Message 2026-11-21 - There and Back Again

Introduction
Today we are going to basically do a deeper dive into the weekly parashah. A lot of important things happen in this portion. So, we will definitely not touch on everything in this portion, but this will be a few d'varim torah, words of Torah, that stood out to me this year.

בעזרת השם

Be'ezrat Hashem.
With God's help.

Be'ezrat Hashem, with God's help, we will accomplish together what He has for us this morning.

Parashah Vayetze- B'reshit [Genesis] 28:10-32:3

In Parashah Vayetze, Ya'akov is heading out on a journey to find a wife. He dreams about angels going up and down between earth and heaven and then continues on his journey toward the home of his uncle Lavan. During years of indentured servitude, Ya'akov marries Lavan's daughters Leah and Rakhel, bearing children with them and with their maidservants, Bilhah and Zilpah. These children become the tribes of Israel. Lavan deals with Ya'akov dishonestly, but Adonai greatly blesses Ya'akov. By the conclusion of the portion, after 20 years, Ya'akov and his wives and his children are on a journey back to the land of promise.

In Parasha Vayetze we see a man become a family.

This family will go on to become the nation of Israel, and, through Israel, all the world will be blessed.

He Went Out

This portion begins with the words 'and Ya'akov went out (וַיֵּצֵא יַעֲקֹב)'. This story begins a few verses before in B'reshit 28 with Yitz'khak, on the counsel of Rivkah, instructing Ya'akov with these words.

Go now to the home of B'tu'el your mother's father, and choose a wife there from the daughters of Lavan your mother's brother. May El Shaddai bless you, make you fruitful and increase your descendants, until they become a whole assembly of peoples. And may he give you the blessing which he gave Avraham, you and your descendants with you, so that you will possess the land you will travel through, the land God gave to Avraham.
B'reshit {Genesis} 28:2–4 (CJB)

One remarkable thing about these verses is that Ya'akov had just had to deceive Yitz'khak into giving him the blessing that Adonai had told Rivkah (that Yitz'khak knew) that he should receive. Yitz'khak trembled uncontrollably when he realized what he had done. However, here Yitz'khak freely blesses Ya'akov, and he asks that Adonai also bless him with the blessing Adonai gave Avraham.

This instruction and this blessing echo the words Hashem spoke to Avram when he was still in his father's house.

Jacob's Journey

Ya'akov obeys Yitz'khak and sets out on his journey. Like Avraham, he is told to go, and he goes, va'yetze Ya'akov. He acts on faith.

{map showing Beer-sheva and Beit-El}

He stops near what would later become Jerusalem, and Ya'akov has a vision of a structure between ha olam and ha shamayim with angels ascending and descending. This is a fascinating vision. However, that is a topic for another day.

What I would like to focus on is what happened right after this. As he is witnessing this amazing spectacle, Adonai appears and speaks to Ya'akov.

Then suddenly Adonai was standing there next to him; and he said, “I am Adonai, the God of Avraham your [grand]father and the God of Yitz’chak. The land on which you are lying I will give to you and to your descendants. Your descendants will be as numerous as the grains of dust on the earth. You will expand to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. By you and your descendants all the families of the earth will be blessed.
B'reshit [Genesis] 28:13–14 (CJB)

Adonai introduces Himself to Ya’akov as the God of Avraham and the God of Yitz’khak. Then, just in case it wasn't clear or was somehow in doubt when Yitz'khak passed on the covenant of Avraham to him, Adonai comes to Ya'akov and reiterates His covenant with Avraham (just like Yitz'khak said).

When you take the words of Yitz’khak and these words of Adonai together, they echo the words Hashem spoke to Avram when he was still in his father’s house.

Now Adonai said to Avram, “Get yourself out of your country, away from your kinsmen and away from your father’s house, and go to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, I will bless you, and I will make your name great; and you are to be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, but I will curse anyone who curses you; and by you all the families of the earth will be blessed.”
B’reshit {Genesis} 12:1-3 (CJB)

The tasks Avraham and Ya'akov are given are different, the context is similar, but the goal is the same. The goal is the redemption of the world.

