

Likutei Divrei Torah

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Covenant and Conversation Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l

Laban the Aramean

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

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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.

Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

We left Jacob at the end of last week’s portion as he was leaving behind Laban and Laban-land, heaven-bent on returning to the land of Abraham and to the house of Isaac. Jacob understands that his inner self has been overtaken by the deceitful and aggressive hands of Esau, that he must return to his ancestral home in order to recapture the Abrahamic birthright. But what exactly are the building blocks of this birthright?

Is it possible that Esau is now even more deserving, or at least as deserving, of it as is Jacob? What is the real content—and significance—of our Jewish birthright? The first prerequisite for the carrier of the birthright is a very strong Hebrew identity, a powerful familial connection that contributes—and defines—the link to a specific and unique heritage and ancestry. Abraham established his commitment to the Hebrew identity when he insisted on purchasing a separate grave for his wife Sarah, when he was willing to spend a small fortune in establishing a Hebrew cemetery beyond the various sites of the Hittites. He defines himself as an alien resident, sees himself as living amongst the Hittites but certainly not as being existentially a Hittite, and therefore refuses an “of right” burial for Sarah in any Hittite plot of land (Gen. 23:3-20).

Esau is described as having a strong sense of familial identity. He demonstrates strong feelings of filial respect and devotion; the Bible even records that Isaac loved Esau because he made certain to provide his father with the venison he dearly loved (Gen. 25:28). He even has strong sibling ties to his brother, despite Jacob’s underhanded deception surrounding the blessings.

In the Torah portion this week, the Bible tells us how Esau first seemed to have set up a greeting brigade of 400 potential warriors to “welcome” the return of the prodigal brother (Gen. 32:7); but once Esau actually sees his younger brother and his family, his heart apparently melts with brotherly love: “Esau ran to meet him; he hugged him, fell upon his neck and kissed him” (Gen. 33:4). Esau even wishes for the two of them to travel together and to settle down together. “Let us travel together and move on; I will go alongside you.”

It is Jacob who politely refuses: “You know that my children are weak and I have responsibility for the nursing sheep and cattle. Please go ahead of me, I shall eventually come to you in Seir” (Gen. 33:13-14).

Yes, Esau has strong familial identity. However, Abraham has two crucial characteristics that Esau lacks: continuity and destiny.

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Continuity is most meaningfully expressed in marrying a suitable mate: from our modern perspective, taking a Jewish spouse (so that the children will remain Jewish), and from the biblical perspective, not marrying an immoral Canaanite. Esau takes Hittite wives (Gen. 26:34), “Judith the daughter of Beeri and Basemath the daughter of Elon.” Perhaps he comforted himself with the fact that his first wife had a Jewish name (Judith) and the second had a name which means sweet-smelling perfume.

Esau’s mentality is apparently as superficial as the name “Edom” he acquired from his red complexion as well as the red colors of the lentil soup he exchanged for his birthright and the venison he gave his father. Moreover, when he realizes how upset his parents are with his marital choice, he still doesn’t look to his mother’s family in Aram Naharayim for a mate, but rather chooses a daughter of Ishmael, the “wild ass of a man whose hand is over everything.” And he takes this wife not instead of but in addition to his Hittite wives (Gen. 28:9).

Another test for continuity is a unique daily lifestyle, the ability to delay gratification and act with discipline, especially in the sexual and gustatory realms. The biblical laws of kashrut for Jews have always been a powerful tool in keeping us a “nation set apart” which didn’t fall prey to assimilation. Esau sells his birthright for a portion of lentil soup—a thick, juicy filet mignon steak in our contemporary terms. He even expresses his desire to have the broth “poured into his mouth” as one would feed a camel (Gen. 25:30, see B.T. Shabbat, P.155 b, Rashi ad loc.).

To have one’s eyes on a historic mission, to realize the goal of having “all the families of the earth blessed by us” (Gen. 12:3) through our vision of a God of compassionate justice, morality and peace (Gen. 18:19) requires a lifestyle of commitment to an ideal and delayed gratification which is foreign to—and even impossible for—the character displayed by Esau. When Jacob tells Esau that he will meet up with him in Seir, our Midrash connects this rapprochement to the messianic period when “the saviors will go up to Mount Zion to judge the mountain of Esau” (Gen. 33:14, Obad. 1:21, Genesis Raba 78, 14). Jacob then continues to travel to Succoth, which implies the tabernacle and the Holy Temple, the place in Jerusalem from where our message to the world will eventually emanate (Isa. 2, Mic. 4).

But before Jacob can affirm his covenantal continuity and begin to achieve his destiny, he must first disgorge the grasping hands of Esau which have overtaken his personality and substituted the Jacob of “he shall emerge triumphant at the end” with “heel-sneak”; he must restore his “image of God” which was the

source of that “wholehearted individual who was a studious dweller in tents.”

This is the purpose of that mysteriously eerie nocturnal struggle with an anonymous assailant, a wrestling match which must precede the Esau/Jacob face-to-face confrontation. Jacob is all alone (Gen. 32:25); his struggle is an inner battle, to rid himself of the heel-sneak Esau in his soul. And he wins, both over divine forces and human powers (Gen. 32:28); he has seen God (Elohim) face-to-face, and succeeded in restoring his own divine image by exorcising Esau the heel-sneak. He now proudly stands as Israel, the righteous representative of God and the fitting recipient of the Abrahamic birthright.

Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Reuven at Three Didn't Know Choshen Mishpat, but He Knew Right from Wrong

The pasuk says “Reuven went out in the days of the wheat harvest; he found mandrakes (dudaim) in the field and brought them to Leah his mother; Rochel said to Leah, ‘Please give me some of your son’s dudaim.’” (Bereshis 30:14). Rashi comments on the words “in the days of the wheat harvest” that this is a testimony to the greatness of the Shevatim (Tribes). It was the harvest season for wheat, meaning that there was wheat lying around and yet they did not send forth their hands to take something that did not belong to them. Reuven only took wild growing mandrakes, a type of ownerless flower.

The Tolner Rebbe asks two interesting questions on this Rashi.

First: What kind of “praise of the Shevatim” is it to tell us that Reuven was not a thief?

Second: Regardless of how we answer this first question, why would Rashi say that this incident is praise for “the Shevatim”? All we know is that Reuven did not steal. Why does that reflect on all his brothers, to make a general statement of praise about “all the Shevatim”?

The Tolner Rebbe further points out that the Seder Olam, which describes the chronology of all the personalities of Tanach, says that Reuven was born in the year 2193 from Creation, and Yissochor (who was conceived following this incident with the mandrakes) was born three years later. So how can Yissochor be praised for an incident that occurred before he was even born? Reuven picked these flowers for his mother when he was only three years old. If so, what is the point of evaluating the righteousness of the act of taking the mandrakes? Does a three-year-old understand the concept of property rights and the fact that it is wrong to take something that belongs to someone else? Considering his age, why in fact did Reuven not take the wheat and give it to his mother?

The answer is that Reuven did not know the severity of the sin of theft, but he did know the values of his parents. It must have been such a prominent concept in his father’s house that someone else’s property is OFF LIMITS, that this three-year-old recoiled at the thought of taking something that was not his. This was not because he maturely understood Torah or Hilchos Gezeilah in the Rambam or the Choshen Mishpat section of Shulchan Aruch. He did not know any of that at this stage in his life. But from growing up in a house whose motto was “Titen Emes L’Yaakov...” (Micha 7:20), theft was such an anathema that even a three-year-old would not touch it.

