

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Vayetzei
December 3, 2022 *** 9 Kislev, 5783

Vayetzei in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3191/jewish/Vayetze-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 Charan, 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 14 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: Hosea 11:17 – 12:14

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

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

The haftarah begins with the prophet Hosea's rebuke of the Jewish people for

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

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

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

Food For Thought

How The Light Gets In by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vayetse/how-the-light-gets-in/>

Why Jacob? That is the question we find ourselves asking repeatedly as we read the narratives of Genesis. Jacob is not what Noah was: righteous, perfect in his generations, one who walked with God. He did not, like Abraham, leave his land, his birthplace and his father's house in response to a Divine call. He did not, like Isaac, offer himself up as a sacrifice. Nor did he have the burning sense of justice and willingness to intervene that we see in the vignettes of Moses' early life. Yet we are defined for all time as the descendants of Jacob, the children of Israel. Hence the force of the question: Why Jacob?

The answer, it seems to me, is intimated in the beginning of this week's parsha. Jacob was in the middle of a journey from one danger to another. He had left home because Esau had vowed to kill him when Isaac died. He was about to enter the household of his uncle Laban, which would itself present other dangers. Far from home, alone, he was at a point of maximum vulnerability. The sun set. Night fell. Jacob lay down to sleep, and then saw this majestic vision:

He dreamed: "Ve-hinei!" – He saw a ladder set upon the ground, whose top reached the heavens. "Ve-hinei!" – On it, angels of God went up and came down. "Ve-hinei!" – The Lord stood over him there and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father, and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants. Your descendants shall be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west, the east, the north, and to the south. Through you and your descendants, all the families of the earth will be blessed. "Ve-hinei!" – I am with you. I will protect you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land, for I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken of to you."

Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, “Truly, the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it!” He was afraid, and said, “How full of awe is this place! This is none other than the House of God, and this is the gate of the heavens.”

Gen. 28:12-17

Note the fourfold *ve-hinei*, in English “and look,” an expression of surprise. Nothing has prepared Jacob for this encounter, a point emphasised in his own words when he says, “the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it.” The very verb used at the beginning of the passage, “He came upon a place,” in Hebrew *vayifga ba-makom*, also means an unexpected encounter. Later, in rabbinic Hebrew, the word *ha-Makom*, “the Place,” came to mean “God.” Hence in a poetic way the phrase *vayifga ba-makom* could be read as, “Jacob happened on (had an unexpected encounter with) God.”

Add to this Jacob’s night-time wrestling match with the angel in next week’s parsha and we have an answer to our question. Jacob is the man who has his deepest spiritual experiences alone, at night, in the face of danger and far from home. He is the man who meets God when he least expects to, when his mind is on other things, when he is in a state of fear and possibly on the brink of despair. Jacob is the man who, in liminal space, in the middle of the journey, discovers that “Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it!”

Jacob thus became the father of the people who had their closest encounter with God in what Moses was later to describe as “the howling wasteland of a wilderness” (Deut. 32:10). Uniquely, Jews survived a whole series of exiles, and though at first they said, “How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” they discovered that the *Shechinah*, the Divine Presence, was still with them. Though they had lost everything else, they had not lost contact with God. They could still discover that “the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it!”

Abraham gave Jews the courage to challenge the idols of the age. Isaac gave them the capacity for self-sacrifice. Moses taught them to be passionate fighters for justice. But Jacob gave them the knowledge that precisely when you feel most alone, God is still with you, giving you the courage to hope and the strength to dream.

The man who gave the most profound poetic expression to this was undoubtedly David in the book of Psalms. Time and again he calls to God from the heart of darkness, afflicted, alone, pained, afraid:

Save me, O God,
for the floodwaters are up to my neck.
Deeper and deeper I sink into the mire;
I can’t find a foothold.
I am in deep water,
and the floods overwhelm me.

Ps 69:2-3

From the depths, O Lord,
I call for Your help.

Ps. 130:1

Sometimes our deepest spiritual experiences come when we least expect them, when we are closest to despair. It is then that the masks we wear are stripped away. We are at our point of maximum vulnerability – and it is when we are most fully open to God that God is most fully open to us. “The Lord is close to the broken-hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit” (Ps.34:18). “My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart You, God, will not despise” (Ps. 51:17). God “heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds” (Ps. 147:3).

