

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

What kind of man was Jacob? This is the question that cries out to us in episode after episode of his life. The first time we hear a description of him he is called ish tam: a simple, quiet, plain, straightforward man. But that is exactly what he seems not to be. We see him taking Esau's birthright in exchange for a bowl of soup. We see him taking Esau's blessing, in borrowed clothes, taking advantage of their father's blindness.

These are troubling episodes. We can read them midrashically. The midrash makes Jacob all-good and Esau all-bad. It rereads the biblical text to make it consistent with the highest standards of the moral life. There is much to be said for this approach.

Alternatively we could say that in these cases the end justifies the means. In the case of the birthright, Jacob might have been testing Esau to see if he really cared about it. Since he gave it away so readily, Jacob might be right in concluding that it should go to one who valued it.

In the case of the blessing, Jacob was obeying his mother, who had received a Divine oracle saying that "the older shall serve the younger." Yet the text remains disturbing. Isaac says to Esau, "Your brother came deceitfully and took your blessing." Esau says, "Isn't he rightly named Jacob [=supplanter]? He has supplanted me these two times: He took my birthright, and now he's taken my blessing!" Such accusations are not levelled against any other biblical hero.

Nor does the story end there. In this week's parasha a similar deceit is practiced on him. After his wedding night, he discovers that he has married Leah, not, as he thought, his beloved Rachel. He complains to Laban. "What is this you have done to me? Was it not for Rachel that I served you? Why then have you deceived me?" (Gen. 29:25)

Laban replies: "It is not done in our place to give the younger before the firstborn." (Gen. 29:26) It's hard not to see this as precise measure-for-measure retribution. The younger Jacob pretended to be the older Esau. Now the elder Leah has been disguised as the younger Rachel. A fundamental principle of biblical morality is at work here: As you do, so shall you be done to. Yet the web of deception continues. After Rachel has given birth to Joseph, Jacob wants to return home. He

has been with Laban long enough. Laban urges him to stay and tells him to name his price.

Jacob then embarks on an extraordinary course of action. He tells Laban he wants no wages at all. Let Laban remove every spotted or streaked lamb from the flock, and every streaked or spotted goat. Jacob will then keep, as his hire, any new born spotted or streaked animals.

It is an offer that speaks simultaneously to Laban's greed and his ignorance. He seems to be getting Jacob's labour for almost nothing. He is demanding no wages. And the chance of unspotted animals giving birth to spotted offspring seems remote.

Jacob knows better. In charge of the flocks he goes through an elaborate procedure involving peeled branches of poplar, almond and plane trees, which he places with their drinking water. The result is that they do in fact produce streaked and spotted offspring.

How this happened has intrigued not only the commentators-who mostly assume that it was a miracle, God's way of assuring Jacob's welfare- but also scientists. Some argue that Jacob must have had an understanding of genetics. Two unspotted sheep can produce spotted offspring. Jacob had doubtless noticed this in his many years of tending Laban's flocks.

Others have suggested that prenatal nutrition can have an epigenetic effect- that is, it can cause a certain gene to be expressed which might not have been otherwise. Had the peeled branches of poplar, almond and plane trees been added to the water the sheep drank, they might have affected the Agouti gene that determines the colour of fur in sheep and mice. (Joshua Backon, "Jacob and the spotted sheep: the role of prenatal nutrition on epigenetics of fur color," Jewish Bible Quarterly, Vol. 36, No.4, 2008)

However it happened, the result was dramatic. Jacob became rich: "In this way the man grew exceedingly prosperous and came to own large flocks, and maidservants and menservants, and camels and donkeys." (Gen. 30:43)

Inevitably, Laban and his sons felt cheated. Jacob sensed their displeasure, and-having taken counsel with his wives and being advised to leave by God himself-departs while Laban is away sheep-shearing. Laban eventually discovers that Jacob has left, and pursues him for seven days, catching up with him in the mountains of Gilead.

The text is fraught with accusation and counteraccusation. Laban and Jacob both feel cheated. They both believe that the flocks and herds are rightfully theirs. They both regard themselves as the victim of the other's deceitfulness. The end result is that Jacob finds himself forced to run away from Laban as he was earlier forced to run away from Esau, in both cases in fear of his life.

So the question returns. What kind of man was Jacob? He seems anything but an ish tam, a straightforward man. And surely this is not the way for a religious role model to behave-in such a way that first his father, then his brother, then his father-in-law, accuse him of deceit. What kind of story is the Torah telling us in the way it narrates the life of Jacob?

