



The Marcos and Adina Katz YUTORAH IN PRINT

Vayeitzei 5784

Israel Belongs Nowhere: An Arab Taunt and Its Ancient History

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered November 23, 1974)

The Yalkut tells us that the stones that Jacob used as a pillow during his lonely flight from Esau were the very ones upon which his father Isaac was offered up at the Akedah.

How history repeats itself! We today rest on pillows of stone. I did not sleep well this past week or two. What Jew did not experience difficulty in sleeping during this time? We had a hard, cold feeling, under and in our heads--and in our hearts and in our stomachs. Make no mistake about it. Even as Jacob felt the stones and reminded himself of the near-death of Isaac, we feel today the specter of the Holocaust, the Akedah of the 20th century. It is a reality that lies just beneath the surface of all contemporary Jewish experience. So, like Jacob, we have the dread sensation of *כי בא השמש*, the sun is setting. Darkness is spreading and danger is abroad in the world.

How shall we respond to these worries? First, let us define the areas of concern. I find three such amongst others: self-doubt, fear of the future, and loneliness.

In these critical moments, Jews both in Israel and in the Diaspora do entertain doubts about the justice and worthwhileness of our cause. Of course, I am not speaking about the New Left and Trotzkyite Jews. I unequivocally and unambiguously condemn such Jewish self-haters who are open-minded to Arabs, close-minded to Jews; who can understand sympathetically every nationalism--except that of their own people. I do not refer to Communist Jews who slavishly follow Moscow's party line. They are an instance of psycho-pathology, the most pathetic example of political masochism in our times.

Rather, I refer to those Jews who are fully committed to the Jewish cause, who make their lives in Israel and put their lives on the line--and yet, ask themselves whether we have acted properly all along, whether it is possible to reconcile our claims with Palestinian claims. Of course, every sane person recognizes that there can be

no compromise with the PLO. You cannot reconcile the claims of life and death and end up with a condition that is neither one nor the other. But there is some incipient doubt as to whether our claim to all of Palestine is justified theoretically. And there is some nagging self doubt.

Such doubts occurred to Father Jacob. When we met him on that memorable night, he had his famous dream. And Abarbanel, who is the most psychologically oriented of all commentators, reminds us that dreams occur to people because of something that is stirring inside them. What was so disturbing Jacob that caused him to dream? Self-doubt, answers Abarbanel. The dream was a projection of his internal struggles and the divine prophetic response to them. Maybe, thought Jacob, I was wrong in taking away the blessings from Esau. True, he kept them only by deceit. True, had he gotten the blessings--by which is meant the right of his posterity to the land of Israel--it would have been a tragic miscarriage of the divine intent. But maybe I had no right to take it away from him. *אולי לא יישר בעיני אלקים*. Maybe it was not right in the eyes of God. And maybe it was simply not worthwhile! Here I am, away from my parents, all alone, cold and hungry and frightened. Was it worth it?

And so the divine answer came in a dream, in the form of a vision: *מגיע השמימה* the ladder placed on earth (which according to the Midrash, held within itself, in concentrated form, all the land of Israel) and its top reaching into the heavens. God was saying to Jacob: Despite all your self-doubt, despite all your questioning of the morality of your conduct, you are connected to God. Still your doubts, remove your hesitation, your questions are resolved. In life, one must often make tragic choices--between a greater morality and a lesser morality, between a greater evil and a lesser evil. You chose in this manner--and you were right, painful and tormenting though your deeds were.

I find it hard to understand the thought of a moral justification for the Palestinian claim--especially when such claims are pressed by the likes of the PLO, who are nothing more than common gangsters. Nevertheless, Jews are morally sensitive, and if they are not, they ought to be. Therefore, even in upbuilding Eretz Israel, we know that its function must be to bring blessing to all humankind. No matter how much the majority of humanity seems arrayed against us, we shall never forfeit our function and our role of enhancing life for all men on earth. For so did God tell Jacob in that vision: *וַיְבָרְכֵנוּ בְּכָל מִשְׁפְּחוֹת הָאָדָמָה וּבְזֶרַעךָ*, "and all the families of the earth will be blessed through you and your children."

The second area of concern is the simple apprehension of the future. We experience fear of the unknown. You will notice this if you visited Israel recently, if you talked to Israelis by phone or by mail or read their literature. We seem to be locked in an inexorable drive towards war. There is depression in Israel and in the Diaspora as well. We do not know how oil will affect our future. So we are caught in fear and in gloom and in anxiety.

We are, indeed, in the position which Jacob anticipated for us: pursued, hated, frightened.

And so, in response, Jacob dreams his dream. According to Ramban, the dream consists primarily of angels to teach Jacob one most important principle: that all that is happening to him is *מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם*, the providential acts of Heaven. Nothing is mere happenstance. He must not feel that God has abandoned him, that he is at the mercy of purely mundane forces. The eye of God never closes. The angels are there.

I would add: the ways of God are mysterious and complex. The help He sends to His children does not come in straight lines, and in unimpeded spurts. There is advance and retreat, progress and pullback, triumph and defeat. The angels are *עוֹלִים וְיורִידִים*, they ascend and descend. First they are *עוֹלִים*, they go up--leaving us here, on earth, with a feeling of being forsaken, abandoned, almost in despair. But eventually *יורִידִים*, they descend, and allow us to feel the direction of God's hand in history, the consolation of His presence.

So when we have these fears, when we worry about the future, when we are told by the so-called realists to think the unthinkable thoughts about the bleak future of the State of Israel, we hear from across the centuries the comforting voice of God: *הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה שׁוֹכֵב עִלֶּיהָ לְךָ אֶתְנַנָּה*,
"The land on which you lie, I have given to you."

Eretz Israel will remain ours, We shall prevail!

If we succumb to despair, we are only satisfying our enemies and carrying out their plan. Let there be no *יָאוֹשׁ*, no despair. Let there be no divisiveness, no fighting of Jew against Jew. Let there be only hard work--and hope!

Finally, there is the element of loneliness. In every instance in recent weeks, in every international form, we have been out-numbered and outvoted and isolated. We have been silenced and excoriated at the UN.

We are even unsure of the United States--and we certainly ought not take for granted a country whose highest military officer this past week delivered himself of a kind of anti-Semitic tirade which is appropriate for a small-town hick. Our leading soldier seems to be the kind of man who has obtained his philosophy of American society from the scrawlings on walls, and whose level of sophistication does not rise beyond that of the country-club locker-room.

Only a small handful of countries ever votes with us. Many others think that they are virtuous and heroic and pure if they abstain while the Arabs and communists and Third World gang up on us in the diplomatic equivalent of a gang rape.

The nadir was reached yesterday or the day before. It took place after the vote in UNESCO--the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization--which decided that Israel was the only country in the world which had to remain alone, and did not have the right to join with any region or bloc of nations. After this vote, the Lebanese delegate said the following: "Israel is a state which belongs nowhere, because it comes from nowhere."

We belong nowhere because we come from nowhere ...

I confess, I was not completely shocked at this obscene taunt, at this cruel gloating. Outraged, yes; but not shocked.

I recognize it. Smell it carefully and you will detect the whiff of an ancient malodorous theory. We belong nowhere--it is the old Christian canard condemning the Jewish people to eternal homelessness as the "Wandering Jew." We have here--remarkably, in the words of a Lebanese Arab who represents a country evenly divided between Christian and Moslem-- the ultimate synthesis of discredited and evil Christian theology with malicious and manipulative Arab politics.

The old anti-Semitism has been resurrected in the half of the UN. And the world fidgets, but does not raise its voice at this international replay of a Kitty Genovese murder.

So, "Israel is a state which belongs nowhere because it comes from nowhere!" How shall we answer that when our non-Jewish ask us whether there is anything to it? What

should we say to those pathetically ignorant Jews who may be taken in by a statement of that sort?

Permit to suggest the following answers.

Israel comes from the concentration camps of Western Europe--which bloc it was not permitted to join by UNESCO.

