

SEPHARDIC INSTITUTE

511 Ave. R Brooklyn, NY 11223-2093 718 998 8171 Fax: 718 375 3263
Rabbi Moshe Shamah, Director Rabbi Ronald Barry, Administrator

בס"ד

Parashat Vayishlah Part IV Genesis 35

1. To Bethel

Although Jacob was deeply concerned with the possible repercussions of the slaughter at Shechem (Gen. 34:30), he still did not decide to depart for home, that is, to his father in Hebron. (As it turned out, the people of the neighboring cities were fearful and did not pursue Jacob's family.) G-d appeared to him and instructed him to go to Bethel (a distance of about twenty miles south of Shechem, directly on the way to Hebron, which itself is about thirty miles south of Bethel). He was told to "dwell there" (35:1), meaning that it was not to be a mere transit stop but that he was to spend a period of time there.

The purpose of this directive was obviously to have him, his household and all attached to him undergo a major spiritual uplifting. The extended experience would provide the time and opportunity for Jacob to impart to his family and entourage the new religious outlook of serving the one supreme G-d together with the concomitant values and applications and for everybody to internalize the teaching. It would establish the proper foundation in them and be a turning point in their lives. G-d reminds Jacob that Bethel was the site where He had appeared to him upon his departure from home, fleeing from Esau, and he should now construct an altar there (thus reminding him of the commitments that he made there).

On that previous occasion Jacob designated his headstone as a monument at the site, commemorating the theophany he had received there, and made a conditional vow. He stated then that if G-d protected him on the journey he was embarking upon and provided for his needs, and if he returned to his father's home safely, he would accept upon himself certain religious obligations. These included expanding the monument he had just set up into a *bet Elokim* (an abode for G-d). Thus, in any event, it was incumbent upon him eventually to go to Bethel in

order to fulfill his vow and establish a religious center there as he was now doing. Indeed one wonders that he had not as yet done so, considering the solemnity of a vow and that he had been back from Aram for a number of years. Why did he await a divine call to go to Bethel?

Perhaps the cautious Jacob, postponing his return to his father, did not yet consider himself safely back, especially as he was not yet at his father's home; in his vow he had specifically mentioned returning safely to his father's home. So G-d informed him that it was now time to go to Bethel; it was not necessary to wait until he actually returned to his father's home. Since there was no impediment to doing so, and it was only Jacob's personal choice to delay, the conditions upon which the vow was based were fulfilled.

In his vow, Jacob had stated that upon his safe return, *vehaya Hashem li lelokim* (28:21). Some commentators translate that clause to mean that he would then establish Hashem as his G-d, a commitment that he will now be fulfilling, despite the absence of any mention in our passage of the Tetragrammaton. They take that clause to be the beginning of the apodosis (the "then" portion of a conditional vow): if G-d fulfills the stipulations, "then Hashem will be my G-d." Of course such an understanding has nothing to do with Jacob's personal belief and trust in Hashem, from whom he received prophetic communications and to whom he was devoted in his prior phase of life also. Rather, it connotes his intention that upon his safe return he will devote his life to advocacy and promulgation of knowledge in Hashem and His ways, referring to the time when he would have the wherewithal to so comport.

Other commentators interpret *vehaya Hashem li lelokim* to be the last item of the protasis (the "if"

clause of a conditional commitment). As the final clause of the stipulations, it might be serving as a summary. Taking G-d's name *Elokim* as derived from the word for "might," the translation of the statement would be, "[in other words] if Hashem will be my mighty one," in the sense of my champion and protector.

Regardless, a momentous occasion was now at hand, perhaps the spiritual peak of his life.

Before departing from Shechem, Jacob prepared his household and retinue for the upcoming event. He instructed everyone to remove all *elohe nekhar* (alien gods) from their midst, purify themselves (probably referring to immersion in a body of water) and change their garments, symbolizing their embarking upon a major transformation in their life's orientation and commitment. Henceforth, they must renounce idolatry and will be required to be exclusively dedicated to the one G-d.

In the previous phase of life, Jacob had not demanded from his entourage loyal allegiance to the one G-d. He was on foreign ground, struggling to survive; given the deeply entrenched polytheistic ideologies of the time, he could not achieve such a major change in the orientation of others. Surely he did what he could; when Laban accused him of stealing his *terafim* (household gods), he was confident that no member of his family or household could have been guilty of such an act. This indicates that he had been teaching moral values to his people. (As it turned out, Rachel did steal them.) And when he requested that his assemblage turn over to him their idols and idolatrous earrings that they had apparently been openly wearing up to that point, they promptly did so.

