

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

What did Jacob add to the Jewish experience? What is it that we find in him that we do not find to the same measure in Abraham and Isaac? Why is it his name – Jacob/Israel – that we carry in our identity? How was it that all his children stayed within the faith? Is there something of him in our spiritual DNA? There are many answers. I explore one here, and another next week in Vayishlach.

Jacob was the man whose deepest spiritual encounters happened when he was on a journey, alone and afraid at the dead of night, fleeing from one danger to another. In this week's parsha, we see him fleeing from Esau and about to meet Laban, a man who would cause him great grief. In next week's parsha we see him fleeing in the opposite direction, from Laban to Esau, a meeting that filled him with dread: he was "very afraid and distressed." Jacob was supremely the lonely man of faith.

Yet it is precisely at these moments of maximal fear that he had spiritual experiences that have no parallel in the lives of either Abraham or Isaac – nor even Moses. In this week's parsha he has a vision of a ladder stretching from earth to heaven, with angels ascending and descending, at the end of which he declares: "Surely God is in this place and I did not know it...How awesome is this place! This is nothing other than the house of God, and this, the gate of heaven!" (Gen. 28:16-17).

Next week, caught between his escape from Laban and his imminent encounter with Esau, he wrestles with a stranger – variously described as a man, an angel and God Himself – receives a new name, Israel, and says, naming the place of the encounter Peniel, "I have seen God face to face and my life was spared" (Gen. 32:31).

This was no small moment in the history of faith. We normally assume that the great spiritual encounters happen in the desert, or a wilderness, or a mountain top, in an ashram, a monastery, a retreat, a

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Chaim Dovid Mermelstein
by
Rosalyn & Stephen Flatow

place where the soul is at rest, the body calm and the mind in a state of expectation. But that is not Jacob, nor is it the only or even the primary Jewish encounter. We know what it is to encounter God in fear and trembling. Through much – thankfully not all, but much – of Jewish history, our ancestors found God in dark nights and dangerous places. It is no accident that Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik called his most famous essay, *The Lonely Man of Faith*, nor that Adin Steinsaltz called one of his books about Judaism, *The Strife of the Spirit*.

Sometimes it is when we feel most alone that we discover we are not alone. We can encounter God in the midst of fear or a sense of failure. I have done so at the very points when I felt most inadequate, overwhelmed, abandoned, looked down on by others, discarded and disdained. It was then that I felt the hand of God reaching out to save me the way a stranger did when I was on the point of drowning in an Italian sea on my honeymoon.¹ That is the gift of Jacob/Israel, the man who found God in the heart of darkness.

Jacob was the first but not the last. Recall Moses in his moment of crisis, when he said the terrifying words, "If this is what You are going to do to me, please kill me now if I have found favour in Your sight, and let me not see my misery" (Num. 11:15). That is when God allowed Moses to see the effect of his spirit on seventy elders, one of the rare cases of a spiritual leader seeing the influence he has had on others in his lifetime.

It is when Elijah was weary to the point of asking to die that God sent him the great revelation at Mount Horeb: the whirlwind, the fire, the earthquake and the still, small voice (1 Kings 19). There was a time when Jeremiah felt so low that he said: "Cursed be the day on which I was born, let not the day on which my mother gave birth to me be blessed ... Why did I come out from the womb, to see toil, and sorrow, and to end my days in shame?" (Jer. 20:14, 18). It was after this that he had his most glorious hope-filled prophecies of the return of Israel from exile, and of God's everlasting love for His people, a nation that would live as long as the sun, the moon and the stars (Jer. 31).

Perhaps no one spoke more movingly about this condition than King David in his most agitated psalms. In psalm 69 he speaks as if he were drowning:

¹ I have told the story in the video *Understanding Prayer: Thanking and Thinking*. I also give an account of it in my book, *Celebrating Life*.

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Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck.
I sink in the miry depths, where there is no foothold.
(Ps. 69:2-3)

Then there is the line as famous to Christians as to Jews: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Ps. 22:2). And the equally famous, "Out of the depths I cry to you, Lord" (Ps. 130:1).

