

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Vayetzei
December 7, 2024 *** 6 Kislev, 5785

Vayetzei in a Nutshell

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

The name of the Parshah, "Vayetze," means "And he left" and it is found in Genesis 28:10.

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 11:7-12:14

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

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

The haftorah 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

[The Birth of the World's Oldest Hate by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l 5772](https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vayetse/the-birth-of-the-worlds-oldest-hate/)
<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vayetse/the-birth-of-the-worlds-oldest-hate/>

"Go and learn what Laban the Aramean sought to do to our father Jacob. Pharaoh made his decree only about the males whereas Laban sought to destroy everything."

This passage from the Haggadah on Pesach – evidently based on this week's Parsha – is extraordinarily difficult to understand.

First, it is a commentary on the phrase in Deuteronomy, *Arami oved avi*. As the overwhelming majority of commentators point out, the meaning of this phrase is "my father was a wandering Aramean" - a reference either to Jacob, who escaped to Aram [Aram meaning Syria, a reference to Haran where Laban lived], or to Abraham, who left Aram in response to God's call to travel to the land of Canaan. It does not mean "an Aramean [Laban] tried to destroy my father." Some commentators read it this way, but almost certainly they only do so because of this passage in the Haggadah.

Second, nowhere in the Parsha do we find that Laban actually tried to destroy Jacob. He deceived him, tried to exploit him, and chased after him when he fled. As he was about to catch up with Jacob, God appeared to him in a dream at night and said: 'Be very careful not to say anything, good or bad, to Jacob.' ([Gen. 31:24](#)). When Laban complains about the fact that Jacob was trying to escape,

Jacob replies: “Twenty years now I have worked for you in your estate – fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for some of your flocks. You changed my wages ten times!” ([Gen. 31:41](#)). All this suggests that Laban behaved outrageously to Jacob, treating him like an unpaid labourer, almost a slave, but not that he tried to “destroy” him – to kill him as Pharaoh tried to kill all male Israelite children.

Third, the Haggadah and the Seder service of which it is the text, is about how the Egyptians enslaved and practised slow genocide against the Israelites, and how God saved them from slavery and death. Why seek to diminish this whole narrative by saying that – actually - Pharaoh’s decree was not that bad, Laban’s was worse. This seems to make no sense, either in terms of the central theme of the Haggadah or in relation to the actual facts as recorded in the biblical text. How then are we to understand it?

Perhaps the answer is this. Laban’s behaviour is the paradigm of antisemites through the ages. It was not so much what Laban did that the Haggadah is referring to, but what his behaviour gave rise to, in century after century. How so? Laban begins by seeming like a friend. He offers Jacob refuge when he is in flight from Esau who has vowed to kill him. Yet it turns out that his behaviour is less generous than self-interested and calculating. Jacob works for him for seven years for Rachel. Then on the wedding night Laban substitutes Rachel for Leah so that to marry Rachel, Jacob must work another seven years. When Joseph is born to Rachel, Jacob tries to leave. Laban protests. Jacob works another six years, and then realises that the situation is untenable. Laban’s sons are accusing him of getting rich at Laban’s expense. Jacob senses that Laban himself is becoming hostile. Rachel and Leah agree, saying, “[he treats us like strangers! He has sold us and spent the money!](#)” ([Gen. 31:14-15](#)). Jacob realises that there is nothing he can do or say that will persuade Laban to let him leave. He has no choice but to escape. Laban then pursues him. Were it not for God’s warning the night before he catches up with him, there is little doubt that he would have forced Jacob to return and live out the rest of his life as his unpaid labourer. As he says to Jacob the next day: “[The daughters are my daughters! The sons are my sons! The flocks are my flocks! All that you see is mine!](#)” ([Gen. 31:43](#)). It turns out that everything he had ostensibly given Jacob, in his own mind he had not given at all.

Laban treats Jacob as his property, his slave, a non-person. In his eyes Jacob has no rights, no independent existence. He has given Jacob his daughters in marriage but still claims that they and their children belong to him, not Jacob. He has given Jacob an agreement as to the animals that will be his as his wages, yet he still insists that “The flocks are my flocks.”

