

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

After Lavan catches up with the fleeing Yaakov, they eventually make a pact promising not to harm each other (Beraishis 31:44-53). As a permanent testimony to this pact, Yaakov (with Lavan's consent and/or help) builds two things, a monument ("matzayva") from a single stone and a pile ("gal") of stones. But why did they need both? Wouldn't one (or the other) have been enough? What is added by having the pile of stones that wouldn't have been there if only the monument was built? Or, conversely, what does the monument add that the pile of stones alone didn't have? Either one is a permanent reminder of the pact, so why did Yaakov build both?

"And do not put up for yourself a monument, which is hated by Hashem your G-d" (Devarim 16:22). It seems pretty unusual that Yaakov would have constructed a monument, not just here, but when consecrating the future site of the Temple (Beraishis 28:18), if G-d doesn't like them. G-d apparently was okay with it, though, as when commanding Yaakov to return home (31:13) He identifies Himself as the One to whom he built a monument. Rashi (in Devarim) points this out, telling us that "an altar of [multiple] stones and an altar of dirt [He] commanded [us] to make, [but] this (a monument of just one stone, even if used to bring an offering to G-d) [He] hates, as it is the mode of worship used by the Canaanites (when worshipping idols). And even though it was loved in the days of our forefathers, it is now hated, since it became a mode of idol-worship."

There are several things we can glean from this Rashi. First of all, although G-d actually liked it when Avraham, Yitzchok and Yaakov brought an offering to Him on a "matzayva," He came to dislike it, because it was now being used by idol worshippers. Secondly, it must not have been used for idol-worship during the time of our patriarchs, or it would have been hated then as well. And it wasn't the offering itself that is being referred to as "loved" or "hated," but how it was brought. After all, an offering to G-d brought on a "matzayva" is no longer appreciated, and using a multi-stoned altar for idol-worship is obviously hated as well. The end result is that despite an offering brought on a "matzayva" being a very positive thing before the Canaanites started using it in their idol-worship, once

they did, G-d no longer wanted offerings brought on them even to Him.

The commentators ask why altars (made of multiple stones) are allowed, since they were also used for idol-worship. This is evident from the simple fact that when G-d commanded us to destroy the things used by the Canaanites for idol-worship (Shemos 34:13 and Devarim 12:3), He mentions both altars and monuments. If being used as a mode of idol-worship disqualifies something from being a valid form of serving G-d, altars should be just as hated as monuments!

However, there is a big difference between the two. The patriarchs reintroduced monotheism to a polytheistic society. Using a monument consisting of a single stone was a way of pointing out that the offering was being brought to the One True G-d, the Creator, and not to the multiple deities that were being worshipped at the time. It was therefore cherished by G-d, as it was an integral part of pointing out the Oneness of G-d.

When describing the sin of those who built the Tower of Babel (Beraishis 11:4), the Sefornu explains that it wasn't just that they would impose idol-worship on the masses, but that they would cause everyone to think that the deity they chose to worship was "the G-d of the deities," ("Elokay ha-elohim") i.e., the One to whom all the other deities answered. He explains it further (11:6) by describing how "the deity they would choose would be revered by all of humanity, and no one would try to learn about the Creator, blessed is He or understand that He formed everything. And the opposite will occur when there will be disagreements between the nations regarding the foreign deities, for each of these will think that there is a G-d of all of the deities that all of the deities defer to." Although mistaken by thinking that these deities have any power, at least their worshippers will believe in a "higher G-d" that presided above them.

This would explain why Shem, the son of Noah, who practiced monotheism and taught it to those that sought it out, referred to G-d as "Kel Elyon," the "G-d on High" or "uppermost G-d" (14:18-20). Soon afterwards, Avraham uses that same term (18:22) when describing G-d to polytheists. The Radak tells us (2:4) that the reason one of G-d's names ("Elokim") is in the plural form is "because all of G-d's actions are done by the administering angels who fulfill His will; He is

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therefore referred to by their name." Polytheists worshipped G-d's intermediaries instead of G-d, thinking either that this is what G-d Himself wanted (see Rambam's Laws of Idol Worship 1:1) or that these deities actually had the ability to affect things as they saw fit.

