

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Veyetzei
November 28, 2020 *** 12 Kislev, 5781

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

Vayetzei in A Nutshell

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

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

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

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

Haftarah in a Nutshell

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

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

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

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

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

Light in Dark Times (Vayetse 5781) by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks
<https://rabbisacks.org/vayetse-5781/>

What is it that made Jacob – not Abraham or Isaac or Moses – the true father of the Jewish people? We are called the "congregation of Jacob," "the Children of Israel." Jacob/Israel is the man whose name we bear. Yet Jacob did not begin the Jewish journey; Abraham did. Jacob faced no trial like that of Isaac at the Binding. He did not lead the people out of Egypt or bring them the Torah. To be sure, all his children stayed within the faith, unlike Abraham or Isaac. But that simply pushes the question back one level. Why did he succeed where Abraham and Isaac failed?

It seems that the answer lies in parshat Vayetse and parshat Vayishlach. Jacob was the man whose greatest visions came to him when he was alone at night, far from home, fleeing from one danger to the next. In parshat Vayetse, escaping from Esau, he stops and rests for the night with only stones to lie on, and he has an epiphany:

He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it... When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it." He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven." (Gen. 28:12–17)

In parshat Vayishlach, fleeing from Laban and terrified at the prospect of meeting Esau again, he wrestles alone at night with an unnamed stranger:

Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome." ...So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared." (Gen. 32:29–31)

These are the decisive spiritual encounters of Jacob's life, yet they happen in liminal space (the space between, neither a starting point nor a destination), at a time when Jacob is at risk in both directions – where he comes from and where he is going to. Yet it is at these points of maximal vulnerability that he encounters God and finds the courage to continue despite all the hazards of the journey.

That is the strength Jacob bequeathed to the Jewish people. What is remarkable is not merely that this one tiny people survived tragedies that would have spelled the end of any other people: the destruction of two Temples; the Babylonian and Roman conquests; the expulsions, persecutions, and pogroms of the Middle Ages; the rise of antisemitism in nineteenth-century Europe; and the Holocaust. It is truly astonishing that after each cataclysm, Judaism renewed itself, scaling new heights of achievement.

During the Babylonian exile, Judaism deepened its engagement with the Torah. After the Roman destruction of Jerusalem it produced the great literary monuments of the Oral Torah: Midrash, Mishnah, and Gemara. During the Middle Ages, it produced masterpieces of law and Torah commentary, poetry, and philosophy. A mere three years after the Holocaust it proclaimed the State of Israel, the Jewish return to history after the darkest night of exile.

When I first became Chief Rabbi I had to undergo a medical examination. The doctor had me walking at a very brisk pace on a treadmill. "What are you testing?" I asked him. "How fast I can go, or how long?" "Neither," he replied. "I will be observing how long it takes for your pulse to return to normal, after you come off the treadmill." That is when I discovered that health is measured by the power of recovery. That is true for everyone, but doubly so for leaders and for the Jewish people, a nation of leaders. (This, I believe, is what the phrase "a kingdom of Priests" [Ex. 19:6] means).

Leaders suffer crises. That is a given of leadership. When Harold Macmillan, Prime Minister of Britain between 1957 and 1963, was asked what the most difficult aspect of his time in office was, he famously replied, "Events, dear boy, events." Bad things happen, and when they do, the leader must take the strain so that others can sleep easily in their beds.

Leadership, especially in matters of the spirit, is deeply stressful. Four figures in Tanach – Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah, and Jonah – actually prayed to die rather than continue. This was not only true in the distant past. Abraham Lincoln suffered deep bouts of depression. So did Winston Churchill, who called it his "black dog." Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. both attempted suicide in adolescence and experienced depressive illness in adult life. The same was true of many great creative artists, among them Michelangelo, Beethoven, and Van Gogh.

Is it greatness that leads to moments of despair, or moments of despair that lead to greatness? Do those who lead internalise the stresses and tensions of their time? Or is it that those who are used to stress in their emotional lives find release in leading exceptional lives? There is no convincing answer to this in the literature thus far. But Jacob was a more emotionally volatile individual than either Abraham, who was often serene even in the face of great trials, or Isaac, who was particularly withdrawn. Jacob feared; Jacob loved; Jacob spent more of his time in exile than the other patriarchs. But Jacob endured and persisted. Of all the figures in Genesis, he was the great survivor. The ability to survive and to recover is part of what it takes to be a leader. It is the willingness to live a life of risks that makes such individuals different from others. So said Theodore Roosevelt in one of the greatest speeches ever made on the subject:

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better.

