

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

The events narrated in this week's parsha -- Jacob's flight to Laban, his stay there, and his escape, pursued by his father-in-law -- gave rise to the strangest passage in the Haggadah. Commenting on Deuteronomy 26:5, the passage we expound on Seder night, it says as follows: Arami oved avi. Go and learn what Laban the Aramean sought to do to our father Jacob, for Pharaoh condemned only the boys to death, but Laban sought to uproot everything.

There are three problems with this text. First, it understands the words arami oved avi to mean, "[Laban] an Aramean [tried to] destroy my father." But this cannot be the plain sense of the verse because, as Ibn Ezra points out, oved is an intransitive verb. It cannot take an object. It means "lost," "wandering," "fugitive," "poor," "homeless," or "on the brink of perishing." The phrase therefore means something like, "My father was a wandering Aramean." The "father" referred to is either Jacob (Ibn Ezra, Sforno), or Abraham (Rashbam), or all the patriarchs (Shadal). As for the word Aram, this was the region from which Abraham set out to travel to Canaan, and to which Jacob fled to escape the anger of Esau. The general sense of the phrase is that the patriarchs had no land and no permanent home. They were vulnerable. They were nomads. As for Laban, he does not appear in the verse at all, except by a very forced reading.

Secondly, there is no evidence that Laban the Aramean actually harmed Jacob. To the contrary, as he was pursuing Jacob (but before he caught up with him) it is written: "God appeared to Laban the Aramean in a dream by night and said to him, 'Beware of attempting anything with Jacob, good or bad'" (Gen. 31:24). Laban himself said to Jacob, "I have it in my power to do you harm; but the God of your father said to me last night, 'Beware of attempting anything with Jacob, good or bad.'" So Laban did nothing to Jacob and his family. He may have wanted to, but in the end he did not. Pharaoh, by contrast, did not merely contemplate doing

evil to the Israelites; he actually did so, killing every male child and enslaving the entire population.

Third, and most fundamental: the Seder night is dedicated to retelling the story of the Exodus. We are charged to remember it, engrave it on the hearts of our children, and "the more one tells of the coming out of Egypt, the more admirable it is." Why then diminish the miracle by saying in effect: "Egypt? That was nothing compared to Laban!"

All this is very strange indeed. Let me suggest an explanation. We have here a phrase with two quite different meanings, depending on the context in which we read it.

Originally the text of Arami oved avi had nothing to do with Pesach. It appears in the Torah as the text of the declaration to be said on bringing first-fruits to the Temple, which normally happened on Shavuot.

Then you shall declare before the Lord your God: "My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt... Then the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm... He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey; and now I bring the first-fruits of the soil that You, Lord, have given me." (Deut. 26:5-10).

In the context of first-fruits, the literal translation, "My father was a wandering Aramean," makes eminent sense. The text is contrasting the past when the patriarchs were nomads, forced to wander from place to place, with the present when, thanks to God, the Israelites have a land of their own. The contrast is between homelessness and home. But that is specifically when we speak about first-fruits -- the produce of the land.

At some stage, however, the passage was placed in another context, namely Pesach, the Seder and the story of the Exodus. The Mishnah (Pesachim 10:4) specifies that it be read and expounded on Seder night. Almost certainly the reason is that same (relatively rare) verb h-g-d, from which the word Haggadah is derived, occurs both in connection with telling the story of Pesach (Ex. 13:8), and making the first-fruits declaration (Deut. 26:3).

This created a significant problem. The passage does indeed deal with going down to Egypt, being persecuted there, and being brought out by God. But what is the connection between "My father was a

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wandering/fugitive Aramean" and the Exodus? The patriarchs and matriarchs lived a nomadic life. But that was not the reason they went down to Egypt. They did so because there was a famine in the land, and because Joseph was viceroy. It had nothing to do with wandering.