This is the heritage of Jacob who discovered that you can find God, not just when you are peacefully tending your sheep, or joining others in prayer at the Temple or in the synagogue, but also when you are in danger, far from home, with peril in front of you and fear behind.

These two encounters, in this week's parsha and the next, also provide us with powerful metaphors of the spiritual life. Sometimes we experience it as climbing a ladder, rung by rung. Each day, week, month or year, as we study and understand more, we come a little closer to heaven as we learn to stand above the fray, rise above our reactive emotions, and begin to sense the complexity of the human condition. That is faith as a ladder.

Then there is faith as a wrestling match, as we struggle with our doubts and hesitations, above all with the fear (it's called the "impostor syndrome") that we are not as big as people think we are or as God wants us to be.² Out of such experiences we, like Jacob, can emerge limping. Yet it is out of such experiences that we too can discover that we have been wrestling with an angel who forces us to a strength we did not know we had.

The great musicians have the power to take pain and turn it into beauty.³ The spiritual experience is slightly different from the aesthetic one. What matters in spirituality is truth not beauty: existential truth as the almost-infinitesimal me meets the Infinite-Other and I

² There is, of course, the opposite phenomenon, of those who think they've outgrown Judaism, that they are bigger than the faith of their fathers. Sigmund Freud seems to have suffered from this condition.

³ For me the supreme example is the Adagio of Schubert's String Quintet in C Major op. 163, written just two months before the composer's death.

find my place in the totality of things and a strength-not-my-own runs through me, lifting me to safety above the raging waters of the troubled soul.

That is the gift of Jacob, and this is his life-changing idea: that out of the depths we can reach the heights. The deepest crises of our lives can turn out to be the moments when we encounter the deepest truths and acquire our greatest strengths. *Covenant and Conversation 5778 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l ©2017 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"**A**nd he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it. And, behold, the Lord stood above it, and said, I am the Lord God of Abraham your father, and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, to you will I give it, and to your seed" [Gen. 28:12-13].

Dreams have a unique capacity to inspire us to aim higher, to remain focused on a distant goal even when the present circumstances give us little reason for optimism. But what happens when the gap between dream and reality seems insurmountably vast? Jacob's dreams throughout this week's Torah reading of Vayetze shine a bright light on this question, and offer important insights into his evolution as a person, as well as lessons about his descendants' mission in the world and destiny as a nation.

Jacob begins his journey from his father's home into exile with the loftiest of dreams: a ladder rooted in the ground while reaching up to the heavens with angels ascending and descending upon it. This visual symbolizes his and his descendants' Divine mandate: even in exile, to unify heaven and earth so that the Divine Presence can be manifest in the world.

Unfortunately, something goes awry along the way, as Jacob's long sojourn with his father-in-law Laban has a corrupting influence on him. In order to hold his own with his devious employer, Jacob perfects the art of deception, and in time, the bright nephew even out-Labans his clever uncle, becoming wealthy in his own right.

It must be said that Jacob has not completely forgotten the traditions of his youth, despite the distance from his parents' home: "With Laban have I



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dwelt,' and the 613 commandments have I kept" [Rashi to Gen. 32:5] is what Jacob reports after the ordeal has passed. Although it may be true that, technically speaking, he has remained faithful to his roots, his focus of concentration has become the livestock on earth rather than the stars of the heavens.

Indeed, Laban has certainly corrupted his aspirations. Just look at his new dream after a period in Laban-land: "And I saw in a dream and behold, rams that leapt upon the sheep were speckled, spotted and striped" [ibid., 31:10]. Jacob now dreams of material success devoid of any spiritual component.

It is upon coming to this spiritual nadir that he soon receives the life trajectory-changing command of the Divine messengers: "I have seen everything that Laban is doing to you. I am the God of Beit El...now rise, leave this land and return to the land of your birthplace" [ibid., v. 13]. In other words, leave the land of obsession with materialism. Return to the land – and to the dream – of your forefathers who walked with God!

