

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Rashi points out for us in the beginning of this week's parsha (really at the conclusion of last week's parsha) that Yaakov stopped at the study house of Shem and Ever for fourteen years on his flight from Eisav to his uncle's house in Aram. This seems to be a strange stopover at first glance.

How will the instruction that he received in the school established by Shem and Ever contribute to his survival and success at the house of Lavan, the master conniver and duplicitous character? The question is phrased in a more current if blunter fashion in the Talmud itself - of what value are the Torah students to society at large?

To meet Lavan, Yaakov apparently needs to train in different forms of legal, commercial and worldly pursuits. Studying Torah is all well and fine, but how does it prepare one for the real world? This question is heard today in thousands of Jewish households and is a most vexing one. Our world today is one of Lavan compounded.

Where does Torah study and Torah knowledge fit into our milieu, into solving our problems and difficulties, in facing down our enemies? Yet, we find that on the whole Yaakov was quite successful in the house of Lavan. He acquires his wives there and his children are born and raised there. He waxes wealthy in spite of all of Lavan's efforts to cheat him out of his just payments and wages. What courses of study did he take and master in the school of Shem and Ever that enabled him to so succeed?

I have always felt that the answer lies in understanding the place and goals of a Torah education in one's life. Most people, especially those who view it from the outside looking in, think that Torah education is purely a matter of material covered, of knowledge of facts, of understanding complex and difficult Talmudical concepts and statements. In truth it is all that but it is much more.

A proper Torah education, a study course at the school of Shem and Ever, is meant to impart life-long values and a world view in which to fit the events of one's life in a proper and moral fashion. One has to learn how to deal effectively with Lavan but one has to be very cautious not to become Lavan in the process.

Self-defense and protection of one's own interests is part of the Torah value system. But pleasantness, sensitivity, faith in G-d's justice and promises, and a willingness to tolerate and accommodate others (even unpleasant others) are also a part of the value system of the Torah.

Yaakov enters the school of Shem and Ever to absorb the Torah value system that will allow him to survive Lavan and not to fall spiritually and become Lavan in the form of Yaakov. One of the most difficult tasks that faces Jewish society today is to remain a kingdom of priests and a holy people even when struggling with Lavan, Yishmael and Eisav for our very existence. Our schools have to teach Torah values and not be satisfied merely with knowledge, grades and test scores. © 2007 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 AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

How is it possible that Yaakov (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." (Genesis 29:25)

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

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

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

Perhaps it can be said that Yaakov's surprise came that evening, yet he still accepted Leah as his wife. When the text indicates that on the next morning

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"behold, it was Leah," it is the community that learned of the switch.

Outside of these attempts to understand Yaakov being fooled, there is a kabbalistic approach. This approach teaches something fundamental about love. Rachel represents the woman Yaakov wished to marry. 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 personality that take us by surprise.

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

"Ve-hineh hi Leah" teaches that in every relationship there will always be an element of surprise, the element that we don't consciously choose, the element represented by Leah. © 2007 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 DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

Although Yaakov had worked seven long years in order to marry Rachel (Beraishis 29:20), Lavan pulls a fast one and gives him his older daughter, Leah, instead (29:23-25). Yaakov and Rachel had suspected he would try this, so Yaakov gave her "signs" to verify that it was really her (and not Leah) under the chuppah and/or in the yichud room. In a remarkable display of self-sacrifice, Rachel gives her sister these "signs" so that she would not be embarrassed (see Rashi on 29:25). But what was Yaakov thinking when he gave Rachel these signs in

the first place? Was he planning to embarrass Leah if she was the bride? How could he?

