

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

### AISHDAS SOCIETY

## Aspaqlaria

by Rabbi Micha Berger

**F**or a day and a half, all Jewish eyes were on Mumbai, formerly known to us in the west as Bombay, named for two Hindu G-desses. Nine popular tourist sites were attacked, locations that attracted many American and British citizens. Nine tourist sites... and one Chabad House.

Jews around the world suddenly took an interest in IBN, CNN's partner in India. Streaming audio or video available live, listening to the reporter telling the story from outside. Occasionally interrupting her reporting to duck down or tell her cameraman to shut off his lights as shots fire out.

Why the Jews?

Why again the Jews?

Once upon a time, all of humanity got along. We used that beautiful unity improperly, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in heaven, and we will make ourselves famous; lest we get scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." And Hashem responds, "Yes, they are one nation and they have one language, and this is what they begin to do..." (Bereishis 11:4,6)

There were few families who did not participate. One of them was that of Avraham. (Others include Malkhitzedeq / Sheim, Eiver, and Ashur the forefather of Assyria, who thereby merited the Torah script, Ashuris.) Avraham refused a unity committed to evil.

And 502 years later his children stood at Mount Sinai. "Vayichan sham Yisrael ...-and Israel camped there, under the mountain." (Shemos 19:2) The Mekhilta (quoted by Rashi) notes the use of the singular for the verb, as though Israel were an individual, and writes, "Like one person, with one heart." And with that moment of unity, we merited to be the recipients of the Torah.

Unlike the unity of the Egyptians six weeks

**This issue of Toras Aish is anonymously  
dedicated in honor of  
Rabbi Dov & Goldie Kramer  
on the birth of their daughter  
Chava Gittel  
Mazel Tov!**

earlier, at the Red Sea. "Hineih Mitzrayim nasa achareihem -- ... and here, Egypt is chasing after them." Also with a singular verb. And one of Rashi's explanations is "with one heart, like one person." In opposite order, first the heart, than the unity like a single person.

The Egyptians had no inherent unity. They had a single heart, a single desire and goal, and they unified behind that goal. Had they lived long enough for that goal to evaporate they would have once again been divided. The giving of the Torah, however, required unity as a precondition, not a consequence. As we say in the Hagaddah about the evil son's use of the word "you" when asking "What is this work for you?" "Since he took himself out of the community, he denied the essence [of Judaism]." Our doxology is not only "Hashem is our G-d, Hashem is One", it first begins "Hear Israel".

The "ish echad", the unity of the people, precedes the "leiv echad", the common mission. Perhaps this is why Rabbi Aqiva's students passed away in the period of Omer in particular, in the period of transition between conditional unity and love based on a common goal, and the inherent unity as a precondition to Sinai. A utilitarian unity is not the basis of respect, it's unity so as to use the other. In their case, as a tool for one's own learning. And so the students who died "because they did not show respect one for the other" were sentenced during that time in our calendar; they didn't survive the transition from Pesach to Shavu'os.

"It is not because you are more plentiful than other nations that Hashem holds you dear (chashaq) and chose you; for you are few from among the nations. Rather, from the love of G-d (ahavas Hashem) for you, and from His keeping the promise..." -Devarim 7:7-8

Cheisheq, holding someone dear, is described as something that can be conditional (in this case, on our size). Ahavah, true love, is inherent, without reason or cause. Ahavah without an adjective is ahavas chinam.

Terrorism is an echoing of the generation of the Tower of Babel's call, "let us make ourselves a reputation". When they rise up they are unified like the Egyptians. Not inherently, but functionally, behind a common cause. In Babel as Pirqei de'R' Eliezer describes it, if a person fell off the tower, worked

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proceeded. If a brick fell, they mourned. R' Hirsch describes this as the first Totalitarian government-humanity was subdued to the cause. In terrorism, this is expressed in a willingness to kill innocents, to die, even to raise one's own children with dreams of becoming "shuhada", martyrs for the cause.

Why again the Jews?

Because in Judaism, unity is inherent, love is to be unconditional, and the value of a cause defined by the value it brings to humanity.

Why again the Jews?