After the patriarchs publicized monotheism, using the single-stoned monument as part of the message, idol-worship still continued. Sometimes they used multi-stoned altars when they worshipped multiple deities and sometimes they used a single-stoned monument. However, instead of representing the One True G-d, the idol worshipper focused on a single deity from the multitude of deities, depending on what he wanted to accomplish and therefore which deity he thought he should be appealing to. The monument became a mode of worship that excluded G-d, while the multi-stoned altar was used either by idol-worshippers who at least acknowledged that there was a "higher G-d" or by monotheistic worshippers that were referencing His being above all other powers. What was once loved because it signified monotheism was now hated, because it was co-opted by idol-worshippers to signify the exact opposite. In the days of the patriarchs G-d loved the offerings brought on a "matzayva," but after it was used for idol-worship He hated it.

Lavan knew about monotheism because his sister married a monotheist (Yitzchok), and was that much more familiar with it after Yaakov lived with him for 20 years. Nevertheless, Lavan did not become a monotheist, as evidenced by how upset he became when his "terafim" were missing (31:30). Yaakov was still building monuments to serve G-d, as the message of monotheism still needed to be spread, and G-d still appreciated his doing so. But would building a monument with/for Lavan be used by him to focus on G-d, or on a particular deity? Yaakov wanted to use a monument because of what it signified, but wanted to make sure it would not be used inappropriately by Lavan. A pile of stones built next to the monument would show that the one stone of the monument was a reference to the One G-d who was above His multiple intermediaries. This may be why Yaakov felt he had to build both. © 2006 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

As soon as we open the Biblical portion of VaYetze, we are struck by a problematic vow which Jacob makes after his dream, a kind of bargain with G-d as he sets out for exile: "If G-d (Elokim, the Universal Power of Creation) will be with me, and will guide me in this path whereon I am going, and will give me bread to eat and garments to wear, and will return me in peace to the house of my father, then the Lord (Y-HVH, the Abrahamic more personal G-d of world redemption) will be my G-d, and this stone which I have placed as a monument will be a house of G-d..." (Gen. 28: 20-22). How can we justify making such "deals" with G-d?

There are other textual difficulties as well within the entire context of Jacob's dream and subsequent vow. First he experiences a most stirring and inspiring dream in which he is specified as the heir to the Abrahamic mission; he - Jacob - will be granted multiple progeny through whom "will be blessed all the families of the earth." After Jacob awakens from the dream- and declares the awesome and numinous quality of a place which he now realizes is the house of G-d and the gateway to the heavens - the text then informs us that Jacob woke up early in the morning (he apparently went back to sleep after he had previously awakened from his dream) and then makes his vow. What point is there to the Bible's recording the time lag between the dream and the vow? And finally, does G-d not promise Jacob in his dream whatever he later asks for in his vow, that He will watch over him wherever he goes, return him to this land, and not forsake him (Gen 28:15)? Why does Jacob require the vow altogether?

I attempted to demonstrate in my commentary on Toldot the crucial necessity of unconditional parental love for each child as he/she essentially is for the sake of the future development of that child. This is not to say that a parent does not have the right - and even the obligation - to attempt to ameliorate the child's rough edges and refine certain unpleasant personality traits. But the child must always be made to feel loved and accepted by his/her parents, and to believe that his/her basic personality finds favor in their eyes. Jacob did not feel that his persona as a "wholehearted, dweller of tents" was accepted by his father; Isaac clearly favored the out-door, aggressive hungry Esau, who provided him with the red venison meat that he loved and who knew how to get around him with honey-sweet words.

Hence Jacob, in his obsessive desire to gain his father's favor, attempts to bury his true and essential personality and become as much like Esau as possible; he jumps at his mother's offer to put on the external garb of Esau, to aggressively substitute himself for Esau by bringing his father venison and so assuming the grasping hands of Esau, and to attempt

to convince his father with deceitful words that he indeed is Esau.

And perhaps Jacob can justify his deception: did he not purchase the birthright from his elder brother with a pot of lentil soup, and did not Esau spurn the birthright? Of the two twins, Jacob was certainly a worthier heir to Abraham and Isaac! But Biblical morality does not support the view that the ends justify the means; "justice, justice shalt thou pursue" (Deut. 16:20) teaches that not only the goal but also the procedure of getting there must be perfectly just.