"Since Rivka gave birth to Eisav and Yaakov, two daughters-Leah and Rachel- were born to Lavan (her brother). They exchanged letters and agreed that Eisav would marry Leah and Yaakov [would marry] Rachel" (Tanchuma Yoshon, Vayeitzay 12). Nevertheless (the Midrash continues), "Eisav didn't follow through, but went to Yishmael and married his daughter Machalas." Yaakov said, 'because of the blessings he wanted to kill me, and when I take Leah, his wife, who knows if he'll leave Machalas and come to me saying, 'it wasn't enough that you took my birthright and my blessings, but you also took my intended?' Therefore, [Yaakov] said to Lavan, 'I will work seven years for Rachel.' Is there anyone that gets married, leaving the older (girl) aside and marrying the younger one? This teaches us that Leah was intended for Eisav, [so] Yaakov said 'I will work for you for seven years.'" The Midrash seems to be telling us that Yaakov set a wedding date so many years down the road in order to give Eisav a chance to reconsider, as otherwise he would have to marry Leah instead. Not only that, but he would be expected to marry Leah before Rachel. If he could marry Rachel first, there would be need to wait so long; just marry her and then wait a few years to see if Eisav changes his mind and wants to marry Leah. Apparently, Yaakov knew it would be difficult to marry Rachel first, so was waiting (hoping?) that within those seven years Eisav would marry Leah so he could marry Rachel.

"Just as [G-d's] name rested on Yaakov, so was it (originally) appropriate that it should rest on Eisav" (Midrash Zuta Shir Hashirim 1:13). The Midrash then goes on to describe what would have happened had Eisav actually fulfilled his potential, and the Nation of Israel descended from both brothers: "Eisav would have had kings descend from him, and Yaakov would have had Priests come from him. The first blessings (the ones that Yaakov "took" from Eisav) were meant for Eisav, and the latter ones (given before Yaakov fled, 28:3-4) for Yaakov. Leah and Zilpah were meant [to be married to] Eisav and Rachel and Bilhah were meant for Yaakov. [But] all of these presents were taken from [Eisav]: he sold the birthright to Yaakov, [and] he removed the yoke of heaven from upon him. The Name was [therefore] taken [from Eisav] and rested on Yaakov twofold; sometimes [G-d is referred to as] the G-d of Yaakov and sometimes [as] the G-d of Israel. The birthright was taken from [Eisav] and given to Yaakov, who merited the kingship and the priesthood. Leah and Zilpah were taken from him and Yaakov merited [marrying all] four of them. [He merited having all these presents] because he followed in the ways of his fathers."

Even after it was clear that Eisav was not very religious, Yitzchok hoped that he would at least support

Yaakov's spiritual pursuits, which is why he had wanted to give Eisav the blessings for material wealth (see www.aishdas.org/ta/5767/toldos.pdf). Leah (and Zilpa) would still have married Eisav, and would have had the role of providing the material needs for Israel to focus on spirituality. When Yaakov "stole" the blessings, he took over the responsibilities of both, and therefore married Rachel and Leah (and Bilhah and Zilpa). All 12 Tribes came from him and were included in the "Children of Israel" (see www.aishdas.org/ta/5765/vayeitzei.pdf). Evidently, though, had Eisav repented and come to marry Leah within those seven years, he still could have reclaimed the role of the provider. Yaakov knew this, and wanted to give Eisav more time by marrying Rachel first.

Even if Yaakov had not explained this dynamic to Rachel, we can safely assume that when she gave the "signs" to Leah, Leah told her why she felt she should (also) marry Yaakov and help build the Nation of Israel. [Several Ba'alay Tosfos say that the "signs" Yaakov gave Rachel were the significant role women have in the areas of family purity, taking "challah" for a kohain when baking bread, and lighting candles. It is interesting to note that by teaching Leah these "signs," Rachel was teaching her about her new role, as marrying Yaakov meant that she would become one of the foremothers of the emerging Jewish nation.]

Lavan may have known this as well. However, his primary motivation for switching brides was not to exclude the wicked Eisav from his family, but to keep Yaakov around longer. Whereas water had been very scarce (necessitating all the flocks to gather around the one well outside of Charan), once Yaakov showed up there was water aplenty. Lavan therefore conspired with everyone else in town to have Yaakov marry Leah first, then work another seven years for Rachel, in order to keep the water flowing longer (Beraishis Rabbah 70:19).