Because when there is a terror attack in some exotic city, and the fate of two people I never met hangs in the balance, everything stops. Jews in every time zone track the news obsessively. We are Benei Yisrael, the Children of Israel, siblings. All our petty (and perhaps not so petty) squabbles forgotten. Little Moishe is out safely?! Thank G-d. His parents? "About these I cry; my eyes, my eyes, spill water."

Last Shabbos (which had already begun in Mumbai), Moishe turned two and became an orphan. May the Omnipresent comfort the family amongst the rest of us mourners of Tziyon and Yerushalayim.  
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**RABBI DOV KRAMER**

## Taking a Closer Look

“**A**nd [Yaakov] raised his voice and he cried” (Beraishis 29:11). Why did Yaakov cry when he first met Rachel? Rashi (based on Beraishis Rabbah 70:12) explains that it was “because he came [to Charan] empty-handed (and couldn't give Rachel anything). He said, 'Eliezer, my grandfather's servant had rings, bracelets and other presents with him (when he came to Charan to find a wife for Yitzchok), and I, I have nothing.'” Why did he have nothing with him? “Because Elifaz the son of Eisav, following his father's commandment, chased after Yaakov in order to kill him, and caught up to him. And because Elifaz had grown up in the lap of Yitzchok, he held back (from killing Yaakov). [Elifaz] said to [Yaakov], 'what should I do about my father's direct command?' Yaakov answered him, 'take [all] that I have, [since] one who is impoverished is considered as if he were dead” (Rashi, based on Midrash Aggada Beraishis 28:2).

Okay, so now we know why Yaakov cried, and why he had nothing to give Rachel as a present. But it seems odd that, after saying that he would wait until after Yitzchok died before trying to kill Yaakov (27:41), Eisav sent Elifaz to kill him. What changed that caused Eisav to try killing Yaakov now rather than waiting until their father had passed away?

Rashi (27:41, based on Beraishis Rabbah 67:8) says that the reason Eisav wanted to wait until after Yitzchok died was to avoid distressing his father. It can be suggested that he was only concerned with Yitzchok knowing about Yaakov's death while Yaakov was still living at home. Once he left for Charan, though, and Yitzchok wouldn't be in contact with him, Eisav was no longer afraid that it would cause his father pain. After all, Yaakov was away for 36 years, and it was possible that Yitzchok would die anyway before Yaakov would have returned (as Rivka, who was younger, did).

According to another opinion in Beraishis Rabbah, Eisav hatched a more elaborate plan, although there are several ways of understanding what it was. The Maharzo says that it is consistent with the plan described in Midrash Tehillim (14:2), that Eisav would get Yishmael riled up over Yitzchok inheriting everything from Avraham-to the extent that Yishmael would kill his half-brother, after which Eisav would kill Yaakov and Yishmael and inherit everything. I'm not sure how this fits with the wording of Beraishis Rabbah, however, where Eisav's fear is not so much about killing Yaakov while Yitzchok was still alive, but that if he killed Yaakov he would have to answer to the court of Shem and Eiver. The Matenos Kehunah explains this plan as follows: Eisav married into Yishmael's family in order to have steady access to Yishmael in order to get him upset that Yaakov would inherit everything (including what Yitzchok inherited from Avraham). Yishmael would then kill Yaakov, followed by Eisav playing the role of as the avenging relative (“go-el hadam”) and killing Yishmael, whereby Eisav would inherit everything from both Yishmael (through his wife and because he was his nephew) and Yaakov. Eisav wasn't waiting until Yitzchok died; rather than referring to mourning over Yitzchok's death, the “mourning of Yitzchok” refers to Yitzchok mourning over the loss of his son (Yaakov) and brother (Yishmael). Another way of possibly understanding Eisav's plan is that he would wait until Yitzchok died and Yaakov inherited him before getting Yishmael upset about losing the birthright to Yitzchok (which went to Yaakov), wait for Yishmael to kill Yaakov, and then kill Yishmael (as the “go-el hadam”), whereby he would inherit everything.