The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and

shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.[1]

Jacob endured the rivalry of Esau, the resentment of Laban, the tension between his wives and children, the early death of his beloved Rachel, and the loss – for twenty-two years – of his favourite son, Joseph. He said to Pharaoh, “Few and evil have been the days of my life” (Gen. 47:9). Yet, on the way he “encountered” angels, and whether they were wrestling with him or climbing the ladder to heaven, they lit the night with the aura of transcendence.

To try, to fall, to fear, and yet to keep going: that is what it takes to be a leader. That was Jacob, the man who at the lowest ebbs of his life had his greatest visions of heaven. [1] *Theodore Roosevelt, “Citizenship in a Republic”, speech given at the Sorbonne, Paris, 23 April 1910.*

The World in God by Gordon Tucker
<http://www.jtsa.edu/the-world-in-god>

Our patriarch Jacob reaches a night camp on his way to Haran, a fugitive from the anger of his brother Esau. And then the text of **Genesis 28:11** tells us: *Vayifga bamakom*. The New Jewish Version translation [JPS 1962] renders that phrase according to its straightforward, contextual meaning [*peshat*]: “He came upon a certain place”—a place that we learn was first called Luz, and later Bet-El. But while the *peshat* is the primary way of reading a biblical text, it is almost never the only way to do so. And the Talmud [**BT Berakhot 26b**] reads our phrase as a notice that Jacob prayed at that place; because (1) they had an example in the Book of Jeremiah in which a slight grammatical variant of the word *vayifga* meant “prayer,” and (2) they were already used to using the word *hamakom*, not only to denote a “place,” but also as a way of referring to God.

Why would a word that denotes a location in space have been used in Rabbinic Hebrew to mean God? That question was raised in the rabbinic period itself [**Genesis Rabbah 68**]:

*Rav Huna said this in the name of Rabbi Ami: What is the reason that we give the Blessed Holy One the name “Makom”? It is because God is the place of God's world. Rabbi Yitzhak said: . . . We cannot decide . . . whether the Blessed Holy One is the place of the world, or whether the world is the Blessed Holy One's place. However, when Moses said [**Psalms 90:1**]: “Adonai, You have been a place of refuge for us throughout the generations,” we were taught that the Blessed Holy One is the place of the world, and not vice versa.*

What may sound like an arcane issue of little practical import, is in fact a theologically audacious and far-reaching statement. Let me explain:

We ordinarily specify the location of things in a coordinate system (for example, by latitude and longitude, or by referencing a city's street grid). Thus, each such ordinary object has its unique place. Now, it is axiomatic in sophisticated theologies that God cannot be located in one particular place. That is, after all, the basis of the rather simplistic but sweet children's song that begins with the words "Hashem is here, Hashem is there, Hashem is truly everywhere." But that basic axiom is not what the text in Genesis Rabbah is conveying. Instead, it is making the bold claim that

God cannot have any coordinates at all—not finite ones nor even infinite ones (as in: "Hashem is truly everywhere"). And that is because God *is* the coordinate system!

A charming, but deep, articulation of this comes at the end of Act I of Thornton Wilder's beloved play *Our Town*. The passage consists of a brief bedtime dialogue between Rebecca Gibbs and her older brother George:

Rebecca: I never told you about that letter Jane Crofut got from her minister when she was sick. He wrote Jane a letter and on the envelope the address was like this: It said, "Jane Crofut; The Crofut Farm; Grover's Corners; Sutton County; New Hampshire; United States of America."

George: What's funny about that?

Rebecca: But listen, it's not finished: "The United States of America; Continent of North America; Western Hemisphere; the Earth; the Solar System; the Universe; the Mind of God"—that's what it said on the envelope . . . And the postman brought it just the same.

George: What do you know!

Ask yourself: Is God's place necessarily beyond us, with God above the fray, as it were, or is God the place in which we, and all we know, reside?