A famous Gemara (Succah 56b) comments that a child’s conversation in the market place inevitably reflects things he heard from one of his parents. A child’s mode of conversation and what he says reflects what is going on in his parent’s home. The praise of the Shevatim is that even toddlers in that family, because of the education they received at home from their earliest ages, recoiled from taking things which did not belong to them. All the Shevatim were like this, because they all grew up in Yaakov Avinu’s house, an atmosphere which constantly stressed the middos of honesty and integrity.

Was It a Message from G-d or Wishful Thinking?

The Tolner Rebbe has a further thought which clarifies a peculiar insight in the parsha, based on a schmooze of Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz in Parshas Vayechi.

The Almighty came to Yaakov after twenty years of service in Lavan’s house and told him, “It is time to leave. Go back to the Land of your fathers and your birthplace.” (Bereshis 31:3). If we study the pesukim which follow, we see a strange phenomenon. Yaakov Avinu tells his wives that an Angel of G-d appeared to him the previous night and told him that they need to leave. “What do you think—should we leave or should we not leave?” They respond with their opinion that they should leave, but they justify that decision based on financial and familial interpersonal issues: “Do we yet have an inheritance portion in our father’s house? He considers us like strangers, for he sold us and he also consumed our money. For all the wealth that the L-rd has rescued from our father belongs to us and our children. Thus, all that the L-rd said to you, you should do!” (Bereshis 31:14-16)

This is a mind-boggling parsha. First of all, Yaakov seems to weigh whether or not to listen to what Hashem commanded him based on the advice of his wives, and second of all, his wives seem to make their calculation based on resentment of their father and financial calculations, mentioning Hashem’s command merely as an afterthought! How do we understand this strange conversation Yaakov has with Rochel and Leah?

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We have mentioned this question in previous years. An additional question here (mentioned by the Chizkuni) is the following: When Yaakov receives the message from Hashem, he is told directly (Vayomer Hashem el Yaakov): “Return to the Land of your fathers and your birthplace and I will be with you”. However, when he relays the dream to his wives, he does not say he heard this message from Hashem; he says he heard the message from “Malach haElokim” (an Angel of the L-rd).

Which was it? Was it a direct communication from Hashem or a message from an Angel? (The Chizkuni makes note of this discrepancy and explains that the original communication was indeed from a Malach as Yaakov told his wives, But the pasuk, in mentioning the original communication, does not bother to mention that detail, since at any rate it was a Divine communication.)

In Parshas Vayechi, there is a beautiful teaching from Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz. The pasuk says “But as for me—when I came from Paddan, Rochel died on me in the land of Canaan on the road, while there was still about a beras of land to go to Ephrath; and I buried her there on the road to Ephrath, which is Bethlehem” (Bereshis 48:7) Yaakov Avinu tells his son Yosef: I want you to bury me in Eretz Yisrael... Rashi there explains that Yaakov is offering an apology to his son: Even though I am asking you to trouble yourself to bury me in Eretz Canaan, I did not do the same for your mother. I buried her on the road because she died near Beth Lechem (and I did not schlep her to the family burial plot in Chevron). I know that you have complaints against me about this, but you should know that the reason I buried your mother there was not because I was lazy. It had nothing to do with the weather or any excuse of that nature. You should know that I buried her based on the word of G-d that she should be of aide to her descendants at that burial spot when the Jewish people will be exiled from the Land of Israel by Nevuzradan as it is written: “A voice is heard on high, Rochel weeps for her children...” (Yirmiyahu 31:14) That is why I buried her there.

Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz asks: Why does Yaakov Avinu need to go through this whole shtickle Torah with Yosef: You should know it wasn’t raining, and I wasn’t lazy, etc., etc.? Say to Yosef straight out: “Listen, Yosef I know you have complaints against me, but I buried her there because I was commanded to do so by the Almighty. End of discussion!

Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz explains an important principle of life: We hear what we want to hear, we see what we want to see, we believe what we want to believe.

Yaakov Avinu had doubts. He told Yosef: Don’t say that I got the message of G-d wrong. Don’t say that I misinterpreted it. Don’t say that G-d told me something else, but because of my negiyus (bias) – because it was too hard,

because it was too far, because it was too rainy – I misinterpreted what the Ribono shel Olam said because people hear what they want to hear and believe what they want to believe. Yaakov Avinu needs to emphasize that there was no bias here. He could have easily brought Rochel to the Me'Aras haMachpelah. It would not have been difficult for him to do that. Consequently, Yaakov is emphasizing “I did not misinterpret the Almighty, because I had no personal agenda which would have caused me to do so.”

The Tolner Rebbe uses this insight of Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz in Parshas VaYechi to explain this incident in Parshas VaYetzei.

Yaakov Avinu hated being in the house of Lavan. During their final confrontation, he told it to his father-in-law like it was: “I worked for you for twenty years and during that entire time you were a crook. You cheated me day and night...” Yaakov Avinu cannot wait to get out of the house of Lavan. One night, Yaakov has a dream. An Angel comes to him in the name of the Ribono shel Olam and told him “Time to leave.”

Yaakov Avinu thought to himself, “Ah, this is what I have been waiting for!” But he woke up the next morning and wondered, “Did I really dream that? Did I really hear that? Is that actually what the Malach said? Or perhaps I want to get out of here so badly that I started hallucinating! Maybe I am misinterpreting my dream and we should really stay here?”

Because Yaakov had these doubts, he decided to consult with his wives. Even though when I had the dream, I thought Hashem was speaking to me directly, I will tell them: “Listen here, last night I think a Malach came to me and I think that he told me in the name of Hashem that it is time to leave here. What do you think? Is there any reason not to leave?” Yaakov feared that his negiyus (bias) caused him to misinterpret his dream, and was seeking reassurance from his wives that there was no reason not to leave.

Rochel and Leah assured him that there was absolutely no reason to stay. “Therefore, what you heard was not your negiyus – it was the truth. A Malach did come to you and tell you to leave, and therefore you should definitely act upon that vision!”

This is how to understand this parsha. Yaakov Avinu was so concerned about Emes (Truth), that he needed reassurance that what he heard was not just wishful thinking or a fantasized imagination of his subconscious desires. He expressed his uncertainty by emphasizing the role of the Malach (as opposed to a direct and explicit message from Hashem). His wives put his mind at rest, that he had no negiyus here, and that the message was an authentic one from Hashem, which should be acted upon.

Dvar Torah Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

How do we respond to extraordinary experiences? If I were to give a subtitle to Sefer Bereishit, the Book of Genesis, it would be the Book of Dreams. Not only does this book of the Torah present us with details of the dreams themselves, but more importantly we're told how the dreamer reacted.

In Parshat Vayeitzei we are given a description of Jacob's famous dream of the ladder, which spanned the distance from earth up to the heavens. How did Jacob react when he woke up? The Torah tells us (Bereishit 28:16),

“Vayikatz Yaakov mishnato vayomer,” – “Jacob woke up from his sleep and he declared,”

“Achein yesh Hashem bamakom hazeh.” – “Behold the presence of God is in this place.”

That was how he responded. He recognized the presence of God, and he continued to do so for the rest of his life; indeed we speak about it to this day.