More than twenty years in the prime of one's life is a significant period. Jacob must have been devastated when he realized what had become of him and his dreams. He must have seen himself as an abject failure. He must have questioned whether he would ever succeed in achieving his original aspirations. He knows he must leave Laban before it is too late.

When he leaves Laban's home, with his large family in tow, he has a third dream, even more momentous than those that preceded it: "And Jacob went on his way and he was met there by angels of God...and he called the name of that place Mahanayim [Divine encampments of God's messengers]" [Gen. 32:2-3].

This dream, which concludes Parshat Vayetze, is a parallel to the one that opened the reading, with Jacob again meeting angels of God. This time, however, there is no ladder; but instead two distinct encampments, family compounds, one outside Israel and the other in Israel.

The message is dramatic: uniting heaven and earth requires more than ascending a spiritual ladder. It also requires making an impact on the world around us by building a family dedicated to God and Torah in the Land of Israel – and not to materialism in Laban's house of exile.

The fact that Jacob somehow manages to return to Israel – despite the inertia of habit and the comforts of his home in exile – is the reason, I believe, why he is called the 'chosen among the patriarchs' [Midrash Rabbah 76:1 to Genesis].

Whereas Abraham obeys the Divine command to come to the land, and Isaac never leaves the land, Jacob, returns to this land despite the sibling conflict that awaited him there.

Did Jacob's return to Israel mark the end of his difficulties and challenges? Certainly not. And so it is with his descendants. Disappointments and setbacks are inevitable, in a world still divided between the holy and the profane, the religious and the secular.

But if we keep our sights focused on preserving our Jewish heritage into future generations; if we wish to live a holistic Jewish life whose civic experience is guided by the Jewish calendar, and if our national dream is to create a society able to merge heaven and earth, then the only place where this can happen is in the land of our dreams and destiny, the Land of Israel. It is the land promised by God to Israel, the earth whose sacred gravestones below and whose dedicated mountain tops above are that very ladder which connects the human with the Divine, and the Jew to his eternal dream of a united world. ©2017 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Our father Yaakov now embarks on a long, tortuous journey that represents the story of his life. In recounting his story before Pharaoh, when he descended to live in Egypt, he was brutally frank in assessing his life: "My years compared to those of my ancestors have been few, and they have not been good ones."

From the onset, he swims in a sea of troubles. He is robbed by his nephew, deceived by his father-in-law in every possible facet of their relationship, always the outsider, and a permanent stranger in a strange land. His lifetime has become, in rabbinic thought and in historical reality, the template for Jewish existence in exile among the nations and countries of the world.

Yet Yaakov embarks on this perilously dangerous journey with high hopes and a secure spirit. As he has dreamed, he has been promised by the God of Israel that he would never be forsaken by Heaven. He will remember this dream and its promise throughout the tumultuous events of his lifetime. Even in his moments of greatest despair, he will be comforted by the Heavenly commitment that guarantees his success and survival.

This belief, that Heaven would never fully abandon him, becomes the defining feature of his life and activities. In this he has set the matrix for all the succeeding generations of the Jewish people. In all of our struggles, we believe that somehow God will eventually raise us and deliver us from oppression and cruelty. And so it has been.

The fundamental difference between Yaakov and Eisav is revealed to us at the beginning of their life stories. Eisav is a man of the fields, out in the world, hail and hearty. The private Eisav, the child who is protective of his father, who yearns for spiritual blessings and for generational continuity is

overshadowed by the public Eisav who is physically powerful, aggressive and impulsive, hedonistic and given to violence and cruelty towards others. All of this is included in being a man of the fields, one who is influenced and immediately reacts to every passing wind that blows.

Yaakov is also physically powerful and is even capable of struggling successfully with angels and humans. He is financially successful against daunting odds and is, in essence, a person of the tents, of study halls and the pursuit of knowledge, and of gratitude towards God and other human beings. His private persona overshadows his public life; his innate modesty tempers his assessments of his very accomplishments.