What arouses his anger, his rage, is that Jacob maintains his dignity and

independence. Faced with an impossible existence as his father-in-law's slave, Jacob always finds a way of carrying on. Yes, he has been cheated of his beloved Rachel, but he works so that he can marry her too. Yes, he has been forced to work for nothing, but he uses his superior knowledge of animal husbandry to propose a deal which will allow him to build flocks of his own that will allow him to maintain what is now a large family. Jacob refuses to be defeated. Hemmed in on all sides, he finds a way out. That is Jacob's greatness. His methods are not those he would have chosen in other circumstances. He has to outwit an extremely cunning adversary. But Jacob refuses to be defeated, crushed or demoralised. In a seemingly impossible situation Jacob retains his dignity, independence, and freedom. Jacob is no man's slave.

Laban is, in effect, the first antisemite. In age after age, Jews sought refuge from those - like Esau - who sought to kill them. The nations who gave them refuge seemed at first to be benefactors. But they demanded a price. They saw, in Jews, people who would make them rich. Wherever Jews went they brought prosperity to their hosts. Yet they refused to be mere chattels. They refused to be owned. They had their own identity and way of life; they insisted on the basic human right to be free. The host society then eventually turned against them. They claimed that Jews were exploiting them rather than what was in fact the case, that they were exploiting the Jews. And when Jews succeeded, they accused them of theft: "The flocks are my flocks! All that you see is mine!" They forgot that Jews had contributed massively to national prosperity. The fact that Jews had salvaged some self-respect, some independence, that they too had prospered, made them not just envious but angry. That was when it became dangerous to be a Jew.

Laban was the first to display this syndrome but not the last. It happened again in Egypt after the death of Joseph. It happened under the Greeks and Romans, the Christian and Muslim empires of the Middle Ages, the European nations of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and after the Russian Revolution.

In her fascinating book *World on Fire*, Amy Chua argues that ethnic hatred will always be directed by the host society against any conspicuously successful minority. All three conditions must be present.

1. The hated group must be a minority or people will fear to attack it.
2. It must be successful or people will not envy it, merely feel contempt for it.
3. It must be conspicuous or people will not notice it.

Jews tended to fit all three. That is why they were hated. And it began with Jacob during his stay with Laban. He was a minority, outnumbered by Laban's family. He was successful, and it was conspicuous: you could see it by looking at his flocks.

What the Sages are saying in the Haggadah now becomes clear. Pharaoh was a one-time enemy of the Jews, but Laban exists, in one form or another, in age after

age. The syndrome still exists today. As Amy Chua notes, Israel in the context of the Middle East is a conspicuously successful minority. It is a small country, a minority; it is successful, conspicuously so. Somehow, in a tiny country with few natural resources, it has outshone its neighbours. The result is envy that becomes anger that becomes hate. Where did it begin? With Laban.

Put this way, we begin to see Jacob in a new light. Jacob stands for minorities and small nations everywhere. Jacob is the refusal to let large powers crush the few, the weak, the refugee. Jacob refuses to define himself as a slave, someone else's property. He maintains his inner dignity and freedom. He contributes to other people's prosperity, but he defeats every attempt to be exploited. Jacob is the voice that says: I too am human. I too have rights. I too am free.

If Laban is the eternal paradigm of hatred of conspicuously successful minorities, then Jacob is the eternal paradigm of the human capacity to survive the hatred of others. In this strange way Jacob becomes the voice of hope in the conversation of humankind, the living proof that hate never wins the final victory; freedom does.

[Going Out to Meet God and History by Arnold M. Eisen](https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/going-out-to-meet-god-and-history/)

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There is no doubt that the Jewish world changed dramatically on October 7, 2023, and it seems, as I write in mid-November 2024, that America too is now headed in a radically new direction. What it means to be Jewish in America; how one should live and teach our tradition in the unprecedented circumstances in which we find ourselves—these seem the question of the hour for committed Jews. As I seek answers, familiar passages in the Torah arrest my attention in ways they have never done before.

