

PARASHAT VAYETZE

Genesis 28:10–32:3

Vayetze means “and he went out” and relates the story of Jacob’s departure from Beer-sheba for distant Haran, Rebekah’s birthplace. The first night of his journey, he dreams of a stairway reaching from earth to heaven and is told by God that his descendants will be blessed and that they will inherit the land already promised to Abraham and Isaac. After a long journey, Jacob arrives in Haran where he is welcomed by Rebekah’s brother Laban and his two daughters, Leah and Rachel. Laban promises to allow Rachel to marry Jacob if he will work seven years for him. When it comes time for the marriage, Laban deceives Jacob by sending Leah to his tent. When Jacob protests, Laban tells him that, if he will serve another seven years, then he will also give him Rachel. Jacob agrees. With his two wives and their maidservants, Bilhah and Zilpah, he has twelve children: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, and Dinah with Leah; Dan and Naphtali with Bilhah; Gad and Asher with Zilpah; and Joseph with Rachel. After working many years for Laban, Jacob decides to return to his homeland. He works out an agreement with Laban for payment of his wages. They will divide the herd. Jacob will be given all the spotted and speckled sheep and goats; Laban will keep the rest. Laban agrees, but, when Jacob’s herd increases in numbers, Laban’s sons accuse Jacob of cheating them. Fearing trouble, Jacob decides to leave secretly with all his family and cattle. Laban pursues him, but, when he overtakes him, they share their grievances and reconcile their differences. Afterwards, Jacob and his family continue on their way.

OUR TARGUM

· 1 ·

On the eve of his departure from Beersheba, Jacob makes a pillow with some stones and goes to sleep. He dreams of a stairway reaching from earth to heaven. On it, angels are going up and down, and God tells him that his descendants will be many, that they will spread out in all directions, that all peoples will be blessed by them, and that ultimately God will bring him back to his homeland. In the morning, Jacob names the place Bethel, meaning "House of God." He also promises that, if God will protect him on his long journey and return him to his homeland, he will worship God and set aside a tithe, ten percent, of his wealth for God.



· 2 ·

Jacob continues his journey and arrives in Haran. He asks some shepherds if they know his uncle, Laban, and they point to Rachel, Laban's daughter, who is bringing her flocks to a well. Jacob waters the flock and tells Rachel who he is. She runs to inform her father. Laban warmly greets Jacob as "my bone and flesh."

After a month, Laban says to Jacob, "You should not work for me without wages. How much shall I pay you?" Jacob, who has fallen in love with Rachel, answers, "I will serve you seven years if you will give me Rachel for a wife." Laban agrees, but after the seven years he tricks Jacob on the night of the wedding and sends his older daughter, Leah, into Jacob's tent.

The next morning Jacob complains to Laban. "Why have you deceived me?" Laban tells him that "it is not the practice in our land to marry off the younger before the older," but Laban promises to allow him to marry Rachel if he will serve him another seven years. Jacob agrees.

· 3 ·

Leah gives birth to Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah. Rachel is jealous and upset that she cannot have children. So she sends her maidservant, Bilhah, to Jacob to have children for her. Bilhah bears Dan and Naphtali. Leah also instructs her maid-

servant, Zilpah, to bear children with Jacob, and Zilpah gives birth to Gad and Asher. Afterwards, Leah bears Issachar, Zebulun, and a daughter, Dinah. Finally, Rachel conceives and bears Joseph.

· 4 ·

After Joseph's birth, Jacob approaches his father-in-law, Laban, and says, "Allow me and my family to leave and to return to my homeland."

Laban, knowing that his riches have increased greatly over the fourteen years of Jacob's service, tells him: "I have been blessed because of you. What shall I pay you?"

Jacob answers: "Pay me nothing, but do me a favor. Let me pass through your flocks and take all of those that are speckled and spotted, or dark-colored. They will be my wages." Laban agrees but secretly instructs his sons to remove all of the speckled and spotted or dark-colored sheep from the flock, taking them a distance of three days away from where Jacob is caring for his flock.

