete tzaddik [righteous person].” (Pesachim 8a)

Apparently it would seem that ‘making deals with God’ is meritorious. However, according to Rabbenu Hananel, the proper textual reading

should be not tzaddik but rather tzedek (charity). This rendering would maintain that the individual who gives charity in such a manner can- not be regarded as a tzaddik, as a righteous person. Rather we can only regard the gift itself as tzedek, a gift of righteousness and charity. Rabbenu Hananel wants us to understand that such a conditional vow does not vitiate the gift, but does render the giver less praiseworthy.

Ba'alei HaTosafot also question the accepted reading of 'he is a complete tzaddik' (Pesachim, ad loc). After all, there is a theological principle set forth in Ethics of the Fathers [Chapter 1, Mishna 3] that teaches that a person should not be like a servant who serves his master in order to receive a reward, but rather ought to serve his master with no thought of reward. Hence, the Ba'alei Tosafot (as well as Rashi) explain the Talmudic teaching to refer to an instance in which the individual is not making his charity a conditional gift. After all, the Hebrew doesn't state 'on the condition my son lives,' but rather 'so that my son will live.' The father will give the charity in any case; he is merely expressing the prayer that the merit of the good deed will help towards his son's recuperation. Clearly, even if his son should die, God forbid, he would not take back the charitable contribution. Had he made his gift conditional on his son's recovery, he would not be considered righteous at all!

From the perspective of these commentaries, the Talmudic passage ultimately teaches us that every action brings with it varied and complex motivations and it is unnecessary to delve into all of the motivations of the person performing a good deed. However, as long as the sole motivation is not individual reward, we need not investigate any further. From the above discussion, a vow to the Almighty that is conditional upon the attainment of an individual reward is meaningless. Certainly a vow which stipulates acceptance of God only if personal well-being is experienced can hardly be considered meritorious. Therefore, how can we justify Jacob's vow?

Rashi clarifies the conditions of the verse, thus mitigating our theological problem considerably:

"If God...will guard me in this path...and He will give me bread to eat and clothes to wear and will return me in peace to the house of my father, and the Lord will be for me as a God, then this stone which I have made a monument will be a House of God, and from all that God gives me I shall tithe." (Gen. 28:20-22)

Rashi explains that 'the Lord will be for me as a God' is part of the if clause, not the then clause. And the list of specifics in Jacob's if clause are not new demands that he is now bringing as a deal before God; it is rather a list of God's own previous promises. After all, God has already declared:

"I am with you, and will watch over you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land, for I will not leave you until I have fully kept this promise to you." (Gen. 28:15)

Jacob is saying that if God does everything He said He would, if God is acting as his God in accordance with the divine promises, then Jacob will return to Bet El, erect a Temple to God and tithe everything he owes to God. If he is prevented in some way from returning to Israel, he will obviously be unable to erect a monument in Bet El; and if he has no physical substance, there will be nothing to tithe. Hence, this is not a deal but a logical result of the situation at hand.

Nahmanides accepts Rashi's premise that Jacob is not striking a bargain with God but is rather expressing the natural results. However, in one important respect he disagrees with Rashi; he does regard the phrase 'the Lord shall be for me as a God' as part of the then clause: 'if You [God] will return me to the land of my fathers, then the Lord shall be for me as a God.' For Nahmanides it is clear that if Jacob were to remain outside Israel, he would ipso facto be exiled from his God. After all, the Talmud declares, 'Whoever lives outside the land of Israel, it is as though he has no God' (Ketubot 110b). For as long as Jacob will be forced to wander in the homeland of Laban, Diaspora to Jacob, he will have no God. Hence his statement, 'If you bring me back to Israel, then You will be for me as a God' is plain and straightforward. Jacob means exactly what he says; if he never returns to Israel, he will have no God!

How are we to understand this startling idea? Since the essence of the Torah is keeping the commandments, the Midrash further amplifies the Talmudic statement cited above by explaining that only in Israel does the performance of the commandments have real value. In fact, the only reason we keep the commandments in the Diaspora is so that they not be forgotten when we eventually return to the true home of the Jewish people and the true place for Torah observance – the land of Israel. According to Nahmanides, this applies to all of the commandments, and not only to the laws that are related to the land and its produce, such as tithes and the Sabbatical year. He argues that even the genuine observance of Shabbat can only take place in Israel (see Rashi on Deut. 11:18).

But isn't God everywhere? Why shouldn't a Jew in New York, Johannesburg, London or Paris be able to keep those commandments which are not dependent on the land of Israel – like the tithes and the Sabbatical year – just as well as a Jew in Efrat?

I believe that Jacob's dream of the ladder rooted on earth, whose top extends heavenwards, contains the key to a proper understanding of Nahmanides' position. Judaism posits a 'this-worldly' religion, that attempts to suffuse every aspect of earthly culture and endeavor with a touch of the divine and a taste of heaven. We are not to escape this world in our quest for the divine, but are enjoined to bring God down into this world. Jerusalem is not a city of God, but a city of humanity, and Jewish law extends far beyond the precincts of the Temple or the synagogue. The angels ascend the ladder in order to ultimately descend, and to bring with them a sanctity which can and must infuse the kitchen and the bedroom, the market-place and the wheat field, the prayer house and the sporting fields. And it is only in Israel that Judaism has the right and the challenge to influence every aspect of society; only Israel is, after all, a Jewish state. I believe this to be Nahmanides' position.

I'd like to suggest another interpretation of Jacob's vow. There are two major names of God in the Torah: Elokim, which reflects God's quality of truth and judgment, and the four-letter name of God (YHWH), which expresses God's attribute of love and compassion.

With this in mind, Jacob's vow to God means that under all circumstances he will serve God as Elokim. But, if the things God promised will come to pass and Jacob will be cared for by God in a personal and compassionate way, then a Lord of compassion will be revealed to him as his God.

Having given this interpretation, we must remember that the young Jacob learnt a great deal by the end of his life. I am reminded of a significant prayer attributed to Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav, when he was only a child: "Dear God, I do not ask You to make my life easy; I do ask You to make me strong."

Jacob experienced very little divine compassion in his life – he is hurt by the lack of a father's love and appreciation; he is forced to flee his homeland to escape a vengeful brother; he works for two decades for a scoundrel uncle; he loses a young beloved wife; and he is separated for twenty-two years from his favorite son, whom he thinks is dead. Although he manages to return to Israel, the end of his life is spent in exile. Nevertheless, an aged Jacob blesses his grandchildren:

"May the angel who has redeemed me from all evil bless these children." (Gen. 48:6)

The God of justice has indeed become his God of compassion and redemption – not because his life was made easy, but because he found the inner strength to confront, and overcome, all obstacles. That fortitude is ultimately the greatest gift we can ask of the Divine, and is the greatest expression of His compassion towards us.

Shabbat Shalom

[CS – Late-breaking dvar torah added:

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Gratitude & Thanksgiving During Challenging Times

How Rachel Taught Her Child—and the World—the Secret to Happiness

By: Rabbi YY Jacobson

These are challenging times for our people, and for all good people. For Jews, one of the most powerful resources for millennia has been thanksgiving and gratitude. In our tradition, we express gratitude hundreds of times a day, at every step of the road. Before I eat an apple, after I come out of the bathroom, when I open my eyes in the morning, and when I am about to retire. How do we cultivate this life-changing gift during times of visceral pain and distress?

What's the Shame?

It is a perplexing response in this week's Torah portion, Vayetzei. Rachel, who has been childless for many years, gives birth. In the words of the Torah:

"And she conceived and bore a son, and she said, "G-d has taken away my shame."

What type of shame was she referring to? What shame is there in infertility, which is not her fault? Sarah and Rebecca were also barren, but we never hear that they were ashamed. In the world of Torah, there is no room for shame for a condition you never caused. Pain, anguish, or jealousy are sentiments we can appreciate, but why shame?

Rashi presents the astounding and disturbing answer in the Midrash:

The Aggadah (Midrash Rabbah 73:5) explains it: As long as a woman has no child, she has no one to blame for her faults. As soon as she has a child, she blames him. "Who broke this dish? Your child!" "Who ate these figs? Your child!"

Rachel was previously ashamed because she had nobody to blame for any errors, oversights, or flaws. The food was burnt? Rachel must be a lousy cook. The keys to the car are lost? Rachel is irresponsible. Rachel is in a bad mood? She is impulsive and irrational. A plate breaks? She is a shlimazal. The couch is dirty? She is a lazy couch potato. The home is unkempt? Rachel just can't get it together.

Ah, but now, with the birth of Joseph, the shame is gone. The food burnt because the baby ran a fever, and she had to rush him to the doctor. The keys to the car lost? The baby got a hold of them and cast them in the dustbin. The plate broke? The baby dropped it. The couch is dirty? The baby decided to have his ice cream on the couch. The house is a mess? Of course, the baby is at fault.

So, if I am understanding this correctly, that is why Rachel who was childless for 7 years wanted a baby—not for the incredible experience of creating a life, not for the infinite joy of having a child, not for the happiness that comes with the singular mother-child relationship—all of this was not the motivating factor. Why did Rachel want a child? So that she has somebody to blame for getting the turkey and cranberry sauce all over the floor?!

Absurd or what? Our mother Rachel, barren and infertile, was yearning for a child—to the point of her telling Jacob: "If I don't have children, I am dead."—So that she would blame all her mistakes on her child?

What is more, this seems so dishonest. If Rachel did not really make errors like breaking dishes and eating up figs, she would have not been ashamed to begin with. If she did, and she was constantly getting embarrassed, what exactly was her comfort now? That when she breaks a china plate she will lie and say that her child did it?

What is even more disturbing is that she names her baby "Yosef," which means removed, to celebrate the fact that now her shame has been "removed" (asaf). You are giving your child whom you waited for so many years a name which represents your newfound ability now to blame him for your mistakes?!

How can we make sense of this perplexing Midrash?

Of course, we need to dig deeper to uncover the gems contained here. In essence, Rachel was teaching us one of the primary secrets to live a life of gratitude.

Rachel's Magic

In all our lives there is a gap between what we have, and what we want. No one gets everything. And even when we are given blessings, the "package" comes with "fine print" you may have not realized in the beginning. Human nature is to focus on that which we are missing, while forgetting that which we have. We take our blessings for granted and we obsess about the missing pieces.

Rachel knew about the human proclivity to focus on the negative instead of the positive, and that even after you experienced an extraordinary gift, after a while you take it for granted and begin kvetching about the imperfections. To counterbalance this human recipe for misery, she exclaimed, "G-d has removed my shame," to remind herself of the idea that she must attribute the things going wrong to her child. When your child breaks the dish or eats the figs, remember that the only reason you have this problem is because you were blessed with a child. When your child breaks something or eats up the fresh food you made for the guests, attribute the problem to your child, to the miracle and blessing of having a child.

You can say: Oy, my child MADE A MESS. Or you can say: Thank G-d, MY CHILD made a mess. Same words, but with a different emphasis. It is the Jewish custom that when a glass breaks, we shout: Mazal Tov! When the groom breaks the glass under the chuppah, we exclaim Mazal Tov! Why don't we say: Oy, 10 dollars down the drain? This is Rachel's gift: When the plate breaks, be grateful. It means you have a home; you own dishes. When your husband breaks something, say: Mazal Tov! Thank goodness, I married a human being, not an angel.

To live means to become aware of the miracle of the breath I am emitting at this moment. Every breath is a Divine gift. I am alive, wow. I am grateful. I do not own life; I did not create life; I am privileged to be a channel for life, for the infinite source of life, at this moment—wow. And I have a child sitting near me—wow, I can now be a channel for love and light.

Yes, life presents us with painful moments, and we can feel overwhelmed, scared, and sad. And at that very moment, I can talk to my mind and say: And now, I want to go into space of gratitude—of knowing that G-d creates me at this moment so I can be a channel for His infinite love, light, peace, and compassion, and to radiate that to all around me.

The Hunch of a Mother

With the hunch of a mother, Rachel decided to immortalize this message in the name of her child, Yosef, meaning "G-d removed my shame." This became the secret of Joseph's success.

Joseph endured enormous pain and suffering. His brothers despised him, they sold him into slavery, he was accused of promiscuity, and thrown into a dungeon for twelve years. And yet throughout his entire life, Joseph never lost his joy, grace, passion for life, love for people, ambition to succeed, and his ability to forgive. Joseph comes across as one of the most integrated, wholesome, cheerful, loveable persons in the entire Tanach. With a life story like his, we would expect him to be bitter, cynical, resentful, angry, stone-like, and harsh. "A rock feels no pain and an island never cries," yet Joseph weeps more than everyone in the Hebrew Bible.

How did he do this? This, perhaps, was his mother's gift. Though she died when he was nine years of age, she infused him with perspective on how to live: Every challenge can only exist because it has a blessing as its backdrop. I feel pain. But that means I am alive, and I have feelings. It also means that there is something new I must discover about myself and the world. I am hurt, but that means that I am sensitive, and I can be here for people. I disagree with my spouse, but that means that I am blessed to have a soul partner who cares for me, and that we have an opportunity to create a deeper relationship. My children challenge me? That means I have children whom I love, and I am given an opportunity to dig deeper and find the light beyond the darkness.