One way of approaching an answer is to look at a specific character- often a hare, or in African-American tradition, "Brer rabbit"-in the folktales of oppressed people. Henry Louis Gates, the American literary critic, has argued that such figures represent "the creative way the slave community responded to the oppressor's failure to address them as human beings created in the image of God." They have "a fragile body but a deceptively strong mind." Using their intelligence to outwit their stronger opponents, they are able to deconstruct and subvert, in small ways, the hierarchy of dominance favouring the rich and the strong. They represent the momentary freedom of the unfree, a protest against the random injustices of the world. (Henry Louis Gates, *Black literature and literary theory*, New York, Methuen, 1984, 81-104)

That, it seems to me, is what Jacob represents in this, the early phase of his life. He enters the world as the younger of two twins. His brother is strong, ruddy, hairy, a skilful hunter, a man of the open country. He is quiet, a scholar. Then he must confront the fact that his father loves his brother more than him. Then he finds himself at the mercy of Laban, a possessive, exploitative and deceptive figure who takes advantage of his vulnerability. Jacob is the man who-as almost all of us do at some time or other-finds that life is unfair.

What Jacob shows, by his sheer quick-wittedness, is that the strength of the strong can also be their weakness. So it is when Esau comes in exhausted from the hunt, and is willing impetuously to trade his birthright for some soup. So it is when the blind Isaac is prepared to bless the son who will bring him venison to eat. So it is when Laban hears the prospect of getting Jacob's labour for free. Every strength has its Achilles' heel, its weakness, and this can be used by the weak to gain victory over the strong.

Jacob represents the refusal of the weak to accept the hierarchy created by the strong. His acts are a form of defiance, an insistence on the dignity of the weak (vis-a-vis Esau), the less loved (by Isaac), and the refugee (in Laban's house). In this sense he is one element of what, historically, it has been like to be a Jew.

But the Jacob we see in these chapters is not the figure whom, ultimately, we are called on to emulate. We can see why. Jacob wins his battles with Esau and Laban but only at the cost of eventually having to flee in fear of his life. Quick-wittedness is only a temporary solution.

It is only later, after his wrestling match with the angel, that he receives a new name-that is, a new identity-as Israel, "because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome." As Israel he is unafraid to contend with people face-to-face. He no longer needs to outwit them by clever but ultimately futile stratagems. His children will eventually become the people whose dignity lies in the unbreakable covenant they make with God.

Yet we can see something of Jacob's early life in one of the most remarkable features of Jewish history. For almost two thousand years Jews were looked down on as pariahs, yet they refused to internalise that image, just as Jacob refused to accept the hierarchies of power or affection that condemned him to be a mere second-best. They, like Jacob, relied not on physical strength or material wealth but on qualities of the mind. In the end, though, Jacob must become Israel. For it is not the quick-witted victor but the hero of moral courage who stands tall in the eyes of humanity and God. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl zt"l* ©2023 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Torah Lights

“**A**nd Jacob rose up early in the morning and took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a monument and poured oil on the top of it.” [Genesis 27:18] Vayetze opens with Jacob's journey into exile. He is leaving his Israeli parental home and setting out for his mother's familial home in Haran. His first stop, as the sun is setting, forces him to sleep outdoors in the fields outside Luz – the last site in Israel he will occupy before he begins his exile. He dreams of a ladder standing (mutzav – matzeva) on land with its top reaching heavenwards, 'and behold, angels of God are ascending and descending on it' [Gen. 28:12]. God is standing (nitzav) above the ladder, and promises Jacob that he will return to Israel and that this land will belong to him and his descendants eternally. Upon awakening, the patriarch declares the place to be 'the House of God and the gate of heaven' [Gen. 28:17]. He then builds a monument from the stones he has used as a pillow and pours oil over it.

This monument – (Hebrew, matzeva) is the first one in Jewish history. Until this point, the great biblical personalities have erected altars (mizbe'ahot, sing. mizbe'ah), to God: Noah when he exited from the ark, Abraham when he first came to Israel, Isaac when he

dedicated the city of Be'er Sheva, and Jacob on two significant occasions. An altar is clearly a sacred place dedicated for ritual sacrifice. But what is a monument? An understanding of the first monument in Jewish history will help us understand the biblical attitude towards life and death – and even the true significance of the land of Israel.