So that although Jacob may have wrested the material blessings ("the dew of the heavens, the fat of the earth and much grain and wine) from his hapless brother, at this juncture he loses the spiritual birthright, the Abrahamic mission which will bring redemption to all of humanity from the backdrop of Israel and Jerusalem. Jacob must journey backwards; he is exiled from his ancestral home Israel and is forced to wander back to Haran, back to the place which G-d told Abraham he must leave if he were to become the great blessing for the world. And exile has meant punishment for Biblical personalities ever since Adam and Eve were exiled from the Garden of Eden; moreover, the Abrahamic mission can hardly be realized outside of Canaan in Haran!

And then comes Jacob's dream, in which the Almighty introduces Himself as "Y-HVH the G-d of Abraham your father and of Isaac." G-d is in effect telling Jacob that Isaac is not his father, that although Isaac has not related to him as a loving father, Jacob has sealed off the relationship by his act of deception. But nevertheless Abraham remains Jacob's father; since Jacob has the essential character necessary for the continuity of the Abrahamic mission, his seed shall spread out throughout the world and all the families of the earth shall be blessed through him and his seed.

Jacob awakens, Jacob is moved and inspired; but Jacob remains conflicted. On the one hand, he feels pangs of guilt for his deception and on the other hand he listened to his mother's command as well as to the voices in his heart telling him to become Esau. Yes, he played the imposter before his father, but did not his father later say, "He, (Jacob) shall nevertheless be blessed." And now G-d has confirmed the fact that he does have the birthright but does not say when and how?

Jacob goes back to sleep to rest and to process the dream. He awakens and takes a special vow. He doesn't refer to the Divine guarantee that he will be the heir apparent, holder of the birthright. He understands that that must refer to the future. He is not up to that yet; he is still in the midst of his struggle; he remains fixated on trying to win his father's favor. He still thinks that without his father's love and acceptance, he won't be able to accomplish anything; he will never successfully realize his potential. And so he makes his

bargain with G-d: "If you will guard me... and will return me in peace to the house of my father, then the Lord will be my G-d and this (place)... will be a house of G-d."

Yes, Jacob is still in the early stages of his struggling development. He interprets the dream to mean that only if he returns in peace to his father, only if he gains his father's love and acceptance, will he be able to express the birthright of the Y-HVH of love and redemption and will he be able to make the world a house of G-d. And so he continues to compound his error of transforming himself into Esau, and out-Laban's Laban in Haran as he tries to become a wily and aggressively grasping "contender" - and not nurturer - of the cattle. He has yet to learn that true maturity comes only in freeing oneself from dependency upon parental acceptance, only in establishing one's moral autonomy by listening only to the voice of the G-d of ethical monotheism on the march to self realization with as much integrity as possible. When Jacob learns that lesson, he will be able to exorcize from himself the false overlay of Esau and he will emerge as independent Yisrael, the one who has emerged triumphant over himself by having returned to his truest self. © 2006 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

As Ya'akov (Jacob) flees Esav (Esau) he arrives near his uncle Laban's home. There he sees his cousin Rachel. The Torah tells us, "And Ya'akov kissed Rachel and cried." (Genesis 29:11) Why the tears?

To be sure, Ya'akov was lonely. Running from Esau he was forced to leave home. It is therefore conceivable that his tears were tears of joy that he had once again connected with family. Sensing that he would gain comfort and solace in Rachel, he cries. Tears of happiness stream down his face.

Rashi, quoting the Midrash, sees it differently. According to this reading, Ya'akov's tears were ones of sadness for his prophetic abilities made him realize that he would not be buried with his beloved Rachel.

Rachel was buried in Bethlehem. According to the Midrash, she was buried there so that when the Jews would pass by after the destruction of the Temple they would pray at Rachel's grave. There, Rachel would intervene on behalf of her people. It seems then that Ya'akov's tears may be echoes of the tears to be shed by am Yisrael when they would be exiled. Similar tears are shed today, as Jews are being denied the right to pray at Rachel's grave.

Another thought comes to mind. It is possible that Ya'akov's love for Rachel was already so deep that he became anxious. Sometimes one's love for another is so profound that fear builds up that the love would eventually be lost. Built into love is the reality that every

love relationship must terminate, for death comes to all of us. The greater the love, the greater the pain when it terminates. Hence Jacob cries. His love for Rachel is so great that he is overcome for he knows it will end and the pain was unbearable.