So Lavan, Leah, and the entire town of Charan are in on the scheme to switch brides, and Rachel eventually joins in too. Only Yaakov is unaware, thinking that it is Rachel behind the veil, especially after "confirming" it via the previously arranged "signs." Wouldn't this invalidate the marriage? If Yaakov only agreed to marry Rachel, worked for seven years for Rachel, and thinks that the girl he's marrying is Rachel, it should be a "kiddushay ta'us," a marriage made based on wrong information and therefore not legally binding. The Riva quotes Rabbeinu Elyakim, who says that Yaakov knew that Lavan might try to fool him, so had in mind that it should be a valid marriage no matter which sister was under the veil. This would explain why the Talmud (Bava Basra 123a) says that until he saw her in the morning he didn't know who it was (rather than saying he thought it was Rachel). Nevertheless, it would have been ideal for Yaakov to know for sure which girl he was actually marrying. The Or Hachayim

explains the double-wording of "what did you do to me, and why did you trick me" (29:25) as referring to Yaakov being upset that he didn't know which one it was (and not just that it was not the one they agreed upon). It is therefore possible that the reason Yaakov gave Rachel "signs" was not so that he would stop the wedding if it wasn't Rachel, but so that he would know who it was before marrying her. Even though he wanted to marry Rachel, and if he also had to marry Leah would have preferred to marry Rachel first, he knew that it was very likely he would have to marry Leah, and tried to set things up in a way that he would know which one he was marrying. © 2007 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

Monuments or MATZEVOT are a common and sensitive aspect of religious ritual when we ceremoniously erect them over the graves of our loved ones. The origin of such monuments is to be found in next week's Torah reading, when Jacob places a MATZEVAH on the gravesite of his beloved Rachel, who has tragically died in childbirth. But in this week's Torah reading, Vayetze, Jacob erects the first monument in Jewish history. Until this point, the great Biblical personalities have erected altars (mizbeah), to G-d: Noah when he exited from the ark, Abraham when he first came to Israel, Isaac when he dedicated the city of Beersheba and Jacob on two significant occasions. An altar is clearly a sacred place dedicated for ritual sacrifice. 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.

Our portion opens with Jacob leaving his Israeli parental home and setting out for his mother's familial home in Haran. That night he sleeps in the fields outside of Luz - the last site in Israel he will occupy before he begins his exile - and dreams of a ladder standing (MUTZAV-matzevah) on land with its top reaching heavenwards, "and behold, angels of G-d are ascending and descending on it" (Genesis 28:12).

G-d is standing (nitzav) above the ladder, and promises not only that Jacob will return to Israel but also that this land will belong to him and his descendants eternally. Upon awakening, the Patriarch declares the place to be "the house of G-d and the gate of heaven" (Genesis 28:17). He then builds a monument of the stones he has used as a pillow and pours oil over it. The message is indubitably clear: a monument is a symbol of an eternal relationship, the ladder linking heaven and earth, the land of Israel which connects the descendants of Jacob to the Divine forever. A monument is in effect a gateway to heaven, a House of G-d on earth. The land of Israel, with its laws of tithes, Sabbatical years and Jubilee, magnificently

expresses the link between humanity and the Almighty; the promise of Jacob's return from exile bears testimony to the eternity of the relationship between the people and the land of Israel.

Two more aspects bear mention. The monument is made of stone - the Hebrew word for stone being "even", a contraction of "father-son" (av-ben, the eternity of family continuity). And the monument is consecrated with oil, as will be the King-Messiah (lit. anointed with oil), the ultimate herald of peace and redemption for Israel and the world.

Jacob then spends two decades with his uncle Laban, who does his utmost to assimilate his bright and capable nephew-son-in-law into a life of comfort and business in exile. Jacob resists - escaping Laban's blandishments and secretly absconding with his wives, children and live-stock for 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" (Genesis 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 matzevah) Yegar -Sahaduta, but Jacob called it Gal-Ed," (Genesis 31:44-47). The wily Laban wants the monument to bear an Aramean name, a symbol of the Gentile part of Jacob's ancestry; Jacob firmly insists upon a purely Hebrew-inscription of GAL-ED.

