

PARASHAH: Vayetze (He went out)
ADDRESS: B'resheet (Genesis) 28:10-32:3
READING DATE: Shabbat
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(Note: all quotations are taken from the Complete Jewish Bible, translation by David H. Stern, Jewish New Testament Publications, Inc., unless otherwise noted)

Let's begin with the opening blessing for the Torah:

***“Baruch atah YHVH, Eloheynu, Melech ha-O'lam,
asher bachar banu m'kol ha-amim,
v'natan lanu eht Torah-to.
Baruch atah YHVH, noteyn ha-Torah.
Ameyn.”***

(Blessed are you, O' LORD, our God, King of the Universe,
you have selected us from among all the peoples,
and have given us your Torah.
Blessed are you, LORD, giver of the Torah.
Ameyn.)

Today's portion is named **Vayetze**, because in the opening sequence of events, we find our main character, Ya'akov (Jacob) **“going out”** from Be'er-Sheva towards the land of Haran. The next few parash'ot read like a good action novel, so I want to encourage the readers to follow along closely in the actual Torah portion of their Bibles. Last week, I likened the action to that of the pace of a good Tom Clancy novel, complete with intrigue, suspense, and betrayal. However, the Torah is much more superior to any novel that a man could write, for, not only is it real life (non-fictional) action, it has the capacity to speak to each and every single individual, and bring about a real life change in their circumstances as well.

Ya'akov is on a journey, much like many of us today. From the beginning, his has been a life of struggle and competition. The harrowing events of last week's parashah, and the theft of the family birthright, left him running from his angry brother 'Esav, at the instruction of his mother Rivkah. Indeed, he would find himself running from his brother for a good part of his life, before he finally sets things straight. In a very real way, however, he is both running from something and running to something. He is running from the circumstances created by his selfish greed, while at the same time, he is running to **the place** where he believes he can be the man that he really should be. In a play on words, his first encounter with the supernatural is in a location that the Hebrew text calls **“haMakom,”** meaning, **“the Place”** (28:11). Traditional Judaism identifies **haMakom** as the very spot where Avraham offered up Yitz'chak, as well as the place where the future Temple would stand. For now, it was to Ya'akov, a fearful place. We'll discuss the name later.

This week's portion and next week's portion are going to serve as a kind of two-part series that focus on HaShem's masterful design to shape Ya'akov into the covenant man that he is destined to become. To be sure, it is the tale of how a man, complete with weaknesses and inconsistencies, became a nation of peoples, chosen by HaShem to demonstrate his holiness to the rest of humanity. Here is a brief overview of this portion's events:

- Ya'akov dreams of a ladder bridging heaven and earth, complete with ascending and descending angels; HaShem, once again, restates the covenant promises that Ya'akov and his descendants will become a blessing to all the nations; Ya'akov erects a monumental stone in the place, renaming it "Beit-El" [house of God] (28:10-20)
- Ya'akov meets Rachel, the daughter of Lavan his uncle, and quickly falls in love with her; he makes an agreement with her father, to work for him for seven years to obtain her hand in marriage; Lavan tricks him on his wedding night, substituting Rachel's older sister Le'ah instead; despite the deception, because of his intense love for Rachel, Ya'akov agrees with Lavan to work another seven years for Rachel; each girl is accompanied by one handmaid (29:1-30)
- Rachel remains the favored of Ya'akov's two wives and two handmaids; in her despair, Le'ah receives favor from ADONAI and she bears him his first four sons, named Re'uven, Shim'on, Levi, and Y'hudah (29:31-35)
- Sibling rivalry of the worst kind—between two wives of the same husband—ensues, and Rachel blames Ya'akov for her barren state; in her anger she grants him permission to conceive children with her handmaid Bilhah; two more sons are born named Dan, and Naftali (30:1-8)
- Le'ah follows suit and gives her handmaid Zilpah to Ya'akov for more children; two more sons are born named Gad, and Asher; Le'ah makes a deal with Rachel to sleep with Ya'akov and a fifth and sixth son named Yissakhar and Z'vulun are born; this time Le'ah also bears him a daughter named Dinah (30:9-21)
- HaShem hears the prayer of Rachel and gives her Ya'akov's first son by her, named Yosef; the "family circus" of wives, handmaids, sons and a daughter, finally comes to an end for now; Ya'akov and Lavan make a six-year deal involving the flocks owned between them; after this, unbeknown to Lavan, Ya'akov takes off for his father's house with all that belongs to him (30:25-31:17)