Here may lie a reason why we break the glass under the chupah. We do so of course to remember the Temple destroyed. But we also do so to remind bride and groom that nothing lasts forever. In the end even the greatest of marriages are fragile and will end.

Strange as it may seem, death has echoes in the wedding ceremony. In fact, juxtaposed to the Talmudic discussion of the seven blessings recited beneath the chupah are the blessings recited at a burial (Ketubot 8a, 8b). Additionally, following the marriage is a week of seven nights of family and communal gathering called Sheva Brakhot. Following death is also a week of communal and family gathering called Shiva. The relationship is not bizarre. Both of these times are ones of reflection and transition. They teach us that nothing continues forever. At the moments of greatest joy and deepest sorrow we are taught the lesson that we must live every moment of our lives in love, as life is fleeting and like a dream, flies away.

And so, this may be why Jacob cries. He is aware of the reality that we must use our time on this earth to hold on tight and to truly treasure those whom we love. © 2006 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 ABBA WAGENSBERG

Between the Lines

Parshat Vayetzei opens with a seemingly straightforward description of Jacob's travels: "And Jacob left Beersheva and went toward Haran. And he encountered the place, and he spent the night there, because the sun had set" (Genesis 28:10-11).

The Kedushat Levi explains that this journey symbolizes Jacob's departure from the Land of Israel and subsequent travels into exile. Since our tradition teaches that every experience of the patriarchs has repercussions for their descendants, it seems that Jacob's travels must still be relevant to our lives today.

Let's examine the opening verses of the parsha in detail:

"And Jacob left Beersheva." The Kedushat Levi says that Jacob's departure from Israel hints to the spiritual greatness of the Land. He derives this from the word "Beersheva," which is a combination of be'er and sheva. Be'er means "well"-a source of water, symbolizing abundance and blessing. Sheva means "seven," alluding to a seven-fold increase of blessing. The Land of Israel is therefore the source of spiritual abundance.

The verse continues: "...and he went toward Haran." Jacob understands that his journey out of the Land of Israel will cause his descendants to be exiled in the future. According to the Kedushat Levi, the word "Haran" is related to the phrase "charon af," meaning "anger." G-d's displeasure at the Jewish people's future behavior will result in their being exiled from the Land.

This knowledge causes Jacob great pain, as the next part of the verse indicates: "And he encountered the place" (vayif'ga ba-makom). The word vayifga shares a root with the word lifgo'ah, which means "to injure." Furthermore, the word makom, beyond its simple meaning of "place," often refers to G-d Himself, the foundation of the world (Bereishit Raba 68:9).

We can understand from these words that Jacob did not only feel the people's pain at being exiled, but he also felt G-d's pain at being compelled to exile His children.

Jacob was highly sensitive to the pain of exile. Therefore, the verse continues, "...and he spent the night there, because the sun had set." The exile is compared to night. Jacob saw that his journeys out of Israel would eventually lead to the darkness of exile descending upon the Jewish people. Just as Jacob slept, the people, too, would be compelled to "sleep."

Jacob understood that his actions were only a prelude to what would happen to his descendants. Based on this idea, we can suggest a deeper understanding of the words, "And Jacob left" (vayeitzei Yaakov). Jacob "came out of himself" by allowing himself to feel the pain of the Jewish exile. He broadened his focus, shifting his attention away from himself and making room for others. This teaches us a valuable lesson about the importance of feeling other people's pain.

We see another demonstration of this quality in Genesis 15:13, when G-d tells Abraham that the Jewish people will be enslaved to a foreign nation for 400 years. We know from other sources, however, that the Jewish people served in Egypt for only 210 years (Rashi on Genesis 42:2). How can we reconcile this contradiction?

According to the Kedushat Levi, as soon as Abraham was informed about the future Egyptian exile, he felt the pain that the Jewish people would experience there. His pain was so acute that G-d subtracted 190 years from the original decree!

This ability to feel the pain of others also helps us to see why Rachel was the ideal wife for Jacob. Jacob had arranged to marry Rachel, yet he suspected that his future father-in-law Laban would try to deceive him in some way. He and Rachel therefore agreed upon secret signs that would enable them to recognize each others' true identity. When Rachel learned of Laban's plan to give her sister Leah to Jacob instead, she taught Leah these secret signs-because she was

so sensitive to the pain that Leah would experience were she to be publicly humiliated under the chuppah (Talmud-Megilla 13).

