Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Vayetzei
November 29, 2025 *** 9 Kislev, 5786

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/Haftorah-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."

Encountering God: Vayetze by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l(5767)
https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vayetse/encountering-god/

It is one of the great visions of the Torah. Jacob, alone at night, fleeing from the wrath of Esau, lies down to rest, and sees not a nightmare of fear but an epiphany:

> In time he [Yaakov] chanced upon a certain place [vayifga bamakom] and decided to spend the night there, because the sun had set. He took some stones of the place and put them under his head, and in that place lay down to sleep. And he dreamed: He saw a ladder set upon the ground, whose top reached the heavens. On it, angels of God went up and came down. The Lord stood over him... Gen. 28:11-13
>
> Then Yaakov 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 the gate of the Heavens!" Gen. 28:16-17

On the basis of this passage, the Sages said that "Jacob instituted the evening prayer." The inference is based on the word vayifga which can mean not only, "he came to,

encountered, happened upon, chanced upon" but also "he prayed, entreated, pleaded" as in Jeremiah, "Do not pray for this people, nor raise up a cry for them, and do not plead with Me… [ve-al tifga bi]" (Jeremiah 7:16).

The Sages also understood the word bamakom, "the place" to mean "God" (the "place" of the universe). Thus Jacob completed the cycle of daily prayers. Abraham instituted Shacharit, the morning prayer, Isaac initiated Mincha, the afternoon prayer, and Jacob was first to establish Arvit, also known as Maariv, the prayer of night-time.

This is a striking idea. Though each of the weekday prayers is identical in wording, each bears the character of one of the patriarchs. Abraham represents morning. He is the initiator, the one who introduced a new religious consciousness to the world. With him a day begins.

Isaac represents afternoon. There is nothing new about Isaac – no major transition from darkness to light or light to darkness. Many of the incidents in Isaac's life recapitulate those of his father. Famine forces him, as it did Abraham, to go to the land of the Philistines. He re-digs his father's wells.

Isaac's is the quiet heroism of continuity. He is a link in the chain of the covenant. He joins one generation to the next. He introduces nothing new into the life of faith, but his life has its own nobility. Isaac is steadfastness, loyalty, the determination to continue.

Jacob represents night. He is the man of fear and flight, the man who wrestles with God, with others and with himself. Jacob is one who knows the darkness of this world.

There is, however, a difficulty with the idea that Jacob introduced the evening prayer. In a famous episode in the Talmud, Rabbi Joshua takes the view that, unlike Shacharit

or Mincha, the evening prayer is not obligatory (though, as the commentators note, it has become obligatory through the acceptance of generations of Jews). Why, if it was instituted by Jacob, was it not held to carry the same obligation as the prayers of Abraham and Isaac? Tradition offers three answers.

The first is that the view that Arvit is non-obligatory according to those who hold that our daily prayers are based not on the patriarchs but on the sacrifices that were offered in the Temple. There was a morning and afternoon offering but no evening sacrifice. The two views differ precisely on this, that for those who trace prayer to sacrifice, the evening prayer is voluntary, whereas for those who base it on the patriarchs, it is obligatory.

The second is that there is a law that those on a journey (and for three days thereafter) are exempt from prayer. In the days when journeys were hazardous – when travellers were in constant fear of attack by raiders – it was impossible to concentrate. Prayer requires concentration (kavanah). Therefore Jacob was exempt from prayer, and offered up his entreaty not as an obligation but as a voluntary act – and so it remained.

The third is that there is a tradition that, as Jacob was travelling, "the sun set suddenly" – not at its normal time. Jacob had intended to say the afternoon prayer, but found, to his surprise, that night had fallen. Arvit did not become an obligation, since Jacob had not meant to say an evening prayer at all.

There is, however, a more profound explanation. A different linguistic construction is used for each of the three occasions that the Sages saw as the basis of prayer. Abraham "rose early in the morning to the place where he had stood before

God" (Gen. 19:27). Isaac "went out to meditate [lasuach] in the field towards evening" (Gen. 24:63). Jacob "met, encountered, came across, chanced upon" God [vayifga bamakom]. These are different kinds of religious experience.