The goal has always been that all the families of the earth will be blessed, will be saved, and Israel is His agent that He uses to accomplish His goal. What is this salvation? What is this blessing? It is the kingdom of Heaven.

Because the plan is the plan, and it has always been the plan.

All that changes is our position along the path from the beginning to the end. Adonai seems to be playing, what seems to us within the limits of our mortal lives, a very long game. When we experience many years between the promise and the delivery, Adonai, the creator of time, does not. Adonai is outside of time.

To further illustrate this understanding, hear what Yeshua tells Nakdimon. The goal Adonai is accomplishing through Him is the same goal that Adonai promised to Avraham.

For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but rather so that through him, the world might be saved.
Yokhanan {John] 3:17 (CJB)

This is not Avraham's plan, or Yitzhak's plan, or Ya'akov's plan. This does not become Yosef's plan, or Moshe's plan. It is not Israel's plan. It is Adonai's plan. Adonai has chosen to work that plan out through the people of Israel, the Jewish people.

Rav Sha'ul writes of God's utilization of Israel in Romans.

They were made God's children, the Sh'khinah has been with them, the covenants are theirs, likewise the giving of the Torah, the Temple service and the promises; the Patriarchs are theirs; and from them, as far as his physical descent is concerned, came the Messiah, who is over all. Praised be ADONAI for ever! Amen.
Romans 9:4-5 (CJB)

It is into Israel that all of those from the nations who come to faith are grafted. And it is that root which nourishes us all, Israel and the nations. Through Israel all the nations of the earth are blessed.

In 'The Rational Bible: Genesis' which a commentary on the Torah, Dennis Prager writes about this passage,

"*The Torah constantly repeats the centrality of the Land of Israel to the faith of Israel and the nation of Israel. God wants at least one place on earth to embody His holy and ethical will. That will become the task of His people, the people descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who came to be known as Jews. The Torah repeatedly warns that if God's people chosen for this task fail, they will be expelled from the land, just as the Canaanites were. It is to be the Holy Land."*

The Torah also promises return to the land. The return of the nation of Israel is proof that God is faithful to His word. This is also why the enemies of God attack the land, the people, and the scriptures of Israel.

The persistence of the Jewish people, by this I mean the continued existence of the Jewish people, is the greatest testament to the faithfulness of God.

Adonai is faithful to His word.

The plan is the plan, and it has always been the plan.

The House of God

Yitz'khak names the place of this encounter with Adonai Beit-El, Bethel, the house of God. Because:

This place is fearsome! This has to be the house of God! This is the gate of heaven!
B'reshit [Genesis] 28:17 (CJB)

I would like to take some time to talk about where this is happening because I think the setting is important. The land Adonai showed and gave to Avraham is the same land that Adonai gave to Yitz'khak, and it is a specific land. It is to be the Holy Land.

{map of Israel}
{map of Beit-El}

Beit-El is about 8 miles north of Yerushalayim. How many of you live more than 8 miles from Or HaOlam?

{map of Judea and Samaria}

There is one basic point I want to make about this and all of the other areas within this dotted line. This is Israel. These are the regions of Judea and Samaria IN ISRAEL. This is not the 'West Bank'. This is where all of the major events of the Bible take place. This is where most of the life of Yeshua takes place. This is the Biblical heartland.

The only significance this land has to Islam is that the land of Israel is a promise from the God of Israel to the people of Israel. By laying claim to the land of the Bible, Islam seeks to say that it has conquered and subjugated the people of the book. It seeks to demonstrate that Allah is greater than Adonai.

We know better. We know that God Most High, El Elyon, the maker of heaven and earth is faithful to His word.

From this you can know that Adonai your God is indeed God, the faithful God, who keeps his covenant and extends grace to those who love him and observe his mitzvot, to a thousand generations.
D'varim [Deuteronomy] 7:9 (CJB)

Adonai is Faithful to His words.