Rav Nahman of Bratslav used to say; “A person needs to cry to his Father in heaven with a powerful voice from the depths of his heart. Then God will listen to his voice and turn to his cry. And it may be that from this act itself, all doubts and obstacles that are keeping him back from true service of Hashem will fall from him and be completely nullified.”^[1]

We find God not only in holy or familiar places but also in the midst of a journey, alone at night. “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil for You are with me.” The most profound of all spiritual experiences, the base of all others, is the knowledge that we are not alone. God is holding us by the hand, sheltering us, lifting us when we fall, forgiving us when we fail, healing the wounds in our soul through the power of His love.

My late father of blessed memory was not a learned Jew. He did not have the chance to become one. He came to Britain as a child and a refugee. He had to leave school young, and besides, the possibilities of Jewish education in those days were limited. Merely surviving took up most of the family’s time. But I saw him walk tall as a Jew, unafraid, even defiant at times, because when he prayed or read the Psalms he felt intensely that God was with him. That simple faith gave him immense dignity and strength of mind.

That was his heritage from Jacob, as it is ours. Though we may fall, we fall into the arms of God. Though others may lose faith in us, and though we may even lose faith in ourselves, God never loses faith in us. And though we may feel utterly alone, we are not. God is there, beside us, within us, urging us to stand and move on, for there is a task to do that we have not yet done and that we were created to fulfil. A singer of our time wrote, “There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.” The broken heart lets in the light of God, and becomes the gate of heaven.^[1] Likkutei Maharar 2:46. ^[2] Anthem by Leonard Cohen.

[Was Laban Really Worse than Pharaoh by Avi Garelick](https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/was-laban-really-worse-than-pharaoh/)

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שְׁפָרְעָה לֹא גָזַר אֱלֹהִים עַל הַזְּכָרִים, וְלִבָּן בִּקֵּשׁ לַעֲקֹר אֶת־הַכֹּל

“For Pharaoh only decreed against the male babies—but Laban sought to uproot it all.”

According to the Passover Haggadah, Laban, Jacob’s father-in-law, is the archvillain of Jewish history, even more dangerous than the Pharaoh who enslaved the people of Israel and launched a campaign of male infanticide. Yet, after this provocative comparison, the Haggadah leaves the rest as an exercise for the reader. Laban “sought to uproot it all,” but how? What makes Laban so dangerous?

Laban, like Pharaoh, was a slave master. According to some traditional views, Jacob himself was his slave. Rabbi Yehuda ben Eliezer, a 12th–13th century Tosafist, wrote a commentary in which he cites the opinion of Rabbi Jacob of Orleans (12th century) that Jacob was equivalent to the Hebrew slave of the Covenant Code in Parashat Mishpatim (Exod. 21:2–6). For these Tosafists, this legal template helps explain why Laban, after 20 years of Jacob’s labor, sees himself as entitled to his family and all his work: “The daughters are my daughters, the sons are my sons, the flocks are my flocks—all that you see is mine” (Gen. 31:43). This might seem like an outrageous tantrum, but according to these Tosafists, Laban was using the power of the law to his advantage: “If [the Hebrew slave] came by himself, he shall go out by himself . . . If his master should give him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her master’s, and he shall go out by himself” (Exod. 21:3–4).

This perspective on Laban and Jacob’s relationship is possible because of the wide lexical range of the root עבד in Biblical Hebrew, which can mean slavery as well as remunerated labor. Thus, at the beginning of Jacob’s stay in Aram, when he says “I will serve (e’evadekhah) seven years for Rachel your younger daughter” (Gen. 29:18), his proposal could entail any number of possible arrangements of power and ownership. If Laban was a slave master, he had a total right of ownership over Jacob’s life and family.

Whether or not we accept the Tosafist tradition of Jacob’s slavery, Laban is certainly guilty of mistreating his own daughters. Even in a patriarchal society, where he was entitled to strong rights of ownership over his daughters’ sexuality, Laban abused his power. As Rachel and Leah complain to Jacob: “Why, we have been counted by him as strangers, for he has sold us, and he has wholly consumed our money” (Gen. 31:15). They clearly feel used by their own father. As the scholar and translator Robert Alter explains in his commentary on the verse, a bride-price in those times would customarily have been shared by a father with his daughter, thus improving her position and the position of her new family. Laban, in contrast, “has evidently pocketed all the fruits of Jacob’s fourteen years of labor. His daughters thus see themselves reduced to chattel by their father, not married off but rather sold for profit, as though they were not his flesh and blood.”[1] For Laban, the efforts of his daughters and their maidservants to bear and raise a

family of their own are all on his behalf and for his benefit. When they seek their independence, he chases them down. If it weren't for divine intervention, Laban may indeed have uprooted it all.