While pasturing Laban's flock, Jacob uses a form of magical rod, causing them to give birth, not only to speckled and spotted animals, but to stronger ones. As a result, Jacob becomes very prosperous. His household includes many maidservants, menservants, camels, and asses.

Seeing Jacob's wealth, Laban's sons become

jealous. They accuse Jacob of stealing from their father. Even Laban's attitude toward Jacob changes to suspicion.

Jacob is told by God to return to his homeland. He discusses the matter with Leah and Rachel, and they agree. So he gathers his family and possessions and sets out for the land of Canaan. As they depart, Rachel enters Laban's tent and steals one of his idols.

When Laban learns that they have gone without informing him, he pursues them. Overtaking them, he asks Jacob: "Why did you flee in secrecy and mislead me and not tell me? I would have sent you off with festive music . . . [and] why did you steal my gods?"

Jacob answers that he was afraid to reveal his

plans but that he has not taken anything belonging to Laban. After searching the tents of both Leah and Rachel, Laban finds nothing since Rachel has cleverly hidden the idol she had taken under the camel cushions on which she is sitting.

Jacob turns to Laban and asks, "What is my crime, what is my guilt that you should pursue me?" Laban responds by claiming that "the daughters are my daughters, the children are my children, and the flocks are my flocks," but then he suggests that he and Jacob make peace with each other. The Torah portion concludes with their setting up a pillar of stones between them, promising that they will not cross the mound against each other with hostile intent.

THEMES

Parashat Vayetze contains three important themes:

1. The meaning of angels in the Torah.
2. The difference between proper and improper prayer.
3. Dealing with dishonest people.

PEREK ALEF: *Who and What Are Angels?*

When Jacob flees from Beer-sheba, he camps the first night on the desert. Gathering some stones for a pillow, he goes to sleep and dreams of a stairway reaching from the ground to the sky. On it "angels of God were going up and down." Later in our Torah portion (Genesis 31:10-13), Jacob tells Leah and Rachel that he has dreamed of an angel who explained to him how the streaked and speckled flocks were increasing to his advantage and that he should return to his homeland.

Who and what are these angels appearing to Jacob?

Actually, the Torah contains many mentions of angels: When Hagar, Sarah's maidservant, flees to the desert, an angel comforts and counsels her. (Genesis 16:7-12) Two angels visit Lot in Sodom and urge him to escape from the city with his family. (Genesis 19) Just as Abraham is about to sacrifice Isaac, an angel appears and tells him, "Do not raise your hand against the boy. . . ." (Gen-

esis 22:11) An angel speaks to Moses out of a burning bush and commands him to return to Egypt to free the Israelites from bondage. (Exodus 3:2-10)

Most scholars would define the angels mentioned in the Torah as "messengers of God." The Hebrew word for angel is *malach*, meaning "one who carries a message."

Belief in angels was quite common among peoples in the ancient Middle East. It was assumed that angels could fly, that they often had wings, that they could walk, talk, appear, and disappear, and that they were the designated agents of the gods. Within Jewish tradition, angels were believed to be slightly superior to human beings and to work as God's agents.

The Psalmist on angels

*O God, our God,
How majestic is Your name throughout the earth!*

*You who have covered the heavens with Your splendor. . . .
When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers,
the moon and stars that You have set in place:
What is man that You have been mindful of him,
mortal man that You have taken note of him,
that You have made him little lower than the angels. . . . (Psalms-8:2, 4-6)*

Jews during the talmudic period also believed in angels. Some rabbis taught that God had actually consulted with angels before creating heaven, earth, and human beings. Others point out that angels have a life span of only one day. They are created in the morning, praise God throughout the day, and die in the evening. It was also believed that angels accompany Jews at the beginning of their observance of Shabbat and that they protect those who are faithful in carrying out God's commandments.