The Sages, however, understood something deep about the narratives of the patriarchs and matriarchs. They formulated the principle that *ma'asei avot siman lebanim*, "What happened to the fathers was a sign for the children." They saw that certain passages in Genesis could only be understood as a forerunner, a prefiguration, of later events.

(The principle does not appear explicitly in these terms in the classic Midrashic or Talmudic literature. A similar expression appears in Bereishit Rabbah 39:8. A key text is Ramban, Commentary to Gen. 12:6, 10. It was widely adopted by subsequent commentators.)

The classic example occurs in Genesis 12 when, almost immediately after arriving in the land of Canaan, Abraham and Sarah were forced into exile in Egypt. Abraham's life was at risk. Sarah was taken into Pharaoh's harem. God then struck Pharaoh's household with plagues, and Pharaoh sent them away. The parallels between this and the story of the Exodus are obvious.

Something similar happened to Abraham and Sarah later on in Gerar (Gen. 20), as it did, also in Gerar, to Isaac and Rebecca (Genesis 26). But did Jacob undergo his own prefiguration of the exodus? He did, late in life, go down to Egypt with his family. But this was not in anticipation of the Exodus. It was the Exodus itself.

Earlier, in our parsha, he had gone into exile, but this was not because of famine. It was out of fear for Esau. Nor was it to a land of strangers. He was travelling to his mother's own family. Jacob seems to be the only one of the patriarchs not to live out, in advance, the experience of exile and exodus.

The Sages, however, realised otherwise. Living with Laban, he had lost his freedom. He had become, in effect, his father-in-law's slave. Eventually he had to escape, without letting Laban know he was going. He knew that, if he could, Laban would keep him in his household as a kind of prisoner.

In this respect, Jacob's experience was closer to the Exodus than that of Abraham or Isaac. No one stopped Abraham or Isaac from leaving. No one pursued them. And no one treated them badly. It was Jacob's experience in the house of Laban that was the sharpest prefiguration of the Exodus. "What happened to the fathers was a sign for the children."

But where does Laban come into the phrase, *Arami oved avi*, "A wandering Aramean was my father"? Answer: only Laban and Laban's father Betuel are called Arami or *ha-Arami* in the whole Torah. Therefore Arami means "Laban."

How do we know that he sought to do Jacob harm? Because God appeared to him at night and said "Beware of attempting anything with Jacob, good or bad." God would not have warned Laban against doing anything to Jacob, had Laban not intended to do so. God does not warn us against doing something we were not about to do anyway. Besides which, the next day, Laban said to Jacob, "I have it in my power to do you harm." That was a threat. It is clear that had God not warned him, he would indeed have done Jacob harm.

How can we read this into the verse? Because the root *a-v-d*, which means "lost, wandering," might also, in the *piel* or *hiphil* grammatical tenses, mean, "to destroy." Of course, Laban did not destroy "my father" or anyone else. But that was because of Divine intervention. Hence the phrase could be taken to mean, "[Laban] the Aramean [tried to] destroy my father." This is how Rashi understands it.

What then are we to make of the phrase, "Pharaoh condemned only the boys to death, but Laban sought to uproot everything"? The answer is not that Laban sought to kill all the members of Jacob's family. Quite the opposite. He said to Jacob: "The women are my daughters, the children are my children, and the flocks are my flocks. All you see is mine" (Gen. 31:43). Jacob had worked for some twenty years to earn his family and flocks. Yet Laban still claimed they were his own. Had God not intervened, he would have kept Jacob's entire family as prisoners. That is how he "sought to uproot everything" by denying them all the chance to go free.

This interpretation of *Arami oved avi* is not the plain sense. But the plain sense related this passage to the bringing first-fruits. It was the genius of the Sages to give it an interpretation that connected it with Pesach and the Exodus. And though it gives a far-fetched reading of the phrase, it gives a compelling interpretation to the entire narrative of Jacob in Laban's house. It tells us that the third of the patriarchs, whose descent to Egypt would actually begin the story of the Exodus, had himself undergone an exodus experience in his youth. (On this whole subject, see David Daube, *The Exodus Pattern in the Bible*, Faber, 1963.)

