

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

It is one of the great dreams of the Bible. Jacob, afraid and alone, finds himself in what the anthropologist Victor Turner called liminal space—the space between-between the home he is escaping from and the destination he has not yet reached, between the known danger of his brother Esau from whom he is in flight, and the unknown danger of Laban from whom he will eventually suffer great wrongs.

As will happen again twenty-two years later on his return—in the wrestling match with the stranger—Jacob has his most intense experiences alone, at night, isolated and vulnerable, in the middle of a journey. In this, the first of his visions: He had a dream in which he saw a ladder resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and angels of G-d were ascending and descending on it. What does this signify? There are many interpretations given by the sages and commentators, but the simplest is that it has to do with the encounter between the human soul and G-d, the encounter later generations knew as prayer.

When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely G-d is in this place, and I did not know it." He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of G-d; this is the gate of heaven." The synagogue is the house of G-d. Prayer is the gate of heaven. And when we have truly prayed, the most profound result is that we too are conscious of the feeling: "Surely G-d is in this place, and I did not know it." Did this vision exercise any influence on the structure of Jewish prayer? I want to suggest that it did. Its influence was profound. If we examine Jewish prayer carefully, we will see that its shape precisely matches the idea of a ladder on which angels ascend and descend.

If we study the liturgy carefully we will find that it often has a symmetrical three-part structure, A-B-A, which has the following form: (a) ascent, (b) standing in the Presence, (c) descent. Here are some examples.

1. The morning service begins with (a) pesukei de-zimra, a series of Psalms, which constitute a preparation for prayer. It moves on to (b) prayer as such: the Shema, the three blessings that surround it, and the Amidah, the standing prayer. It ends with (c) a series of concluding prayers including Ashrei, itself a key element of pesukei de-zimra.

The basis of this threefold structure is a statement in the Talmud (Berakhot 32b) that "the early pious men used to wait for an hour before praying, then they would pray for an hour, and then they would wait for a further hour." The Talmud asks on what basis they did so. It answers by citing the verse Ashrei itself: "Happy are those who sit in Your house." Clearly this is what is known as an *asmachta*, a supporting verse, rather than the origin of the custom itself (this passage, though, is undoubtedly the reason that Ashrei is said in the first and third sections).

2. Another example is the structure of the Amidah. This has the following three-part pattern: (a) shevach, praise, the first three paragraphs; (b) bakashah, requests, the middle paragraphs, and (c) hodayah, 'thanks' or 'acknowledgements', the last three paragraphs. On Shabbat and Yom Tov, the middle section is replaced by usually one, on Rosh Hashanah three, paragraphs relating to 'the holiness of the day' on the grounds that we do not make requests on days of rest. Shevach is a preparation. It is our entry to the divine presence. Hodayah is a leave-taking. We thank G-d for the goodness with which He has favoured us. Bakashah, the central section, is standing in the presence itself. We are like supplicants standing before the King, presenting our requests. The spiritual form of the first and last actions—entry and leave-taking—are dramatized by taking three steps forward, and at the end, three steps back. This is the choreography of ascent and descent.

3. The kedushah-verses taken from the mystical visions of Isaiah and Ezekiel—is said three times in the morning service (on Shabbat, the third is transferred to the afternoon service, because the morning service is more than usually long. However, its proper place is in the morning service). The first, known as kedushat yotser, occurs in the blessings before the Shema; the third, kedushah de-sidra, is in the concluding section of the prayers, beginning Uva Le-Tzion. The middle kedushah is in the reader's repetition of the Amidah.

The kedushah makes explicit reference to angels. Its key verses are the words Isaiah and Ezekiel heard the angels saying as they surround the Throne of Glory. We speak of the angels at this point: the Serafim, Cherubim, Ofanim and holy Chayot.

There are obvious differences between the first and last, on the one hand, and the second on the other.

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The first and third do not need a minyan. They can be said privately. They do not need to be said standing. The second requires a minyan and must be said standing. Maimonides explains the difference. In the first and third, we are describing what the angels do when they praise G-d. In the second, we are enacting what they do. The first and third are preparation for, and reflection on, an event. The second is the event itself, as we re-live it. There are other examples, but these will suffice.

