

Torah Weekly

ת"ב

19-25 November, 2023
6-12 Kislev, 5784

Torah: Vayeitzei: Genesis
28:10 - 32:3

Haftorah: Hosea 11:7 - 12:14
PARSHAT VAYEITZEI

Calendars

We have Jewish Calendars. If you would like one, please send us a letter and we will send you one, or ask the Rabbi/Chaplain to contact us.

Family Programs

Do you have family on the outside struggling? Please contact or have them contact our office to learn more about our family programs. You and they are not alone, we are here to help.

Grape Juice & Matzah

We offer free Grape Juice and Matzoh for you to be able to make the blessings every Shabbos. Please have your chaplain / Rabbi contact us to enroll (available to all prisons).

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INSTITUTE**
No One Alone,
No One Forgotten.

How the Light Gets In

Why Jacob? That is the question we find ourselves asking repeatedly as we read the narratives of Genesis. Jacob is not what Noah was: righteous, perfect in his generations, one who walked with G-d. He did not, like Abraham, leave his land, his birthplace and his father's house in response to a divine call. He did not, like Isaac, offer himself up as a sacrifice. Nor did he have the burning sense Why Jacob? of justice and willingness to intervene that we see in the vignettes of Moses' early life. Yet we are defined for all time as the descendants of Jacob, the children of Israel. Hence the force of the question: Why Jacob?

The answer, it seems to me, is intimated in the beginning of this week's Parshah. Jacob was in the middle of a journey from one danger to another. He had left home because Esau had vowed to kill him when Isaac died. He was about to enter the household of his uncle Laban, which would itself present other dangers. Far from home, alone, he was at a point of maximum vulnerability. The sun set. Night fell. Jacob lay down to sleep, and then saw this majestic vision: He dreamed and, look, there was a ladder set on the earth, with its top reaching heaven; and, look, angels of G-d were ascending and descending on it. And, look, the L-rd stood beside him and said, "I am the L-rd, the G-d of Abraham your father and the G-d of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread forth to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed through you and through your offspring. And look, I am with you, and I will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the L-rd is in this place—and I did not know it!" And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of G-d, and this is the gate of heaven." Note the fourfold "and look," in Hebrew ve-hinei, an expression of surprise. Nothing has prepared

Jacob for this encounter, a point emphasized in his own words when he says, "The L-rd is in this place—and I did not know it." The very verb used at the beginning of the passage, "He came upon a place," in Hebrew vayifga ba-makom, also means an unexpected encounter. Later, in rabbinic Hebrew, the word ha-Makom, "the Place," came to mean "G-d." Hence in a poetic way the phrase vayifga ba-makom could be read as "Jacob happened on, had an unexpected encounter with, G-d." Add to this Jacob's nighttime wrestling match with the angel in next week's Parshah, and we have an answer to our question. Jacob is the man who has his deepest spiritual experiences alone, at night, in the face of danger and far from home. He is the man who meets G-d when he least expects to, when his mind is on other things, when he is in a state of fear and possibly on the brink of despair. Jacob is the man who, in liminal space, in the middle of the journey, discovers that "surely the L-rd is in this place—and I did not know it!"

Jacob thus became the father of the people who had their closest encounter with G-d in what Moses was later to describe as "the howling wasteland of a wilderness."² Uniquely, Jews survived a whole series of exiles, and though at first they said, "How can we sing the L-rd's song in a strange land?" they discovered that the Shechinah, the Divine Presence, was still with them. Though they had lost everything else, they had not lost contact with G-d. They could still discover that "the L-rd is in this place—and I did not know it!" Abraham gave Jews the courage to challenge the idols of the age. They had not lost contact with G-d. Isaac gave them the capacity for self-sacrifice. Moses taught them to be passionate fighters for justice. But Jacob gave them the knowledge that precisely when you feel most alone, G-d is still with you, giving you the courage to hope and the strength to dream. The man who gave the most profound poetic expression to this was undoubtedly David in the book of Psalms. Time and again he calls to G-d from the heart of darkness, afflicted, alone, pained, afraid: Save me, O G-d, for the floodwaters are up to my neck. Deeper and deeper I sink into the mire;

I can't find a foothold.