When they take their respective oaths at the site of the monument, the deceptive Laban still endeavors to get in his licks: "The G-d of Abraham and the G-d of Nahor, the G-d of their father judge between us" (Genesis 31:53). Jacob refuses to give an inch: this monument is a witness to the eternity of his commitment to Israel, the faith and the land: "But Jacob swore to the fear of his father Isaac" (Genesis 29:53). Jacob's response is a polite - but emphatic - rejection of Laban's assimilationist lure.

Since this monument with Laban is erected in the exile, however, it is not anointed with oil. Whatever important role the Diaspora may have played in the history of Israel - as long as we refused to assimilate and remained true to our unique values and life-style - the oil of redemption will only emerge in the land of Israel. When Jacob returns to Bet-El, the House of G-d, he obviously erects another stone monument - the symbol of G-d's faithfulness which he anoints with oil. (Genesis 35:14,15)

In the next sequence, tragedy befalls Jacob's family, when the beloved Rachel dies 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" (Genesis 35:19,20).

All of our commentaries question why Jacob did not travel another relatively short distance - perhaps twenty miles - and bury his beloved wife in Ma'arat HaMachpela 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. G-d promises Jewish return: "... Rachel weeps for her children ... So does G-d 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'" (Jeremiah 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 leader of World Zionism after the death of Theodore Herzl. He was a Viennese physician who was not at all 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 diary 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 discovered 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 12, blushed as she explained that she could not kiss a grown man. He then suggested that she give over to him the Torah lesson she had learned that morning as substitute payment. She cited the midrash I have just brought about Rachel's grave site. Max Nordau writes in his diary that if after 2000 years of exile Jewish children still learn about and believe in Jewish return to Israel, the Jews will certainly return. © 2007 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

Virtual Beit Medrash

STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA HARAV YA'AQOV MEDAN SHLIT"A

Summarized by Aryeh Dienstag with Rav Yoseif Bloch

Parashat Vayeitzei opens with Yaakov's famous prophetic dream of the angels on the heavenly ladder, in which G-d promises to accompany him on his journey to the house of his uncle Lavan. The next morning, Yaakov takes the stone that had been his pillow, sets it up as a monument and anoints it with oil. He names the place Beit El, and finally, he makes a neder (vow):

"If G-d remains with me, if He protects me on this way on which I travel, giving me bread to eat and clothing to wear; and if I return safely to my father's

house, the Lord shall be my G-d. This stone, which I have erected as a monument, will be G-d's house (beit E-lohim), and of all that You give me, I will set aside a tithe for You." (Bereishit 28:20-22)

The concept of a neder presents a contradiction between the Written and the Oral Torah-if one can even say such a thing! In Scripture, a neder is seen as a very positive thing, with Yaakov setting the template. In the desert, the Jews make a neder before they attack the king of Arad (Bamidbar 21:2), and the main passage of nedarim (Bamidbar 30) precedes their war with Midyan (Bamidbar 31). Sefer Shmuel begins with Channa's neder to dedicate her son to G-d (I 1:11), where it is seen as a tremendous merit. Later in that book, Avshalom makes a neder when he runs away from his brothers and his father to Geshur (II 15:8).

However, in the Oral Torah, our sages have a completely different perspective on nedarim. Consider Nedarim 22a, where Rabbi Natan says, "He who vows, it is as if he has built a forbidden altar; if he fulfills it, it is as if he has brought an offering upon it." Our sages see nedarim as something very negative, something which should not be made-even if they are fulfilled to the letter.

Furthermore, the concept of hattarat nedarim (annulment of vows) is one with no basis in the text of the Torah. Our sages say (Chagiga 10a) that it "hangs in the air, with nothing to support it." There is no Scriptural basis for this device! Would we ever allow our courts to use the petachim (literally, "openings," i.e. pretexts to release one from a vow on the basis of unanticipated developments) that are used in hattarat nedarim for commercial or matrimonial law? It would destroy the entire framework of marriage and business!

Why then does Halakha permit us to annul vows? It is clear that the mechanism of hattarat nedarim is a direct consequence of our sages' negative attitude towards nedarim. The Mishna (Nedarim 3:1-3) lists four types of vows that are so baseless that they are automatically annulled, from nidrei havai, vows to establish outlandish claims, to vows used as a tool to fight or coerce people. Our sages see this potential abuse and react by undermining the concept of nedarim.

