# Parashat Vayetzei Essays

## The Twelve Sons and the Twelve Tribes

Nahum Sarna

The narrative in 29:31-30:26 tells of the birth of twelve sons to Jacob through two wives and two concubines. Eleven are born in Paddan-Aram, and one [Benjamin] in Canaan. The account is set forth according to a pattern that combines maternal origin, social status, and chronological order, as follows:

**LEAH**

1. Reuben

2. Simeon

3. Levi

4. Judah

9. Issachar

10. Zebulun

**Bilhah** (Rachel’s Maid)

5.Dan

6. Naphtali

**Zilpah** (Leah’s Maid)

7.Gad

8. Asher

**RACHEL**

11. Joseph

[12. Benjamin]

Nothing in the language of the narrative suggests a reference to underlying tribal history, yet there can be no doubt that the sons are perceived to be the eponymous, or name-giving, ancestors of the future tribes of Israel. That is to say, the text exhibits consciousness of the fact that each son is to be regarded as the father of a tribe to which he lends his name.

The Genesis narratives that detail the birth of Jacob’s sons through a schematized arrangement actually constitute an important historic document relative to the evolution of the league of Israelite tribes. Certain stages of development can be discerned. The six Leah tribes must have originated in Mesopotamia and have constituted a separate fraternity that evolved in two distinct stages. The handmaid tribes must have endured a subordinate status. The tribe of Benjamin was the last to join the Israelite league and came into being in Canaan.

According to our account, Reuben is Jacob’s first-born, and his name consistently heads the biblical lists of the tribes of Israel. The prominent role he plays in the Joseph novella echoes his position of seniority and creates the expectation that he will enjoy the leadership of the league of israelite tribes. Yet such is not the case in the historical sources. During the conquest and settlement, the tribe of Reuben was insignificant. Its territory lay east of the River Jordan, where it felt itself isolated from the main body of Israel. The Song of Moses (Deut. 33) shows that its very existence as a tribe was at one time in jeopardy. Deborah censured it for its inactivity in a moment of great national crisis. The backwardness of the Reubenites is illustrated by the fact that as late as Saul’s time, they still maintained their pastoral nomadic existence, and until the exile they continued to be governed by a “chieftain.”

What this adds up to is that the depiction of Reuben as Jacob’s first-born cannot possibly be a retrojection from later times. It is, in fact, inexplicable unless it accurately represents an early historic reality in which Reuben enjoyed hegemony at least over the five other Leah tribes. Its loss of leadership is reflected in Genesis 35:22, and 49:3-4, and the involvement of the Reubenites in the rebellion against Moses, as described in Numbers 16, may also be part of this process.

Similarly, decisive conclusions about the antiquity of the data in the birth narratives may be drawn from the portrayal of the other three sons in the first Leah group. Simeon is next in line in seniority, but he does not inherit the mantle of leadership. Historically quite unimportant, the tribe did not even merit a mention in the Blessing of Moses or the Song of Deborah. It was largely absorbed by Judah, who took over many of the cities assigned to Simeon. Nevertheless, our narrative makes Simeon senior to Judah.

Levi, too, is here senior to Judah; yet in later times it had no territory and was dispersed throughout Israel. The story of his birth yields not the slightest intimation of all this. In fact, although Levi became a sacerdotal tribe, God is not invoked in explanation of his name, which is given a purely secular meaning. This is exceptional among the six sons of Leah.

Judah is also ignored by Deborah, and the early weakness of the tribe is evident from Deuteronomy 33:7. Our text, which has him as the fourth son, clearly reflects the situation prior to the ascendancy of Judah, an event that is reflected in Genesis 49:8-12.

The arrangement o( the four above-named as Leah tribes must stem from a period when they were politically related. Since their tribal territories were not contiguous, the organizing principle cannot be geographical, and the list must be pre-settlement. This is further underlined by the association of Issachar and Zebulun with the Leah group. These two had their territories in the north. Nothing that is known of their later history could possibly explain the connection. As to Gad and Asher both being the sons of Leah’s handmaid, here again there is no known history to account for the linkage or for the association of both with the other six. Gad had its territory east of the Jordan, far from Asher, who is situated in the north. Dan and Naphtali did occupy nearby territories in the north, but our scant information about the history of these two tribes prevents us from making any deductions about the reality behind our narrative or as to why Dan is the elder of the two.