The Backdrop of Pain

When your husband comes home late from work, instead of thinking: He is so irresponsible and unreliable, you can choose to say: Thank G-d I have a husband, who loves me and cares for me, and he has a job he loves, and works hard. Sure, speak to him about coming home on time, but choose what you will focus on.

When your mother or father calls you for help, instead of saying to yourself: Oy, my entire life must revolve around her needs, say instead: Thank G-d I have parents.

When you come into the office, and you experience overload, with 90 emails to respond to, six different options for future growth, tell

yourself: Thank G-d I have a job, I have six different options, I have so much to do, I am busy and productive, and I am driven.

When your wife rebukes you for your mistakes, instead of thinking, Why do I need someone who criticizes me? Say to yourself: I am so grateful that I have a wife who cares about me deeply and allows me the gift of introspection. (Of course, you may want to share with her how she can communicate with you in a way that goes easier on your trauma, but choose what to focus on.)

When your kids or grandkids make a "balagan" in your home and turn the place upside down, don't zoom in exclusively on the mess; rather focus on the fact that you have children and grandchildren who are filled with good spirit.

When your car breaks down, and you must get it towed, instead of cursing your luck, say to yourself: I own a car. That puts me in the one percent bracket, superior to most humans on this planet.

An Appetite

Chassidim tell a story about the holy Reb Zusha of Anipoli. When he was a child, he often went hungry. But he was always thankful. Once, when he was really hungry, someone overheard him talking to G-d. This is what he said: G-d, I want to thank you so much for giving me an appetite!

Even the hunger he experienced as something that can exist only in the context of a blessing. G-d gave me an appetite.

Gratitude Even As I Don't Get It

I do not comprehend the reason and purpose of so much of what is going on in our world; it is much larger than our brains. The pain we are all feeling is visceral and profound; it is the pain of peoplehood, of being part of a singular organism challenged to its core. How can I show up best in such a situation? How can I remain anchored in hope, faith, and courage? How can I, and each of us, become a beacon of light, love, and strength?

Rachel teaches us, by choosing to live in a space of gratitude, because that allows us to remain anchored in the source of all life, love, and strength, not get washed away by the tides of anger, frustration, and madness. My heart swells with gratitude to the majestic people of Israel, to my people, my brothers and sisters who are so holy and good; toward the loved ones in my life who are Divine gifts; to my inner soul, which has so much light and love.

And, finally, gratitude for the privilege of being a conduit for Hashem's truth, love, and clarity.

(The idea behind this essay I heard from Rabbi Fishel Schachter shlita). Gratefully dedicated by Menachem & Batya Abrams and family to all our Israeli soldiers & volunteer organizations]

The Significance of Tachanun

By Rabbi Yirmiyahu Kaganoff

Why is tachanun such an important part of davening?

According to the Zohar,[1] the level of kapparah (atonement) achieved through the sincere recital of tachanun cannot be accomplished any other way in this world. Talmudic sources teach that a tearfully recited tachanun can accomplish more than any other prayer.[2]

The Rambam writes that the most important aspect of tachanun is to make personal requests.[3] He states pointedly that there is no limit to the number of personal requests one may make.

Although the importance of tachanun is both underestimated and not duly appreciated by many, this should certainly not be the case. Tachanun is actually based on Moshe Rabbeinu's successful entreating of Hashem on Har Sinai to spare Klal Yisrael from punishment after their grievous sins:[4] Va'esnapal lifnei Hashem, "And I threw myself down in prayer before G-d." [5]

When do we recite tachanun?

After completing shemoneh esrei, which is recited standing, the supplicant continues the mitzvah of tefillah by reciting the tachanun in a manner reminiscent of prostration.[6] Thus, tachanun should be viewed and treated as a continuation of the shemoneh esrei.[7]

Total submission

In earlier days, tachanun was said with one's face pressed to the ground and one's body stretched out in total submission to Hashem.[8] In the time of the Gemara, people bowed without prostrating themselves totally, or by prostrating themselves while tilting a bit on their side.[9] This was done to avoid violating the prohibition against prostrating oneself on a stone surface, which is derived from the pasuk, "You may not place a stone (even maskis) for bowing upon it in your Land." [10] This prohibition is violated only by prostrating oneself on a stone with one's hands and legs completely stretched out.

Today, the accepted custom is that we do not prostrate ourselves, except on Yom Kippur (and some have the custom also on Rosh Hashanah), and, when doing so, we place cloth or paper beneath ourselves, to avoid any shaylah.[11] Similarly, we do not bow fully when reciting tachanun. The Ashkenazic custom is to recite tachanun sitting, while resting one's head on the arm as a reminiscence of bowing. This is called nefilas apayim or "falling tachanun." The custom among Sefardim is to sit while reciting tachanun, but not to place the head down. I will soon explain the halachic reasons for both practices.

Interrupting between shemoneh esrei and tachanun

Conversing between shemoneh esrei and tachanun weakens the effectiveness of the tachanun.[12] Therefore, the Shulchan Aruch rules that one should not converse between tefillah and tachanun. Some contend that only a lengthy conversation disturbs the efficacy of the tachanun, but not a short interruption,[13] whereas others rule that any interruption at all undermines the value of the tachanun.[14]

The Magen Avraham rules that one may recite tachanun in a place different from where one davened shemoneh esrei, and this is not considered an interruption.

Interrupting during tachanun

One should not interrupt during the recital of tachanun except to answer Borchu and the significant responses of Kedusha and Kaddish.[15]

May tachanun be said standing?

The early authorities dispute whether tachanun may be said standing, some contending that it is even preferable to recite tachanun by bowing in a standing position. Others contend that it is better to sit for tachanun; this completely avoids the problem of even maskis, since it is impossible to prostrate oneself completely from a sitting position.[16] The accepted custom is to recite tachanun while sitting.[17] The Shulchan Aruch rules that one should recite tachanun only in a sitting position.[18] Under extenuating circumstances, one may recite it while standing.[19]

What about the chazzan?

Tachanun is the only part of davening where the chazzan does not stand. Since the entire purpose of the tachanun is to recite a prayer while one is bowing, the chazzan also "falls tachanun."

What prayer is recited for tachanun?

Whereas Ashkenazim recite Chapter 6 of Tehillim while "falling tachanun," Sefardim recite Chapter 25 of Tehillim as tachanun, and recite it in a regular sitting position.

Why do Ashkenazim (including "nusach Sefard") "fall tachanun," whereas Sefardim (Edot Hamizrah) do not? And, why do Ashkenazim and Sefardim recite different chapters of Tehillim for tachanun?

In actuality, these differing practices are based on the same source. According to the Zohar, the sincere recital of Chapter 25 of Tehillim accomplishes a tremendous level of atonement, and repairs other spiritual shortcomings. However, reciting it insincerely and without proper intent can cause tremendous damage.[20] To avoid the harm that may be incurred should tachanun not be said properly, both Ashkenazim and Sefardim say tachanun differently from the procedure described by the Zohar. Ashkenazim recite Chapter 6 of Tehillim rather than Chapter 25,[21] while Sefardim recite Chapter 25 as stated in Zohar, but do not place their heads down in a bowing position. The Sefardic practice is never to do nefillas apayim when reciting tachanun, due to the eventuality that one may not have the proper kavvos.[22]

On which side do we lean?

The early authorities dispute whether it is preferable to lean on the left side or on the right side during tachanun. Some contend that it is better to lean on the left side, because in earlier times, wealthy people used to

lean on that side (compare the mitzvah of heseibah, reclining, at the Pesach Seder). By leaning on the left side, we demonstrate the subjugation of our “wealthier” side to Hashem.[23]

A second reason cited is that the Shechinah is opposite one’s right side. Therefore when leaning on the left side, one faces the Shechinah.[24] Others contend that one should always lean on the right side, and we should fall tachanun on the side of the Shechinah rather than facing it.[25]

The most common, but not exclusive, Ashkenazic practice is to lean on the left side when not wearing tefillin, and on the right side when wearing tefillin, so as not to lean on the tefillin.[26] A left-handed person should always recite tachanun while leaning on his left side.[27]

Why do we stand up in the middle of the pasuk "Va'anachnu lo neida"? The first three words of this pasuk are recited sitting, and then, we stand up to complete the prayer. In addition, we say the first five words of this prayer aloud. Why do we follow these unusual practices?

This practice is observed in order to emphasize our having attempted to pray in several different positions. We davened shemoneh esrei while standing, tachanun while bowing, and other prayers while sitting. Finally, we exclaim, *va'anachnu lo neida*, “We do not know!” We have tried every method of prayer that we can think of, and we are unaware of any other possibilities.[28]

Tachanun recited with the community

Tachanun should, preferably, be said together with a minyan.[29] Therefore, someone in an Ashkenazi shul who finished *Vehu Rachum* before the *tzibur* should wait in order to begin tachanun together with them.[30] Similarly, if davening with a mincha minyan that did not recite the full repetition of shemoneh esrei (sometimes called *heicha kedusha*), one should wait to say tachanun together with a minyan. (Please note that I am not advocating that a minyan daven with a *heicha kedusha*. I am personally opposed to this practice, except for extenuating circumstances.)

Is it more important to say tachanun sitting or to recite it together with the minyan?

This question manifests itself in two cases.

(1) Someone is davening shemoneh esrei immediately behind me, making it halachically impossible for me to sit down for tachanun, since it is forbidden to sit down in front of someone who is davening shemoneh esrei.

(2) Someone who completed the shemoneh esrei is required to wait for a few seconds (the time it takes to walk four amos) in his place after backing up. Therefore, someone who has just finished the quiet shemoneh esrei when the *tzibur* is beginning to say tachanun needs to wait a few seconds before he can “fall tachanun.” What is the optimal means of reconciling this with the obligation to recite tachanun with the *tzibur*?

The poskim dispute which way is best to deal with this predicament. Some contend that one should begin tachanun immediately, while still standing,[31] whereas others contend that it is better to wait and recite tachanun while sitting.[32]

Incidentally, the *chazzan* may sit down immediately and begin tachanun without waiting for the regulation few seconds and walking back three steps. He should just leave the *amud* and sit down immediately for tachanun.[33]

Conclusion

It is essential to appreciate that tachanun is a time when one can include personal tefillos and sincerely beg Hashem for whatever we lack. May He speedily answer all our prayers for good!

[1] End of *Bamidbar*, quoted by *Beis Yosef*, *Orach Chayim* 131. [2] See *Bava Metzia* 59b. [3] *Hilchos Tefillah* 5:13. [4] *Tur*, *Orach Chayim* 131. [5] *Devarim* 9:18, 25. [6] See *Rambam*, *Hilchos Tefillah* 5:1, 13. [7] *Levush*, *Orach Chayim* 131:1. [8] *Megillah* 22b; *Rambam*, *Hilchos Tefillah* 5:13-14; *Tur*, *Orach Chayim* 131; see *Bach*. [9] *Megillah* 22b. [10] *Vayikra* 26:1. [11] See *Shu't Rivash* #412 and commentaries on *Tur* 131. [12] *Bava Metzia* 59b, as explained by the *Shibbolei Haleket* #30 and the *Beis Yosef*, *Orach Chayim* 131; *Levush*, *Orach Chayim* 131. [13] *Magen Avraham* 131:1. [14] *Aruch Hashulchan* 131:3; *Kaf*

Hachayim 131:1-3, quoting *Zohar* and *Ari*. [15] *Shaarei Teshuvah* 131:1. [16] *Shu't Rivash* #412. [17] *Beis Yosef* 131, quoting the *mekubalim*. [18] *Shulchan Aruch*, *Orach Chayim* 131:2. [19] *Mishnah Berurah* 131:10. [20] *Zohar*, end of *parshas Bamidbar*, quoted by *Beis Yosef*. [21] *Magen Avraham* 131:5. [22] *Ben Ish Chai*, 1: *Ki Sissa*; *Yalkut Yosef*, *Orach Chayim* 131: 16. [23] *Shibbolei Haleket* #30, quoting *Rav Hai Gaon*. [24] *Shibbolei Haleket*, quoting his brother, *R' Binyamin*. [25] *Rakanati*, quoted by *Magen Avraham*; *Rema*, quoting *yesh omrim*. [26] *Darchei Moshe* and *Rema* comments on *Shulchan Aruch*. [27] See *Pri Megadim*, *Mishbetzos Zahav* 131:2. [28] *Shelah*, quoted by *Magen Avraham* 131:4. [29] *Rambam*; *Tur*. [30] *Be'er Heiteiv* 134:1. [31] *Mishnah Berurah* 131:10. [32] *Magen Avraham* 131:5. [33] *Mishnah Berurah* 104:9.