Take, for example, the words that introduce the covenant ceremony on Mount Sinai that binds the people of Israel to one another and to God ([Exod. 19:3](#)): “[Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and declare to the children of Israel.](#)” I have always read that verse as a classic example of Biblical parallelism and nothing more. “[Say](#)” is another word for “[declare.](#)” “[The house of Jacob](#)” is synonymous with “the Children of Israel.” Rashi, of course, found significance in each element of the two pairings, but I did not—until now. As I read the passage in the light of this week's Torah portion and in the shadow of the events that have shaken our world since the morning of October 7 these words take on new meaning.

In what ways do the Jewish people, the descendants of Jacob, still reside in his “house”? How can we, who bear the name by which Jacob will be called in next week's Torah portion, become the Israel whom Jacob henceforth struggles to become? I'd like to suggest, using the indispensable categories for Jewish self-understanding contributed by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, that Jacob is party to the

“covenant of fate,” while Israel signifies the “covenant of destiny.” The “covenant of fate” is imposed on Jews by history and circumstance, while the “covenant of destiny” is one that Jews are called on to embrace in partnership with God.

Many American Jews, shocked and alarmed at the outbreak of anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism that swiftly followed the Hamas attack, have realized for the first time, or with greater clarity than before, that they are part of the Jewish people: a target of attacks upon it, regardless of their personal affiliations or opinions; caught up in its history; subject to its fate; forever linked in the eyes of Christians and Muslims to its God, Who is also their God. Such Jews may be wondering anew this year what the Torah has to teach about the house in which descendants of Jacob still live—and about the destiny to which children of Israel are called.

The first lesson is perhaps the fact of our connection to this ancestor and his story. We identify with Jacob from the start because he responds to the momentous events that overtake him in a manner that we recognize as what we too might have done. He dreams, as we all do, and his dream, like many of ours, is what Freud would call “wish-fulfillment.” What Jacob most wants and needs, as he flees for his life from his brother’s wrath and heads for an unimaginable future, is assurance that he will get home safely. That is what he receives in the dream from YHWH—not a distant Creator God but the personal deity Who “stands beside him.” When Jacob declares upon awakening that “the Lord is present in this place, and I did not know it” (Gen. 28:16), he celebrates above all the promise of Divine protection. This is the knowing he gains from this intimate encounter. He knew beforehand that there was a God in the world, perhaps many gods. Now Jacob knows for himself that God is with him, near at hand.

In response Jacob does exactly what many people would do and have done: he builds an altar to God as a sign of gratitude and then tries to strike a deal. If God does X, Y, and Z for him, YHWH will be his God. Jacob will dedicate the stone on which his head had rested as a pillar of worship—and he will give God back ten percent of what God has granted him! We smile at this all-too-human maneuver: the man owes God everything, owns absolutely nothing, and yet he thinks he can trade favors with the Lord! But how many of us have given even that much back, let alone more?

The instrument of Jacob’s next life-lesson is Laban: a trickster and deceiver worthy of Jacob himself, in whose house Jacob finds neither rest nor safety. He does find love there and he acquires wives and children, but overwhelmingly his days are filled with toil, trouble, and challenge. The Torah details all this at length, until Jacob, with God’s blessing, flees this home as he fled the last. “Had not the God of my father Abraham and the Fear of Isaac been with me, you would have sent me away empty-handed (31:42).” Jacob has learned that having God “with him” does not mean immunity from hardship. Nor can he expect Laban to read the results of

their interactions as Divine judgment. These aspects of the covenant of fate have endured for Jews. Jacob separates from Laban, as he will soon meet up with—and then separate from—Esau. He moves on, goes out, as Jews have done forever after.