The daily prayers, as we now have them, evolved over a long period of time. The sages tell us that the first architects were the men of the Great Assembly in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, the 5th century BCE. There was a further intensive process of composition and canonization in the days of Rabban Gamliel at Yavneh. Shaping and reshaping continued until the first siddurim, those of Rav Amram Gaon and Rav Saadiah Gaon in the ninth and tenth centuries CE.

What we see from the above examples is that there is a basic shape—a depth grammar—of prayer. It consists of ascent—standing in the Presence—descent. The inspiration for this cannot have been any other than Jacob's vision. Prayer is a ladder stretching from earth to heaven. On this ladder of words, thoughts and emotions, we gradually leave earth's gravitational field. We move from the world around us, perceived by the senses, to an awareness of that which lies beyond the world—the earth's Creator.

At the end of this ascent, we stand, as it were, directly in the conscious presence of G-d—which Maimonides defines as the essential element of kavannah, the intentional state essential to prayer.

We then slowly make our way back to earth again—to our mundane concerns, the arena of actions and interactions within which we live. But if prayer has worked, we are not the same afterward as we were before. For we have seen, as Jacob saw, that "Surely G-d is in this place, and I did not know it."

If the first stage is the climb, and the second standing in heaven, then the third is bringing a fragment of heaven down to earth. For what Jacob realized when he woke from his vision is that G-d is in this place. Heaven is not somewhere else, but here—even if we are alone and afraid—if only we realized it. And we can become angels, G-d's agents and emissaries, if, like

Jacob, we have the ability to pray and the strength to dream. © 2005 Rabbi J. Sacks

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

If one ever doubted the Bible's positive attitude towards love and the awesome power of love to transform individuals and direct the course of history, our weekly portion of Vayetze tells a beautiful love story—and at the same time defines and delineates how love yearns to be expressed and the extent to which love weaves its magic tapestry.

Our love story seems to be an idyllic, pastoral tale which almost comes as a welcome relief from the heavy, murderous tension between Jacob and Esau and as an introduction to the scheming competitive tension between Jacob and Laban. But it is much more than that; it is a firm declaration, that the Bible understands and affirms the positive potency of love; it is a song of love not to Torah or to the Land of Israel, but rather to love itself.

Just consider the fact that the then young father Jacob is forced to leave his parents' ancestral home and wander into an alien and lonely exile because of the lack of love—or at least the lack of loving communication—between Isaac and Rebecca. Whether Rebecca's daring deception—an act which resulted in the destructive sibling hatred between her two sons—was the result of the fact that here was an arranged marriage which could not offer the benefit of a loving and beloved friendship (re'im ahuvim) of two young people whose lives and love grow up together or whether it was built into the very unequal situation of a match between an older, spiritual son of a path-breaking religionist who had just survived a near-sacrifice to his father's G-d and a child-bride from a deceptive, rapacious family to whom G-d was an alien concept, (see the commentary of the Netziv) is very much beside the point. In either case, an honest sharing of ideas and mutual decisions arrived at together was virtually precluded.

Moreover, the subsequent story of tensions between Laban and Jacob were caused in no small measure by the lack of trust Jacob had to feel towards his uncle, who deceived him into an arranged and loveless marriage with Rachel's elder sister, Leah. Therefore, the romantic love scene between Jacob and Rachel is not merely a welcome respite between the prior and succeeding stories of scheming deceptions and sibling rivalries, both between Jacob and Esau as well as Rachel and Leah; it is the honest and romantic love which Jacob and Rachel have for each other which enables Jacob to overcome all other tensions and obstacles in his life and ultimately emerge Yisrael-victorious!

Chapter 29 of our Biblical portion tells the tale. Jacob sets out to his exile with light skipping steps

(29:1) and immediately comes upon a well in a field. Remember that the match-maker Eliezer met Rebecca-whom he identified as being suitable for Isaac-near a well, and later on Moses met his wife Zipporah near a well; a well is also used as a Biblical and Rabbinical metaphor for woman and womb (Proverbs 5, and see HaKhmat Adam, Laws of Niddah 116, 18 for the prayer of the groom after the marriage is consummated, which mentions the fact that 'no stranger will rule over this sealed well"). Jacob takes in the scene: a large boulder protects the water in the deep recesses of the well, a boulder so heavy that all the shepherds and their flocks must gather together in order to share the burden of lifting the boulder. Young Jacob engages in small-talk with the three shepherds who had already assembled, asks if they know Laban the son of Nahor, and as they are answering, they mention that-behold-his daughter the shepherdess Rachel is now coming with her flock of sheep. "And it was, when Jacob saw Rachel, daughter of Laban his mother's brother... that Jacob came forward and rolled the stone off the mouth of the well; he watered the sheep of Laban, his mother's brother" (Gen 29:10).