All in all, the contrast between what is known of the post-settlement history of the tribes and the reality that can be culled from the present narrative account about the birth of Jacob’s sons unmistakably points to the conclusion that the latter preserves the earliest traditions.

## Jacob’s escape

Nahum Sarna

Jacob, in Lavan’s household, is completing 20 years of service. His material success aroused the envy of Lavan’s sons and he made up his mind to return home, Prompted by a divine call. and with the backing of his wives, Jacob assembled the members of his family, gathered together his possessions, and awaited a suitable opportunity to slip away.

The reaction of Rachel and Leah to Jacob’s suggestion of flight can now be understood through the material found in the Nuzi archives. The women declared,

“Have we still a share in the inheritance of our father’s house? Are we not reckoned by him ad outsiders? For he has sold us and then used up our purchase price.”

The first part of this complaint fits in well with what is known of the inferior status of foreign slaves in Nuzi. An outsider, deprived of local relatives who could supply protection or demand redress, would be a likely object of exploitation. As to the second sentence, the reference is most probably to the marriage arrangement, which Lavan had made with Jacob, exacting from him 14 years of service in payment of the bridal price for his two wives, Normally, the groom deposited with the bride’s father or guardian a sum of money to be settled on the bride. In this case, the service substituted for the money. The regular term for the bridal-price payment in biblical Hebrew is mohar. In our text the word kesef is used. In Nuzi documents, this same word sometimes employed instead of the usual technical term. Moreover, the Akkadian idiom expressing utilization of the bridal purchase money is the very one used by Rachel and Leah. It is uncertain, though, whether Lavan is being accused of improvident disposition of the monetary equivalent of Jacob’s years of service, or of downright larceny.

At any rate, Jacob made good his escape while Lavan was away on a sheep-shearing mission. A curious derail of this flight is Rachel’s appropriation of her father’s terafim. That this can be none other than the images of gods is apparent from Lavan’s angry accusation when he finally caught up with this son-in-law, “Why did you steal my gods?”

That these particular figurines were small and portable is obvious from the way Rachel quickly managed to conceal them in the camel cushion. We must therefore be dealing here with the private household gods. Once again the archives of Nuzi throw a little light on the matter. The adoption contract of Nashwi and Wullu stipulates as follows:

“If Nashwi has a son of his own, he shill divide (the estate) equally with Wullu, but the son of Nashwi shall take the gods of Nashwi. However, if Nashwi does not have a son of his own, then Wullu shall take the gods of Nashwi.”

We do not yet know the exact interpretation of this clause, nor the precise significance attaching to the possession of these household gods. They certainly had great religious significance, and this and other texts indicate that they would normally belong to the paterfamilias. But why Rachel stole them it is impossible to say. The Nuzi tablet provides only North Mesopotamian and hence, local, coloration for the incident.

From Lavan’s actions and Jacob’s fearful imprecation, we may gather that the theft of the gods was a grievous offence. This impression is reinforced by the importance attached to their disposition in the kind of legal document just cited. For this reason, the way the biblical narrator handles the story is highly significant. In direct speech the objects are called “my gods” by Lavan, and “your gods” by Jacob in response. This dissociation of the patriarch from the terms of religious expression accepted by Lavan is further emphasized by Jacob’s contemptuous reference to the figurines as “household objects.” Even more derisive is the descriptive epithet terafim in the narration, as distinct from the direct speech. While the etymology of the word is obscure, it un­doubtedly has ignominious connotations. Finally, it is not at all im­probable that to the narrator the culminating absurdity in the religious situation was reached when Rachel hid the idols in the camel cushion and sat upon them in a claimed state or menstrual impurity. In the light or the Israelite notions of “clean and unclean,” the description or Rachel’s act implies an attitude of willful defilement and scornful rejec­tion of their religious significance.

Lavan’s futile search for his gods provoked Jacob to an impassioned outpouring of righteous indignation arid protestations of injured inno­cence. We are treated to a revealing picture of the hard life and the trials and tribulations of the shepherd in ancient limes. Jacob asserts that Lavan had exacted recompense whenever an animal entrusted to his care had been lost by accident or force majeur. If Hammurabi’s laws be any guide in this situation, Jacob is accusing his uncle of having far exceeded his legal rights, for a shepherd who could prove lack of negligence was not liable in such circumstances.