Let's now have a look at a dream of Pharaoh King of Egypt, as described in Parshat Mikeitz (Bereishit 41:4, Bereishit 41:5). There the same term ‘vayikatz’ is used.

“Vayikatz Paroh,” – “Pharaoh woke up,”

“vayishan.” – “and he went back to sleep,”

“Vayichalom,” – “And he had another dream.”

What a remarkable dream Pharaoh had just had! In the course of time he would discover that it would provide for him and his people a secret to their survival! Yet his reaction was that he turned over and he went back to sleep.

Herein lies a very powerful message for us all. So often it's not just in dreams that we might see something remarkable. More than that, we actually have exceptionally powerful experiences in our lives. Hashem is trying to say something to us.

What will our response be? Will it be just to turn over and ignore it, or will we respond in an appropriate way?

During the past year and a half every single one of us has experienced something unprecedented; we've all had our own personal, family, communal, national and global experiences. We have been able to learn so much from the pandemic. And now that b'ezrat Hashem we are gradually moving out of it, what will our response be? Will we just go back to the way we were before? Or will we learn some lessons and guarantee that as a result of this extraordinary experience our lives will forever be changed for the better?

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Let's always see to it that when it comes to those unusual and extraordinary moments of our lives, our response should be the response of Jacob, and not the response of Pharaoh.

Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel Encyclopedia of Jewish Values*

Physical Beauty in Judaism or Being Aware of God

When describing Rachel for the first time in our Parsha (**Genesis 29:17**), the Torah goes out of its way to accentuate her beauty, describing it in detail with two phrases, *Yifat Toar* and *Yifat Mareh*. Rashi explains the first as the beautiful outline of her face, and the second as her features or complexion. Other commentaries disagree about the details of these descriptions. But if the Torah went out of its way to describe Rachel's beauty in such detail, it is obviously important. Is that, indeed, the correct view of physical beauty in Judaism? Isn't the “inside” of a person much more important value in Judaism (see my Shiur on Parshat Chaye Sara)? So, how does Judaism, then, evaluate physical beauty – as something positive, negative, or neutral?

In general society, physical beauty, both in men and in women, has always been admired and valued throughout the ages. In the culture of ancient Greece, it was the highest ideal. But today, perhaps more than ever before, in a mass media age, society values physical beauty in everyday life as never before. Successful models have turned into superstars, emulated by millions. The cosmetics industry is a multibillion-dollar business, as people actively try to look and remain physically attractive, at all ages and in all walks of life. It has been proved that an attractive person will almost always get a job over a less attractive person with identical skills and qualifications. Does Judaism agree with this assessment of physical beauty? Are spiritual ideals and values all that matter, or is physical attractiveness a desirable trait in Judaism? Or is physical beauty possibly a trait to be avoided completely in Judaism?

Beautiful People, Cities and Animals - In many different areas of life, Judaism recognizes and seems to admire physical beauty. The Talmud (Megillah 15a), in addition to Rachel in our Torah portion, describes four other famous women as exceedingly beautiful. Among them were Sara, Abraham's wife and Queen Esther, showing that Judaism recognizes physical beauty as an admirable trait, something to be desired. Judaism recognizes physical beauty not only in people but also in places. Of the ten portions of physical beauty given to the world, Jerusalem received nine of those portions (Esther Rabbah 1:16). Therefore, we can surmise that Judaism describes Jerusalem not only as a holy city, but also as a beautiful city, another aspect of the city to be admired. The Torah also commanded specific laws to insure the physical beauty of any city. It was forbidden to plant or graze in the area immediately around the city limits

(Numbers 35:2) (see Shiur on Maasei 5782) Rashi (Rashi commentary, Numbers 35:2) comments that the purpose of this law was to insure the physical beauty of each city. Therefore, this concept of preserving the physical beauty of a city is not merely a positive feature to be admired, but a Biblical commandment, a necessary component in each city's development.

Even the physical beauty of non-Jewish people is admired in Judaism. When Rabban Gamliel saw a beautiful woman at the Temple Mount who was an idol worshipper, his reaction was to comment how beautiful she was and how beautiful is God's creation. Another sage commented that one should make a blessing when seeing such beauty (**Avodah Zarah 20a**) (Imagine if a prominent Rabbi at the Kotel did something like this today!). Thus, all kinds of beauty, not only those that related to Jewish people or Jewish cities are to be admired.

From Rabban Gamliel's comment, we can begin to see the reasoning behind Judaism's admiration for physical beauty. The admiration is not necessary for the person himself or herself. Rather, that person's physical beauty is a reflection upon the Creator of that beauty, God Almighty. Just as a beautiful painting reflects positively upon the artist and a compliment about the painting also compliments the artist, so, too, admiring a physically beautiful person honors God, the Creator of that person.

In the same sense, even a physically beautiful animal is admired in Judaism. In a similar fashion to a beautiful person, the Talmud says that one should make a blessing upon seeing a physically beautiful animal (**Jerusalem Talmud, Avodah Zarah 8a**) because the animal, as well, is God's creation and its beauty reflects positively upon God. Two of the three examples of beautiful animals given by the Talmudic passage may be difficult for people from western culture to relate to at first. Normally, we do not think of exceedingly beautiful donkeys or camels. Perhaps that is because we are not from the Middle Eastern culture where we can readily tell the difference between a beautiful or ugly camel. But we can relate to the third example, the beautiful horse more easily. Most western people have seen and admired an exceedingly beautiful horse.

Ethics of the Fathers (**Avot 6:8**), shows us that not only is physical beauty in people to be admired if it happens to be noticed, but it is a goal to aspire to. It is one of the qualities that a sage should try to possess. In fact, it is the very first quality of a sage that is mentioned.

How, Then, Can it Say that "Beauty is Worthless"? If all these sources portray a true picture of the Jewish view of physical beauty, then how is it that the verse many traditional Jews sing each Friday night around the Shabbat table (Proverbs 31:30) declares that beauty is vain or worthless? Isn't this a contradiction to all that was previously

mentioned, and sources cited? How is this verse, then, supposed to be understood?

Perhaps an approach to help resolve this apparent contradiction can be learned from a story about Rabbi Akiva (**Avodah Zara 20a**). When Rabbi Akiva saw the beautiful wife of the wicked Turnus Rufus, one of his reactions was that he cried. The reason he cried was that he realized that such unbelievable beauty could not be preserved and would one day decay and be gone. Therefore, as great as physical beauty might be, it is always transitory and will ultimately disappear. That may explain why King Solomon wrote that beauty is worthless – it is a value that cannot endure and one day it will one day be gone. Unlike other Jewish values which are more permanent, beauty by its very nature must be fleeting. This may be one reason why the Mishna (**Avot 3:7**) says that one who stops his Torah learning, an eternal and enduring commandment, to admire a beautiful tree, it is as if he is worthy to die. The reason this admiration is so abhorred is that by stopping Torah learning, that person is declaring, through his or her action, that the transient quality of beauty of the tree, which will disappear, supersedes the permanent quality of Torah, whose effect is lasting. In a similar vein, any relationship between husband and wife that is based solely on physical beauty and physical attractiveness will ultimately fall apart because this attraction must necessarily disappear along with the beauty (**Avot 5:16**).