Jacob's experience leaves us in no doubt: a monument is a symbol of an eternal relationship. It is the physical expression of a ladder linking heaven and earth, the land of Israel and the Holy Temple of Jerusalem (House of God) which connects the descendants of Jacob to the divine forever. A monument is a gateway to heaven, a House of God on earth. The land of Israel, with its laws of tithes, Sabbatical years and Jubilee, magnificently expresses the link between humanity and the Almighty, and the promise of Jacob's return from exile bears testimony to the eternity of the relationship between the people and the land of Israel.

Furthermore, a monument is made of stone – the Hebrew word for stone is even, comprised of the letters aleph-bet-nun. This is also a contraction of parent-child (Hebrew, av-ben) which also uses the letters aleph-bet-nun symbolizing the eternity of family continuity. And the monument is consecrated with oil, just as the Redeemer will be consecrated with oil – and herald eternal peace and redemption for Israel and the world. (In Hebrew, Messiah literally means 'the one anointed with oil.')

Jacob then spends two decades with his uncle Laban, who does his utmost to assimilate his bright and capable nephew-cum-son-in-law into a life of comfort and business in exile. Jacob resists, escaping Laban's blandishments and eventually secretly absconds with his wives, children and livestock to return to Israel. Laban pursues them, and they agree to a covenant-monument: 'And Jacob took a stone, and set it up for a monument' [Gen. 31:44]. Here again, we have the expression of an eternal promise: Abraham's descendants will never completely assimilate – not even into the most enticing Diaspora. The text continues: "And Jacob said to his brethren, gather stone, and they took stones and made a heap.... And Laban called it [the monument] Yegar-Sahaduta, but Jacob called it Gal-Ed." [Gen. 31:44–47]

The wily Laban wants the monument to bear an Aramean name, a symbol of the gentile part of Jacob's ancestry while Jacob firmly insists upon the purely Hebrew inscription of Gal-Ed – the eternal, Israelite language. When they take their respective oaths at the site of the monument, the deceptive Laban still endeavors to manipulate: 'The God of Abraham and the god of Nahor, the gods of their fathers, judge between us' [Gen. 31:53]. Jacob refuses to give an inch; this monument must give testimony to the eternity of his commitment to Israel, the faith and the land: 'But Jacob swore to the fear of his father Isaac' [Gen. 31:53]. Jacob's response is a polite – but emphatic – rejection of

Laban's attempt at assimilation.

Although this monument is erected with Laban after Jacob leaves his home, it is nevertheless still established in exile; therefore, it is not anointed with oil. Whatever important role the Diaspora may have played in the history of Israel – as long as we maintained our unique values and lifestyle – the oil of redemption will only emerge in the land of Israel. When Jacob returns to Bet-El, the House of God, he will erect another stone monument in order to fulfill his oath. Understandably, that monument – erected to God in Israel – will be anointed with oil.

In the next sequence, tragedy befalls Jacob's family when the beloved Rachel dies while giving birth to Benjamin. 'And Rachel died, and she was buried on the road to Efrat which is Bethlehem. And Jacob erected a monument on her grave; it is the monument of the grave of Rachel until this day'. (Incidentally, this explains the origin of ceremoniously erecting a monument over the graves of our loved ones; obviously it reflects the desire to link the world of the present to the world of eternity.)

Many of our commentaries question why Jacob didn't continue the relatively short distance – perhaps twenty miles – to bury his beloved wife in the Ma'arat HaMakhpela in Hebron, the ancestral burial place.

The Midrashic response, cited by Rashi, is that when the Jews would be carted off to their first exile in Babylon, they would pass by the monument at Rachel's tomb and pray that the matriarch's spirit intercede on their behalf before the Almighty. God hears her prayers, and promises Jewish return:

"...Rachel weeps for her children, thus does God say: 'Stop your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears. There is a reward for your deeds...a hope for your future: the children shall come back to their border.'" [Jer. 31:15–16]

Rachel's grave is a truly fitting place for a monument, a link between heaven and earth. It represents the eternity of the Jewish spirit and our eternal relationship to the land of Israel.



