

Parashat Vayetze וַיֵּצֵא

Torah: Genesis 28:10–32:3

Haftarah: Hosea 12:13–14:10

The Battle Of The Wits

General Overview

The main character of Parashat Vayetze is Jacob. This portion begins as Jacob is busy packing his bags to flee from his angry brother, Esau, and closes with Jacob fleeing again, but this time from his angry father-in-law and uncle, Laban. During his journeys, we see Jacob caught in a cycle of deception. In this battle of wits, a younger Jacob, whose life has thus far been characterized by shrewdness, is pitted against an older more experienced conniver, Laban.

Let us examine how Jacob conducts himself and what he learns during these difficult years in his life. In the process, we shall also see how God sovereignly uses all of the events in order to carry out His eternal will for Israel.

Exposition

The following outline represents our approach to this match of trickery:

- I. Preparations for the Battle: God Speaks to Jacob
- II. The Battle
- III. First Round: Laban Frustrates Jacob
- IV. Second Round: Jacob Out-Smarts Laban
- V. Third Round: Rachel Joins the Battle
- VI. The Aftermath of the Battle: God Speaks to Laban

In this excerpt from Parashat Vayetze, we will focus on section I, Preparations for the Battle.

I. Preparations for the Battle: God Speaks To Jacob

In the first part of this *sidra* we shall examine Jacob's famous dream. First, we shall look at some of the data, and then we shall continue by exploring some interpretations.

Jacob was alone on his flight from the family home in Beer Sheba to his ancestral home in Haran. The text states in 28:11 that he came to "the place." In Hebrew the location is not specifically identified except that there is a definite article in front of the word place, *hamokom* (הַמְּקוֹם). The rabbis equate this "place" with the same wording of this location in chapter 22 where the place has been specifically identified with Mount Moriah. Here is how Rashi explains it:

Scripture does not mention which place. This can refer only to the place which is mentioned elsewhere, that is Mount Moriah, regarding that which is stated (Genesis 22), "And he saw the place (הַמְּקוֹם) from afar."¹

If Rashi is correct, then this parasha records the second major event that took place on Mount Moriah, the first being the binding of Isaac. It was also at this place that Jacob had a very graphic dream. In this dream, he saw the Lord standing on top of a ladder, which was extended from heaven. Upon this ladder were angels that first ascended and then descended.

The angels are described as “angels of God.” This indicates that they are beneficent angels, since Hebrews 1:14 teaches, “Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?” Hence, the Lord intended this spot to be a place where Jacob would receive some kind of ministry from Him through the angels. Since Jacob was travelling away from the Promised Land, we can only assume that the ministry had something to do with this important journey. Then we read in 28:13, “The Lord was standing over him, and He said...” This indicates that the Lord spoke to Jacob in this dream. Take note of the contents of His speech; they are significant. The Lord declared to Jacob that the ground he was on would be given to him.

If Rashi is correct in saying that Mount Moriah is the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, this then is the site of both the First and Second Temples. Presently, the Moslems administer the Temple Mount. There are two important Islamic shrines located there: The Al Aksa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock. The latter is built directly atop of the traditional site where Abraham offered Isaac.

Yet, despite the current Moslem control over the Temple Mount, 28:13 affirms who the rightful owners really are — the children of Israel! For, God gave this “place” — not to Ishmael or to Esau — but to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their descendants.

In addition, this is the place where the covenant God made with Abraham and Isaac was confirmed with Jacob. In fact, the Lord introduced Himself as Abraham and Isaac’s God, lest there be any doubt concerning who this God was.

The Holy One spoke other things to Jacob as well. He told Jacob that, “I will guard you, bring you back, and not forsake you” (verse 15). These three promises have been the by-words for God’s relationship, not only with all of the patriarchs, but also with all of their descendants throughout the centuries — in every place where the Jewish people have been scattered. The Lord promised to guard, protect, and return the Jewish people from wherever they had gone, just like He promised Jacob. This was a solemn covenantal promise, obligating the Holy One to stand by His word. Ultimately, the Lord will keep all of His assurances which He is here promising Jacob, and He will bring a redeemed remnant back to live in the land which He has promised to their forefathers.

After God’s revelation to him, 28:16 says that Jacob awoke from his dream. However, his actions in the next verses seem to indicate that what he experienced was more than just a passing dream. Jacob’s reaction was such that he believed that God had really appeared and had spoken to him. Consequently, we see him worshipping the Holy One in verse 17 and, like his father Abraham, he gives this sacred place a name, actually two names: The House of God,

1. *Beit Elohim* (אלוהים בית): (later shortened to *beit el*, אל בית)

2. The Gate of Heaven: *sha'ar hashamayim* (השמים שער)

In addition, because he had such a significant encounter with the Holy One, he set up memorial stones to help him relocate this place whenever he returned to it. He did not want the blessedness of his meeting with God at this spot to be forgotten.