The relationship of Judaism to physical beauty can further be illuminated by the Mishna (**Avot 4:20**) which exhorts the Jew not to look at the jug but at the contents (do not judge a book by its cover). There are some new jugs (which would ostensibly contain new, cheaper grade wine) that really contain old wine (better quality) and some old jugs (that should have old wine) that have nothing in them at all. Therefore, there can be a person who is a new jug (not very physically beautiful) who has fine wine inside, i.e., a great personality, Torah learning and a good heart. Similarly, there can be a person who is an old jug, i.e., a beautiful person without anything inside, i.e., no content or learning as a human being. Thus, physical beauty alone is not the most important thing in life. What is inside is far more important, not only because it is more permanent, but also because it is more valuable in the hierarchy of Jewish values.

The implication of this Mishna is also clear: if a person is an old jug and also contains old wine, it is better than either of the two previously combinations discussed. Thus, if a person does possess physical beauty on the outside, and also possesses content and values on the inside, which is a superior combination to having only one of the two. So, while external beauty is less important than internal beauty, having both is the highest ideal. This idea was once demonstrated in that verse from Proverbs using a mathematical model. When it

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says that "beauty is worthless," (**Proverbs 31:30**) the word "worthless" in mathematical terms is zero. So, too, does the verse mean that beauty by itself has a value of zero. But if that same zero is placed after any number, it multiplies the value of that number by ten. So, too, if there is already inner content (a positive number), then physical beauty can enhance that person's worth and multiply the person's worth. All the previously cited examples of people in the Talmud described as beautiful already had content and meaning besides their beauty. Thus, physical beauty only enhanced the deep content of Sara and Esther and the holiness already present within them.

In a symbolic sense, the Talmud speaks about the qualities of the two sons of Noah, Shem and Yefet. Yefet (from the Hebrew word *Yafe*, meaning beauty) represents beauty in the world and was the ancestor of the Greek culture who admired beauty as the ultimate value. Shem, on the other hand, represents the spiritual side of man, and is the ancestor of Abraham and the Jewish people (Semites). In explaining Noah's blessing to his children (**Genesis 9:27**), the Talmud (**Megillah 9b**) says that the beauty of Yefet will reside in the tent (house of learning) of Shem. This implies that while physical beauty is a positive force in Judaism, it will only remain admired if it subsumed within the tent of Shem, as a subset or secondary importance to the totality of Judaism.

Is Beauty Subjective or Objective? - The debate has probably raged for centuries whether physical beauty can be objectively measured, or does it differ in the taste from person to person. On the one hand, certain models and actresses have universal appeal and are admired by all as beautiful women (if they were not, they would not be the top models). But, on the other hand, other stars are seen as "beautiful" by some and not attractive by others. What does Judaism believe?

There is a Mitzvah to make the bride happy by dancing before her at a wedding. But there is a Talmudic debate between Beit Hillel and Beit Shamai whether you should say that the bride is beautiful (Beit Hillel) or whether you say the bride is "as she is" (Beit Shamai) (**Ketuvot 16b**). Beit Shamai will not say the bride is beautiful, because not every bride has physical beauty (and saying it for some who are beautiful and not others will cause embarrassment). In fact, Beit Shamai asks Beit Hillel: How can you lie and say that the bride is beautiful if she is lame, for example? Isn't it a violation of the Torah commandment to keep far away from a lie? (**Exodus 23:7**) Beit Hillel answers with an analogy about a special item, such as a dress, purchased in the marketplace like a flea market (that cannot be returned). If a woman spends a lot of time and a lot of money selecting an item and then asks her husband what he thinks of the item, what should he answer? Beit Shamai admitted that he should say it is beautiful (even if he finds it atrocious),

implying that that this is the proper response, in order not to insult his wife, and because to her, the item is indeed special and beautiful. Beit Hillel said the same thing is true with any bride. To the groom, she must be beautiful, even if she is lame or unattractive.

From this discussion, we may deduce that Beit Shamai measured beauty in objective terms, and if the bride is not objectively beautiful, it would be a lie to say that she is. Beit Hillel, on the other hand, believed that beauty is indeed objective, "in the eyes of the beholder" and thus, to every groom she is indeed beautiful. Thus, saying that she is beautiful is not a lie. Shulchan Aruch (**Shulchan Aruch, Even Ha'ezer 65:1**) codifies according to Beit Hillel, implying that beauty in Judaism is indeed a subjective quality.

It is interesting to note that, ironically, the most objectively beautiful things in the world are those things made by God. Man-made beauty is much more subjective than God-made beauty. So, for example, almost all people will admire a sunset or a scene in nature as objectively beautiful. The same scene depicted in a painting will cause great debate if it is indeed beautiful or not. Man-made creations that do not try to imitate nature will cause even greater diversity of opinion as to their beauty. Sculptures, drawings or other original works of art will almost never receive universal recognition of their beauty.

First Time Beauty - In his ruling on how traditional Jews should react to seeing physical beauty. (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 225:10) Shulchan Aruch indeed rules according to the Talmudic passages mentioned above, that a Jew should make a blessing on every type of physical beauty encountered, including trees, animals and people. He adds, however, that this blessing should only be made the first time a person sees the beautiful object. What is the reasoning behind this unusual caveat? Shulchan Aruch apparently understood human nature and human reactions. Nothing is ever again as beautiful to a person as the first time it is seen. After that, one begins to notice the flaws, and it will never be quite as remarkable. Therefore, the blessing is made when the beauty is most noticeable and most striking. Concerning the physical beauty of a human being, as well, the impact of beauty is also lessened after the first time for similar reasons. But another phenomenon also occurs. Generally, the first time a person relates to someone beautiful, the relationship begins on a level of physical beauty alone. After that, as the effect of beauty diminishes, people begin to relate to this individual as a person, not merely as a beautiful object. One begins to see beyond the physical to what is inside the person, a phenomenon that is very natural and encouraged in Judaism for reasons discussed above.

* This column has been adapted from a series of volumes written by Rabbi Dr.

Nachum Amsel "The Encyclopedia of Jewish Values" available from Urim and Amazon. For the full article or to review all the footnotes in the original, contact the author at nachum@jewishdestiny.com

Ohr Torah Stone Dvar Torah

The Mandrakes and the Horoscope Rabbi Chaim Navon

What was the first fertility treatment ever in Jewish history? Well, it was probably the Mandrake plant, or *duda'im*, to use the Biblical term. The Torah describes the tense atmosphere that prevailed between Leah and Rachel because of the *duda'im* that Reuven brought from the field. As expounded upon by the exegetes, it appears that the popular belief back then was that the *duda'im* could help heal infertility, which explains why Rachel, who was barren, coveted them to such an extent.

Ultimately, it was Leah who was blessed with another son and not Rachel. The Torah teaches us a profound lesson through this story. When Leah gives birth to her fifth son following the above-mentioned events, she gives a moral explanation: "God has given me my reward for I have given my handmaid to my husband." (Bereishit 30, 18). Moral actions lead to reward – the realization of one's dreams.

The Biblical protagonists, who yearn for their wishes to be fulfilled, add another dimension to that of moral action: they turn to God in prayer and beg Him to fulfill their wishes. The portion of Vayetze opens with the Yaakov's vow-prayer. Yaakov turns to God in this fashion: "If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and clothing to put on..." (ibid. 28, 20)

Similarly, when Rachel turns to Yaakov with the words – "Give me children" (ibid. 30, 1), our Sages explain that she begged Yaakov to pray to God on her behalf. Clearly, prayer was an integral part of our Patriarchs' lives.