If Eisav's original intention to wait until Yitzchok died (or was mourning) was in order to avoid being prosecuted by the court of Shem and Eiver (as stated by this opinion in Beraishis Rabbah), it can be suggested that, by sending Elifaz to kill Yaakov, Eisav

felt he wouldn't be blamed for it. Either no one would find out that Yaakov died, would blame his death on the dangers of travel, or blame Elifaz (since he did the actual killing). [As far as Eisav not worrying about his son being held liable, bear in mind that despite having a wicked father (Eisav) and a wicked son (Amalek), Elifaz is described as being righteous (Devarim Rabbah 2:20 and Tanchuma Yoshon Vayaira 38). He was part of Eeyov's inner circle (Aggadas Beraishis 56, Tanchuma Yoshon Vayaira 30, Targum Yonasan on Beraishis 36:12), eventually disassociated himself from his father (Yalkut Shimoni Iyov 897), was one of seven non-Jewish prophets (Bava Basra 15b), and even attained "ruach hakodesh" (Koheles Rabbah 7:2:4, Tanchuma Yoshon Vayishlach 23). Aside from Rashi attributing Elifaz not killing Yaakov to his relationship with Yitzchok (and not because it served his own interests, such as self-preservation if he feared that trying to kill Yaakov might result in his own death instead), in his commentary on Sanhedrin 99b Rashi says that Timna's desire to marry into Avraham's family stemmed from her desire to be part of a G-d-fearing family. If Elifaz did not fear G-d she would never have agreed to marry him, let alone be his concubine. Even though he sometimes let his physical desires get the best of him (see Rashi on Beraishis 36:5 and 36:12), it should be noted that aside from being technically permitted for him to marry his own daughter (see Sifsay Chachamim on 36:12), we don't know for sure that Elifaz knew Timna was his daughter; he may have assumed that Sayir was her father. The bottom line is that it probably wouldn't have bothered Eisav too much if Elifaz was found guilty of murdering his uncle Yaakov, since he was more like his grandfather Yitzchok than his father Eisav.]

There is another possibility as well. I have previously discussed how Yitzchok wanted to give Eisav the blessings because he hoped Eisav would provide all of Yaakov's material needs (see [www.aishdas.org/ta/5767/toldos.pdf](http://www.aishdas.org/ta/5767/toldos.pdf)). I have also pointed out that when Yaakov "stole" the blessings, he took over what would have been Eisav's responsibilities (besides still having his own), and therefore married both Rachel and Leah (see [www.aishdas.org/ta/5765/vayeitzei.pdf](http://www.aishdas.org/ta/5765/vayeitzei.pdf)). And I suggested ([www.aishdas.org/ta/5768/vayeitzei.pdf](http://www.aishdas.org/ta/5768/vayeitzei.pdf)) that Yaakov purposely waited seven years to marry the younger sister (Rachel), in order to give Eisav a chance to repent and marry the older sister (Leah). In other words, there were three steps necessary for Yaakov to take over all the responsibilities and have all 12 Tribes come from him: (1) taking over the birthright, (2) getting the blessing for material success, and (3) marrying both Rachel and Leah. (As it turns out there was another aspect, preventing Eisav from marrying Dina, which is why Yaakov is taken to task for hiding her from him.) When Yaakov left for Charan to get married, Eisav

knew that it meant he would be marrying both Rachel and Leah, essentially ending any chance he had of reclaiming his role (and most importantly to Eisav, the material success that his role relied on).

As opposed to the transfer of the birthright (of which Eisav was a willing participant) and the blessings (which Eisav didn't know about until it was too late), Eisav knew that the third step was about to be undertaken, and wanted to prevent it. Similar to Yosef's brother's considering him a "rodef" because they thought he was trying to exclude them from Israel, and therefore deciding he should be killed to thwart his plans (see [www.aishdas.org/ta/5767/vayeishev.pdf](http://www.aishdas.org/ta/5767/vayeishev.pdf)), Eisav considered Yaakov a "rodef" for trying to complete his "takeover" by going to Charan to get married. While Yaakov was still in Be'er Sheva, Eisav's desire to kill Yaakov could only be attributed to his hatred towards him, but after Yaakov left for Charan it could be seen as an attempt to reclaim his role as part of the Nation of Israel. Therefore, even though Eisav had originally decided to wait until Yitzchok died to kill Yaakov, once Yaakov left for Charan to get married, Eisav felt he had to act right away (and could justify it to Yitzchok and the justices in Shem and Eiver's court), so sent Elifaz after him to kill him. © 2008 Rabbi D. Kramer

#### RABBI BEREL WEIN

### Wein Online

**T**he 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. © 2008 Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com/jewishhistory](http://www.rabbiwein.com/jewishhistory).