Israel comes from the crematoria of Eastern Europe where the chimneys belched forth the smokey remains of six million men, women, and children--and the government of which today, all Communists, leeringly persecute the pitiful remainders of that unprecedented massacre.

Israel comes from the horrendous ghettos, where we did not have almost limitless real estate, and endless oil, only to fight for another piece of real estate--but where all we wanted was one place we can call our own, our home.

Israelis come from the mullahs and slums of Arab countries, where they experienced first-hand the blessings of what the Arabs mean by, "a democratic, secular state--a fraternity of Christian, Jew, and Moslem." They learned quite intimately what it means to live in a democratic state--such as Yemen or Syria; or a secular state--like Libya or Saudi Arabia ...

Israel comes from the people which created a Talmud, the most marvelous compendium of law and morality and justice and civilized life, while the Arab state still had no name, and were nothing more than pagan savages riding through the desert with knives in their teeth and blood dripping from their fingers.

Modern Israel comes from that nation of prophets who blessed the world with the vision of a united humanity--a vision distorted and profaned, made pornographic and obscene, by that organization which today condemns Israel

Who Do You Think I Am?

Rabbi Joshua (The Hoffer) Hoffman z"l

The Torah relates that after Leah had given birth to four children and Rachel had not given birth to any, Rachel became jealous of Leah and complained to Ya'akov, saying, "Give me children - if not, I am dead." Ya'akov became angry, and replied, "Am I in place of God, Who has withheld from you fruit of the womb?" (Bereishis 29:1-2). Many of the commentators are puzzled by this harsh reply. Was this the proper way for someone like Ya'akov, who the rabbis refer to as the choicest of the forefathers, to speak to a childless woman, especially his own wife? Nechama Leibovits, of blessed memory, was

to be the only country not permitted to participate in that same unity of nations.

Israel comes from and is a people who taught the world pity and compassion, civilization and art and music, morality and law and justice--yes, and Education and Science and Culture--when the so called Third World is still populated by the likes of Amin and gives thunderous ovations to an Arafat.

Israel is descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who taught the world what it needs to deserve survival. And, if, indeed, Israel does not belong to this world, maybe the world just does not deserve to go on.

But we do belong. We belong not to Western Europe and not to the Communist bloc, not the Arabs and not the Afro-Asians. We do belong--to the Creator of Heaven and Earth. He is One God--"Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God the Lord is One"--and we are one people--"who is like unto Thy people, one people upon the earth." We are one nation not permitted to join any bloc of peoples. And He is One God who is above all pantheons, and does not belong to any bloc of pagan idols.

And therefore, to us as to our Father Jacob before us, comes the word of God as we feel rejected by the society of nations: והנה אנכי עמך, "behold I shall be with thee." ושומרתיך בכל אשר תלך כי לא אעזבך, "and I will watch over thee in all ways that thou goest, for I will not forsake thee."

That is where we come from. That is whom we belong to.

The Wandering Jew has come home. Twenty six years ago. That is where he belongs.

And he shall not be driven out. Ever.

Read more at www.yu.edu/about/lamm-heritage.

fond of citing the explanation of Rabbi Yitzchak Arama, who writes, in his commentary Akeidas Yitzchak, that Ya'akov was troubled by Rachel's statement that not having children was considered as death in her eyes, as if to say that the only purpose for a woman's existence is to bear children. Actually, argued Ya'akov, a woman has a relationship with God quite independent of whether or not she brings children into the world. This is what he meant when he said, "Am I in God's place?" Rachel's relationship with God, he was saying, did not depend on whether or not he gave her children, and, therefore, she was wrong

in implying that without children, she would be as if she were dead. While this explanation is significant in its championing of women's spiritual capacities independent of their maternal role, it does not seem to conform to the flow of the verses, which center around the contrast between Leah giving birth and Rachel remaining childless. In that context, Ya'akov's anger seems to be directed more to Rachel's view of his role in providing her with children than with his view of Rachel's own function in life. What, then, was the cause of his anger?

Avivah Zornberg, in her work, *The Beginning of Desire : Reflections on Genesis*, writes that Ya'akov's anger was due to Rachel's emphasis on bearing children, rather their own relationship. Ya'akov, as the Torah tells us, immediately fell in love with Rachel upon seeing her, and continued to love her more than he did Leah after marrying both of them. Therefore, he was disconcerted when she placed the entire emphasis of their life together on the bearing of children. Rabbi Avraham Korman, in his work *Haparsha Ledoroseha*, gives a similar explanation, and points out that whereas in regard to Leah, the birth of children seems to be a means toward drawing Ya'akov closer to her and loving her, Rachel took the opposite approach, and viewed her marriage to Ya'akov as a means to having children, which was her major goal. According to this approach, Ya'akov's anger was really a way of venting his frustration over Rachel's failure to view their relationship in the same way that he did. Here, too, the main point seems to be missing. Ya'akov's question, "Am I in God's place," seems to imply that he objected to Rachel's placing the burden of her having children squarely on his shoulders, while in fact God is the one who makes this determination. I believe, however that we can follow this basic, simple explanation and still retain the insights of the Akeidas Yitzchak, Dr. Zornberg and Rabbi Korman.

Rabbi David Kimchi, or Radak, writes that Ya'akov's anger came as a result of Rachel's implication that Ya'akov was the one to determine whether or not she would have children. In reality, it is God who makes that determination, and, therefore, Rachel should have prayed to Him. This approach is already mentioned in Targum Onkelos, and spelled out more explicitly in Targum Yerushalmi. I believe, however, that Ya'akov had more in mind in his answer than the basic fact that a person is supposed to pray to God for things which are in His hands. I believe that he was trying to get Rachel to develop her own powers of prayer, because her role in Jewish history would be to pray on behalf of her children. After all, as

Rashi tells us in the beginning of parshas Toldos, when Yitzchok and Rivkoh prayed for children, God answered Yitzchok's prayers, and not Rivkoh's because Yitzchok was a righteous person and also the son of a righteous person, while Rivkoh, although a righteous person in her own right, was the daughter of an evil man. In the case of Ya'akov and Rachel, the same lineage obtained. Why, then, would Ya'akov tell Rachel, who was also childless, that she was the one who needed to pray? I believe it is because Ya'akov knew that Rachel would become a paradigm of prayer for the Jewish people.

The Torah tells us that when Ya'akov first saw Rachel, he kissed her, and then cried (Bereishis 29:11). Why did he cry? The midrashim and commentators provide us with answers to this question, but I would like to focus on a midrash cited by Rashi. Ya'akov cried, the midrash tells us, because he foresaw that, although Rachel would become his wife, she would not be buried with him in the Cave of Machpeilah. Why wouldn't she be buried there? Another midrash explains that Rachel would be buried on the road to Ephras so that, when the Jewish people would be led into exile, she would cry for them and pray for their return. This is what the prophet Yirmiyahu refers to when he says, "Thus said God, 'A voice is heard on high Rachel cries for her children. There is reward for your work and your children will return to their border'" (Yirmiyahu 31:14-16). These verses have been used as the lyrics for many songs, and, to this day, Jews go to Rachel's grave, asking her to intercede for them. Ya'akov, having experienced this vision of Rachel being buried on the road, understood that, despite his great love for her, she had an independent role to play. In order to fulfill that role, she needed to rely on her own power of prayer and to develop it. Therefore, Ya'akov told her that it was up to her to pray for children, because, in the future, it would be her prayers that would help bring those children back to their land, where they would be able to serve as God's nation on earth.

Beyond Mediocrity!

