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Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

"Go and learn what Laban the Aramean sought to do to our father Jacob. Pharaoh made his decree only about the males whereas Laban sought to destroy everything." This passage from the Haggadah on Pesach -- evidently based on this week's parsha -- is extraordinarily difficult to understand.

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

Second, nowhere in the parsha do we find that Laban actually tried to destroy Jacob. He deceived him, tried to exploit him, and chased after him when he fled. As he was about to catch up with Jacob, G-d appeared to him in a dream at night and said: 'Be very careful not to say anything, good or bad, to Jacob.' (Gen. 31:22). When Laban complains about the fact that Jacob was trying to escape, Jacob replies: "Twenty years now I have worked for you in your estate -- fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for some of your flocks. You changed my wages ten times!" (31:41). All this suggests that Laban behaved outrageously to Jacob, treating him like an unpaid labourer, almost a slave, but not that he tried to "destroy" him -- to kill him as Pharaoh tried to kill all male Israelite children.

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

How then are we to understand it?

Perhaps the answer is this. Laban's behaviour is the paradigm of anti-Semites through the ages. It was not so much what Laban did that the Haggadah is referring to, but what his behaviour gave rise to, in century after century. How so?

Laban begins by seeming like a friend. He offers Jacob refuge when he is in flight from Esau who has vowed to kill him. Yet it turns out that his behaviour is less generous than self-interested and calculating. Jacob works for him for seven years for Rachel. Then on the wedding night Laban substitutes Leah for Rachel, so that to marry Rachel, Jacob has to work another seven years. When Joseph is born to Rachel, Jacob tries to leave. Laban protests. Jacob works another six years, and then realises that the situation is untenable. Laban's sons are accusing him of getting rich at Laban's expense. Jacob senses that Laban himself is becoming hostile. Rachel and Leah agree, saying, "he treats us like strangers! He has sold us and spent the money!" (31:14-15).

Jacob realises that there is nothing he can do or say that will persuade Laban to let him leave. He has no choice but to escape. Laban then pursues him, and were it not for G-d's warning the night before he catches up with him, there is little doubt that he would have forced Jacob to return and live out the rest of his life as his unpaid labourer. As he says to Jacob the next day: "The daughters are my daughters! The sons are my sons! The flocks are my flocks! All that you see is mine!" (31:43). It turns out that everything he had ostensibly given Jacob, in his own mind he had not given at all.

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

What arouses his anger, his rage, is that Jacob maintains his dignity and independence. Faced with an

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

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

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

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

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

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

What the sages are saying in the Haggadah now becomes clear. Pharaoh was a one-time enemy of the Jews, but Laban exists, in one form or another, in age after age. The syndrome still exists today. As Amy Chua notes, Israel in the context of the Middle East is a conspicuously successful minority. It is a small country, a minority; it is successful and it is conspicuously so. Somehow, in a tiny country with few natural resources, it has outshone its neighbours. The result is envy that becomes anger that becomes hate. Where did it begin? With Laban.

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

If Laban is the eternal paradigm of hatred of conspicuously successful minorities, then Jacob is the eternal paradigm of the human capacity to survive the hatred of others. In this strange way Jacob becomes the voice of hope in the conversation of humankind, the living proof that hate never wins the final victory; freedom does. *© 2016 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"And Jacob rose up early in the morning, and took the stone that he had placed under his head, and set it up as a monument, and poured oil on the top of it." [Gen. 28:18]

Our Biblical portion, Vayetze, tells of Jacob's journey into exile and, not coincidentally, the first instance of a monument (matzeva) to G-d in Jewish history. Until this point, the great Biblical personalities have erected altars (mizbahot, singular, mizbeah), to G-d: Noah when he exited from the ark [ibid. 8:20], Abraham when he first came to Israel [ibid. 12:8], and Isaac when he dedicated the city of Be'er Sheva [ibid. 26:25]. An altar is clearly a sacred place dedicated for ritual sacrifice. But what is a monument? An

understanding of this first monument in Jewish history will help us understand the true significance of the Land of Israel to the Jewish People.

