

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Vayetzei
December 7, 2019 *** 9 Kislev 5780

Kol Rina – An Independent Minyan, is a traditional egalitarian community. We are haimish (homey/folksy), friendly, participatory, warm and welcoming. We hold weekly services in South Orange as well as holiday services and celebrations which are completely lay led. We **welcome all** to our services and programs from non-Hebrew readers to Jewish communal and education professionals.

Today's Portions

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Vayetzei in A Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3191/jewish/Vayetzei-in-a-Nutshell.htm

Jacob leaves his hometown of Beersheba and journeys to Charan. On the way, he encounters “the place” and sleeps there, dreaming of a ladder connecting heaven and earth, with angels climbing and descending on it; G-d appears and promises that the land upon which he lies will be given to his descendants. In the morning, Jacob raises the stone on which he laid his head as an altar and monument, pledging that it will be made the house of G-d.

In Haran, Jacob stays with and works for his uncle Laban, tending Laban’s sheep. Laban agrees to give him his younger daughter, Rachel—whom Jacob loves—in marriage, in return for seven years’ labor. But on the wedding night, Laban gives him his elder daughter, Leah, instead—a deception Jacob discovers only in the morning. Jacob marries Rachel, too, a week later, after agreeing to work another seven years for Laban. Leah gives birth to six sons—Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar and Zebulun—and a daughter, Dinah, while Rachel remains barren. Rachel gives Jacob her handmaid, Bilhah, as a wife to bear children in her stead, and two more sons, Dan and Naphtali, are born. Leah does the same with her handmaid, Zilpah, who gives birth to Gad and Asher. Finally, Rachel’s prayers are answered and she gives birth to Joseph.

Jacob has now been in Charan for fourteen years, and wishes to return home. But Laban persuades him to remain, now offering him sheep in return for his labor. Jacob prospers, despite Laban’s repeated attempts to swindle him. After six years, Jacob leaves Charan in stealth, fearing that Laban would prevent him from leaving with the family and property for which he labored. Laban pursues Jacob, but is warned by G-d in a dream not to harm him. Laban and Jacob make a pact on Mount Gal-Ed, attested to by a pile of stones, and Jacob proceeds to the Holy Land, where he is met by angels.

Haftarah in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/593837/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This week's haftarah mentions Jacob's flight from home to the "field of Aram," an episode that is recounted in this week's Torah reading.

The haftarah begins with the prophet Hosea's rebuke of the Jewish people for forsaking G-d. Nevertheless, Hosea assures the people that G-d will not abandon them: "How can I give you, Ephraim, and deliver you [to the hands of the nations]? . . . I will not act with My fierce anger; I will not return to destroy Ephraim."

The prophet discusses the misdeeds of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and the future

degeneration of the Kingdom of Judea. He contrasts their behavior to that of their forefather Jacob who was faithful to G-d and prevailed against enemies, both human and angelic.

The haftorah also makes mention of the ingathering of the exiles which will occur during the Final Redemption: "They shall hasten like a bird from Egypt and like a dove from the land of Assyria; and I will place them in their houses, says the Lord."

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Laban the Aramean (Vayetze 5780) by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

<http://rabbisacks.org/lab-an-the-aramean-vayetse-5780/>

The events narrated in this week's parsha – Jacob's flight to Laban, his stay there, and his escape, pursued by his father-in-law – gave rise to the strangest passage in the Haggadah. Commenting on Deuteronomy 26:5, the passage we expound on Seder night, it says as follows:

Arami oved avi. Go and learn what Laban the Aramean sought to do to our father Jacob, for Pharaoh condemned only the boys to death, but Laban sought to uproot everything.

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

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

Third, and most fundamental: the Seder night is dedicated to retelling the story of the Exodus. We are charged to remember it, engrave it on the hearts of our children, and "the more one tells of the coming out of Egypt, the more admirable it is." Why then diminish the miracle by saying in effect: "Egypt? That was nothing compared to Laban!" All this is very strange indeed. Let me suggest an explanation. We have here a phrase with two quite different meanings, depending on the context in which we read it. Originally the text of Arami oved avi had nothing to do with Pesach. It appears in the Torah as the text of the declaration to be said on bringing first-fruits to the Temple, which normally happened on Shavuot.