At the conclusion of Vayetzei, as Jacob heads home, he meets up with angels and takes this as a sign that his camp is somehow connected to God's camp. We, who have read this story before, know that Jacob, as a consequence, will soon be Israel: a wrestler “with beings Divine and human” (32:28). He will hold his own in those struggles (v. 29) but never get to stop struggling, inside or outside the Land promised him in his dreams. That seems inherent in the covenant of fate to which our ancestor Jacob/Israel and his descendants ever after are bound. It continues to be part of the experience of the Children of Israel as we soberly, joyfully, and determinedly try to find our way to the covenant of destiny. *(Arnold Eisen is Professor of Jewish Thought and Chancellor Emeritus at JTS. He is the author, most recently, of Seeking the Hiding God: A Personal Theological Essay.)*

[Vayetze: How We Choose to See the World by Rabbi Yair Robinson
https://truah.org/resources/yair-robinson-vayetze-moraltorah_2024/](https://truah.org/resources/yair-robinson-vayetze-moraltorah_2024/)

In her poem “Good Bones,” Maggie Smith writes:

...The world is at least
fifty percent terrible, and that's a conservative
estimate, though I keep this from my children.
For every bird there is a stone thrown at a bird.
For every loved child, a child broken, bagged,
sunk in a lake. Life is short and the world
is at least half terrible, and for every kind
stranger, there is one who would break you,
though I keep this from my children...

It is hard not to resonate with this text out of either disappointment or cynicism. As a people, we are well aware of how “half terrible” the world can be; our eyes are open to the injustices, the prejudice, and the pain caused in the world by those who would not see or acknowledge one another's humanity. And as Emmanuel Levinas teaches us, once our eyes are open to that reality, once we are awakened to the half-terribleness of the world, and the ways we — created in God's image — fail to live up to our blessing and expectations, how could we go back to sleep? How could we close our eyes?

So it is when we encounter Leah, the overlooked and unloved first wife of Jacob, but the one who brings Jacob his first children. When we go through Parshat

Vayetze and read the ways she names each of her first children, we may be left feeling sad for her, and perhaps angry on her behalf. Reuben: “The Eternal has seen my affliction,” or “now my husband will love me.” Simeon: “because the Eternal heard that I was unloved.” Levi: “This time my husband will become attached to me.” (Genesis 29:32-34) As Shai Held writes in “The Heart of Torah,” “[Leah] has spent years aching for the love of her husband, repeatedly convincing herself that perhaps it is just around the corner.”

But something changes when she brings her fourth child, Judah, into the world. “This time,’ she says, ‘I will praise the Eternal.” (Genesis 29:35) Rabbi Yochanan in the Talmud (Berakhot 7b) tells us that no one since the creation of the world had offered gratitude to God until Leah, who somehow finds it in her heart to offer thanks for the gifts and blessings she has received. She no longer waits for the world to be all good, she accepts the disappointments of the world even as she embraces the holiness in it. As Held continues in his commentary, “Leah is disappointed, and, as we have seen, she has every right to be. But she is also grateful — despite the intensity of her pain, she too, has her blessings.”

Our world is half-terrible, to be sure, but retreating from the tasks before us into fantasies — or praying that people will simply be different — will not repair the brokenness of the world. Nor should we merely curse the world as irreconcilably wicked, incapable of beauty, love, or justice. Rather, we must bless what is good, offering our gratitude for the holiness in our lives and in each other, so that we may see to our work to repair the world with that much more love and compassion.

Held ends his commentary by drawing attention to Judah being our namesake as a people. “Who is a Jew? One who discovers the possibility of gratitude even amid heartbreak...” Maggie Smith ends her cynical poem with the lines:

This place could be beautiful,
right? You could make this place beautiful.

As Jews, heartbroken though we are at the state of the world, we still lift ourselves up in thankfulness so that we may, as Smith writes, make our world beautiful.

(Rabbi Yair Robinson first got involved with T’ruah (then part of Rabbis for Human Rights) in 1999, rebuilding an Arab home in East Jerusalem. Since 2009 he has served as the rabbi of Congregation Beth Emeth in Wilmington, Delaware, where he lives, trying to make a difference in his community.)

Yahrzeits

Treasure Cohen and Rachel Rose-Siwoff remember their sister Rebecca Lubetkin on Sat. Dec. 7

Perry Fine remembers his mother Rosette Fine on Sat. Dec. 7

Nancy Isaacson remembers her mother Ruth Isaacson Sat. Dec. 7