Lavan made no detailed reply to Jacob’s allegations. Instead, he suggested that the two conclude a pact of mutual non-aggression and peaceful coexistence. Jacob must have been most happy to rid himself of Lavan at last and he readily agreed. Anxious to provide his daughter with legal protection under divine sanction in a strange, far-off land, Lavan inserted a clause in the pact restricting Jacob’s right to take addi­tional wives in the future.

Such stipulations are unknown elsewhere in the Bible, but in recent years legal documents from Nuzi and the town of Alalakh in northern Syria have shown that impositions of this kind upon the son-in-law were not infrequent in that part of the world. The Nashwi-Wullu contract provided that, “if Wullu takes another wife he shall forfeit the lands and buildings of Nashwi.

Another tablet, a marriage document, stipulates that “Zilikkushu shall not take another wife in addition to Naluya.”

## What Rachel really stole, and why

Wendy Zierler

At first, in Genesis 31, Jacob appears as the central actor in this narrative. Everything is said and done in relation to him, stated in masculine possessive terms. In 31:19, however, Rachel seizes the opportunity afforded by Lavan’s going off to shear his sheep to steal her father’s terafim. Until this point, Rachel and Leah have followed a course initiated by Jacob and his concerns. Here, however, Rachel initiates and plots her own destiny. So much so that in the next verse Jacob is seen as following Rachel’s lead: Rachel stole the terafim (verse 19) and Jacob “stole the mind (literally: heart) of Lavan the Aramean” (verse 20).

Jacob re-assumes center stage in the narrative when Lavan overtakes him on his journey and the two men begin to air their respective grievances. But from the moment Rachel steals the terafim, Jacob ceases to con­trol the action or facts. It is in a condition of ironic ignorance that Jacob makes his rash pronouncement (verse 32): “But the one with whom you find your gods shall not live.” (Compare Jephthah’s vow in Judges 11:30 to sacrifice the first to come out to meet him, a vow that leads him to sacrifice his daughter.)

Several midrashic sources contend that Jacob’s death sentence for the theft of Lavan’s terafim is borne out in Rachel’s tragic death after giving birth to Ben­jamin (for example, B’reishit Rabbah 74.32). Accord­ing to a plain reading of Genesis 31, however, Rachel emerges from the episode victorious and unscathed. After all, Jacob’s curse is conditioned upon Lavan actually finding the terafim in someone’s possession, ­something that Lavan never accomplishes.

Lavan conducts a thorough search of Jacob’s camp—Jacob’s tent, Leah’s, the two maidservants’, and Ra­chel’s—but he finds nothing. What has Rachel done to elude her father? She has placed the terafim in a camel’s saddle (echoing how Jacob put his wives and sons onto camels in verse 17) and conceals them by sitting on this same saddle. She then shrewdly apologizes to her father for not obeying usual custom and rising before him as he searches her tent. “The way of women is upon me” (31:35), Rachel claims, cunningly manipulating the (male) menstruation taboo to her own advantage.

What are these terafim that Rachel risks so much to steal? What did they stand for in Rachel’s time, and what do they mean for us today?

According to Rashi, the terafim were household idols that Rachel steals from her father for pious, monotheistic reasons: “in order to distance him from the practice of idol wor­ship-” This interpretation clearly stems from rabbinic discomfort with the idea of Rachel as idol worshipper. Yet if Rachel were so angry with her father as to be willing to leave his house forever without so much as a goodbye, would she really care about his spiritual fate?

Based on other instances in the Bible where the word appears, other traditional exegetes identify terafim with the practice of divination. Thus, Rachel steals the terafim, which were used by ancient magicians as a means of telling the future, in order to prevent Lavan from knowing Jacob’s plans or where­abouts. If that were the case, however, Rachel should have simply broken them. Why does she go to the trouble of stealing them, hiding them in a saddle, and tricking her father?

Several contemporary biblical scholars have argued chat possession of the “household gods” was related to issues of clan leadership or inheritance. Accordingly, the terafim are symbolic tokens that indicate Rachel’s right to take her children and possessions away from her father and hand them over to her husband. And yet, Rachel’s decision not to inform Jacob of her theft of the terafim suggests that she acts for her own sake, not Jacob’s.