Ma'asei avot siman lebanim, "the act of the

fathers are a sign to their children," tells us that what is happening now has happened before. That does not mean that danger is to be treated lightly. But it does mean that we should never despair. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and their wives experienced exile and exodus as if to say to their descendants, this is not unknown territory. God was with us then; He will be with you now.

I believe that we can face the future without fear because we have been here before and because we are not alone. *Covenant and Conversation 5780 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l* © 2019 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"And Jacob kissed Rachel, and he lifted up his voice and he wept" (Gen 29:11) The Bible presents two models for finding one's life partner: the Isaac-Rebekah arranged marriage model, and the romantic Jacob-Rachel model. In both instances, there must be "love" (ahava): The Bible informs us that "Isaac brought [Rebekah] into the tent of Sarah his mother, he took Rebekah and she became his wife, and he loved her..." (Genesis 24:67); and in our portion, when Laban asks Jacob what remuneration he wants for his work, the Torah records that "Jacob loved Rachel, and so he said, 'I shall work for you for seven years in exchange for marrying Rachel, your younger daughter'" (Gen. 29:18).

The major difference between these models is that with Isaac and Rebekah, the love came after the marriage, whereas with Jacob and Rachel, love preceded the marriage. In both cases, however, the Bible emphasizes that love is fundamental to relationships.

The Talmud likewise speaks of the "love" component, "It is forbidden for a man to betroth a woman unless he sees [comes to know] her, lest he find in her something unseemly and she becomes distasteful to him; for the Torah teaches, 'You must love your friend like yourself.'" (B.T. Kiddushin 41a); Maimonides rules that the woman also has the right to choose her mate. (Laws of Marriage 19:3).

It is fascinating that Rabbi Yehuda (Judah bar Ezekiel, 220–299 CE) records in the name of Rav that the law of "loving your friend like yourself" applies to husband and wife – perhaps he would maintain that this is the fullest compliance of the command.

This is reminiscent of the magnificent verse regarding the very first married couple, Adam and Eve: "...This time she is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.... Therefore, shall a man leave his father and mother, join together with his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (Gen. 2:23, 24) The Ramban (Nahmanides) explains "one flesh" as referring to the

act of sexual intercourse which unites both individuals; Rashi interprets it as referring to "the child formed by the two parents." From this perspective, "love" includes the desire to join physically with one's mate as well as to have children with him/her.

Among the seven marital blessings recited under the nuptial canopy and in Grace after Meals for seven days following the wedding, we find the best description I know of a married couple: re'im ahuvim, loving and beloved friends, drawn from Rav's verse.

If we can define love as sexual attraction towards a partner with whom we would wish to continue the Jewish narrative into future generations, "friendship" would suggest a relationship of complete and unabashed honesty, mutual respect, and commonly held ideals and values.

If all of these criteria are present in a relationship, then I would say the two people are "in love." However, one doesn't just "fall" in love; one must actively work to see that love continues and grows.

Love requires nurturing – giving time every day to the relationship, with a sharing of ideas, emotions and events which make two individuals more and more of a united entity. Each must be encouraged to grow and develop independently, but there must be sufficient sharing to allow both people to grow together as one even as they develop themselves. Hence there must be a "will to love" and to create a stable and lasting family environment (see Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving*.) To return to our portion.

We are told that when the fleeing Jacob arrived in the town where his mother's family dwelt, he found shepherds gathering together to lift the boulder from atop the well so that they could give water to their sheep. "But when Jacob saw Rachel, he singlehandedly uncovered the stone from atop the well and gave water to her sheep..." (Gen. 29:10).

The amazing power of love – love at first sight.

Immediately thereafter, the Bible notes "Jacob kissed Rachel and he lifted up his voice and wept." Why did he weep? A student of mine once suggested that perhaps he wept because he kissed her before they were married, transgressing the prohibition of touching a woman who is not your wife. One of the commentaries suggests that since he kissed her on the hand, it was an act of one relative to another without any erotic content.