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

In the context of first-fruits, the literal translation, "My father was a wandering Aramean,"

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

At some stage, however, the passage was placed in another context, namely Pesach, the Seder and the story of the Exodus. The Mishnah specifies that it be read and expounded on Seder night.[1] Almost certainly the reason is that same (relatively rare) verb h-g-d, from which the word Haggadah is derived, occurs both in connection with telling the story of Pesach (Ex. 13:8), and making the first-fruits declaration (Deut. 26:3). This created a significant problem. The passage does indeed deal with going down to Egypt, being persecuted there, and being brought out by God. But what is the connection between “My father was a wandering/fugitive Aramean” and the Exodus? The patriarchs and matriarchs lived a nomadic life. But that was not the reason they went down to Egypt. They did so because there was a famine in the land, and because Joseph was viceroy. It had nothing to do with wandering.

The Sages, however, understood something deep about the narratives of the patriarchs and matriarchs. They formulated the principle that ma’asei avot siman lebanim, “What happened to the fathers was a sign for the children.”[2] They saw that certain passages in Genesis could only be understood as a forerunner, a prefiguration, of later events. The classic example occurs in Genesis 12 when, almost immediately after arriving in the land of Canaan, Abraham and Sarah were forced into exile in Egypt. Abraham’s life was at risk. Sarah was taken into Pharaoh’s harem. God then struck Pharaoh’s household with plagues, and Pharaoh sent them away. The parallels between this and the story of the Exodus are obvious.

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

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

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

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

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

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

How can we read this into the verse? Because the root a-v-d, which means “lost, wandering,” might also, in the piel or hiphil grammatical tenses, mean, “to destroy.” Of

course, Laban did not destroy “my father” or anyone else. But that was because of Divine intervention. Hence the phrase could be taken to mean, “[Laban] the Aramean [tried to] destroy my father.” This is how Rashi understands it.

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

This interpretation of Arami oved avi is not the plain sense. But the plain sense related this passage to the bringing first-fruits. It was the genius of the Sages to give it an interpretation that connected it with Pesach and the Exodus. And though it gives a far-fetched reading of the phrase, it gives a compelling interpretation to the entire narrative of Jacob in Laban’s house. It tells us that the third of the patriarchs, whose descent to Egypt would actually begin the story of the Exodus, had himself undergone an exodus experience in his youth.[3]

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

I believe that we can face the future without fear because we have been here before and because we are not alone. [1] Mishnah Pesachim 10:4. [2] The principle does not appear explicitly in these terms in the classic Midrashic or Talmudic literature. A similar expression appears in Bereishit Rabbah 39:8. A key text is Ramban, Commentary to Gen. 12:6, 10. It was widely adopted by subsequent commentators.

[3] On this whole subject, see David Daube, *The Exodus Pattern in the Bible*, Faber, 1963.

Vayetzei by Rabbi Shaul Rosenblatt

<https://mailchi.mp/729a8fcd7463/weekly-davar-2577041?e=e0f2ca6c0d>

Jacob leaves Canaan for Haran, arriving 14 years later. On the way, he experiences his famous vision of the ladder stretching to heaven. He arrives at the home of his uncle Laban: a good-for-nothing of the highest order who misses no opportunity to try to steal from and cheat his nephew out of all he has.

Jacob wishes to marry Laban’s daughter, Rachel. He works seven years for her and then Laban substitutes Leah under the chuppah. He works another seven years for Rachel. He fathers eleven sons and a daughter. Jacob works for Laban for another six years, during which time he makes Laban into a very wealthy man and, although Laban tries to swindle him at every turn, Jacob manages to make himself into an even wealthier man. Finally, the time has come and he packs his bags and begins the long journey home to Israel.

Jacob’s famous dream is of a ladder ascending to Heaven. The Rabbis understand this as a metaphor; the way to Heaven is a ladder. You climb it rung by rung. There may be the odd rung or two that you can skip, but in general, it’s a slow and continuous process.

There were no elevators or escalators at the time the Torah was written, but even if there were, the metaphor would remain a ladder. There are no shortcuts. If a person wants to become a great human being, it’s a day-to-day process, climbing one rung at a time.

In a quick fix generation, this can be a little hard for us to swallow. We are always looking for shortcuts. Diets, I’m sorry to say, take months, many months, not weeks. So, we’d rather tie our stomachs or suction out the fat instead. Looking after kids is

hard work and after eight, I can vouch for that (although my wife would likely say that I didn't do much of it!) – it's much easier to work so we can pay a nanny to do it for us. We send Whatsapp messages, voice notes even, rather than the effort of direct personal engagement. We fill our bodies with sugars, sodium, saturated fats and cholesterol because it's quicker and easier to grab some fast food than stand over the stove cooking something nutritious. And when it comes to Heaven, there are many, many shortcuts on offer. The quick fix suicide belt. The immoral life combined with large charitable donations. Kabbala (Jewish mysticism) – study the holy books, wear a red string on your wrist, drink the holy water and Paradise is yours. But the metaphor the Torah uses remains a ladder. You want to reach your full potential as a human being? Well, then, you need to get out into the world today and find good that you can do, seek wisdom to learn and grow..... and then you need to do the same again tomorrow, the same again the day after and the same again the day after that. The days need to become weeks, the weeks months, the months years and the years decades. And slowly, but very surely and very certainly, you ascend the ladder. Slow and steady wins the race, as they say. Live a good life, live it quietly and humbly but steadily. That's the path to greatness, the path to ultimate fulfilment – in Judaism, the ladder to Heaven.