Fleeing the wrath of his brother, Esau, Jacob leaves his Israeli parental home and sets out for his mother's familial home in Haran. His first stop, as the sun is setting, is in the fields outside Luz (Beit El) – the last site in Israel he will spend the night before he begins his exile. He dreams of a ladder standing (mutzav) on land with its top reaching heavenwards, "and behold, angels of G-d are ascending and descending on it" [ibid. v. 12]. G-d is standing (nitzav) above the ladder, and promises Jacob that he will return to Israel and that this land will belong to him and his descendants eternally. Upon awakening, the patriarch declares the place to be "the House of G-d and the Gate of Heaven" [ibid. v. 17]. He then builds a monument (matzeva) from the stones he has used as a pillow and pours oil over it.

Jacob's experience leaves us in no doubt: a monument is a symbol of a relationship that stands forever. It is the physical expression of a ladder linking Heaven and earth, the Land of Israel and the Holy Temple of Jerusalem (House of G-d), which connects the descendants of Jacob to the Divine forever. A monument is a gateway to Heaven, a House of G-d on earth. The Land of Israel, with its laws of tithes, Sabbatical years and Jubilee, magnificently expresses the link between humanity and the Almighty, and the promise of Jacob's return from exile bears testimony to the eternity of the relationship between the People of Israel and the Land of Israel. Every link with G-d expresses eternity.

Furthermore, a monument is made of stone, the Hebrew word for stone being even, comprised of the letters aleph-bet-nun. It is also a contraction of parent-child (Hebrew, av-ben) which also uses the letters aleph-bet-nun symbolizing the eternity of family continuity ("Binyan Adei Ad" – an eternal building from generation to generation). And the monument is consecrated with oil, just as the Messianic Redeemer will be consecrated with oil – and herald eternal peace and redemption for Israel and the world.

In exile, Jacob spends two decades with his uncle Laban, who does his utmost to assimilate his bright and capable nephew / son-in-law into a life of comfort and business in exile. Jacob resists, escaping Laban's blandishments, and eventually secretly absconds with his wives, children and livestock to return to Israel. Laban pursues them, and they agree to a covenant-monument: "And Jacob took a stone, and set it up for a monument" [ibid. 31:45]. Here again, we find the expression of an eternal promise: Abraham's descendants will never completely assimilate – not even into the most enticing Diaspora.

The Torah continues: "And Jacob said to his brethren, gather stone, and they took stones and made a heap…. And Laban called [the monument] Yegar-Sahaduta, but Jacob called it Gal-Ed" [ibid. v. 46-47].

The wily Laban wants the monument to bear an Aramean name, a symbol of the gentile aspect of Jacob's ancestry, while Jacob firmly insists upon the purely Hebrew inscription of Gal-Ed – the eternal, Israelite language.

When they take their respective oaths at the site of the monument, the deceptive Laban still endeavors to manipulate: "May the G-d of Abraham and the god of Nahor, the gods of their fathers, judge between us' [ibid. v. 53]. Jacob refuses to give an inch; this monument must give testimony to the eternity of his commitment to Israel, both the faith and the land: "But Jacob swore to the fear of his father Isaac' [ibid.]. Jacob's response is a subtle – but emphatic – rejection of Laban's attempt at assimilation.

Although this monument is erected with Laban after Jacob leaves his home, it is nevertheless still established in exile; therefore it is not anointed with oil. Whatever important role the Diaspora may have played in the history of Israel – as long as we maintained our unique values and lifestyle – the oil of redemption will emerge only in the Land of Israel. When Jacob returns to Beit El, the House of G-d, he will erect another stone monument in order to fulfill his oath [ibid. 35:14]. And, of course, that monument – erected to G-d in the Land of Israel – will be anointed with oil.