Talmudic teachers on angels

Rabbi Helbo taught that God creates a new choir of angels each day. They sing God's praises and then depart. (Genesis Rabbah 78:1)

Great is peace, for God has given no more beautiful gift to the righteous. When a righteous person dies, angels accompany him to heaven and say: "He shall enter in peace"; "He shall rest in peace"; and "He walked uprightly." (Numbers Rabbah, Naso, 11:7)

If one does a mitzvah, a commandment, one is given one angel. If one does two commandments, one is given two, and, if one does all the commandments, one is given many angels. And who are these angels? They guard people against bad things happening. . . they make peace for them. (Tanchuma, Mishpatim, 19)

Rambam (Maimonides)



For the medieval philosopher Moses Maimonides, angels were *forms* of intelligence through which God "ruled the world." The human mind was such a *form* or "angel." Maimonides taught that, if God wished to send a message to a human being, it was sent through the person's mind or intelligence. For him, human minds were containers for God's signals or signs. That is why he called them angels. Angels were a wonderful way in which God spoke to human beings and inspired them with new ideas and visions. (*Guide for the Perplexed*, Part II, Chapters VI-VII)

Most modern Jewish philosophers and teachers no longer believe in the existence of angels, special nonhuman messengers of God. How, then, do they interpret the mention of angels in our Torah text?

Some simply explain that ancient authors accepted the existence of angels. They believed that, like human beings, they could speak, think, and see and that they could and did influence all aspects of human life. For the ancients, who wrote and edited the Torah text, angels were as real as people are for us.

Other modern teachers argue that ancient authors used angels as a dramatic way of expressing the inner thoughts of the characters they were describing. In our Torah portion, the author may have wished to portray Jacob's fear of leaving his homeland for a distant unknown place. His dream about the stairway stretching from earth to heaven, with angels going up and down on it, may depict his anxiety about his future. Would his fortunes go up or down? Would he be a success or failure? And would God help him and protect him from evil?

In reading and interpreting the role of angels in the Torah, both approaches prove helpful. At times an angel will simply appear as a messenger; at other times as a form of intelligence, a sign of the future; and sometimes as an insight into the fears and hopes of biblical characters. Clearly, angels add excitement, dimension, and color to the Torah tradition.

PEREK BET: *Jacob's Prayer—Can You Bargain with God?*

The Torah tells us that, just after he awoke from his dream of the stairway reaching to the heavens, Jacob made a vow—a promise in the form of a prayer.

The word for vow in Hebrew is *neder*. On Yom Kippur evening, Jews recite the prayer *Kol Nidre*, “all these vows,” requesting forgiveness from God for any promises made but not kept from one Yom Kippur to the next.

Within Jewish tradition a *neder*, or vow, is defined as a promise made to God to carry out some action (“God, I will give ten percent of what I earn to charity”) or a commitment not to do something otherwise permitted (“God, I will not smoke”).

Vows were considered so important within Jewish tradition that the rabbis devoted an entire section of the Talmud to the subject. They called the section *Nedarim*, “Vows,” and it is one of the largest in the Talmud.

The Talmud on vows

The person who makes a vow places a burden around his neck. (Jerusalem Talmud, Nedarim 9:1)

It is better to do a good deed without making a vow to do it. (Nedarim 77b)

A man came to Rabbi Judah ben Shalom, asking him to void a vow that he had made. The rabbi asked him: “What did you vow not to do?” The man answered, “I vowed to make no profit.”

“How can a person in his right mind vow such a thing?” asked the rabbi.

“What I meant,” explained the man, “was that I would no longer make profits by gambling.”

Rabbi Judah refused to void the man's vow. (Jerusalem Talmud, Nedarim 5)

Jacob's vow has raised serious questions for biblical commentators through the centuries. After

he had piled up stones to mark the place where he had slept and dreamed, he named it Bethel, “House of God.” Then he made a vow: “If God remains with me, if God protects me on this journey that I am making and gives me bread to eat and clothing to wear, and if I return safe to my father's house—the Lord shall be my God . . . and of all that You give me, I will always set aside a tithe for You.”