Max Nordau became the world leader of Zionism after the death of Theodore Herzl. He was a Viennese physician who was not an observant Jew and had no previous connection to the Zionist movement. What made him a committed believer in Jewish return? He writes in his memoirs that a Hassidic family whose young daughter had been stricken with a mysterious disease came to him for a diagnosis. He diagnosed the malady and prescribed the cure. The grateful family returned, promising – despite their poverty – to pay whatever they owed him because he had saved their daughter's life. He smiled and suggested that she kiss him on the cheek as a fitting payment. The young girl, who had just reached the age of twelve, blushed as she explained that she could not kiss a grown man. He then suggested that she tell him the Torah lesson she had learned that morning

as substitute payment. She cited the midrash I have just written about Rachel's grave site. Max Nordau writes in his diary that if, after close to two thousand years of exile, Jewish children still learn about and believe in a Jewish return to Israel, then the Jews will certainly return. At that moment, Max Nordau became a committed Zionist. *The above article appears in Rabbi Riskin's book Bereishit: Confronting Life, Love and Family, part of his Torah Lights series of commentaries on the weekly parsha, published by Maggid. © 2023 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Our father Yaakov leaves his home, he who is accustomed to study, tranquility, and to “dwelling in tents,” and immediately finds himself alone and endangered in a hostile world. A rock is his pillow and he must erect barriers at night to protect himself from wild animals (both four and two footed) as he sleeps on the ground. Though he is reassured by Heaven and by his grand dream and vision it is clear to him that his future is still uncertain and fraught with dangers, peril and challenges.

When he finally arrives close to his destination he encounters the neighbors and daughters of Lavan who are unable to water their flocks because of the great rock that seals the opening to the well of water. The Torah then describes for us in great detail how Yaakov greets the people and the family of Lavan and in a selfless gesture of help and compassion to others - who he has just met - singlehandedly removes the rock from the mouth of the well.

It is interesting to note that the Torah lavishes a great deal of space and detail to this incident at the well while the Torah tells us nothing about the fourteen years of Yaakov's life that passed between his leaving home and arriving at the house of Lavan. Rashi, quoting Midrash, tells us that Yaakov spent these fourteen years in spiritual study and personal growth at the yeshiva academy of Shem and Ever. So, if this is in fact the case, why does the Torah not tell us of this great feat of spiritual challenge and self-improvement – fourteen years of sleepless study - while it does seem to go into mystifying detail regarding the incident at the well of water? Certainly, it would seem that the years of study would have a greater impact on the life and persona of Yaakov than rolling a rock off of the mouth of a well would have had.

As we see throughout the book of Bereshith, if not indeed regarding all of the Torah generally, the Torah places utmost emphasis on the behavior that one exhibits towards other human beings. Not everyone can study for fourteen years in a yeshiva day and night. Yet everyone can care about others, can demand justice for the defenseless and can provide, to the best of one's abilities, to help those who so obviously need it. Though

Yaakov, like the great figures and founders of our people that appear here in Bereshith, is unique in spiritual stature and blessed with Divine vision and revelation, he is also essentially everyman. His actions are meant to be a template of attitude and behavior for his descendants and the people who bear his name.

The Torah, while making it clear that we can never personally be the equal of our ancestors in their exalted spiritual state and accomplishments, we can and should attempt to emulate their values and behavior. We can all help those in need to roll the rock off of their wells and thereby to nurture an environment where the Yaakov within all of us can grow and expand. © 2023 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 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 [v'hinei hi Leah]” (Genesis 29:25).

Some commentators suggest that this reveals the extraordinary modesty of Jacob and Leah – all through the night, they did not see or even speak to each other (Radak).

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

But these possibilities prompt another question. If Jacob didn't know his new wife was Leah, how could the marriage have been legitimate? Isn't this a classic case of mekach ta'ut (an agreement that is considered null and void because of faulty assumptions)? Perhaps Jacob'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 may be describing the community, rather than Jacob himself, learning of the switch.

Beyond these attempts to understand Jacob's being fooled, a more mystical approach to this story teaches something fundamental about love. Rachel represents the woman Jacob 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 in a

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

But this hidden side of a partner may also shape the relationship positively. Previously unrecognized 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, 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, which may turn out to be our beloved’s greatest blessing.

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RABBI DOV KRAMER

Jewish Geography

Yaakov Avinu is described as a “tent dweller” (Bereishis 25:27), which Rashi tells us refers to the tent of Shem and the tent of Eiver. But he didn’t only study with Shem and Eiver growing up, he spent another 14 years studying in the house of Eiver (see Rashi on 28:9) before going to Charan to find a wife (Shem had passed away by then). Where was the “tent,” “house,” and/or “Yeshiva” of Shem and Eiver located?