The more broadly accepted orthodoxy in Jewish theology—certainly in pre-modern times—was that of divine transcendence. God was beyond the world, separate from it, and unreachable (the actual meaning of "transcendent"), and yet, in unfathomable ways, able to interact at will with the world. So the idea that God is the Place, that all is in God, is a view that one does not expect to find in an ancient Rabbinic text. And yet, there it is.

When God is pictured in such a way, not as having created the universe from outside of it, but instead as *comprising*, being the address of, the universe, accusations of heresy often follow. Whether it is "pantheism" (in which God and the universe are identified), or "panentheism" (in which God does indeed encompass all other parts of Creation, but is more than that), such departures from the dualism of "heaven and earth" have called forth condemnation. Whatever was the ultimate cause of Spinoza's excommunication, he has been, and no doubt always will be, remembered as a theological deviant because of this. Which makes it all the more surprising to read, in the introduction to Arthur Green's anthology and translation of the teachings of

the *Sefat Emet* (Yehudah Aryeh Leib of Ger, 19th–20th century), this letter that the Hasidic master wrote to his children and grandchildren:

The proclamation of oneness that we declare each day in saying Shema Yisra'el . . . needs to be understood as it truly is. That which is entirely clear to me . . . based on the holy writings of great Kabbalists, I am obligated to reveal to you . . . The meaning of "Y-H-W-H is one" is not that Y-H-W-H is the only true God, negating other gods (though that too is true!). But the meaning is deeper than that: there is no being other than God, even though it seems otherwise to most people . . . Everything that exists in the world, spiritual and physical, is God Himself . . . These things are true without a doubt.

What a breathtaking teaching.

Clearly, we cannot simply dismiss as beyond the pale what Mary-Jane Rubenstein, in a recent book, calls "pantheologies" (the book's title). But, we may ask, what advantage can such departures from transcendent orthodoxy provide? For one thing, they can vitiate much, if not all, of the force of the problem of human suffering, since God can no longer be portrayed as a powerful but callous bystander, allowing evil to run amok. On the contrary, a pantheological view such as this must be behind the Rabbinic idea that God suffers with humans, and even goes into exile with Israel. Heschel identified this depiction of God's identification with human suffering as a source of great comfort and divine-human love. And, in addition, there may be an ethical advantage as well, and I will let Rubenstein's own words on the subject make the point:

This is not at all to say that suffering, extinction, oppression, and violence are not pantheological concerns; to the contrary, the abandonment of an extra-cosmic problem-solver is motivated in part by the need to take responsibility for the messes we make . . . "Evil" . . . is therefore not a mystery to be explained but rather a concrete reality to negotiate and try to overcome.

Jewish theology has always been an intricate tapestry woven of many threads (or perhaps better: a quilt with many squares). My purpose here has not been to endorse pantheologies, but rather simply to argue against ruling them out of bounds. There are significant figures in our array of sages on whom we can rely for that. And whatever Jacob actually did at Bet-El, the way in which our forebears read that mysterious chapter—with its nocturnal dream of a ladder forming a tight connection to Heaven—is at the root of the complex, and never-to-be-resolved, history of how the people Israel has understood its God.

In the morning, Jacob wakes up from his dream and says "Y-H-W-H was in this *Makom*, and I did not know." Perhaps, from then on, he knew. (*Gordon Tucker is the Vice Chancellor for Religious Life and Engagement at JTS*)

The Morning After by Ilana Kurshan

<https://myemail.constantcontact.com/Torah-Sparks.html?soid=1102506082947&aid=kuJRhCAz39s>

Our parsha tells the story of Jacob's marriage to two sisters, Leah and Rachel. A simple

reading of the biblical text suggests that Rachel was Jacob's beloved—the woman he fell in love with at first sight when he met her by the well upon his arrival in Haran—whereas Leah was her unloved older sister whom Jacob was tricked into marrying against his will. But the Talmud contains several midrashim that tell a different story – a story that has much to teach about the complexity of love as it unfolds over the course of marriage.