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Yaakov is forced to flee from home and family because of the threat that his brother Eisav poses. He is informed by his mother that his brother, in a moment of jealousy, frustration and anger, threatened to kill him. Yaakov is no physical weakling; he is not the pale yeshiva student, the caricature of nineteenth century Haskalah literature. In fact, we see in this week's Torah reading the description of the great physical strength of Yaakov. He is able to single-handedly remove the rock that covers the well of water, a task that requires many ordinary people to do so in concert.

Later in the biblical narrative of his life, we will see how he is able to wrestle with an angel and prevail and to accomplish other feats of physical prowess. So, why does Yaakov flee from his home and rightful place and embark on a long journey of exile? Why does he not simply stay and fight it out with Eisav?

Later, upon his return to the Land of Israel, it is apparent that he is willing to go to war with his brother in order to protect himself and his family. So, why does he shy away from confronting Eisav directly when he is threatened? He certainly has the physical ability to do so if he desired to physically defend himself against any violence emanating from his brother.

Yaakov will prove himself to be a valiant warrior not only spiritually but in the physical world as well. If so, then why should he be forced to flee instead of standing his ground and justifiably defending himself against the aggression of Eisav?

Yaakov was assigned the characteristic trait of truth by the prophets of Israel. This has baffled many throughout the ages because in the biblical narrative regarding his life we find that Yaakov was forced many times to resort to tactics that were understandably necessary but did not meet the bar of absolute truth.

Because of this obvious contradiction between theory and reality, many different interpretations have been given as to how to judge the truthfulness of Yaakov. The one that appeals most to me is that Yaakov remained true to himself, to his inner being and to his natural personality. Yaakov never desired to be what he was not. He never wished to be like his brother Eisav, a man of force and violence.

His inner self was to be a whole and peaceful person, a scholar and a dweller in tents. Even when life forced him to use the tactics of Eisav, to be a man of aggressive prowess, his inner self always remained true to his nature of peace, harmony and perfection. Being true to one's own inner self, not wishing to be what we are not, not aping the behavior of others – be they celebrities, political leaders, sports champions or simply a reflection of the changing mores of a bewildered society – is the greatest lesson that we can learn from the life of our father Yaakov. And that is the greatest ultimate truth that one can achieve in life. *© 2016 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com*

RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

The Torah states: "And (Jacob) had a dream and in his dream there was a ladder standing on the ground and its top reached the Heavens" (Genesis 28:12). What insight into life can we learn from this dream?

The Chofetz Chaim, Rabbi Yisroel Meir Kagan, cites the idea expressed by many commentators that the ladder Jacob saw in his dream symbolizes the situation of every person in this world. There are two actions a person performs on a ladder. Either he goes up from the bottom to the top, or else he goes down from the top to the bottom. Each day in a person's life he faces new challenges. If he has the willpower and self-discipline to overcome those challenges, he goes up in his spiritual level. If, however, a person fails to exercise the necessary self-control, he lowers himself. This is our daily task, to climb higher every day.

There is no standing in one place. When challenges arise, you will either behave in an elevated manner and grow from the experience or you will fail. Learn to appreciate the daily challenges that face you. Every difficulty is a means of elevating yourself. Every time you overcome a negative impulse you grow as a person. When a person climbs a ladder, he feels his progress with each step. So, too, with your daily victories over your negative impulses. Feel your progress and you will have the motivation to continue climbing.

Whenever you see a ladder, let it serve as a reminder of Jacob's ladder. When passing near a ladder ask yourself, "Am I presently climbing in my spiritual level or am I going down?" If you ever answer that you are going down, do not despair. Rather, strengthen yourself and start climbing from where you are.