As soon as Jacob feels the pain of the Jewish people's exile and goes to sleep in the darkness, G-d blesses him with the promise, "Behold, I am with you, and I will guard you wherever you go, and I will return you to this Land" (Genesis 28:13-15). We can learn from this blessing the tremendous power of developing sensitivity to others. Although G-d's Presence is with us even in the exile, feeling other people's pain can give us the merit to return to the Land of Israel. The blessing that Jacob receives is a message to us as well.

May we all learn to become sensitive and responsive to the pain of others, and may this ability bring us one step closer to the final redemption, when we will be gathered from exile and return to our land in peace. © 2006 Rabbi A. Wagensberg & aish.com

RABBI ZEV LEFF

Outlooks & Insights

“**N**ot like Avraham who called [the Temple] 'mountain,' and not like Yitzhak who called it 'field,' but rather like Yaakov who called it 'house'...” (Talmud-Pesachim 88a)

Maimonides in the beginning of Hilchos Beis HaBechirah lists three functions of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, the Beis Hamikdash: (1) to be a bayis laHashem- literally, G-d's house; (2) to be the place where sacrifices will be offered; and (3) to be the place to which the Jewish people will ascend three times yearly to celebrate the festivals.

The Beis Hamikdash serves as a mountain (har), a place to ascend to, to look up to, a place that inspires one to feel that he is in the shadow of the Shechina, the Divine Presence. That is the function of the Beis Hamikdash emphasized by Avraham: Har Hashem yera'eh-"the mountain upon which G-d will be seen" and from which the Jewish people will be observed by G-d. This refers to the first Beis Hamikdash, on which the Shechina devolved and which made a profound impression on those who stood in its shadow.

Yitzchak emphasized the second function of the Beis Hamikdash by calling it a "field" (sadeh), a place for growth and development, an environment conducive to bringing out all man's various emotions and expressing them in G-d's service. This was the essence of the second Beis Hamikdash, which lacked the full measure of Shechina, but which still served as a place for prayer and the bringing of the sacrifices.

It was left to Yaakov, however, to perceive the all-encompassing nature of the Beis Hamikdash as the House of G-d. Yaakov clearly knew the place of the future Mikdash as one where his forefathers prayed. That is why he returned after having passed by on his

way to Charan. Nevertheless after awakening from his dream, he exclaimed:

"...surely G-d is in this place and I did not know it.... How awesome is this place. This is none other than G-d's House, and this is the Gateway to Heaven." (Genesis 28:16-17)

Although he knew of the distinction of this site as a mountain and a field, its significance as a house, which he perceived at that moment, overshadowed either of those designations. That designation applies to the third Beis Hamikdash, which will be eternal and influence the entire world.

Yaakov perceived this aspect of the Beis Hamikdash as he was ready to descend into exile, where his children would be as the dust of the earth, trod upon by all the nations of the world, yet, at the same time, a source of inspiration and blessing to the entire world. In exile the concept of "G-d's House" would be embodied in the House of Prayer, House of Study, and the Jewish Home. These three would preserve the Jewish people in exile and enable them to return to Israel and receive the ultimate House of G-d, the third Temple.

To appreciate the precise function of the House of G-d, we must understand what a house is. A house is basically four walls, a door, and perhaps a window. The four walls serve three functions. First, they create an interior area, a private inner domain, separated from the public domain. The Jewish home must create an environment of Jewish values and morals, an inner sanctum of spirituality that serves as the foundation of Torah learning and observance.

Secondly, the walls form a partition that encompass and unite all the individuals who occupy this inner area. Peace in the home (shalom bayis) refers to the perfect harmony that the home engenders, where each individual feels himself part of a unit that must function together-each using their unique talents for a common goal.

And finally, the walls of the house serve as buffers against destructive foreign influences, hostile to Torah values.

Once the inner area is infused with sanctity and purpose, then the light from the inside can be projected from the windows, and the intense sanctity of this home environment can be exposed to the outside world. There are several Mitzvot that apply specifically to a house. The Mitzvah of Shabbos lights symbolizes the sanctity that the house must engender and the enlightenment of Torah values and ethics. In addition, the Shabbos lights symbolize the harmony that is produced when each member takes care not to step on others in the darkness of ignorance and selfishness.