The Torah suggests that Jacob's love for Rachel was related to her extraordinary beauty: "Leah had weak eyes; Rachel was shapely and beautiful. Jacob loved Rachel" (Gen. 29:17-18). In contrast, Leah is described as the "hated" wife: "The Lord saw that Leah was hated" (29:31). But the Talmud offers a different reading of these verses amidst a discussion of the laws of inheritance in tractate Bava Batra (123a). The rabbis consider the relative status of Reuven, Leah's eldest son, and Joseph, Rachel's eldest. They explain that God had originally ordained for Rachel to give birth to Jacob's firstborn, but then Leah pre-empted Rachel on account of her prayers. While Rachel succeeded in winning over Jacob with her beauty, it was Leah who succeeded in winning over God with her appeals to divine mercy.

The rabbis link Leah's prayers to her "weak eyes," which the Torah contrasts with Rachel's beauty. They explain that Leah's eyes were weak from crying because she feared the fate that awaited her. But contrary to what we might expect, it was not the fate of being Jacob's unloved wife that she feared, but rather the fate of marrying Jacob's twin. The Talmudic sage Rav relates that Leah used to sit by the crossroads and listen to the gossip of passersby. The word on the street was that since Rivka had two sons and Lavan had two daughters, the oldest son was destined to marry the oldest daughter, and the youngest son was intended for the youngest daughter. When Leah heard that she was to be matched with Rivka's oldest son Esau, she inquired about his character, and was told that he was an evil bandit, whereas his younger brother Jacob was a quiet tent-dweller. Leah was so distraught at the prospect of marrying the evil twin that she cried and prayed for divine mercy until her eyelashes fell out. While the prophet Jeremiah immortalized the image of Rachel crying inconsolably by the roadside for her exiled children (Jer. 31:14), in the midrash, Leah sheds her own share of tears at the crossroads.

Leah cried her eyes out until her tears drained her of her beauty, which was presumably one reason that Jacob found Rachel more attractive. Rachel was also the kindred spirit he fell in love with at first sight when he first arrived at the well in Haran; he met Leah only later, in the domestic space of the home of Uncle Lavan, who was eager to marry her off. Even so, according to the rabbis, Leah wasn't truly hated. After all, Leah was one of the matriarchs and so she must have been righteous; how then could the Torah speak negatively of her? The answer, according to Rav, was that when the Torah refers to Leah as "hated," it is not referring to Jacob's hatred for Leah, but rather to Leah's hatred for Esau – a hatred which God regarded as meritorious. It was

because Leah hated “Esau’s actions” that God opened Leah’s womb and gave her children.

Though Leah was unlucky in love, she was favored when it came to fertility. She was the dependable wife who could be counted on to get pregnant with ease, in contrast to her sister who cried out in anguish, “Give me children or give me death” (30:10). A midrash in tractate Berakhot (60a) teaches that when Leah became pregnant for the seventh time, the fetus was originally a boy. Leah knew that twelve sons were destined to be born to Jacob. She had already birthed six sons, and the handmaidens had birthed four sons between them. This left only two more boys, and Rachel was still childless. So Leah prayed to God, who turned the child into a girl – Dinah. Once again, Leah appealed to God’s mercy, but this time she asked God to have compassion not on herself, but on the sister she had so long resented for being the more beloved wife. Did Jacob always love Rachel more than Leah? At the end of his life, Jacob recalls the deaths of his wives in language that suggests that they each had a unique place in his heart. He recounts to his son Joseph that “Rachel died, to my sorrow, while I was journeying in the land of Canaan... and I buried her there on the road to Efrat” (48:7). The loss of his beloved Rachel was devastating for Jacob, but it is beside Leah that he asks his sons to bury him: “Bury me with my fathers in the cave which is in the field of Efron...there I buried Leah” (49:29-30). While Rachel represented the passion of his youth—a passion that never died—Leah represented the stable relationship that developed and deepened over time.

In a sense we might think of Rachel and Leah not as two separate women, but as two aspects of the same woman. Yehuda Amichai captures this notion beautifully in a short poetic fragment (my translation):

Morning now, and behold you are Leah; you were Rachel last night.

It wasn’t Laban who deceived me in darkness with spite.

It has always been this way – by darkness, by light--

Now you are Leah. You were Rachel last night.

Every Rachel in the evening becomes Leah the morning after. The fiery passion of youth is eventually contained inside the steadily-burning hearth. Perhaps for this reason, both women are mentioned in the marriage blessing at the end of the book of Ruth (4:11): “May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, both of whom built up the house of Israel.” It takes both a Rachel and a Leah to build up the house of Israel, and in every loving partnership we can learn from their example. (*Ilana Kurshan teaches Talmud at the Conservative Yeshiva*).