An Invocation in an America First Moment: Standing for Faith and Principle

By Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

When I was invited to deliver an invocation at the America First Policy Institute (AFPI) Summit, I was honored, but I also hesitated. The timing, early Friday morning, was particularly challenging, and there were other considerations as well. After consulting with people I respect and trust, I came to see it as an important opportunity at a critical moment.

AFPI is a relatively new but rapidly growing conservative think tank that promotes a Trump-aligned “America First” agenda. It has limited Jewish involvement and, until now, had never hosted a rabbi to speak or offer an invocation. With several high-ranking members of the administration and prominent conservative leaders present, the invitation created a rare platform: to both express gratitude for those standing firmly with Israel and the Jewish people, and to candidly address the troubling trends and dangerous elements emerging in parts of the conservative world.

In this broader landscape, some institutions have taken divergent paths. Most notably, the Heritage Foundation has not, in recent times, been sufficiently clear or consistent in condemning antisemitism or its purveyors. By contrast, the Hudson Institute has been a steadfast ally of the Jewish community through its long-standing, principled pro-Israel positions. AFPI is currently on the pro-Israel side of that divide, but it is crucial to reinforce and encourage institutions like AFPI to follow the Hudson model rather than drifting toward the ambiguity we have seen from Heritage.

I am grateful to share that the remarks were warmly received. There were several spontaneous rounds of applause, particularly when speaking about unwavering support for Israel. Afterward, many attendees came over specifically to express their strong solidarity with Israel and the Jewish people, and to affirm how deeply the message resonated with them.

I am sharing the text of my remarks below not only for your interest, but also as a resource, a set of talking points and themes you can draw upon and adapt for your own settings, whether addressing a crowd or having one-on-one conversations where these issues arise.

Invocation at the America First Policy Institute

Mar-a-Lago | November 21, 2025

Ladies and gentlemen, honored leaders and dear friends,

We gather today to thank God for the gift of this great nation and to offer our prayers for America: for safety, unity, and for moral clarity and courage.

I stand before you this morning as an Orthodox rabbi, as an unapologetic Jew, and as a grateful and proud American.

If we speak of “America First,” we must also speak of how America first came to be. This country was born from an extraordinary faith, deeply informed by the language and ideas of the Jewish Bible.

When our Founders wrote in the Declaration of Independence that all men are “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights,” they were echoing the first chapter of Genesis, that every human being is created *b’tzelem Elokim*, in the image of God.

When they appealed to “the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God,” they were affirming that there is a moral law higher than any king, any parliament, or any polling data.

When they concluded, “with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence,” they spoke in the language of our prophets, a people placing its destiny in the hands of Heaven.

So if we say “America First,” it must mean America first in fidelity to these founding biblical principles: First in honoring the Creator who endows our rights. First in defending the dignity of every person and their right to practice their faith. First in preserving the moral order that makes liberty possible.

“America First” must not only mean prioritizing American interests; it must mean America first in standing true to the principles, values, and ideals that made her exceptional in the first place.

We now approach 250 years of American history. For nearly a quarter of a millennium, this nation has been a beacon of light and hope to the world. It has understood that being the world’s superpower means wielding not only might, but also moral influence.

This morning, we offer our deepest gratitude and our prayers for the next 250 years. That America remains strong, free, and secure. That her children grow up in homes of stability, in communities of faith and responsibility. That her leaders be guided by wisdom, humility, and courage.

As Jews, we are profoundly conscious of the blessing this country has been. In all of Jewish history, no diaspora land has given us more freedom, more safety, and more opportunity than the United States of America, and for that we are deeply grateful.

I stand here as a rabbi but also as an ordinary Jew to say, “I love America,” not as a slogan or a platitude, but as a heartfelt expression of religious obligation, a fulfillment of hakaras hatov, of gratitude: recognizing the goodness we have received and feeling the responsibility to respond with loyalty and service.

Yet I must also take this moment to speak personally and honestly. We are living in a time when, from the extremes of both the left and the right, a climate is being created in which many Jews feel less safe.

There are moments, even in this blessed country, when I step onto certain streets wearing this yarmulka on my head, and for the first time in my life, I hesitate. I feel the stares. I hear the rhetoric. I read the threats. And I find myself unimaginably asking: Are they questioning my loyalty? Do they see me as fully American?

There are voices on the left who demonize Israel and then look suspiciously at anyone who loves and supports it, as if that love somehow disqualifies us from full belonging in American life. There are voices on the right who speak of “real Americans” and “patriots” in a way that can leave Jews and other minorities wondering whether we are truly included in that vision.

To all those voices, I say this, respectfully but firmly: my loyalty to this country is not conditional, not partial, not divided. It is expressed in prayer for its leaders, in gratitude for its freedoms, in service to its communities, and in the raising of children who sing its anthem and uphold its ideals.

And at the very same time and in no way a contradiction, I am a proud, unapologetic Jew and a steadfast supporter of Israel. To love Israel is not to betray America. To stand with Jerusalem is not to stand against Washington.

In truth, to love Israel is to be deeply faithful to America’s own values, because America is founded on values that come from Jerusalem: On belief in one God. On the sanctity of human life. On the rule of just law over mere power. On the conviction that nations are accountable to a higher moral standard.

The Bible that inspired the Declaration of Independence is the same Bible that first gave birth to the people and land of Israel. So when America stands with Israel, America is standing with the very wellspring of its own moral vocabulary.

Let me be clear: to platform purveyors of hate, to provide a podium to promote antisemitism, may be one’s first amendment legal right, but it is not “America First.” In fact, it is not American at all. It is an offense

against the very values that America ought to be first in defending. Those spreading vile lies against Israel and the Jewish people on college campuses, outside of Synagogues and even in the halls of Congress do so not only because they hate the Jew. In truth, they hate America, they are not proud Americans, and they are not loyal to how America first came to be or how it must remain first in upholding its values.

We must speak with moral clarity. We must act with courage. And we must continue to express gratitude. We thank God Almighty that on July 13, as a bullet was fired at him, President Trump suddenly turned his head. Turning his head saved his life, and the president has continued to turn his head since then: turning to listen, turning to hear the call of the moment, turning to act. President Trump and his Administration have shown unprecedented loyalty and friendship to Israel and the Jewish people, a steadfast support that we don’t take for granted and for which we will never stop saying thank you.

I close with a brief prayer.

“The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not lack.” Let us never lack in knowing the Lord is our Shepherd.

Master of the Universe, Bless the United States of America as she approaches her 250th year. May she return again and again to the truths written in the Bible and echoed in its founding Declaration—that our rights come from You, and that our greatness lies in fidelity to Your moral law. Bless our leaders, that they may have wisdom to discern right from wrong, courage to choose what is sometimes the harder path. Bless the alliance between America and Israel, two nations that look to Jerusalem not only as a city on a map, but as a source of enduring values. Bless this land so all may continue to walk proudly including those with our yarmulkas visible, our faith intact, and our love for America unwavering.

Our Father in Heaven: Give strength, wisdom and courage to President Trump and his distinguished administration to guide our country towards unity, security, and success. Guard the courageous members of the United States military and the Israeli Defense Forces as they guard us and protect freedom and democracy around the world.

Dear God - We ask that you grant peace and prosperity to the United States, to the State of Israel and to the entire world, and let us respond, Amen.

Rav Kook Torah

VaYiteitzi: The Prayers of the Avot

According to the Talmud (Berachot 26b), the Avot (forefathers) instituted the three daily prayers:

Abraham — Shacharit, the morning prayer.

Isaac — Minchah, the afternoon prayer.

Jacob — Ma’ariv, the evening prayer.

Is there an inner connection between these prayers and their founders?

Rav Kook wrote that each of these three prayers has its own special nature. This nature is a function of both the character of that time of day, and the pervading spirit of the righteous tzaddik who would pray at that time.

The Morning Stand

Abraham, the first Jew, established the first prayer of the day. He would pray at daybreak, standing before God:

“Abraham rose early in the morning, [returning] to the place where he had stood before God.” (Gen. 19:27)

Why does the Torah call attention to the fact that Abraham would stand as he prayed? This position indicates that the function of this morning prayer is to make a spiritual stand. We need inner fortitude to maintain the ethical level that we have struggled to attain. The constant pressures and conflicts of day-to-day life can chip away at our spiritual foundation. To counter these negative influences, the medium of prayer can help us, by etching holy thoughts and sublime images deeply into the heart. Such a prayer at the start of the day helps protect us from the pitfalls of worldly temptations throughout the day.

This function of prayer — securing a solid ethical foothold in the soul — is reflected in the name Amidah (the “standing prayer”). It is particularly appropriate that Abraham, who successfully withstood ten

trials and tenaciously overcame all who fought against his path of truth, established the “standing prayer” of the morning.

Flowering of the Soul in the Afternoon

The second prayer, initiated by Isaac, is recited in the afternoon. This is the hour when the temporal activities of the day are finished, and we are able to clear our minds from the distractions of the world. The soul is free to express its true essence, unleashing innate feelings of holiness, pure love and awe of God.

The Torah characterizes Isaac’s afternoon prayer as *sichah* (meditation): “Isaac went out to meditate in the field towards evening” (Gen. 24:64). The word *sichah* also refers to plants and bushes (*sichim*), for it expresses the spontaneous flowering of life force. This is a fitting metaphor for the afternoon prayer, when the soul is able to naturally grow and flourish.

Why was it Isaac who established this prayer? Isaac exemplified the attribute of Justice (*midat ha-din*), so he founded the soul’s natural prayer of the afternoon. The exacting measure of law is applied to situations where one has deviated from the normal and accepted path.

Spontaneous Evening Revelation

And what distinguishes *Ma’ariv*, the evening prayer?

Leaving his parents’ home, Jacob stopped for the night in Beth-El. There he dreamed of ascending and descending angels and divine promises. Jacob awoke the following morning awestruck; he had not been aware of holiness of his encampment.

“He chanced upon the place and stayed overnight, for it became suddenly night.” (Gen. 28:11)

The “chance meeting” — a spiritual experience beyond the level to which the soul is accustomed — that is the special quality of the evening prayer. The night is a time of quiet solitude. It is a time especially receptive to extraordinary elevations of the soul, including prophecy and levels close to it.

Unlike the other two prayers, the evening prayer is not obligatory. But this does not reflect a lack of importance; on the contrary, the essence of the evening prayer is an exceptionally uplifting experience. Precisely because of its sublime nature, this prayer must not be encumbered by any aspect of rote obligation. It needs to flow spontaneously from the heart. The voluntary nature of the evening prayer is a continuation of Jacob’s unexpected spiritual revelation that night in Beth-El.

Chief Rabbi Mirvis

Vayeitzei

To be Jewish is to be Grateful

The essence of our Judaism is gratitude. Parshat Vayeitzei describes how after the births of her first three children Leah felt particularly despondent and this was reflected in the names she gave them. But, when she gave birth to her fourth child she declared, “ha’paam odeh et Hashem”, “this time I will give thanks to Hashem” and therefore she called his name Yehuda, from the word ‘*todah*’ which means thankful.

Fascinatingly, Yehuda was the only tribe to survive and remain intact and to this day we are descendants of Yehuda and therefore we are called Yehudim or Jews. So, to be grateful is an essential part of our Jewish character. And this is reflected in many ways, for example, in our shul services, of course, we stand when the ark is open and we stand as well for the most important prayers.

But in addition, we stand for thanksgiving prayers such as *Mizmor L’toda*, psalm 100, which we say every weekday morning, or via *Vayavarech David*, also in the morning service, which includes sentiments attitude and also, *Mizmor Shir Le’yom Ha’sahbat*, the psalm for the Sabbath day within which we say, “tov le’hadot, l’Hashem, “it is good to be grateful to the Lord” and we stand for *Hallel* and so on. There is a further way in which this is expressed.

We have in Judaism a very strong concept of *shlichut*, that is, representation. “*Shlucho shel adam kemoto*”, my representative is my extended arm, and in a halakhic context can actually represent me as if I am doing what he or she is doing. However, there is no concept of *shlichut*, of representation, of an ambassador’s role, when it comes to

gratitude. If I feel grateful to somebody, I should pick up the phone, I should write the letter and not rely on somebody else to convey my appreciation.

And this is why in the repetition of the *Amidah*, the *Chazan* recites all the blessings and we respond *Amen*, with one exception. And that is *Modim*. When it comes to the thanksgiving blessing, we all must recite it. No wonder, therefore, that the very first words that we utter every morning are ‘*modeh ani le’fenacha*’, we give thanks to Hashem for enabling us to live on yet another day. From the very moment that Judah was born, we as Jews feel eternally grateful to those who brought us into this world, to those who have blessed us and more than anything, to *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*, to Almighty God, who continues to bless us always.

Shabbat Shalom.

Parshas Vayeitzei

Rabbi Yochanan Zweig

(Not) Together Forever

And it was when Yaakov saw Rochel [...] Then Yaakov kissed Rochel and he raised his voice and wept (29:10-11).