What has bothered interpreters is that Jacob seems to be bargaining with God. Rather than promising what he will or will not do, which is the accepted form for a vow, Jacob laces his commitment with conditions. Over and over again, he uses the qualifying *if* in his statement to God. He says: “*If* God remains with me . . . *if* God protects me . . . gives me bread . . . clothing . . . and *if* I return safe . . .” *then* “the Lord shall be my God” and “I will always set aside a tithe. . . .”



Abravanel

Don Isaac Abravanel, in his commentary on our Torah portion, asks: “How could Jacob act like those who serve upon the condition of receiving a reward? Is it possible that Jacob meant to say that, if God did not do all these things for him, Jacob would not believe in God and would not set aside charity?”

Clearly, Abravanel is bothered by the “deal” Jacob offers God in his vow. He considers it inappropriate to make a conditional promise. As a matter of fact, Abravanel's criticism of Jacob is stated quite bluntly. He compares Jacob with his grandfather, Abraham, and notes that “Abraham never made such vows, and he was tested many times.”

Others have also questioned how Jacob could have made such a vow. Did he really mean to condition his devotion to God on whether or not God met his demands? Did he doubt God's power to bring him back to his homeland? Does the Torah mean to teach us that, if our prayers are not answered, God does not care about us?

Rabbi Jacob ben Isaac Ashkenazi, author and editor of the collection of Torah interpretation

called *Tze'enah u-Re'enah*, was also bothered by such questions about Jacob's vow. Rather than criticizing Jacob, however, he suggests that Jacob did not mean to indicate that his belief in God was conditional at all. What Jacob meant when he used the conditional phrase ("if . . .") had to do with the place where he was making the vow, not with the vow itself.

In other words, we should understand what Jacob said in the following way: "If God helps and protects me, I will worship God on this very spot; if God does not, I will of course still worship God but not necessarily in this place." (Comment on Genesis 28:16)

Jacob, the deal maker

Rabbi Reuven Bulka explains that Jacob was not one of these "stock market" people who thank God when things are good and question or reject God when life turns sad and disappointing. Jacob's vow was a way of proving what God had promised. If God would return him to the place where he had experienced his dream of the ladder, then Jacob would know that God had chosen him "for special responsibility." (Torah Therapy, *Ktav*, New York, 1983, p. 20)

Leibowitz

Some would label Rabbi Jacob ben Isaac's explanation a "clever excuse" for Jacob. Others, like the modern Israeli biblical commentator Nehama Leibowitz, would disagree. While she is also troubled by the appearance that Jacob was making a "commercial deal" with God through his vow, she writes that this is not what the Torah intended. Leibowitz explains that ". . . no deal is involved." What Jacob meant was that "if God would not grant him to return to his father's house, how would he be able to erect a temple on the spot? All that Jacob's vow implied was: 'Give me the possibility of serving you.'" (*Studies in Bereshit*, World Zionist Organization, Jerusalem, 1980, p. 307)

It is clear that most commentators were troubled by Jacob's vow. Either they criticize him for trying to "strike a deal" with God, or they try to find an excuse for all the conditions that he attached to his prayer. They consider a person's promises or vows as a sign of his integrity and character.

Perhaps that explains why Jewish teachers paid so much attention to the subject of vows and promises. Prayers that, like Jacob's, were filled with conditions ("God, if you will do this for me, I will take on responsibilities for you") were forbidden. The rabbis taught: "Be not like servants who work for their master only on condition that they receive payment, but be like servants who work for their master without looking for any reward—and be filled with reverence for God." (*Avot* 1:3)

Vows were to be made without any conditions attached. A promise was to stand without any excuses. One's integrity was measured by the fulfillment of one's vows. It was forbidden to mislead others or oneself. The teacher Ben Sirach warned that "before you make a vow or a promise, think well. Do not mislead yourself." (*Tanchuma, Va-yishlach* 8)

Jewish tradition counsels us to make our promises and vows with care. Our prayers and actions in the service of God are to be made without conditions attached. God does not want our "deals" but our deeds of kindness, justice, charity, and love. "The joy of the mitzvah, of the good deed, is its own reward."