I am in deep water,
and the floods overwhelm me.³
From the depths, O L-rd,

I call for Your help. Sometimes our deepest spiritual experiences come when we least expect them, when we are closest to despair. It is then that the masks we wear are stripped away. We are at our point of maximum vulnerability—and it is when we are most fully open to G-d that G-d is most fully open to us. "The L-rd is close to the brokenhearted, and saves those who are crushed in spirit."⁵ "The sacrifices of G-d are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart You, G-d, will not despise."⁶ G-d "heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds." Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav used to say, "A person needs to cry to his Father in heaven with a powerful voice from the depths of his heart. Then G-d will listen to his voice and turn to his cry. And it may be that from this act itself, all doubts and obstacles that are keeping him back from true service of Hashem will fall from him and be completely nullified." We find G-d not only in holy or familiar places, but also in the midst of a journey, alone at night. "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me." The most profound of all spiritual experiences, the base of all others, is the knowledge that we are not alone. G-d is holding us by the hand, sheltering us, lifting us when we fall, forgiving us when we fail, healing the wounds in our soul through the power of His love.

My late father, of blessed memory, was not a learned Jew. He did not have the chance to become one. He came to Britain as a child and a refugee. He had to leave school young, and besides, the possibilities of Jewish education in those days were limited. Merely surviving took up most of the family's time. But I saw him walk tall as a Jew, unafraid, even defiant at times, because when he prayed or read the Psalms he felt intensely that G-d was with him. That simple faith gave him immense dignity and strength of mind. That was his heritage from Jacob, as it is ours. Though we may fall, we fall into the arms of G-d. Though others may lose faith in us, and though we may even lose faith in ourselves, G-d

never loses faith in us. And though we may feel utterly alone, we are not. G-d is there, beside us, within us, urging us to stand and move on, for there is a task to do that we have not yet done and that we were created to fulfill. A singer of our time wrote, "There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in." The broken heart lets in the light of G-d, and becomes the gate of heaven.

By Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

A Lesson From Grandpa Laban

An English Jew, a prominent novelist and intellectual, is informed that he will be knighted. The queen's protocol officials prepare him and other knights-to-be for the ceremony. He is informed that when he stands before the queen, just before being knighted, he is to recite certain Latin words. On the day of the ceremony, the man is very nervous and, sure enough, when he approaches the queen, he forgets the Latin expression. As precious seconds tick by, the only non-English words that he knows pour out of him: "Ma nishtana halaila hazeh mikol haleilot!" The queen, confused, turns to her protocol officer and asks: "Why is this knight different from all other knights?" A Jew is a Jew is a Jew. Knighthood will not change that fact. Sooner or later, the differences between this knight and all the other knights will become apparent. Attempts to break down the walls between Jews and non-Jews by assimilating will not fix anti-Semitism. Unfortunately, there are many Jews who are under the impression that the way to solve the age old problem of anti-Semitism is by joining and assimilating into the prevalent society and culture. If you can't beat 'em, join 'em! If only we stopped putting up social fences and embraced the gentiles of this world and married them, they argue, we would rid the world of arguably its worst historic shame! The Passover Haggadah addresses this mistake. Just after it discusses the perennial state of anti-Semitism – "In every generation they stand up against us to destroy us" – it immediately states: "Go and learn from Laban the Aramite." What's the connection? The Haggadah is perhaps responding to the dangerous notion of blaming anti-Semitism on ourselves, responding to those who believe that if only we were closer to the other nations, we would once and for all cure the world of its anti-Semitic tendencies.

"Go and learn from Laban," says the author of the Haggadah. Which gentile in Jewish history was closer to Jews than Grandpa Laban. He was the patriarch: Jacob's uncle, father-in-law, employer, and Zeide (grandfather) to his children. You can't get closer than that. Laban was truly family! Yet, his anti-Semitism was so legendary that the Haggadah claims that it was worse than Pharaoh's. In other words, attempts to break down the walls between Jews and non-Jews by assimilating and intermarrying will not fix anti-Semitism.