Abraham initiated the quest for God. He was a creative religious personality – the father of all those who set out on a journey of the spirit to an unknown destination, armed only with the trust that those who seek, find. Abraham sought God before God sought him.

Isaac's prayer is described as a sichah (literally a conversation or dialogue). There are two parties to a dialogue – one who speaks, and one who listens and, having listened, responds. Isaac represents the religious experience as conversation between the word of God and the word of humankind.

Jacob's prayer is very different. He does not initiate it. His thoughts are elsewhere – on Esau from whom he is escaping, and on Laban to whom he is travelling. Into this troubled mind comes a vision of God and the angels and a stairway connecting earth and heaven. He has done nothing to prepare for it. It is unexpected. Jacob literally "encounters" God as we can sometimes encounter a familiar face among a crowd of strangers. This is a meeting brought about by God, not man. That is why Jacob's prayer could not be made the basis of a regular obligation. None of us knows when the presence of God will suddenly intrude into our lives.

There is an element of the religious life that is beyond conscious control. It comes out of nowhere, when we are least expecting it. If Abraham represents our journey towards God, and Isaac our dialogue with God, Jacob signifies God's encounter with us – unplanned, unscheduled, unexpected; the vision, the voice, the call we can never know in advance but

which leaves us transformed. As for Jacob, so for us. It feels as if we are waking from a sleep and realising, as if for the first time, that "God was in this place and I did not know it." The place has not changed, but we have. Such an experience can never be made the subject of an obligation. It is not something we do. It is something that happens to us. Vayfiga bamakom means that, thinking of other things, we find that we have walked into the presence of God.

Such experiences take place - literally or metaphorically - at night. They happen when we are alone, afraid, vulnerable, close to despair. It is then that, when we least expect it, we can find our lives flooded by the radiance of the Divine. Suddenly, with a certainty that is unmistakable, we know that we are not alone, that God is there and has been all along but that we were too preoccupied by our own concerns to notice Him. That is how Jacob found God – not by his own efforts, like Abraham; not through continuous dialogue, like Isaac; but in the midst of fear and isolation. Jacob, in flight, trips and falls – and finds he has fallen into the waiting arms of God. No one who has had this experience, ever forgets it. "Now I know that You were with me all the time, but I was looking elsewhere."

That was Jacob's prayer. There are times when we speak and times when we are spoken to. Prayer is not always predictable, a matter of fixed times and daily obligation. It is also an openness, a vulnerability. God can take us by surprise, waking us from our sleep, catching us as we fall.

The Monumental Act of Listening: Vayetzei by Jessica Fisher https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/the-monumental-act-of-listening-2/ (2019)

Parashat Vayetzei brings us to a climactic moment of a 20-

year conflict between Jacob and Laban. When Jacob came to Laban's house after tricking his own father and brother, Laban made him work for seven years to earn the right to marry Rachel, only to be tricked into marrying Leah. So he worked seven more years and finally married Rachel. More hiding and trickery ensued, until finally Jacob decided it was time to leave this toxic dynamic and he snuck away with his family. But Laban caught up to them and, after years of deceit, they had it out with each other, putting everything on the table once and for all: Laban was hurt that Jacob had left without giving him a chance to say goodbye to his children and grandchildren; Jacob was resentful for the years of hard labor, lies, and harsh treatment. (Gen. 31:26-42)

You can picture Jacob and Laban going at it: arms flailing, chests heaving, spit flying out of their mouths in their urgency to release feelings and resentments that had been percolating beneath the surface for years.

But somehow amidst the venting, they realized two things: they are family, forever connected whether they like it or not; and, at its core, their conflict was founded on secrets and trickery, on the ways they hid the truth from each other about themselves and their plans, hopes, and goals. In this moment, after finally listening to each other's pain, they realized their common humanity and the ways we all hide parts of ourselves from each other.