PEREK GIMEL: *Dealing with Dishonesty*

Twice in our Torah portion, Jacob must deal with the dishonesty of Laban, the father of Leah and Rachel. In the first incident, Laban promises to give Jacob his daughter Rachel as a wife. Instead, he deceives him and sends Leah in Rachel's place. In the second incident, Laban offers to pay Jacob for all his work by giving him his choice of animals from his herd. Then, he deliberately cheats him by sending away with his sons the animals that Jacob has chosen.

These two incidents point up Laban's dishon-

esty. He was willing to take advantage of Jacob when it came to marrying his daughters and also when it came to paying him fair wages for all his work. Laban did not hesitate to lie when it suited his purpose nor to steal when he believed he could get away with it.

The question many interpreters ask is how Jacob should have dealt with Laban. How should you treat a person who is dishonest and may even be stealing from you? How shall we handle deceit?

Defining deceit

What is deceit? It is creating a false impression.
(Hullin 94a)

A person who practices dishonesty shall not dwell in My house. (Psalms 101:2)

It is forbidden to deceive anyone, Jew or non-Jew. (Hullin 94a)

To deceive with words or abuse with the tongue is a greater offense than to cheat in matters of money. (Baba Metzia 58a)

Jacob's first response to Laban's trickery was to confront him with a series of questions: "What is this that you have done to me? Was it not for Rachel that I have been in your service? Why did you deceive me?"

One impression we get from the questions Jacob asks is that he is conducting an investigation. He is trying to sort out Laban's motives and also seeking to test his own memory of their agreement. While his questions are clear and direct and reveal his disappointment, they are not asked in an angry or even hostile manner.

When Laban explains that "it is not the custom in our place to marry off the younger before the older," Jacob seems to accept the reasoning without protest. Could it be that Jacob, the younger son, felt guilty at that moment for the trick he had played on his own father in stealing the blessing from his older brother, Esau? Some commentators believe that is the reason why Jacob

agreed, without loud complaints, to Laban's explanation. (*Midrash Tanchuma*)

How is it possible that Jacob mistook Leah for Rachel?

A great chasidic rabbi, Levi Isaac of Berdichev (1740–1809), known for his defense of Jews and his forgiving attitude to all human beings, once explained that, when Rachel learned that Laban planned to trick Jacob by giving him Leah as a bride instead of herself, she decided to do all that she could to save her sister from shame. So she taught Leah all of the secret signs of love between herself and Jacob. In this way Rachel was sure that Jacob would take Leah as his wife and not reject her. Rachel was willing to sacrifice her own happiness for the sake of her sister. When Jacob learned of Rachel's sensitivity toward her sister and her concern about her being humiliated, his love for Rachel increased. In this case, deceit committed for a "righteous" not a selfish purpose brought reward.

Is a tzadik, a "righteous person," allowed to cheat?"

If the person with whom he is dealing is dishonest, one is permitted to outwit him. (Megillah 13b)

Others point out that Jacob was naive and believed Laban because Laban was his mother's brother. He trusted him, but, after Laban broke his agreement and removed all the streaked and spotted animals from his flocks, Jacob was enraged. When Jacob finally confronted him, he angrily accused Laban of cheating him out of his wages and flocks. Torah interpreter Nehama Leibowitz writes that "the Torah here teaches us an instructive lesson in human conduct and self-control. Anger . . . should be deferred till the last possible moment, till there is no other alternative—only as a last resort." (*Studies in Bereshit*, p. 341)

Leibowitz also calls attention to the fact that Jacob's response to Laban's dishonesty was "controlled" anger. It was not a wild outburst. It was carefully constructed and thought out.

When Laban pursued Jacob after he had departed with his family and herds, Jacob did not go to war with him. Nor did he become belligerent when they met and Laban confronted him with the questions: "What did you mean by keeping me in the dark and carrying off my daughters like captives of the sword? Why did you flee in secrecy and mislead me and not tell me?" Rather than losing his temper at Laban, Jacob calmly reminded Laban that he had worked faithfully for him for twenty years, often suffering hardships while caring for his property. He pointed out that he had earned everything he had taken.