But Rashi makes two other suggestions. The first is that Jacob cried because he didn't have any gifts to give her, since Eliphaz the son of Esau had stolen all the gifts that Jacob had brought for his kinspeople.

From here, we see that one should give gifts to one's fiancée and also to one's wife throughout one's marriage. Everyone wants to know that they are appreciated. The Rambam (Maimonides) rules that every husband should give his wife a gift on every festival. Even though the author Erich Segal wrote,

"Love means never having to say you're sorry," I would contend that love means always being the first to say you're sorry and giving frequent gifts.

Rashi's second interpretation is even more poignant. Jacob saw that he wouldn't be buried together with his beloved Rachel, since he would be laid to eternal rest in the "Cave of the Couples" (Ma'arat Hamachpela) and she would be buried in Bethlehem on the road to Efrat.

I interpret this to mean that Jacob saw that in the order of things, towards the end of their lives there would be an enforced separation; usually one partner predeceases the other. And the bitter price that one pays for loving is the necessity of an ultimate existential separation. ©2019 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Rashi quotes the well-known Rabbinic observation that the departure of a righteous person from a society is an indelible loss to the community. Now I do not want to sound like a heretic, God forbid, but for many years I was troubled by this statement. From my personal experience and observation of life, I did not always find this to be realistic and accurate.

I have lived in many communities and when a great man from that community passed away or left to live in a different area, life in that original community seemed to go on as usual. Everyone certainly missed the presence of that great person but after a few days no one's life seemed to be truly altered or affected by that person's absence. The bitter truth of life is that out of sight is out of mind. Therefore, I have always struggled to understand the deep meaning of what Rashi quotes.

As I have aged, hopefully gracefully, I am beginning to gain a glimmer of understanding into those words and an insight into that sublime message. A certain community had a distinct problem and for various reasons contacted me to hear my opinion as to how it should handle the situation. That community had a great and wise person whom I knew personally, living there for half a century. While that person was alive, the community had no need to call upon any outside person for advice or counsel.

But now that the person was no longer present and this problem had arisen and threatened to cause irreparable harm to the fabric of the community, they and I agreed that though this wise person would have been able to solve the problem equitably and peacefully, they needed to turn to outside sources for help. At that moment, they felt the absence of this great man and even though no one human being is indispensable, so too no human being is ever replaceable either.

When Yaakov left Be'er Sheva, I imagine that not everyone took notice of his absence. Everyone in

Be'er Sheva got up the next morning and went about their usual daily tasks. However, it is obvious that in the twenty-two years of Yaakov's absence from that community, problems and issues arose that had he been present he would have been consulted on and would have helped solve. It was at these moments that the full realization of Yaakov's absence became apparent. As was observed by Rashi, about the absence of a good and wise person, it is at these times that it becomes real and evident to all.

Such is the nature of life, that much greatness and goodness is not appreciated until somehow it – in the form of a human being – is no longer present within that society. We always see things much more clearly in retrospect than we do in the present. This is an important lesson that is worthy of our consideration. ©2019 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. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

How is it possible that Ya'akov (Jacob) didn't know that he spent his wedding night with Leah rather than Rachel? The text says, "and it came to pass in the morning and behold it was Leah – ve'hinei hi Leah." (Genesis 29:25) Some commentators suggest that this reveals the extraordinary modesty of Ya'akov and Leah – all through the night, they did not see or even speak to each other. (Radak)

The Talmud explains that Ya'akov could have been fooled in another way. Suspecting that Lavan (Lavan, Leah and Rachel's father) would switch Leah for Rachel, Ya'akov gave Rachel signs through which she could identify herself to him. When at the last moment, Lavan exchanged Leah for Rachel, Rachel feared Leah would be embarrassed, and gave her sister the special signs. (Megillah 13b)

But all this leads to another question. If in fact Ya'akov didn't know it was Leah, how could the marriage have been legitimate? Isn't this a classic case of an agreement which is considered null and void because of faulty assumptions, known as mekah ta'ut?

