

פרשת ויצא

OVERVIEW

Yaakov is forced to leave his parental home to escape his brother's fury. In a nocturnal vision he receives a divine promise for blessing and assistance. Arriving at his uncle Laban's farm, he agrees to serve as a shepherd. After seven years of hard work he asks for the hand of Rachel, Laban's younger daughter. Laban cunningly substitutes the older daughter, Leah, to be Yaakov's wife. After agreeing to serve another seven years he obtains Laban's consent to marry Rachel. She remains childless for a number of years while Leah gives birth to six sons and one daughter.

As a result of Yaakov's fervent prayer Rachel finally gives birth to a son, Joseph. Two maidservants, Zilpah and Bilhah, who become Yaakov's concubines, each bear him two sons.

Having acquired some wealth, Yaakov asks Laban to release him from his service. When he is refused he decides to serve another six years. In the absence of Laban he takes his family and property and leaves. Laban pursues him, bent on revenge. However, warned by G-d, he relents and they separate peacefully.

COMMENTARY

Jacob's Ladder

The circumstances force Yaakov's sudden flight from his parental home; he leaves with bare necessities. Alone, calm and confident, he is on his way to establish his own family and home, a home which will be a house of G-d where every activity will bear the stamp of the divine Will. This task of building such a home and family in strict conformity with the dictates of divine Will, requires total concentration. Thus the ladder that appears to Yaakov in his dream is a symbolic representation of the bond that will bring him close to G-d during his entire lifetime. The angels, heralds of G-d's universal design, ascend and descend on this ladder as an added emphasis of the closeness of this bond. Everything is striving forwards and upwards - one goal unites all: G-d, at the top of the ladder.

Encounter at the Well

Arriving at the outskirts of Haran, Yaakov comes across a seemingly insignificant sight that, however, alerts him to some of the unpleasant customs of the city. Normally, a public well is not

hermetically sealed. But the wells of Laban and his neighbors are covered by rocks so large that they can only be removed by several strong men. This showed the mistrust and pettiness that characterized Yaakov's future father-in-law.

The extraordinary strength of the young Yaakov enables him to lift up the rock on his own. He waters his cousin's sheep and thereby displays qualities that will be most useful for the future: solid physical health, a clear sense of justice, zeal and aptitude for any kind of work. As he meets Rachel by the well, he is impressed by her dignity, simplicity and maidenly beauty. His emotional tears are a touching sign of his deep gratitude to G-d for having guided him to this young woman who reminds him of his mother and who helps soften the pain of his exile.

Laban

The Torah gives us a fascinating portrait of the old fox that is prepared for any lie and deception as long as it serves his purpose. He recognizes at once the benefit of having this impoverished nephew work for him. Here is a man one can exploit, a defenseless beggar who is forced to accept any condition and wages. This will be the future husband of his daughter whom he could not marry off so far. The presence in his house of this "pious" man can be most helpful in obtaining the divine blessing. Surely a strange mixture of greed, superstition and cunning. Little does Laban know that he is about to encounter a man whose unshakeable faith in G-d gives him the strength to meet his uncle's dishonest ways with the calm confidence of a man who knows that justice and truth are in his side.

Rachel and Leah

Nature itself smiles on Rachel's gracious personality. Leah, on the other hand, is unassuming, marked by a resigned sadness that originates from her own retiring ways as well as from her younger sister's brilliant qualities. Leah's whole life will be a struggle for the love of a man who did not want to marry her. She tries to hold him through her boundless devotion and deep attachment, and she is richly rewarded. Her six sons, joined together by brotherly love, will form the core of the Jewish nation. Yehuda and Levi will be the natural leaders of this people through the force and spiritual grandeur of their personalities.

Rachel's life is likened to a flame that blazes intensely only to quickly die down. Her short life will be rich, even turbulent; Yaakov's love will sustain her. The character of the two sisters is as different as their appearance. Rachel seems to be irascible, easily swayed, while Leah calmly accepts the vicissitudes of fate. Together these two women will be the unique source from which an entire nation will be nourished. Justly Jewish tradition has accorded the same historical recognition to both.

The Sheep

Fourteen years of hard work went by. Yaakov's situation has not changed much since he came to Laban's house. He is still totally dependent on his uncle. But he can no longer allow his children to grow in an atmosphere that is incompatible with his life ideals. Without further ado he notifies his father-in-law that he intends to leave his employ. He knows only too well that this decision will cause numerous problems for he had to support a large family on limited financial means.

Laban begs Yaakov to change his mind, promising him well-deserved benefits. Yaakov agrees to postpone his move. He acts as a responsible head of family who avoids risks when he is offered a chance to improve his position. He stipulates that his compensation would consist of the newly born speckled and spotted lambs and goats. They would become his property from the time of their birth, for he knew that once an object would become Laban's property it would be difficult to wrestle it from him, no matter how justified the claim. It seemed like an adequate wage, likely to frustrate any attempt of deception on the part of Laban. True to form, Laban agrees but tries another ruse by separating the goats that were marked on their legs and were spotted and then giving them to his sons, while leaving Yaakov with flocks of one color, all black or all white. G-d comes to the rescue and causes the lambs and kids to bring forth speckled and spotted young. Laban received a lesson that he would not forget.

Yaakov's Departure

"Rachel stole her father's idols and Yaakov stole the heart of Laban in that he did not

tell him of his plan to leave" 31:19-20). Against the background of the twofold "theft" the text leads over to the dramatic account of Yaakov's flight. It seems strange that here the term "theft" is applied to actions that appear entirely justified. Was it not right and proper for Yaakov to conceal his plan from his father-in-law knowing that Laban would do anything, even use force, to prevent his most valuable worker from leaving? Moreover, depriving Laban from his idols would serve to demonstrate their impotence and the senselessness of venerating them.

Our text is firm in using the word "theft" to make it clear that even moral considerations do not condone unlawful acts. It puts the "theft of the heart" on the same level with stealing money or property, winning the goodwill of another by false kindness, pretense, make-believe, and misrepresentation. Although the circumstances forced Yaakov's hand, his action, from a moral viewpoint, must be condemned.

The Angels

At his homecoming, Yaakov is met by angels just as they had appeared to him in his dream on the way to Laban. These encounters symbolize the pivotal role in his life of the bond between him and G-d. His home has become a veritable house of G-d, the historic encounter between divinity and humanity. "Machanayim", "a twofold camp" – this is the eloquent title Yaakov gives his home. A "twofold camp", referring to the interaction between intense human activity and the timeless ideals of the Eternal conveyed to man by the Revelation.

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