Ultimately, Laban was more dangerous than Pharaoh because his power and abuse was born of familial relations. He combined a slave master's ruthlessness with a patriarch's sense of aggrieved entitlement. Indeed, sometimes the greatest villains are those closest to you, who see your growth in terms of their own advantage, and your independence as a threat. (*Avi Garelick is the Principal of the Rebecca and Israel Ivry Prozdor High School*)

[1] Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2018)

Seeing God in All of Us: Even (Especially) Those on Death Row
by Rabbi Michael Bernstein

<https://truah.org/resources/michael-bernstein-parshat-vayetze-moraltorah/>

Last week, the governor of Alabama, Kay Ivey, took the unusual step of ordering a moratorium on executions in her state. Under normal circumstances, this act would be impossible to imagine in a state that is among the leaders per capita in carrying out the death penalty. In this case, however, Ivey was reacting to the incompetence and cruelty in the implementation of recent executions. The attempt to inject Kenneth Smith with deadly poison failed, making him the third inmate in recent days whose execution was botched or deemed after the fact to have caused excessive suffering. All the while, Mr. Smith prayed fervently that he would not be killed and recognized his survival as a miraculous answer to this prayer. I am indebted to an indispensable organization, L'Chaim: Jews Against The Death Penalty for sharing this window into Mr. Smith's and other inmates' experience in their own words. L'Chaim not only advocates tirelessly against the practice of state sanctioned execution in every country, but reaches out to make contact with the condemned prisoners and their families.

The incredible soul of this organization, Michael Zoosman, has become a close confidant of many of those awaiting their prescribed fate on death row, referring to them as "our pen pals." Cantor Zoosman, with whom I had the honor of sharing a bima in my first pulpit what seems like a lifetime ago, moved from being a pulpit cantor to a prison chaplain and from one who opposed the death penalty as a general principle to one who is dedicating his life in service to the lives of those whose deaths have been ordered in our country and around the world.

L'Chaim points to the nauseating facts that some states employ Zyklon B, the gas used by the Nazis in their extermination camps, and that the list of other countries practicing the death penalty includes such brutal regimes as Iran, China, and Saudi Arabia.

Cantor Zoosman talks about his own realization that there should be no exceptions even in the edge case of Nazis who murdered so many Jewish forebears,

including his own.

No exceptions means even in such a singular case as Adolf Eichmann or even the theoretical execution of Hitler. More recently and poignantly, when many condemned a Florida jury for failing to sentence the Parkland school shooter to death, L'chaim was among those who cheered the verdict.

In fact, the motto adopted by L'Chaim is a quote from Elie Wiesel:

With every cell of my being and with every fiber of my memory I oppose the death penalty in all forms. I do not believe any civilized society should be at the service of death. I don't think it's human to become an agent of the angel of death.

Elie Wiesel, having borne the brunt of the ultimate degradation of human worth, emerged with a certainty that no human being, regardless of their wickedness, loses their status as created in God's image.

Such an awakening to the divine stamp on every human being is part of the story of many death penalty abolitionists. In this, they echo a seminal moment in the life of Jacob, one of the architects of the Jewish tradition of discovering God in dark places. Fleeing from his brother Esau, he finds himself in the wilderness as the sun is setting, falls asleep, and has his famous dream of a ladder reaching to heaven. In the morning, he wakes suddenly and exclaims in surprise, "Indeed there is Adonai in this place and I, I did not know." (Genesis 28:16)

Unlike his grandfather Abraham, who woke up early in the morning to take his son to a mountaintop he was shown by God, Jacob had no idea he was in the presence of God. According to the midrash, this place was the future site of the Holy Temple. Jacob was intending to pass through on his journey but God, desiring that he rest there, made the night fall abruptly. Only then does Jacob lay down and dream of the great ladder to heaven and the angels running urgently up and down. When he wakes up, he is struck not just by his vision but that he "did not know." L'Chaim seeks to make sure none of us simply passes by these places where the presence of God, the Divine image, is being ignored. When someone like Kenneth Smith is praying even as he is lying on a bed of death, how can we pass by once we are made aware, awakened to God's presence there?