The Journey Continues

Ya'akov prepares to continue on his journey, but before Ya'akov leaves Beit-El,

Ya'akov took this vow: "If God will be with me and will guard me on this road that I am traveling, giving me bread to eat and clothes to wear, so that I return to my father's house in peace, then Adonai will be my God; and this stone, which I have set up as a standing-stone, will be God's house; and of everything you give me, I will faithfully return one-tenth to you."
B'reshit [Genesis] 28:20–22 (CJB)

This is interesting for several reasons, but one thing stands out to me. Adonai had just told Ya'akov that He would give the land he had been lying on to 'him and his descendents'. He knew he would be returning to it. The thing that really stands out to me is that it sounds a lot like he is trying to make a transactional deal with Adonai.

If you need your kitchen pipes fixed, you would find a plumber. You might say something like, "If you fix my pipes so that I can use the faucet without water spraying in my face and leaking under the sink, and if you make it so that water and food will drain down the drain; then I will say you did a good job and will pay you what you ask."

"If You, Adonai, do all of this, then I will do this."

However, Hashem is not your plumber.

The problem inherent in this approach is that it can lead to severe dissatisfaction and disappointment and disillusionment.

In another comment in the Rational Bible, which I have copied in full in my notes, the author writes the following:

God's promise to Jacob does not mean we can all expect God to protect us. It does not even mean God would protect Jacob from all pain and suffering; as we will see, Jacob suffered a great deal. What God was probably referring to was protecting Jacob from his greatest fears- being harmed by his brother Esau or harmed in a strange land.

God, as Maimonides argues, chooses certain people for specific divine roles and protects them until that role is carried out.

Jacob was one such person.

Many people believe God will protect them from tragedy, and when it turns out they have not been protected, they lose not only trust in God but even belief in God's existence. That is one reason it is a bad idea to have such an image of God. Aside from being irrational, it too often leads to disillusionment and the consequent abandonment of faith and religiosity.

We cannot expect God to protect us, for two reasons:

First, that would mean God always intervenes in human affairs and in nature, thereby robbing human beings of freedom and depriving nature of the ability to function according to the laws of nature. In order for God to protect all of us from being hit by a drunk driver, He would have to rob all drivers of the ability to drive while intoxicated-or divert every wayward car from hitting us. In order to protect all of us from all illness, God would have to constantly intervene in nature. And what about protection from non-lethal mishaps? Does divine protection mean we could never fracture a leg? Have our feelings hurt? Where does one draw the line?

Second, with a few exceptions chosen by God, if God protects you or me, He will have to protect every decent person in the world. Otherwise, He would be an unfair and capricious God.

He goes on to write

What, then, can we expect from God, if not to be protected? I believe we can expect two things: God will honor His promises. And God will provide ultimate justice in an afterlife.

As an example of the former, many Jews and Christians see the return of the Jews to their homeland after almost two thousand years as a fulfillment of divine promises. And as regards the afterlife and its importance, see my essay at Genesis 25:8.

My relationship with God does not revolve around expectations of God (other than the two aforementioned exceptions). It revolves around trying to know and do what God expects of me.

In other words, Adonai is faithful to His word. He is not faithful to your whims.

On this subject, Ya'akov, the brother of Yeshua had this to say,

You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives so you may spend it on your passions.
Ya'akov [James] 4:3 (HNT)

He also said that 'we don't have because we don't ask'.

This is not about getting what we want if we are good people. This is about pursuing the things of God and living in the faith that He will provide what we need. Yeshua tells us.

But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.
Matityahu [Matthew] 6:33 (TLV)

The issue is that we need to be asking with the right motives and with the understanding that our Father in Heaven's answer might not be what we want. When we are pursuing God's will, our will aligns more with His. In faith we know that the Father knows what we need, and He will provide it according to His will and in His time. We must place our faith, our emunah, in Him alone.

Yeshua also goes on to say this.

Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.
Matityahu [Matthew] 6:34 (TLV)

That applies to our parish today because Ya'akov continues on his journey to Harran in Padan-Aram to find a wife, and his tomorrows were full of many blessings and many worries.

Ya'akov meets Rakhel, and she goes and gets her father, Lavan. Lavan welcomes Ya'akov, and he puts him to work. This is the real beginning of Ya'akov's troubles.

We oftentimes see trouble as punishment, but that is not usually the case. Usually trouble is simply the result of our own actions.

However, trouble can also be sent our way by Hashem. It can be intended to correct our behavior, and sometimes trouble is used to develop character that we lack. Other times trouble is intended to move us out of complacency and back onto the journey God set us on in the first place.