Anselm of Canterbury, an 11th Century clergyman and philosopher, succeeded in formulating the wittiest philosophical proof for God's existence. His proof, which later became known as The Ontological Argument is of interest to philosophers to this day. Prior to his formulating his Ontological Argument, Anselm prayed to God for three whole days, crying to Him and beseeching Him to help him find proof of God's existence. The 19th Century Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, ridiculed Anselm: Does a bridegroom who embraces his bride need proof of her existence? Similarly, does a person who prays to his God need proof of His existence?

Prayer is, first and foremost, an intimate encounter between Man and God. As for content, prayer is all about entreating for something. However, the core essence of prayer is the very act of turning to God, whereas the content is only secondary. In

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many instances, our Sages referred to the person engaged in prayer as one standing before God. The Rambam viewed their words as a direct psychological instruction to the one praying: "His [a person engaged in prayer] heart should be directed upwards, as if he were standing in heaven." (Laws of Prayer 5, 4)

In direct contrast to our Patriarchs – who were well familiar with the merits of prayer and its redeeming properties – the Torah makes mention of the relatives from Charan. When Lavan admits to Yaakov that his prosperity was in merit of Yaakov, his son-in-law, he phrases it thus: "I have learned by divination that the Lord has blessed me for thy sake" (Bereshit 30, 27). This verse gives us a peek into Lavan's strange spiritual world. He "learned by divination" means he turned to sorcery, and in so doing – discovered that God had blessed him because of Yaakov. Let's translate this into contemporary talk: I read my horoscope for this week, and discovered God will bless me financially. One can scoff at Lavan for being so primitive; however, even our own newspapers give more coverage to astrological nonsense than they do to the weekly Torah portion.

Rachel steals her father's idols (ibid. 31, 19), and our Sages explain that she did so in order to wean her father off his addiction to cheap mania. However, this action backfires and, instead, Lavan chases Yaakov, driven by his belief – "Why have you stolen my gods?" (ibid. 30) – hardly aware of the inherent paradox created by his own actions: What kind of God can be stolen?

At the end of our portion, the two branches of the family split up officially. They erect a pillar of stones between them, marking the territory belonging to each family. They talk different languages: Yaakov speaks in Hebrew; Lavan uses Aramaic. Their spiritual worlds are different as well. "The God of Avraham", to whom we pray, is juxtaposed to "the God of Nachor" (Bereishit 31, 53), representing mania and sorcery. This is the point in time when the worshippers of God finally break away from the idol worshippers and each go their separate ways.

Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

Rabbi Ahron Lopiansky

The Divine Wells

Toldos and Vayeitzei combine to present us with three stories about the Avos and wells: Avraham digs wells, Yitzchak reclaims those wells after they had been clogged by the Plishtim, and Yaakov removes a rock from on top of a well.

Chazal already point out the many "shidduchim" realized at a well (i.e. Rivka and Yitzchak via Eliezer, Rachel and Yaakov, and Tzipora and Moshe), and the Ramban discusses the significance of the three wells that Yitzchak attempted to reopen and shows them to be symbolic of the future batei

mikdash. But what lies in the different tasks performed by each of the Avos? They share the common undertaking of making well-water accessible, yet each of them does it differently.

It is obvious that a well reflects the flow of "Elokus" [divinity] into the world - it is a seemingly infinite flow in the sense that wells seem to have an unlimited supply of water, as opposed to cisterns and reservoirs. It is, so to speak, a gateway to the infinite; not that we have full access to the infinite, but that it does become more accessible to us, and is the source of life for all and everything.

The world seems devoid of the divine presence, and it is incumbent upon man to breakthrough to it. Each of the Avos engaged in bringing that light into this world. Each - based on his particular kocho - perceived the challenge differently and added another approach to allowing that light into the world.

Avraham Avinu came into this world at the end of the two thousand years of tohu - the darkness of sin and idolatry. Hashem had simply "ceased to exist" for the majority of humanity, and Avraham needed to actually bring God into this world. The very idea of one god, who is incorporeal, creator and source of the good, was an idea that needed to be "created". Avraham "dug the well" and introduced Elokus into the world. This is the hallmark of ahavas Hashem: a constant drive to let the world feel the divine presence. [See Rambam in Sefer HaMitzvos, aseh #3.]

Yitzchak Avinu is seen as the embodiment of yirah. While Avraham's middah is a proactive one, Yitzchak's nature is more given to guarding against evil. It is true that Avraham had dug a well and water flowed into the world, but this well was slowly dying from the minute it came into existence. Dirt and silt were accumulating, and jealous neighbors were waiting to stuff them up entirely. It is only the constant cleansing and removing of silt that will keep the wells from disappearing. This is the essence of yirah: a nonstop standing on guard so that evil does not choke out the good that exists already.

Yaakov's attribute, however, is deeper still. He brings into the world the understanding that the good always existed and exists, and evil does not and can not eradicate this good. What can happen is that the divine presence may be covered up, and we become oblivious to it. Yaakov himself realized it when he slept in Beis El and proclaimed that, "Indeed there is Hashem in this place, and I was but oblivious to it." Yaakov's perspective meant that one simply has to remove the covering and see that the well is as pristine as it ever was.

Klal Yisroel inherited all three of these perspectives from our Avos: the burning drive of ahava to bring the divine presence into this world, the caution of yirah to guard against evil seeping in and polluting that divine light,

and, above all, the realization that in truth the divine light is never extinguished and if one but removes the covering one sees the light as it was.

This is the basis for the ruling that, "Yisroel, afa al pi she'chiti, Yisroel hu - a Jew, even if he sins, he is still a Jew." The divine spark that Yisroel (Yaakov) fathered in us eternally remains unextinguished regardless of how many layers cover over it.

Torah.Org Dvar Torah **by Rabbi Label Lam**

Everything at Risk

And Lavan said to Yaakov, "Behold this pile and behold this monument, which I have cast between me and you. This pile is a witness, and this monument is a witness, that I will not pass this pile [to go] to you and that you shall not pass this pile and this monument to [come to] me to [do] harm. May the G-d of Avraham and the god of Nachor judge between us, the god of their father." And Yaakov swore by the Fear of his father Yitzchok. (Breishis 31:51-53)

The G-d of Avraham: This is holy (referring to HASHEM)...and the god of Nachor: Profane. [I.e., it refers to pagan deities.] - the god of their father: Profane. [I.e., it refers to pagan deities.] - Rashi

And you shall call out and say before HASHEM, your G-d, "An Aramean [sought to] destroy my forefather, and he went down to Egypt and sojourned there with a small number of people, and there, he became a great, mighty, and numerous nation. (Devarim 31:5)

An Aramean [sought to] destroy my forefather: [The declarer] mentions [here] the kind deeds of the Omnipresent [by stating]: "An Aramean [sought to] destroy my forefather." That is, Lavan, when he pursued Yaakov, sought to uproot [i.e., annihilate] all [the Jews], and since he intended to do so, the Omnipresent considered it as though he had actually done it - Rashi

How did Lavan the Aramean try to destroy Yaakov? What was his plan to destroy Yaakov? Was it to kill him? Perhaps! When he chased after Yaakov as he surreptitiously slipped out of town, maybe he had an evil plan to wipe out Yaakov and his family.