#### **RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## **Shabbat Shalom**

“**A**nd Jacob took him rods of fresh poplar, and of the almond and of the plane-tree; and peeled white streaks in them, making the white appear which was in the rods. And he set the rods which he had peeled over against the flocks in the gutters in the watering-troughs where the flocks came to drink; and they conceived when they came to drink” (Gen 30:37,38).

What happened to Jacob during all those years when he lived in Haran together with his Uncle Laban? Initially, in last week's portion of Toldot, we were introduced to him, as a "...wholehearted man, a dweller in tents," (Genesis 25:27), a pure and somewhat naïve personality who was more introspective and inner-directed than the kind of person who lives outdoors and

roughs it in the natural world: if a tent is the Biblical symbol for a house, a house of study and a house of prayer (Numbers 24:5, in accordance with the Midrash), then Jacob was wed to the hearth and to the book (Bible) rather than to the field and to the hunt. And although a central, and perhaps even self-defining, act occurs to him (and even to a certain extent by him) in his "taking" of the birthright, (an act in which he is both the actor and also the one upon whom the drama is enacted) we still find him dreaming, at the opening of our Biblical reading this week, of a ladder connecting heaven and earth, of ascending and descending angels, and of G-d promising him the inheritance of the ancestral Land of Israel.

But in "Laban-land" we encounter a very different, seemingly altered, Jacob. He strikes a business deal with Laban, ostensibly asking for next to nothing for himself when he sets up a system to divide and share in the natural increase of the flocks of sheep and goats they've been tending. He asks Laban to remove all the striped, spotted or speckled sheep and goats; his share, the share of Jacob, the shepherd son-in-law, will be limited only to the striped, spotted and speckled lambs and goats that happen to be born. After the removal of these very types from Jacob's pool, Laban readily agrees. Why shouldn't he? No one has ever offered him such a generous and 'sweet' deal. Jacob's terms are what dreams are made of: the father-in-law and his sons are about to become wealthy.

But apparently, among his other talents, Jacob possesses expertise in husbandry, and he manages to turn the tables on his father-in-law by "manipulating" the flock, using a genetic experiment nearly 4000 years ago. He proceeds to take various planes of wood, peeling them so that the white stripes from beneath the surface are revealed, creating striped and streaked wands of wood, which he then places near the water troughs where the sheep and goats usually mate. The result of the animals cohabiting in the presence of these wands is to be seen in the numerous striped and streaked offspring they give birth to. In effect, Jacob becomes a very wealthy man by revealing the "lavan" (Hebrew for white, which is also the name of Laban) under the surface of the planes of the wood (Gen. 30:37).

On the surface it might seem that not only has Jacob turned into a "deceiving manipulator," but that he's traded in his dream of uniting heaven and earth and his eventual return to Israel, his ancestral home, for a huge flock of ringed, spotted and striped sheep, a "killing" on the stock market that gives him earthy, material prosperity while ignoring all his years in the yeshiva of Shem and Ever (Gen. 31:10-12). What happened? And why did it happen?

Our Talmudic Sages placed great store in the power of a name, "...as is his name, so is he." Jacob's Hebrew name "Ya'akov" carries several connotations.

Here is how the Bible pictures the birth of Ya'akov: "And afterwards [Esau's] brother emerged, with his hand grasping onto the heel of Esau; so he named him Ya'akov [ekev means heel]." On the one hand Ya'akov can imply a heel-grasper, sneaking up from behind, a "heel -sneak" (Everett Fox so translates the name "crookedly usurping" based on Jeremiah 9:3 and Isaiah 40:4).

On the other hand, the name may actually suggest a more positive quality, the admirable ability to "come up from behind," succeeding against difficult odds by dint of extra effort and diligence, "surviving and triumphing at the end" (see S'forno, ad loc). Which is the correct name? Will the real Ya'akov stand up!

Ya'akov's character is so fully-fleshed out that he resonates with us as probably the most carefully depicted personality in the Bible. Our Sages call him "the most special of the patriarchs" because he, more than the other patriarchs, changes and develops, assumes many peregrinations and transformations, until he ultimately emerges, triumphant, as "Yisrael," (as he was later named). And the Bible, if we read it closely enough, actually reveals the hidden keys to his personality and its development.