When trouble is allowed to come our way by Adonai, I think it is because it will serve His purposes in this world in some meaningful way. It won't always make sense to us. It rarely does at the time, if ever. Sometimes we are given a glimpse of what God is accomplishing through our trouble, but I consider those glimpses to be rare and gracious blessings.

Don't forget. Yeshua Rabbinu (יֵשׁוּעַ רַבֵּנוּ) taught us with these words.

These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have shalom. In the world you will have trouble (tsuris), but take heart! I have overcome the world!
Yokhanon [John] 16:33 (TLV)

{pillow images}

Our shalom does not come from an easy life. Our shalom comes from our relationship with Adonai.

But let's get back to Ya'akov and his time in Paddan-Aram with Lavan.

Jive Turkey

{jive turkey}

A jive turkey is someone who is unreliable, makes empty promises, or is full of bluster. A jive turkey is someone who behaves in a glib, disingenuous way, or who is otherwise dishonest.

Ya'akov's father-in-law Lavan, let's face it, is a jive turkey. He consistently does whatever he thinks is going to be best for himself with no apparent concern for Ya'akov or his daughters or his grandchildren. He also happens to live in what is modern day Turkey.

{map of Turkey}

We really start to see Lavan's character with Ya'akov's request to marry Rakhel. Ya'akov has already been working for free for a month, and that seems to bother Lavan. So far, so good. Ya'akov offers to work for seven years in exchange for Rakhel's hand in marriage, and Lavan accepts this. However, he makes Ya'akov work all seven years before they can marry, and then he deceives Ya'akov into marrying Leah. Then, in order to actually marry Rakhel, Lavan requires another seven years.

This pattern of behavior continued for the entirety of the 20 years Ya'akov spent there. Lavan kept changing the rules and cheating on his agreements. Finally, Adonai tells Ya'akov that it is time to head home.

Even though he was not treated well by Lavan or the rest of that family, Adonai had blessed Ya'akov. He had 11 sons and a daughter. He had 4 wives, oy vey. He had large flocks of goats and sheep.

But then he heard what Lavan's sons were saying: "Ya'akov has taken away everything that our father once had. It's from what used to belong to our father that he has gotten so rich." 2 He also saw that Lavan regarded him differently than before. 3 Adonai said to Ya'akov, "Return to the land of your ancestors, to your kinsmen; I will be with you."
B'reshit [Genesis] 31:1–3 (CJB)

So, Ya'akov once again obeys the instructions of Adonai. He tells Rakhel and Leah, and for the first time in this parashah they seem to completely agree.

Rachel and Le'ah answered him, "We no longer have any inheritance from our father's possessions; 15 and he considers us foreigners, since he has sold us; moreover, he has consumed everything he received in exchange for us. 16 Nevertheless, the wealth which God has taken away from our father has become ours and our children's anyway; so whatever God has told you to do, do."
B'reshit [Genesis] 31:14-16 (CJB)

Ya'akov gathers his household together and all of his possessions, and they leave Harran.

When Lavan hears of it he is enraged, and he pursues them with the intent to do them harm. However, Elohim comes to Lavan and warns him to leave Ya'akov alone. Don't do anything to him, good or bad. Lavan still catches up to them, and he starts verbally attacking Ya'akov. He twists the narrative and tries to reframe the entire situation. He tries to blame Ya'akov for all of the consequences Lavan earned with his own unrighteous behavior. Ya'akov simply speaks truth.

41 These twenty years I've been in your house—I served you fourteen years for your two daughters and six years for your flock; and you changed my wages ten times! 42 If the God of my father, the God of Avraham, the one whom Yitz'chak fears, had not been on my side, by now you would certainly have already sent me away with nothing! God has seen how distressed I've been and how hard I've worked, and last night he passed judgment in my favor."
B'reshit [Genesis] 31:41–42 (CJB)

Elohim had already confirmed what was true.