Yaakov Avinu, having traveled quite a distance to meet his future wife, reacts in a very unusual manner upon first seeing Rochel: He begins to cry in a very loud voice. Rashi, noting that this seems rather odd, explains that Yaakov cried because he saw through the Divine spirit that Rochel would not be buried alongside him (29:11).

But why would Yaakov be preoccupied by the idea of not being buried together on the day he first meets his wife? It would seem that Yaakov Avinu had far more pressing issues to overcome in the immediate future: he was destitute, had a devious Uncle Lavan, a brother who had proclaimed his intent to kill him, etc. So why was Yaakov worrying about their separate burial locations — events far removed in the future — at this time?

Perhaps even more perplexing: Rashi, in Parshas Vayechi (48:7), relates how Yaakov explains to his son Yosef that he should not be upset with him for not burying his mother Rochel in Beis Lechem because he buried her there at the direction of the Divine word of Hashem: “So that she should be of aid to her children when the Nebuzadran would exile them; (as they are leaving Eretz Yisroel) they would pass by her grave and Rochel would emerge from her grave and cry and seek Divine mercy for them[...].”

Thus, it was necessary for Rochel to be buried by the side of the road in order to come out and daven as her descendants passed by her grave. But if this is the reason she needed to be buried there then why did Yaakov cry — Rochel was obviously never intended to be buried next to him in Chevron anyway! Furthermore, Rashi, on the words “He shall not live” (31:32), explains that Yaakov inadvertently cursed Rochel and this is what caused her to be buried by the side of the road. But this seems to be a direct contradiction to the reason that Yaakov gave his son Yosef!

The answer to these questions lies in the fundamental understanding that the Jewish view of marriage is one of an eternal union. As explained in earlier editions of *INSIGHTS*, the primary method of how a woman becomes betrothed to a man is learned from the story of how Abraham acquired a burial plot for his deceased wife Sarah. He wasn’t buying one plot, he was buying plots for both of them. In fact, the Torah calls the city *Kiryat Arba* because of the four couples who are buried there (Rashi on 23:1). It isn’t eight individuals; it’s four merged couples. This is the Jewish view of what a marriage is supposed to be.

Yaakov was devastated when he saw through *Ruach Hakodesh* that he wouldn’t be buried together with his soulmate Rachel because this indicated that their union wouldn’t be perfect. A defect in their union would be very painful and obviously have repercussions throughout the marriage.

We find a fascinating concept by Yaakov Avinu. Rashi, in Parshas Vayechi (49:33), quotes the Gemara (Taanis 5b) that Yaakov never really died. In fact, according to the Midrash (BereishisRabbah 92:2), Yaakov was actually standing there when Bnei Yisroel left Egypt. Even though the Torah explicitly says that he was embalmed and buried in

Chevron, apparently, he wasn't physically bound by his death. In all likelihood, if Yaakov and Rochel would have had a perfect merged identity, it seems very possible that Rochel could have had the same quality of not being really dead. In other words, she could have been buried in Chevron and still gone out to the side of the road to pray for her children when they needed her.

This is why Yaakov Avinu was sobbing loudly when he first met Rochel. He understood from the outset that they would not share that eternal bond. Their brief marriage, which ended upon the sudden death of Rochel, also ended their connection and the potential for an eternal relationship. This is why Yaakov was exceedingly distraught when they first met.

A Fate Worse Than Death

[...] and he [Yaakov] cried (29:10).

Rashi relates that Yaakov was saddened by the fact that he came searching for a wife empty handed in contrast to Eliezer who, when he went to find a wife for Yitzchak, came bearing many gifts. This was because Elifaz, the son of Eisav, pursued him on the orders of his father to kill Yaakov. But Elifaz, who was "raised on the lap of Yitzchak," did not want kill Yaakov. As Elifaz was conflicted, he asked Yaakov, "What should I do about my father's command?" Yaakov responded, "Take all my possessions, I will be impoverished and a poor person is considered as if he is dead." Obviously, Elifaz couldn't return to his father and outright lie by saying that he killed Yaakov because the truth would come to light eventually. This being so, even if technically he didn't violate his father's command, how could this scheme possibly satisfy Eisav?

There is a well-known maxim in Judaism; "He who publicly shames his neighbor is as though he shed his blood" (Baba Metzia 58b). The Gemara continues, "all who descend into Gehenna eventually leave. Except for one who publicly shames his neighbor."

This is quite remarkable. The ultimate punishment for embarrassing someone is worse than the punishment received for killing him! How is

this possible? Rabbeinu Yonah in his famous work explains that the pain of shame is even worse than death itself (Shaarei Teshuva 3:139). The reason is quite obvious. When one kills someone the pain caused, while severe, is temporal. In contrast, when one suffers a deep humiliation the pain is replayed in their mind constantly and endured for a lifetime. This, in effect, causes a much greater emotional trauma to the victim than the pain of non-existence and therefore merits a much greater punishment.

This fact is demonstrated as Yaakov was so pained by the fact that he was penniless and had nothing to offer as a gift to his future wife that he cried. Clearly, Elifaz felt that Eisav would be satisfied with the continuous humiliation of Yaakov.

Family Matters

And Yaakov said to his brethren "gather stones" (Bereishis 31:46).

Rashi (ad loc) comments, "this refers to his sons who were as brothers to him, standing by him in his troubles and wars." Rashi's explanation seems a little difficult to understand; if the Torah meant to say his sons why are they referred to as "his brothers"?

Rashi is highlighting how Yaakov interacted with his children. Often parents treat their adolescent children as employees they can order around – and that's on a good day. On a bad day, they tend to treat them as indentured servants ("take out the garbage!" or "get me a beer!" etc.). Rashi is telling us that Yaakov Avinu treated his adolescent children as one would treat siblings: in other words, as equals. This is what spurred them to stand by him during his troubles and throughout wars. It's no wonder then that Yaakov's legacy was considered complete (see Rashi 35:22) and all of his children were righteous. This also explains Rashi's comment in Parshas Vayechi (49:24) on the words "even Yisroel" – foundation of Israel. There Rashi says that the word "even" is a contraction of the words "av" and "bonim" – "father and sons." In other words, the foundation of the Jewish people is built on the strength of the relationship between Yaakov and his children; that of a healthy relationship between a father and his sons.

לע"נ

יוחנן בן יعقوבייל יודה ע"ה
שרה משא בת ר' עקיבא אליעזר ע"ה
ביהילא בת (אריה) ליב ע"ה
אנא מלכה בת ישראל

Parshat Vayeitzei: Measure for Measure

by Rabbi Eitan Mayer

INTRODUCTION AND QUESTIONS:

As Parashat VaYetze opens, Ya'akov Avinu flees his murder-minded brother Eisav. The parasha splits neatly into three units, as Abravanel points out:

- 1) Ya'akov's flight from Cana'an (home) and arrival in Haran, Lavan's abode.
- 2) The growth of Ya'akov's family and flock in Lavan's household.
- 3) Ya'akov's flight from Haran (and Lavan) back to Cana'an.

We will focus primarily on the interactions of Ya'akov and Lavan throughout the parasha. Our main assumptions and main questions will be the following:

The Ya'akov we left at the end of Parashat Toledot was a person who came off significantly better than his brother Eisav, but who still displayed characteristics which left us wondering about his style in dealing with challenges. In particular, we were left wondering about his honesty and straightforwardness. But as we follow him through the events of Parashat VaYetze and VaYishlah, we will be able to watch as he overcomes his earlier personal obstacles and exhibits characteristics truly worthy of emulation.

As readers of the Torah, we are not patronizingly observing Ya'akov as he mends his ways; we should be joining him in this odyssey, and, I would suggest, may need to learn these lessons more than he.

QUESTIONS:

- 1) What events take place in this parasha which shape Ya'akov's character?
- 2) Clearly, Ya'akov flees home to escape from his brother Eisav. But from a "divine plan" perspective, why has Ya'akov been sent to Haran, to his Uncle Lavan's house? What is he there to learn? And how can Lavan, his unscrupulous uncle, be the right kind of teacher to teach Ya'akov what he needs to learn?
- 3) Are there any signs that Ya'akov has changed? What events of the parasha indicate a change in the way Ya'akov deals with challenges?
- 4) Remember that VaYetze is a bridge between Toledot, where the Ya'akov-Eisav saga begins, and VaYishlah, where that saga concludes. That means that we should be looking for signs of transition and change, but not necessarily for decisive, dramatic events; decisive events usually come at conclusions, and, as mentioned, the conclusion comes only next week.

PARASHAT VAYETZE:

Parashat VaYetze begins with Ya'akov journeying from home -- Be'er Sheva -- to the house of Uncle Lavan in Haran. Ostensibly, he is headed for Haran to accomplish two goals: one, to escape the murderous wrath of his brother Eisav, from whom he has usurped the blessings of the firstborn, and two, to find a wife among the daughters of Lavan. But as we will see, he must also go to Haran in order to spend twenty years under the careful tutelage of Lavan; Ya'akov has a lot to learn from his uncle, the grand-daddy of all swindlers.

Before we take a careful look at the interactions between Ya'akov and Lavan in the parasha, we should just take note of a few interesting patterns. These patterns deserve more development than we will give them, but we leave that for another time.

JUST LIKE GRANDDAD:

The first pattern is a reversal of something we've seen before: Ya'akov leaves Cana'an, the future Land of Israel, heading for an uncertain future in unfamiliar territory. Avraham, his grandfather, faced the same situation as he *entered* Cana'an in obedience to Hashem's command. Both grandfather and grandson leave their homeland and birthplace; both grandfather and grandson receive a blessing from Hashem at this uncertain time. Note the great similarity of the two blessings:

TO AVRAHAM:

BERESHIT 12:2-3 -- "I shall make you a great nation, and bless you, and make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and curse those who curse you, and ALL THE NATIONS OF THE LAND SHALL BE BLESSED THROUGH YOU . . ." (14-15) Hashem said to Avram, after Lot had departed from him, "Raise your eyes and look, from the place you are, TO THE NORTH, SOUTH, EAST, AND WEST, for all the land you see, I SHALL GIVE IT TO YOU AND YOUR CHILDREN FOREVER. I SHALL MAKE YOUR CHILDREN LIKE THE DUST OF THE EARTH . . ."

TO YA'AKOV:

BERESHIT 28:12-14 -- He dreamed: there was a ladder standing on the ground, with its head reaching the heavens, and angels of Hashem ascending and descending it. Hashem stood upon it, and said, "I am Hashem, Lord of Avraham, your father, and Lord of Yitzhak. The land you are lying upon -- I SHALL GIVE IT TO YOU AND YOUR CHILDREN. YOUR CHILDREN SHALL BE LIKE THE DUST OF THE EARTH, and you shall burst forth TO THE WEST, EAST, NORTH, AND SOUTH; THROUGH YOU, ALL THE NATIONS OF THE LAND SHALL BE BLESSED, AND THROUGH YOUR CHILDREN."

Ya'akov's return journey to Cana'an at the end of the parasha also echoes the journey of his grandfather to Cana'an:

TO AVRAHAM:

BERESHIT 12:1 -- Hashem said to Avram, "Go FROM YOUR LAND, your BIRTHPLACE, your FATHER'S house, to the land I will show you."

TO YA'AKOV:

BERESHIT 31:3 -- Hashem said to Ya'akov, "Return to the LAND OF YOUR FATHERS, to your BIRTHPLACE, and I shall be with you."

Ya'akov has come full circle by the end of the parasha, both paralleling and reversing patterns of his grandfather's life. In leaving home, Avraham journeys from Aram to Cana'an, while Ya'akov, in leaving home, journeys from Cana'an to Aram. Leaving his life behind and moving to Cana'an is what enables Avraham to achieve his personal religious mission. In some parallel way -- as we will see -- leaving his life behind and moving to Aram is what enables Ya'akov to achieve his own personal religious mission.

LAVAN -- MESSENGER OF HASHEM?

What does Ya'akov gain from living in Lavan's household for twenty years? At first, from a cursory reading of the latter part of the parasha, the answer seems obvious: lots of sheep! Using his cleverness, he makes himself rich by shepherding Lavan's flock of sheep and reserving certain types of animals for himself. But in terms of his personal religious and moral development, what has he gained over this period?

Not long after Ya'akov's arrival in Haran, Lavan generously offers to pay him for his services as a shepherd. Uncle and nephew arrange that Ya'akov will work for Lavan for seven years to earn the hand of Lavan's beautiful younger daughter, Rahel. The seven years pass like days for the eager Ya'akov, but Lavan has a surprise waiting for Ya'akov at the 'altar':

BERESHIT 29:22-27 --

Lavan gathered all the local people and made a party. In the evening, he took Le'ah, his daughter, and brought her to him [Ya'akov], and he came to her . . . In the morning, there was Le'ah! He said to Lavan, "What is this that you have done to me? Was it not for Rahel that I worked for you? Why have you deceived me?!" Lavan said, "It is not done, here, to place the younger before the older. Finish out this week, and the other one [Rahel] will be given to you also for work that you do for me, for another seven years."

