

וישב יעקב וגו', אברהם גייר גיורים, הה"ד (בראשית י"ב) ויקח אברם את שרי אשתו...ואת הנפש אשר עשו בחרן. 'אשר עשה' אין כתיב כאן אלא 'אשר עשו' - א"ר חוניא אברהם היה מגייר את האנשים ושרה מגיירת את הנשים, ומה ת"ל אשר עשו אלא מלמד שהיה אברהם אבינו מכניס לתוך ביתו ומאכילן ומשקן ומקרבן ומכניסן תחת כנפי השכינה

יעקב גייר גיורים, דכתיב (בראשית ל"ה) ויאמר יעקב אל ביתו וגו' ויתנו אל יעקב וגו'. ביצחק לא שמענו והיכן שמענו? רבי יצחק ותאני לה משום רבי הושעיא רבה בשם ר' יהודה בר סימון: כאן כתיב, וישב יעקב בארץ מגורי אביו (בראשית ל"ז) מאי מגורי אביו מגיורי אביו

"Jacob settled [in the land of his father's sojournings, in Canaan." (Gen. 37:1) Abraham converted proselytes, as it is written, "Abraham took Sarai his wife . . . and the souls that they had made in Haran." (Gen. 12:5) . . . 'That *he* had made' is not written, rather 'that *they* had made.' R. Hunia said: Abraham converted the men and Sarah the women. That phrase also teaches us that our ancestor Abraham would bring them into his house, feed them, give them drink, and bring them nearer to the presence of God.

Jacob, too, converted proselytes: "Then Jacob said to his household, [and to all that were with him: Rid yourselves of the alien gods in your midst] . . . and they gave to Jacob [all the alien gods that they had]" (Gen. 35:2) Regarding Isaac we have not learned (of similar activity), so how do we infer [that Isaac also converted proselytes?] R. Isaac, or perhaps R. Hoshaya, taught in the name of R. Judah b. Simon: It says here, "Jacob settled in the land of his father's sojournings" (Gen. 37:1)—what are *meguray aveev* (his father's sojournings)? [Read that phrase instead as] *megioray aveev* (his father's proselytizing).

As a *ba'al teshuvah*, albeit an idiosyncratic "born-again Jew," I find in this midrash great inspiration to share my ongoing spiritual journey with others, especially seekers who aren't Jewish. As a Conservative rabbi, I am proud to report that my denomination has recently begun to embrace the kind of *keiruv* (outreach) activity that this text presents as the "family business" of those who established our faith tradition. We must now adopt assertive push-and-pull methods, like those described above, to attract our fellow travelers.

According to several playful interpretations, Jacob inherited a legacy of missionary work, a vocation that gave birth to monotheism. While the *meguray/megioray* wordplay reveals little about Isaac's role, R. Judah b. Simon claims that Isaac must have done something to continue his Abraham's proselytizing and to instill that fervor in his son Jacob. At the same time, grandfather and grandson are imagined as undertaking very different pursuits.

On the one hand, Abraham employs hospitality to nurture potential converts physically and spiritually and to provide the shelter of God's presence, literally "under the wings of the Shekhinah." On the other hand, Jacob challenges his audience to separate themselves from the objects and practices that keep them distant from the Oneness of God. Instead of warmly embracing these individuals without judgment, Jacob sternly preaches that they must renounce an "alien" way of life in order to enter God's covenant with Abraham.

Synthesizing these two approaches will require creativity and sensitivity, but chiefly it depends upon our openness to a new direction for Judaism. The ambivalence and mixed messages of our tradition present an obstacle (today more than ever) to men and women who desire full spiritual citizenship as Jews. Let us follow the example of those who came before us by leading these men and women home and by confronting those who would stand in their way.

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# Torah from JTS

Parashat Va-yeishev

Genesis 37:1–40:23

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## Parashah Commentary

**This week's commentary was written by Professor Arnold Eisen, Chancellor, JTS.**

The medieval commentator Nachmanides famously wrote that "what happened to the ancestors is a sign for their descendants." In other words, the stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs of our people foreshadow and foretell the events of Jewish history long after. I'm not a believer in the literal truth of that assertion. I don't think Jews are playing out a tale for which God wrote the plotline many centuries ago. Sometimes, however, the correspondence between archetypal biblical narrative and contemporary Jewish situation is remarkable. Consider today's parashah as a case in point.

"And Jacob settled in the land of his father's sojournings, in the Land of Canaan. This is the story of Jacob. Joseph . . ."

Let's begin with the second verse: Joseph is called the story of his father. Joseph's story belongs to Jacob. I know that there is a literal meaning of *tol'dot* that makes more immediate sense of the statement. The word means "generations" or "line," cognate with the word for birth. Joseph is Jacob's child. The Torah, according to this interpretation of the passage, is giving us genealogy, a male line.