Pirke Avos 1:2 "Shimon the righteous... used to say: The world stands on three things -- Torah study, on the service of G-d (prayer) and acts of kindness." *Dvar Torah based on Growth Through Torah by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin © 2016 Rabbi K. Packouz*

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Although we are given a tremendous amount of information about their lives, it is certain that not every event in the lives of our matriarchs and patriarchs is mentioned in the Torah. One wonders then, why, in this week's Torah portion, the seemingly trivial story of Yaakov (Jacob) lifting the stone after seeing Rachel (Rachel) is mentioned. (Genesis 29:10)

Ramban writes that the incident teaches a lesson about faith. If one believes in G-d, one will be able to do the impossible. In Ramban's words, "scripture speaks at lengths about the story to teach us 'those who trust in the Lord, their strength is renewed.' (Isaiah 40:31) For behold, Yaakov our father came from his travels tired, and he removed a stone that shepherds of three flocks could not."

This comment also gives us an insight into dealing with suffering. Contrary to popular thinking, perhaps the primary issue should not be why we suffer, for there is no real answer to this question. It is sometimes beyond human comprehension. This question also tries to understand the past, by examining an event that has already happened. We, of course, have no say over events that are behind us. Rather than ask why, perhaps we should focus on what our actions should be following the suffering. What rather than why is a practical approach, not a philosophical inquiry. It is also a question that deals with the future over which we have control and not with the past, over which we have none.

While we ask this all important question of "what shall we do in the face of suffering," we also wonder "what will G-d do as we suffer?" The comment

by Ramban seems to be suggesting that, when we suffer, G-d gives us the strength to transcend, to reach beyond and to do things we never ever thought we could do. As G-d is infinite, G-d, who has created us in His image, has given us the power to sometimes reach towards infinity, to do the impossible.

In our synagogue we run programs for what we call "Special Friends" - the physically and mentally challenged. I once asked a mother of one “Special Friend” the following: If someone would have told you 25 years ago that on the 25th birthday of your daughter you'd still be diapering her, wheeling her in a stroller, giving her milk from a bottle-would you be able to handle it?

Her response was that she couldn't imagine prevailing over such hardship. But she has prevailed and has given love all these years magnificently. No one is born with this abundant love and commitment; yet the words of Isaiah ring true -- with the help of G-d we can overcome.

We constantly hear about great people in the world. I always have found this strange, because it seems to me that there may not be great people in this world, only great challenges. Faced with those challenges, ordinary people can rise to do the extraordinary. The ability of the average person to do the unusual, is the way G-d works through people.

Perhaps the well of water in the Yaakov narrative represents life itself. The water, as it often does in the Torah, represents life itself. The rock on top of the well reminds us that all too often our life energies are blocked and we feel a weight above us that is difficult to bear. No matter how impossible we thought something was, Yaakov’s actions remind us that we can sometimes dig deep, roll up our sleeves, take a breath, and with the help of G-d, transform it into the possible. *Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale*

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Simultaneous Smachot

Translated for the Encyclopedia Talmudit
by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

At first glance it would seem from the actions and words of Lavan in this week’s portion when saying to Yaakov “finish this week and then we will give you Rachel(to marry)”, that we derive the law that one may not mingle two joyous occasions together (Ein Mearvin Simcha B’simcha). However the Talmud (Moed Katan 9a) derives this axiom from the behavior of King Solomon at the dedication of the Beit Hamikdash. During that dedication which occurred at the same time as the holiday of Succot, King Solomon made sure that the week of celebration for the dedication of the Temple did not interfere with the Holiday of Succot.

One might explain this law forbidding the “mingling of celebrations” by postulating that it is difficult for one to properly celebrate two smachot (celebrations) simultaneously. This is why we do not celebrate any weddings on a Chag (Jewish Holiday) or Chol Hamoed (the intermediate days of a holiday).

One might ask –What is the law when celebrating a wedding on the holiday of Purim? Does the law of “mingling Smachot” only apply to a holiday that is derived from the Torah (as Succot) or does it apply as well to a holiday which is mandated by our Rabbis (as Purim is)? From the behavior of Lavan, it would seem that it really wouldn’t matter- since the seven days of rejoicing following a marriage is certainly mandated by our Rabbis, yet Lavan with Jacob’s concurrence waited the week so as not to mix the two Smachot.