If we are correct in identifying this place as Mount Moriah, then the text reveals for us another of the ancient names for Jerusalem. For we read that Jacob renamed this spot from Luz (לויז) to Beth El. The rabbis assert that Luz was one of those ancient names. Munk offers a most fascinating commentary at this point:

The word Luz also denotes... the bone in the spine which is absolutely indestructible, which resists all elements, even fire . . . It does not draw its nourishment from ordinary food, it never changes in form, nor does it decompose after death like the bones of the human skeleton. Accordingly, the name Luz was given to a city where the angel of death has no influence. One can hold, then, that Jerusalem bore the name Luz originally because it is the "eternal city" which resists all destruction and always renews itself out of its ashes.²

In addition to setting up memorial stones, Jacob also responded to this revelation from the Lord by making a vow of service to Him. It is the first recorded vow in the Scriptures. One of the promises, which Jacob made to the Lord, was to give Him a tenth of his prosperity. We should note that this vow of a tenth, as well as the promise of a tenth that Abraham made to Melchizedek, were both voluntary gifts. God did not command them. They were amounts set by the generosity of their hearts. Later in the Torah, Moshe would set the amounts for required giving to God. The total amount of this type of offering far exceeded 20% of one's income.

A. The Enemy Empires

Having discussed some of the details of this famous dream, let us now look into some of the suggested meanings of this experience, both for Jacob and for ourselves.

One rabbinic interpretation of this dream, found in the midrash, is that it is symbolic of the nations that have come against Israel. "According to the Midrash, Jacob's dream depicts the rise and fall of nations and their cultures on the arena of world history."³

According to this viewpoint, Jacob is regarded as the symbol of the Jewish people who have wandered throughout the nations. The angels are symbols of the different nations who have risen and fallen during Israel's wanderings. The point of the dream, according to this interpretation, is to offer encouragement. Just as God promised to protect and be with Jacob as he was on his journey away from the Promised Land, so also would He protect and be close to the Jewish people in their wanderings outside of the Promised Land. He would guard Israel from total destruction by the hands of her enemies.

B. God is Accessible

Another way this dream has been understood is that it is said to teach us that God is accessible, that He is not far and away, but every spot on earth may be

for man “the gate of heaven.” The angels ascending and descending are bringing God’s messages to man and taking man’s prayers up to God. The activity of communication and implementation of God’s commands was pictured to Jacob as he viewed the ladder in his dream.⁴

C. The Changing of the Guard

Thus far of the two suggested interpretations, it seems that the second one is preferable. Yet there is also a third possible way to understand this dream. This we believe is completely complementary to the second interpretation above, and may be held along side of it.

Rashi offers a helpful insight. He says that the text first indicates that the angels were ascending before they were descending. The reason for that, says Rashi, is that there is something of a changing of the guard going on here.

The angels who escorted him in the Land of Israel do not go out of the land, as they ascended to the sky, and afterwards the angels of outside the area outside the Land of Israel descended to escort him.⁵

What Rashi seems to be saying is that angels accompanied Jacob as he left and entered the Land. It is also possible to apply this to our lives wherever we go. Apparently, there are angels who go with us to the border of another territory whereupon a new set of angels then takes over.

It is hard to be dogmatic at this point because this is a difficult point to confirm or deny. However, we do have personal experience that might illustrate the text at this juncture. Upon moving to Israel, we have experienced different problems and different freedoms from those we had experienced while living in the USA. Perhaps believers who live and minister in other lands can testify to the same. This difference in “protection” may be explained by the fact that there may be truth in what Rashi was saying — that different angels go with us when we go from one geographical territory to another.

It seems, then, that the main reason for this dream was to encourage Jacob in his journey out of the Promised Land. It assured him that the Lord was to be with him in Haran and that, by His sovereign grace, He would bring Jacob back home to Canaan. Judging from what Jacob would experience in Haran, he would need all the encouragement he could get!

¹ Rashi, *Bereshit*, ArtScroll Edition, 310.

² Elie Munk, *The Call of the Torah: Bereshit*, 384.

³ Nechama Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bereshit*, 299.

⁴ J. H. Hertz, *The Pentateuch and Haftarahs*, 106.

⁵ Rashi, *op. cit.* 312.