Lavan paints the episode as a misunderstanding. He had "assumed" that Ya'akov had understood that the elder daughter had to be married off first, and that Ya'akov had known that the woman he had married the night before had been Le'ah. How could anyone have thought otherwise? Of course, Rahel as well can be Ya'akov's if he wants her -- but only for the going rate: seven more years! Lavan, of course, knows blessed hands when he sees them, and he sees them on Ya'akov, as he himself notes later on in the parasha. He will do whatever is necessary to keep his nephew working for him and making him rich.

But Lavan's language is a bit more pointed than this. He stresses that it is not done "HERE" to place the younger before the older. Lavan may not consciously intend to imply that there *is* a place where the younger *is* put before the older, but his language cannot fail to remind Ya'akov (and us) of the events of the previous parasha, when Ya'akov placed himself, the younger, before Eisav, the older. Lavan may be aware of this misdeed (the Torah tells us that upon his arrival, Ya'akov informs Lavan of "all these matters"), and reminds Ya'akov of it in order to silence him. But his motivation in deceiving Ya'akov is not to avenge the wrong done to Yitzhak and Eisav (the picture of Lavan as righteous avenger being somewhat improbable in view of his character and his activities in our parasha!), it is to make sure that Ya'akov stays on as his right hand man. The bigger picture, however, and the one which must appear before Ya'akov's eyes at this time, is that he has just received his wages, 'mida ke-neged mida,' measure for measure. He is being punished for his deceit, for usurping the blessings from his older brother.

YA'AKOV GROWS:

Being on the receiving end of a deception of this proportion is a learning experience for Ya'akov. Not only has justice been served in a retributive sense, but Ya'akov, in his bitterness at what has been done to him, also begins to appreciate the bitterness of Eisav's cry upon discovering that his blessings have been taken. As the sunrise stuns him with the revelation that the woman with whom he has shared intimacy is Le'ah and not the beloved Rahel, he begins to understand the "harada gedola ad me'od," the great trembling fear, which gripped Yitzhak when he realized he had been duped and blessed the wrong son. One of the reasons Ya'akov has been delivered by divine plan into Lavan's custody is so that he can appreciate what it means to be the victim of a swindle. And one of the reasons Ya'akov is silent, that he accepts Lavan's terms, is because he realizes that Lavan has been the vehicle to deliver his punishment and teach him a lesson.

This is not a just a slap on the wrist. Lavan's deceit all but guarantees that Ya'akov will never be happy in marriage. He can either agree to work another seven years in order to marry Rahel -- in which case he can be sure that the two sisters will fill his life with conflict and jealousy in their competition for affection and fertility -- or he can abandon his love for Rahel and remain with Le'ah alone, frustrated with unrequited love for Rahel and bitter with lifelong resentment for the wife who married him in deceit. Ya'akov chooses to marry Rahel as well as Le'ah, and the center stage of the parasha is held by Le'ah's despair of ever earning her husband's love and by the jealousy and strife which erupts between the sisters over Ya'akov's affection and over fertility. The Torah is telling us that Ya'akov pays dearly for the blessings he stole.

SIBLING RIVALRY -- LEAH:

BERESHIT 30:30-31--

... And he [Ya'akov] loved Rahel more than Le'ah . . . Hashem saw that Le'ah was despised, and opened her womb, but Rahel was barren.

Rahel is better loved, so Hashem "evens the score" by granting fertility to Leah and not to Rahel. This inequity makes no one happy, as the Torah goes on to report:

BERESHIT 30:32-35 --

Le'ah conceived and bore a son. She called him Re'uven [= "see, a son!"], because she said, "For Hashem has seen my suffering, for now my husband will love me." She conceived again and bore a son. She said, "For Hashem heard ["shama"] that I am despised, and gave me also this one", and she called his name Shimon ["listen"]. She conceived again and bore a son. She said, "Now -- this time -- my husband will be drawn ["laveh"] to me, because I have borne to him three sons!", so she called his name Leivi ["drawn to me"]. She conceived again and bore a son. She said, "This time, I will praise ["odeh"] Hashem," so she called his name Yehuda ["praise God"], and she bore no more.

Ya'akov is unmoved by Le'ah's remarkable fertility, despite her continued success at producing sons, certainly the preferred flavor of child in those times. The Torah traces Leah's hopes for Ya'akov's affection as they wax through the births of the first three sons and then wane with the birth of the fourth son and Le'ah's realization that Ya'akov will not love her for her fertility:

Name Meaning

RE'UVEIN ---> "Look! A son!"

SHIMON ---> "Listen!"

LEIVI ---> "Come to me!"

YEHUDA ---> "Praised be Hashem" (Le'ah has given up).

Le'ah can communicate with her husband only through the names of her sons because children are the only path she can imagine to her husband's affection; she knows that she alone can never attract Ya'akov, for, as the Midrash Tanhuma richly illustrates, Le'ah reminds Ya'akov of himself: just as Ya'akov executes the plan masterminded by his mother to fool his father, so Le'ah executes the plan conceived by her father to fool Ya'akov. Le'ah will always remind Ya'akov of his own guilt. Desperately, she tries to open the lines of communication by naming her sons as cries to her husband for love and attention, but by the fourth son, she senses her failure and thanks Hashem through the final name for at least giving her the chance to communicate with Ya'akov.

[In the Midrash Tanhuma, Le'ah responds to Ya'akov's accusation of deception by reminding him of his own deception of his father; Ya'akov in turn begins to hate her; and Hashem gives Le'ah children to help her attract Ya'akov's love.]

SIBLING RIVALRY -- RAHEL:

Rahel is not comforted to see that Le'ah's fertility has earned her no grace in Ya'akov's eyes. She counts four sons to Le'ah's credit, which is four more than she can claim. She, too, becomes desperate:

BERESHIT 30:1-2 --

Rahel saw that she had not borne to Ya'akov, and she envied her sister. She said to Ya'akov, "Give me children . . . if not, I am dead!" Ya'akov became angry at her and said, "Am I in Hashem's place, Who has denied to you fruit of the womb?"

Barrenness would be a catastrophe under any circumstance; the fact that Rahel measures herself against another wife, and the fact that his wife is her sister, makes her struggle even more desperate. But, as Hazal point out, Ya'akov has no sympathy for her melodramatic outburst, although she is the wife he loves best.

Rahel gives her maid to Ya'akov as a wife in hopes of achieving fertility vicariously; when she does, she names her children to reflect her struggle, and in particular, her struggle with her sister ("I have struggled ["niftalti"] with my sister, and won!"). Le'ah responds by giving her own maid to Ya'akov, and the names of the children she bears reflect her rekindled effort to attract Ya'akov's attention by having children.

FERTILITY DRUGS?

Rahel and Le'ah clash once again over the duda'im, the mandrakes, which Le'ah's son Re'uvein finds in the fields and gives to his mother. Presumably, Rahel believes in their power as a fertility drug, so she asks Le'ah for some. Le'ah explodes in frustration: "Is it a small matter that you have taken my husband, that you now want to take my son's mandrakes as well?" Read, "You already have the love of the husband whom I want so much to love me, and now you want my help in having children so you can prevail in that category as well?!"

Le'ah eventually agrees to sell the mandrakes to Rahel for the privilege of having a night with Ya'akov, and when Ya'akov returns from a day in the fields, she informs him frankly that she has "hired him" ["sekhor sekhartikha"] for the night with her mandrakes. The Torah does not tell us how Ya'akov reacts to this information, but there must be something unpleasant about being informed by your wives that they consider sexual intimacy with you something that can be traded. Le'ah's role in this scene is most prominent, as she purposefully meets Ya'akov as he comes from the fields and lays claim to him for the night: "You will come to me, because I have 'hired you' with my son's mandrakes."

There may be a hint of an echo in this scene to the sale of the birthright, which Ya'akov bought from Eisav for a bowl of soup. The Torah there characterizes Eisav's attitude as "va-yivez Eisav et ha-behora" -- "Eisav treated the birthright with contempt." Perhaps Ya'akov is being punished for manipulating the impulsive, foresightless Eisav into treating the birthright with contempt by being treated with contempt himself.

Once Rahel has achieved fertility through the birth of Yosef, some stability comes to the household, and Ya'akov turns to the business of getting rich. He offers Lavan a deal too good to be true -- and it is -- and proceeds to build his flocks out of the flocks of Lavan.

A FASCINATING SIDE POINT:

Ya'akov agrees with Lavan that as payment for tending Lavan's flocks, Ya'akov will keep all spotted, speckled and striped sheep produced by the flock. In order to minimize the number of sheep Ya'akov will receive, Lavan removes all of the spotted, speckled and striped sheep from the flock and sets them aside, so that even if they produce offspring like themselves, Ya'akov will not receive them since they are not part of the flocks he is tending. The Torah then describes how Ya'akov cleverly influences the genes of fetuses of the pregnant sheep by placing spotted and speckled objects in front of the sheep as they drink water from their troughs: this tactic changes the fetuses of the sheep, it seems, from plain brown or white to spotted, speckled, and striped. The result: Ya'akov walks away rich, as almost all of the sheep bear animals with the markings favorable to him.

Of course, it is generally understood nowadays that looking at things during pregnancy does not affect the characteristics of the fetus. So how was Ya'akov's strategy effective? Was it a miracle? From the way the Torah presents Ya'akov's activities, it certainly doesn't sound like it. In an article in Tradition (1966, vol. 7, p. 5), Dr. William Etkin, a biologist, offered the following novel interpretation.

Later on in the story, Ya'akov describes to his wives that an angel had visited him in a dream and shown him that all of the females of Lavan's flocks had **already** been impregnated by speckled and spotted male animals -- meaning that they would produce spotted, speckled and striped offspring. Although Lavan had removed the spotted and speckled sheep from the flock to make sure Ya'akov earned little, Hashem foiled his plan by having those sheep impregnate the females before Lavan separated them off from the flock. The angel had told Ya'akov that Hashem had done this because He had seen how Lavan had mistreated Ya'akov.

Etkin suggests that this vision was a divine revelation that all of the female sheep had **already** been impregnated by speckled and spotted sheep, and it hinted to Ya'akov to suggest the "speckled and spotted" plan to Lavan as his wage plan. Lavan, of course, had no idea that the animals had already mated with the speckled and spotted males, thought Ya'akov's plan ridiculous, and promptly removed all the speckled and spotted adult animals so that no further speckled and spotted animals would be produced from the flocks under Ya'akov's care. All of Ya'akov's shenanigans with peeled sticks and his other machinations to get the animals to view certain patterns of colors and shapes were only to fool Lavan and his suspicious sons, who believed (along with most other folks at the time) that viewing patterns could affect heredity. They would have been doubly suspicious if Ya'akov had not gone through these motions, and would have assumed that Ya'akov had simply stolen the spotted and speckled animals from their private store of spotted and speckled sheep.

STEALTHY THEFT:

Ya'akov continues his pattern of avoiding facing challenges directly as the parasha draws to its dramatic close. Stealing away stealthily, he and his family run away without telling Lavan they are going. He has good reasons: Lavan and his sons have become openly resentful of his growing wealth at their expense, and Hashem has commanded Ya'akov to leave Haran and return to Cana'an. Once he has become rich, he calls a conference with his wives and tells them his plans and these reasons. Normally, biblical men do not consult their wives on decisions, but since Ya'akov is planning to sneak away, he needs everyone's agreement and cooperation. Ya'akov reveals here that Lavan has been trying to cheat him for the last six years as he builds up his own flock, and that Hashem has stood behind him and foiled Lavan's schemes. But the Torah also communicates clearly that sneaking away is the wrong way to end this relationship:

BERESHIT 31:20-23 --

Ya'akov STOLE the heart of Lavan the Aramean by not telling him that he was RUNNING AWAY. He RAN AWAY with all that was his; he arose and crossed the river, and turned toward Mount Gilead. It was told to Lavan on the third day that Ya'akov had RUN AWAY. He took his brothers with him and chased after him

As far as the Torah is concerned, Ya'akov's pattern of theft continues with this flight. He stole the birthright from Eisav, stole the blessings from Yitzhak and Eisav, stole away from Be'er Sheva to avoid Eisav, and now he steals away again. The word "bore'ah" (bet, reish, het) is given special prominence here in order to remind us of an earlier "bore'ah" -- when he fled from Cana'an to Aram. Just as he ran then from Eisav instead of facing him and seeking a resolution, so he now runs from Lavan instead of facing him and taking leave in a proper -- although more risky -- fashion. Taking leave in the normal fashion is risky because Lavan is capable of feats of deceit that Ya'akov knows he may not be able to anticipate and control. Rather than take this risk, he bolts.