Upon further investigation, one might also conclude that the law of mixing smachot is only applicable to a wedding, for a Brit Millah (Circumcision) and the subsequent festive meal (seudah), or a Pidyon Haben (the redeeming of a first born) would be celebrated on the holiday regardless of the conflict. Additionally the only time that we reference Simcha (joyousness) is at a wedding when we say the words Shehasimcha bmono (the joyousness is present) and thus the true Simcha is at a wedding.

Additionally, according to Torah law, a man may marry several women at the same time under the same Chupah, or even (if not for the fear that it would cause enmity and jealousy) different couples may be married off at the same time under the same Chupah, and there would not be a problem with the “mingling of Smachot”. Hence we might conclude that this law of “mingling” only applies when there are two distinct and different Smachot as with a wedding and a Chag, however when the smachot are all the same theme, this law would not apply.

If we apply all this to our Parsha, Lavan could have allowed the wedding of both Leah and Rachel simultaneously on condition that they would both celebrate the subsequent seven days of celebration (shivat yemei hamishteh) separately.

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

In Parshat Vayetzei, Yaakov (Jacob) begins a journey to find himself a wife, and essentially begin his life. But when he sleeps and dreams of G-d telling him that the land he's sleeping on is Holy, he is compelled to bring sacrifices, and promises to give a percentage of what he has back to G-d as Maaser (tithe -- which we still practice today). In the Torah, however, it says that "Yaakov woke up from his sleep and said "Surely Hashem is present in this place and I did not know"

(28:16), and shortly later it says that "Yaakov woke up early in the morning and took the stone that he placed around his head and set it up as a pillar" (28:18). Did Yaakov go back to sleep? It seems that he woke up twice. Furthermore, why did he suddenly feel compelled to promise to give a percentage of what he earns?

One way to answer these questions is by examining the dream Yaakov had. In the dream, G-d told Yaakov that the land he was sleeping on would be his, for his children, that He would protect Yaakov, and eventually return him to his land. Why would the land, which is the least spiritual thing in the world, be so important that G-d had to assure Yaakov that it would be his, and that he would be returned to it? The answer to this question is also the reason Yaakov 'woke up' the first time... He didn't physically wake up, but merely realized how much potential land had. As Yaakov put it...." This is the gate to heaven". Through working on the land, and through using it to fulfill G-d's will, we can create a gate to heaven. Land is no longer just land, but has now become more sacred, simply because it gives us more opportunities to do Mitzvot (positive deeds), thereby becoming more spiritual. Giving a percentage of what we earn to charity is ALSO a way of using a very earthly item (money) for a higher purpose, which is why Yaakov saw it necessary to commit to it right then.

We too must realize that there is nothing in this world that can't be used to elevate us spiritually, and it's our job to find ways to do just that. So we use Email to read Dvar Torahs, which is great, but it shouldn't stop there. We must use food, clothes, money, and even nice scenery to bring us closer to the "gates of heaven". The sooner we realize how much potential there is for us to grow spiritually in this world, the sooner we can "get growing".

RABBI ELIAKIM KOENIGSBERG

TorahWeb

"Vayifga bamakom...vayishkav bamakom hahu -- and he encountered the place...and he slept in that place (Vayeitzei 28:11)" The word vayifga sounds like Yaakov Avinu unexpectedly arrived at the place. Chazal explain (Chullin 91a) that this indicates that the earth contracted for him -- kaftza lo ha'aretz. When Yaakov arrived in Charan, he said to himself, "Could it be that I passed a place where my forefathers davened, and I didn't daven there?" He set his mind to return, and the earth contracted and brought Har Hamoriyah to him.

If Hashem wanted Yaakov to daven at the makom hamikdash, why didn't He stop him there on his way to Charan? Rashi answers that since Yaakov didn't have the desire in his heart to daven when he passed the makom hamikdash, Hashem didn't stop him. Only after he set his mind to return to the place, and he traveled to Beis Eil, did the earth contract on his behalf.