D'var Haftarah: Motherhood and Loss by Bex Stern Rosenblatt

<https://myemail.constantcontact.com/Torah-Sparks.html?soid=1102506082947&aid=kuJRhCAz39s>

“Give me children, or, if not, I am dead,” says Rachel in this week’s parasha (Genesis 30:1). She has watched her sister bear child after child and yet she has born none. Rashi, quoting Bereshit Rabah, learns from this verse that “he who is childless may be

regarded as dead." And indeed, children and death will inevitably be linked to each other. The birth of her second child is difficult to the point of death. As she lays dying, she names him *Ben-Oni*, child of my trouble/inequity/sorrow. Looking back on her life's work, on her drive to fill herself with life, even more so than her sister Leah, Rachel is left with only sorrow and regret. In this moment of the extreme pain of childbirth, combined with her fear of slipping into irrelevance and non-being, Rachel gives her child a name that is almost a curse, a negation of good.

The haftarah doubles down on this theme in a bone-chilling way. The Book of Hosea is obsessed with birth and birth pains, with mothers and names. Hosea famously opens with God's command to marry a harlot, bear children with her, and give those children names symbolic of destruction and abandonment. In all biblical baby-making, it takes three to tango - two parents and God. God causes these children to be born in order to punish and rebuke the mother, the harlot, symbolizing Israel.

As the book continues, God destroys. In Hosea 9:14, God gives the nation "a bereaving womb and dry breasts." God punishes by taking away the nation's ability to bear children, echoing Rachel's desperate cry, making the nation die through lack of ability to keep alive progeny. It is a troubling and horrible image, an upsetting idea.

But God is not just the punisher of mother and child. In our haftarah, God is also a grieving mother himself. The book is rife with retellings of the story of the Exodus, as God "birthed" Israel out of Egypt. And now, God watches his child, the nation, and God cannot provide for it and protect it. The nation has grown up and become rebellious, turning from God. So God becomes as a bereaved mother. Just as Rachel felt dead with lack of progeny, God too loses his continuation, his *raison d'être*.

In Hosea 13:8, God tells us that he will meet the nation like a "bereaved bear and tear up the covering of their heart." From a place of pain, God lashes out. Then, in Hosea 13:13, God wishes this pain upon the nation, saying, "The pains of birthing will come to him. He is not a smart child, for at the time he will not stand at the birthing place of sons." This thing God is feeling, this sense of separation and loss, he makes the experience of those who caused it for him.

Yet, from this place of motherhood, this shared experience we have with God, we can look back and have compassion on God. Birthing is not easy. Rachel and God say terrible things and pass on their pain. But the pain passes. At the end of the haftarah, in Hosea 14:4, we speak of orphans. Only in God will orphans find *rehem*, meaning compassion, and bearing the same root as womb. The children, abandoned and misnamed in moments of pain, find the womb, find comfort again once the pain passes. When terrible things happen and we do terrible things, perhaps it is worth recalling God and Rachel. Perhaps we might try having compassion on ourselves and the world, forgiving each other the pain we cause when we are in pain and trying to break the cycle. (*Bex Stern Rosenblatt recently moved to Washington, DC, where she serves as Conservative Yeshiva Faculty-in-Residence for the Mid-Atlantic Region of the U.S. She earned an M.A. in Tanakh from Bar Ilan University.*)

Yahrtzeits

Neal Fox remembers his father Hyman Fox (Chaim) on Sun Nov 29 (Kislev 13)

Amy Cooper remembers her uncle George Israel Stieglitz (Yisrael) on Tues Dec. 1 (Kislev 15)

Roni Bamforth remembers her father William Gelfond on Tues Dec. 1 (Kislev 15)

Willa Brucker remembers her mother Anita Cohen (Chana Bat Shalom v Sarah) on Wed.
Dec. 2 (Kislev 16)

Albert Gottlieb remembers his father Arnold Gottlieb on Fri. Dec 4 (Kislev 18)

Nancy Rothschild remembers her son Joshua Rothschild on Fri. Dec. 4 (Kislev 18)