So they took a deep breath and agreed to a pact, ceremonially marking the occasion by building a monument of stones and eating a meal together. (vv. 43-46) Perhaps in the act of building together and eating together, they were even more able to access their new understanding of one another, their shared embodiment and enactment allowing them to tap into

wells of empathy that ran even deeper than listening and sharing.

Even after coming to a truce, the two men could not agree on a name for the monument, but the biblical narrator tells us that the place is called Mitzpah meaning, "May God keep watch between you and me since people are hidden from one another." (v.49)

There are so many things that keep us hidden and block us from being in relationship with each other. Sometimes we are obstructed by conflicts that run for decades and feel insurmountable. Sometimes we might be trying to reach the same goal, but we just can't understand one another—because we are speaking different languages or operating under false assumptions. Sometimes we block ourselves from being in relationship because we are afraid of vulnerability and because being in relationship with someone else—actually revealing ourselves to another person—is hard and scary.

Master educator Parker Palmer wrote, "The more you know about another person's story, the less possible it is to see that person as your enemy. . . . When we share the sources of our pain with each other instead of hurling our convictions like rocks at 'enemies,' we have a chance to open our hearts and connect across some of our greatest divides." (Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit, 5-6) Although the multi-day chase and culminating shouting match between Laban and Jacob may not be the best model of what this looks like, they achieve what Palmer describes. Once they paused their fighting, they took the time to hear each other's stories, to learn about what brought pain within their relationship, and they crossed the divide that had pushed them apart. They were finally able to

stop seeing one another as enemies, and instead opened their hearts enough to form a pact and to share food.

These kinds of conflicts can be as transformative as they are difficult.

In a midrash about this moment, Rabbi Yohanan describes the mound that Laban and Jacob constructed to commemorate their amnesty, saying the pile of rocks they created was "as large as the peak of Tiberias." (Gen. Rabbah 74:13) It is unlikely that these two men were able to construct anything on the scale of a mountain. Perhaps Rabbi Yohanan is suggesting that it felt monumental—this moment of them witnessing each other, of revealing parts of themselves that had been hidden for so long, was so significant that even the smallest stack of pebbles felt like reaching the summit of a mountain for this family.

In our daily morning liturgy we recite,

> וּתְנֵנוּ הַיּוֹם וּבְכָל יוֹם לְחֵן וּלְחֶסֶד וּלְרַחֲמִים בְּעֵינֶיךָ וּבְעֵינֵי כָל רוֹאֵינוּ
>
> "Today and every day, grant us grace and love and compassion in Your eyes [God] and in the eyes of everyone who looks upon us."

Every day is a new opportunity for connection. The next time you meet someone new, gather with loved ones, or encounter someone who challenges you, I hope you are blessed with the understanding that Jacob and Laban experience when they finally came together over a meal at Mitzpah, the mountain of pebbles that witnessed these relatives truly meeting one another for the first time. I hope you have the opportunity to feel what it is like to be truly seen with grace and to compassionately uncover what is hidden in the person sitting across from you. *(Jessica Fisher is a Rabbinical JTS Alum)*

Vayetze: Remembering Jacob Outside Home Depot

by Rabbi Jonah Winer

https://truah.org/resources/jonah-winer-vayetze-moraltorah_2025_/

When we closely read the Torah's description of the situation in which Jacob, our ancestor, finds himself at the beginning of Parshat Vayetze, it is hard to imagine him any more vulnerable than he is. When the Torah tells us that he stopped to sleep the night of his famous dream of the ladder connecting heaven and earth, it is clear he was sleeping outside in the wilderness.

While there are many midrashic explanations for why he was not able to sleep in a town or any other inhabited place, I want to highlight one. The Malbim tells us that Jacob was too afraid to push on and try to find a town because the sun had already set and night had fallen. Rashi piles on to this terrifying image the fact that he placed stones under his head, noting that he did so "out of fear of wild animals."