Suffice it to say for now that Ya'akov suffers desperately from the fact that his father Isaac "loved Esau because the hunted venison was in his mouth" (Gen. 25:28), Esau and not Ya'akov. This pregnant phrase, the apparent reason for Esau's favored-son status, emphasizes "red-meat" materialism and smooth-tongued verbal manipulation ("entrapment," tsayid), which were the major characteristics of Esau.

Hence Rav Haim Ibn Atar (the 18th century commentary known as the Ohr HaHaim HaKadosh) points out that the very next verse, no segue whatsoever, reads, "And Ya'akov prepared (Hebrew, Vayazed) a lentil stew; and Esau came from the field, being faint" (Gen.25: 29). Ya'akov had prepared the red stew - on purpose, vayazed, mazid - for his father Isaac; Ya'akov desperately wanted to merit paternal love, and hoped that perhaps his red stew would be a fitting substitute for Esau's red venison meat, and might even gain for him the coveted birthright. Thus taking advantage of this opportunity in order to buy with it the birthright from Esau seemed to him a logical extension of the purpose for which it had been cooked in the first place! (I am indebted to Shmuel Klitsner's excellent work "Wrestling Jacob" for this insight.) But undoubtedly Ya'akov the heel - sneak seems to be taking advantage of his brother's hunger and exhaustion!

From this perspective, Ya'akov longed to be his father's Esau, longed for the paternal caresses bestowed upon his brother, longed for the birthright that the patriarch was about to give the eldest son. As a direct consequence of his longings, it's almost natural for Ya'akov to acquiesce to his mother Rebecca's plan,

to wrap himself in the goatskins, the out-doors garb of Esau, so that he become hairy like him and smell like him when he introduces himself to his blind father, "I am Esau, your first born." (27: 18).

Jacob, the one who will succeed at the end and who, in the end, diligently surpasses Esau by coming up from behind, at this point in time has become a conniving usurper, a 'heel-sneak' who peeled away his authentic whole-hearted personality only to reveal another lavan-like layer of deception. The heroism of Ya'akov will emerge in his ability to grow back into himself - and his G-d - and emerge as Yisrael. © 2008 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

### RABBI JONATHAN SACKS

## Covenant & Conversation

It is one of the great visions of the Torah. Jacob, alone and far from home, lies down for the night, with only stones for a pillow. He dreams of a ladder set on earth but reaching heaven, with angels ascending and descending. The question is: what is it a vision of?

There are many answers in our tradition, but the simplest is-prayer. Jacob, according to the sages, established Maariv, the evening prayer. He himself gives the most moving account of his experience: When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it." He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of G-d; this is the gate of heaven."

Only in hindsight do we appreciate the resonances of this sentence. A synagogue is a "house of G-d." Prayer is "the gate of heaven." The result of prayer-if we have truly opened our heart-is to know that "G-d is in this place, and I did not know it."

There is, though, one nuance in the text that is missed in translation, and it took the Hassidic masters to remind us of it. Hebrew verbs carry with them, in their declensions, an indication of their subject. Thus the word yadati means "I knew," and lo yadati, "I did not know." When Jacob wakes from his sleep, however, he says, "Surely the Lord is in this place ve'anokhi lo yadati." Anokhi means "I." In this sentence, it is superfluous. To translate it literally we would have to say, "And I, I did not know it." Why the double "I"?

To this, Rabbi Pinchas Horowitz (Panim Yafot) gave a magnificent answer. How do we come to know that "G-d is in this place"? By ve'anokhi lo yadati-not knowing the I. We know G-d when we forget the self. We sense the "Thou" of the Divine presence when we move beyond the "I" of egocentricity. Only when we stop thinking about ourselves, do we become truly open to the world and the Creator of the world. This answers some of the great questions about prayer. What difference does it make? Does it really change G-d? Surely G-d does not change. Besides which, does not prayer contradict the most fundamental principle of

faith, which is that we are called on to do G-d's will rather than ask G-d to do our will? What really happens when we pray?