In this also we find the Jewish experience throughout the centuries. Though we are fully capable of being people of the fields, as Israel has taught the world over the past decades, we are still basically people of the tents struggling for decency and spirituality in a very decadent and dangerous, Eisav-driven world. Our lot in life is to succeed in this struggle.

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RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Although 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 God, 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 God do as we suffer?" The comment by Ramban seems to be suggesting that, when we suffer, God gives us the strength to transcend, to reach beyond and to do things we never ever thought we could do. As God is infinite, God, 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 challenged – 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 God 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 God 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 God, transform it into the possible. ©2017 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 KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

The Torah states: "And Jacob worked for Rachel for seven years; and it was in his eyes as a few days in his love for her."

When someone loves another even a short time apart can seem like an eternity. How is it possible that the time appeared to be a short time for Jacob?

In his commentary, the Malbim gives two answers:

1) Jacob loved Rachel so much that he thought that she was worth working for many more than seven

years. Therefore, to work only seven years for such a wonderful person was really a bargain.

2) Jacob's love for Rachel was not simple passion. When a person feels deep passion, a day can seem like a year. Jacob loved her because of her good qualities that would make her worthy of being the mother of the future Jewish people. A person whose love is based on passion really loves himself and not the object of his love. When a person loves the good in another, he truly loves the other person and not himself. (The Torah tells us Jacob's focus was "in his love for her.") Therefore, the time seemed short because it was not a selfish love.

The Alschich gives another approach: The seven years seemed like a few days in Jacob's eyes AFTER he was married to Rachel. (This is the order of the words and events in the Torah.) His love and his happiness overshadowed and all but erased the pain of the seven years of work.

Our lessons: Clarify whether it's a burning heart or heartburn -- are you in love or are you infatuated? Secondly, if you have a difficult situation -- like difficulty in finding a spouse -- know that your trials and tribulations will seem insignificant in light of your happiness. Therefore, don't suffer so much now; rather anticipate your future joy! *Dvar Torah based on Growth Through Torah by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin © 2017 Rabbi K. Packouz*

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Simultaneous Smachot

*Translated for the Encyclopedia Talmudit
by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss*

At first glance it would seem from the actions and words of Lavan in this week's portion when saying to Yaakov "finish this week and then we will give you Rachel(to marry)", that we derive the law that one may not mingle two joyous occasions together (Ein Mearvin Simcha B'simcha). However the Talmud (Moed Katan 9a) derives this axiom from the behavior of King Solomon at the dedication of the Beit Hamikdash. During that dedication which occurred at the same time as the holiday of Succot, King Solomon made sure that the week of celebration for the dedication of the Temple did not interfere with the Holiday of Succot.

One might explain this law forbidding the "mingling of celebrations" by postulating that it is difficult for one to properly celebrate two smachot (celebrations) simultaneously. This is why we do not celebrate any weddings on a Chag (Jewish Holiday) or Chol Hamoed (the intermediate days of a holiday).

One might ask –What is the law when celebrating a wedding on the holiday of Purim? Does the law of "mingling Smachot" only apply to a holiday that is derived from the Torah (as Succot) or does it apply as well to a holiday which is mandated by our

Rabbis (as Purim is)? From the behavior of Lavan, it would seem that it really wouldn't matter- since the seven days of rejoicing following a marriage is certainly mandated by our Rabbis, yet Lavan with Jacob's concurrence waited the week so as not to mix the two Smachot.

Upon further investigation, one might also conclude that the law of mixing smachot is only applicable to a wedding, for a Brit Millah (Circumcision) and the subsequent festive meal (seudah), or a Pidyon Haben (the redeeming of a first born) would be celebrated on the holiday regardless of the conflict. Additionally the only time that we reference Simcha (joyousness) is at a wedding when we say the words Shehasimcha b'mono (the joyousness is present) and thus the true Simcha is at a wedding.