For now, I want to leave off summarizing, and briefly talk about the character of Ya'akov up until this point. As I stated earlier, I believe Ya'akov was simultaneously running from something and running to something significant. He had become quite a wealthy man by now, owning a large family, and several pieces of livestock. He felt it was finally time to return to the land of his father Yitz'chak and begin to live his life as the covenant man that he was trying to become. But HaShem was the one who was orchestrating every stage in this

young patriarch's life. Therefore, we have an excellent opportunity to witness the sovereignty of God at work in the life of someone who is operating under his own pretenses. Let's take a look at the scorecard:

- Ya'akov ran from his angry brother.
- Ya'akov fell in love with Rachel.
- Ya'akov agreed to work a total of fourteen years for her hand in marriage.
- Ya'akov played into the rivalry of his wives and handmaids and fathered eleven sons and one daughter up to this point.
- Ya'akov decided to reimburse himself by getting his greedy father-in-law to agree to a ridiculous livestock deal.
- Ya'akov finally being satisfied with his accomplishments decides to head back home.

As you can plainly see, all of these decisions were Ya'akov's. Yet, like an unseen supervisor, HaShem allowed him to make them. Even during the relatively few times when he does encounter the One true living God, HaShem is described in terms that suggest a second or third party relationship. Why? I believe that Ya'akov did not yet have a personal, one-on-one relationship with HaShem. He knew him as the God of his father, and of his grandfather, but not as "his God." His encounter with HaShem at Beit-El left him in a state of amazement, and he did vow to make HaShem "his God," but only after he was safe at his father's house. I believe that HaShem was, step by step, bringing him to **the place** where he would have no choice but to surrender his own will into that of the Almighty. Ya'akov was headed towards one final struggle.

In this way, the Torah demonstrates that even when we operate in our own strength, HaShem's Will is still powerful enough to guide our circumstances into the path that his Will has determined that they should go. It is true that it was Lavan who tricked Ya'akov in the exchange of his daughters. As a result, Ya'akov was now able to witness, first-handed, the pain and frustration that he put his father and brother through earlier. But were it not for this deception on the part of Lavan, Ya'akov might not have ever married Le'ah, from whom came the birth of both Levi and Y'hudah, the ancestor of the priestly line and the Messiah, respectively!

So God's sovereignty is demonstrated in our weakness. Ya'akov would yet still have to face his angry brother, but his dealings with Lavan helped him to see just how greedy his own heart was. To be sure, when Lavan finally catches up to Ya'akov in 31:23-35, his father-in-law is significantly less than happy about the current turn of events. Lavan has witnessed that HaShem's hand of blessing has been on Ya'akov. Moreover, he is reluctant to let him go so easily, being the selfish man that Lavan was. However, Lavan has been warned of God in a dream, not to speak to his son-in-law either positively or negatively, so instead he makes up some nonsense about not being able to say goodbye to his daughters. Lavan does however accuse Ya'akov of stealing the household idols. Unaware

that his beloved Rachel is in possession of the articles (which, by the way, signified an ancient form of inheritance, see 31:14, 15, 19), Ya'akov becomes fearful, and foolishly condemns to death the person guilty of the crime.