Some Tosafists (e.g. Paanayach Raza) assume that “the land of the people of the East” (29:1), where Yaakov went after his ladder vision, is not Charan. Instead, it refers to “בית שם ועבר” which was in the “east,” since Shem’s descendants lived at “the Eastern Mountain” (10:30). Although “the land of the Eastern People” refers to ארם (see Bamidbar 23:7 and Y’shaya 9:11), of which Charan is a part of (so it could be describing Charan), because it is referred to it as something other than Charan, these Tosafists understand it to mean a different place. (Radak explains why Charan is referred to as “the land of the Eastern People” here; I’m still trying to figure out why sometimes it’s referred to as ארם, sometimes as ארם נהרים, and sometimes as חרן, although see Sifsay Cohen on Bereishis 27:10.) In any case, according to these Tosafists the Yeshiva of Shem and Eiver (notice how “Shem” is included, even though he was no longer alive) was outside ארץ ישראל, to its east.

Turay Even (Megilah 16b) also says that Yaakov must have gone outside ארץ ישראל to learn; otherwise the Gemara couldn’t have proven that learning Torah is greater than taking care of parents from Yaakov not being punished for the 14 years he spent away from them. It would prove that it’s at least as important, but not that it’s more important. However, if he learned outside ארץ ישראל and still wasn’t punished, learning

Torah must be at least as important as taking care of parents and living in ארץ ישראל combined, making it more important than either of them individually. And since Eiver came from “the other side of the river” (the Euphrates), that was likely where his house of study was. Others (e.g. Maharaha on Megilah 16b and Chasam Sofer on K’subos 17a) suggest different approaches to answer Turay Even’s question.] That Shem and Eiver were originally from “the east” is indisputable. Whether they stayed there is not.

Rokayach and Rabbeinu Yoel point out hints to the names “שם” and “עבר” in the words “מבאר שבע,” implying that this was where they were based. Maharsha (Megila 17a) says explicitly that בית עבר was in באר שבע. Sifsay Cohen (Bereishis 27:10) says Yaakov spent 7 years in שם and 7 years in עבר, both of which were in באר שבע. [That they had separate Yeshivos is implicit in the fact that Yaakov dwelt in “tents” (plural), i.e. the tent of Shem and the tent of Eiver. Since Shem had already died, his Yeshiva must have continued – independent of Eiver’s – through his children and students; see Rashi on Makos 23b regarding Shem’s court.]

Maharsha says בית עבר had to be in באר שבע because Yaakov went from there to Charan, and if it were elsewhere, that’s where he would have left from, not from באר שבע. However, Netziv argues just the opposite: saying that Yaakov left באר שבע and that he went to Charan (as opposed to leaving “to go to Charan”) implies that he went somewhere else in between. Rather, he left באר שבע, went to בית שם ועבר, and then went to Charan. Alshich says he left באר שבע and went elsewhere in ארץ ישראל, without indicating where in ארץ ישראל it was. (Any connection between Shem and Eiver and the cave in צפת bearing their names is fairly recent.) Kesef Mishna (A”Z 1:3) also says Shem and Eiver were in ארץ כנען. Anaf Yosef (Bereishis Raba 68:5) says בית מדרשו של שם was in באר לחי ראי, where Yitzchok lived after Avraham died (Bereishis 25:11), since Rivka went there to consult with Shem (see Rashi on 25:22). Chasam Sofer (K’subos 17a) assumes that the tent of Shem and Eiver were next to each other (see Rashi on 25:22), and says they must have been in ירושלים, since that’s where Malki-Tzedek (Shem) was king (see Rashi on Bereishis 14:18).

There are other indications that Shem and Eiver were in ארץ ישראל. They were at the party Avraham made when Yitzchok was weaned (Rashi, 21:8), which seems to have been in גרר. [It should be noted that באר שבע and גרר are both near באר שבע.] They helped bury Avraham and Sarah (Bereishis Raba 62:3) in חברון. Aruch Hashulchan (C”M 222:3) says Sarah was punished for asking G-d to judge Avraham rather than bringing him to the court of Shem and Eiver; they were living in באר שבע at the time, so Shem and Eiver must have been in the vicinity. Eisav wanted to wait until Shem and Eiver died before killing Yaakov so that they couldn’t

prosecute him (Midrash Seichel Tov 27:41), so he must have been within jurisdiction of their court. On the other hand, if Yaakov was trying to escape from Eisav, how could he stay nearby?