This shows the power of a heartfelt desire. When a person demonstrates a genuine desire for spiritual achievement, and he puts in effort to try to attain his goal, Hashem gives him the siyata dishmaya he needs to complete the task. And Hashem is even willing to "move mountains" -- to give the person extra strength and resources -- to be able to achieve his goal.

The Ramban takes Rashi's idea one step further. He points out that from the words of the Gemara (both in Chullin 91a and Sanhedrin 95a) it would seem that Yaakov did not even return to Beis Eil. But rather, the moment he felt a desire in his heart to return to Har Hamoriyah, the earth contracted and brought the mountain to him. This shows that just having the desire for spiritual growth can bring divine assistance even before a person actually invests any effort in the process.

The importance of desire and effort is alluded to in the end of the pasuk as well. Rashi quotes from the Midrash that the phrase "and he slept in that place" implies that Yaakov slept only there, but for the previous fourteen years he didn't sleep because he was busy learning Torah in the yeshiva of Sheim and Eiver.

This statement of Chazal cannot be taken literally because the Gemara (Shavuos 25a) says that if a person swears that he will not sleep for three days, we immediately give him malkus for taking a sh'vuas shav (an unnecessary oath) because it is impossible for a person to go for more than three days without sleeping. What Chazal probably meant is that Yaakov Avinu didn't sleep in a bed for fourteen years. He didn't have a good night's sleep. He simply dozed off when he felt tired. But that still seems like an incredible feat. How was Yaakov able to go for fourteen years without sleeping normally?

Reb Chaim Shmulevitz (Sichos Mussar #32) explains that this shows the importance of willpower. When a person has a desire to accomplish something, he sometimes can discover hidden strengths and abilities that he never thought he had. Yaakov Avinu knew that how he spent his years in yeshiva would determine the kind of person he would become. So he pushed himself to his limits, and he discovered wellsprings of energy that he never knew he had. That is why he was able to forge ahead, learning Torah for fourteen years without a deep, comfortable sleep.

But perhaps there might be another explanation for Yaakov Avinu's superhuman ability. Since Yaakov had a genuine desire to learn Torah and he invested effort in the process, Hashem gave him extra siyata dishmaya. He gave him additional strength, beyond his natural abilities, to enable him to accomplish his dream. Chazal say, "Haba l'taheir, m'sayin oso -- one who comes to purify himself receives divine assistance. (Shabbos 104a)" Hashem is ready to help those who truly desire to accomplish spiritually. But the prerequisite for receiving that gift is that a person must be a ba l'taheir. He has to take the first step, like

Yaakov Avinu, to show that he has the desire to achieve and that he is willing to put in effort to accomplish his goal.

RABBI YITZCHOK ADLERSTEIN

Be'eros

"Rochel was jealous of her sister. She said to Yaakov, 'Give me children!'" Be'er Yosef: "Rashi cites a midrash that Rochel's jealousy was of Leah's good deeds. She reasoned that only Leah's righteousness could account for Leah's fecundity and her own barrenness, and was jealous of the merit that Leah possessed that she herself lacked."

This interpretation seems to make the rest of the episode unravel. If Rochel decided that her plight stemmed from the insufficiency of her own merit relative to Leah, she seems to have hit on the wrong strategy. She should have focused on Leah's actions, and learned from her sister how to become more righteous! What prompted her to look for short cut through the prayer of her husband? She should have strived to multiply her own merit, and deserve children in her own right.

When we first meet Leah, we are told that her "eyes were tender."(Bereishis 29:17) The gemara (Bava Basra 123A, cited by Rashi) offers us the back-story. The talk of the "street" was the shidduchim -- to-be between the sons of Yitzchok and the daughters of Lavan. Everyone knew what would happen: the older daughter would go to the older son. Naturally, Leah had some interest in this story, and began inquiring about her apparent intended. She quickly learned that his reputation preceded him -- but not in a good way. His evil exploits were a matter of record. The more she learned about Esav, the more she was repulsed by him -- and took to crying incessantly. When Hashem saw how much Leah hated Esav's lifestyle and misadventures, He had pity upon her, and gave her the gift of the ability to bear children.