Additionally, according to Torah law, a man may marry several women at the same time under the same Chupah, or even (if not for the fear that it would cause enmity and jealousy) different couples may be married off at the same time under the same Chupah, and there would not be a problem with the "mingling of Smachot". Hence we might conclude that this law of "mingling" only applies when there are two distinct and different Smachot as with a wedding and a Chag, however when the smachot are all the same theme, this law would not apply.

If we apply all this to our Parsha, Lavan could have allowed the wedding of both Leah and Rachel simultaneously on condition that they would both celebrate the subsequent seven days of celebration (shivat yemei hamishte) separately. ©2016 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

RABBI DAVID S. LEVIN

What Motivates Lavan to Deceive?

Parashat Vayeitzei deals with the adventures of Ya'akov and Lavan in Aram Naharayim. We met Lavan when we saw how he dealt with Eliezer. We experienced his greed and his propensity to renegotiate any agreement that he had already signed. We also were introduced to Rivka's opinion of Lavan when she appeared hesitant yet resolute in sending Ya'akov to Lavan to escape Eisav. And we find in the beginning of this parasha, even when Ya'akov is extremely careful to specify "b'Rachel, bit'cha, hak'tanah, with Rachel, your daughter, the younger daughter" Lavan still replaces Rivka with Leah and appears unrelenting when confronted with this false "sale." We are therefore not surprised at Lavan's actions at the end of Ya'akov's service to him.

The final year of Ya'akov's "slavery" found Ya'akov in rising degrees of danger. The Torah tells us, "And he heard the words of the sons of Lavan saying, Ya'akov has taken all that was our father's and

from that which belong to our father he made all of this wealth (for himself). And Ya'akov saw the face of Lavan and behold it was not with him like before (yesterday and the day before yesterday)." Interestingly, the Torah reports the reaction of Lavan's sons before Lavan's reaction. HaRav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch explains that Lavan's previous behavior with his own father, Betuel, was now being mimicked by his own sons. Lavan interceded between Betuel and Eliezer, speaking before his own father in the negotiations for Rivka to become Yitzchak's wife so now his own sons spoke first in their growing hatred for Ya'akov.

The Torah continues, "And Hashem said to Ya'akov, return to the land of your fathers and to your birthplace and I will be with you. And Ya'akov sent and he called to Rachel and to Leah to the field to his sheep. And he said to them I see the face of your father and it is not with me as it was before and the Elokim of my father was with me." Hirsch explains that Ya'akov was telling his wives that when he understood Lavan's true feelings he realized that it was only because Hashem was with him that he had survived up until now. The Aznayim L'Torah understood this passage to mean that Lavan's sons actually changed their father's feelings and caused him to notice more clearly that even though he had prospered from Ya'akov's presence, he had become nowhere near as wealthy as Ya'akov during his years of servitude. This realization rekindled in Lavan the greed that was so much a part of his general character.

The Malbim explains the argument of the sons of Lavan. Their feeling was that Ya'akov had not really stolen the wealth of their father yet it appeared as if he had since he did not truly deserve any wages. Lavan had been too generous with Ya'akov. They felt that their father should have treated Ya'akov as a slave. We know from the Torah that in the case of a non-Jewish slave who is owned by a Jew, the slave maintains no possessions. The hand of the slave is considered the hand of the master. Generally, this is also true of a Jewish slave who is owned by a Jew. Of



course, their father, Lavan, had made a deal with Ya'akov. Ya'akov would be able to keep those animals which were born spotted, striped, or speckled depending on which Lavan decided at the time. Lavan had tried to cheat

Ya'akov by keeping all of the spotted, striped, or speckled animals separate from the white sheep which were the only ones from which Ya'akov could develop and breed his own flock of these sheep. Ya'akov outsmarted Lavan and produced large numbers of these sheep from their solid white parents. The sons then claimed that all the wealth that was now Ya'akov's had really come from their father as Ya'akov should have only used the discolored sheep to produce future animals for his flock. Logic is not a prerequisite for jealousy-based arguments.