Along these lines, feminist biblical scholar J.E. Lapsley argues that Rachel steals the terafim because her status as a woman in a patriarchal household pre­vents her from confronting her father with her own grievances about her rightful inheritance. “Therefore, she goes about getting justice from her father through devious and extra-legal means.”

In telling her father that she cannot “rise before” him because the “way of women is upon her,” Rachel is “speaking two languages simultaneously.” Lavan hears Rachel as saying that she cannot honor him by standing because she is menstruating. But Rachel’s speech also reads as a complaint that she has no forum for rising before her father and pleading her case for inheritance; the social “way of women” constrains her possibilities for speech, advocacy, and direct action.

According to Lapsley, Rachel’s “subversive action in stealing the terafim is matched by her equally subver­sive undermining of male definitions of women and her creation of new meanings out of male-generated language.” According to this interpretation, Rachel steals not only the terafim, but also the language that has been used by this patriarchy to define her as woman and limit her access to culture and law.

Rachel thus emerges from this story as an arche­typal feminist writer, who dares to steal across the bor­der of masculine culture, seize control of her cultural inheritance, and make it her own. Understood this way, the theft of the terafim becomes a story about women’s potential to use and craft language, both holy and mundane, in all of its many meanings, to speak potently—and cause others to listen.

## Light in Dark Times

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

What is it that made Jacob—not Abraham or Isaac or Moses—the true father of the Jewish people? We are the “congregation of Jacob,” “the children of Israel.” Jacob/Israel is the man whose name we bear. Yet Jacob did not begin the Jewish journey; Abraham did. Jacob faced no trial like that of Isaac at the binding. He did not lead the people out of Egypt or bring them the Torah. To be sure, all his children stayed within the faith, unlike Abraham or Isaac, but that simply pushes the question back one level. Why did he succeed where Abraham and Isaac failed?

It seems that the answer lies in this week’s parashah and the next (Vayishlach). Jacob was the man whose greatest visions came to him when he was alone at night, far from home, fleeing from one danger to the next. In this week’s parashah, escaping from Esau, he stops and rests for the night with only stones to lie on and has an epiphany:

He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.…When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it.” He was afraid and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.” (Gen. 28: 12-17)

In next week’s parashah, fleeing from Lavan and terrified at the prospect of meeting Esau again, he wrestles alone at night with an unnamed stranger.

Then the man said, “Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome….” So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.” (Gen. 32:29-31)

These are the decisive spiritual encounters of Jacob’s life, yet they happen in liminal space (the space between that is neither starting point nor destination), at a time when Jacob was at risk in both directions, where he came from and where he was going to. Yet it was at these points of maximal vulnerability that he encountered God and found the courage to continue despite all the hazards of the journey.

That is the strength Jacob bequeathed the Jewish people. What is remarkable is not merely that this one tiny people survived tragedies that would have spelled the end of any other people: the destruction of two temples, the Babylonian and Roman conquests, the expulsions, persecutions and pogroms of the Middle Ages, the rise of anti-Semitism in 19th century Europe and the Shoah. After each cataclysm, it renewed itself, scaling new heights of achievement.

During the Babylonian exile, it deepened its engagement with the Torah. After the Roman destruction of Jerusalem, it produced the great literary monuments of the Oral Torah: Midrash, Mishnah and Gemara. During the Middle Ages, it produced masterpieces of law and Torah commentary, poetry and philosophy. A mere three years after the Shoah, it proclaimed the State of Israel, the Jewish return to history after the darkest night of exile.

When I became Chief Rabbi [of Great Britain], I had to undergo a medical examination. The doctor put me on a treadmill, walking at a very brisk pace. “What are you testing?” I asked him. “How fast I can go, or how long?” “Neither,” he replied. “What I am testing is how long it takes, when you come off the treadmill, for your pulse to return to normal.” That is when I discovered that health is measured by the power of recovery. That is true for everyone, but doubly so for leaders and for the Jewish people, a nation of leaders (that, I believe, is what the phrase “a kingdom of priests” means).