However, there is one place where nedarim are still allowed and encouraged by our sages: be-eit tzara (in a time of distress): "Rabbi Yitzchak Ha-Bavli said: 'My mouth spoke when I was in distress' (Tehillim 66:14) -- a neder is a mitzva in a time of distress. What is '[Yaakov made a vow to the Lord,] saying' (Bereishit 28:20)? 'Saying' for all generations: They should make vows in their times of distress. Yaakov was the first to make a neder, so everyone who vows should attribute it to him.'" (Bereishit Rabba 70:1)

Nedarim be-eit tzara are the original case of nedarim mentioned in the Torah. All the cases in Tanakh where nedarim are seen as positive are be-eit

tzara. This is because a neder be-eit tzara is a specific way of communicating with and relating to G-d; therefore, these nedarim are not only allowed by our sages, but even encouraged.

At the end of this week's parasha, after two decades in Lavan's house, Yaakov has another prophetic dream, this one telling him to return to Eretz Yisrael:

I am the G-d of Beit El, where you erected a monument, where you made a vow to me; now, arise and depart from this land, and return to the land of your birth.

This is G-d telling Yaakov that it is time for him to fulfill his neder. Eventually, Yaakov makes his way to Beit El (Bereishit 35:1-15) and builds an altar there, but it is centuries before Beit El becomes "beit E-lohim." When is this dream finally realized?

In Sefer Shoftim (20:26-28), we find:

"All of the Israelites and all the nation ascended, and they came to Beit El and they cried; they sat there, before G-d, and they fasted on that day, until the evening, and they offered burnt-offerings and peace-offerings before G-d. Then the Israelites consulted G-d; the Ark of G-d's Covenant was there in those days. Pinchas, son of Elazar, son of Aharon, stood before it in those days..."

According to the Gemara (Zevachim 118b), the Mishkan (Tabernacle) stood at Shilo for 369 years, from the conclusion of the division of the land in the days of Yehoshua until the capture of the Ark in Shmuel's youth, an era encompassing all of Sefer Shoftim. Thus, we see that the neder of Yaakov was fulfilled when the Mishkan was established in Shilo, as it is equated with Beit El, the site of Yaakov's original dream. Though it takes over two-and-a-half centuries for the first neder in Jewish history to be fulfilled in its entirety, Yaakov's words are not in vain.

We see that a neder can be dangerous, but in an eit tzara, it can be inspiring. Yaakov's vow gave his descendants the strength to survive centuries of exile, and we still look to it. As a nation, we hope for the day when we can emerge from our historical eit tzara and worship in a rebuilt beit E-lohim.

[Ed. Note (AD):] As an aside, I would like to cite Rav Assaf Bednarsh's insightful explanation of the verses cited at the beginning of this sicha. One may ask: what is Yaakov doing? Is he trying to bribe G-d? Does he think that he can promise G-d something and He will help in order to receive Yaakov's half of the deal? It is not as if we say this was a mistake and that Yaakov did something wrong; nor do we say that this is something appropriate only for Yaakov, but we should not follow him. On the contrary, our sages praise Yaakov for this and tell us that this is the way a person should act in a time of trouble! Therefore, we must look at the words of Yaakov, wherein we see that he does not simply promise things to G-d: all of the elements he

vows to G-d are things that he will be able to do only if G-d helps him. He can only build the "beit E-lohim" if he comes back to Eretz Yisrael safely. Yaakov can only give a tithe to G-d if He gives him food and clothing. One who is in a state of trouble feels how insecure one's position in this world really is and how much one is dependent on G-d; at this point, a person feels the need to serve G-d to the fullest. Yaakov realizes this and takes advantage of his situation, being in an eit tzara, to make a neder and fulfill his desire to advance his service of G-d when the eit tzara passes. Similarly, our sages tell us to make a neder be-eit tzara so we can actualize afterwards the returning and closeness to G-d which one feels when in dire straits.