Lavan listened to these statements and repeated these ideas when he chased after Ya'akov. "And Lavan said to Ya'akov, what did you do and you stole my heart and led my daughters away as captives of the sword. Why did you flee secretly and did steal from me, and did not tell me that I might have sent you away in joy and with song, with drum and with harp. And you did not permit me to kiss my sons and my daughters (grandchildren), now see how foolishly you have done." It should be noted here that Lavan discusses his sons and daughters. Even though he may be using that term as one would use the term today of "relative", it is clear that Lavan considers that everything that is Ya'akov's truly belongs to him. Lavan's next statements are a true indication of his character. "It lies within the power of my hand to do evil unto you, but the Elokim of your fathers spoke to me last night saying, be warned for yourself not to speak with Ya'akov from good to evil." Even though he has just finished telling Ya'akov that he considers these children to be his and these wives to still belong to him, Lavan was prepared to kill them all because he felt that they were stolen from him.

We are still at a loss as to the motivation of Lavan. We must look to the last Sefer of the Torah, Devarim, for a possible answer. One of the statements which a farmer would make when he brought his first produce to the Temple included the phrase, "An Aramite tried to destroy my father (Rashi's translation which coincides with the Haggadah's understanding)." His treatment of Ya'akov as a slave encouraged him to say in the end, "The daughters are mine and the sons are mine and the sheep are mine and all that you see are mine." Lavan was only interested in himself. His family, his daughters, and his grandchildren were possessions which glorified himself. Perhaps that is why Rachel stole the terafim, the family gods, his own personal gods which he possessed and controlled and who did his bidding, not the bidding of the community. Ya'akov did not speak of an individual's god but of one Hashem who governed all. Judaism is about community as opposed to the desires of any one person. Lavan understood that this was a break from his thinking and did not want his family to look down on him for his views. In order to do that he needed to destroy the future of Ya'akov's ideas. He was even

prepared to kill Ya'akov's wives and children, his daughters and grandchildren, to preserve his view of the world.

We see Lavan's view of the world and we understand why Judaism could never accept that. All Jews must be concerned with others and the world as a whole. May we each seek our own ways help the community in which we live. Only when our concern is for others do we see that our own needs are also fulfilled. ©2017 Rabbi D.S. Levin

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

Smokescreen

It just doesn't make sense. After more than twenty years of toiling in the house of Lavan (Laban), Yaakov (Jacob) wants out. He should have been entitled to. After all, he married Lavan's daughters in exchange for years of tending the sheep, He increased Lavan's livestock population many fold, and he was a faithful son-in-law despite a conniving huckster of a father-in-law. Yet when Yaakov leaves Lavan's home with his wives, children, and flocks, he sneaks out, fearing that Lavan would never let him leave. He is pursued by Lavan who chases him with a vengeance. But Yaakov is lucky. Hashem appears to Lavan in a dream and warns him not to harm Yaakov. Eventually, Lavan overtakes Yaakov and accosts him. "Why have you led my daughters away like captives of the sword? Why have you fled, secretly, without notifying me? Had you told me you wanted to leave I would have sent you off with song and music!" (Genesis 31:26-27)

Yaakov answers his father-in-law by declaring his fear. "You would have stolen your daughters from me." Lavan then searched all of Yaakov's belongings looking for idols missing from his collection. Yaakov was outraged. He simply did not understand what Lavan wanted. Yaakov responds to the attack by detailing the tremendous amount of selfless work, through scorching heat and freezing nights, that he toiled in order to make Lavan a wealthy man. Reviewing the care and concern that he had for his wives and children, Yaakov declares that he is not worthy of the mean-spirited attacks made by his father-in-law, Lavan. And," Yaakov adds, "If not for the protection of Hashem, Lavan would have sent me away empty handed." (Genesis 31:38-42)

Yet Lavan is unmoved. Like a stoic, unyielding dictator, Lavan responds. "The daughters are my daughters, the children are my children, the flock is my flock and all that you see is mine." (Genesis 31:43)

What can be going on in Lavan's mind? What motivates a man to be so selfish and unreasonable?