The Mezuzah and ma'akeh (guardrail) represent the protection the house offers from the physical and spiritual dangers of the outside world. Checking for Chametz prior to Pesach teaches us that

we must from time to time check to see if foreign influences have succeeded in invading the house and remove them.

Lastly, the Mitzvah of Chanukah lights placed outside the door or in the window symbolizes the influence that the Jewish home can have on the outside world.

The letters of the word bayis (house) itself hint to its function. The first letter, bais, represents bina, understanding-understanding of what to let in and what to keep outside. Yud is a letter of holiness, but it also represents the unity of all the separate integers that unite to form one unit of ten. The yud represents the holiness that pervades the home when all of the individuals unite in service of G-d with a common goal. And finally, the suf is a sign- a sign to the outside world of the Jewish home's influence on the entire world.

It is significant that the Parsha that depicts Yaakov's first exile deals primarily with our matriarchs. The woman is the essence of the house itself (Talmud-Shabbos 118b). To survive in exile and prepare for the Third Temple, we must strengthen our public houses, shuls, study houses, as well as our individual homes, to reflect the ultimate functions of that future house of G-d.

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YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

Virtual Beit Medrash

STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA HARAV AHARON LICHTENSTEIN SHLIT"A

Summarized by Aryeh Dienstag

At the beginning and at the end of our parasha, when leaving Beer Sheva and when leaving Charan, Yaakov is confronted with angels.

"... He came upon the place and stopped there for the night, for the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of that place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. He had a dream; a stairway was set on the ground and its top reached to the sky, and angels of G-d were going up and down on it." (Bereishit 28)

"Early in the morning, Lavan kissed his sons and daughters and bade them farewell; then Lavan left on his journey homeward. Jacob went on his way, and angels of G-d encountered him. When he saw them, Jacob said, 'This is G-d's camp.' So he named that place Machanaim." (Bereishit 32)

However, these are two different Yaakovs that we are speaking about. The first time Yaakov saw angels he was a young man with few responsibilities. Having just completed years of study in the Yeshiva of Shem and Ever, he had no familial or financial obligations and was free to pursue any path he wished. However, the second time Yaakov meets angels he is an established individual. Many responsibilities weigh upon his shoulders, including the burdens of family and a livelihood. No longer is Yaakov free to pursue

whatever his heart desires. He must provide for his very large family and see to all their needs.

Furthermore, at the end of the parasha, Yaakov has just finished spending twenty years of complete subservience to Lavan. He had not had been the master of his time or labor, and always had to do Lavan's bidding. The Gemara (Bava Metzia 93b) describes Yaakov as the epitome of a faithful worker, who took no free time for himself. This is a far cry from the carefree youth at the beginning of the parasha.

Yaakov's metamorphosis between his respective departures from Beer Sheva and Charan amounts to more than simply added responsibilities and less free time. Yaakov has a youthful personality at the beginning of the parasha. He dreams, he has hopes and aspirations: he is young and idealistic. However, Yaakov at the end of the parasha is a grown man. He has become a mature and practical person, concerned with day-to-day life. His thoughts are about the financial and practical constraints life has placed upon him.

Nevertheless, even at the end of the parasha, Yaakov has not lost his ability to see angels. He no longer dreams of angels; now Yaakov encounters actual angels. Yaakov held onto his dreams even after maturing, marrying and accepting the burden of providing for a family. He retained his religious personality even in the face of his new life and new responsibilities. Yaakov Avinu overcame the tremendous challenge of maintaining his ability to dream and maintaining the proper perspective throughout his trials and tribulations. Therefore, Yaakov met angels when he left Charan.

When he left Beer Sheva, Yaakov's vision wasn't merely of a ladder that connected him to heaven. According to Chazal, it was a ladder that had one foot in Beer Sheva and the other at Mt. Moriah. Yaakov constantly linked his mundane life to sanctity.

This challenge confronts each of us as well. As we accumulate responsibilities, we too must retain our ability to see angels. Moving towards a more practically-oriented life must not blind our focus on Torah and avodat Hashem. When a person leaves yeshiva, he can't let the diminishment of his quantity of talmud Torah mean a qualitative diminishment in his connection to Torah and to G-d. The burdens of providing for one's family shouldn't break one's dreams. We must always keep one foot in Beer Sheva and the other at Mt. Moriah.

