

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

cleaved to *tiferet* (balancing splendor), and this quality became more attainable than that of his forebears.”

This insight, that the world of duality is bound together by a larger, unified whole, is typical of what A.H. Maslow described as a classic characteristic of a “peak experience”: “In peak experiences, the dichotomies, polarities, and conflicts of life tend to be transcended or resolved. That is to say, there tends to be a moving toward the perception of unity and integration of the world. The person himself tends to move toward fusion, integration, and unity and away from splitting, conflicts, and oppositions.” As Yaakov’s descendants, we can take part in this kind of mystical consciousness whenever we encounter the experience of centeredness or concentration, stable clarity, and the desire to seek out harmony in a divided world, or our divided self.

While the achievement of a peak divine experience may be thought to be the height of spiritual development, the Biblical text challenges our perception by hinting at the potent possibility of encountering in more mundane matters. During Yaakov’s dream vision of angels ascending and descending between worlds, the word *v’hinei*—‘and look!’—occurs four times, heightening the reader’s sense of amazement and perception to the uniqueness of the moment. Our surprise is even mirrored in Yaakov’s assessment of his encounter “Indeed, YHVH is in this place, and I did not know!”. In the very next scene, as Yaakov observes the Haranite shepherds rolling away and returning the stone on top of a well in a field while watering their herds. There is nothing otherworldly here, yet the text employs the word *v’hinei* twice, subtly connecting this moment to the awe-filled moment which preceded it. What is the wisdom that Yaakov is receiving from the “lower edge of Heaven” here?

The Sfas Emes—the second Rebbe of Gur—sees this as Yaakov’s ability to see divinity in the inner recesses of reality, not only in the transcendent heights: “This reality—the well in the field—is found in everything and in every one of Israel. Every thing contains a life-giving point that sustains it. Even that which appears to be as neglected as a field has such a hidden point within it. The human mind is always able to know this intuitively..With wisdom and intellect a person understands this inwardness: within all things dwells ‘the power of the Maker, within the made.’” There is wondrousness in our differentiated, dualistic reality, comprised of mechanical, rote activity and objects which can go unnoticed and ignored. The depth of the well remains abundantly available as a resource when wonder and amazement cannot be accessed.

As the living inheritors of Yaakov’s name and spiritual heritage, we can continually practice to become his ramp/ladder, with our foundation on the ground, and our heads reaching the heavens. Shabbat shalom.



TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Vayetse

December 7, 2019 | 9 Kislev 5780

Annual | Bereshit 28:10-32:3 (Etz Hayim p. 166-187; Hertz p. 106-117)
 Triennial Bereshit 28:10-30:13 (Etz Hayim p. 166-176; Hertz p. 106-111)
 Haftarah | Hosea 12:13-14:10 (Etz Hayim p. 188-193; Hertz p. 118-121)

D’var Torah: A Bridge Between Worlds

Rabbi Zac Kamenetz, Conservative Yeshiva Alum, is Director of Jewish Living & Learning at the JCC of San Francisco & Co-Director of Beloved Berkeley

Yaakov Avinu is, as Robert Alter describes, “a man of liminal experiences” and his life is comprised of a complex series of binary divisions: “twin brothers struggling..., two sisters struggling..., flocks divided...[his] materials blessing... divided into two camps”, ultimately becoming the bearer of two names. While Alter’s characterization might imply Yaakov as a split persona, the mystics of the Zohar rather saw him as a meeting point between the higher and lower worlds: “...the upper edge of Heaven...the lower edge of Heaven. This was inherited by Yaakov, that he shines from edge to edge, from the first edge, until the last edge, which is for he stands in the middle.” (Zohar 1:1b)

Awareness of the “upper edge of Heaven” is achieved by Yaakov in his first direct encounter with the Divine during his nocturnal vision of the ramp/ladder reaching the heavenly realm. The Baal Shem Tov – the founder of Hasidism – relates the particular intuitive knowledge Yaakov attains during this expanded state of consciousness: “Yaakov saw with wisdom that was necessary for the reality to be governed by the balancing between *hesed* (compassion) and *gevurah* (restriction), for if

not, the world would not be able to exist, pulled toward one particular edge. Thus, he