My friend Reb Yossel Czopnik told me the following true story about Yankel, a heavy smoker who went to see a certain hypnotist who had cured a large number of people. In a method that combined hypnosis,

electrodes, and a little cajoling while placing little metal balls behind the ears, patients swore that the urge to smoke had been totally eradicated from their minds.

Yankel went to the doctor and underwent the entire ritual. The balls went behind his ears, the electrodes were attached to his temples, and the doctor began to talk.

"Let me ask you, Yankel," questioned the doctor of the well wired patient, "every time you inhale a cigarette do you know what is happening? Close your eyes and imagine your lips puckered around the tail pipe of a New York City bus! Now, take a deep breath. Imagine all those noxious fumes filling your lungs! That is what the cigarettes are doing to you!"

Yankel went home that night still wanting a smoke but decided to hold off.

"Maybe it takes one night," he thought.

The next morning nothing seemed to change. In fact, on his way to work, he had queasy feelings. As soon as he entered his office Yankel picked up the telephone and called the doctor.

"So," asked the doctor, "How do you feel? I'm sure you didn't have a cigarette yet! I bet you have no desire for them anymore!"

Yankel was hesitant. "Honestly, Doc. I'm not sure. One thing I can tell you, however. All morning long, on my way to work I was chasing city buses!"

Lavan just wouldn't get it. No matter how clearly Yaakov explained his case, twenty years of work, the devoted labor under scorching heat and freezing cold, Lavan just stood unmoved. "The daughters are my daughters, the children are my children, and whatever you have is mine."

When the sickness of egocentrism overtakes the emotional stability of a human soul; one can talk, cajole, or persuade. The Almighty can even appear in a dream and do his part. It is helpless. Unless one actually takes the initiative to realize his or her shortcomings, anything that anyone may tell them is only a blast of noxious air. ©1997 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky & torah.org

YOUNG ISRAEL OF PASSIAC-CLIFTON

Angels, Shepherds and Stones

by Rabbi JB Love

Yaacov (in fear of his brother) leaves B'er Sheva and goes toward Charan.

Vayifga - he happens upon a place, he takes *avanim* - stones, for his head he dreams of *malachim* - angels, he makes a *matzeva* - monument.⁴ He calls the shepherds *achai* - my brothers, they are waiting to (*v*)*gal(elu)* - roll the large *even* - stone off the well.

⁴ That Yaacov sets up a *matzeva* after seeing a ladder *mutzav* on the ground and G-D *nitzav* above it, is impressive literary style.

It is at this point that Yaacov meets his future wife and begins his twenty year stint as shepherd and competitor with Lavan. Upon seeing that he is no longer welcome and having received instructions from G-D (in a dream of angels), Yaacov consults with his wives and (in fear of Lavan) leaves Charan and goes toward B'er Sheva. Lavan catches up and they make a treaty.

Yaacov sets up *matzeva* - monument and he and *echav* - his "brothers"⁵ gather *avanim* - stones to form a *gal* - mound. Yaacov then *va'yifg'u* - happens to be met by *malachim* - angels.

Yaacov's exile has a definite beginning and a definite end. Verbatim. The verb *pg'* is clearly used to set off this *parasha*. The first exile of his children to Bavel had a specific beginning and a specific end.⁶

Yaacov will put up yet another *matzeva*,⁷ the one upon the grave of his beloved Rachel. Yet another *malach* will play an important part in his life before his *galus* is over and yet another will begin the *galus* of Yosef.⁸ A brother (*ach*) is Yaacov's nemesis, the cause of his exile and, once again, the same applies to Yosef.