One wonders: Did Rachel surrender the *terafim* at this time? This would have brought to Jacob's attention that the death sentence (or curse) that he had pronounced upon the thief, in his penitent overreaction to Laban's accusation of theft, was upon his beloved wife. That would have been a devastating blow to him. Rachel would surely have been reluctant to inform him of that fact.

The narrative informs us that "they gave to Jacob all the alien gods that were in their possession and the rings that were on their ears and Jacob buried them" (35:4). The riddance procedure could alternatively

have been for all to throw their relevant items into a dug out area and they would then cover it. But the point is made that Jacob personally received all the items and he personally buried them. Perhaps he wanted to make sure that only idolatrous items were discarded. In any event, there is no mention of Rachel handing over the *terafim*. Had she somehow rid herself of them previously it would have been an important detail that one would think the Torah would have mentioned. If at the time of great spiritual elevation – as the experience at Bethel was – Rachel retained them in her possession out of fear, shame or concern for her husband, she would have committed a sacrilegious act in the religious center Jacob had established. This might explain her premature death in childbirth, which occurs in the immediately following verses. That the text does not comment on the *terafim* one way or another may be out of respect for Rachel.

There is a midrash (*Gen. Rab.* 74:4, 9) that does attribute Rachel's premature death to Jacob's curse. His impulsive statement "with whomever your gods shall be found shall not live" was described as, "Like an error that proceeds from before the ruler" (*Eccl.* 10:5). According to this school of thought, although Jacob would never have uttered the curse had he known it would apply to Rachel, G-d fulfills it, since Rachel did steal the *terafim* and Jacob's stature in G-d's eyes is such that in this kind of case G-d honors his "decrees." Whether this interpretation reflects the deeper views of the Torah is a dubious matter. It should be recalled that when Rebekah first broached the idea to Jacob of deceiving his father, his response was, "Perhaps my father will feel me...and I will bring upon myself a curse" (*Gen.* 27:12). Nevertheless, he perpetrated the deception. Rachel perpetrated a similar deception in stealing her father's idols, which she believed imparted blessing. Jacob's placing a curse upon her (if that is what he did) is an ironic turn in that it may reflect his original view of what such deception deserves.

2. At Bethel

While at Bethel, Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, dies, and is buried under the oak beneath Bethel; the spot was given the name, "the oak of weeping." It should be borne in mind that Rebekah was married twenty years before Jacob was born. Taking age numbers in the Torah literally,* Jacob was ninety-one years older

than Joseph**, who was born in Jacob's fourteenth year by Laban, making the present time well over 117 years since Rebekah's marriage. Rebekah's nurse was sent with her from home when she departed to marry Isaac (24:59), although she was not previously identified by name. What was such an old woman doing with Jacob's entourage at Bethel? Why is her death cited while the death of women who played very important roles in the narrative, such as Rebekah and Leah, are not?

Some commentators conjecture that Rebekah may have sent her trusted nurse to Jacob to inform him that he should now return home. It is also conjectured that Deborah's death signals the death of Rebekah. There is no indication in the text supporting such explanations and they do not address the question of why her death was mentioned and not that of more prominent women.

Nahum Sarna suggests the following: "With the purging of idolatry and the arrival at Bethel, the contacts with Mesopotamia, maintained by each of the patriarchs, are finally and decisively severed. The mention of the death of Deborah thus becomes appropriate here for she was a living symbol of that connection" (JPS Commentary, Gen., p. 241).

We may add that a nurse symbolizes one who nurtures and provides sustenance and is a mentor of her charge. The Mesopotamian culture within which Rebekah was nurtured – despite her possessing excellent character traits, as displayed at the well – may have manifested itself in her manipulation of Jacob to perpetrate his impersonation of his brother and deceit of his father. She behaved just as her brother later did in manipulating his daughter to perpetrate virtually a mirror-image deception of Jacob's act. The spiritual experience at Bethel officially brought an end to this influence within the family of the patriarchs. Deborah means "bee." There were great, unsurpassable, honey-like qualities that Rebekah possessed but there also was the sting.

At Bethel, G-d changes Jacob's name to Israel, in accordance with what the angel had previously indicated. He also confirms the full measure of blessings of progeny and the promised land to him, officially recognizing him as the heir of Abraham and Isaac.

3. Going Home

After Bethel, before returning to Isaac, Jacob endures two wrenching family events: Rachel dies in childbirth and his firstborn son, Reuben, engages in sexual relations with Jacob's concubine, Bilhah.

In his last will and testament, Jacob declared that Reuben had forfeited his natural right to firstborn ascendancy because of his indiscretion concerning his father's bed, an act of rashness and impulsiveness (49:3-4). There probably is a symbolic dimension to Reuben's despicable act. The sages interpreted him as protecting his mother's dignity. Leah felt that Rachel, her younger sister, took away her husband (Gen. 30:15). Now that Rachel passed away, Reuben wanted to assure that Rachel's maidservant Bilhah does not now become his father's favorite (*b. Shabb. 55b*).