[A Bridge Between Worlds by Rabbi Zac Kamenetz](http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?m=1102506082947&ca=3b3d3d69-cdd2-4787-b918-6efb4a0e17db)

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Yaakov Avinu is, as Robert Alter describes, "a man of liminal experiences" and his life is comprised of a complex series of binary divisions: "twin brothers struggling..., two sisters struggling..., flocks divided...[his] materials blessing... divided into two camps", ultimately becoming the bearer of two names. While Alter's characterization might imply Yaakov as a split persona, the mystics of the Zohar rather saw him as a meeting point between the higher and lower worlds: "...the upper edge of Heaven...the lower edge of Heaven. This was inherited by Yaakov, that he shines from edge to edge, from the first edge, until the last edge, which is for he stands in the middle." (Zohar 1:1b)

Awareness of the "upper edge of Heaven" is achieved by Yaakov in his first direct encounter with the Divine during his nocturnal vision of the ramp/ladder reaching the heavenly realm. The Baal Shem Tov - the founder of Hasidism - relates the particular intuitive knowledge Yaakov attains during this expanded state of consciousness: "Yaakov saw with wisdom that was necessary for the reality to be governed by the balancing between hesed (compassion) and gevurah (restriction), for if not, the world would not be able to exist, pulled toward one particular edge. Thus, he cleaved to tiferet (balancing splendor), and this quality became more attainable than that of his forebears."

This insight, that the world of duality is bound together by a larger, unified whole, is typical of what A.H. Maslow described as a classic characteristic of a "peak experience": "In peak experiences, the dichotomies, polarities, and conflicts of life tend to be transcended or resolved. That is to say, there tends to be a moving toward the perception of unity and integration of the world. The person himself tends to move toward fusion, integration, and unity and away from splitting, conflicts, and oppositions." As Yaakov's descendants, we can take part in this kind of mystical consciousness whenever we encounter the experience of centeredness or concentration, stable clarity, and the desire to seek out harmony in a divided world, or our divided self.

While the achievement of a peak divine experience may be thought to be the height of spiritual development, the Biblical text challenges our perception by hinting at the potent possibility of encountering in more mundane matters. During Yaakov's dream vision of angels ascending and descending between worlds, the word v'hinei-'and look!'-occurs four times, heightening the reader's sense of amazement and perception to the uniqueness of the moment. Our surprise is even mirrored in Yaakov's assessment of his

encounter "Indeed, YHVH is in this place, and I did not know!". In the very next scene, as Yaakov observes the Haranite shepherds rolling away and returning the stone on top of a well in a field while watering their herds. There is nothing otherworldly here, yet the text employs the word v'hinei twice, subtly connecting this moment to the awe-filled moment which preceded it. What is the wisdom that Yaakov is receiving from the "lower edge of Heaven" here?

The Sfas Emes-the second Rebbe of Gur-sees this as Yaakov's ability to see divinity in the inner recesses of reality, not only in the transcendent heights: "This reality-the well in the field-is found in everything and in every one of Israel. Every thing contains a life-giving point that sustains it. Even that which appears to be as neglected as a field has such a hidden point within it. The human mind is always able to know this intuitively...With wisdom and intellect a person understands this inwardness: within all things dwells 'the power of the Maker, within the made.'" There is wondrousness in our differentiated, dualistic reality, comprised of mechanical, rote activity and objects which can go unnoticed and ignored. The depth of the well remains abundantly available as a resource when wonder and amazement cannot be accessed.