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed and adapted by a talmid from the YUTorah shiur originally entitled “Parsha Bytes - Vayeitzei 5779” and presented at Gruss Kollel in Yerushalayim on November 1, 2018)

Rashi, at the beginning of this week’s Parsha, mentions an Aggadah in Chulin, daf 91. Why did it say: *Va-yeilech Charanah va-yifga ba-makom va-yolen sham ki va ha-shemesh?* So, pshuto shel mikra, you would say, he left Beer Sheva, heading towards Charan, got to the Makom ha-Mikdash on the way, and slept there. But Chazal explain: *Va-yeitzei Yaakov mi-Be’er Sheva, vayeilech Charanah.* If he already went to Charan, why was he back in the middle at the Makom ha-Mikdash? So the Gemara in Chulin explains that *Ki mata le-Charan, omar, efshar ovarti al makom she-hispalelu avosai ve-ani lo hispalalti?* When Yaakov got to Charan, he says: Oh, I passed the holy makom where my forefathers, Avraham and Yitzchak, davened, and I forgot. I want to go back! *Kad yahiv da’ateih le-mihader, kaftza leih ara’a, miyad va-yifga ba-makom.* And as soon as he decided to return, he had kefitzas ha-derech—suddenly and miraculously, Yaakov immediately got to that place and davened there. The Kotzker has a sharp observation about this medrash. He asks, in his classic style: Why did Yaakov first go all the way from Be’er Sheva to Charan? Why did he pass by the makom ha-Mikdash, *she-yispalelu bo Avosav?* What was his hava amina not to daven there? I don’t understand. A regular affiliated Jew nowadays, if he’s going by the Kosel, stops and davens there. So why did Yaakov think he shouldn’t? The Kotzker, therefore, explains: Yaakov said: my holy forefathers Avraham and Yitzchak were so much greater than me. They were worthy of davening at this very special place. But who am I? Who am I to daven here? Avraham and Yitzchak—they had the Akeidah right here. They had exalted spiritual experiences and great zechuyos. On the other hand, I’m just a simple guy. I grew up. I got a bracha from my dad. I tried to learn a little Torah here and there. I didn’t have an Akeidah. I can’t daven in such a holy place like they did. Who am I? *Mi ya’aleh be-har Hashem u-mi yakum bi-mkom Kodsho?* So he decided not to. Then, when he got to Charan, he said to himself: maybe I’m not as holy as my forefathers, Avraham and Yitzchak, but that shouldn’t stop me from trying to accomplish everything I can. It is true that they’re so much greater than I am, and I haven’t done a thousandth of what they did. But that can’t turn into an excuse for mediocrity. It will not keep me from striving for spiritual excellence like they did. Chazal tell us: Every day a person has to say: *Masai yagiu ma’asai*

le-ma’asei avosai—how can my actions be like those of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov? At first glance, it’s strange. What kind of chutzpanik and ba’al ga’avah am I? Who am I? I’m not like Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. I’m some puny little nobody. But Chazal say: nonetheless! It’s not that they weren’t very great. It’s that even though they were very, very great—much greater than you, you have no right to say: I don’t have to do anything great. I’m a small, mediocre person, so I’ll just stick to doing average things. Everyone has to strive to do great things. Maybe they were greater than you. But are you still great enough to do great things like they did. You don’t have to say: I’m Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov; I am Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nassi; I’m Rebbi Akiva and Rebbi Meir, or I’m Abaye ve-Rava; I am Rambam and Ra’avad, in order to be great. You have to try to be great, nonetheless. And what happened to Yaakov? He changed his mind. He went back. And as soon as he did, what happened? Kefitzas ha-derech. Maybe by himself it would have been very difficult, but Hashem gave him miraculous Siyata di-Shmaya. If you want to be great, He helps you become great.

The Rav once said in a drush on this week’s Parsha that there’s another Chazal on that same daf in Chulin. The pasuk says: *Malachei Elokim olim ve-yordim bo.* And Chazal have a seemingly strange interpretation. They said that first these *malachim olim mistaklim be-dyukano shel ma’alah, ve-yordim mistaklim be-dyukano shel matah.* They went up and saw on the Kisei ha-Kavod a picture of Yaakov. Then they went down and saw that the poor guy sleeping on the stones with a stick and a knapsack is the same as that image on the Kisei ha-Kavod! The malchim were astounded by this. The Rav clarifies: What does this mean? The way many people understand this, and how I always understood it, is that it’s something unique about Yaakov Avinu, like the drasha from the words: *va-yikra lo Kel Elokei Yisroel.* I hesitate to say this because it would sound very heretical if I were not to say it very carefully. Yaakov had some special aspect of Godliness to him that he was on the Kisei ha-Kavod, and the malachim were astounded from this. They were amazed that here’s a human being who’s also somehow Godlike—in some way that I don’t know how to properly explain.

But the Rav said a different pshat. He says, everyone is *chakuk al Kisei ha-Kavod.* The Kisei ha-Kavod is Hashem’s

ideal plan for the universe. Everyone has an image on the Kisei ha-Kavod. Joe Schwartz has his image on the Kisei ha-Kavod of the ideal Joe Schwartz—Hashem’s plan for Joe Schwartz to accomplish in life. And Jack Greenberg has a Jack Greenberg on the Kisei ha-Kavod—what Jack Greenberg could be in life. What were they so surprised about? Here’s Yaakov on the Kisei ha-Kavod—everything he could accomplish. They went down to Yaakov and saw that he was really trying to accomplish, down here, what he was supposed to be in the Kisei ha-Kavod. He wasn’t sitting back and saying, I’ll be okay. I’ll be a decent guy. I’ll be mediocre. The uniqueness of Yaakov is not that he is on the Kisei ha-Kavod while you and I are not. It’s that he lived up to his image on the Kisei ha-Kavod—and you and I still have some work to do. And the Rav says: Yosef saw the *d’mus diyukno shel aviv* when he was about to sin with Eishes Potiphar. What exactly did he see? We know what the *d’mus diyukno* is. It says in Chulin, it’s the *d’mus diyukno shel ma’alah* and *d’mus diyukno shel matah*. What did he think when he was about to sin with Eishes Potiphar? Who am I? I’m a just a guy. I was sold to Mitzrayim. I’m surrounded by the goyim. I’m a slave at someone’s house. I’m not anyone special. And then he realized that he gave up on himself. Look at my father—he lived up to his

potential. He reached the ideal. I could also be great and live up to my ideal in the Kisei ha-Kavod. I could also become a gadol—Hashem wants me to be amazing. And that inspired him to know that whatever the circumstances, he could resist temptation and believe that he had a future, potential, and gadlus that Hashem intended for him.

We are all Bnei Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. And we all should believe, like the Rav says, that there’s a *d’mus diyukno* of each one of us on Hashem’s Kisei ha-Kavod—the ideal version of each one of us. Hashem really wants us to be the best we can be. Maybe I’m not Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. But I could be ideal, like they were. They fulfilled their *d’mus diyukno*, and I can also fulfill my *d’mus diyukno*—if I work hard enough. And we must realize that even though it looks like we’re not very special compared to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. And even when I compare myself to my Rebbeim, who are alive nowadays, I think I’m not very special. But nonetheless, as great as other people are, that doesn’t make me mediocre. I have to say, like Yaakov Avinu did: *Masai yagi’u ma’asai le-ma’asei Avosai*. And even if it’s very hard, if I work the hardest I can, I’ll get *siyata di-Shmaya* and *kfitzas ha-derech* to realize my full potential, like Hashem intended. Shabbat Shalom.

Ramban on Our Parshah: The Message of the Ladder

Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner

Hashem made three pledges to Yaakov:

- At the start of our parshah (Bereishit 28:15), Hashem promised to protect Yaakov on his journey: “Behold, I am with you, and I will protect you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land.”
- In Parshat Vayishlach (ibid. 35:9-12), Hashem promised that Yaakov would produce kings, and that he would receive the land of Israel.
- In Parshat Vayigash (ibid. 46:2-4), Hashem promised to make Yaakov a great nation in Egypt, and to bring Yaakov back to Israel.

The first promise came with something unique: A vision of malachim ascending and descending a ladder. Why was this visual aid necessary, and why now?

First: Ramban emphasizes the opening of Hashem’s promise, “Behold, I am with you,” and sees in the ladder a message about Hashem’s personal protection for Yaakov. Normally, Hashem delegates missions to malachim; malachim “ascend the ladder” to receive Divine instruction, and then “descend” to carry out their tasks.