I want to take a moment to imagine Jacob's emotional state — he is far from home, completely alone, in the middle of the night, afraid of being attacked by animals, having fled from home in a tremendous rush to escape Esau's likely vengeance. This is the fundamental context in which the following narratives of our parshah need to be read in order to unlock some of their deepest insights.

Even after he is blessed with his dream of the ladder and sense of the Divine Presence, Jacob asserts how tenuous he feels his own connection is to the basic needs of life, swearing that "If God remains with me, protecting me on this journey that I am making, and giving me bread to eat and clothing to wear, and I return safe to my father's house — Hashem shall be my God." (Genesis 28:20-21)

The “if” in those sentences holds all the weight in the world for Jacob, for whom clothes and food are clearly not a given. When Jacob finally arrives at what he hopes will be a friendly place, the home of his uncle Laban, he is met with kindness on the surface, but ultimately is betrayed and exploited by his future father-in-law. When Jacob arrives in Laban’s home as a refugee, the promise of becoming a member of the community he has found respite in is cruelly held out before him, then torn away.

After years of labor for Laban, on Jacob’s wedding night, he is conspired against, and Rachel and Leah are switched, in order to exploit him for yet more labor. When Jacob confronts Laban, he is told, “It is not the practice in our place to marry off the younger before the older.” (Genesis 29:26) Not only has a terrible injustice been done, but it is the type of manipulation that could only work on a foreigner. Laban essentially tells him that he should have known better and that his lack of cultural knowledge is to blame for his having been tricked.

This is far from Laban’s only manipulation, as evidenced by Jacob’s criticism later in the parshah that Laban has repeatedly altered their deals and changed his wages. (Genesis 31:41) This too relies on the fact that Jacob has no recourse; there is no court for him to turn to and get justice, and there is seemingly no one in the community he can turn to for support — this just seems to be the way a powerful landowner can treat a refugee laborer. Laban is happy to use Jacob as a worker and use his own children as tools to extract more value from Jacob, all while telling himself a comforting narrative that he is just doing what is right in his country.

While we can draw myriad lessons from this story, I want to focus on the clarity the Torah is giving us about a world in

which such stomach-turning abuse of the vulnerable is normalized. Sadly, this world is not so far from our own.

To focus on one specific example, Home Depot has done nothing to protect immigrants in their stores as ICE continues to conduct violent raids on their property, kidnapping our neighbours, feeling safe in the assumption that they will not face consequences for using human beings for labor and discarding them when convenient.

The rejection of this unethical behavior is at the bedrock of the Torah's values.

I want to ask each of you to join me in recalling our ancestor Jacob's exploitation and, in his honor, join me in boycotting Home Depot this Thanksgiving weekend. May we live up to his holy memory by treating our neighbors with the kindness of Abraham and not the corruption of Laban.

Rabbi Jonah Winer (he/him) is T'ruah's director of learning. He was born and raised in Toronto and, after earning a BA in Religious Studies at McGill University, was ordained by Yeshivat Chovevei Torah in New York. While there, he worked as a Rabbinic Intern at NYU's Bronfman Center and the Kehillah of Riverdale. After ordination, he spent three years working at Hillels, most recently as Senior Jewish Educator and Orthodox Rabbi at Brown RISD Hillel.

Dreams From the Ground Up: Vayetzei by Rabbi Lea Muhlstein

https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/dreams-ground

> "And he dreamed, and behold, a ladder was set on the earth, and its top reached to heaven; and behold, angels of God were ascending and descending on it." (Genesis 28:12)

Jacob's ladder begins not in Heaven, but in the earth. As

Jacob flees from home and lies down with only a stone for his pillow, his vision rises from the ground beneath him. Rashi, the great medieval commentator of Troyes, notices a striking detail: the angels do not descend first; they ascend. Revelation, in this reading, begins from below. It is the human condition-fear, longing, imagination-that stirs movement toward Heaven.