However even after that we see his sinister intent at work to the very moment of parting ways. Yaakov and Lavan set up a pile of stones and made a treaty, a sort of order of protection treaty. Lavan asks Yaakov to swear, even though he is not the threat and Yaakov does so but with a slight deviation from Lavan's language of oath. That last exchange may be the key to how Lavan planned to wipe out Yaakov.

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It was many years ago that I was driving one of my Rebbeim back from an eye doctor appointment. As we were passing a well-manicured church I commented on how lovely they were keeping their property. He interrupted my praise and took the opportunity to tell me a fascinating story that gives support to the Hallacha that there are certain places we are not to use as reference points.

He told me that when Rabbi Aaron Kotler was just getting started in Lakewood he had a small but loyal and dedicated group of learning young men. One of those students was approaching him continually with questions of faith. Reb Aaron would carefully and sensitively answer his questions but he began to suspect that the source of his questions were not a sincere search for the truth. It was like the boy who puts his finger in the dyke and another leak erupts. He was looking for a way out!

On one of his frequent trips to Williamsburg Reb Aaron took counsel with the previous Skverer Rebbe who asked him if this boy had any contact with any local churches. Reb Aaron was certain not but he followed up on the advice and he asked the boy.

The fellow was adamant that he did not have any contact with any churches. Reb Aaron quizzed him further about how and when he goes to Yeshiva and which path he takes.

The boy then realized that on the way to Yeshiva at 7 AM every day he passes by a certain church and he sets his watch to the clock in the bell tower. Reb Aaron assured him that was the source of his problem. That subtle acknowledgment gave a foothold of credibility, enough to subconsciously erode his confidence in Torah.

Lavan tried to corrupt Yaakov and veer him from the path of absolute truth by swearing in the name of the god of Nachor and other false gods but Yaakov wisely dodged the bullet and swore only in name of the G-d that Yitzchok feared. It may seem too slight and subtle to make a difference but it might have put everything at risk.

Mizrachi Dvar Torah

Rav Doron Perz

Agents of Positive Change

It is the person that makes the place and not the place which makes the person.

We see this regarding our forefather, Ya'akov, that the places he left were never the same, and the places he went to were transformed by his presence. We see this in the opening of the parasha when we are told that he leaves Be'er Sheva and goes to Charan. Rashi points out it is of no consequence where he was coming from in the context of the narrative, so why do we need to know that information? Because when a positive influence leaves a place, the place is never the same. Something of that

place is lacking because that person is no longer there.

This is similar to what it says when Ya'akov returns later to the Land of Israel, that "he encamped on the face of the city [of Shechem]", an unusual phrase. Rashi explains that he brought a transformation to the city.

As individuals, we need to be the type of person that wherever we find ourselves we have a positive impact. We should be those agents of positive change and make a difference in the lives of others. Jewish communities throughout the world should not only impact internally, but also externally on those around them. On the global sphere, the State of Israel, the Jewish State, should be a positive force on the world. Not just to transform the land and society, but also play such a role in making a difference to the world.

Yeshivat Har Etzion: Virtual Bet Midrash

There and Back Again: The Exilic Journeys and Sojourns of Yaeitzze Rav Elchanan Samet

I: The Unity of Parashat Vayetze - Parashat Vayetze is unique in that it consists of a single Masoretic parasha, i.e., one paragraph of 148 uninterrupted consecutive verses.[1] Though Masoretic division of the parashiyot is based on sundry reasons, not all of which are always clear, [2] it sometimes indicates a literary unity. It appears that this is the case with our parasha: Parashat Vayetze is all one long story. The unity of the narrative may be seen on many planes:

Yaacov, the main character of the story, can be followed throughout it with unity of time and place. Every event in the parasha is footnoted, whether in terms of the place of presentation or the stretch of time it occupies.[3]

The plot flows continuously, each segment of it flowing from what precedes it and introducing what follows it.

The entire narrative has one topic: Yaacov's adventures in exile, from the moment he leaves until he returns.

Even though our story is prefaced already in the conclusion of Parashat Toledot with Yitzchak's command to Yaacov to go to Lavan and to marry one of his daughters, it is distinguished by a basic element: there is no mention of Eisav's name or Yitzchak's blessing in Vayetze.[4]

The story has a very clear chiasmic structure. Angels appear to Yaacov as he is about to leave the land and when he returns. There is also a linguistic chiasm:

"He encountered (vayifga) the place... he dreamt... behold, angels of God..." (28:11-12).

"He encountered (vayifgi'u) angels of God" (32:1).

"He said... 'This is none other than the house of God!'... and he called the name of the place Beit El" (28:17-19).

"Yaacov said: 'This is the camp of God!' and he called the name of the place Machanayim" (32:2).

Thus the narrative of Parashat Vayetze is separate from that which precedes it in Toledot and that which follows it in Parashat Vayishlach.

In both of those parshiot, Eisav is Yaacov's antagonist, and they are tied to each other by the story of the taking of the blessing. In Vayetze, Lavan takes Eisav's place. In order to stress the uniqueness and independence of this story, the parasha opens with a restatement of the fact that we know already from the end of Toledot. Thus, 28:5 tells us: "Yitzchak sent Yaacov, and he went to Padan Aram, to Lavan;" 28:9, the first verse of Vayetze, notes, "Yaacov left Be'er Sheva, and he went to Charan."

What is the significance of Vayetze being one unified narrative? What is the difference if we read it as one story or as the interweaving of many shorter episodes? The distinction lies in the principle of thematic unity. The moral of a story or its aim are generally not stated explicitly, but rather they are hinted to in different ways. The plot which unites all of the scenes is a tool by which the Torah suggests the inner meaning of the narrative. Thus, we are driven by the unified structure to ask: what is the central theme of Parashat Vayetze?

II: The Axis of the Narrative - In a story the purpose of which is the description of a hero's exile and his adventures until he returns home, what would be the expected point of dramatic shift? Presumably, this point would be the decision to return home, as this is the axis of the entire narrative. The first part of the story, with its description of his departure and his sojourn in exile, builds up to this decision, while the second half, of the preparations for and execution of the return journey, is engendered by it.

This point appears to be found at 30:25-26: "When Rachel had given birth to Yoseif, Yaacov said to Lavan: Send me, and let me go to my place and to my land. Give me my wives and my children... and I will go..." These verses are at the virtual dead center of the story, as verse 26 is the 74th of Vayetze's 148 verses - but do they truly introduce the second half of the story? In fact, they do not begin Yaacov's return to Canaan, as there is no movement as a result of this declaration. This is due to the fact that the continuation of these verses presents a surprising event: Yaacov acquiesces, without any argument or opposition, to Lavan's idea that he remain by him, and he does this so that "I will do also for my house" (30:30).

Thus, the axis of our narrative is not in Yaacov's declaration of his intent to leave - a declaration which is not realized for another six years, and then in a vastly different manner - but rather in the dialogue that follows: Lavan's request in verses 27-28 and Yaacov's positive reply in 29-30. It is this shift that splits our narrative into two units.