Although everyone seems to put both בתי מדרשות in the same place, that might have only been true while Shem was still alive. I would suggest that after Shem passed away, and his (other) students kept his Yeshiva (and court) going, Eiver decided to move back to his hometown, "to the east," to try to bring people there closer to the Creator. Yitzchok had a Yeshiva in ארץ ישראל (Yoma 28b). Shem's Yeshiva was still going strong (his court was still active when תמר was accused of not waiting for her brother-in-law). So Eiver moved back east. It's also possible that Yaakov having to leave was the impetus (or final straw) for Eiver deciding to move his מדרש to a different location.

Shem and Eiver were in ארץ ישראל, near Avraham and Yitzchok, for all those events. But when Yaakov spent 14 years in Eiver's מדרש בית before going to Lavan in Charan, it might have been in (or closer to) ארם than it was to ארם. ©2023 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

Cross-Currents

Sometimes an idea can only be possible after a certain point in history. One example might have to do with the imagery of Yaakov's dream at the start of the parsha.

The message delivered to our forefather during that prophecy was "To you shall I give [Cna'an], and to your children." And: "All the families of the earth will be blessed through you, and through your children." Yaakov, in his dream, is being reassured that, unlike Avraham and Yitzchak, all of his children will comprise the Jewish nation.

Even the stone on which he rested his head that night and later made into a monument to the revelation he received carries that message. According to the Midrash, it had originally been many stones, which fused into one, a metaphor for the family unity he would achieve. Rashi even comments elsewhere (Beraishis, 49:24) that the word for "stone" (even) itself is a contraction of the words av and ben, "father" and "son."

But then there is the sulam, usually translated "ladder," which plays the central role in Yaakov's dream imagery.

The word occurs only this one time in the Torah, and its etymology is unclear. But an Arabic cognate of the word refers to steps ascending a mountain. The easiest way to ascend a mountain is a spiral path. That fact, and the possibly related Aramaic word "mesalse!" - to twist into curls - might lead one to imagine Yaakov's ladder as something akin to a spiral staircase.

Which speculation leads to a fascinating thought that couldn't have been thought until the 1960s.

Considering that the assurance given Yaakov in

his dream was essentially a "genetic" one - that all his progeny would be part of Klal Yisrael -- might the sulam have been not a simple ladder but rather something reminiscent of, and symbolizing, the essential structure of the molecule that carries genetic information - a double helix? ©2023 Rabbi A. Shafran and torah.org

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"He came to the place, and tarried there for the sun had set... and he lay down in that place." (Beraishis. 28:11) Enroute to Lavan's home to find a wife as his parents told him, Yaakov passed a place. Not just any place, this was "The Place." Chazal tell us this was Har HaMoriah, where the binding of Yitzchak occurred, and where the Bais HaMikdash would be built in the future. Arriving there, a number of things happened.

First of all, Yaakov davened. We know this because the word used for his arrival is 'vayifga,' which we find in other verses refers to prayer. Prayer is a meeting of the person and Hashem, and Yaakov took the opportunity to daven at this holy spot. But that wasn't it.

He then stayed there because the sun had set. The Midrash tells us the sun set two hours early, presumably to keep Yaakov in that location. Finally, it tells us that Yaakov lay down in that spot. We deduce from these words that though he lay himself down here, but he did not lay down during the fourteen years he spent in Yeshiva on the way to Lavan, where Yaakov had stopped to prepare himself for life's challenges ahead.

If Yaakov hadn't slept in a bed in fourteen years, why did he choose to lay down now? Especially when he sensed there was holiness in that place, he should have remained awake. Why the sudden change?

Perhaps, when Yaakov came to Har HaMoriah, he sensed it was a special place. Just as Yitzchak had prayed in the spot where the angel appeared to Hagar, Yaakov prayed in the spot where his father had been bound as a sacrifice until an angel appeared to his grandfather and told him to stop. He was prepared to move on, but darkness fell abruptly. He therefore tarried and stayed in that place. He understood that Hashem wanted him to stay there for some reason, so he waited.

When nothing happened, Yaakov reasoned that Hashem wanted something else from him. Instead of traveling on, he made himself even more present in that location by laying down. Sleep overtook him and he dreamed the prophecy of Hashem promising to give him the land promised to his fathers, and to protect him and accompany Yaakov throughout his life.