But for Yaakov, Hashem will provide direct care and supervision. Perhaps Yaakov, away from home for the first time and fleeing for his life, feared that Hashem had found him unworthy (as in Bereishit 32:11); therefore Hashem reassured him of His special protection.

Second: Rashi picks up on the middle part of the promise, “I will protect you wherever you go.” He contends that the ladder appeared here because Yaakov was leaving Israel for the first time, and Hashem wished to teach him that he would be protected even outside the promised land. The malachim providing protection within Israel would remain in the land, but new malachim would descend the ladder to escort him on his path.

Third: Ramban quotes a midrash (Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer 35) which highlights the words, “I will bring you back to this land.” Hashem showed Yaakov malachim representing the nations which would torture the Jewish people in exile in the future. Each representative ascended a certain number of steps, but then descended the ladder, vanquished.

This message was not only for Yaakov, but for his descendants, consistent with Ramban's principle that the events of our ancestors' lives foreshadow our own. As we learned in Parshat Lech Lecha: Hashem wanted us to receive certain blessings, and so He began to implement them in the lives of our meritorious ancestors, at the first

opportunity, so that the positive Divine decree should already begin to come true. That which Yaakov saw in a dream in his initial exile portended good things for his descendants in their own journeys.

Rav Soloveitchik on Vayeitzei: Yaakov's Soaring Angels

Rabbi Aaron Goldscheider (Excerpted from *Torah United, Teachings on The Weekly Parashah From Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, and The Chassidic Masters* (Ktav, 2023)

Yaakov's unforgettable dream of angels ascending and descending a cosmic ladder is unlike anything encountered earlier in the Torah. Since the Torah does not interpret it for us, we must call in the interpreters. As with all dreams, it is fundamentally open to divergent interpretations, as we will see below in the approaches of the Midrash, Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo b. Yitzchak), and Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik.

A View of History

The Midrash characteristically offers a panoply of interpretations, but one that is particularly notable construes the dream as foreshadowing the historical drama that would unfold for the Jewish people. In this rendering, Yaakov symbolizes the entire Jewish people, who are after all *benei Yisrael*, the Children of Israel, an alternative name given to Yaakov. The ascending angels are the ministering angels of the great empires—the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans—whose ascent signals their rise to world domination. It is short-lived, however, because what goes up must come down. The Jewish people may suffer under their harsh rule but will outlive these dominions and witness their downfall. The Almighty stands at the top of the ladder orchestrating history from heaven, and at the end of days, He will be recognized as the one and only sovereign. The dream is about the history of the Jewish people, their suffering and eventual triumph.¹

Guardian Angels

Rashi is generally devoted to the literal-contextual meaning, or *peshat*, of the text, so unlike in the Midrash, in Rashi's commentary Yaakov is Yaakov and the angels are angels. Rashi looks to the context to make sense of the dream. Yaakov has this dream on his way out of the Land of Canaan as he takes flight from his brother Esav and is on his way to Paddan Aram.

Rashi addresses the strange formulation describing the angelic movement, "ascending and descending" (Genesis

28:12). Seeing as they are angels, shouldn't they descend from Heaven first and then return to their abode on high? Rashi answers that the angels which accompanied Yaakov in the Land of Israel could not leave it, so they ascended on high, and the angels assigned to areas outside the Land of Israel descended to accompany him on his way.²

This vision, then, has an immediate purpose, to reassure Yaakov that God will keep him safe even outside the Holy Land. Angels will accompany him throughout his tribulations, from the moment he leaves Be'er Sheva (Genesis 28:11) until his eventual return twenty years later to Machanaim (Genesis 32:3), where he is greeted by angels of the Land of Israel.³ At the same time, the Almighty reminds him of his duty to return to Canaan, whose lofty spiritual state is reflected in its special class of angels.

The Essence of Man

The Rav interprets the dream as more than about Yaakov's present condition, but about the existential condition of every Jew:

According to the Midrash, Jacob's image was engraved on the heavenly throne (Genesis Rabbah 66:12). In Jacob's dream, angels ascended the ladder to look upon the image, then descended the ladder to look upon Jacob on earth, marveling at how the images were identical... the images of the ideal Jacob etched in the throne and the real Jacob on earth were exactly the same.⁴

A Jew's purpose in this world is intrinsically connected to his soul. Every person is put on earth to fulfill a heavenly calling. We may be physical beings living in a material world, but we possess a sacred soul that strives for spiritual perfection. The angels did a "double-take" because they were astounded by the fact that man can align himself here on earth with his ideal self in heaven, and attain spiritual greatness.

The Rav's interpretation may have its basis in the

eminent work *Nefesh ha-Chayim* by his forbear Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, founder of the Lithuanian style of yeshiva that endures to this day. In endeavoring to ascertain the meaning of Yaakov's dream, he begins by noting a grammatical problem. Why, Rabbi Chaim asks, does the verse read, *mutzav artzah*, literally "standing towards the ground," rather than *mutzav ba-aretz*, "standing on the ground"?

Rabbi Chaim explains that, indeed, the ladder is oriented earthward, with its base in heaven. He understands the ladder in mystical terms, representing the rungs of reality through which the soul, rooted in the Throne of Glory, gradually emanates down to the earth, until it is encased in the human body. He further quotes a comment from the Zohar on the verse, "[God] blew into [Adam's] nostrils the breath of life" (Genesis 2:7), explicitly identifying the soul with Yaakov's ladder. Developing the Zoharic comparison, Rabbi Chaim teaches that the ascending and descending angels allude to man's power to affect this world and all other dimensions of existence. The angelic movement depends entirely on the deeds, words, and even thoughts of man.⁵

The idea propounded by the Rav and earlier by Rabbi Chaim is both inspiring and sobering, as it imposes an awesome measure of responsibility on each and every one of us. We have been gifted a heavenly soul that can have an untold effect on others and the world around us. Every action of ours begins a chain reaction that reverberates throughout the cosmos.

Exploring the Rav's Insight

When Pharaoh's daughter brought Moshe home to the palace, she made a futile attempt to have him nurse from an Egyptian woman. Rashi explains that Moshe refused

because he was destined to speak directly to God, and such a holy mouth could not receive nourishment from a non-Jew.⁶ The great codifier of Ashkenazi Halachah, the Rema, rules that ideally one should not have a Jewish child nurse from a non-Jewish woman, and the Vilna Gaon sources it to this episode concerning Moshe, which is extended to all Jewish children.⁷

Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky was troubled by the Vilna Gaon's source. What license do we have to extrapolate from Moshe's conduct when Rashi says explicitly that it was his destiny to speak directly to God? He suggests that we may conclude from Rema's codification of this rule that all Jewish children, no matter their particular background, have the potential to speak to God, in the same manner as Moshe. From infancy on, we ought to raise our children as if they are destined for greatness.⁸

The Rav understood the imagery of Yaakov's dream to be conveying that God grants man immense potential and power through our heavenly soul. We sanctify our lives when actualizing this potential to the fullest extent. Yaakov's image on earth mirrored his supernal ideal, because he was fulfilling his divine task in life. His ethereal vision communicated an eternal message. When we fulfill our task in life, we come closest to our most Godly selves.

[1] Midrash Tanchuma, Vayetze, §2.

[2] Rashi on Genesis 28:12.

[3] See Rashi on Genesis 32:2-3.

[4] Chumash Mesoras Harav, 1:212.

[5] *Nefesh ha-Chayim*, pt. 1, ch. 19.

[6] Rashi, Exodus 2:7.

[7] Rema on Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah 81:7, with Be'ur ha-Gra ad loc.

[8] *Emet le-Ya'akov*, Exodus 2:7.

Thanksgiving: Praise and Pain

Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman

The names that Leah provides her children in Parshat Vayeitzei give us a glimpse into her inner life and deepest desires.