Perhaps it can be said that Ya'akov's surprise came that evening, yet he still accepted Leah as his wife. When the text indicates that on the next morning "behold, it was Leah," it is the community that learned of the switch.

Outside of these attempts to understand Ya'akov being fooled, there is a kabbalistic approach. This approach teaches something fundamental about love. Rachel represents the woman Ya'akov thought he was marrying. But it is often the case that once married, we find elements in our spouse's personality of which we were previously unaware. These unknown factors are represented by Leah. In any relationship, there will

be pieces of our partner's character that take us by surprise.

When this occurs, the challenge is to improve or make peace with that side of our beloved and realize that love means accepting the whole person.

But, it can be that this hidden side is a positive one that never formerly surfaced. These traits have the capacity to add vibrancy and a new excitement to the relationship. At times, these new qualities can even turn out to be exactly what was always needed. In the words of Rabbi David Aaron, "Leah was not Jacob's bride of choice, but she was actually a great source of blessing to him..." (Endless Light, p. 38).

"Behold it was Leah" teaches that in every relationship there will always be an element of surprise, the element that we don't consciously choose, the element which may turn out to be our beloved's greatest blessing. © 2019 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 JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"And Yaakov lifted up his feet and went to the land of the Easterners" (Beraishis 29:1) Every word in the Torah is a lesson for us. Instead of saying that Yaakov went, the Torah says "he lifted his legs." What is the message here?

Rashi quotes the Midrash that after the good news that Hashem would watch over him, Yaakov's heart lifted him up and made his feet feel lighter. This teaches us that a person who is happy doesn't feel the burdens of the road.

Taken further, the Sforno tells us that when the Torah describes someone undertaking a journey of his own volition, he lifts up his feet. When they are doing what they are commanded to do, even if they are not opposed to it, but the initiative is not theirs, their legs are said to carry them. In his dream, Hashem told Yaakov He would return him home, but now we see that once Hashem told Yaakov that He would be with him, it was Yaakov's initiative to move forward and return home.

The Kli Yakar seems to offer a much more common sense approach which is that while previously Yaakov made his way through a miraculous shortening of the distance of travel, he now had to return without the benefit of miracles, but only through his own physical effort, actually putting one foot in front of the other.

By meshing all these explanations, we come out with a wonderful, empowering lesson that we can all use. Yaakov experienced many trials and tribulations. Hashem assured him that he would be taken care of. The trust he had in Hashem lightened the burden on Yaakov's mind to the extent that even his

body felt lighter and his exertions seemed less.

Being freed of the anxiety enables a person to strike out on their own and take on new challenges without fear or pain. Obstacles don't stop him and he laughs at difficulties. And there's an even more amazing finish here. The Kli Yakar says that before, Yaakov had miracles, and now, he only had his own effort. What this says to us is the most amazing lesson of all: positivity and Bitachon, complete confidence in Hashem, enable us to make our own miracles!

By casting our burdens upon Hashem, we can go forward without fear and reach destinations and goals that might have seemed beyond us before. Optimism and positivity improve your Mazel and make things go better for you. When we are happy we succeed more than when we complain. It worked for Yaakov and it can work for us.

One cold winter day Rabbi Nosson Adler was traveling with his esteemed talmid, the Chasam Sofer. The horses pulling the wagon trudged through the heavy snow with great difficulty. Suddenly, one of the horses collapsed and died, and the second horse was not strong enough to pull the wagon alone. The wagon driver, having no other choice, starting walking to the nearest village to obtain an additional horse. The two saintly passengers waited in the wagon.

Eventually, the wagon driver returned, leading... a donkey. When Rav Nosson saw the donkey approaching, he descended from the wagon, and began to dance happily in the snow. "Rebbi," asked the Chasam Sofer, "Why are you so happy?"