RABBI NAFTALI REICH

Legacy

The dream was more vivid than real life could ever be. As Jacob slept atop Mount Moriah, a fugitive from his own home, he saw a vast ladder reaching into the very heavens and angels ascending and descending upon it. As he watched, awestruck and transfixed, Jacob heard the voice of Hashem promising that the land upon which he lay would become an everlasting heritage for his descendants.

What was the purpose of this spectacular vision? Why did this crucial prophecy have to be transmitted in this particular setting? What timeless message was implicit in the symbolism of the dream?

Let us reflect for a moment on the nature of mankind. Our Sages tell us that a human being is a hybrid creature, a miraculous fusion of two polar opposites, the soul and the body, a living contradiction. The soul is a soaring spark of pure immortal spirit ever striving for fusion with its divine Source. The body is altogether mortal, self-indulgent, formed from the dust of the earth, always seeking new forms of physical gratification, always hungry, never fulfilled.

When the Creator formed man he breathed the soul into the body, and miraculously, these two totally dissimilar entities were united into one composite. Ever since, human beings have struggled with the inherent conflict between these two antithetical aspects. The soul, trapped in a material cage, unable to fly freely into the highest celestial spheres, yearns to transcend its physical shackles, to elevate and spiritualize its existence. The body resists fiercely, seeking instead to indulge its corporeal impulses even when they result in the degradation of the soul.

How is a person to deal with this internal war? Should he choose a life of rigid asceticism, mortifying his flesh and completely negating his body? Should he withdraw from the mundane world and seek a state of pure spirituality?

Not at all, say the commentators. Hashem wants a person to function in the physical world, to find a harmonious balance between his spiritual and

material sides. The human spirit triumphs only when it conquers the material, not when it flees from it.

This is the message for posterity implicit in the ladder of Jacob's dream. Our mission in life is to create a channel of communication between the dust of the earth and the highest heavens, an inner harmony of body and soul. How can this be accomplished? Only step by step, like climbing the rungs of a ladder, building new achievements on the foundations of earlier ones.

The Talmud relates the following parable: A king was leaving on a journey, and he did not want to entrust his beautiful vineyard to his watchmen, fearing they would steal its succulent grapes. After much thought, he decided to appoint two watchmen, one lame and the other blind. The lame one would spy intruders and warn the blind one to intercept them. They themselves, however, would be incapable of climbing up and stealing the grapes.

As soon as the king left, the lame man called to his blind companion, "Come to the sound of my voice. I will climb up onto your shoulders and together we will feast on the king's grapes."

When the king returned and found a substantial number of grapes missing, he called his watchmen to task. "Your majesty," said the lame man. "Look at me! I cannot even walk one step. Do you think I climbed up to take the grapes?"

"Your majesty," said the blind man. "Look at me! I cannot see a thing. Do you think I climbed up to take the grapes?"

The king shook his head in disgust. He placed the lame man on the shoulders of the blind man and judged them both together.

The soul and the body, the Talmud concludes, could conceivably make similar arguments in their defense. "Look at me," the soul could say after death. "I am like a bird flying through the air, a creature of pure spirit and light." "Look at me," the body could say, "lying there like an inert piece of clay." Therefore, Hashem brings the body and soul together and judges them as one. In other words, we are a new entity, a composite of body and soul, not one to the exclusion of the other. In this hybrid state, we are completely responsible for our actions.

In our own lives, we must temper our search for spiritualism with a healthy respect and appreciation for the material world. Instead of denying the material side, we can seek to harness it for spiritual purposes, for instance, by enjoying fine foods and wines in celebration of the Sabbath and the festivals. If we acknowledge our material origins yet keep a clear sight of our spiritual goals, we can climb Jacob's ladder, rung by rung, and achieve an internal harmony which will reward us with the deepest satisfaction and fulfillment.