Prayer has two dimensions, one mysterious, the other not. There are simply too many cases of prayers being answered for us to deny that it makes a difference to our fate. It does. A few days ago I heard the following story. A man in a Nazi concentration camp lost the will to live-and in the death camps, if you lost the will to live, you died. That night he poured out his heart in prayer. The next morning, he was transferred to work in the camp kitchen. There he was able, when the guards were not looking, to steal some potato peelings. It was these peelings that kept him alive. I heard this story from his son. Perhaps each of us has some such story. In times of crisis we cry out from the depths of our soul, and something happens. Sometimes we only realise it later, looking back.

Prayer makes a difference to the world-but how it does so is mysterious. There is, however, a second dimension which is non-mysterious. Less than prayer changes G-d, it changes us. Literally, the Hebrew verb *lehithpallel*, meaning "to pray," means "to judge oneself." It means, to escape from the prison of the self and see the world, including ourselves, from the outside. Prayer is where the relentless first person singular, the "I," falls silent for a moment and we become aware that we are not the centre of the universe. There is a reality outside. That is a moment of transformation.

If we could only stop asking the question, "How does this affect me?" we would see that we are surrounded by miracles. There is the almost infinite complexity and beauty of the natural world. There is the Divine word, our greatest legacy as Jews, the library of books we call the Bible. And there is the unparalleled drama, spreading over forty centuries, of the tragedies and triumphs that have befallen the Jewish people. Respectively, these represent the three dimensions of our knowledge of G-d: creation (G-d in nature), revelation (G-d in holy words) and redemption (G-d in history).

Sometimes it takes a great crisis to make us realise how self-centred we have been. The only question strong enough to endow existence with meaning is not, "What do I need from life?" but "What does life need from me?" That is the question we hear when we truly pray. More than prayer is an act of speaking, it is an act of listening-to what G-d wants from us, here, now. What we discover-if we are able to create that silence in the soul-is that we are not alone. We are here because someone, the One, wanted us to be, and He has set us a task only we can do. We emerge strengthened, transformed. More than prayer changes G-d, it changes us. It lets us see, feel, know that "G-d is in this place." How do we reach that awareness? By moving beyond the first person singular, so that for a moment, like Jacob, we can say,

"I did not know the I." In the silence of the "I," we meet the "Thou" of G-d.

Peace must grow from the ground. Credo  
Published in The Times July 2003

The other day two young men came to see me. They were seeking support for a project they have devised to create better understanding across ethnic and religious divides. They began in Bradford, where racial tensions reached boiling point two years ago. One was a youth worker, the other a documentary film producer, and they asked themselves how they could use those skills to promote social cohesion and respect for difference. The idea they came up with, CommunitySpeak, is brilliant in its simplicity.

Many young people would like to learn how to make films. So they use film-making to get young Muslims and Jews to talk about their identity and make a documentary about it. At first the two groups are separate, but eventually they show each other their work. Each then sees that the problems they face are shared by others also. A small project, but momentous in its possibilities.

The previous evening I had been visited by someone involved in a similar project in the Middle East. OneVoice brings together ordinary Israelis and Palestinians in a shared conversation about the peace process using the Internet. Their aim is to empower individuals and community groups at the grass-roots, using new communication technologies. Ordinary Israelis and Palestinians, they believe, are often more moderate than their political leaders, and this is one way of letting their voice be heard.

A few days earlier I met leaders of yet another project, Merchavim, which engages Jewish and Palestinian Israelis in the idea of shared citizenship, promoting a stronger sense of the common good, and working to improve equal access to cultural, political and economic opportunities regardless of group identity. This too, in the five years of its existence, has been a healing force.

The most powerful initiative I have come across recently is The Parents' Forum, created by Yitzhak Frankenthal, an Israeli whose son was kidnapped and killed by Hamas in 1994. It brings together Israeli and Palestinian parents whose children have lost their lives in the current conflict. Instead of seeking revenge, they have pledged themselves to work for reconciliation. They visit schools and community centres, speaking to Israelis and Palestinians alike. They donate blood to each other's hospitals. They have held together despite appalling tensions in both societies. And they are realists, not utopians. "I do not love Palestinians-they killed my son," said Frankenthal, "But I have respect for Palestinians as a people and want them to have the same dignity that I would give to an Israeli." Jews pray for peace. There is hardly a prayer in our liturgy that does not end with a plea for peace. But the words in

which we do so are significant: "May He who makes peace in His high places, make peace for us". The meaning is clear. It is not enough to make peace in high places, through summit meetings, international gatherings, diplomatic initiatives, resolutions, declarations and political settlements. Peace must grow from the ground.