Not everyone who is in yeshiva merits seeing angels, and not everyone in yeshiva learns how to dream. I hear people speak of leaving yeshiva as going into "real life." How can Torah, "our lives and length of our days, ki hem chayeinu ve-orekh yameinu," not be "real life"? A person in yeshiva must maximize his time and work on his relationship with G-d so that this relationship is strong enough to outlast his career in yeshiva.

If we work on ourselves and our connection to G-d during our formative years in yeshiva, we shall merit seeing angels in yeshiva, and will continue to see angels even after we leave yeshiva. (*This sicha was delivered at seuda shelishit, Shabbat parashat Vayetze 5766 [2005].*)

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Of all of the patriarchs, Yaakov is the most representative of all later Jewish history. His story therefore should be viewed as the story of Israel and its relations with the other peoples and faiths in the world. Yaakov flees from the sword of Eisav. On the way to the house of Lavan where he senses that he will find some sort of refuge, he is despoiled and robbed of all of his worldly possessions by Eisav's son, Elifaz. He arrives in abject poverty at Lavan's house as an unwanted guest that is tolerated to an extent but who is always destined to remain a stranger and outsider. Yet in spite of all of the obstacles and bigotry that Yaakov encounters, he rises to power and wealth in the house of Lavan.

This deserved and hard won success, a success that also makes Lavan wealthy in the process, becomes a cause for enmity and jealousy amongst Lavan's sons and family. They do not count their own blessings but rather begrudge others - Yaakov and the Jews - their blessings. They repeat the accusation that Yitzchak faced in the land of G'rar at the hands of Avimelech and his cohorts - "Leave us, for you have become wealthy from us."

It is too galling to the insider to witness the success and wealth of the outsider. No matter what Yaakov will do he will remain the eternal pariah, the outsider who somehow has exploited the insider - so thinks Lavan and his family. There is no refuge from such feelings of paranoia and envy. The only thing that Yaakov can do is to move on again and return home to the Land of Israel and the home of his parents. And this in an encapsulated nutshell is the story of the Jewish people over its centuries of dispersion and exile.

The inherent disdain towards Jews generally and currently focused primarily on the Jewish state of Israel is a product of millennia of Lavan attitudes. In the 1930's, though Franklin Roosevelt was appalled by the treatment of Germany's Jews by the Nazis, he nevertheless commented that Hitler was correct in asserting that there were too many Jewish doctors and lawyers in Germany. His fashionable, Hudson Valley manor house upbringing imprinted this attitude upon his psyche.

The weakness of Lavan lies not only in his cheating and lying behavior but rather in his inability to allow Yaakov credit for his success. Every success of Yaakov is viewed as having been at Lavan's expense even though at the end of the parsha Lavan himself

admits that his own success and great wealth is directly traceable to Yaakov's efforts, talents and industry.

Yet this admission does not truly reflect any change of attitude in Lavan regarding Yaakov. Only G-d's interference, so to speak, in warning Lavan not to attempt to physically harm Yaakov saves Yaakov from a most unpleasant and violent confrontation with Lavan.

Perhaps it is this knowledge that G-d's interference, so to speak, is necessary to preserve the Jewish people is, itself, the ultimate lesson of this story and of the parsha itself. May such heavenly protection and interference always continue. © 2006 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.

RABBI LEVI COOPER

Judging Favorably

Favorably judging others is a well-known and oft-repeated maxim. Countless times we are enjoined by the sages to look upon others sympathetically, always assuming the best and never presuming the worst (M. Avot 1:6; Derech Eretz 1:31).

This guideline is emphasized when we enter a courtroom. Our sages suggest that the biblical directive to judge peers with righteousness (Leviticus 19:15) indicates the order to consider each person favorably (Sifra, Kedoshim 2; B. Shavuot 30a).

As if to stress the importance of judging others favorably, the sages speak of the harsh punishment for one who presumes the worst of a good person - in or out of the courtroom. Citing biblical sources, the Talmud tells us that one who suspects the innocent of misdeeds is punished by suffering bodily harm (B. Shabbat 97a).

Perhaps because of our tendency to disparage leaders, there is another arena where the importance of positively viewing others is accentuated - when the other is a Torah scholar (B. Berachot 19a): "If you saw a scholar transgressing at night, harbor no ill thoughts of that scholar by day, for perhaps that scholar has repented."