Picture the moment: Jacob sees Rachel approaching, apparently feels "love at first sight," probably looks back quickly to ascertain that she is watching, takes off his jacket, rolls up his sleeves, perhaps takes a second glance in her direction-and then single-handedly performs the feat of removing the boulder. He then triumphantly-but with an embarrassed smile-waters Rachel's flock, letting her know that he did it for her!

"Then Jacob kissed Rachel, and he raised his voice and wept" (Gen 29:11). Why did he weep? I once had a student who suggested that he wept because he kissed her before they were married-although the Sforno comments that he tells her in the very next verse that he is her cousin so that she not think him to have acted improperly with the kiss. Rashi (ad loc) gives other explanations for his tears: he had arrived empty-handed; his nephew Eliphaz, Esau's son, had run after him to kill him, and he ransomed his life by giving his would-be-assassin all of his possessions. From this we learn that to be in love means to want to give tangible gifts to your beloved as an expression of your love. Indeed, the Hebrew word ahavah is built on a two letter root (according to some grammarians) hav, which means the flame of passion as well as the act of giving. One who doesn't feel the desire to give tangible gifts and to provide for his beloved, is not really in love!

Furthermore, says Rashi, "Jacob saw through the gift of prophecy that he would not enter into the grave with her." Most commentaries take this to mean that they would be buried in separate places, he in the Cave of the Couples in Hebron, and she in Rachel's tomb in Bethlehem on the road to Efrat. I would take it to mean more simply that the price we pay for loving is

eventually having to be separated from our beloved; it is rare that a couple leaves this world at the same time, and the greater the love, the more poignant the pain of the surviving spouse.

In the final analysis, however, Jacob's love for Rachel gave him the power and the patience to both work and wait for his love; "the seven years (he had to work for Laban to earn the right to marry Rachel) passed as only a few days because of his love for her" (Gen 29:20). It gives him the strength to out-Laban and build up more than a nest egg-and when his beloved Rachel finally conceives and bears Joseph (the son who inherited Jacob's great love for his mother), Jacob knows that he can only nurture that beloved son in Israel, in the environment of the new-found faith of his parents and grand-parents (Gen 30:25). He lost his beloved wife at a very young age, but his love added a steely strength to his initially withdrawn, studious and spirited personality; it also gave him his two sons Joseph and Benjamin, the first who brought the G-d of morality to Egypt and became the savior of his people, and the second upon whose land in Israel our Holy Temples have stood and yet will stand. © 2005 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Amnon Bazak

After she gave birth to four of Yaacov's sons, Leah stopped having children. Like her sister Rachel, she became infertile, even if only temporarily. The first step that Leah takes in view of her new situation is to give her maid Zilpah to Yaacov. This seems to be similar to what her sister Leah did a short time before and what Sarah had done years earlier. However, there is a very big difference between what Leah did and what Sarah and Rachel did. The first two women wanted to solve their own personal problems. Sarah said, "Please go to my maid, perhaps I will be built up through her" [Bereishit 16:2], while Rachel said, "Here is my servant Bilhah, go to her and let her give birth in my place, so that I will also be built up through her" [30:3]. Leah, on the other hand, did not need to be "built up," since she already had children of her own. Giving her maid to Yaacov seems to her the proper thing to do based on her understanding of the need to have as many children as possible. Now that she has become temporarily sterile, she still feels obligated to continue to expand Yaacov's family. She is therefore ready, out of a sense of dedication and with no regard to her personal interests, to give her maid to Yaacov. "And Leah saw that she stopped giving birth, so she took her maid Zilpah and gave her to Yaacov as a wife" [30:9].