CONFRONTATION AND TRANSFORMATION:

Finally, after three days of pursuit, Lavan and his men confront Ya'akov. Lavan delivers an angry speech, accusing Ya'akov of two different thefts:

BERESHIT 31:26-30 --

Lavan said to Ya'akov, "What have you done? You have *stolen* my heart! You have treated my daughters like captives of the sword! Why did you sneak to run away, *stealing* me and not telling me -- I would have sent you off with gladness and songs, with timbrel and lyre! You did not allow me to kiss my sons and daughters -- indeed, you have done foolishly! I have the power to do evil to you, but the God of your fathers said to me last night, 'Take care not to speak to Ya'akov, whether good to bad.' Now you have gone, because you wanted so much to go to your father's house -- but why have you *stolen* my gods?"

Ya'akov trades an accusation of theft for an accusation of theft, responding that he ran away because he was afraid that Lavan would *steal* his daughters away. Indeed, Lavan's past dishonesty on the issue of his daughters supports Ya'akov's accusation. On the question of Lavan's stolen gods, Ya'akov is certain that Lavan has made this up and that no one from his camp has stolen them -- otherwise Ya'akov would never have pronounced a death sentence on the thief. Ya'akov invites Lavan to search his belongings.

Lavan accepts the invitation, but as he searches, Ya'akov, who is sure that this is all a charade, an excuse for Lavan to sift through his belongings, gets angrier and angrier. Finally, he explodes, and in this explosion, through the ensuing confrontation, "Ya'akov" begins to rise to "Yisrael":

BERESHIT 31:36-42 --

Ya'akov became enraged, and he fought with Lavan. Ya'akov began and said to Lavan, "What is my crime, what is my sin, that you have chased like a fire after me? You have felt through all of my possessions -- what have you found that belongs to you? Place it here, before my brothers and your brothers, and they will judge between us! For twenty years I have been with you: your sheep and goats never lost child; I never ate your rams. I never brought you a torn animal -- I took responsibility for it myself when you sought it of me, whether stolen from me during the day or night. During the day drought consumed me, and frost at night, and sleep evaded my eyes. It is now twenty years that I am in your house; I worked for you fourteen years for your two daughters and six years for your sheep, and you switched my wages ten times! If not for the God of my fathers -- God of Avraham and Awe of Yitzhak -- Who was with me, you would have sent me out empty-handed! My suffering and my hard labor did Hashem see, and chastised [you] last night!"

Ya'akov never really believed that someone from his camp had stolen Lavan's gods, but he contained himself because of the chance that someone had taken them without his knowledge. But now that Lavan has searched everywhere and found nothing, Ya'akov's fury bursts forth. Since the accusation about the gods was obviously false, Ya'akov demands to know why Lavan has pursued him. Moreover, the accusation of theft and dishonesty stings Ya'akov painfully, as his twenty years of meticulous honesty in tending Lavan's sheep are rewarded with an accusation of theft. Twenty years of frustration pour out of Ya'akov, and we -- and Lavan -- learn for the first time just how seriously he has taken his responsibilities as shepherd. He has been scrupulously honest, going further than legally necessary, paying out of his own pocket for sheep destroyed by predators or stolen by thieves. He has suffered physically as well, exposed to the elements and deprived of rest. And Lavan can accuse him of theft!

The secret tragedy which makes us cringe as we hear Ya'akov pronounce a death sentence is that Rahel has indeed stolen Lavan's gods. But the situation provides Ya'akov with an opportunity for growth. Finally, instead of running from the

challenge or attempting to avoid it with cleverness, Ya'akov takes Lavan on directly and indignantly. This is the first visible step in Ya'akov's growth to "Yisrael," a process which will become much more explicit and reach completion in Parashat VaYishlah. He ran away to avoid Lavan, and even this confrontation itself was initiated by Lavan, not Ya'akov, but now that it is before him, he addresses it as the "ish yode'a tsayyid," the hunting man, who channels his aggression into constructive paths, actively pursues his goals, and confronts his enemies and challenges. Ya'akov is aggressive and direct, no longer cunning, subtle and clever. And Lavan, surprised, blusters, boasts, but backs down:

BERESHIT 31:43-32:1 --

Lavan answered and said to Ya'akov, "The daughters are my daughters, the sons my sons, the sheep my sheep, and everything you see is mine. As for my daughters, what can I do to them now, or to the children they have borne? Now, let us make a covenant, me and you, and it shall be a witness between us. If you afflict my daughters, or if you take more wives in addition to them, no one will be there [to see], but know that Hashem is witness between me and you . . . I will not pass this pile, and you will not pass this pile or this altar, for evil" Lavan awoke in the morning, kissed his sons and daughters and blessed them, and went and returned to his place.

Lavan has no response to Ya'akov's outburst because he knows Ya'akov has dealt with his sheep honestly and self-sacrificingly. And he is convinced that Ya'akov has not stolen his gods. But he cannot explicitly apologize, so he blusters, claiming that everything that is Ya'akov's is really his, that he is letting Ya'akov keep these things out of generosity, insisting that he means no evil toward his daughters or grandchildren. Lavan realizes how foolish he looks accusing Ya'akov of theft and dishonesty, so he must shift the focus: he demands that they make a covenant. Suddenly Lavan, who is more responsible than anyone else for the fact that both of his daughters have married the same man, has developed great concern for their welfare and wants a guarantee that Ya'akov will not mistreat them! This is surely disingenuous, as Rahel and Le'ah testify earlier that their father has 'sold them away,' that they are estranged from him, and that he intends to give them nothing of his estate. But Lavan must save face, so he pretends that his real mission is to extract a guarantee from Ya'akov to treat his daughters fairly. And for good measure, he adds a phrase about his and Ya'akov's not harming each other. But Ya'akov has won, and Lavan goes home without his gods, without his daughters, and without his sheep.

At the very end of the parasha, as at the very beginning, Ya'akov has a vision of angels. And just as then, they come at a time of uncertainty for him, as he struggles to redefine himself and prepares to face his brother, Eisav. Next week we will accompany Ya'akov as he confronts Eisav and transforms himself into Yisrael.

Shabbat Shalom

Parshas Vayeitzei: Yaakov's Vow

By Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

I. THE DREAM AND THE RESPONSE

At the beginning of our Parashah, we are told of Ya'akov's famous "ladder" dream at Beit-El, wherein God promises that he will give him the Land, many descendants, that he will be a blessing to all of humanity - and that He will protect and guard Ya'akov on his journey to Haran until he returns to the Land and realizes the fulfillment of all of these promises.

When Ya'akov awoke (the second time - look carefully at B'resheet 28:16-18) in the morning, he consecrated an altar and made the following vow:

"If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear and I come again to my father's house in peace; Hashem will be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, will be God's house; and of all that You give me I will surely give one tenth to You." (Beresheet 28:20-22)

There are three difficulties inherent in this statement - and one which is external to it:

II. ANALYZING THE TEXT: FIVE QUESTIONS

PROBLEM #1: "NEDER AL T'NAI"

The conditional vow -*neder al t'ani* is odd for several reasons:

- a) If the condition (God watching over Ya'akov) is a mirror of God's promise to him in the dream, why is Ya'akov phrasing it conditionally - "if God will be with me..." - isn't he fully confident that God will fulfill His promise?
- b) On the other hand, if Ya'akov's condition is somehow different than God's promise - why is Ya'akov "setting the terms" for God? Isn't that inappropriate?
- c) In any case, the condition seems unnecessary - if God doesn't help Ya'akov return to the Land, he won't be in a position to fulfill his vow. Ya'akov could have made an unconditional vow - and then, if God saw him safely back to the Land, he would fulfill it. If not, he would either be "stuck" outside of the Land, or dead; in either case absolved of his vow.

Ramban (v. 20) suggests that the conditional word *im* ("if") is sometimes used (as in God's own words to Ya'akov in the dream - v. 15 - see also Sh'mot 22:24) as "when". Here too, he suggests that Ya'akov is not making a conditional vow, rather a "delayed" vow -*neder l'achar z'man* - meaning, WHEN these things (which God has promised and which I am confident will come to pass) happen, I will... Although there are other examples of this usage, it is not the simplest way to read the text.

PROBLEM #2: HOW MUCH IS "VOW"?

In Ya'akov's statement, where does the condition end and where does the vow begin? The biggest question relates to the phrase "Hashem will be my God" - is this the end of the condition (as Sa'adiah, Rashi, Rashbam and Hizkuni understand) or is it the beginning of the vow/commitment (Radak, Ramban)? Either reading is difficult, as follows:

- a) If it is the end of the condition, how should it be understood? What must God do to "fulfill" His end of the bargain? If it means that God should be "with" Ya'akov (whatever that may mean - see Yehoshua [Joshua] 3:7), isn't this a restatement of the first phrase in the condition?
- b) If it is the beginning of the vow/commitment, what does it mean? What is Ya'akov committing to do in this phrase?

PROBLEM #3: MA'ASER

The final phrase of the vow seems a bit odd - after committing to have a special relationship with God, including (apparently) to worship Him at this spot, the climax of his statement - "...and of all that You give me I will surely give one

tenth to You" seems incongruous. What is the import of this commitment?

There is one external difficulty:

PROBLEM #4: WHEN IS THE VOW FULFILLED?

Why was Ya'akov never "called" on this vow? Even though he returned to the Land, he didn't go directly to Beit-El for worship. Indeed, Rashi explains God's beckoning of Ya'akov to return to the Land: " '...I am the God of Beit - El, where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to me. Now leave this land at once and return to the land of your birth. ' " (31:13), in this light: " 'and made a vow to me:' - and now you must fulfill it" (Rashi ibid. - see also Ramban ibid). Rashi even sees Ya'akov's delay in fulfilling his vow as the cause for the Dina tragedy (see Rashi 35:1). In spite of this approach, there is no mention in the text of any failing on Ya'akov's part regarding his obvious delay in returning to Beit-El.

Examining one further difficulty in the text will help us understand Ya'akov's vow:

PROBLEM #5: "TOLEH B'DA'AT AHERIM"

In the penultimate phrase, Ya'akov states: "...and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, will be God's house...". Although the commentaries understand some form of commitment on Ya'akov's part (e.g. to construct a sanctuary there [Radak], to worship there [Rashi]), the text is enigmatic. The simplest reading of this phrase is that this place (Beit-El) will be a house of God - but that is, of course, something which is out of Ya'akov's control. Whether the world recognizes the special nature of that location and, as a result, comes there to worship, is not something Ya'akov can guarantee - at best, he can endeavor to publicize the place and hope to attract worshippers. How can this be a vow, considering that its fulfillment is dependent on others (*toleh b'da'at acherim*)?

Returning to an earlier question, what is the significance of the commitment to tithe (the last clause of Ya'akov's vow)?

III. YITZCHAK'S FINAL BLESSING TO YA'AKOV: BE LIKE AVRAHAM

Just before leaving his parents (and experiencing the vision which led to this vow), Ya'akov received one last blessing from his father - and this one was given with full knowledge of the recipient:

"...May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and numerous, that you may become a company of peoples. May He give to you the blessing of Avraham, to you and to your offspring with you, so that you may take possession of the land where you now live as an alien, [the land] that God gave to Avraham." (28:3-4)

Ya'akov was blessed that he should be like his paternal grandfather, Avraham. One of the central features of Avraham's greatness was the recognition on the part of the people around him - including kings - of his special relationship with God. And that is exactly where tithing comes into the picture.

The one explicit instance of tithing found before Ya'akov was that of Avraham (Bereshit 14:17-20). Subsequent to his defeat of the four mighty kings, Avraham encountered the king of S'dom in the presence of MalkiZedeck , a "priest of the Most High God". MalkiZedeck blessed him and verbally affirmed Avraham's special relationship with God (as evidenced by his military and political power). In response, Avraham gave MalkiZedeck a tenth of his goods. This was, then, the proper reaction to public recognition of one's special relationship with God. Whereas pagan belief held that a person might be favored by the gods as a matter of fate or caprice, the approach of the Torah - which is consistently stressed and repeated - is that God's selection of an individual for blessing is a direct result of that person's saintly behavior (see e.g. Bereshit 6:9 and 18:18-19). Once someone is publicly recognized as being blessed by God, it is a supreme act of responsibility toward achieving the goal of publicizing God's Name (the Avrahamic mission) to demonstrate that His favors are bestowed upon the righteous. By titheing at that point, the righteous person shows that his special relationship with God is justified - and is accessible to others. Ya'akov knew that when he would be recognized by leaders as having a special relationship with God - that would be the point at which he would tithe.

IV. REEVALUATING THE VOW

Now, let's look at the vow again and divide it a bit differently:

"If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear and I come again to my father's house in peace; Hashem will be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, will be God's house; THEN all that You give me I will surely give one tenth to You."