However, Reuben possibly had a different intention. It is well substantiated that in many areas of the ancient Near East, having sexual relations with the wife or concubine of a vanquished, deposed or deceased ruler, or one being contested, established one's claim to the mantle of leadership. Jacob was perhaps seen as withdrawing from his leadership role – this was particularly manifest in the Shechem episode – and Reuben may have been intent on securing his leadership claim over the clan.

There seem to be a number of biblical reflexes of employing sexual relations for such a purpose. Saul's son Ish-bosheth may have suspected that his military chief Abner had such an intention in cohabiting with Saul's concubine after the king's death, which may explain his sharp criticism of Abner about it (2 Sam. 3:7). Absalom's sexual violations of David's concubines may reflect such an intention, although the primary reason given there was to prove his total break with his father (2 Sam. 16:21-22). Solomon surely assumed that such an intention played a role in Adonijah's petition for Abishag after David's death. The king tells his mother, who transmitted Adonijah's request, "Rather, ask the kingdom for him," and then promptly has him put to death (1 Kgs 2:13-25). Since David had apparently made it known that he did not have sexual relations with Abishag, it was an ambiguous matter, as otherwise it would not be conceivable that such a request might be granted. In Nathan's rebuke to David concerning his sinning

with Bathsheba, G-d's statement, "I gave you your master's house and your master's wives" (2 Sam. 12:8a), seems to include a reference to this concept.

Finally, Jacob returns home to Isaac in Hebron (Gen. 35:27). There is no mention of an embrace nor is a single word of dialogue or interaction between father and son recorded. Although reconciled with Esau, perhaps Jacob's shame in front of his father was unbearable. Could the difficulty of facing his father after what he did, added to the less-than-ideal relationship that had previously obtained between them, have been the cause of his reluctance to return home? Is the textual silence itself a statement reflecting on the father-son relationship? After all, Isaac had a different vision for the national future than was now set in motion, one that included Esau, whom he loved, in some capacity. He may very well have thought that Jacob's usurping the blessing irretrievably upset his well-laid plans, causing a rift between the brothers that had been unnecessary, and changing the course of what he thought would have been a preferable program. Jacob may very well have suspected that these were Isaac's thoughts.

When shortly after Jacob's ruse Isaac sent him to Laban to find a wife, while he blessed him with the blessing he had prepared for him (he had no doubt that Jacob had the potential to carry on the heritage and the blessing reflected it), he probably brought up the matter of Jacob's deceptive behavior. It is reasonable to assume that in the manner of a caring father Isaac reprimanded Jacob. But at that time Jacob, fully supported by his mother, was obviously not receptive to his father's correction. Out of respect for Jacob's later transformation the Torah did not make any mention of explicit criticism. Since prior to Jacob's transformation (which was brought on when he had to confront a hostile Esau) he did not view his deceptive act as wrong, his reluctance to return home to his father only began after his meeting with Esau and his appreciation of the enormity of the wrong he committed. As pointed out earlier, when leaving

Laban, his intention had been to go directly home to his father (31:18).

In the verses immediately following Jacob's return home we are informed of Isaac's death*** and that Esau and Jacob, mentioned in that order, buried him.

Endnotes

* The evidence for allegorical interpretation of age numbers in the Torah is compelling, as brought out in our study *On Number Symbolism in the Torah from the Work of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon*. Moreover, there is a set of arithmetic patterns to the number of years the patriarchs lived: Abraham, $175 = 7 \times 5^2$; Isaac, $180 = 5 \times 6^2$; Jacob, $147 = 3 \times 7^2$. The multipliers are in a 7, 5, 3 pattern while the squared digits are in 5, 6, 7 order. Nevertheless, it is appropriate to reconcile the surface details where possible, for there is meaning at all levels.

** Joseph was thirty years of age when in front of Pharaoh, just before the seven years of plenty began. In the second year of famine (nine years later), Jacob told Pharaoh he was 130 years of age. Thus, Joseph was then thirty-nine and Jacob was ninety-one years older than him.

*** The note regarding Isaac's death (Gen. 35:28-29) should be considered out of chronological order, having occurred subsequent to the later-narrated sale of Joseph. This can be seen as follows. As pointed out in the previous note, Jacob was ninety-one years older than Joseph. Isaac was sixty when Jacob was born, so when Joseph was sold at seventeen, Jacob was 108 and Isaac 168. As the latter passed away at 180, he was alive for twelve years after the sale. Of course this opened interesting possibilities for the Midrash. Isaac's death is mentioned where it is in order to close his story, as there was nothing in his last years significant enough to be included in the text.

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