As the living inheritors of Yaakov's name and spiritual heritage, we can continually practice to become his ramp/ladder, with our foundation on the ground, and our heads reaching the heavens. (*Rabbi Zac Kamenetz, Conservative Yeshiva Alum, is Director of Jewish Living & Learning at the JCC of San Francisco & Co-Director of Beloved Berkeley*)

Dvar Haftarah: Fallible Leadership by Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein

<http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?m=1102506082947&ca=3b3d3d69-cdd2-4787-b918-6efb4a0e17db>

The prophets never lost their preoccupation with the nature of Israel's governance and its flaws. When the monarchy was first established, the prophet Shmuel cautioned that monarchic rule would quickly fall into corruption and abuse of power, and would lead people to become alienated from God. In this week's haftarah, Hosea follows suit and goes a step further in his critique. He fears not only the people's being misled about the king's personal righteousness and intentions, but also that the people will develop the false expectation that salvation might be found in the hands of an earthly king: "Yet, I am the Lord your God ever since the land of Egypt, and no God save Me shall you know and no rescuer save for Me... You are ruined, O Israel, for who will come to your aid? Where is your king, then? Let him rescue you in all of your towns. And your leaders to whom you said, 'Give me a king and nobles.' But I will give you a king in My wrath and take him away in My anger." (13:4;9-11)

Clearly, Hosea bewails human overdependence on, and idolization of, those with political power, reminding his fellow countrymen that worship was meant exclusively for God. The rule of kings and political leaders is ephemeral and their power is fleeting. They are neither reliable nor totally responsible and, as the prophet suggests, should be treated appropriately.

That which Hosea only alludes to in his prophecy, is made explicit by the commentator, Rabbi David Kimche (12th century Provence). He points to the very first king, Shaul, as an example of the fallibility of leadership. He asserts that God made him king against His (God's) better judgment and ultimately removed him from office on account of flaws in his performance as king. He and other commentators give numerous examples of other kings who failed both Israel and Judea in their roles as leaders through acts of idolatry, dishonesty and moral turpitude.

The relations between kings and prophets was always charged, each vying for power and influence. Still, the message delivered here and earlier by the prophet Samuel should be taken seriously. It is not enough to wield power. With power comes responsibility. And for the Jewish tradition, that means leading honestly, morally, and in a manner that brings glory and honor to both God and the nation. (*Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein*)

Can We Be Grateful and Disappointed at the Same Time? Or: What Leah Learned by Rabbi Shai Held

https://mechonhadar.s3.amazonaws.com/mh_torah_source_sheets/ParashatVaYeitzeiHeld5774.pdf?utm_campaign=Dvar%20Torah%205780&utm_source=hs_email&utm_medium=email&utm_content=80209694&hsenc=p2ANqtz--TtWa_lrzACuVJzRkbZEdnSiNBTLptZxllgzgNSK4tp7hQocjG99Ft6lrYwKAlu_-62vN5PFnoRB4dxbLfgLaQWk-6w&_hsmi=80209557

It's not often that a biblical character makes you want to cry, but if you pay careful attention to the matriarch Leah, she can break your heart. (1) Leah is married to Jacob, a man who does not love her—indeed, who barely notices her. According to the book of Genesis, Jacob arrives at Laban's house and is soon smitten with Laban's younger daughter Rachel, who is, the text tells us, "shapely and beautiful." As for Rachel's older sister Leah, we are told only that she had "weak eyes"—and Jacob pays her no attention at all (Genesis 29:17).

The way the story unfolds next is well-known. Jacob works almost breathlessly for the right to marry Rachel; the seven years he serves in order to win her hand "seemed to him but a few days because of his love for her" (Genesis 29:20). But Laban deceives him, and Jacob ends up married to Leah, whom he does not love, and does not want. After arguing with Laban over being tricked, Jacob agrees to work for seven more years so that he can be with Rachel, his true love.

Imagine Leah's predicament, and her humiliation. She is older and less physically attractive than her sister. While Rachel presumably has suitors, Leah remains alone, with no sense that this situation is likely to end happily, or soon. Perhaps her father thinks he is doing his elder daughter a favor, protecting her honor by deceiving Jacob into marrying her. Perhaps Leah herself harbors the fantasy that Jacob will learn to love and appreciate her. Imagine her feelings when, on the morning after her wedding, her husband's only response to discovering that she, rather than her sister, is his wife is an excruciating mix of outrage and disappointment: "What is this you have done to me?" he demands of Laban. "I was in service for Rachel! Why did you deceive me?!" (29:25). Perhaps we have sympathy for Jacob, and perhaps also for Rachel—lovers unjustly kept apart by a father's machinations. But what of poor Leah, so undesired, and likely feeling so utterly undesirable? Jacob is now married to two sisters. The text makes no secret of his preferences, and neither, ostensibly, does he. Genesis tells us simply that Jacob "loved Rachel more than Leah" (29:30).

But then something happens, the pathos of which is almost unbearable. God sees that Leah is unloved, and blesses her—but not her sister Rachel—with children. Leah has several children in succession, and as she names each one in turn, her loneliness and her yearning come bursting forth. She names her first son Reuben, declaring that the name means: "the Lord has seen (*ra'ah/Reuven*) my affliction"; it also means, "Now my husband will love me (*Ye'ehevani/Reuven*)" (29:32). One can almost feel Leah's plaintive wish: Maybe now that I have given my husband a son, he—like God—will actually see me, pay attention to me, love me. But nothing changes. The text's silences speak volumes: Leah expresses a heartfelt hope for love, but Jacob is simply nowhere to be found.