Rochel, on the other hand, led a charmed life. She was aware of the blessing of her attractiveness. More importantly, she knew she was destined to marry Yaakov the tzaddik. Her demeanor was one of happiness and th ankfulness -- and hence her dilemma. She understood that her sister had achieved great merit in fully reacting against Esav's deeds with disgust. Because Leah thought she was going to be drawn into his life, she was able to personalize the rejection of his evil. While Rochel certainly rejected Esav's evil, she knew that she could not feel it as intensely as her sister. She could not attain Leah's merit, because she was an entirely a different person. Lacking that merit, she turned to her husband to daven for her, hoping that his merit could compensate for what she could not supply.

We know that Yaakov spurned her request -- and used some sharp, acerbic language to boot. Essentially he told her that this was her problem, and not his. He had children through Leah. Rochel was the one in trouble.

Rochel was not only rejected, but Yaakov's apparent coldness got her thinking. Perhaps, if I can't provide children to Yaakov, he won't really need me. He will consid er divorcing me. If he does, what will happen if Esav then sets his eyes on me? (Rashi, in fact, on pasuk 22 writes that even though there was no divorce contemplated, Esav did set his eyes upon Rochel, and desired to make her his!)

The upshot of this nightmare was that Rochel began to react to Esav exactly the way her sister had! In her new position of vulnerability, she was able to look upon Esav with heightened contempt. When that happened, Hashem rewarded her with a pregnancy.

But why should having children hinge on hatred for Esav. We know that both Rochel and Leah were tzidkoniyos. Both achieved prophesy. Did they have no other merits that justified giving them children?

Perhaps this was the reason. Our meforshim are troubled that Yitzchok could father an Esav after his experience at the Akeidah. There, he had become a pure, elevated olah. How did Esav become part of his family?

Some of them pin the birth o f Esav on Rivka, Yitzchok's wife. There was an ample font of evil in her familial roots; she had not purged herself entirely from its burden. Some of the unresolved evil in her background took shape in the person of Esav. (These commentators find support for this theory in the verse that predicted the clashing personalities of the two children she would bear. "There are two nations in your womb." Since this was written in response to her question about her difficult pregnancy, why would the Torah emphasize the words, "in your womb?" Rather, the Torah means to localize the source of Esav and his evil. Because he was a product of Rivka's womb -- and not of the purity of Yitzchok alone -- Esav was well connected to the evil that was a legacy of Rivka's forebears. This is also evidenced by the reactions of his parents when Esav marries women not to their liking. "They were a source of grief to Yitzchok and Rivkah." (Bereishis 26:35)

A midrash (Bereishis Rabbah 65:2) sees precision in the word order: they caused more grief to Yitzchok, who had been entirely purged of all evil, than they caused his wife. Because Esav's evil ultimately was sourced in her family roots, Rivkah did not react against it the same say.

Divine Providence had a different plan for Yaakov. His progeny had to be united in their commitment to their father's principles and message. Somehow, the residual evil in the family had to be dealt with. HKBH engineered the context within which their mothers would operate. First Leah, and then Rochel,

were placed in situations where they would develop a fierce contempt for Esav and all that he stood for. Only in this way could they become suitable mothers of the shivtei Kah; only this way would they merit having children. (Based on Be'er Yosef, Bereishis 30:1)