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MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Amnon Bazak

The Torah gives us three reasons why Yaacov fled from Lavan. (1) "And he heard the words of Lavan's sons, saying, Yaacov has taken everything that belongs to our father, and all of his wealth stems from our father. (2) And Yaacov saw Lavan's face, and behold he did not look at him as he had in previous days. (3) And G-d said to Yaacov, Return to the land of your fathers and to your birthplace, and I will be with you." [Bereishit 31:1-3]. After Yaacov explains these reasons to his wives (31:5-13), he flees from Lavan's house, taking advantage of the fact that Lavan was involved in shearing his flocks. As a result, Lavan chases after Yaacov and a dispute develops between them, with an additional argument about Lavan's missing idols. In the end, things work out for the best, but we are left with a question: Why was Yaacov forced to run away in this manner instead of having the privilege of returning to his father's house in a more comfortable way?

It would seem that the answer to this question is explicitly stated in the previous chapter. The idea to return to Eretz Yisrael did not arise because of the circumstances noted above but rather before that: "And it happened, when Rachel gave birth to Yosef, Yaacov said to Lavan, send me away, and I will go back to my place and my land. Let me have my wives and my children for whom I worked, and I will go" [30:25-26]. Lavan cannot reject Yaacov's request outright, but he turns to him with compliments and requests that Yaacov should remain and continue working for him, this time at full pay. "And Lavan said to him, if I have found favor in your eyes, see how I have prospered because of you. And he said, Name your salary, and I will give it to you." [30:27-28]. It might have been expected that Yaacov would refuse this offer and insist on returning to his father's home, where he could build his own house. However, surprisingly, Yaacov accepts Lavan's proposal. "If you will do this for me, I will return to tend your sheep. I will pass through your sheep today; remove from there every spotted and striped lamb... which will be my salary" [30:31-32]. And Yaacov delays his return by six years, during which he becomes very wealthy (see 30:41). "And the man expanded greatly, and he had many flocks, and maidservants, slaves, camels, and donkeys" [30:43].

And this seems to be the reason that Yaacov could no longer delay his return to his own home. His great wealth led to jealousy by Lavan's sons and even led Lavan himself to have a negative attitude towards Yaacov. These factors encouraged Yaacov to leave, but evidently the direct command by G-d was the final trigger that led Yaacov to decide to return to Eretz Yisrael. The return could indeed have been under

better circumstances? "in joy, with song, accompanied by drums and violins" [31:27]? but the fact that Yaacov stayed in Aram longer than was required caused him to return to his father's land out of a state of fleeing and discord.

"Anybody who takes an oath and then delays fulfilling it will in the end come to idol worship, illicit sex, killing, and slander. From whom can this be learned? All of them can be seen with respect to Yaacov? since he took an oath and delayed fulfilling it, all of these happened to him." [Bereishit Rabba 37].

RABBI ADAM LIEBERMAN

A Life Lesson

Isaac had given Jacob a blessing that Esau, Jacob's brother, felt should have gone to him. Out of fear that his brother would harm him, Jacob left his parent's home. He went by a well and saw a woman, Rachel, who was there to water her father's flock. And it was....

"... when Jacob saw Rachel... Jacob came forward and rolled the stone off the mouth of the well and watered the sheep..." (Genesis 29:10)

Acts of kindness usually take place when someone makes a request from another person. It could be asking for someone's time, money, opinion, etc. The person being asked could either say yes or no, and if he says yes, then an act of kindness has taken place. This is certainly a praiseworthy act for the person who gave selflessly to someone else in need clearly did a mitzvah, a good deed.

But there's a much higher level that can be attained when doing acts of kindness. There's something you can do that can elevate your good deed into a great deed. This happens when someone anticipates the needs of others and without ever being asked, he simply comes forward. This is what Jacob did for Rachel. When you proactively do a good deed without ever being asked, then it transforms your act of kindness into an entirely new and higher dimension.

Most people are generally good, meaning, they'll usually do acts of kindness for others when asked. If someone needs something and we're able to give it to him without causing much discomfort for ourselves, most people will do it. These are good people doing good things. Some more, and some less.

Jacob, however, teaches us how to become a great person who does great things. Ironically, the act we proactively choose to do will usually be the same one we would do if asked. By acting first, however, it puts the same action on a radically higher level.

It's certainly more difficult to anticipate the needs of others and come forward, but now it becomes a supreme act of kindness because it was offered instead of being asked.

It's also important to know that many people also have a hard time just asking others for help. But they're in just as much need, if not more, as those who

more easily ask others for assistance—Coming forward with them is of paramount importance.