D'var Haftarah: Fallible Leadership

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

The prophets never lost their preoccupation with the nature of Israel's governance and its flaws. When the monarchy was first established, the prophet Shmuel cautioned that monarchic rule would quickly fall into corruption and abuse of power, and would lead people to become alienated from God. In this week's haftarah, Hosea follows suit and goes a step further in his critique. He fears not only the people's being misled about the king's personal righteousness and intentions, but also that the people will develop the false expectation that salvation might be found in the hands of an earthly king: "Yet, I am the Lord your God ever since the land of Egypt, and no God save Me shall you know and no rescuer save for Me... You are ruined, O Israel, for who will come to your aid? Where is your king, then? Let him rescue you in all of your towns. And your leaders to whom you said, 'Give me a king and nobles.' But I will give you a king in My wrath and take him away in My anger." (13:4;9-11)

Clearly, Hosea bewails human overdependence on, and idolization of, those with political power, reminding his fellow countrymen that worship was meant exclusively for God. The rule of kings and political leaders is ephemeral and their power is fleeting. They are neither reliable nor totally responsible and, as the prophet suggests, should be treated appropriately.

That which Hosea only alludes to in his prophecy, is made explicit by the commentator, Rabbi David Kimche (12th century Provence). He points to the very first king, Shaul, as an example of the fallibility of leadership. He asserts that God made him king against His (God's) better judgment and ultimately removed him from office on account of flaws in his performance as king. He and other commentators give numerous examples of other kings who failed both Israel and Judea in their roles as leaders through acts of idolatry, dishonesty and moral turpitude.

The relations between kings and prophets was always charged, each vying for power and influence. Still, the message delivered here and earlier by the prophet Samuel should be taken seriously. It is not enough to wield power. With power comes responsibility. And for the Jewish tradition, that means leading honestly, morally, and in a manner that brings glory and honor to both God and the nation.

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learning and spiritual growth as individuals and in their communities in North America, Israel, and around the world.

Parashah Study: Leah & Not Leah

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

In the end of the past parashah Yaakov is instructed by his father to leave his home and head to his maternal uncle Lavan to find a wife among his daughters. Alone and fleeing from his brother Esav (whose blessing he took by deceit), he arrives at Haran and meets his cousin Rachel.

TEXT - Bereshit 29:18-25

Yaakov loved Rachel. He said [to Lavan]: "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel" ...So, Yaakov served seven years for Rachel and they seemed to him but a few days because of his love for her. Then Yaakov said to Lavan: Give me my wife for my time is fulfilled, that I might cohabit with her. And Lavan ...made a feast. When the evening came, he took his daughter Leah and brought her to him, and he cohabited with her... And it was in the morning and, behold, she was Leah! He said to Lavan: What is this that you have done to me? I serve you for Rachel, why did you deceive me?!

- Whose voice(s) is/are missing here? Where would you have inserted those voices? What might they say?
- Could Yaakov have anticipated that this might not go smoothly? If so, why?
- What does the Torah mean by "it was in the morning and, behold, she was Leah!?" We (the readers) know that Leah was brought to Yaakov the evening before! How could this have happened?

COMMENTARY - Rashi on Bereshit 29:25

And it was in the morning and behold! She was Leah! - But at night, she was not Leah. For Yaakov had given signs to Rachel, but when she saw that they were bringing Leah to him, she (Rachel) said: "Now, my sister will be put to shame!" so she transmitted those signs to her. - [from Meg. 13b]

- Whose point of view is given when we are told "but at night she was not Leah"? What question does Rashi attempt to answer after that statement?
- While in the Torah text Yaakov accuses Lavan of deceiving him, Rashi's comment suggests that those words should [also] be directed at someone else. Who is that? Why does Rashi suggest that this person was part of the deceit?
- Rashi attempts to take us into the complicated relationship of two sisters and one husband. What might be Rachel's conflicting loyalties and interests?
- What do you think of Rachel's act – is it kindness?

We welcome your comments: torahsparks@uscj.org

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