Unsatisfied with this favorable assessment, the Talmud goes further: "Perhaps the scholar has repented, rather - surely the scholar has repented!" Not only should misdemeanors committed under the cover of darkness not be considered when the sun rises, but we should even assume that scholars repent their daytime wrongdoings overnight (Eliyahu Rabbah 3). Maimonides (12th century, Cairo) appears to view this positive judgment of Torah scholars as axiomatic. He categorically states that when a sage drinks wine he only drinks to moisten the food in his belly.

Thus the Torah scholar is afforded a more than generous favorable assessment. What, however, are

the limits of this evaluation? Are we ever permitted to entertain the possibility that a sage has transgressed?

Our sages limit the favorable appraisal of scholars to affairs concerning their personal conduct; when it comes to monetary matters, they are given no such license until they return misappropriated funds (B. Berachot 19a). One commentator explains that we are not referring to outright stolen goods, for one who pilfers the property of others can hardly be considered a Torah scholar. Rather we are talking about unbecoming financial behavior that does not reflect the expected benchmark of a sage. In such a case, the scholar is not afforded favorable judgment until all monies are returned (Hatam Sofer, 18th-19th century, Hungary).

Another commentator limits the positive judgment to sins conducted away from the public eye: Even though someone spied the misconduct, repentance is a private affair and hence we can assume that the sage has atoned for his sins in private. If, however, the sage visibly transgressed and thus desecrated G-d's name, his repentance needs to be public; no favorable assessment is required by onlookers in this scenario until they witness his atonement (Rabbi Ya'akov Reisher, 17th-18th centuries, central Europe).

Indeed, this extreme favorable judgment is reserved for those with a proven track record of absolute righteousness. A history of constant misconduct, in contrast, carries an opposite default: We suspiciously assume the worst, even when the deed appears at face value to be credible. Most people, however, fall somewhere in between these two categories, and when such people's actions can be construed in multiple ways, we are instructed to judge them favorably (Maimonides).

Thus our sages are clear about the importance of looking upon others with sympathetic eyes - whether it be in cases where more than one possibility of interpretation presents itself or for a select group of righteous people, even when this positive view is unlikely.

Why is it important to view others so favorably? Our tradition offers a number of explanations. According to one approach, one who imagines the worst of a scholar is akin to assuming the worst of the Holy Presence (Eliyahu Rabbah 3). Thus not judging favorably is equivalent to a defamation of the Almighty. This approach, however, may only apply to sages who shoulder the responsibility of being G-d's agents in this world.

Returning to courtroom language, a second approach suggests that it is unjust to assume the worst. When looking upon others there is a presumption of goodness and innocence. Thus judging favorably is a legal axiom.

Perhaps an alternative attitude might suggest that people are essentially good and their conduct should be assessed under this assumption. This approach certainly reflects a positive world outlook, though it may be difficult for some to swallow.

A different line offers a utilitarian justification: If we judge others favorably, we can expect to be assessed in a similar vein by others (B. Shabbat 127a-b; Eliyahu Zuta 16).

Finally we come to Maimonides, who says that when an action could be viewed positively or negatively and there is no clear indicator to tip the scales, it is *bederech hahasidut* (in the path of piety) to judge the other favorably. Maimonides does not expand on this appellation, though surely he cannot be suggesting that this course is for select pietists, since rabbinic literature does not advocate such limitation, bidding all to judge favorably.

Building on the designation of Maimonides, we can suggest that judging others favorably is valuable to our own spiritual journey. When we frown upon others, not only may we be doing them an injustice that may boomerang back on us one day, but we reflect what is in our own innards. As a face reflects a face in water, thus a person's heart reflects another person (Proverbs 27:19) - what we see in others is a reflection of what is inside ourselves. Only a true artist can grasp the artwork of another; only the palate of a food connoisseur can fully appreciate an exquisite dish. Thus how we assess others mirrors our own innards.

A waypoint on the path to piety is being able to recognize the good in other people. Eliminating the dross of assuming the worst in others, stamping out this reflex action, reflects a sincere effort to refine our own behavior and cleanse our souls. © 2006 Rabbi L Cooper. *Rabbi Levi Cooper teaches at Pardes. His column appears weekly in the Jerusalem Post and Up Front Magazine. Each column analyses a passage from the first tractate, of the Talmud, Brachot, citing classic commentators and adding an innovative perspective to these timeless texts.*



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