This may be the story of Yaacov and Lavan, but the words in the subtext point to the story of Yaacov and Rachel. Which is the story of Yaacov and Yosef. In fact the story of Yaacov's travels doesn't really end until that *matzeva* is put up at Rachel's grave. The *galus* doesn't end until Rachel is placed where she may elicit the promise of the end of *galus*. Though Yaacov was on his way back to *Bais El* from the moment he decided to leave Lavan's house, he doesn't actually go there until after Rachel dies. Only after that *matzeva* is set up does he redo the original *matzeva* ceremony and rename the place *Bais El*. Even the sheep which play such a prominent part in this weeks story are a hint to Rachel's name.⁹

His decision to leave Lavan's house is made directly after the birth of Yosef, the "spark" which would consume the "straw" of Esav.¹⁰ Even Yaacov's

relationship with Yosef doesn't end without reference to the burial of Rachel.¹¹ Yaacov and Yosef both will die in *galus*. Their dream of the end of *galus* is incomplete without the mention of Rachel's burial.

Shepherding too is no small part of the story. Yaacov's last words to the children of his beloved Yosef concern "*Elo-im haroeh osi*" the G-D who shepherded me, and "*hamalach hagoel*"¹² the angel who saved him. Yaacov's last words to Yosef include, "*roeh even yisrael*," the shepherd (of) the rock of Israel?¹³ Angels shepherds and stones.¹⁴ Rachel even shows up in the final confrontation between Yaacov and Lavan and Chazal see this incident as foreshadowing her early death.¹⁵

This is the story of *galus*. The story of *galus* is the story of Rachel and Yosef. Rachel never comes home because she must be the mother to those who go out to *galus*.¹⁶ Her's are the bitter cries at the sight of the first exile. She is the witness to the *galus*, the *gal-ed*.¹⁷ And it is her Yosef who is the shepherd of the second *galus*. Wait as we may for the *mashiach* of Yehuda, the *galus*, our *galus*, Esav and his hosts, must fall to the spark which is Yosef.

Wait as we may for the shepherd and pray as we may for Rachel's eyes to cease weeping, we must first unite the stones at the head of Yaacov to become the one *even yisrael*. The *malach hagoel* who has protected us since *vayetze* Yaacov will greet us upon our return, *v'shavu banim ligvulam*.



children of Yaacov, Yosef."

¹¹ B'raishis 42:7

¹² Ibid. 48:15 & 16

¹³ Ibid. 49:25. According to many commentators, Yosef is the *roeh even yisrael*.

¹⁴ Chazal (Midrash Rabba 68:11) say twelve stones were laid out by Yaacov and they turned into one - the *even yisrael*. It was this twelve-part whole which was shepherded by Yosef.

¹⁵ V. Rashi to 31:32. Chazal see the moment of their meeting the same way. (Rashi to 29:11)

¹⁶ Yirmiyahu 31. V. the beautiful midrash in Rashi to B'raishis 48:7.

¹⁷ Translated, by the way, into Aramaic. (31:47)

⁵ V. Rashi to 31:46. This is a strange term used here and it calls our attention to the words.

⁶ As opposed to his second exile from which he did not return alive, nor, unfortunately, is the end in sight. His first exile was caused by a virtual outsider, his second by strife internal to the *shivtei yisrael*.

⁷ And the word will be repeated three times in the same *pasuk*, B'raishis 35:20. Yaacov will put up still another in an exact repetition of the ceremony at the start of our *parasha* (32:14), but more about that later.

⁸ V. Rashi to B'raishis 37:15.

⁹ A *rachel* is a ewe and, "Rachel comes with the sheep" (29:6). Rachel is a *roah*, shepherdess, as Yaacov is later referred to as being *roeh* the sheep of Lavan. The shepherds whom Yaacov meets upon his arrival in Charan are called *a'darim*, keepers of flocks. He admonishes them to go shepherd, underlining the fact that they weren't. It is the *roeh* that plays a part in the Yosef story, *e'der*, flocks are mentioned in connection with Esav.

¹⁰ V. Rashi to 30:25. This beautiful midrash is repeated by Rashi zl on 37:2 where Chazal read, "These are the