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

Well Check-Up

Fleeing from his brother Esav, Yaakov travels to his uncle Lavan in Charan; as he nears the town, he sees a peculiar sight. He sees a field and in the middle of it, he spots a well with a large rock placed upon its mouth. Three flocks of sheep with their shepherds nearby are standing near it, waiting to be watered. But the shepherds are just standing and waiting. It seems that they have no work to do and are about to take the sheep back to their pens. The flocks are crouching and waiting for something. Yaakov is very curious. So Yaakov greets them, "My brothers!" he begins. "Where are you from?" They tell him that they are from Charan. Yaakov inquires about the welfare of Lavan and his family, and then Yaakov asks the question. "The day is yet large; it is not yet time to bring the sheep back. Why don't you water the sheep and continue grazing?" (Genesis 29:4-7) Rashi explains the verse in detail. "If these are your sheep," Yaakov asks, "then why don't you give them their water? And," Yaakov continues "if you are working for someone else, then why are you just sitting here?"

The shepherds explain to Yaakov that they would like to water the sheep but unless a large group of shepherds arrive, they cannot. It is impossible to lift the rock and draw water. Therefore they sit and wait each day until enough shepherds arrive to give lift the rock (Genesis 29:8). It seems to be a fair and understandable exchange except for one word. Yaakov began the conversation with a term of endearment. "My brothers!" No pun intended, but Yaakov did not know these shepherds from Adam!

Why did he begin his question with words that seem to show an affinity that could not have yet been forged? He just met these men, why does he call them brothers?

I recently heard a wonderful story about someone I know dearly: A prominent Chassidic Rebbe was not feeling all that well so his doctor recommended that he go for a comprehensive cardio-vascular examination including a stress test, echo-cardiogram and a slew of other tests would be beneficial. He recommended a prominent cardiologist, Dr. Paul Fegil (not his real name), who headed the cardiology department of a large medical center in Manhattan.

Waiting for the doctor to arrive, the Rebbe felt very uncomfortable in the unfamiliar surroundings. He barely responded to the nurse's questions pertaining to his medical health and history. The nurse was frustrated as the Rebbe almost refused to discuss his symptoms. It got worse. When the nurse began attaching electrodes to all parts of his chest, he began to sweat. He became so nervous that the monitors and other meters connected to the wires began to pulsate wildly.

The nurse was astounded by the very erratic movements on the heart monitor. Never having seen lines jump off the monitor like that, the nurse quickly ran out of the examining room to summon the esteemed cardiologist immediately. Meanwhile, the Rebbe was still sweating profusely as his heart was pounding wildly.

All of a sudden the door opened and in walked Dr. Fegil. He was a distinguished looking man with graying hair a warm smile and a small leather yarmulke on his head. He stood at the opening, and exclaimed to the Rebbe. "Sholom Aleichem! Rebbe! HaKol B'seder? Is everything OK?" Hearing those familiar words, the Rebbe became startled. He picked up his head and saw the doctor. He could not believe it Dr. Paul Fegil was one of his own! Almost magically, the bells and whistles that were muddling the monitor suddenly stopped. Immediately all the readings showed a sign of a very normal heart beat! Minutes later the Rebbe told the nurse every one of his maladies and his entire medical history as well!

Dr. Fegil looked at the nurse and laughed. "Sometimes a few haimishe words can fix more problems than open-heart surgery!"

Rav Yaakov Kamenetzky, of blessed memory, explained that Yaakov approached a group of shepherds whom he had never met. He wanted to admonish them in a gentle manner while finding out what was transpiring at the well. After all, he was puzzled, why were they just sitting around waiting. However, Yaakov was smarter than just to criticize. He knew that unless he both called and considered them as brothers they would turn a deaf ear.

It was only after they explained to him that until all the shepherds gathered to lift the rock, they could do nothing, did Yaakov understand that his complaints were unjustified. But Yaakov had no problems presenting his critique to the shepherds for one simple reason. He began with one simple exclamation. "My brothers." Yaakov approached them by exclaiming, "Brothers! Where are you from?"

The moment he initiated the concept of brotherhood, any suggestion -- even criticism -- would be allowed. Criticisms, even constructive ones, are difficult, but Yaakov taught us a lesson: Before you can espouse your druthers, make sure that you are talking to brothers!