Leaders suffer crises. That is a given of leadership. When Harold Macmillan, prime minister of Britain between 1957 and 1963, was asked what was the most difficult aspect of his time in office, he replied, “Events, dear boy, events.” Bad things happen, and when they do, the leader must take the strain so that others can sleep easily in their beds.

Leadership, especially in matters of the spirit, is deeply stressful. Four figures in Tanach—Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah and Jonah—actually pray to die rather than continue. Nor was this true only in the distant past. Abraham Lincoln suffered deep bouts of depression. So did Winston Churchill, who called it his “black dog.” Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King both attempted suicide in adolescence and experienced depressive illness in adult life. The same was true of many great creative artists, among them Michelangelo, Ludwig von Beethoven and Vincent Van Gogh.

Is it greatness that leads to moments of despair, or moments of despair that lead to greatness? Is it that those who lead internalize the stresses and tensions of their time? Or is it that those who are used to stress in their emotional lives find release in leading exceptional lives?

There is no convincing answer to this in the literature thus far. But Jacob was a more emotionally volatile individual than either Abraham, who was often serene even in the face of great trials, or Isaac, who was more than usually withdrawn. Jacob feared; Jacob loved; Jacob spent more of his time in exile than the other patriarchs. But Jacob endured and persisted. Of all the figures in Genesis, he is the great survivor.

The ability to survive and to recover is part of what it takes to be a leader. It is the willingness to live a life of risks that makes such individuals different from others. So said Theodor Roosevelt in one of the greatest speeches ever made on the subject:

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat. (Theodor Roosevelt, Speech at the Sorbonne, April 23, 1910)

Jacob endured the rivalry of Esau, the resentment of Lavan, the tension between his wives and children, the early death of his beloved Rachel and the loss, for 22 years, of his favorite son Joseph. He said to Pharaoh, “Few and hard have been the years of my life” (Gen. 47:9). Yet, on the way, he “encountered” angels, and whether they were wrestling with him or climbing the ladder to heaven, they lit the night with the aura of transcendence.

To try, to fall, to fear, and yet to keep going: that is what it takes to be a leader. That was Jacob, the man who at the lowest ebbs of his life had his greatest visions of heaven.

## The path Jacob trod

Yeshayahu Leibowitz

“Jacob went out” (Gen. 28:10). With what did Jacob leave his father’s house to go into exile? He left. with the birthright and the blessing which he had acquired by roundabout means, means which were a mixture of the positive and the negative. But beyond these, which included the great mission which had devolved upon him from Abraham, he had nothing.

As he himself would testify 20 years later regarding the dramatic episodes in which he was involved when he obtained the birthright and the blessing, he had crossed the Jordan with nothing more than his staff.

The first great event after he left his home was the prophetic vision which he saw. That dream has revealed profound allusions, hidden meanings and significant messages to generation after generation of those who studied the Torah, those who interpreted it, and those who offered homiletic messages based on it. After this dream, after he awoke from his sleep, Jacob took a vow.

This vow is surprising, first of all, in the fact that after Jacob was granted this revelation of God, which included the promise of a glorious future, he spoke, as it were, only of satisfying his material needs: of bread to eat and clothing to wear. More than that, it seems as if he made a condition: if his wants were granted and God aided him—so one may understand it—then God would be his God.

But one can explain this in an entirely different way. Jacob did not impose any condition here on the acceptance of the Yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven. “God will be my God” was not a quid pro quo which Jacob promised, but was included in those things he sought: bread to eat, clothes to wear, to return to his father’s house, and that God should be his God.

The Midrash delves into this more deeply, and in one instance converts Jacob’s vow from a request which he made for the supplying of his needs to an obligation which he accepted upon himself vis-a-vis God. “If God is with me and protects me on the path on which I am going’ (28:20)—’on the path’ (in Hebrew, “haderekh”)—that he will preserve me from lashon hara (slander), in accordance with the verse (Jer. 9:2), ‘They bend (vayidrekhu) their tongues like their bow for lies’; ‘and He will give me bread to eat’—he will preserve me from lewdness, in accordance with the well-known allusion to ‘the bread I eat’ as referring to sexual relations; ‘and I return in peace to my father’s house’—to be taken literally: to refrain from spilling blood; ‘and God will be my God’: He will preserve me from idolatry.”