If only the governor had her moment of revelation not based on the state's failure to efficiently execute an inmate but rather through the recognition that, indeed, God is in this place and she, she had yet to awaken to the image of the Divine in those who are being put to death in our name.

(Rabbi Michael Bernstein is the spiritual leader of Gesher L' Torah in Alpharetta, GA. He was ordained at the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1999 and served congregations in Massachusetts and Philadelphia before coming to Atlanta.)

[God's Favorites: Vayeitzei by Rabbi Stacy Rigler](https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/gods-favorites)

<https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/gods-favorites>

There is a story about a school that was known to be the best in the country. When

someone asked the head of the school to show them around the classes, the principal agreed. At the first class, the head of the school called to a child and said, "See that child, this one is my bat yachid, my special one." In the next class, they pointed to another and said, "See that child - that one is my ben yachid, my special one." In the third class, they pointed out more students and said, "Those, those are my b'nai yachid, my special ones."

"I do not understand," said the visitor. "Are these your children?"

"They are not my biological children," said the head of the school, "they are my special ones. Each child in this school is my special child, each child is the favorite child."

What would it be like if each one of us felt like we were the most special person in our school, our work, our synagogue, our family? How might we act differently if we felt secure in our love and our sense of belonging?

There is a sense of joy, pride, and affirmation when someone chooses to notice you above others. There is also a sense of embarrassment, discomfort, and guilt if you know that others are aware of the inequitable treatment. The power of favoritism is deep and profound, with long-lasting effects.

This week, we see Jacob, Rebecca's favorite child, pursuing Rachel in marriage. Jacob marries Leah, her sister, because their father plays a trick on him. Jacob is eventually allowed to marry Rachel, his intended bride. But this creates a situation with two wives where one is favored and the other not. In the coming chapters, Leah, Rachel and their handmaids bear 13 children. Jacob favors Joseph, the son of his favored wife. In each of the family relationships in Genesis, we see the effects of favoritism. Fights between siblings and spouses are part of generational conflicts that only end with the transition from the narrative of Genesis to the narrative of Exodus.

What changes in Exodus and the rest of Torah? Why do we no longer read about painful favoritism? The story in Exodus is not about one person being the favorite. There, the focus is on the People of Israel. We all become God's favorite. God no longer singles out one special one; all of us are b'nai yachid, the special ones. Each one of us can be blessed by God and continue to build the Jewish people. The Torah portion this week shows the effects of choosing one person over another. In the story about the exceptional school, caring for each child as if they were the favorite led to the success of the school. As a rabbi educator, I know that investing in every member of the community and ensuring they know they are valued contributes to our ability to thrive and grow.

As you think about the power of favoritism consider:

- Where do I show favoritism or bias for one person over another? How can I take note of those feelings and decrease their effects?
- Where might I be participating in or advancing in-group bias or how can I help others in my community see when they might unintentionally be displaying

favoritism towards an individual because of their identity?

- How can I lift up those that may not have felt me notice them or care for them?
- How can I ensure that every person in my orbit feels that they are "b'nai yachid" or special ones?

May each of us see our power to change the narrative and treat everyone as our favorite. (*Rabbi Stacy Rigler (she/her), RJE is Executive Director of the Association of Reform Jewish Educators.*)

Yahrtzeits

Neal Fox remembers his father Hyman Fox on Wed. Dec. 7 (Kislev 13).

Blossom Primer remembers her husband Irwin Primer on Fri. Dec. 9 (Kislev 15).

Roni Bamforth remembers her father William Gelfond on Fri. Dec.9 (Kislev 15)

Amy Cooper remembers her uncle George Israel on Fri. Dec.9 (Kislev 15)

Bob Axelrod remembers his father Isidore Axelrod on Fri. Dec.9 (Kislev 15)

Coming Up at Kol Rina

Spotlight on Jewish Artists.

Two Sundays, December 4 and December 11, at 10:30 am via Zoom

Presented by **Janet Mandel**, acclaimed local art educator.

December 4: Amedeo Modigliani

December 11: Chaim Soutine

These art history lectures are sponsored by the Susan Marx Fund for Adult Education at Kol Rina, and are presented to the public free of charge. Please use the following link to register for either or both of these programs on Eventbrite:

<https://www.eventbrite.com/e/jewish-art-talks-on-zoom-124-1211-tickets-472240432847>