Leibowitz praises Jacob's cool management of his emotions in what might have been an angry confrontation. He kept his dignity. He neither attacked Laban nor lost control of his anger. Leibowitz claims that Jacob is a model for handling those who cheat us.

Dealing with dishonesty: advice to parents

Our policy toward lying is clear: On the one hand, we should not play District Attorney or ask for confessions or make a federal case out of a tall story. On the other hand, we should not hesitate to call a spade a spade. When we find that the child's library book is overdue, we should not ask, "Have you returned the book to the library? Are you sure? How come it's still on your desk?"

Instead, we state, "I see your library book is overdue. . . ."

In short, we do not provoke the child into defensive lying nor do we intentionally set up opportunities for lying. When a child does lie, our reaction should be not hysterical and moralistic but factual and realistic. We want our child to learn that there is no need to lie to us. (H. G. Ginott, Between Parent and Child, pp. 60-61)

One other way of handling cheaters and liars is to expose them publicly. Confrontation in front of an audience not only brings satisfaction to the party that has been harmed but also warns others about those who practice deceit.

It is clear from the Torah text that Jacob shares Laban's dishonesty with both Leah and Rachel. He tells them: "Your father has cheated me, changing my wages time and again." Yet his complaint is not a public one. It is kept within the family, and, while Leah and Rachel agree that their father has treated Jacob unjustly—and even cheated them—they do not expose him in the marketplace or to his friends.

In discussing what to do about a dishonest person, Rabbi Israel Meir Ha-Cohen, who lived for nearly a century (1838-1933) in Lithuania, and whose book, *Hafetz Chaim*, became one of the most popular treatments of Jewish ethics, suggested a very careful approach. He taught that exposing a cheating or deceitful person was permitted if it would help the injured party and might protect others. But, said the rabbi, seven conditions must be met: (1) You must have hard evidence not rumors. (2) You must be absolutely certain that it was deceit and must think it over before announcing it to others. (3) You must confront dishonest persons privately seeking to change their behavior. If those people will not change, then you can speak publicly. (4) You must not exaggerate the facts. (5) You must examine your motives, making sure that you are not exposing the person for your own selfish reasons. (6) You must try all other ways to solve the situation without using slander. (7) You must not bring more harm to the dishonest person than a court might bring if the person was found guilty.

Confronting the dishonesty of others is very difficult and distasteful. No one wants to be taken advantage of or cheated. Like Jacob, we want to be given honest wages and to enjoy trusting relationships with others. Unfortunately, we do not always have our way. Sometimes we find ourselves selfishly twisting the truth to our advantage; at other times we find ourselves face to face with those who are cheating us.

Our choices are similar to Jacob's with Laban. Shall we react in anger or rush to condemn publicly the person cheating us? Do we say nothing, wait, and give the person a second chance? Shall we see it as our fault or admit, "I once cheated X. Now it's my turn to be taken advantage of"? Do we make excuses for the liar? Do we act with calm and reasonable concern or with hostility?

The choice is ours. Our examination of how Jacob chose to react to Laban reveals the growth and development of his character. He enters Haran as a trickster and cheater, and as he departs he has matured into a man of strength, reason, and integrity.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. We know from research done by scientists that dreams often reveal our subconscious fears and longings. In that sense, they are “messengers.” Do you agree with the interpretations of Jacob’s dream in our text? What other interpretations would you give to his dream?
2. According to the Torah and its commentaries, what special function and roles do angels play within Jewish tradition? Why do some modern authors continue to use mystical characters or angels in their fiction?
3. Why do the rabbis consider a vow a “burden around the neck”? Why were conditional vows forbidden in Jewish tradition?
4. Given what the commentators have to say about dealing with dishonesty, would you agree with H. G. Ginott’s “policy toward lying”?