Leah has a second chance to act as a result of the incident of the "duda'im" -- mandrake flowers. This story highlights Leah's tragic situation in that she was kept at a distance by her husband, and she tried to

renew her relationship with him by making use of the plants. Her willingness to give the flowers to her sister Rachel, who had begun to be favored by G-d, was not a simple matter. Whether this plant was useful against infertility (RADAK) or as a way to enhance the love between a man and a woman (Ramban), giving the flowers to Rachel could have led to increased estrangement between Yaacov and Leah. But Leah was ready to pay the price, in order to renew her intimate contact with Yaacov, praying at the same time that this renewed link would bring her new fertility.

In the end, Leah's dedication to Yaacov was not in vain, and she indeed gave birth to Yissachar. Her son's name can be linked to two reasons, related to the two good deeds that she performed. Leah explicitly says about her act of giving her maid to Yaacov, "G-d gave me my reward (sechari) for giving my maid to my husband" [30:18]. Immediately afterwards it is written, "She called him Yissachar" [ibid]. It can also be assumed that the name hints at her words to Yaacov, "you will come to me tonight, for I have hired you (secharticha) with my son's flowers" [30:16], as a reward for giving up the flowers in order to renew her contact with him.

Perhaps this duality is the answer to the puzzle of how the name Yissachar is spelled, with the letter "SIN" appearing twice. According to tradition, this double letter is read as if only one letter appears. Perhaps the two different ways of looking at the name—once with a double letter and once without—is related to the two different meanings of the name. The written tradition might be related to the explicit element noted above of a reward for the fact that Leah gave Zilpah to Yaacov, while the way the name is read is linked to the deeper meaning, using the flowers as payment to Rachel, when Leah gave them up in order to renew her links with Yaacov.

Dreams That Descend to the Earth

by Rabbi Shlomo Schock

"And he dreamed, and behold a ladder was on the ground, with its top reaching into the sky. Behold, angels of G-d rose and descended" [Bereishit 28:12].

Every single one of us has dreams that he or she would like to bring down to earth but still find that our deepest desires rise into heaven, even when they are fulfilled. The great disappointment that we often feel from dreams that become real stems from the gap between the dream and reality. We tend to feel that the divine remains in heaven, and what we actually achieve on earth is nothing more than sparse remains from our great dreams.

However, our sages teach us about angels who rise and descend: "They rise and look at the image above, and they descend and look at the image below" [Chulin 91]. That is, the angels of our dreams, who can see the high spiritual level above, will give us the ability

to continue to see at the same high level while we are on the earth below.

The ability to bring a dream down to earth begins with the simple fact that there is a ladder alongside each and every one of us that is standing on the ground, waiting for our attention and for us to relate to it. The ladder invites us to climb to ever greater heights. We have all the necessary resources, it is up to us to link them to our mission and to stop getting stuck down below, where we remain at eye level. We must leave our earthly life for short heavenly bursts and, with the aid of the descending angels, we must bring sparkling and exhilarating stars down to the earth.

If we experience a cyclic movement, when we are successful not only in rising to heaven but also in descending with gifts from heaven which we use to build a house that has its foundation in the earth, we have been privileged to bring down a divine spirit to the earth, and this gives us great pleasure and a feeling that "being close to G-d is good for me." The Almighty does not want us to be only on the ground and He does not want us only in heaven. The Almighty wants us to learn to act in great repeating cycles of success, up and down, up and down, making good use of the ladder which stands nearby. Our thoughts, words, and actions can often take us on an "interstellar voyage" and bring us back as extraterrestrial beings, which can excite and interest us too.

An artist is not satisfied with events down below. He wants to expand the abundance from heavenly inspiration, and to grant it an earthly home. He will gather his angels and begin to climb his inspirational ladder—until the longed-for meeting with the star of his dreams. After all, "every person has a star in heaven," which has as its goal to descend to earth and be revealed in a home of thought, speech, or action. This will result in Divine joy that cannot be achieved in heaven alone.

"Lavan Wanted to Uproot Everything"

by Rabbi Shmuel Weiss, Midreshet Tal Menashe, Northern Shomron

The Midrash, as quoted in the well known passage in the Hagadda, compares Lavan to Pharaoh and comes to the conclusion that Lavan was worse. "Go out and study what Lavan the Aramite wanted to do to Yisrael. Pharaoh only made a decree against the male children, but Lavan wanted to uproot everything." But we are left with a question. While it is true that Lavan is seen in this week's Torah portion to be an accomplished swindler, how does this lead to the conclusion that he "wanted to uproot everything"?