"Don't you see?" asked Rav Nosson. "The wagon driver brought a donkey instead of a horse. Who would have ever thought that I would merit fulfilling the mitzva of, "Do not plow with an ox and donkey together"? In Frankfurt, I never imagined that I would merit fulfilling this commandment. Now that Baruch Hashem, I merited it, I am filled with joy!"

Unfazed by cold or the delay, the venerated passengers kindly instructed the wagon driver to return the donkey, and he brought back a horse in its place. © 2019 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr

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 bmono (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 MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

Sheepish Leadership

Sheep. You wouldn't think they'd play a major role in determining our leaders, but they did. The Midrash says that one of Moshe's defining acts that moved G-d to choose him as the leader of Israel was his attitude toward his animal flock. Once a ewe wandered from the pack, and Moshe scoured the desert to find it. He finally found the parched and

exhausted creature, and he fed and carried her back to the rest of the flock. G-d was impressed. On the way home, Moshe saw a very fascinating sight. A burning bush. The rest is history.

King David was also a shepherd. The Midrash tells us that David's handling of sheep was also the impetus for G-d to choose him to lead His flock. David had a very calculated grazing system. First he would allow only the young sheep to pasture. They would eat the most tender grass. After they finished, David allowed the older sheep to graze. In this manner the tougher meadow grass was left for those sheep with stronger jaws. The Midrash tells us that G-d was impressed with David's abilities to discern the different needs of varying age groups and foresaw in those actions the leadership qualities needed to be King of Israel.

So much for the careers of two of our greatest Jewish leaders as shepherds. What troubles me is this week's Torah portion which contains a long episode that also deals with sheep. It expounds in detail exactly how Yaakov manipulated genetics and had the acumen to cultivate an amazingly large and diverse flock. However, I am troubled. Why is a long narrative of seemingly inconsequential breeding techniques detailed so intricately? The Torah spends nearly twenty verses on a half-dozen varieties of sheep colors and explains how Yaakov bred them. Why are such seemingly insignificant breeding details given so much play in the Torah? Let us analyze the story:

Yaakov worked fifteen years for his father-in-law, Lavan. No matter how arduously he toiled, Lavan constantly tried to deny Yaakov compensation. Finally, he forced Yaakov to accept a share in the sheep as wages, but only with certain stipulations. He would only compensate him with sheep that were an mutation from the normal flock. First, he set Yaakov's wages to be paid with only speckled lambs that born of Yaakov's flock. Yaakov, in a procedure that would have astounded even Gregor Mendel, produced sheep exactly according to those specifications. Next, Lavan allowed him striped sheep. Again, miraculously Yaakov cultivated his flock to produce a bounty of striped sheep! The Torah repeats the episode in various colors and stripes. What could be the significance of its importance?

Rabbi Aryeh Levin was once standing outside his yeshiva in Jerusalem while the children were on a 15 minute recess break. His son, Chaim, a teacher in the yeshiva, was standing and observing, when suddenly his father tuned to him. "What do you see my son?" asked Rav Aryeh. "Why," he answered, "children playing!"

"Tell me about them," said Reb Aryeh. "Well," answered Reb Chaim, "Dovid is standing near the door of the school, with his hands in his pockets, he probably is no athlete. Moishie is playing wildly, he probably is

undisciplined. Yankel is analyzing how the clouds are drifting. I guess he was not counted in the game. But all in all they are just a bunch of children playing." Reb Aryeh turned to him and exclaimed, "No, my son. You don't know how to watch the children.

"Dovid is near the door with his hands in his pockets because he has no sweater. His parents can't afford winter clothes for him. Moishie is wild because his Rebbe scolded him and he is frustrated. And Yankel is moping because his mother is ill and he bears the responsibility to help with the entire household.

"In order to be a Rebbe you must know each boy's needs and make sure to give him the proper attention to fulfill those needs."