We learn from the actions of Yaakov Avinu to take our cues from Hashem. When we find ourselves somewhere, it is for a reason. It's our job to try to figure out that purpose, and to change the way we think or act in order to do so. Because Yaakov recognized the signals from Hashem that something great was to

happen, he did what he could to be ready for it.

Therefore, despite not laying down for fourteen years, now he felt it was what Hashem wanted from him, so he did it. How far one should go to get the messages Hashem is sending him, and how open he must be to recognizing that what Hashem wants may not be what he originally thought.

The Baal Shem Tov was known to do things ordinary people didn't understand. Once, he told one of his students to go to a particular island. The fellow caught the ferry to the island and waited all day for something special to happen. Nothing did, and he caught the ferry back in the afternoon.

When he returned to his master, he said that he had gone where instructed, but was unsure why, because nothing special had happened. "Did you do anything on the island?" asked the Rebbe. "No," he replied. "Did you eat anything there?" "Well, yes, I brought food along but lunch was uneventful."

The Baal Shem Tov said, "From the Six Days of Creation, no bracha or mention of Hashem has been said on that island. There were sparks of holiness trapped there. When you made your bracha, you freed them, and elevated them to Heaven." ©2023 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

Negotiating with Evil Lavan

We saw last week that Yitzchak warned Ya'akov that Lavan was evil and would try to trick him.

Ya'akov was forewarned, but even that warning was not enough to prevent him from being swindled. The Torah tells us, "Then Lavan said to him (Ya'akov), 'Nevertheless, you are my bone and my flesh!' And he stayed with him for a month of days. Then Lavan said to Ya'akov, 'Is it that you are my brother, that you should work for me without charge? Tell me, what are your wages?' Lavan had two daughters, the name of the older one was Leah and the name of the younger one was Rachel. Leah's eyes were tender, while Rachel was beautiful of form and beautiful of appearance. Ya'akov loved Rachel so he said, 'I will work for you seven years, for Rachel, your younger daughter.' Lavan said, 'It is better that I give her to you than that I give her to another man; remain with me.' So Ya'akov worked seven years for Rachel and they seemed to him a few days because of his love for her. Ya'akov said to Lavan, 'Deliver my wife for my term is fulfilled, and I will come to her.' So Lavan gathered all the people of the place and made a feast. And it was in the evening, that he took Leah his daughter and brought her to him; and he came to her. And Lavan gave her Zilpah, his maidservant, to Leah his daughter as a maidservant. And it was in the morning, and behold, it was Leah! So he said to Lavan, 'What is this you have done to me? Was it not for Rachel that I

worked for you? Why have you deceived me?' Lavan said, 'Such is not done in our place, to give the younger before the elder. Complete the week of this one, and we will give you this one, for the work that you will work further, another seven years.'

What may be surprising to some is the period of seven years of work for Rachel, which comes as a suggestion from Ya'akov rather than Lavan. Rashi explains that Rivka had told Ya'akov that he should remain with Lavan "yamim achadim," which can be translated as either a few days or a few years, until Eisav's anger would dissipate. Ya'akov had calculated that it would take seven years for Eisav to relinquish his desire to kill Ya'akov, so the seven-year period would be the "few years" of his mother's advice. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin suggests other reasons for the seven years. He quotes Rabbeinu Bachya that Rachel was only five years old when she met Ya'akov at the Well. The additional seven years would allow her time to mature and become ready to have children. But, HaRav Sorotzkin points out that there are others who say that Rachel was already either fifteen or twenty-one. If so, why did Ya'akov wait? Why not insist that Rachel marry him immediately with a promise that he would work afterwards for seven years? HaRav Sorotzkin posits that for the first seven years, Ya'akov was afraid that Eisav, or someone hired by Eisav, would pursue him to Aram and kill him there. The Rambam, in Hilchot Dei'ot, explains that a couple should not be unsteady in their actions, lazy, or sad, nor any one of them, for their children will not be wise or righteous. Ya'akov did not want to begin his family until those first seven years were completed and he no longer felt the fear of a threat from Eisav.