Leah, the "hated" wife, bore children, precisely, the verse indicates, because she was hated (Gen. 29:31). The names of her first three children reflect this inner struggle, and her hope that through her children, she could finally attain her husband's love. Reuben (literally, "see a son") was so named because "Surely God has looked (*ra'ah*) upon my affliction; now therefore my husband will love me" (Gen.

29:32). Yet, her wish was not granted, so she named her second son Shimon (from the root, "to hear"), "Because God has heard (*shama*) that I was hated, He has therefore given me this son also" (Gen. 29:33). She did not give up faith in this love, and names her third son, Levi (meaning, to join), hoping that "Now this time will my husband be joined (*yilaveh*) to me, because I have born him three sons" (Gen. 29:34). The chapter ends with the birth of her fourth child, who she named Judah, declaring that "this time I will thank (*odeh*) God" (Gen. 29:35).

Ultimately, the text remains cryptic. We get a glimpse into her heart, but not the full depths of her experience. Why does she only thank God after her fourth son is born? Were her hopes realized? Did Jacob love her after she bore him these children?

Rabbi David Tzvi Hoffman writes that she thanked God after Judah was born because her desires were finally fulfilled. She not only was blessed with children, but also, she finally received her husband's love. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, in contrast, contends that she ultimately did not receive Jacob's affection. At no point in the text does it indicate that she no longer perceived the enmity. Her gratitude, instead, is a product of her acceptance of this sad reality. Leah finally realized that she could not earn her husband's approval by having children. After relinquishing this ambition, she was able to express her gratitude to God for the children with whom she was blessed.

Leah was able to be grateful amidst pain. This, Rabbi Soloveitchik suggests, is the legacy she left for her children and her descendants, that "despite the suffering and persecution we have been subjected to, we remain thankful to God for the privilege of having been selected as His people (*Chumash Mesoras HaRav*, p. 223)."

Feeling and expressing gratitude amidst suffering has resonances in the history of the American Thanksgiving holiday as well. Thanksgiving was designated a national holiday by Abraham Lincoln in 1863 amidst the Civil War. In addition to thanking God, Lincoln acknowledged the war's devastation, praying to "commend to His tender care

all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife." He also prays for "the interposition of the Almighty Hand to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it as soon as may be consistent with Divine purposes to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquility and Union" (Presidential Proclamation 106). Cultivating the national character of gratitude was particularly important because the nation was still in the throes of conflict and anguish.

Social psychologist and gratitude expert, Robert Emmons recommends cultivating gratitude both when times are good, and perhaps even more importantly, when times are challenging. Grateful people, research indicates, are more resilient to both minor stressors and more major upheavals. "In the face of demoralization, gratitude," he writes, "has the power to energize. In the face of brokenness, gratitude has the power to heal. In the face of despair, gratitude has the power to bring hope ("Gratitude as the Foundation for Joy," *Journal of Youth and Theology*, 20(1), 2021, p. 19).

As Israel continues its war against Hamas, and as we eagerly await the safe return of the hostages, celebrating Thanksgiving or expressing gratitude generally, seems like an impossible, almost inappropriate ambition. Yet, following in Leah's lead, we try to balance our gratefulness to God and our emotional pain. Despite the inner and outer turmoil, we can still open our eyes to the precious blessings in our lives and declare "this time I will thank God."

Holding on to Truth

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

Ya'akov spends twenty years in the house of lies and deceit. From the outset, he faced constant scheming and chicanery. Though slated to marry Rochel, he woke up the next morning married to a different woman. Confronting his father-in-law about this fraud, he receives a lame answer surrounding local customs of not marrying off younger sisters before their older siblings. Of course, no one ever mentioned the universal norm about being honest, and not lying to your future family. I guess Lavan forgot that one.

The longer Ya'akov remains in Lavan's snare the more exploitation and dishonesty he encounters, as his salary is repeatedly and unilaterally reduced. At one point, Ya'akov generously agrees to relinquish all rights to healthy sheep, while committing himself to herding only sickly and

damaged animals. Of course, this plan doesn't "work", as Ya'akov, with Hashem's help, continues to prosper. Unable to handle Ya'akov's financial success, Lavan disseminates false rumors about Ya'akov's unethical business practices.

Though Ya'akov and his family ultimately flee this house of horrors, they are hunted down by Lavan, and, astonishingly, are accused of treason. Having been victimized for over twenty years by unremitting manipulation and cheating, Ya'akov is now accused of those very same crimes. Pulling on everyone's heartstrings, Lavan wails that he wasn't even given opportunity to wish goodbye to his daughters. Ironically, by doing his utmost to avoid confrontation and conflict, Ya'akov has committed a humanitarian crime.

Thousands of years later, Ya'akov's children find

themselves in a similar predicament. A coalition of Israel bashers including antisemites, ignorant stooges, shockingly gullible students, and stubborn but blind denialists, have all teamed up to accuse our people of fictitious crimes, all the while tacitly supporting rape, torture, burning human beings, and taking babies and octogenarians as hostage. The more things change the more they stay the same.

You would think that, especially in this instance, moral truth is straightforward. It was pretty clear-cut on Sept 11, and Oct 7th should not be any different. Just in the past decade the entire civilized world firmly supported the cleansing of ISIS, but, astonishingly, Gaza is different.

The moral calculus is clear: we are a nation of peace and Arab countries which have normalized relations with us have enjoyed shared prosperity. By contrast, the genocidal murderers who continue to seek our extinction always look to justify their violence with false narratives about colonialism and with hypocritical accusations of immorality. We are literally walking in the footsteps of Ya'akov.

Defending Integrity

At some point, Ya'akov had enough. After twenty years of lies and counterfeit claims, he finally defends himself and his record. He calmly accounts for his twenty years of faithful service, through freezing cold nights and scorching hot summer days. You would imagine that Lavan, when confronted with his own corruption and duplicity, would finally acknowledge Ya'akov's virtue. The facts speak for themselves.

However, hate and contempt leave little room for facts and, for those consumed with rage and violence, nothing is obvious. Unable to communicate with one another, the best Ya'akov and Lavan can muster is to agree to disagree. Reluctantly, they sign a treaty of non-aggression and agree to part ways.

Exasperated, Ya'akov walks away, failing to convince anyone, but confident in his own moral integrity. Like our grandfather, we too, are unlikely to convince much of this world of our morality in waging a just war. There is too much noise, hate, and ignorance for the truth to shine.

Yet, despite the futility of these efforts, we must continue to try, for the sake of the few who may listen. But, even if no one listens, we must still affirm morality and truth for ourselves, so that we can maintain our own moral compass even though so many around us have lost theirs. When truth slowly dies, we must hold on to it even more tightly.

The Battle for Truth

This war has many layers. Obviously, this is a continuation of the war of Independence as we continue our struggle to return and resettle our ancient homeland. The world isn't yet ready to grant us this small parcel of land awarded to us by Hashem. One day they will, but it may take a while.

The second layer to this war is the battle between good and evil. A struggle is being waged between an axis of blood thirsty barbarians who care little about life and human dignity and civilized societies who cherish life and condemn unnecessary violence. This is a clash of civilizations and we, as always, are at the forefront. Good will always prevail over evil, provided that courageous people stand up and make a difference. Hashem give us courage and give us strength.

As the war unfolds, a third layer is becoming apparent. We are waging a battle to preserve the concept of truth. The world around us has gone mad, losing its ability to identify truth. Facts are recklessly tossed around, and preposterous claims are weaponized to attack and discredit our people.

Post- Modernism

The popular movement known as post modernism asserts that all truth is subjective, and context dependent, and therefore there is no objective right and wrong. This has generated the concept of moral relativism and the belief that we must always study a diversity of opinions while appreciating multiple competing narratives. Under the terms of moral relativism, there are no absolute moral positions, and any set of moral codes is merely a cultural convention.

The absence of objective standards is eroding moral clarity and leading to the moral free-for-all we are all suffering through. It is a disgrace to share a planet with human beings, presumably equipped with brains and hearts, can actually celebrate incinerating other human beings. These people are the hideous monsters of post modernism.