Yaakov had a very difficult task. His mission was to breed twelve tribes -- each to be directed in a unique path. Some sons were to be merchants, others scholars. Judah was destined for royalty, while Levi was suited to be a teacher of the common folk. Each son, like each Jew, had a special mission. Hashem needed a father for the twelve tribes who would not breed all his children in the same mold. If Moshe's and David's destinies were determined by their care and compassion for their animal flock, perhaps Yaakov's development of twelve tribes was pre-determined by his development of a wide array of his flock. Only someone who knew how to cultivate unity in diversity would know how to produce the forebearers of the Jewish nation.
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RABBI DAVID LEVIN

And I Did Not Know

When Ya'akov is sent away from his family to protect him from his brother, Eisav, we are told in a Midrash that he went to study in the Yeshiva of Shem and Eiver before he began his journey to Lavan's house to choose a bride. When he began this second part of his journey which would require that he leave his Land, Ya'akov passed by the Mountain upon which his father, Yitzchak, had been offered as a sacrifice. As he approached the Mountain, it suddenly became dark as the sun set. Ya'akov lay down to sleep and experienced the vision of a ladder with angels ascending and descending. Hashem appeared to him in this dream and promised to protect him and return him to his land and grant him many children.

A Midrash informs us that Ya'akov almost missed the opportunity to pray at this important mountain. Ya'akov left in haste, and Hashem enabled him to travel as far as Haran, Lavan's home, in one short journey. Only upon arriving did he realize that he had not taken the opportunity to pray at this mountain where Hashem had appeared to his father and grandfather. The Ramban tells us that he decided that he wished to return, and Hashem caused the earth to spring him to the mountain's location. The Ramban

argues with Rashi who says that Hashem caused the mountain to spring to Ya'akov in Beit El rather than remain in Jerusalem. Being a Midrash, it is not the facts which are important but the message that is taught by the Midrash. In Rashi's understanding, Hashem caused the mountain to meet Ya'akov as he was returning from Haran. This indicates that Hashem will meet each person who seeks a closer relationship with Him and assist that person to accomplish his goal. The Ramban's understanding is the emphasis on the uniqueness of this mountain where Hashem caused Himself to dwell among the people. That uniqueness remains whether or not there exists a Temple, Hashem's House, upon the Mountain.

Ya'akov fell asleep and dreamed. When Ya'akov awoke from this dream, he realized that he had just experienced his first prophecy. He made a statement and then offered a contract to Hashem: Hashem will protect and provide for him and he will make Hashem his G-d. There are, however, two p'sukim prior to this contract which are very significant: "Ya'akov awoke from his sleep and said, 'Surely Hashem is present in this place and I did not know!' And he became frightened and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of Elokim and this is the gate of the Heavens.'"

Many of the meforshim, commentators, attempt to deal with the meaning of Ya'akov's words, "and I did not know." Rashi explains that had Ya'akov known that he was in the presence of Hashem, he would not have laid down. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin does not accept this explanation. We must remember that this is prophecy and that all prophecy (except Moshe's) was in the form of a dream or vision while in some form of hypnotic state. Rashi said that Ya'akov slept, but HaRav Sorotzkin explained that only his soul slept but his body remained alert (similar to a hypnotic state) so that he would be able to interact through this vision or dream. HaRav Sorotzkin also explained that had Ya'akov not been in this relaxed state, he would have lost the opportunity of his first prophecy, his first real encounter with Hashem. S'forno appears to synthesize the two arguments by saying that had Ya'akov known that Hashem was present, he would have prepared himself for prophecy. What is unclear from S'forno was how Ya'akov could have known that something special was to take place.