So Leah tries again. Bearing a second son, she names him Simeon, declaring: "This is because the Lord heard (*Shama/Shimon*) that I was unloved and has given me this one also" (29:33). Like Hagar before her, Leah is unseen and unheard by her husband but is vividly seen and heard by God (cf. Genesis 16:11-13). Yet the earthly love she so longs for continues to elude her, and we can almost taste her desperate longing. Again, things remain as they have always been, and Jacob's silence grows louder and louder. Leah soon bears a third son, names him Levi, and declares: "This time my husband will become attached (*Yilaveh/Levi*) to me, for I have borne him three sons" (29:34). Notice

that when her first son was born, she had the temerity to hope that his arrival would elicit Jacob's "love"; by the time the third is born, it seems she would settle for her husband's "attachment" to her. By this point, the reader is ready to cry for her. What ensues, predictably, is more of the same: Jacob is absent, and Leah remains forsaken and forlorn.

But now something seemingly inexplicable happens. Leah bears a fourth son, and we wait for yet another expression of her sadness and desolation, and perhaps also of her wish that her husband finally care for her. But something else entirely occurs: "She conceived again and bore a son, and declared: 'This time I will praise (*odeh*) the Lord.' Therefore, she named him Judah (*Yehudah*)" (29:35). What has happened here? How does a woman mired in such deep misery, languishing in such excruciating lovelessness, suddenly do a total about-face and express gratitude rather than longing?

Leah has somehow found the courage to accept that her life is not going to turn out as she had hoped. She has spent years aching for the love of her husband, repeatedly convincing herself that perhaps it is just around the corner. But now, suddenly, she sees that this constant yearning will only generate more fantasy and illusion, and the steadily mounting pain of a dream dashed time and time again. Something inside of her shifts, and rather than sinking in the sorrow of what she does not have, she is able to embrace the beauty and fullness of what she does. She is the mother of four children, and they will beget an entire nation, the people of God's covenant.

It is crucial to emphasize that Leah's gratitude does not magically set everything aright and banish every other feeling she has. Her disappointment is real, and deep: she will never have the kind of love, or the kind of marriage, she has so fiercely hoped for. In its inimitably understated way, the Torah tells us that even after Leah's death, Jacob still does not betray even a modicum of marital love for her. Instructing his sons to bury him in the cave Abraham had bought long ago, he remarks: "There Abraham and his wife Sarah were buried; there Isaac and his wife Rebekah were buried; and there I buried Leah" (49:31). The reader waits in vain for Jacob to refer to Leah as his wife, but he cannot bring himself to do so. In death as in life, Leah remains unloved. (2)

Leah is disappointed, and as we have seen, she has every right to be. But she is also grateful—despite the intensity of her pain, she, too, has her blessings. (Recall that when she utters these words, Rachel has Jacob's love, but no children. Even Leah's beautiful and beloved sister has her share of pain and disappointment.) With the birth of Judah, Leah has discovered the awesome capacity to feel grateful even amidst her sorrows. A Talmudic Sage makes a surprising, even jarring statement about Leah. R. Simeon b. Yohai says that Leah was the first person in the history of the world who ever expressed gratitude to God (Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 7b). What could this possibly mean? Of course other people before Leah had offered thanksgiving to God. An impulse to gratitude is part of the human condition, at least as natural as the urge to suppress it. According to Psalm 139, Adam expressed profound gratitude to God for how wondrously he was made (Psalm 139:14). What makes Leah's gratitude unique? What is it that establishes her as the first truly grateful person? It is one thing to be grateful when everything is wonderful, when all of our dreams have been fulfilled and all of our hungers sated. But it is quite another to be grateful when life is complicated, when some of our most cherished dreams have remained painfully unrealized, when some of our yearnings are so intense that they threaten to burn right through us. Leah is the first person to feel and express gratitude even and especially amidst profound sorrow and enduring disappointment.

Strikingly, the name Leah gives her fourth son, Judah, meaning "I will praise" or "I will express gratitude," becomes the name of the Jewish people as a whole (*Jew—Yehudi, comes from the name Judah—Yehudah*). Who is a Jew? One who discovers the possibility of gratitude even amidst heartbreak. That is why we are given the name that expresses Leah's courage, and her achievement: a Jew is, ideally, a human being who,

like Leah, can find her way to gratitude without having everything she wants or even needs.