Lavan's answer to Ya'akov's request appears to be without any argument. He agreed immediately and did not engage in any revision of the terms. Yet we know from later sentences that Lavan never had the intention to fulfill his promise to Ya'akov. Ya'akov tried to circumvent any deception that Lavan might have used. He specified the terms, "for Rachel, your younger daughter." Ya'akov specified Rachel, but also that the Rachel he wanted was Lavan's daughter and not another Rachel from the city. He also specified the younger daughter in case Lavan switched the names of his daughters to trick him. Yet, Lavan still tricked him by switching his daughters on the wedding night. It appears that Lavan had this in mind all the time. This is seen from the second half of his statement of acceptance includes the words, "remain with me." Lavan loved his daughters and did not want them to leave. Lavan knew that if he replaced Rachel with Leah, he would be able to keep Ya'akov as his "slave," basically working without pay for an additional seven years. Lavan's argument for switching Rachel with Leah was, "Such is not done in our place, to give the younger before the elder." HaRav Shmshon Raphael Hirsch explains Lavan's statements

to Ya'akov. "With us, if someone asks for the hand of a younger sister, he automatically includes an unmarried elder one, as here with us, it is not considered correct to marry a younger sister before an elder one. So that he can only get the younger through marrying the elder, and gets the elder one first and then the younger," Lavan had seven years to find a husband for Leah so that Ya'akov could marry his younger daughter. Obviously, this switch was part of his plan all along.

The Ohr HaChaim presents another aspect of the interaction between Ya'akov and Lavan that is unspoken at least in terms of the negotiations between them. When Ya'akov had completed the seven years of labor for Rachel, he said to Lavan, "Deliver my wife for my term is fulfilled, and I will come to her." The Ohr HaChaim explains that this language seems inappropriate for a righteous person to use. It is too harsh and disrespectful, that is, until we see the writings of the Rambam in Hilchot Ishut. "If a man says to a woman, 'Behold thou art consecrated unto me with this work that I will do for you,' and he does it, they are not married. His wages for the work are considered to be a loan held by her, and one cannot acquire a wife with a loan. Ya'akov was aware of this law which was unknown to Lavan, so he understood that he could not acquire Rachel with the loan but only with marital relations, "and I will come to her."

After Ya'akov realized that he was tricked with Leah, he insisted that Lavan give him the wife he had requested, Rachel. Lavan told him to wait the week of the wedding feast, and he would allow him to marry Rachel immediately if he agreed to work for an additional seven years. Ya'akov could have nullified the marriage to Leah, but such an embarrassment might have caused his whole plan to collapse. But something else held him back; he understood that Hashem works in mysterious ways. His faith in Hashem led him to believe that this "treachery" was really part of that plan. In the end, Leah gave birth to half the tribes, including the Kingship, the Priests, and the Mashiach.

There are times that we do not like what has happened to us. We may feel that we are being punished unjustly. Yet everything that Hashem does is for our benefit. We must continue our lives to discover, in hindsight, how our personal tragedies have been for our benefit. ©2023 Rabbi D. Levin

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His Wife's Sister

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

The Torah forbids a man from marrying his wife's sister as long as his wife is alive: "You shall not take a woman in addition to her sister, to make them rivals, to uncover the nakedness of one upon the other in her lifetime" (*Vayikra* 18:18). It seems that the Torah wants to make sure that sisters, who naturally love each other, do not come to see each other as enemies.

However, if a wife dies, the Torah allows and even encourages the marriage of the surviving sister and the widower. This is because we can assume that in a household which lost its homemaker, the person most likely to be able to maintain a similar home environment would be the sister of the departed wife.

One of the seven Noachide laws is a ban on sexual immorality. Is marrying two sisters included in this prohibition? Some say that it is. When the Torah speaks of marrying two sisters, it uses the word "*tikach*" (take). This is the same verb used later in the Torah to refer to the mitzva of taking a wife. Thus they argue that the prohibition relates specifically to Jewish marriage (*kiddushin*), rather than to sexual relations. *Kiddushin* is a halachic framework relevant only to Jews but not to Noachides (non-Jews). Indeed, Ramban (in his commentary on *Yevamot* 97a) and many other *Rishonim* (medieval rabbis) see this as the reason that Yaakov was permitted to marry two sisters. Since the Torah had not yet been given, he was considered a Noachide.

However, others disagree. They point to the verse that introduces all the forbidden sexual relationships, "Any man shall not approach his close relative to uncover nakedness" (*Vayikra* 18:6). The verse is inclusive, with "any man" including non-Jews as well. Those who follow this opinion need a different explanation for how Yaakov was allowed to marry two sisters. One possibility, suggested by Ramban in his Torah commentary, is that as long as Yaakov lived outside the Land of Israel, he was not subject to the commandments, and, therefore, was permitted to marry two sisters. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and *Encyclopedia Talmudit*