When Lavan welcomed Yaacov into his house, he ran towards him. Based on the Midrash, Rashi explains that Lavan "thought that he was carrying money." Lavan is seen as a pleasure seeker, whose only interest is to acquire more and more wealth.

Yaacov lived in his house for twenty years, and Lavan tried to influence him and to teach him to pursue money and wealth. In this way, he would have uprooted everything. Yaacov succeeded in not accepting this evil trait: "I lived with Lavan-but I continued to observe the 613 mitzvot" [Rashi, Bereishit 32:5].

Yaacov stayed an additional six years in Lavan's house, learning the skills of tending sheep, gaining wealth and for the time being forgetting the purpose of his mission. In the end, the Almighty is forced to remind him explicitly:

"Return to the land of your fathers and your birthplace, and I will be with you" [31:3]. As the sages explained, "Rabbi Ami said in the name of Rish Lakish: Property outside of the land are not blessed, but when you return to the land I will be with you" [Bereishit Rabba 74]. This shows that pursuit of wealth is the opposite of the true mission of Bnei Yisrael.

Two incidents related to the establishment of the nation of Yisrael were indeed spoiled by the pursuit of wealth and riches. The first one is the shattering of the tablets during the events at Mount Sinai, when Bnei Yisrael danced around the gold that had become their deity. While the people danced around the gold, the Torah was shattered. A second event was the destruction of the Second Temple. The sages wrote, "During the Second Temple, we know that the people labored over the Torah and observed the mitzva of Maaser. Why were they sent into exile? It was because they loved wealth and every man hated his colleague." [Tosefta Menachot 13:22]. The Temple, which is linked to the spiritual status of the nation, was destroyed at a time when the people loved their wealth and therefore hated each other. Lavan knew that this was the point at which everything could be uprooted. The Torah, the Temple, and all holy things will not be able to exist at the same time as wealth is pursued, and Lavan attempts to use this principle as a point of attack in trying to uproot everything.

To this very day we suffer from the destruction of the Temple. We are continuously forced to struggle against the culture of Lavan in our generation, which influences us to accept this evil trait. When we succeed to really return to our land and our birthplace, only then will we obtain the blessing of G-d to Yaacov, "I will be with you."

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“**A**nd she (Rachel) said, 'here is my maid Bilhah, marry her; and I will raise her offspring, and I will also be built up through her' (Beraishis 30:3). Rashi tells us that the "also" refers to Sara, Yaakov's grandmother, and that Rachel was saying that just as Sara had a child after giving her maid, Hagar, to be Avraham's second wife, so too will she

(Rachel) be able to give birth after giving Bilhah to Yaakov as his third wife.

When Sara told Avraham, "perhaps I will be built up through her," Rashi had told us (16:2) that she meant, "in the merit of having my rival enter my house," i.e. allowing Avraham to take a second wife to have children at least with her, G-d may give her a child of her own. If Abraham was to start a family, and she (Sara) wasn't going to bear any children, then bringing in another wife to have his children makes sense. And making such a tremendous personal sacrifice in order for the Abrahamic mission to continue is certainly meritorious enough to be rewarded. But how does this translate to Rachel deserving to have her own children just because she also gave her maid to her husband? Yaakov already had four children with Leah, so Rachel's sacrifice was not in order that Yaakov could at least have children with *somebody*, if not her. And Leah was already her "rival." How would bringing in another rival help?

Leah followed Rachel's lead, and after stopping from having children after four, gives her maid, Zilpah, to be Yaakov's fourth wife. When Leah finally has another child, she attributes it to being a reward for having given her maid to Yaakov as a wife (30:18). This is not as difficult to understand, though, as it can be considered sacrificing in order for Yaakov to have more children, even if he already had some (with her and with Bilhah). Putting the good of the nation (by helping bring about more Tribes; see Rashi on 30:17) ahead of herself is certainly meritorious, and deserving of being rewarded. And had this been Rachel's intention, we could understand her thinking too. But if Rachel thought that giving her maid to be Yaakov's wife was some kind of "magic solution" that should work for her as it had worked for Sara, it is much harder to understand. After all, Sara was afraid that otherwise Avraham would have no children at all, while Yaakov was already the father of four children! How did Rachel think that it would work for her just because it had for Sara?

