

Torah Weekly

ד"ב

PARSHAT VAYEITZE

3 - 9 Kislev 5786
23 - 29 November 2025

Torah: Exodus 13:17-17:16
Haftorah: Judges 4:4-5:31

PSALMS DAILY

Psalms for our brethren in the Holy Land

Psalms 117

1. Praise the Lord, all nations, laud Him, all peoples.
2. For His kindness has overwhelmed us, and the truth of the Lord is eternal. Hallelujah!

(Please say Chapter 20 daily)

SEFER HAMITZVOT

Negative Mitzvah 252 Hurtful Words to a Convert

It is forbidden to verbally distress or humiliate a convert. Though it is forbidden to verbally humiliate anyone, one who does so to a convert transgresses this prohibition, too.

Negative Mitzvah 253 Cheating a Convert

It is forbidden to cheat a convert in the course of commerce. Though it is forbidden to cheat anyone, one who cheats a convert transgresses this additional prohibition, too.

LABAN THE ANTISEMITE

“Go and learn what Laban the Aramean sought to do to our father Jacob. A Pharaoh made his decree only about the males, whereas Laban sought to destroy everything.” This passage from the Haggadah on Passover - evidently based on this week’s Torah portion - 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 [=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 do so only because of this passage in the Haggadah.

Second, nowhere 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.” 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!” All this suggests that Laban behaved outrageously to Jacob, treating him like an unpaid laborer, 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 practiced 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 behavior 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 behavior 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 realizes 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!”

Jacob realizes 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 laborer. 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!” 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 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 demoralized. 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

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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.

*By Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks
Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom*

HEROD THE GREAT

In 3724 (36 BCE), an Idumean named Herod took over as king of Judea. Known as Herod the

Great, he apparently suffered from paranoia and ruled with ruthless brutality. He put to death forty-six leading members of the Sanhedrin (Jewish Supreme Court) and killed all the remaining members of the Hasmonean family, including, eventually, his own wife and children.

Herod was also an ambitious builder. His projects included, among others, the fortress in Massada, the building over the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron, and the port city of Caesaria. But his most ambitious project by far – which he embarked on in 3741 (19 BCE) – was the renovation and expansion of the Temple, which was dilapidated after 334 years. (He undertook this renovation as atonement for all the rabbis he killed.)

The result was spectacular. Herod's Temple was made of white marble and covered with gold plates and was surrounded by a raised stone platform stretching over 35 acres. According to Josephus, "it reflected so fierce a blaze of fire that those who tried to look at it had to turn away, as if they had looked straight at the sun. To approaching strangers it appeared in the distance like a mountain covered with snow." The Sages concurred: "He who has not seen the Temple [made by] Herod, has never seen a beautiful building" (Babylonian Talmud, Baba Batra, 4a; Shemot Rabba 36:1).

VAYEITZE IN A NUTSHELL

The name of the Parshah, "Vayetze," means "And he left" and it is found in Genesis 28:10. Jacob leaves his hometown of Beersheba and journeys to Charan. On the way, he encounters "the place" and sleeps there, dreaming of a ladder connecting heaven and earth, with angels climbing and descending on it; G-d

appears and promises that the land upon which he lies will be given to his descendants. In the morning, Jacob raises the stone on which he laid his head as an altar and monument, pledging that it will be made the house of G-d. In Charan, Jacob stays with and works for his uncle Laban, tending Laban's sheep. Laban agrees to give him his younger daughter, Rachel - whom Jacob loves - in marriage, in return for seven years' labor. But on the wedding night, Laban gives him his elder daughter, Leah, instead - a deception Jacob discovers only in the morning. Jacob marries Rachel, too, a week later, after agreeing to work another seven years for Laban.

Leah gives birth to six sons - Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar and Zebulun - and a daughter, Dinah, while Rachel remains barren. Rachel gives Jacob her handmaid, Bilhah, as a wife to bear children in her stead, and two more sons, Dan and Naphtali, are born. Leah does the same with her handmaid, Zilpah, who gives birth to Gad and Asher. Finally, Rachel's prayers are answered and she gives birth to Joseph.

Jacob has now been in Charan for 14 years and wishes to return home. But Laban persuades him to remain, now offering him sheep in return for his labor. Jacob prospers, despite Laban's repeated attempts to swindle him. After six years, Jacob leaves Charan in stealth, fearing that Laban would prevent him from leaving with the family and property for which he labored. Laban pursues Jacob but is warned by G-d in a dream not to harm him. Laban and Jacob make a pact on Mount Gal-Ed, attested to by a pile of stones, and Jacob proceeds to the Holy Land, where he is met by angels.

IN JEWISH HISTORY

Sunday, 3 Kislev 5786 - 23 November 2025

Temple Cleared in Chanukah Miracle (139 BCE)

After overcoming the Greek forces, the Hasmoneans cleared the Temple from the idolatrous images that had been erected there on 3 Kislev 3622 (139 BCE).

Monday, 4 Kislev 5786 - 24 November 2025

Zechariah Foretold Messianic Era (352 BCE)

In 3410 (352 BCE), a delegation from Babylonia put forth a query to the prophet Zechariah, asking whether the fast of the Ninth of Av (established following the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem in 3338 (423 BCE) was still in effect, now that the Second Temple had been built. In response, Zechariah transmitted G-d's message that it was not fasting that was most important, but to uphold justice, truth, kindness, and compassion. Zechariah also foretold what will occur to the fast days in the Messianic era: "*So says the L-rd of Hosts: The fast of the fourth month [the seventeenth of Tammuz], the fast of the fifth month [the ninth of Av], the fast of the seventh month [the third of Tishrei], and the fast of the tenth month [the tenth of Teves] will be to the House of Judah for rejoicing, happiness, and festivals.*" - Zechariah 7-8

Purim Teveryah (1743)

After a three-month-long unsuccessful battle and siege waged by Suleiman Pasha, governor of Damascus, against the Sheikh of Tiberias, in northern Israel, the governor finally left the city on 4 Kislev 5503 (1743). To mark their salvation and the numerous miracles that had occurred throughout the siege, the Jews of Tiberias, led by the venerable Rabbi Chaim Abulafia (5420-5505, or 1660-1744), established this date as a yearly festival of rejoicing and praise to G-d.

Tuesday, 5 Kislev 5786 - 25 November 2025

Passing of the Maharsha (1631)

5 Kislev is the Yahrtzeit (date of the passing) of Rabbi Shmuel Eliezer Eidels (5315-5392, or 1555-1631), known by the acronym "Maharsha". Rabbi Shmuel authored a highly regarded and widely used commentary on the Talmud and its primary commentaries, Rashi and Tosfot.

Thursday, 7 Kislev 5786 - 27 November 2025

Death of King Herod (1 BCE)

Herod, King of Judea, died on 7 Kislev 3760 (1 BCE). Herod seized the rule from the Hasmoneans, 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.

Shabbat, 9 Kislev 5786 - 29 November 2025

Birth & Passing of Rabbi Dovber of Lubavitch (1773 - 1827)

9 Kislev 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 5534 (1773), Rabbi DovBer was named after Rabbi Schneur Zalman's mentor and teacher, Rabbi DovBer of Mezeritch, who had passed away on the 19th of Kislev of the previous year. Rabbi DovBer assumed the leadership of Chabad upon his father's passing in 5572 (1812). In 5573 (1813) he settled in the town of Lubavitch, which was to serve as the movement's headquarters for the next 102 years. In 5587 (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 5588 (1827), a day before the first anniversary of his liberation.