Its seeds are planted and tended by hundreds of local encounters in which ordinary men and women—yes, and children also—meet, talk and make the effort to understand each other, hearing the hopes, fears, anxieties and resentments of people on the other side. Those encounters are taking place in an astonishing variety of ways, but often they go unreported and unknown.

No less than political initiatives, they too must be recognized, empowered and made part of the peace process. For without them, resolutions made on high will stay on high. With them, peace may yet grow from the ground. © 2008 Rabbi J. Sacks & torah.org

**RABBI ZVI SOBOLOFSKY**

## TorahWeb

**Y**aakov is about to embark on a journey during which he will face two great challenges. As his first challenge, Yaakov must sustain himself spiritually in an environment alien to the values he absorbed in the his parents' home. Somehow, a buffer must be created to protect him from being influenced by his deceitful uncle and future father-in-law, Lavan. Yaakov's second challenge, as the heir to the legacy of Avraham, is to build a family which can serve as the foundation of the Jewish nation-to-be. The future of the Jewish People depends on the actions of Yaakov in this regard. What can Yaakov do to guard himself from the negative influences around him and how can he prepare himself to found a nation?

Chazal teach us that Yaakov did not go immediately to the house of Lavan when fleeing from Esav, rather he first immersed himself in learning Torah in the Yeshiva of Ever. Given that Yaakov was already sixty-three years old and had already spent his youth learning Torah in the Yeshivas of Shem and Ever, why was it necessary to return to the yeshiva now?

It was precisely the two aforementioned challenges facing Yaakov that compelled him to return to the study of Torah. Torah study is the only line of defense against spiritually hostile forces and the protection that guarantees that a person's value system remains pure. The Rambam (Hilchos Issurei Biah 22:21), after elaborating upon all the necessary safeguards against inappropriate activity, concludes that the greatest impediment to sin is whole-hearted involvement in Torah study. For Yaakov to survive the house and society of Lavan, an extra dose of Torah study was necessary.

Yaakov was about to begin a new chapter in his life. Standing on the threshold of marriage and building a family, Yaakov is about to begin to transmit Torah to the next generation. It is this transmission from parent to child that creates the essence of the Jewish nation. Yaakov no longer studied Torah only as an individual, but also as one with a responsibility to transmit the Torah to the next generation. Yaakov returns to the Yeshiva of his youth to reapply himself to the talmud Torah that will enable him to properly build his family and nation.

Yaakov's return to Torah serves as a model for all subsequent generations. We are often faced with challenges to our spiritual goals. How do we survive when the values we hold dear are under attack? We return to our sources of Torah, our yeshivas and batei medrash, to strengthen ourselves. Our learning before and after work can be the buffer that preserves our Torah, even if we are exposed to influences antithetical to the Torah value system during the day. We look to Yaakov as a role model for how to create a family. Talmud Torah is indispensable in creating an environment in which our children can spiritually flourish. Therefore we, as parents, have the responsibility to rededicate ourselves to talmud Torah to enable us to share our legacy with our children. Just as Yaakov's fourteen years of renewed Torah study enabled him to respond to the challenges that faced him, our return to talmud Torah will enable us to rise to our own challenges. © 2008 Rabbi Z. Sobolofsky & The TorahWeb Foundation

**RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ**

## Shabbat Shalom Weekly

“**A**nd Leah conceived and gave birth to a son and she called his name Reuven, because she said the Almighty has seen my affliction, for now my husband will love me. And she conceived again and she gave birth to a son. And she said, for the Almighty has heard that I am hated, and he gave me also this. And she called his name Shimon" (Genesis 29:32,33).

What differences do we see in these two verses on how the Almighty perceived Leah's plight? What do we learn from this?

In the first verse, the Almighty saw Leah's affliction. In the second verse, the Almighty heard that she is hated.

Since we have a mitzvah (commandment) to emulate the Almighty, we need to learn from here to become more sensitive to the emotional pain of others however they express it. People express their pain through words and through variations in their facial expressions and body language.