Ya'akov is vowing that when the rest of the world recognizes his special relationship with God ("Hashem will be my God"), he will give tithes, as did his grandfather when he was recognized as being blessed by God. This recognition would come to pass, in Ya'akov's case, by God protecting and sustaining him in exile and bringing him back home. There is, however, more to the story. Once Ya'akov becomes recognized by leaders and their people as blessed by God, it follows that any site where he worshipped would become a place of prayer and worship for others. After all, imagine how we would flock to the original Luz/Beit-El if we could unqualifiedly identify the location of Ya'akov's dream - and none of us ever met Ya'akov in the flesh! How much more so would someone who saw Ya'akov and recognized his special qualities want to go back to that pillar and worship there. Ya'akov is stipulating that even if God protects him, it will only be of value to the rest of the world once they recognize this and act upon that recognition.

At that point, his tithing will make the necessary statement of commitment to all of those values which it is his job to publicize - because his position will afford him that opportunity.

We can now answer all of our questions:

- 1) Ya'akov's condition is not merely a mirror of God's promise - it takes the promise one step further. If God's protection leads to Ya'akov's public recognition as a recipient of God's blessing, then he will demonstrate the propriety of that selection by tithing.
- 2) The "condition" ends before the last phrase. The only commitment is found in the final phrase - to tithe.
- 3) The commitment to tithe is not so incongruous - since it is the only commitment made here. In addition, its significance is understood against the backdrop of Avraham's tithing to MalkiZedeck.
- 4) Ya'akov was never "called" on this vow because he never vowed to go back to Beit El (read Beresheet 31:13 and 35:1 carefully) - rather, to tithe.
- 5) Beit-El becoming a place of worship was not the commitment - it was the final condition which would commit Ya'akov to follow Avraham's model and to give a tenth of everything with which God blessed him.

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PARSHAT VAYETZE

Is it acceptable for one to doubt a divine promise?
 Certainly, if God makes a promise, we'd expect Him to keep it!
 Why then does Yaakov Avinu vow to worship God only **IF** (and when) God fulfills His promise to return him to the Promised Land? [See 28:20-22.]

Furthermore, why should Yaakov make a "neder" (vow) at all? After all, neither Avraham nor Yitzchak ever made any sort of conditional vow after receiving their divine promises!

Why is Yaakov's behavior different?
 In this week's shiur, as we study God's "hitgalut" (revelation) to Yaakov at Bet-El, we attempt to explain why.

INTRODUCTION

Our shiurim thus far in Sefer Breishit have discussed the 'bechira' process, i.e. how (and why) God chooses the Avot to become the forefathers of His special nation. We have shown how an additional element of this process unfolds with each time that God appeared (and spoke) to Avraham & Yitzchak.

Now, at the beginning of Parshat Vayetze, God's appears for the **first** time to Yaakov Avinu (see 28:10-17), promising him what sounds like the very same thing that He promised Avraham and Yitzchak. Nonetheless, Yaakov's reaction to this 'hitgalut' [revelation] differs drastically from that of his predecessors.

To understand why, we must first consider Yaakov's predicament **before** God appears to him at Bet-El.

SOMETHING TO LOSE SLEEP OVER

Recall from last week's shiur that the Avot themselves were not quite sure exactly WHEN or HOW this 'bechira' process would finally end. In Parshat Toldot it did become clear that the process would continue for at least one more generation: i.e. either Yaakov OR Esav would be chosen, but not both. Therefore, after the incident of the 'stolen blessing', Yitzchak blesses Yaakov that God should grant him with "birkat Avraham", i.e. he (to the exclusion of Esav) should become the chosen son (see 28:3-4).

Despite his father's blessing, Yaakov may have had ample reason to doubt this.

First of all, only the day before, his father had planned to give the primary blessing to his older brother Esav. Secondly, Yaakov's parents had just sent him AWAY from Eretz Canaan - to flee from Esav and look for a wife (see 27:43-28:2). Now if Yaakov is truly the chosen son, then it should be forbidden for him to leave Eretz Canaan, just as his father Yitzchak was prohibited to leave.

[Recall that during the famine, God did not allow Yitzchak to go down to Egypt (see 26:1-3). Likewise, when Yitzchak was getting married, Eliezer traveled to Padan Aram to bring Rivka back - Yitzchak himself was not allowed to go.]

Furthermore, when Yishmael and the children of Ketura were rejected from the 'bechira' process, they were sent away to the EAST (see 25:6). Now, Yaakov himself is being sent away to the EAST (see 29:1), while Esav, his rival brother, remains in Eretz Canaan!

Finally, even though his father had blessed him 'that God should chose him', nevertheless, Yaakov realizes that it is up to God alone to make that final decision, and not his father.

For all or any of these reasons, it is easy to understand why Yaakov may have needed some 'divine reassurance' before embarking on his journey to Padan Aram!

With these points in mind, we can begin our study of God's 'hitgalut' [revelation] to Yaakov at Bet-El to better appreciate the reason for his special reaction.

YAAKOV HAS A DREAM

As you review 28:10-15, note how Yaakov's dream begins with a vision [of God's angels ascending and descending a ladder /28:12] - followed by a direct message from God (28:13-15). Hence, we should expect for that divine message to relate to both that vision and Yaakov's current situation.

With this in consideration, let's discuss God's message to Yaakov - one pasuk at a time:

"I am the Lord, the God of Avraham and Yitzchak, the land upon which you are lying; I am giving to you and your offspring" (28:13)

As this is the first time that Hashem speaks to Yaakov, it may have made more sense for God to introduce Himself as the Creator of the Heavens & Earth? But there's a simple reason why he doesn't.

DIVINE IDENTIFICATION & 'BECHIRAH' CONFIRMATION

Even though God had never spoken to Yaakov directly, it would only be logical to assume that he was very aware of God's existence as well as the various promises He had made to his father and grandfather. [Note especially 17:7-12 and 18:19!] Therefore, when God now appears to him at Bet El, the very first thing God must do is 'identify' Himself in a manner that is meaningful to Yaakov - i.e. as the God of his fathers.

Then, God immediately informs Yaakov that he is indeed the 'chosen' son, using the almost identical wording that He had told Avraham:

"... the land ['aretz'] upon which you are lying I have given to you and your offspring ['zera']. And your offspring will be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread out [in all four directions]. and through you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed" (see 28:13-14).

Note the use of the key words - 'zera' (offspring) and 'aretz' (the Land). These are certainly typical of God's earlier blessings of 'bechira' to Avraham and Yitzchak (see 12:7, 13:15, 15:18, 17:8 & 26:3), and thus confirm Yaakov's 'bechira'. Note as well the key phrase emphasizing the purpose of God's nation - 'to be a blessing for other nations!

[The significance of the phrase 'afar ha-aretz' [dust of the earth] will be discussed in Part II of this week's shiur.]

DIVINE RE-ASSURANCE

While the first two psukim of this 'hitgalut' sound very familiar, the third and final pasuk introduces an entirely new element:

"And behold, I will be with you, and I will protect you wherever you go and bring you back to this Land..." (28:15).

This 'extra' promise clearly relates to our earlier discussion of Yaakov's questionable situation. God must allay his fears by assuring him that EVEN THOUGH he must now leave Eretz Canaan, He will remain with him, take care of his needs, and ultimately bring him back - BECAUSE he indeed is the 'chosen' son.

YAAKOV'S REACTION [and REALIZATION]

Upon awakening from this dream, Yaakov not only recognizes the uniqueness of this site, but also makes an interesting statement: "And Yaakov awoke and stated: 'Indeed God is in this place, but I did not know'. Then in awe he stated: 'This [site] is none other than a BET ELOKIM [a house of God], and this is the gate of heaven'" (28:16-17).

Yaakov's conclusion re: the uniqueness of this site is obviously based on the fact that He just appeared to him. Furthermore, his conclusion that "v'zeh sha'ar ha-shamayim" - this is the gateway to heaven - is clearly based on his vision of angels ascending and descending the ladder. However, this doesn't appear to be any obvious reason for Yaakov to conclude that this place is a 'bet Elokim' - a house of (or for) God! After all, there was nothing in his vision to suggest that he saw a 'house' of any sort.

The simplest answer would be to connect the two halves of Yaakov's statement. Namely, the very fact that this site is a 'gateway to heaven' renders it an appropriate place for a 'House of God'. However, Yaakov refers to the site first as 'Bet Elokim' and only afterward "sha'ar ha-shamayim". Furthermore, a careful reading of the pasuk shows that these two qualities stand on their own: "This is none other than Bet Elokim, AND this is sha'ar ha-shamayim." The fact that Yaakov divides his comment into two distinct sections suggests that he has reached two unrelated conclusions.

Did Yaakov see some sort of 'bet Elokim' in his dream, or is he 'predicting' that one day a 'bet Elokim' will be built here? At this point in the narrative, it remains difficult to reach any definite conclusion. However, a careful study of what Yaakov does next will clarify the deeper meaning of his statement.

"And Yaakov rose up early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put at his head, and set it up for a pillar [matzeyva], and poured oil upon the top of it.

Then he called the name of that place Bet-el [even though the original name of this city was Luz]." (28:18-19)

Why does Yaakov erect a "matzeyva", pour oil on it, and name this site Bet-el? In these actions, Yaakov is acting in a manner very different than is forefathers. Recall that after God had spoken to Avraham and Yitzchak, they both reacted by building a "mizbeyach" (an altar / see 12:7 & 26:24-25) - but neither Avraham nor Yitzchak ever put up a 'pillar'! Nor did Avraham or Yitzchak ever name cities in Israel!

As before, at this point in the narrative, it remains difficult to reach any definite conclusion concerning why Yaakov is doing so many different things. However, a careful study of what Yaakov does next will clarify the purpose of all of his actions.

YAAKOV'S NEDER

After taking these actions (in 28:18-19), Yaakov makes a vow. Note the wording of his promise and how he concludes his vow:

"And Yaakov then made a vow saying:

IF God remains with me and protects me... And I return safely to my father's house...

=> Then **this stone**, which I have set up as a **matzeyva**, will be a **bet Elokim - a House for God** - and from all that You give me I will set aside one-tenth" (see 28:20-22).

By following the 'if' & 'then' clauses of his vow, it becomes rather clear why Yaakov had set up this pillar (in 28:18) - it was simply in preparation for his vow that he plans to make (see 28:22), as that pillar will serve as the cornerstone of a House for God that Yaakov now promises to establish upon his return. To symbolically designate this site, his preparation (in 28:18-19) included anointing the pillar with oil; and as a statement of his intention - Yaakov names the site Bet-El - which basically means that this site will be a 'House for God'.

In other words, **all** of Yaakov's actions in 28:18-19 are in preparation for his vow.

Now we must return to our original question, i.e. what was it in Yaakov's dream that prompted him to make this 'neder' [vow]?

To answer this question, we must return to re-examine Yaakov's immediate reaction to his dream.

A PREDICTION - or A RESOLUTION!

Recall the difficulty that we encountered when trying to understand Yaakov's statement (after awakening from his dream) that 'this site is none other than the House of God' (in 28:17) - for there was nothing in his vision suggesting that he saw God's house, nor any obvious reason from him to predict its future existence at that site.

But now that we have seen Yaakov's ensuing 'neder' - his earlier statement of "ein ze ki im bet Elokim" (28:17) becomes most significant - for now we see that Yaakov was not making a prediction - rather he was stating his resolve!

In other words, Yaakov's reaction to his dream was not merely a statement of what he saw and felt, but rather a declaration of his

future intention - to build a House for God - and specifically at this site.

This now explains everything that Yaakov does after awakening from his vision.

- 1) He states his resolve to build a 'bet Elokim' at this site (based on what he saw /see 28:16-17), then:
- 2) He sets a 'marker' to remember this precise location (upon his return /see 28:18); then
- 3) He anoints that pillar with oil (see 28:18), symbolically designating its future purpose (compare Bamidbar 7:1 - noting how the Mishkan was also anointed with oil!); then:
- 4) He names the site 'Bet El', once again, reflecting his intention to return one day and build a House for God (28:19); and finally
- 5) Makes his vow to build this 'Bet Elokim' upon his successful return from Charan (see 28:20-22)

Even though we can now explain **what** Yaakov does, we still need an explanation for **why** he makes this resolution. In other words, we must try to figure out what was it that Yaakov saw (or heard) in that vision that prompted his sudden resolve to build a House for God. Secondly, we must also explain why Yaakov makes his resolution so 'conditional'.

To answer these questions, we must return once again to consider Yaakov's current predicament, in contrast to the lives of Avraham and Yitzchak.

WHY YAAKOV IS DIFFERENT

In the lives of Avraham and Yitzchak, being 'chosen' was much more than a 'one-way' relationship. After being told by God he was chosen, Avraham responded by building a "mizbeyach" and 'calling out in God's name' (see 12:6-8, 13:4).

Similarly, after God spoke to Yitzchak at Beer Sheva - re-iterating the blessing, he too built a "mizbeyach" and called out in God's Name.

This 'calling out in God's Name' - as Ramban explains - was how the Avot tried to 'make a name for God' by preaching his existence and by setting an example of the highest moral behavior (see Ramban on 12:8 and 26:5, see also Seforno on 26:5). This also foreshadowed the ultimate mission of God's special nation - acting as a model nation to make God's Name known to all mankind.