If we take a closer look at the conversation between Yaakov and Rachel, as explained by Rashi, we might be able to get a clearer understanding as to why bringing Bilhah into the equation helped Rachel have children of her own, and why it was similar to Sara and Hagar. Rachel asks Yaakov to give her children (30:2), which Rashi explains to mean "pray for me just as your father prayed for your mother when she couldn't have children." It would be very difficult to imagine that Yaakov hadn't already been asking G-d to help Rachel have children. He had to know that she wanted children, and he certainly wanted to have children with her. So Rachel's request couldn't just be for Yaakov to start asking G-d now to help her have children. It was a request to "pray for me the way your father prayed for your mother." What kind of prayer was that? "Prayer upon urgent prayer" (Rashi on 25:21).

Yitzchok never let up, asking G-d over and over and over again, with extreme urgency, pressing G-d again and again to help Rivkah have children. This is the kind of prayer Rachel was asking of Yaakov, the kind that Yitzchok had done for Rivkah.

Yaakov responds (30:3) by saying that "you claim I should do what my father did, but I am not in the same situation my father was. He didn't have any children at all, while I already have children." Yes, Yaakov had already been praying for her, but how could he feel the same type of urgency that Yitzchok felt? Yitzchok had no children, and no other wives. If he were to have children, it would have to be with Rivkah. So his prayers for her to have children were also prayers for *himself* to have children. Yaakov, on the other hand, already had children with Leah, so could not feel the same kind of urgency praying for Rachel that his father felt praying for Rivkah.

Rachel counters (Rashi on 30:3) by reminding Yaakov that Avraham also prayed urgently for Sara, even though he had already had a child with Hagar. To this, Yaakov answers that there was a reason why Avraham was able to pray so hard for Sara, even though he already had a son: "My grandmother brought her rival into her house." The context of the conversation indicates that Yaakov is not telling Rachel that Sara had merits that she didn't have, but that Sara was in a situation that allowed Avraham to pray harder for her than he (Yaakov) can pray for Rachel. What situation? "Bringing her rival into her house."

After Avraham married Hagar, she started thinking that she was more worthy than Sara. Even after Hagar was forced to live under Sara's guidelines, Avraham knew how much it hurt Sara knowing that her maid was able to have a child (with Avraham) while she couldn't. Even if Avraham couldn't have prayed as hard for her to have child as when he himself had no children, seeing Sara suffer motivated him to "gird his loins" in prayer, begging G-d to help Sara have a child. Not just so that she can have one, but also so that she wouldn't have to continue being without one while her maid raised hers. This enabled Avraham's prayers for her to be even more urgent, and eventually Sara gave birth to Yitzchok.

Yaakov was therefore telling Rachel that he couldn't be expected to pray as hard as Avraham did, as Avraham had extra motivation, being that his wife was in such an emotionally wrenching situation. How did Rachel respond? "She said to him, 'if this is what's preventing' you from praying as urgently for me as Avraham prayed for Sara, 'here is Bilhah, my maid.' Now I am in the same situation as Sara, having to endure the torment of my husband having an additional wife, and, after Bilhah gives birth, having my very own maid raise her children while I remain childless.

Rachel wasn't necessarily comparing her situation to Sara's, only how both of their personal

sacrifices enabled their husbands' prayers to become much more urgent. And therefore much more easily accepted. © 2004 Rabbi D. Kramer

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

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

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

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

Her response was that she couldn't imagine prevailing over such hardship. But she has prevailed and has given love all these years magnificently. No one is born with this abundant love and commitment;

yet the words of Isaiah ring true-with the help of G-d we can overcome.