Disappointment need not preclude gratitude, and nor need gratitude crowd out the very real possibility of disappointment. Judaism does not ask us to choose one feeling or the other, but rather makes space—indeed, seeks to teach us to make space—for the sheer complexity and contradictoriness of human experience. Who better than Leah to teach us that a broken heart can also have moments of profound fullness. (*Rabbi Shai Held—theologian, scholar, and educator—is President, Dean, and Chair in Jewish Thought at Hadar, where he also directs the Center for Jewish Leadership and Ideas.*) (1) I am grateful to Rabbi David Hoffman, whose essay “Why Religion?” (then titled “Living With Gratitude”) planted some of the seeds of my own thinking about Leah. (2) I am grateful to Eli Gordon for this point.

No Excuses: Jacob's Sin and Its Consequences by Rabbi Shai Held

https://docs.google.com/viewerng/viewer?url=https://mechonhadar.s3.amazonaws.com/mh_torah_source_sheets/CJLIParashatVaYeitzei5775.pdf

To be human is to be accountable. In contrast to (other) animals, the Mishnah teaches, human beings are always held responsible for their actions (Mishnah, Bava Kamma 2:6). The Torah seeks to impart this lesson through the often sordid story of the patriarch Jacob.

One day, as Jacob is cooking a lentil stew, he is approached by his exhausted older brother, who asks, “Give me some of that red stuff to gulp down, for I am famished” (25:30). Esau is presented as brutish and uncouth—he does not care how or what he eats, as long as it fills him—but Jacob comes across as cold-hearted and conniving. He responds to his brother by demanding, “First sell me your birthright.” Bible scholar Yair Zakovitch notes that “we would have expected Jacob to try to alleviate his brother’s distress quickly, to give him food and drink with no conditions and without (it goes without question) expectation of payment. Not only is this not the case, but Jacob demands the highest price—the birthright—for a simple bit of food.”(1) Jacob’s “lack of compassion and hospitality stand in stark contrast to that of his grandfather Abraham (18:1-8)”² and his mother Rebekah (24:15-27).(3)

Esau responds impetuously, willingly accepting Jacob’s offer. But Jacob still does not share his stew, insisting that his brother first swear to surrender the birthright. Esau again consents. The text then informs us that Esau “ate and drank and rose and went away and spurned the birthright” (25:32-34). The barrage of five consecutive verbs draws out “Esau’s earthly, bestial nature as a man who does not pause to consider his actions.”⁴ The picture of Esau presented in the text is disturbing, but the portrayal of Jacob is worse. As R. Isaac Abravanel (1437-1508) comments, “Had Jacob been blameless and upright, how could he have dared to tell his older brother to sell him his birthright for... a contemptible price such as a bowl of lentil stew.” Esau’s boorishness does not excuse Jacob’s greed: “If Esau is a foolish man, Jacob should have been a just man and not tricked him.”(5)

What comes next is even more distressing. Concerned that her husband is going to bestow his blessing on Esau, Rebekah hatches a plot for Jacob to trick his father into blessing him instead. Rebekah will cook a meal like the one Isaac expects from Esau, and then Jacob will impersonate his brother by donning Esau’s clothes. Rebekah covers Jacob’s hands and neck with the skins of kids, gives him the food to present his father, and things unfold as planned. Both Isaac and Esau condemn Jacob’s trickery. Isaac informs his elder son that “your brother came with deceit and took your blessing.” Esau responds by connecting Jacob’s name (Ya’akov) with his actions—he cheated (va-ya’akveini) me these two times! First he took away my birthright and now he has taken away my blessing” (27:35-36). When Jacob was born, his name was explained as deriving from the word heel (Ya’akov-akev), one who grabbed his brother’s heel (26:26). But now Esau offers a brutally critical alternative etymology: Ya’akov, he implies, derives

from the word *akov*, and means “crooked one” (27:36). As if the condemnations were not enough, the text also vividly elicits the reader’s pathos: Esau “bursts into wild and bitter sobbing” and pleads like a small child, “Bless me too, Father” (27:34). (6)

Based on a series of subtle textual clues, R. Ya’akov Zvi Mecklenberg (1785-1865) argues that Jacob was “uncomfortable” with Rebekah’s plan and that he acted as he did only because he “felt compelled to do his mother’s bidding” (*Ha-Ketav Ve-ha-Kabbalah* to Genesis 27:12,14,16). (7) Yet the simple meaning of the text suggests otherwise. Jacob hesitates to carry out his mother’s wishes only because he is afraid of getting caught: “If my father touches me,” he says, “I shall appear to him as a trickster and bring upon myself a curse, not a blessing” (27:12). Jacob does not worry about how his deception will hurt his brother or humiliate his father, nor does he evince concern for how his actions will reflect upon his character. Bible scholar Victor Hamilton acidly notes, “He who is later capable of wrestling with God wrestles little with his mother or with his conscience.”(8)