To hear someone's pain, be aware of both the content and the tone of voice of another person. The more perceptive you become, the more you will notice

slight nuances in tone of voice that reflect painful feelings.

Also, learn to see someone's pain even if he does not express it verbally. Be aware of slight changes in a person's facial expression, skin color, breathing rate, muscle tone that serves as an announcement of emotional suffering. The more you are able to notice pain, the more *chesed* (kindness) you will be able to do.

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### **RABBI AVI WEISS**

## **Shabbat Forshpeis**

**A**lthough we are given a tremendous amount of information about their lives, it is certain that not every event in the lives of our matriarchs and patriarchs is mentioned in the Torah. One wonders then, why, in this week's Torah portion, the seemingly trivial story of Yaakov (Jacob) lifting the stone after seeing Rachel (Rachel) is mentioned. (Genesis 29:10)

Ramban writes that the incident teaches a lesson about faith. If one believes in G-d, one will be able to do the impossible. In Ramban's words, "scripture speaks at lengths about the story to teach us 'those who trust in the Lord, their strength is renewed.' (Isaiah 40:31) For behold, Yaakov our father came from his travels tired, and he removed a stone that shepherds of three flocks could not."

This comment also gives us an insight into dealing with suffering. Contrary to popular thinking, perhaps the primary issue should not be why we suffer, for there is no real answer to this question. It is sometimes beyond human comprehension. This question also tries to understand the past, by examining an event that has already happened. We, of course, have no say over events that are behind us. Rather than ask why, perhaps we should focus on what our actions should be following the suffering. What rather than why is a practical approach, not a philosophical inquiry. It is also a question that deals with the future over which we have control and not with the past, over which we have none.

While we ask this all important question of "what shall we do in the face of suffering," we also wonder "what will G-d do as we suffer?" The comment by Ramban seems to be suggesting that, when we suffer, G-d gives us the strength to transcend, to reach beyond and to do things we never ever thought we could do. As G-d is infinite, G-d, who has created us in His image, has given us the power to sometimes reach towards infinity, to do the impossible.

In our synagogue we run programs for "special friends" (known to many as mentally retarded-a term I do not like). I once asked a mother of one "special friend" the following: If someone would have told you 25 years ago that on the 25th birthday of your daughter you'd still be diapering her, wheeling her in a stroller,

giving her milk from a bottle-would you be able to handle it?

Her response was that she couldn't imagine prevailing over such hardship. But she has prevailed and has given love all these years magnificently. No one is born with this abundant love and commitment; yet the words of Isaiah ring true-with the help of G-d we can overcome.

We constantly hear about great people in the world. I always have found this strange, because it seems to me that there may not be great people in this world, only great challenges. Faced with those challenges, ordinary people can rise to do the extraordinary. The ability of the average person to do the unusual, is the way G-d works through people.

Perhaps the well of water in the Yaakov narrative represents life itself. The water, as it often does in the Torah, represents life itself. The rock on top of the well reminds us that all too often our life energies are blocked and we feel a weight above us that is difficult to bear. No matter how impossible we thought something was, Yaakov's actions remind us that we can sometimes dig deep, roll up our sleeves, take a breath, and with the help of G-d, transform it into the possible. © 2008 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

### **RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER**

## **Weekly Dvar**

**I**n this week's Parsha, Vayetzei, we can learn an incredible lesson. The Torah relates how when Leah had her fourth son, Rachel became envious. The obvious question is why wasn't Rachel jealous when Leah has her first three sons. As Living Each Week explains, Leah named her first three sons based on her emotions; that 1) now her husband will love her, and 2) now she won't be disliked, and 3) now my husband will have to help me. But it is the fourth one that got to Rachel. When Leah named her son "Because now I can be grateful to G-d", that's when Rachel became envious. Rachel realized that she couldn't achieve the same level of gratitude to G-d that Leah could. How incredible a virtue! To want to have a reason to thank G-d, just for the sake of thanking Him.

And then there's us... We have three chances a day to thank G-d through prayer, but do we? And if/when we do daven (pray), is it with enough meaning/concentration? Are we as grateful as we should be even when we DO have a reason? We can all emulate Rachel's desire to show gratitude by studying prayers, learning about ourselves from them, and improving ourselves THROUGH them. © 2008 Rabbi S. Ressler & LeLamed, Inc.