Why is this shift so surprising? In the previous parasha, Yaacov lived in his father's house as an adult bachelor at the same time that his twin brother was marrying local women and starting a family. Why did Yaacov wait? It appears that while he was aware that the local women were not appropriate candidates for marriage, he felt that, like his father Yitzchak, he did not have the right to leave the land for the purpose of marriage. Yaacov did not see why this rule applied by Avraham to Yitzchak (23:5-8) should

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be subject to change, and so he decided that "to sit and do nothing is better." [5]

Yaacov agrees to leave only under the combined pressure of his father and mother. Yaacov consents, but only after his mother goes to great lengths emphasizing the danger from Eisav and minimizing the time which Yaacov will have to spend in exile: "Now, my son, listen to me, and rise; flee for yourself to Lavan my brother, to Charan. You will dwell there a few days until your brother's anger subsides... Then I will send and take you from there" (27:43-45).

At the beginning of Vayetze, God himself joins in the campaign. God's revelation to Yaacov at Beit El (his first prophetic vision) and what follows contain not only an insistence that Yaacov leave with faith and hope, but also a promise of his quick return: "The ground on which you sleep, I will give it to you and your seed... I am with you, and I will watch you wherever you go, and I will return you to this land, for I will not abandon you until I have done what I have told you" (28:13,15). Yaacov responds to this revelation and takes a vow that when God fulfills His word "and I will return in peace to my father's house, then this stone which I have placed as a monument will be God's house..." (v. 21-22).

Now, with a feeling of lightness, Yaacov sets off for Charan to satisfy his obligation to establish a family, on the condition of returning speedily to his destined land, to his parents' house, and to the fulfillment of his vow at Beit El.

When he reaches Lavan, Yaacov at first stays in his house for a month without a defined aim (29:14), and afterwards he begins his seven years of indentured servitude for Rachel. Nevertheless, we are still within Rivka's conception of "and you will dwell there A FEW DAYS," as verse 20 notes: "and they were in his eyes like A FEW DAYS, in his love for her." As it turns out (v. 25), "it was in the morning, and behold, she was Leah!" A week later, Yaacov is able to celebrate his marriage to his beloved, Rachel, but he is forced to undertake seven more years of hard labor in order to earn her hand. Within those seven years, twelve children are born to Yaacov.

His purpose of journeying to Charan has been fulfilled, above and beyond all expectations, and his stay has also gone above and beyond the plan. With the end of Yaacov's fourteen years of servitude to his father-in-law, we expect Yaacov to leave. His return journey has been delayed more than long enough, and it is time to return to his land, his vow, and his parents.

Indeed, with the end of the first half of the narrative, we hear from Yaacov the long-awaited words: "Send me, and I will go to my place and to my land." We anticipate that the continuation of the narrative - second part - will be Yaacov's return journey at the head of a large family.

Yet at the beginning of this second part we encounter the surprising fact that Yaacov is still willing to stay with Lavan, for the sake of "doing for his house." This "doing" is the accumulation of wealth via sheep, as we see from the rest of this scene. How much time, we must wonder, did Yaacov intend to spend in Charan? A year? Two? How much time is necessary to "do for his house," and what will indicate that Yaacov has amassed sufficient wealth? The reasons which

compelled Yaacov to remain in exile no longer apply. From here on, the parasha describes Yaacov in exile under very different circumstances.[6]

III: Unable or Unwilling to Leave? - At this point, we must ask: what is the general relationship between these two halves of the narrative? How are they similar? How are they different?

Despite the fact that this is a story of leaving the land and returning to it, neither a geographical crux nor the dimension of movement define the distinction between the two parts. This is particularly striking if we compare the beginning and the end: Yaacov does not return in Vayetze to his point of origin; he leaves the heart of Eretz Yisra'el proper, on the western bank of the Yardein, and returns only to the eastern side, not to return to his father until the end of Parashat Vayishlach, and to Beit El only a few verses earlier.

Can we then employ a chronological reason for splitting the narrative? This idea does not pan out either, as fourteen years pass in the first part, while the second part details the events of six years, less than half of the other's total.

Apparently, the halves relate to each other in terms of a very different dimension of the narrative: the evaluation of Yaacov's actions. The first section describes a mandatory and reluctant sojourn, which is justified throughout; the second part, on the other hand, describes a superfluous and unaccountable delay. The two halves are thus diametrically opposed.

Indeed, marriage was Yaacov's goal in his journey to Charan, and Providence saw to it that it turned out that Yaacov married not one wife, but "two who are really four,"[7] and thus was created the tribal unit that would be the foundation of an embryonic nation. To this end, Yaacov had to work for fourteen years. However, the further economic delay has no justification: the accumulation of wealth does not justify a delay in returning to his birthplace, fulfilling his vow, and honoring his father and mother. It is particularly damning that Yaacov does not set any limit for these activities, and only external matters and a divine command following them cut his extra stay to six years.

What does this second delay yield? First, let us note what does not happen: no additional son is born to Yaacov during these six years. It is as if Yaacov's four wives stop giving birth simultaneously. There is a hint here that the lone reason for Yaacov's staying in Charan - building a family - has been fulfilled, and more time will not add to this.

Indeed, Yaacov acquires a great deal of wealth in those years, but it becomes clear that this was "wealth guarded to the detriment of its owner" (Kohelet 5:12). This prosperity arouses the jealousy of Lavan's sons and of Lavan himself, and in the end it causes Yaacov to run away from his father-in-law's house like a thief. [8] This wealth is what entangles Yaacov in Lavan's pursuit and, ultimately, in a bitter confrontation. There are serious and disturbing consequences of this action: when they flee, Rachel steals her father's sacred images, his "terafim" (31:19). This brings Yaacov to

unwittingly curse his beloved wife (31:32). He takes a morally questionable position in the denouement with Lavan, denying absolutely the accusation of theft; to the eyes of the reader, this gives Lavan the upper hand, as we know that his suspicions are essentially correct. The same wealth requires Yaacov to appease Eisav's envy in Parashat Vayishlach.

These unnecessary entanglements of the second half do not add a bit to the building of Yaacov's house. If Yaacov had, at the end of the first half, realized the original goal of his journey, Lavan might have truly executed the intention that he falsely claimed after the chase (31:27): "Why... did you not tell me? I would have sent you with joy and song, with drum and harp!" This leave-taking would have concluded honorably the fourteen years in his father-in-law's house, and Yaacov would have returned to his land, poor and penniless, but with a clear conscience. In the land of Canaan, Yaacov would have begun to build up his bank account, and then it would have been permanent wealth. That which compelled Yaacov to leave exile was the impression that "the ground was burning beneath his feet." The picture is a familiar one from Jewish history: "He heard the words of the sons of Lavan, saying, 'Yaacov took everything which was our father's; and from that which was our father's, he made all of this honor.' Yaacov saw Lavan's face, and behold, he was not with him as previously" (31:1-2). Yaacov feels the exilic kick in the shins.

Immediately afterwards, God appears to him and reminds him of the reasons which should have motivated him to return already: "God said to Yaacov: Return to the land of your fathers and to your birthplace, and I will be with you" (31:3). "I am the God of Beit El that you set up a monument there, that you vowed to Me there a vow. Now, rise, leave this land, and go back to the land of your birthplace" (30:13).[9]

Concerning God's words to Yaacov in the first verse, the Sages interpret it as follows in Bereishit Rabba (74): The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to him: "Return to the land of your fathers" - Your father waits for you. "And to your birthplace" - Your mother waits for you. "And I will be with you" - I Myself wait for you. Rav Ami said in the name of Reish Lakish: The property of the Diaspora carries no blessing, but when you return to the land of your fathers - then I will be with you.