The Torah takes an extremely dim view of Jacob’s trickery; he is made to pay for his deception for the rest of his life. Parashat VaYetzei reports that after working seven long years in order to marry his beloved Rachel, Jacob is deceived by his father-in-law Laban, who gives him his elder daughter Leah instead of the younger Rachel. When Jacob discovers the deception, he is outraged, demanding of Laban, “What is this you have done to me? I was in service for Rachel! Why did you deceive me?” (29:25). A midrash imagines Jacob lambasting Leah as well: “You are a lying daughter of a liar!

During the night did I not call out ‘Rachel’ and you answered me?” Leah’s response to Jacob is searing: “Is there a school without students? Did your father not call out to you, ‘Esau,’ and you answered him?!” (Genesis Rabbah 70:17). Infuriated by the deception, Jacob is nevertheless silenced: “Laban indeed cheats Jacob, but how can the scheming Jacob protest, Jacob whom his own father has described as having ‘come with deceit and taken your blessing’ (27:35)?” This is a clear case of poetic justice, or measure-for-measure (*midah ke-neged midah*). Zakovitch notes the painful symmetry between what Jacob does and what is now done to him: “In the story of the stealing of the blessing, the mother, Rebekah, took advantage of the father’s blindness to replace his firstborn son with the younger one. In the parallel episode, the father, Laban (who is Rebekah’s brother), takes advantage of darkness... to substitute his younger daughter with the firstborn.”(9) Terence Fretheim rightly observes that “in matching deception for deception, the narrator must have understood Jacob’s activity in Genesis 27 as reprehensible.

Jacob must now know something of how Esau felt.”(10) Laban none-too-subtly reminds Jacob that he has no leg to stand on in protesting fraud. “Laban said, ‘It is not the practice in our place to marry off the younger before the older’” (29:26). The word “*bimkomeinu*,” in our place, is no doubt intended to sting. “‘In our place’— Laban pronounces—matters are not conducted as they are in Canaan, where a younger sibling can bypass the firstborn and steal his rights.”(11) Years later, Jacob’s sons sell his beloved Joseph into slavery. Then they dupe their father into believing that Joseph is dead: “They took Joseph’s tunic, slaughtered a kid, and dipped the tunic in blood... they said, ‘We found this. Please examine it; is it your son’s tunic or not?’” (37:31-32). Again, poetic justice: “His sons’ cruel trickery represents [another] measure-for-measure punishment for Jacob’s having procured his brother’s blessing: He cheated his father by using his brother’s garments, now his own sons cheat him by using the garment of their brother.”¹² As a Hebrew aphorism puts it, “Jacob betrayed with garments, and his sons betrayed him with a garment.”(13)

Esau is not alone in his evaluation of Jacob’s behavior. Suggesting that Jacob’s duplicity goes all the way back to his time in his mother’s womb, the prophet Hosea proclaims: “In the womb he deceived (*akov*) his brother” (Hosea 12:4). In contrast to Genesis, where, as we have seen, Jacob’s name is said to derive from the fact that he grabbed his

brother's heel, in Hosea his name at birth is already a denunciation of his character. (14) Jeremiah goes even further. Excoriating the people for their perfidy and corruption, he accuses them all of being Jacobs: "Beware, every man of his friend! Trust not even a brother! For every brother acts deceitfully (akov ya'akov), every friend is base in his dealings. One man cheats the other, they will not speak the truth... You dwell in the midst of deceit (mirmah) [note: the same word Esau uses in decrying Jacob's actions—S.H.]; in their deceit, they refuse to know Me—declares the Lord" (Jeremiah 9:3-5).

But "crooked" is not Jacob's only name. He is also called Yeshurun, which sounds like yashar, meaning straight or upright. (15) Moreover, when the gentile prophet Balaam blesses the Israelites, he ties another of Jacob's names, "Israel," to the same root (Numbers 33:10). It is as if there are two impulses in Tanakh, one that castigates Jacob for his treachery, and another that seeks to rehabilitate him. Strikingly, though, the very first invocation of this alternative name drips with irony. Moses accuses the people of forgetting God: "So Yeshurun grew fat and kicked—you grew fat and gross and coarse—he forsook the God who made him and spurned the Rock of his support" (Deuteronomy 32:15). The very name suggesting Jacob's straightness is thus used to accuse his descendants of crookedness. The Torah is unsparing in its criticism of Jacob's conduct. Esau is a problematic character; perhaps Jacob thinks his brother deserves what he gets. But theft is a crime even if the victim is no saint. The Torah describes Rebekah as the chief instigator and schemer; indeed, she tells Jacob that if he gets caught the curse will be upon her (27:13). Perhaps Jacob feels he is only fulfilling his mother's wishes. But Jewish ethics is unequivocal: We may not obey our parents when they tell us to do something morally or religiously forbidden (Midrash Sifra, Kedoshim, Parashah 1). It is God who loves Jacob and wants him to be heir of the covenant; perhaps Jacob believes he is only effecting God's will. But sacred ends do not justify crooked means, and even those who enact God's will are punished for their sins (15:14).