Certainly, we would expect Yaakov to act in a similar manner.

In fact, in this opening 'hitgalut' to Yaakov, in addition to the promise of 'zera v'aretz', God emphasizes the same key phrase: "...v'nivrachu b'cha - kol mishpachot ha'adama" - that through you (and your offspring) there will be a blessing to all nations - the same phrase that He had emphasized when He **first** spoke to both Avraham and Yitzchak! [To confirm this, see 12:2-3 and 26:3-4, and compare with 28:13-14!]

Furthermore, when God explains His purpose for choosing Avraham and his offspring (see 18:18-19), we find precisely this phrase emphasized:

"For Avraham will surely become a great nation [goy gadol] - compare 12:2) - **and through him all nations will be blessed**.

For I have known him in **order** [for the purpose] that he will command his children... and they will keep the way of God - to do 'tzedek u'mishpat' [justice and righteousness] - in order to [fulfill the purpose] of what God had spoken about Avraham [that he would become a great nation]" (see 18:18-19)

[See this phrase also in 22:18, after the Akeyda!]

God reiterates this point to each of the Avot, for the goal of "v'nivrechu becha kol mishpachot ha-adama" reflects the ultimate purpose of this bechira process.

In this sense, God's opening 'hitgalut' to Yaakov emphasizes not only his being the 'chosen son' [=bechira], but also its **purpose**.

Therefore, when Yaakov receives this blessing from God, he is immediately inspired to act in same manner as Yitzchak and Avraham. However, his present predicament does not allow him - for he is now running away (penniless) from his brother who wants to kill him! He **cannot** build a "mizbeyach" (he doesn't have anything to offer on it!); nor can he call out in God's Name (no one is around to listen!).

Nevertheless, because he understands the deeper meaning of his 'bechira' - he immediately states his absolute resolve that when he returns to Eretz Canaan, and achieves a status where he too can 'make a Name for God' - he too will attempt to accomplish this goal. In fact, he is so inspired that he plans to elevate 'calling out in God's Name' a step further - by establishing a 'House for God'!

[To see how a 'House for God' will make God's Name great, see Melachim Aleph 8:14-20, 8:40-42 & 10:1.]

WHY CONDITIONAL?

Now that we have explained both what Yaakov does, and why he does it, we are left with one last question - If Yaakov is so inspired to build this House for God, why does he make this promise 'conditional'? Let's first explain this question.

Recall that prefaces his promise to establish his 'matzeyva' as a 'Bet Elokim' with the condition: "If God will be with me, and take care of me, etc.". Why can't Yaakov simply state that he's going to do it - no matter what!

To answer this question, let's examine the 'conditions' of Yaakov's 'neder' - to determine their underlying reason.

"And Yaakov then made a vow saying:

- 1) IF God remains with me,
- 2) and He protects me on this journey, on which I embark,
- 3) and gives me bread to eat and clothes to wear.
- 4) And I return safely to my father's house,
- 5) and [or then?] Hashem will be my God.
- 6) And this stone, which I have set up as a monument, will be a Bet Elokim... (see 28:20-22).

IF OR WHEN

Even though it is unclear where precisely the IF clause ends and the THEN clause begins (see Related Topics section), the first four clauses are clearly all conditions, for they are almost identical to God's re-assurance to Yaakov that He will take care of his needs (during his stay in Charan) :

"And behold, I will be with you (1), and I will protect you wherever you go (2) and bring you back to this Land (4)..."

[See 28:15, see also Rashi on 28:20, where he 'matches' them up more precisely:]

As indeed these 'conditions' are simply a repeat of God's reassurances, then it could be that Yaakov may not be doubting God at all, nor setting any conditions! Rather, he is simply explaining why he has to wait - before he can build this 'Bet Elokim'.

Recall, that the word "im" in Hebrew can also mean 'when' (and not exclusively 'if' / see Rashi on Shmot 22:24).

In other words, Yaakov may simply be stating that: **WHEN** God fulfills His promises (in 28:15), then I will be in the position to build this Bet Elokim (and thus help 'make a Name for God').

Yaakov is not a 'doubter' - rather he's inspired to accomplish, but explains why he must wait until the 'time is right' before he can fulfill his stated goals.

You're probably asking - if so, why doesn't Yaakov actually build a Bet Elokim when he finally returns to Eretz Canaan? Well, that's not only a question for Parshat Vayishlach, that's what a good part of Parshat Va'yishlach is all about! And iy"h, that will be the topic of next week's shiur! Till then,

shabbat shalom,
menachem

Below - you'll find below some short discussions on additional topics relating to the above shiur

RELATED TOPICS

A. TWO PARTS OF YAAKOV'S NEDER A CONDITION OR A PROMISE?

Review 28:20-22 and take note of how the 'neder' divides into two parts:

- 1) a CONDITION - IF... ; followed by:

2) a PROMISE (i.e. the vow) - THEN...

It is unclear, however, where the IF clause ends and the THEN clause begins. Let's take a look:

"And Yaakov then made a vow saying:

- 1) IF God remains with me,
- 2) and He protects me on this journey, on which I embark,
- 3) and gives me bread to eat and clothes to wear.
- 4) And I return safely to my father's house,
- 5) and [or then?] Hashem will be my God.
- 6) And [or then?] this stone, which I have set up as a monument, will be a BET ELOKIM
- 7) and from all that You give me I will set aside one-tenth" (28:20-22).

The first four clauses are clearly part of the CONDITION, as they reflect precisely what God had just promised Yaakov in his dream several psukim earlier. [Compare with 28:15; see also Rashi.]

Similarly, the last two clauses clearly describe what Yaakov vows to do once the conditions are met. They describe Yaakov's promise to establish a Bet Elokim at this site upon his return from Charan and offer a tithe of his possessions.

However, the middle clause (5) - "and Hashem will be my God" - can go either way. Although it can refer to either a condition or promise, each option poses considerable difficulty. On the one hand, it doesn't appear to be a condition for two basic reasons:

- a) It does not reflect God's promise in 28:15 as do the other clauses.
- b) If this is indeed a condition, then it does not add anything to what Yaakov had already stated in his first clause - "If God will be with me".

On the other hand, it does not appear to be a vow, either. How could Yaakov possibly accept Hashem as his God only IF God fulfills His promises! Is Yaakov Avinu so 'spoiled' that he would accept God only if He is good to him?

The classical commentators tackle this question in their commentaries.

Rashi and Rashbam explain that it is indeed a CONDITION. Rashi brilliantly solves the first problem raised above [(a)] by explaining this phrase as a reference to God's earlier promise to Avraham at brit mila - "lihiyot lecha le-Elokim" (see 17:7-8).

Rashbam solves the second problem [(b)] by explaining this clause simply as a summary (or generalization) of the first three clauses.

On the other hand, Ramban, Radak, and Seforno all explain this clause as the VOW. They all solve the problem raised above (that Yaakov appears to accept God only on condition) by explaining that Yaakov vows to INTENSIFY his relationship with God should (or actually WHEN) God fulfills His promise. Surely, Hashem will always remain Yaakov's God no matter what may happen. But Yaakov promises that if (or when) he returns 'home' he will dedicate his entire life to God's service.

[I recommend that you see these "parshanim" inside.

Btw, Ramban adds an additional peirush, which he categorizes as 'sod', that explains the clause as neither a condition nor a vow; it is a STATEMENT OF FACT. Yaakov simply states that only when he returns home to Eretz Canaan will it (de facto) become possible 'for Hashem to become his God', since one cannot develop the fullest relationship with God outside of the Land of Israel. (I've toned down Ramban's statement in translation - see it inside (28:21) for a bit of a shocker.)

B. BET-EL / A SPIRITUAL INTERSECTION

In this week's Parsha we find the first biblical reference to the concept of 'Bet Elokim', a House of God. Though mentioned only once throughout Sefer Breishit, this concept constitutes one of the most fundamental religious principles in Chumash, as it

presupposes the possibility of man's visiting the house as a means to improve his relationship with God.

Yaakov's description of this site as both 'sha'ar ha-shamayim' and 'Bet Elokim' can help us understand the nature and purpose of the Bet ha-Mikdash and how it represents the potential heights of our relationship with God.

The 'sha'ar ha-shamayim' aspect of the Mikdash, symbolized by the angels ascending and descending from Heaven, suggests the possibility of a 'vertical' relationship, a conceptual connecting point between Heaven and Earth. Despite God's transcendence, a connection, and thus a relationship, can be attained.

In contrast, the 'Bet Elokim' aspect, a HOUSE on earth where Man can encounter God, implies the potential for a 'lateral' relationship. In this sense, the Mikdash serves as both a center for congregation as well as the means of dissemination. From this site, God's word and the recognition of His authority can be spread to all mankind.

[See Yeshayahu 2:1-5! This centrality may be reflected by the unique phrase at Bet El - "yama ve-keydma, tzafona, ve-negba," which might symbolize this dissemination of God's word to all four corners of the earth.]

From God's perspective, so-to-speak, the 'shechina' descends to earth by way of 'sha'ar ha-shamayim' and radiates via 'Bet Elokim' (in the form of His Torah) to all of mankind. From man's perspective, we gather at the 'Bet Elokim' to serve God, and through the 'sha'ar ha-shamayim' we can climb the 'ladder' of holiness.

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C. BET-EL & BET ELOKIM

In God's first 'hitgalut' to Yaakov, we find some additional phrases that can help us appreciate why Yaakov decides that this site should become a Bet Elokim. Let's take another look at the second pasuk of this hitgalut:

"And your offspring shall be like the AFAR HA-ARETZ, you shall spread out to the WEST, EAST, NORTH, and SOUTH ('yama ve-kedma, tzafona, ve-negba), and through you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed" (28:14).

The first two phrases - "afar ha-aretz" and "east west north & south" - had been mentioned only ONCE before, i.e. when God affirmed Avraham's BECHIRA at BET-EL (after Lot's relocation in Sodom). Note the similarities:

"And God said to Avram, after Lot had parted from him, Raise your eyes and look out... to the NORTH, SOUTH, EAST, & WEST, for I give you all the LAND which you see... I will make your offspring like the AFAR HA-ARETZ..." (13:14-16).

Based on our earlier comparison between this 'hitgalut' to Yaakov (28:14) and God's earlier 'hitgalut' to Avraham at BET EL (13:14-16), we may offer a deeper interpretation of these terms.

As explained above, the two common phrases, 'afar ha-aretz' and 'yama ve-kedma...', suggest to Yaakov that he currently stands on the same site where Avraham Avinu built a MIZBEYACH and 'called out in God's Name'. This as well adds additional reason for Yaakov's resolve to make this site a BET ELOKIM.

[See also Devarim 12:5-12, and note the expression used numerous times in Sefer Devarim to describe the Mikdash - "ha-MAKOM asher yivchar HASHEM leshakein SHMO sham". Compare to the use of the word "ha'makom" in 28:10-22!]

However, God's hitgalut to Avraham in chapter 13, also took place in Bet-el (see 13:4, noting its context).

Notice, how the Torah describes this site as Bet-el, even though Yaakov only named that city over a hundred years later. The reason why is simple, because the Torah realizes that Yaakov's dream took place near the same spot where Avraham built his mizbayach! And in any case, the thematic connection, based on the above shiur, is rather obvious.

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FOR FURTHER IYUN

A. Note the emphasis and repetition of the word 'ha-Makom' in this Parsha - 28:11,16,17,19. Note the use of the term also in Parshat Lech Lecha, 13:14, at the Akeida - 22:4, and in Sefer Dvarim 12:5,11,14,18.

1. Try to explain the significance of this word specifically in the context of these parshiot.
2. Use this to explain Chazal's identification of this spot as the site of the Akeida on Har Ha-Moriah, and eventually the site of the Bet HaMikdash in Yerushalayim.
3. Read Ramban on 28:17 (including Rashi whom he quotes). Relate this Ramban and his machloket with Rashi to the above shiur.

B. Read Rashi on Breishit 2:7, and note the two explanations he cites from the Midrash on that pasuk - "vayitzer Hashem Elokim et ha-adam afar min ha-adama":

- a) 'afar' from Har Ha-Moriah
- b) 'afar' from the four corners of the earth.

How do these two opinions relate to our analysis in this week's shiur?

C. See if you can connect the last section of this shiur to two other well-known Midrashim:

1. Opposite "Yerushalayim shel mata" exists a "Yerushalayim shel ma'alा" (Taanit 5a). [Relate this to the concept of "sha'ar ha-shamayim".]
2. Yerushalayim is known in the Midrash Tanchuma as "taburo (navel) shel olam" - the umbilicus of the world. [Relate this to the concept of Bet Elokim and the 'four directions'.]

D. Several related questions to think about which relate to next week's Parsha, as well:

1. Does Yaakov actually fulfill his 'neder' when he returns?
2. Is this "neder" fulfilled by Am Yisrael? If so, when?
3. Relate Yaakov's "galut" and his "neder" to the principle of "maase avot siman l'banim" and Jewish history