Tower of Babel and the Mabul

Tragically, when we abandon absolute moral truths, we also lose dialogue. If we can't agree on universal moral values, our conversation degenerates into shouting matches in which we lodge opposing cultural narratives at each other. Social media exacerbates the racket by providing mock communication, but no real dialogue. Social media platforms merely goad opinionated people into hollering their opinions, as they spar with one another in the cybersphere. The tower of Babel has returned and this time,

though we share language we do not possess a common baseline of values. If we can't speak with one another, we can't live side-by-side.

Moral relativism also diminishes moral accountability. Absolute moral values provide us with a conscience through which we inspect our behavior. Once every heinous act can be contextualized and justified, all moral accountability vanishes. The next step after the loss of moral accountability is a moral indifference in which people do not feel the responsibility of ethical decision-making, and do not consider the impact of their actions on others. Moral relativism is destroying communication and extinguishing moral sensibility. Without communication

Becoming a Single “Stone”

Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

The Torah tells that before Yaakov went to sleep on the night when he beheld his famous dream, ויקח מאבני המקום וישם מראשותיו – he took “from the stones” in the area and put them around him for protection (28:11). The next morning, ויקח את האבן אשר שם מראשותיו – “he took the stone which he had placed around his head” and turned it into a special monument (28:18).

Rashi notes that whereas Yaakov had originally taken מאבני המקום – several stones, in the morning, he had האבן, a single stone. The explanation, Rashi writes, is that the stones quarreled with one another during the night, each vying for the privilege of having Yaakov rest his head upon it. To solve this problem, God miraculously merged the stones into a single stone.

Rav Yisroel Meir Druck, in *Lahavos Eish*, raises the question of how this solved the problem. Even after the stones were combined, Yaakov's head remained the same size. It rested on only part of the large stone. Therefore, the stones which formed the other parts of that stone would not be satisfied. How did it help to bring all the different stones together?

Rav Druck explains that once the rocks were integrated into a single entity, there was no longer any competition or envy. When we come together to form a single, indivisible entity, we no longer compete with one another, because one person's good fortune is, essentially, the good fortune of all of us. If we see ourselves as one unit, then one person's success is everyone's success.

This is what Yaakov was being shown at this time. Rashi's description of the rocks merging together is not some fairy tale. It is a profound lesson about the

we inhabit the tower of Babel. Without moral sensibility we are the generation of the mabul.

Finally, when we lose sight of truth in the public arena it becomes more difficult to locate inner truth. Once truth disappears from the broader world it also fades from human hearts and souls. So many in our generation suffer from impostor syndrome in which they doubt their accomplishments and their talents. In the modern swirl of dishonesty, fake news, and untruth is it any surprise that people feel like they themselves are frauds?

Our opponents are attacking the concept of truth. Hold fast and hold tight to truth. We know what truth is and that is enough.

importance of *achdus* (unity). Yaakov was now on his way to Charan to get married and build a family, the entirety of which would be included as part of God's special nation. Whereas only one of Avraham's two sons (Yitzchak and Yishmael) continued the covenant, and only one of Yitzchak's two sons (Yaakov and Eisav) continued the covenant, all of Yaakov's sons would be included. Yaakov was, understandably, concerned about how this would work. If he was going to now beget twelve sons, all of whom would be joint heirs, would they not be torn apart by strife and jealousy? Wouldn't each of them vie for prestige and leadership roles? And wouldn't each group insist that they are the ones who get it right, that their *nusach* is correct, that their *hashkafa* is correct, that their opinions are correct?

God put these concerns to rest by merging the rocks into a single stone. He showed Yaakov that when we come together to form a single entity, there is no longer any competition or jealousy. If one person succeeds and accomplishes, then we all succeed and accomplish, because we are all part of a single organism. And even though we are different from one another, we can nevertheless respect and care for each other, because we are all part of a single “stone,” members of the same team.

An example of this concept is the Gemara's teaching (Sanhedrin 105b) that although all people are prone to jealousy, parents generally do not envy their children, and teachers seldom envy their students. I never met a parent who was jealous of their son who became richer than him, or a bigger talmid chacham. The reason is that parents see their children as extensions of themselves. A child's good

their G-d; they serve Yaakov's G-d ...

“Nothing short of divine intervention would have stopped Lavan from implementing his plans. In comparison to him, Pharaoh was sane. Of course, Pharaoh had ordered the Hebrew sons cast into the Nile... Pharaoh was immoral, an exploiter, a slave-driver, but he was normal. He made money from his slave society. The temptation to exploit the Jews was too strong. He wanted to keep them downtrodden, but he did not try to wipe them out, nor did he wish to harm his own family.

“Lavan proves that the hatred of the Jew can reach psychopathic proportions. It is not only wrong from a moral point of view, but it is an abnormal, sick emotion from a psychiatric standpoint. Only a madman could have devised the Final Solution, the plan to exterminate every single Jew. The hatred of our enemies today is abnormal, and that is what is frightening. Lavan was ready to kill his own daughters because they had adopted a G-d he did not understand; he felt so alienated from them that he kindled an insane hatred against his own children. This is what Chazal meant: *שהוא אהד בלבד עמד* והיא שעמדה לאבותינו ולנו. שלא אהד בלבד עמד עמנו. עמנו לבלותנו, אלא שבכל דור ודור עומדים עלינו לבלותנו. Some of our enemies are worse than Pharaoh... והקדוש ברוך הוא - and Hashem always saves us from their hands.

In Praise of Humility

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

In this week's parasha, parashat Vayetzai, we find Jacob in Beth El, fleeing from his brother Esau, who has threatened to kill him. As the sun sets in Beth El, Jacob places some stones under his head and lays down to sleep.

Jacob dreams the famous dream of a ladder standing on earth, with its top reaching heavenward. Angels of G-d are ascending and descending the ladder. G-d then appears to Jacob and informs him that the earth upon which Jacob is lying will ultimately be given to him and his descendants. The Al-mighty then promises Jacob that his children will be as numerous as the dust of the earth and will spread westward, eastward, northward and southward. Furthermore, G-d confirms, that all the families of the earth will bless themselves by Jacob and his offspring.

When Jacob awakens from his sleep he declares, (Genesis 28:16): *אכן יש השם במקום הזה, ואנכי לא ידעתי*. Surely, G-d is present in this place, and I did not know! Rashi explains that in this verse, Jacob apologizes for the fact that had he known that G-d was present in that place he would not have dared to sleep there. The Ohr HaChaim explains

“If you want to find out what kind of enemies we have, צא ולמד מה בקש לבן הארמי לעשות ליעקב אבינו: שפרעה לא גזר אלא על הזכרים, ולבן בקש לעקר את-הכל. שנאמר: ארמי אבד אבי, ויירד מצרימה ויגר שם במתי מעט, ויהי שם לגוי גדול, עצום ורר. It is not just that he wanted to uproot everything, but that everything included his own flesh and blood! This kind of hatred of the Jew is indicative only of insanity” (*Festival of Freedom*, p.122-125).

Sefer Bereishis is known as sefer ha'siman - the Book of Foreshadowing (Ramban to Bereishis 12:6), for all that happened to our forefathers is a foreshadowing, a blueprint, a pattern of what would happen to their children - what happens to us. As Am Yisrael, Eretz Yisrael and Medinat Yisrael continue to battle the eternal enemies of halacha b'ya'udah - and we mourn for so many kedoshim u'tehorim HY”D since Oct. 7 - dayeinu! - we must demonstrate with full faith and belief that it is only HKB”H Who can save us from their hands; אס-ה' לא יבנה בית שוא (Tehillim 127:1). As He delivered Yaakov and his family from Lavan and Eisav, may He speedily deliver us with everlasting peace and the geula sha'laimoh - immediately and in our days.

alternatively, that Jacob regrets not having sufficiently prepared himself spiritually, so that he could have had a proper vision while he was awake, rather than while asleep.