In most of the Torah, revelation descends from above: at Sinai, God's voice thunders down to the people. But at Bet-El, the place of Jacob's dream, the movement is reversed-revelation rises from below. Jacob's vision teaches that divine encounter can begin in human strife; the ladder becomes a symbol of holiness discovered by reaching up.

Modern scholar Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg builds on Rashi's commentary and reads the aftermath of the dream as an experience of embodied resilience. Drawing on the classical Targum and midrash, she notes that "Jacob lifted up his legs … his heart lifted up his legs and he became light on his feet." For Zornberg, "There is a richness in the earth that gives resilience to Jacob … His motion, vertical and horizontal at once, has a paradoxical superiority to that of the angels." Where the angels climb cautiously, Jacob moves freely-his humanity itself a source of sacred energy. Revelation becomes an upsurge from the ground, a buoyancy born of earthly strength.

Centuries later, another Jewish dream rose from the ground, this time in fin-de-siècle Vienna. In the city's cafés, salons, and lecture halls, Jewish thinkers such as Martin Buber, Bertha Pappenheim, and Sigmund Freud sought moral and intellectual renewal in an age of doubt. It was a culture of progressive imagination, where Judaism was reinterpreted

through ethics, art, and social vision. Out of that same firmament, Theodor Herzl, who was more a journalist than a theologian, dreamed of his own ladder between earth and heaven.

Herzl's book, "Judenstaat," and the First Zionist Congress were not revelations from above, they were built from the ground up. Like Jacob's ascending angels, Herzl's dream began with human movement: meetings, pamphlets, and will. He dreamed not of angels but of delegates, teachers, and engineers building the rungs of a people's future. His declaration, "If you will it, it is no dream," turned yearning into covenantal responsibility.

This theology of ascent sits at the heart of Reform Judaism. Creation and revelation unfold through human action. Faith is sustained not by waiting for miracles, but by our actions. In Herzl's day, few Reform Jews embraced Zionism; many saw the idea of a modern nation-state as a distraction from Judaism's ethical mission. However, Herzl's insistence that renewal must begin from human initiative echoes the same impulse that animates Progressive Judaism. Zornberg's Jacob rises light-footed from the earth; Herzl's Vienna transformed that ancient ascent into a practical dream of a people rising on their own strength: Jewish identity was translated into civic imagination and ethics into structure. In both, revelation is not bestowed but enacted as divine purpose takes shape through human creativity.

A century later, in Herzl's own city, that ladder still stands. What many Reform Jews of his generation resisted, their descendants now claim with conviction. Vienna's Or Chadash, "New Light," embodies this grounded vision. Rooted in Central European Progressive Judaism, the community has recently

relaunched its branch of Reform Zionism, ARZENU (known in the United States as ARZA). In doing so, Or Chadash stands tall in Herzl's footsteps, affirming that Zionism and Progressive Judaism are not opposing currents but intertwined expressions of covenantal partnership, dreams that rise through human initiative toward divine purpose. Their renewal in Vienna, the city where Herzl first dreamed and where Jewish thought once flourished, reminds us that revelation still ascends from the ground.

Each generation must decide how to dream from the ground up. What ladders will we build between our ideals and the world as it is? What might we still uncover in the richness of the earth beneath our feet, the same ground where Jacob woke, Herzl walked, and a new Jewish light now shines?

The Torah reminds us that revelation is not confined to a mountaintop moment; it can begin wherever human hope and responsibility meet. When we dare to act, lightened by vision, we join the movement that began with Jacob's dream and continues every time we choose to climb. *(Rabbi Lea Muhlstein is Senior Rabbi of the Ark Synagogue in the suburbs of London, UK)*

****

Yahrtzeit

Bob Axelrod remembers his father Isidore Axelrod on Fri. Dec.5

Amy Cooper remembers her uncle George Israel Stieglitz on Fri. Dec. 5

Blossom Primer remembers her husband Irwin Primer on Fri. De Dec. 5