It appears that the basis for this aggadic interpretation is the distinction between God's promise in Beit El, "Behold, I am with you, and I will guard you WHEREVER YOU GO" (28:15), and his assurance here, that "IN THE LAND OF YOUR FATHERS" (and nowhere else) "I will be with you." The first answer of the midrash is that at the time that God says these last words to Yaacov, there was no good reason for his dwelling in exile. God's promise in Beit El was to be with him wherever he might be forced to wander, but at this point He, along with Yitzchak and Rivka, are waiting for Yaacov to fulfill his promise - both his vow and his potential. Rav Ami responds to this that the intent of God in his last words to Yaacov is that "[He] will be with [him]" is limited only as regards guarding Yaacov's wealth; there was never a promise to

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protect the riches he might accumulate in exile, because no blessing rests on them, and it was not to accumulate them that Yaacov left. Only when he will return to his fathers' land will God "be with [him]" to guard his possessions as well.

IV: The Mark of Exile - In both of these halves, there is a description of Yaacov's adventures in two states: travelling and during his extended stay in Lavan's house.

Let us first examine the parallelism between the two segments that describe Yaacov's stay in the house of Lavan. Yaacov's actions are described in both as regards the terms of service he agrees to with Lavan. The general order of both descriptions is strikingly similar, each being composed of six elements:

- 1) Lavan's amenable opening,
- 2) Yaacov's conditions,
- 3) Lavan's consent,
- 4) chicanery in the application of the agreement,
- 5) the results for Yaacov of the agreement, and
- 6) the decision to return to the land.

Most striking is the similarity between the halves in elements (1) (in 29:15 and 30:28) and (3) (in 29:19 and 30:35). Elements (2) and (5), Yaacov's conditions and results, which consist of "I will work for you seven years for Rachel..." and the birth of twelve children in the first half (29:18; 29:31-30:24), paralleled by "I will pthrough all of your stoday, remove from there... and this will be my wage," and "And he had many sheep, maidservants, slaves, camels, and donkeys," also share a common point. In both, Yaacov appropriates that which Lavan has but does not deserve: his daughters and his marked flocks; as a result, Yaacov is blessed with a multitude of offspring, the first time human, and the second time sheep.

The other two elements are reversed between the two halves of the story. In (4), this is as regards the issue of who tricks whom: in the first half, Lavan deceives Yaacov by exchanging Rachel for Leah; in the second, Yaacov outsmarts Lavan by encouraging the sheep to give birth to marked offspring. Yaacov's questionable conduct in the second half of the story will be revealed as a direct reaction to and protection from Lavan's own fraud (31:7, 12, 41); however, at this stage the reader does not know this, and Yaacov's actions seem unjustified. This reinforces the idea that Yaacov's extended stay has affected him. The victim of deceit now becomes its perpetrator.

This is even more striking in element (6). In the first half, Yaacov reaches the conclusion that he must return home because his goal in coming to Charan has been achieved. This is his autonomous decision. In the second half, however Yaacov is compelled by Lavan's conduct and by divine command.

It thus turns out that the Yaacov's second period in Lavan's house, though it bears similarities to the first, is distinct in two aspects: Yaacov's involvement in questionable activities and the reasons for his decisions to leave. Both of these developments are negative.

Now let us turn to the descriptions of Yaacov's journeys, found at the extremes of our narrative. Normally, we would expect the departure to exile to be depressing, while the return journey should be a happy one. For Yaacov, however, the reverse

is true, even though he set out alone and returns with a huge household. The element stressed at Yaacov's return is not his family, but the abundance of material possessions that he brings back with him; 32:18 mentions "accumulation" and "acquisition" three times each. When Yaacov leaves Canaan, at the beginning of the parasha, the term "going" appears three times, but never "fleeing" (even though it does appear at the end of Toledot). Yet, Yaacov's return journey is described four times as "flight."

Certain motives appear in both segments, almost always in opposite contexts. For example, the angelic dream is sublime in 28:12, but in 31:10-11, it is set amid sheep in heat. Similarly, the stones and the monument of Beit El are a symbol of the bond between God and Yaacov, while those in Gal Eid (31:45-46) mark the covenant between Lavan and Yaacov. Additionally, on the way to Charan, at the well, Yaacov finds his soul-mate, in an encounter full of innocent love. After that encounter, Lavan runs to greet Yaacov. On the way back, Lavan chases Yaacov, and because of the confrontation, Yaacov curses his beloved unwittingly and loses her forever.

With these reversals between the two halves, the narrative expresses its disapproval of Yaacov's delay in Charan. Every relationship of Yaacov is damaged by it, and nevertheless, even at that time, Yaacov has God's protection, whether in Lavan's house or in flight. "For He will command His angels for you, to guard you on all your paths" (Tehillim 91:11).

Notes:

1] As is true of Parashat Miketz. Note that the Tosafists and others refer to our parasha as "closed," and many different explanations are given. It is clear that they saw Vayetze as attached to the end of Parashat Toledot without any true break, as Parashat Vayechi is attached to Parashat Vayigash (which prompts the Sages and Rashi to ask there: "Why is this parasha closed?"). However, between Toledot and Vayetze is a "closed" break, i.e., a space of a word, with the latter beginning on the same line as the former ends; no variation is found among manuscripts or midrashic sources. See Hagahot Maimoniyot, Laws of Sefer Torah 8:3. Minchat Shai suggests that Vayetze is referred to as "closed" because it runs uninterrupted, but Chizkuni seems to see that as a separate idea.

2] A more general reason, which does not explain specific parshiot, is given in Torat Kohanim (1): "What purpose did the interruptions serve? To give Moshe a break in order to contemplate between each parasha and between each topic."

3] "He dwelt with him a month of days" (29:14); "Yaacov worked for Rachel seven years" (ibid. 20); "He worked... another seven years" (ibid. 30); "These twenty years in your house - I worked fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for your sheep" (31:41).

4] There is a hint in 29:13: "And he told Lavan all of these things," to which Rashi comments, "that he came only because of his brother's compulsion;" Radak and Seforno explain similarly.

5] To borrow a famous Talmudic phrase; see Eiruvin 100a, among others.

6] Indeed, Rav Ovadya Seforno in his commentary to Yaacov's words in verse 25 (s.v. Shalecheini), rejects the notion that Yaacov was destitute; if he did not have provisions for a journey a) he never would have endangered his family; b) Lavan, a notable of

his city, would not have let him; c) Lavan would not have asked Yaacov to stay for Lavan's sake (30:27).

7] To borrow another Talmudic phrase; see Shevu'ot 2a, among many.

8] "Ganav" in Hebrew; the root g-n-v appears seven times in the scene.

9] The claim becomes so damning that we must find a defense for our patriarch. Psychologically, perhaps he tarried so long for fear of Eisav; Yaacov may have wanted to delay the inevitable confrontation. On the other hand, one may argue that the delay is rational, as in the meantime Yaacov will amass wealth that will help in the confrontation with Eisav as a "tribute" to appease his brother (even though the reverse is also feasible: a penniless Yaacov might arouse pity rather than envy). Also in the meanwhile, Yaacov's first sons will approach fighting age (See Rashi 32:9, s.v. Ve-haya). These are only hypotheses. Yaacov may have believed them, but the fact that the Torah ignores them indicates that they are insufficient. *[Translated and edited by Yoseif Bloch]*