This means that Jacob was not seeking to have his needs taken care of, but wanted God to help him fulfill his obligations, by preventing him from slander, murder, lewdness and idolatry. This vow was a very great religious commitment, and was not a request for a reward.

Alternatively, another midrash delves even more deeply into this matter, but in an almost frightening way. This midrash notes that Jacob regressed to such a state that, based on the literal meaning of the text, he begged for bread to eat and clothes to wear, because he had absolutely nothing: he had crossed the Jordan with his staff, and he begged to be able to return in peace, because he was in great distress and great danger.

But what caused him to reach that state? The fact that he had obtained the birthright and the blessing by devious ways, and as a result earned the enmity of his brother Esau; it was as a result of this that he had been forced to flee and to go into exile. This midrash does not show any partiality toward Jacob, and makes the following shocking statement: “All those things which Jacob wished to refrain from, came upon him. He wished to refrain from slander, and what happened to him and his household? ‘Joseph brought to his father their evil report’ (37:2). Jacob wished to refrain from lewdness, and in his household the events of Reuben and Bilhah, and of Judah and Tamar took place. He very much wished to live in peace and to refrain from shedding blood, and the affair of Shechem and Simeon and Levi occurred”—an action for which one can find justification (“Should he deal with our sister as with a harlot?”—34:31), but which was nevertheless a cursed action whose accursedness Jacob mentioned decades later, just before he died.

Whatever Jacob wished to refrain from, occurred to him: slander, lewdness in his family, the shedding of blood, and even idolatry—Rachel took her father’s idols into Jacob’s home, and later Jacob had to demand the removal of the foreign gods “in their midst.”

Here we see that God does not show partiality even to His chosen ones. On the contrary: one may even say that it is specifically to His chosen ones that He does not show partiality. That is why the Chosen One of the forefathers (as Jacob is commonly known), who attained the heavenly mission assigned to him, underwent all these terrible events. He suffered all these failures because, on his way to attain his mission, he did not follow the straight path.

## Between Two Dreams

Pinchas Peli

“Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Charan.” He did not leave his home and his country to go to Charan on a pleasure trip or to seek adventure. He was a fugitive, running for his life after being threatened by his brother Esau “who had a hatred of Jacob on account of the blessing his father had given him” (Gen. 27:41). Young Jacob must have been very upset, being forced to leave his idyllic life of study and personal growth [as the Midrash would have it] in the tents of Shem and Ever.

His mother, who warned him that Esau was scheming to murder him and advised him to flee, was now far away. He missed home and wondered what would happen now with his studies. And what about his uncle Lavan to whom he is running now, and whose reputation as a shrewd operator was not unknown even in the land of Canaan? How would Lavan receive him? And yet, Jacob has this marvelous dream in which heaven and earth are joined together; he sees angels going up and down. He receives a message of Godliness, a promise of a great fu­ture. Upon awakening he proclaims: “This is an abode of God, a gateway to heaven!”

Notwithstanding the gloomy circumstances in which he finds himself at that hour, Jacob is sure that God is with him and that he will be returning home. He is a man with a dream. A heavenly, angelic dream.

This, however, is not the only dream Jacob dreamt. There is yet to come another dream, one quite different in nature. Twenty-one years elapse between the two dreams. When the second dream comes, Jacob is settled down and prosperous, he has two wives, children and property. He has been exposed to Lavan’s materialistic soci­ety and values, in fact he became part of it, as he engaged in an economic struggle with his shrewd uncle and father-­in-law to secure a livelihood for his growing family.

Jacob had just concluded a series of hard negotiations with his senior partner, and had arrived at a seemingly satisfactory arrangement, and, suddenly, a dream. He tells it to his wives at a clandestine meeting in the fields:

“Once at the mating time of the flocks, I had a dream in which I looked up and saw that the he-goats mating with the flocks were streaked, speckled or spotted. The angel of God said to me in the dream, ‘Jacob: I answered, ‘Here I am.’ And he said, look up and see all the he-goats mat­ing with the flock are streaked, speckled or spotted, for I have seen all that Lavan has been doing to you. I am the God of Bethel….Now leave this land at once and go back to your native land.”

The dream as told by Jacob to his wives does not seem to make sense in warranting the conclusions arrived at by the angel of God. Now that Jacob is “making it” and even biology works for him, thanks to the ingenious invention he devised, and all the sheep “go his way,” is now of all times, the time to “leave this land at once”? Why?