So the next time you choose to come forward—and you do so without any provocation—and give someone a kind word, a small loan, or a helping hand, it will be an act equal to what Jacob did for Rachel at the well. And you will have done a great deed. © 2007 Rabbi A. Lieberman & aish.org

RABBI OSHER CHAIM LEVENE

The Living Law

The ladder in Yaakov's dream was no ordinary ladder. It was a ladder that rested on the ground but which stretched all the way up to the heavens. Angels ascended and descended upon its rungs. G-d appeared to Yaakov and pledged to protect him in all his future journeys. When awakening from this vision, Yaakov affirmed his pledge to serve G-d. Upon his return, Yaakov gave self-testimony how he had observed all 613 commandments in his sojourning with Lavan.

It is impossible to ignore the potent symbolism of the "ladder". Why the use of this symbol? Why its appearance before Yaakov on route to begetting the Jewish people?

The most outstanding feature of a ladder is its function as the vehicle of vertical movement. In the context of Yaakov's dream, where it spanned from the ground up to the skies, this ladder comes to define the relationship between G-d and man, between heaven and earth, and between the spiritual and physical worlds. It is also the key of how to elevate what is below and to simultaneously pull down what is above. It is the link between what is above and what is below. That, in a nutshell, captures the mechanism of a mitzvah.

The Maharal (Chiddushei Aggados, Sotah 3b) remarks how mitzvah performance can itself be characterised as a "ladder". It is the 613 commandments of G-d on high that are executed by man on the earth below as originally given at Sinai. The word "Sinai" shares the same numerical value at Sulam, "ladder" (130). Moshe ascended the mountain to receive the divine Torah from G-d and brought it down to the Jewish people.

Mitzvah observance uplifts the Jew from his physical station and mundane existence. It guarantees man does not become too attached to his earthly body; that his physical needs are not perceived as being of paramount importance. He has an insatiable appetite for him to go above and beyond. It is the opportunity of how to relate to G-d and fulfil the aspirations of the soul to transcend his physical existence and to ascend on steps to go upwards.

A life of mitzvos means a spiritual journey for forever "climb the ladder". It entails identifying with Torah whose roots are of the supernal world and his

spiritual reward by reaching the celestial realm of the world-to-come. The direction is which mitzvah observance is directed is: upwards. And the goal is to ascend higher and higher....

When overly involved in the demands of the physical body, a mitzvah has the remarkable, dynamic capacity like a "rope" to pull a person from the lowest pit and to raise him upwards (Maharal, Tiferes Yisrael Ch.4). Our tradition teaches how every thought, word and action of a Jew here on Earth has the wondrous "ripple effect" to impact the worlds up above. Whatever occurs down here is, in fact, a reflection of the spiritual truth up there. But how can man, in his puny position, possibly control or shape what is above? The answer is because man is related to both of these worlds: his soul emanates in the pure, spiritual domain but amazingly descends all the way down until it enters and inhabits a body composed of a flesh and body. Thus, he is charged with the task in arranging the synthesis of upper and lower realms (Nefesh HaChaim 1:5)

What every nuance of mitzvah performance does is to "tug" the rope down here below. The awesome impact is that pulling the rope at the bottom resonates and vibrates all the way upwards into the heavenly worlds. This is alluded in the verse "The portion of G-d is His people; Yaakov is the measure (chevel) of his inheritance" (Devarim 32:9). The word chevel literally means "rope". The exclusive portion of the Jew is the mitzvos that solidify his relationship with G-d. The Jew is in tune with his spiritual source and how his conduct on Earth intrinsically relates to Heaven.

This is synonymous with our ancestor Yaakov. His image may be engraved on the Heavenly Throne up there. His portion was the spiritual world-to-come; Eisav demanded control of this transient world. Nevertheless it is Yaakov who was actively involved in sanctifying every aspect of man's existence down below so that it ascends upwards towards G-d.

This story of climbing ladders and tugging ropes continues in the mitzvah observance and in Yaakov's legacy to the Jewish people. © 2007 Rabbi O.C. Levene & torah.org



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