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

Perhaps the well of water in the Yaakov narrative represents life itself. The water, as it often does in the Torah, represents life itself. The rock on top of the well reminds us that all too often our life energies are blocked and we feel a weight above us that is difficult to bear. No matter how impossible we thought something was, Yaakov's actions remind us that we can sometimes dig deep, roll up our sleeves, take a breath, and with the help of G-d, transform it into the possible. © 2005 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov all suffered from success-induced jealous reactions from the local populations where they lived. Avraham is recognized as the prince of G-d in our midst and yet is begrudged a grave plot to bury Sarah. Yitzchak is sent away from the kingdom of Avimelech because you have grown too great from us. And in this weeks parsha, Yaakov is told by Lavan that everything that Yaakov owns is really the property of Lavan. The blessings of G-d and the promise that He made to protect the patriarchs and matriarchs of Israel save them from their neighbors, relatives and enemies. However, this very success and achievements of this small family, as per G-d's promise and against all odds and opposition, raises the hatred and jealousy of their neighbors. No matter that the neighbors themselves, such as Avimelech and Lavan benefit mightily from the achievements of Yitzchak and Yaakov. The rabbis of the Talmud taught us that hatred destroys rational thought and behavior. So, instead of gratitude and friendship, the accomplishments of the patriarchs and matriarchs only bring forth greed, jealousy, persecution and always the threat of violence hovers in the background. All efforts to maintain a low profile and to mollify Lavan result only in increased bigotry and hatred. It is not for naught that the Pesach hagada makes Lavan a greater enemy to the survival of the Jewish people than even the Pharaoh of Egypt. But almost all of the enemies of the Jews over the centuries suffer from the same basic moral faults regarding the Jews: ingratitude, jealousy and greed. These are all revealed to us in this weeks parsha.

Someone mentioned to me that perhaps if we maintained a lower profile in the world, didnt receive so

many Nobel prize awards, and were less influential in the fields of finance and the media, anti-Semitism would decrease. What if is a difficult field of thought to pursue intelligently. There is no question that the world and all humankind would be by far the poorer if the Jews purposely withheld their energy, creativity and intelligence from contributing to human civilization. And there certainly is no guarantee that the world would like us any more than it does now if we were less successful and prominent. The mere fact that G-d blessed the patriarchs with the blessings of success and influence indicates that this is His desire for us. The Torah specifically states that all of the nations and families of the earth will benefit and be blessed through us. So in our case less would not necessarily be more. Yet we were enjoined from flouting our success in the faces of those less fortunate than us. Modesty in behavior and deportment is an important partner to success. This is also a lesson that our father Yaakov intended to teach us. We are not allowed to rein in our talents and achievements. But we are certainly bidden to rein in our egos and bluster. That is also an important Jewish trait that should be a foundation in our lives. © 2005 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/jewishhistory.

DR. AVIGDOR BONCHEK

What's Bothering Rashi?

This week's parsha recounts Jacob's flight from his brother, Esau, to his uncle, Lavan's home. There he marries Leah and Rachel and there they (and Zilpah & Bilhah) bear him eleven sons (Benjamin was born to Rachel later). On his way to Lavan, Jacob rests and dreams his famous "ladder" dream. This is a divine vision in which G-d promises Jacob to guard him on his way and to bless him with many offspring who will inherit the Land of Israel.

Let us begin with a difficulty in the Torah text itself and proceed to Rashi. After Jacob awakens from his dream, he vows that if G-d's promises are fulfilled, Jacob will build Him an altar and he will offer up a tithe to G-d. "And this stone which I have set as a monument, will become a House of G-d and all You give I will give a tenth to You." (Genesis 28:22)

Look at our verse and compare its grammar with that of the previous verses (20-21) of Jacob's vow. Do you see a problem?

A Question: Jacob refers to G-d in the second person in our verse ("all that You give me I will give You a tenth"). But in verses 20-21 he refers to G-d in the third person ("if G-d will be with me, and He will guard me and He will give me..."). Why this switch from indirect (third person) reference to G-d to a direct (second person) reference to Him?

To understand this we will now look at the Rashi-comment. In the long Rashi on the words "This is the House of G-d" Rashi makes the following comment: "When he reached Haran he (Jacob) said 'Is it possible that I passed the place (Mount Moriah) where my fathers prayed without my having prayed there?' He decided to go back (to Moriah)" etc.

Compare this statement with verse 17 and Jacob's surprise. What would you ask?