A closer reading will reveal to us that this last dream of Jacob did not come as suddenly as it may seem at first glance and that it is connected with Jacob’s earlier dream at Bethel. There are two factors that make Jacob realize that it is high time for him to leave this land at once and return home. One is in the bad “vibes” which reach him from the sons of Lavan complaining that he got rich on their back: he feels unwanted, a victim of economic envy. This Jacob should have perhaps fought and survived, but there was another factor, a more serious one, which con­vinced Jacob that he did not belong there, in the land of Lavan and his sons.

In the language of our parashah, “And Jacob noticed that Lavan’s face did not appear to him as it did before.” What was that “new face” that so startled Jacob? We know from the story told so far, that Lavan’s attitude toward Jacob was not particu­larly friendly from the beginning; what then had changed now?

May we suggest that what had startled Jacob in the “reading” of Lavan’s face was not that it changed from a friendly countenance to an unfriendly one, but that, on the contrary, the face of Lavan appeared now to Jacob as being proper and “normal.” Until now, whenever Jacob looked at Lavan, and his total enslavement to materialism, he felt uneasy and it appalled him. What a strange ‘‘face!” He was constantly aware of the gap between his own val­ues and those of Lavan. Now. as he himself became immersed in the materialistic world of Lavan, he suddenly realized that the face of Lavan “does not appear to him [as strangely!] as it did before.”

Moreover, his dream has changed, too. It is filled with streaked, speckled and spot­ted flocks instead of ascending and descending angels. “I have seen all that Lavan has been doing to you,” says the angel of God. The worst had happened. Lavan succeeded in destroying your original dream and made you dream his material dreams. “I am the God of Bethel”—Do you still remember, Jacob, the dream you dreamt there?

All that follows is a direct result of this moment of truth. At this point, Jacob hears the Lord saying to him: “Go back to the land of your fathers where you were born and I will be with you.” From that moment on, he knows that he does not belong here any­more. When he summons his wives to the meeting in the field, he tells them about his upcoming plans by way of the dream he had.

Jacob finds himself again when he realizes what hap­pened to his dream, how it changed from a dream of a ladder stretching from earth to heaven, with angels going up and down on it, to a dream of cattle, all kinds of cattle, streaked, speckled and spotted. He catches himself in time to realize that dreams filled with sheep—which were, as we know, the hard currency of those days—cannot take the place of the dreams of his youthful idealism where man communicates with God. It is then, when the materi­alistic dreams are about to take him over, that Jacob realizes what Lavan and Lavanism had done to him, and that he must act now or he will not have another chance. It is then that he decides to go home, back to the land of the fathers and mothers, where he may yet recapture the old dream. Where Jacob may yet become Israel.

## Jacob’s Ladder and the Structure of Jewish Prayer

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

It is one of the great dreams of the Bible. Jacob, afraid and alone, finds himself in what the anthropologist Victor Turner called liminal space—the space between—between the home he is escaping from and the destination he has not yet reached, between the known danger of his brother Esau from whom he is in flight, and the unknown danger of Lavan, from whom he will eventually suffer great wrongs.

As will happen again 22 years later on his return—in the wrestling match with the stranger—Jacob has his most intense experiences alone, at night, isolated and vulnerable, in the middle of a journey. In this, the first of his visions: “He had a dream in which he saw a ladder resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and angels of God were ascending and descending on it.”

What does this signify? There are many interpretations given by the sages and commentators, but the simplest is that it has to do with the encounter between the human soul and God, the encounter later generations knew as prayer.

When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, “Surely God is in this place, and I did not know it.” He was afraid and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.”

The synagogue is the house of God. Prayer is the gate of heaven. And when we have truly prayed, the most profound result is that we too are conscious of the feeling: “Surely God is in this place, and I did not know it.”

Did this vision exercise any influence on the structure of Jewish prayer? I want to suggest that it did. Its influence was profound. If we examine Jewish prayer carefully, we will see that its shape precisely matches the idea of a ladder on which angels ascend and descend.

If we study the liturgy carefully, we will find that it often has a symmetrical three-part structure, A-B-A, which has the following form: (a) ascent, (b) standing in the Presence, (c) descent. Here are some examples.