This dialogue vividly demonstrates the complicated situations that can happen when greed meets its match. Ya'akov is now at the end of his proverbial patience rope, and in a fit of anger lashes out at Lavan. "What have I done wrong?" he demands in 31:36. In a barrage of historical recollection, mixed with accusation and hurt, he defends himself from this man whom it seems doesn't realize the obvious "honesty" and good fortune that Ya'akov has provided for him all these years. To Ya'akov, it has been a long, arduous twenty years of genuine servitude. Why can't his father-in-law see this fact? But Lavan sees only what he stands to gain from the relationship, and that is precisely why he is reluctant to let him go without squeezing just one more drop of prosperity out of him. In his greed, Lavan blindly declares, "The daughters are mine, the children are mine, the flocks are mine, and everything that you see is mine!" (Vs.43)

What Ya'akov needed in his life was a mirror, someone or something to show him the greed and selfishness of his own heart. He needed to be able to see the inner-workings of his own selfish heart, in order to move on past this time of trials in his life. This was provided for him in the person of Lavan. HaShem was in the process of teaching Ya'akov that, in order to walk in the shoes of a covenant man, he would have to have a transformation of the heart—a transformation that would ultimately culminate in the changing of his name as well—a change waiting for us in next week's parashah. For now let us continue our current analysis of Ya'akov and Lavan in **Vayetze**.

Lavan was smart enough to heed the word of ADONAI concerning speaking to Ya'akov good or bad, but the character of Lavan is demonstrated in his effort to protect himself from what he supposed would be the repercussions of his angry son-in-law. Because greedy individuals think alike, in his estimation, Ya'akov should be concocting methods of revenge at this point, so Lavan strikes a mutual, non-aggression pact, ensuring the safety of his own health and possessions. After all, his son-in-law was indeed a rich man, and riches meant power! The covenant, like so many other ancient middle-eastern covenants, involved the selection of testimonial markers (standing stones), as a visual reminder to all involved. A meal also accompanied this "peace treaty," and the two families spent the night on the mountain before finally going their separate ways the next day. As Ya'akov moves out early the next morning, he is met by two angels (messengers) of ADONAI, therefore he decides to name the place "Machanayim," meaning, "two camps."

How can we apply this Torah lesson to our lives today? We already know that the Torah itself works in our lives as a mirror, highlighting the "way in which we should walk"—a way that should be pleasing to our heavenly father. In fact the book of James (whose Hebrew title is Ya'akov), informs us that the man who

“looks into the mirror of the Torah” and fails to heed its instruction (do what it says), is like a man who beholds his face in a real mirror, walks away, and immediately forgets what he just saw (James 1:21-25). But sometimes HaShem uses everyday experiences to act as his mirror of truth, showing us exactly where we need to concentrate our energies of correction.

I’m reminded of a Messianic Jewish Rabbi friend of mine who witnessed this “mirror” in his own life. Before his transformation, he was somewhat self-centered in his quest for spirituality, much like many in our formalized religious circles are today. HaShem brought a dubious salesman, slick and polished in his presentation, into his home, offering him wealth, prestige and position. When my rabbi friend questioned the salesperson about his view of God, the salesperson took out a small index card, wrote a single word on it, circled it, and handed it to my friend. When my friend looked at the word, his world shattered. The word was “self.” It was then that his eyes were supernaturally opened to his own heart’s condition, and he was able to see that he was no better off than the person he was currently “looking down his nose” at. “After all,” he thought to himself, “I’m spiritual. I don’t need worldly riches and fame. I have my religiosity (his Biblical upbringing) and my relationship to God to fulfill me.” The problem with this mentality is that when we use our own “spiritual” achievements to measure our place with HaShem, we become callous to the real problem—a heart that is clouded by pride.

Thanks be unto our God, that he knows our heart better than we know it ourselves! He knows exactly what remedy is needed to shatter our shallow, prideful image, and bring us to **the place** where we are ready to receive a genuine revelation from him. He lovingly places just the right individuals and circumstances in our lives, which will cause us to surrender our will into his Perfect Will. But like Ya’akov, we must be willing to stop running long enough to recognize them. Next week, we will see just where HaShem has brought him to.... And why.

The closing blessing is as follows:

***“Baruch atah YHVH, Eloheynu, Melech ha-O’lam,
asher natan lanu Toraht-emet,
v’chay-yeh o’lam nata-b’tochenu.
Baruch atah YHVH, noteyn ha-Torah.
Ameyn.”***

(Blessed are you O’ LORD, our God, King of the Universe,
you have given us your Torah of truth,
and have planted everlasting life within our midst.
Blessed are you, LORD, giver of the Torah.
Ameyn.)

“Shabbat Shalom!”

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