Look at Germany before the Holocaust where Jews were not just accepted as equals in German culture, they were Germany itself. Yet, it was ironically in that country where the worst outbreak of anti-Semitism occurred. The only solution to anti-Semitism is, as the Haggadah itself states: "And this – G-d's covenant and promise – is what stood by our parents and us. For not just one alone has risen against us to destroy us, but in every generation they rise against us to destroy us; and the Holy One, blessed be He, saves us from their hand!" Only a strong and proud Israel with unshakeable trust in G-d will break the anti-Semites of this world. Only when the Labans of this world see that our Jewishness is non-negotiable will they respect us and live in peace with us.

Next year in Jerusalem!

By Avraham Plotkin

IN JEWISH HISTORY

Monday, November 20, 2023-7 Kislev, 5784

Jehoaikim Burnt Lamentations (3321/-440)

Jehoaikim, King of Judah, burnt a scroll dictated by the prophet Jeremiah and written by his disciple Baruch son of Neriah. This scroll was the book of Lamentations and was written to forewarn the king of the imminent destruction of Jerusalem. (Jeremiah ch. 36. Megilat Taanit, perek ha'acharon. It should be noted that other sources provide alternate dates—see Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 580:1 and Magen Avraham ad loc.)

Death of King Herod (3760/-1)

Death of Herod, King of Judea. Herod seized the rule from the Hasmonians, after killing them all. Fearing that the rabbis would challenge his authority, he killed them all, leaving only Bava ben Buta. Later, out of remorse for his cruelty, he had the Holy Temple completely renovated.

Wednesday, November 22, 2023-9 Kislev, 5784

Birth & Passing of R. Dovber of Lubavitch (1773; 1827)

Kislev 9 is both the birthday and day of passing of Rabbi DovBer of Lubavitch, son of and successor to the founder of Chabad Chassidism, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi. Rabbi DovBer was known for his unique style of "broadening rivers" -- his teachings were the intellectual rivers to his father's wellspring, lending breadth and depth to the principles set down by Rabbi Schneur Zalman.

Born in Liozna, White Russia in 1773, Rabbi DovBer was named after Rabbi Schneur Zalman's mentor and teacher, Rabbi DovBer of Mezeritch, who had passed away on Kislev 19 of the previous year. Rabbi DovBer assumed the leadership of Chabad upon his father's passing in 1812. In 1813 he settled in the town of Lubavitch, which was to serve as the movement's headquarters for the next 102 years. In 1826, he was arrested on charges that his teachings threatened the imperial authority of the Czar, but was subsequently exonerated.

Rabbi DovBer passed away on his 54th birthday in 1827, a day before the first anniversary of his liberation (see calendar entries for tomorrow, Kislev 10)

Thursday, November 23, 2023-10 Kislev, 5784

Liberation of R. DovBer (1826)

In 1826, Rabbi DovBer of Lubavitch (see calendar entry for yesterday, Kislev 9) was arrested on charges that his teachings threatened the imperial authority of the Czar, but was subsequently exonerated. The date of his release, Kislev 10, is celebrated amongst Chabad Chassidim as a "festival of liberation." Tachnun (confession of sins) is omitted from the day's prayers, farbrengens are held, and Rabbi DovBer's teachings are studied.

Shabbat, November 25, 2023-12 Kislev, 5784

Rabbi "YY" Kazen (1998)

Kislev 12 is the yahrtzeit (date of the passing) of Chabad.org's founding director, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Kazen ("YYK," 1954-1998), widely acclaimed as the "father of the Jewish internet."

Passing of R. Shlomo Luria (1573)

R. Shlomo Luria, known by his acronym Maharshal, was an eminent scholar in sixteenth-century Poland. He headed a yeshiva in Brisk and Lublin and wrote many works, including Yam Shel Shlomo and Chachmas Shlomo. An independent thinker, he did not hesitate to criticize his colleagues when he felt they had erred in their method of Talmudic study and halachic analysis. At the same time, he was an extremely humble person and was the teacher of many great Torah scholars of his generation.

It is related that one night, R. Shlomo sat down to study to the light of a small candle. Miraculously, the candle did not extinguish, allowing R. Shlomo to continue his studies for many hours (Shem Hagedolim).