There are two words in the Hebrew language that mean “I” or “me,”—the simple אני—“ah'nee,” and the more regal and formal אנכי—“ah'no'chee.” When Jacob says: “I did not know,” he uses the Hebrew expression לא אנכי, וידעתי, “and I (“Ah'no'chee”) did not know! The Chassidic commentators have a field day with the word “ah'no'chee.” The Tifferet Shlomo explains that Jacob, in effect, said to himself: “If G-d is indeed in this place, if I helped bring the Divine Presence here, it is because I was able to nullify the “ah'no'chee” in me. Because I had no ego, no hidden agenda or personal ulterior motive, my own self-essence was voided, with the result that everything I did was for the sake of the Al-mighty, to unite His holiness, Blessed be He, and His divine presence.”

When can a human being experience G-d's nearness? Says the Panim Yafot, only when a person is suffused by “I don't know”—only when the person knows that he/she

does not know or pretend to have wisdom and insight into G-d.

The Torah states, in Genesis 1:27, that when the human being was first created, “G-d created the human in His image, in the image of G-d created He him, male and female, created He them.” According to the interpretation of some biblical commentators, including Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, the first human being was created with the potential to be Divine-like. Just as G-d is compassionate, so does the human being have the capacity to be compassionate. Just as G-d is filled with loving-kindness, so the human being should be filled with loving-kindness. Unfortunately, this early human being did not live-up to his divine potential, and, often, chose instead, to act in a bestial manner, seeking self-gratification and utilitarian fulfillment.

That is why, these commentators explain, that in Genesis 2, there is a second story of “creation.” Genesis 2:7 reads: “And the L-rd G-d ‘formed’ the human being out of dust of the earth and He breathed into his nostrils a living breath, and the human being became a living soul.” “Adam I,” as Rabbi Soloveitchik calls him, the primordial human being created in Genesis 1, had Divine potential, but never realized that potential. Therefore, G-d infuses this human being with dust of the earth. “You, Adam, think that you are the end-all-and-be-all of creation? I am telling you,” says G-d, “that you are but ‘dust of the earth’—you are nothing!” The Al-mighty in effect endows the human being with humility. “You may be a homosapien,” says G-d to Adam I, “but you are not a mensch, because you’re filled with pride and arrogance. I will implant within you the quality of humility. Now, let us see how things develop from here.”

The Bible provides many examples of the importance of the quality of humility. So, for example, while Moses had many unparalleled virtues, the Bible singles out his extraordinary humility (Numbers 12:3). Furthermore, the fact that his humility is cited in reference to his behavior toward other human beings and not only G-d, is indeed fascinating. That, says the Noam Megadim, was Moses’ true humility.

The Talmud, in Megillah 31a, in a citation that is recited on Saturday nights in the V’yeetayn L’chah prayer, points

out that wherever there is a Biblical reference to G-d’s greatness and power, we find there a parallel reference of G-d’s humility and grace. The G-d who is transcendent and all-knowing, all-powerful and remote, is the same G-d who is imminent and close, caring and humble. The Pesikda d’rav Kahana, chapter 4, points out that a person stricken with צָרַעַת—*tza’raat* (the biblical disease), is cleansed with both a piece of cedar wood and a hyssop (Leviticus 14:4). This serves to remind the one who is stricken, that the disease צִוְרָעַת—*tzoraat* may have been caused by his hubris, represented by the cedar, the tallest and most powerful tree, and that he may be healed only by humbling himself like the lowest of plants, the hyssop.

The midrash Mechilta reminds us that G-d revealed himself to Moses in a bush, to teach that the loftiest may be found in the lowliest. Similarly, the Talmud in Sotah 5a declares, “We can learn [to be humble] from the Creator, who revealed himself at Sinai (a low mountain), not on high mountains, and in a bush, not in majestic trees.”

The prophet Michah (6:8) has articulated perhaps the most famous statement concerning humility. In his immortal words, the prophet declares, “It has been told you O man, what is good, and what the L-rd does require of you? Only to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with G-d.” The prophet beseeches the people to walk with decency, chastity and purity, underscoring the greatness of G-d’s model. That is why, the Baal Shem Tov was accustomed to say: “To find truth, bend down humbly,” (Derash Tov), and that the test of the real service of G-d is that it leaves behind the feeling of humility.

There is a Chassidic tale, quoted by Louis Jacobs in his volume, *What does Judaism say about ...?* (1973, Keter Publishing House, Jerusalem), that tells of the disciples of the Kotzker Rebbe who paid great deference to a man whom they held to be humble. “Is he a scholar?” they were asked. “No,” was the reply. “Is he a rich man?” “No.” “Is he of good family?” “No.” “Then what has he to be proud about?” But when the Kotzker heard of it he declared: “If the man is no scholar, is poor and of bad family, and yet manages to be humble, this is, indeed a great achievement!”

Haftarat Vayeitzei: Spiritually Integrated Treatment of Emotional Distress: The Patriarch Yaakov and R. Bachya Ibn Pakuda

Rabbi Dr. Eliezer Schnall (From *From Within the Tent: The Haftarah, Essays on the Weekly Haftarah from the Rabbis and Professors of Yeshiva University*, YU Press, 2011)

In chastising the Kingdom of Israel for its sinfulness, the prophet Hoshea refers to its forefather Yaakov, whom Hashem cared for, even in the most difficult circumstances. The verse in the haftarah of Vayeitzei (Hoshea 12:13) recounts “*va-yivrach Yaakov sedeih Aram*” – “Yaakov fled toward the field of Aram.” Forced by his brother Esav’s jealousy and malicious designs, Yaakov fled his familial home in Eretz Yisrael for a faraway land. Hashem’s love and attention protected him during this dark period; but, laments Hoshea, the Benei Yisrael, Yaakov’s descendants, were nonetheless unfaithful to Hashem and His Torah.

R. Matisyahu Salomon, in his *Sefer Matnat Chaim* (Maamarim, pp.48–50) notes that the terminology used by Hoshea in describing Yaakov’s travel, “*va-yivrach Yaakov*” – “Yaakov fled,” strongly contrasts with the wording of the Torah’s own description of that event. The verse in the original narrative (Bereishit 28:10) states simply, “*va-yelekh Charanah*” – “[Yaakov] went toward Charan.” The Torah pointedly refrains from characterizing Yaakov’s travel as “fleeing,” in contradistinction to the verse in Navi.

A careful reading of the events that lead up to Yaakov’s departure from his parents’ home suggests that he was indeed running for his life, as implied by the wording in Hoshea. For example, his mother Rivkah reveals unambiguously that Esav intends to murder him (Bereishit 27:42). She further implores Yaakov, “*berach*” – “flee,” to Lavan’s home in Charan, using the very same verb found in Navi.

The fact that, despite his circumstances, Yaakov’s journey was not described in the Bereishit narrative with the dramatic word “*berach*” – “flee,” used by his mother and by Hoshea, but rather with the simple word “*va-yeilekh*” – “he went,” hints at an important message, suggests R. Salomon. Although Yaakov was in actuality fleeing for his life, his trust in Hashem allowed him to maintain constant equanimity. Rather than questioning His ways, wondering why the Divine plan allowed his wicked brother Esav to prosper while Yaakov himself was forced to run for his life, Yaakov’s faith never wavered. This trust in Hashem allowed him to remain in a state of internal peace, reflected by the usage of “*va-yeilekh*” – “he went,” even as his external

situation was accurately described by others as “*va-yivrach*” – “he fled.”

Religiosity and Mental Health: R. Bachya’s

The above elucidation assumes that faith in God leads to equanimity and inner peace, even in circumstances otherwise assumed to be stressful and anxiety provoking. However, many modern mental health theorists and researchers long assumed that religion was related to pathology, and that it could exacerbate forms of mental illness. However, in recent decades numerous empirical investigations that closely examined such issues reached the opposite conclusion, that religious behavior and faith is associated with mental health and wellness. For example, a meta-analysis conducted by Smith, McCullough, and Poll reviewed data collected from 98,975 participants over 147 studies and concluded that greater religiosity was associated with fewer depressive symptoms.