The Or HaChaim gives us a clue as to what Ya'akov could have noticed which would have hinted to him that something special was taking place. As Ya'akov began his journey to Lavan's house, he passed by the place where his father was bound when suddenly the sun set and it quickly became dark. Ya'akov either did not notice that the sunset came earlier than its prescribed time or he simply could not think of a reason for this occurrence. Only after he slept and had the dream of the angels on the ladder,

did he understand that he experienced prophecy and that this place was the house of Hashem. HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that this place was different than other places in the world. "[Ya'akov] modestly ascribes the proximity of Hashem, not to himself, but to the place. So there is no necessity to go to heaven to look for Hashem, but where a guiltless man lays down his head, Hashem is there!" According to Hirsch, this is what Ya'akov means when he says, "I did not know." I did not know that Hashem would follow me wherever I lay my head.

Ya'akov understood now that this place was unique; "This is none other than the abode of Elokim and this is the gate of the Heavens." He understood that Hashem had assisted him to return to the Mountain before sunset. He understood that the sun had set early so that he would be in that place overnight to receive his first prophetic discourse with Hashem. Both the Or HaChaim and HaRav Sorotzkin remark that Hashem purposefully brought on the darkness so that Ya'akov would sleep in "beit m'lono, His hotel". This is Hashem's House and the place that He has chosen as His dwelling place on earth. That is why it is determined to be the gates of the Heavens. Nowhere else on earth can Man find a place that is so open for his prayers to be heard and answered. Hirsch describes "the House of Hashem, a house into which Hashem moves, that a human life can be, and should be, such, that when the ascending angels seek Hashem in heaven, they have to come down to find Him amongst mankind."

We no longer have the Temples that had been built on the Mountain as Hashem's House. We no longer have the daily service that was performed by the Kohanim on the Mount. We no longer have control over the Mount even though it is owned by Israel. But we do have the Holiness, the uniqueness, of the Mount and Hashem's presence and designation that this is the gate of the Heavens. Part of that Holiness has been spread to our places of worship where Hashem's presence is also apparent. Perhaps this is why our Rabbis insist that our prayers are more readily heard when spoken in a congregation of men. Even though we are permitted to pray in private, we are all encouraged to attend a synagogue, even if uttering one's prayers when no one else is there. May we not lose the opportunity to join with others even when making an individual request. May we continue to support each other as we each become closer to Hashem. ©2019 Rabbi D. Levin

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In his dream Yaakov Avinu saw angels going up the ladder that led to heaven and coming down again. The medrash offers various interpretations of this image. One of the understandings presented by the

medrash is that the angels going up and down represented the historical rise and fall of various nations, with the angels representing the sar of those various nations.

The medrash continues to explain that Hakadosh Baruch Hu told Yaakov Avinu, "now it is your turn to climb up the ladder to represent the success of the Jewish people." Yaakov was afraid to do so, for the angels of all the other nations ultimately went down again, representing the fall of all those nations, and he didn't want the Jewish people to fall. Whereupon Hakadosh Baruch Hu told Yaakov not to fear; "I will be with you. I will hold your hand. The Jewish people will not disappear."

The entire existence of the Jewish people from its very outset was not natural. According to tradition, the avos and imahos were akorim ; b'derech hateva none of us should exist. This is the simple meaning of the Talmudic statement (Shabbos 156), " ein mazal l'Yisroel." According to the Ramban, " mazel " is a reference to the natural rules of history. Jewish history is not subject to any of those rules. In Yaakov's fight with the malach, the malach succeeded in injuring Yaakov's leg, but Yaakov won the fight. The malach represents the laws of nature (as the Talmud tells us that every blade of grass has a malach causing it to grow) and Yaakov's victory over the malach represents the principle that Klal Yisroel is l'malah min hateva.

If one were to draw a graph representing the history of any other nation or culture, the graph would go up, reach a peak, and then do down, representing the rise and fall of that nation. But if one were to graph the history of the Jewish people, the graph would zigzag, i.e. have many alternating peaks and valleys. When we observe the mitzvos we rise, and when we sin we fall.

The navi (Malachi 3:6) tells us that just as Hashem is above teva, and therefore not subject to change, so too Bnai Yisroel are also above teva and will not disappear. ©2015 Rabbi H. Schachter
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