Conclusion

Parashah Vayetze explores Adonai's faithfulness to His covenant and His ongoing plan to bring redemption to the world through Israel. As Ya'akov leaves his family to find a wife, Adonai appears to him at Beit-El and reaffirms the covenant given to Avraham and Yitz'khak: through their descendants, all the families of the earth will be blessed. This is not the plan of one patriarch or nation, but Adonai's plan, with Israel chosen as the people through whom He works. The continued existence and return of the Jewish people to their land testify to His faithfulness.

Ya'akov's vow at Beit-El raises an important lesson about our relationship with God. We should not treat Adonai as though our relationship with Him were a transaction, expecting Him to fulfill our personal wishes in exchange for our devotion. He is faithful to His promises, not to our whims. Rather than demanding that God meet our expectations, we should seek His Kingdom and righteousness, trust His provision, and align our will with His.

Ya'akov's years with Lavan demonstrate that trouble is not necessarily punishment. It can result from our own actions, correct our behavior, develop our character, or move us back toward the path Adonai has set before us. Our shalom does not depend on an easy life; it comes from our relationship with Adonai. As Yeshua taught, we will experience trouble in this world, but He has overcome it.

Despite Lavan's dishonesty and mistreatment, Adonai blesses Ya'akov and ultimately instructs him to return to the land of his ancestors. Ya'akov obeys, and his wives support his decision. Even when others distort the truth, Adonai knows what has happened and remains faithful to His word.

The plan is the plan. It has always been the plan.

He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Adonai will honor His promises. Adonai will provide justice in the afterlife. Our relationship with Him should revolve around trying to know and do what He expects of us.

Trust in ADONAI with all your heart; do not rely on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him; then he will level your paths.
Mishlei [Proverbs] 3:5-6 (CJB)

Our job is to be faithful to what Adonai has asked us to do and to walk in His ways.

Excerpt from The Rational Bible: Genesis, pp333-335

God's promise to Jacob does not mean we can all expect God to protect us. It does not even mean God would protect Jacob from all pain and suffering; as we will see, Jacob suffered a great deal. What God was probably referring to was protecting Jacob from his greatest fears- being harmed by his brother Esau or harmed in a strange land.

God, as Maimonides argues, chooses certain people for specific divine roles and protects them until that role is carried out.

Jacob was one such person.

Many people believe God will protect them from tragedy, and when it turns out they have not been protected, they lose not only trust in God but even belief in God's existence. That is one reason it is a bad idea to have such an image of God. Aside from being irrational, it too often leads to disillusionment and the consequent abandonment of faith and religiosity.

We cannot expect God to protect us, for two reasons:

First, that would mean God always intervenes in human affairs and in nature, thereby robbing human beings of freedom and depriving nature of the ability to function according to the laws of nature. In order for God to protect all of us from being hit by a drunk driver, He would have to rob all drivers of the ability to drive while intoxicated-or divert every wayward car from hitting us. In order to protect all of us from all illness, God would have to constantly intervene in nature. And what about protection from non-lethal mishaps? Does divine protection mean we could never fracture a leg? Have our feelings hurt? Where does one draw the line?

Second, with a few exceptions chosen by God, if God protects you or me, He will have to protect every decent person in the world. Otherwise, He would be an unfair and capricious God.

But, many people will respond, they are good people and deserve to be protected.

It is surely true that good people deserve to be protected. But if all good people were protected, we would be back to God depriving humans of free will, thereby

rendering humans automatons and rendering life meaningless. Moreover, why would anyone expect to be protected given the enormous number of decent people who have not been protected?

The foregoing does not mean God never protects us or intervenes in any of our lives. I believe God intervenes in any number of people's lives. We simply cannot expect Him to.

What, then, can we expect from God, if not to be protected? I believe we can expect two things: God will honor His promises. And God will provide ultimate justice in an afterlife.

As an example of the former, many Jews and Christians see the return of the Jews to their homeland after almost two thousand years as a fulfillment of divine promises. And as regards the afterlife and its importance, see my essay at Genesis 25:8.

My relationship with God does not revolve around expectations of God (other than the two aforementioned exceptions). It revolves around trying to know and do what God expects of me.

Bibliography

- The Complete Jewish Bible
- Tree of Life Version
- Lexham Hebrew Bible
- Hebrew New Testament
- Jewish New Testament Commentary
- The Rational Bible: Genesis