Although most studies of this type include participants of diverse religious faiths, several that focused exclusively on Jewish populations also found that religious identity or involvement is related to psychological health. However, contemporary researchers are hardly the first to recognize a relationship between Jewish religiosity and mental health. The eleventh century philosopher and ethicist, R. Bachya ben Joseph ibn Paquda, in his magnum opus, *Chovot Ha-Levavot* (Duties of the Heart), refers frequently to this concept. Specifically, in the fourth treatise of his work (“*The Gate of Trust in God*”), R. Bachya opines that one with “trust in God” will develop “a tranquil spirit” and “a sense of calm security and peace” (p. 361); such a person “is happy in whatever situation he is placed in” (p. 363). By contrast, one who is lacking such trust “is in a state of constant distress, protracted anxiety, and sorrow and sadness which never leave him” (p. 449).

Based explicitly on R. Bachya’s exposition, recent theorists hypothesized that trust in God may relate to emotional health via various mechanisms. For example, the belief that God is aware of all that transpires, is gracious and compassionate, and able to bring about any eventuality, would suggest that worry and anxiety are largely unnecessary. Similarly, if the world is not governed by chance, but by an involved omnibenevolent God, then

the hopelessness usually associated with depression should become less likely. To assess their contention that those with trust in God would benefit from better mental health, they created a 24 item questionnaire. Drawing extensively from *Duties of the Heart*, their instrument reflected six core beliefs associated with the construct being evaluated (“God has constant regard for all worldly affairs”; “God has absolute knowledge of what is in people’s best interests”; “no power is greater than God”; “God must be involved for anything to occur”; “God is merciful and generous”; and “God is righteous in judgment”). A group of 565 Jewish participants completed the questionnaire, along with other tests designed to measure a host of psychological factors. Consistent with the researchers’ hypotheses, results demonstrated that those with the greatest trust in God reported the greatest personal happiness, along with less depression and anxiety.

However, the authors of the abovementioned study caution that they cannot infer any casual relationship between trust in God and mental health from their data, given the nature of a cross-sectional study. The principle that correlation is not causation prevents drawing such conclusions. In other words, while it may be that religious faith actually leads to psychological well-being, other possibilities could also account for their findings. For instance, persons already happy and well-adjusted may, for whatever reason, be the ones most attracted to religious beliefs.

The primary clinical research method designed to demonstrate causality is a randomized controlled trial, considered the gold standard in all current investigations of prospective medical and psychological treatments. As such, researchers next set out to determine whether a “spiritually integrated” psychological therapy, based on the prescriptions of R. Bachya’s treatise “*The Gate of Trust in God*” and related classic Jewish teachings, could cause a reduction in anxiety, i.e., successfully treat anxiety. To this end, the researchers collaborated with Orthodox rabbis to develop a two week online treatment program designed to enhance trust in God. The program incorporated readings adapted from rabbinic sources, anecdotes intended to inspire, and related exercises and prayers, all highlighting the theme of trust in God.

In the next step of their study, a total of 125 male and

female adult Jewish volunteers with at least mildly elevated levels of anxiety and worry were randomly assigned to either a treatment or comparison group. Participants in the former were presented with the abovementioned spiritually integrated treatment (SIT) encouraging trust in God. Those assigned to the latter were offered standard anxiety treatment (in the form of a common muscle relaxation technique) or no treatment at all (i.e., a “control” condition). Results, based on participants’ scores on various psychological tests, strongly underscored the efficacy of the SIT. Upon completion of the study, those receiving this treatment reported significantly reduced levels of worry, stress, and depression, along with increased trust in God, compared with controls. In fact, the treatment was so effective that those in the SIT group, although they began with near-clinical levels of worry and stress on average, were found within the normal range when they underwent a follow-up assessment six to eight weeks after the study, a fact that may also demonstrate that effects of the intervention were not fleeting or momentary. Also of note, Jews of various denominations responded to the SIT, not only those identifying with Orthodoxy, highlighting the broad appeal and powerful mental health benefits of a traditional Jewish approach to trust in God.

Conclusion

Clinicians and theorists long doubted that religion was associated with psychological wellbeing. By contrast, the recent research studies cited here provide empirical validation to the opposite contention, demonstrating the efficacy of trust in God in contributing to happiness and mental health. Indeed, religious faith and trust in God are prominent themes throughout classic Jewish literature, including R. Bachya ben Joseph ibn Paquda’s *Chovot Ha-Levavot*. As demonstrated in *Sefer Matnat Chaim*, a comparison of the wording in Parashat Vayeitzei and its corresponding haftarah from Hoshea, highlights our forefather Yaakov as a paragon of trust in God, a characteristic that allowed him to maintain serenity and calm even in the most trying circumstances. Indeed, Yaakov provides a model for those who wish to develop trust in God, both for its mental health benefits and in order to fulfill an important religious imperative.

At Home With God

Rabbi Dr. Kenneth Brander

Upon greeting mourners, the Ashkenazic tradition is to say “*Hamakom Yinachem Etchem*,” translated roughly to ‘may the place comfort you,’ with ‘the place’ being a reference to God. Weeks after the massacre, as the entire Jewish people continues to share in the grief of those whose lives were taken and the courageous soldiers who have fallen, we would be right to ask: why is this the term used to speak of God in times of mourning?

As Yaakov journeys from Be’er Sheva to Charan at the beginning of our Parsha, he encounters a place - “*Vayifga Bamakom*.” (Genesis 28:11) While he will later discover that this place is sacred, the future site of the Beit Hamikdash, he seems at first to merely stumble upon this location. But Chazal read this phrase differently, noting that ‘*Vayifga*’ can also mean to entreat, engage, or demand. Thus they read “*Vayifga Bamakom*” not as ‘and he stumbled upon the place,’ but rather as ‘and he entreated God’ - with ‘the place’ being a reference to the divine. (Breishit Raba 68:9) It is ostensibly on this basis that the Gemara (Brachot 26b) infers that Yaakov instituted the prayer of Maariv, entreating God at night, when clarity has been obfuscated by the onset of both physical and existential darkness.

When Yaakov faces his moment of fear, fleeing the brother who wishes to kill him, he turns to God with a personal plea of salvation. In that moment, when he yearns for the comfort of divine closeness, he looks to God as a home, a “*makom*” in which he may open his heart and take refuge. The physical space of the Beit Hamikdash played exactly this function for generations, with mourners being greeted by other worshippers with the words “may the one who dwells in this place console you.” (Middot 2:2) The sense that God is near and accessible is the bedrock of faith in moments of challenge, crisis, and grief. Even now, as we pray for the welfare of our homes and our homeland, we feel ourselves calling out to the God who is intimately tied up with this place, tied up with us, asking for the comfort of closeness even in the face of tragedy.

We are witness to a surge in religious activity throughout Israel, with soldiers chanting the Shema and blowing shofar as they prepare for battle, and thousands of sets of Tzitzit, prepared by volunteers around the country, sent up to the front lines. Tehilim are being recited throughout Israel and around the world, as Jews of every stripe pray for the hostages, the soldiers, the wounded, and the grieving.

So many people are seeking out the presence of God in this trying moment, to feel that the divine is with us.

And as we approach God, we find that God is with us in this moment, sharing in our distress. Chazal teach us that whenever the Jewish people suffers, God suffers alongside us. (Megillah 29a). Our pain is His pain, our sadness is His grief, and our salvation is His redemption (ibid.). For God is not far away; God is here. The whole land of Israel, indeed the whole world, is the place where God resides, joining us in our struggle, imposing upon Himself a degree of imperfection as He sheds a tear for our collective pain. It is this God, “*haMakom*,” whom Jacob meets as he forges the Jewish people, and this is the God to whom we turn in our moments of crisis, as we find ourselves today.