Why was Jacob surprised that the place where he slept was a holy place? Had he not intentionally returned there precisely because he thought it was special for his fathers had prayed there? Can you suggest an answer?

Jacob knew that Moriah was a holy place. There Abraham and Isaac proved their faith in G-d by going through the Akeida ordeal. The place was holy because his fathers had had a divine experience there. It was a place that Jacob knew through tradition as a holy place. For him, G-d (Elokim-the more impersonal name for G-d) was here. But after his "ladder dream," which was Jacob's personal vision from G-d, Jacob personally experienced G-d himself, not just as a tradition from his forefathers but as a personal religious experience. Now G-d was to Jacob not the third person, indirect 'Elokim,' but the second person, direct, 'Hashem,' the personal G-d.

So Jacob says: If my dream is fulfilled I will know this was not just an ordinary dream, but a true prophecy from G-d to me personally. Then Elokim will become for me Hashem-I will no longer refer to Him indirectly. And I only now realize how holy this place is for me. It is my gateway to heaven- to G-d. I will then speak directly to Him as in "and all You give me I will give You a tenth."

There is always much mystery and deeper meaning in the subtle nuances of the Torah's words.

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RABBI LABEL LAM

Dvar Torah

And Rachel saw that she did not bear a child for Yaakov and Rachel was jealous of her sister...

(Breishis 30:1) And Rachel was jealous of her sister: She was jealous of her good deeds and she therefore declared, "If it wouldn't be that she was more righteous than I, she would not merit children." (Rashi)

The verse tells us that Rachel was jealous of her sister. Can we not assume that jealousy is a ruinous attitude? How do you know that she was only jealous of her sister's good deeds?

It may be fairly simple to deduce from the fact that no action of malice resulted from her jealousy. She did not respond as Cain did to his brother's success. Not a single verse intimates that she butchered her sister's Shaitel or called her bad names behind her back or anything like that. What happened with that

powerful emotion called "jealousy" that drove one man to kill his brother so early in human history? It's obviously not a feeling that can be easily assuaged, once it takes grip of a person. What did Rachel do differently than Cain?

The Sefer Chovos HaLevavos offers powerfully practical advice to avoid being brought to ruin by the bug of jealousy. One should try to enter into the company of people who are materially less well off and of people who are spiritually superior. Let's try to understand. After visiting a poor neighborhood or a hospital or a nursing home we will tend to feel grateful for the youth, health, and wealth that we possess, on whatever scale. Conversely, after being in the Yeshiva study hall for a period of time and seeing people with greater facility for learning making constant progress in personal growth, one might be inspired to try to do even more in that area as well.

Almost eight years ago, a good friend, David, had just gotten his first few tastes of Talmud in some classes he was hosting in his house. He's a really decent fellow with a strong computer-like logic already installed in his bright mind. He naturally enjoyed the intellectual exercise of learning Talmud. Then it happened. Someone offered him, on a whim, an extra ticket to the Siyum HaShas -The completion of the Talmud accomplished every 7 and 1/2 years based on learning two sides a page daily- every day without fail. He went. He scanned the room filled with 15,000 and more in one stadium, aware that another New York arena had about the same and there were even more. He asked the fellow he was with, "Did all these people learn the whole Talmud?" The answer he got was, "No, but a significant number probably did!"

That was enough. He left the hall that night determined to latch on with a ferocious tenacity to learn that page a day. This summer, 7 and 1/2 years later he was happily counted amongst those who completed the Talmud and now he's going for a second time. What a difference it has made to him and his entire family! From where did the initial jolt come? Dare we say that this super accomplishment was borne of jealousy!

Observe how wise the advice of the Chovos HaLevavos. It counters the natural tendency of many to shop the world like a mall and observe lifestyles and things out of reach, leaving us frustrated and filled with envy. At the same time the world obsesses with the news of uglier and uglier behavior. Quietly, this habit anesthetizes our conscience and gives us temporarily an artificial sense of spiritual superiority as the moral ground around us sinks shockingly lower daily.

Much like the gun lobbyists likes to argue, "It is not guns that kill but people." The instrument of destruction is not the object of blame but rather how it is employed. Jealousy, if harnessed brings out the best in men but left to chance - yields chaos. © 2005 Rabbi L. Lam and torah.org