1. The morning service begins with (a) p’sukei d’zimra, a series of Psalms, which constitute a preparation for prayer. It moves on to (b) prayer as such: the Shema, the three blessings that surround it, and the Amidah, the standing prayer. It ends with (c) a series of concluding prayers, including Ashrei, itself a key element of p’sukei d’zimra.

The basis of this threefold structure is a statement in the Talmud (Berachot 32b) that “the early pious men used to wait for an hour before praying, then they would pray for an hour, and then they would wait for a further hour.” The Talmud asks on what basis they did so. It answers by citing the verse Ashrei itself: “Happy are those who sit in Your house.” Clearly this is what is known as an *asmachta*, a supporting verse, rather than the origin of the custom itself (this passage, though, is undoubtedly the reason Ashrei is said in the first and third sections).

2. Another example is the structure of the Amidah. This has the following three-part pattern: (a)s hevach, praise, the first three paragraphs; (b) bakashah, requests, the middle paragraphs, and (c) hodayah, “thanks” or “acknowledgements,” the last three paragraphs.

Shevach is a preparation. It is our entry to the divine presence. Hodayah is a leave-taking. We thank God for the goodness with which He has favored us. Bakashah, the central section, is standing in the presence itself. We are like supplicants standing before the King, presenting our requests. The spiritual form of the first and last actions—entry and leave-taking—are dramatized by taking three steps forward, and at the end, three steps back. This is the choreography of ascent and descent.

3. The k’dushah—verses taken from the mystical visions of Isaiah and Ezekiel—is said three times in the morning service (on Shabbat, the third is transferred to the afternoon service, because the morning service is more than usually long. However, its proper place is in the morning service). The first, known as *k’dushat yotzer*, occurs in the blessings before the Shema; the third, *k’dushah d’sidra*, is in the concluding section of the prayers, beginning Uva l’Tzion. The middle kedushah is in the reader’s repetition of the Amidah.

The k’dushah makes explicit reference to angels. Its key verses are the words Isaiah and Ezekiel heard the angels saying as they surround the Throne of Glory. We speak of the angels at this point: the S’rafim, Cherubim, Ofanim and holy Chayot.

There are obvious differences between the first and last, on the one hand, and the second on the other. The first and third do not need a minyan according to most rulings [others differ on this point, including me—Shammai]. They can be said privately. They do not need to be said standing. The second requires a minyan and must be said standing.

Maimonides explains the difference. In the first and third, we are describing what the angels do when they praise God. In the second, we are enacting what they do. The first and third are preparation for, and reflection on, an event. The second is the event itself, as we relive it.

There are other examples, but these will suffice.

The daily prayers, as we now have them, evolved over a long period of time. The sages tell us that the first architects were the men of the Great Assembly in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, the 5th century B.C.E. There was a further intensive process of composition and canonization in the days of Rabban Gamliel at Yavneh. Shaping and reshaping continued until the first siddurim, those of Rav Amram Gaon and Rav Saadiah Gaon in the 9th and 10th centuries C.E.

What we see from the above examples is that there is a basic shape—a depth grammar—of prayer. It consists of ascent-standing in the Presence-descent. The inspiration for this cannot have been any other than Jacob’s vision.

Prayer is a ladder stretching from earth to heaven. On this ladder of words, thoughts and emotions, we gradually leave earth’s gravitational field. We move from the world around us, perceived by the senses, to an awareness of that which lies beyond the world—the earth’s Creator.

At the end of this ascent, we stand, as it were, directly in the conscious presence of God—which Maimonides defines as the essential element of *kavanah*, the intentional state essential to prayer.

We then slowly make our way back to earth again—to our mundane concerns, the arena of actions and interactions within which we live. But if prayer has worked, we are not the same afterward as we were before. For we have seen, as Jacob saw, that “Surely God is in this place, and I did not know it.”

If the first stage is the climb, and the second standing in heaven, then the third is bringing a fragment of heaven down to earth. For what Jacob realized when he woke from his vision is that God is in this place. Heaven is not somewhere else, but here—even if we are alone and afraid—if only we realized it. And we can become angels, God’s agents and emissaries, if, like Jacob, we have the ability to pray and the strength to dream.