Most of us are not consciously defiant when we go astray; we do not explicitly think, "I know this is wrong and I don't care." We are not brazen sinners—but we are inveterate rationalizers. We tell ourselves that what we did was not actually so bad or that it was not really our fault. Like Jacob, perhaps, we think the person we mistreated had it coming to her; or we insist that someone else—a parent, a mentor, a supervisor—is ultimately the one responsible; or we construct a narrative showing that what we did was necessary in order to achieve some compelling goal. In the face of all this the Torah declares: You cannot "spin" your way out of moral responsibility, even when something as important as God's blessing is on the line. Our patriarch Jacob tragically learns this the hard way.

1) Yair Zakovitch, *Jacob*, trans. Valerie Zakovitch (2012), p. 23. 2) Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (2001), p. 363. 3) Cf. what I have written about Rebekah's generosity (and complexity) in "People Are Complicated, Or: Sensitivity is a Dangerous Thing," 4) Zakovitch, *Jacob*, p. 24. 5) Translation adapted very slightly from Zakovitch, *Jacob*, p. 23. 6) Cf. Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (2004), p. 144. 7) R. Mecklenberg notes that: 1) Jacob says, "Perhaps (ulai) my father will touch me" (27:12) rather than "lest (pen) he touch me," thus suggesting that he wants the plot to be foiled; 2) Jacob does what his mother orders, but since there are no verbs in the text to suggest eagerness or alacrity, Jacob's heart must not be in it; 3) The text says that Rebekah dressed Jacob (27:16), not that he dressed himself. Clearly, then, according to R. Mecklenberg, Jacob is only a very reluctant participant in the goings on. 8) Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 18-50* (1995), p. 217. 9) Yair Zakovitch, *Jacob*, trans. Valerie Zakovitch (2012), p. 64. 10) Terence E. Fretheim, "The Book of Genesis: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 1 (1994), p. 553. Fretheim adds rather tartly that Jacob "has met in Laban someone not unlike himself." 11) Zakovitch, *Jacob*, p. 64. Note, as does R. Eliezer Ashkenazi (1512-1585), that in contrast to the narrator, who refers to Leah as "ha-gedolah," the big one, Laban speaks of her as "ha-bekhirah," the older one—an allusion to Esau's status in Genesis 25:33. Laban is mocking Jacob, as if to say, "You are the younger, yet you took the birthright from your brother—but that is not the practice in our place." R. Eliezer Ashkenazi,

Gedolim Ma'asei HaShem, Ma'sei Avot, 32, cited in Amod Frisch, "Your Brother Came With Guile': Responses to an Explicit Moral Evaluation in the Bible," Prooftexts 23 (2003), pp. 271-296; citation is at p. 294, n28. 12) Zakovitch, Jacob, p. 156. Cf. also R. Abraham Saba (1440-1508), Tzror HaMor to Genesis 37:29. 13) The wonderful alliteration of the aphorism cannot be captured in translation: "B'BeGeD BaGaD Ya'akov, u-ve- BeGeD BaGDu bo banav." Cited in Menorah Rotenberg, "A Portrait of Rebecca: The Devolution of a Matriarch into a Patriarch," Conservative Judaism 54:2 (2002), pp. 46-62; citation is on p. 61, n31. 14) For a provocative historical-critical discussion of Jacob's name(s), cf. Avigdor Shinan and Yair Zakovitch, From Gods to God: How the Bible Debunked, Suppressed, Or Changed Ancient Myths and Legends (2012), trans. Valerie Zakovitch, pp. 149-156. 15) Deuteronomy 32:15; 33:5, 26; and cf. especially Isaiah 44:2.

Yahrtzeits

Neal Fox remembers his father Hyman Fox (Chaim) on Wed. Dec. 11 (Kislev 13).
Amy Cooper remembers her uncle George Israel Stieglitz (Yisrael) on Fri. Dec. 13 (Kislev 15).
Roni Bamforth remembers her father William Gelfond on Fri. Dec.13 (Kislev 15).