But as the commentators were quick to notice, no other children are named here, though Jacob had many. Nor are his grandchildren mentioned. Something more than DNA alone is being transmitted from Jacob to Joseph. The same was true a few weeks ago, in the Torah portion called *Tol'dot*, where we read a similar statement about Isaac's *tol'dot*: the stories of Jacob and Esau. I think the same lesson can be learned from the fact that the portion of the Torah called *Hayyei Sarah* (Sarah's Life) concerns the death and burial of Sarah, and the portion entitled *Va-y'hi* (And He [Jacob] Lived) describes the death and burial not only of Jacob but of Joseph.

The lesson is this: our stories do not begin or end with us. We entered life in the middle of a plotline that began long before us. We are heirs to the characters who preceded us in far more than a biological sense. All of us carry on a story influenced and shaped decisively by individuals and events that we barely know or imagine. So too, the stories of our lives continue long after we are gone, borne by individuals and events that for the most part we will not know and taken in directions that we cannot begin to imagine. Some of us are blessed to know our children's children or our student's students. If especially fortunate, we may even get to meet members of the next generation after that. In rare cases we are also remembered several generations hence, invoked as influence or precedent, perhaps even cited as cause of effects still ongoing.

Most of the time, however, the legacy we leave behind is carried on less visibly and less directly. We set our children or our students on the path that we ourselves walk, imbue them with the Truth to which we are committed, and (with them beside us) carry forward the inheritance that we have received from our ancestors. We hope with some confidence that they will continue to walk this way, breaking the path to places we cannot go or envision. If we are wise, we are content with that. We do not need to see how things turn out. And we certainly do not want the chapters after us to be identical to the one in which we figured. No wise parent wants children who live exactly as he or she has lived: so much will have changed in the meantime. We want them to live their own lives, not try to relive ours.

The Torah certainly wants this. It does not want merely to be read, let alone to be read solely as

history or literature. It wants to be *lived* by us. It depends on us make the story ours, as Jacob and then Joseph took on the relationship with YHWH that was central to their fathers' lives, deepened that relationship through new dimensions of plot and character, and passed it on in turn to their descendants: a nation of partners in covenant who are called the children of Israel.

In that way Jacob and Joseph outlive their deaths. The Torah speaks—in a pun that cannot be unintended—of *shnei hayyei Sarah*—“the years of Sarah's life,” also translatable as “the two lives of Sarah.” One life ended when she died, and the other is extended by everyone, you and me included, who carries on the tradition that she helped to begin. That is why the convert who adopts the covenant becomes a “child of Abraham and Sarah”: heir to their story, blessed with the responsibility and gift of taking it forward. The story becomes theirs. It belongs to all the community of Israel who continue the path first walked by the ancestors chronicled in Genesis.

That has been true of every generation of Jews. What then is the special relevance of this parashah to us? How is our situation different from that of the many generations of ancestor/descendants and teacher/students who preceded us?

In this way: we are “settled in the lands of [our parents'] sojournings.” Jews in contemporary North America are really, truly, remarkably at home. As a result we face unprecedented challenges in carrying Jewish tradition forward. No one forces us to do so. Nor are we persecuted for being who we are. Doors long closed have swung wide open before us. A thousand and one lines of plot and character development are possible for each individual Jew. Each faces the question, as parents and grandparents did not, of which to choose—or whether to leave the Torah's story altogether and opt for a new one.

I feel this change keenly. For one thing, my scholarship on American Judaism traced the changes in Jewish religious thought and practice from “first generation” immigrants to “second generation” children of immigrants who struggled for acceptance in American society in the face of discrimination, the Depression, World War II, the Holocaust, and the rise of the State of Israel. This carries on to “third generation” Jews who came to maturity in the years following all that momentous history, enjoying unprecedented acceptance in America and turning attention once again to the meaning of being Jews (while confronting the enormity of the Holocaust, helping Israel to survive and grow, and assisting the exodus of Jews from the former Soviet Union) and practicing Judaism in new suburbs and in new ways.

Of course the “fourth generation” barely remembers events in this history that were absolutely formative for their parents and grandparents, including the terrors of that history. This generation wonders, in the postmodern age of “local narratives,” whether the story is anything more than an “invented tradition”—interesting, perhaps ennobling, but hardly binding. Abstain from eating a particular piece of meat because of a story about Jacob wrestling with an angel (32:33)? Stand with the ancestors at Sinai, in covenant, despite the fact that the account of Sinai too might only be a story? Is this for real?

But this generational plotline is more to me than a master story of twentieth-century American Judaism. My grandfathers were both immigrants and suffered for their move from Old Country to New. They sweated out a bare living as tailors. The grandfather I knew as a child (the other died too young) never mastered the language of America and so had little to do with its society or his own grandchildren. My parents also worked hard all their lives, surrendered career ambitions to the Depression, and achieved a degree of at-homeness in America far greater than their parents had known but nothing compared to that of their son, “their only son, whom they loved.” Like many baby boomers, I have benefited enormously from the postwar expansion of the economy and of every other opportunity in America—and from the new possibilities opened to Judaism, the new paths opened by and for Torah.

Ours is a generation that need make no apology for our Judaism: not socially (anti-Semitism is at historically low levels), not politically (Jews are heavily overrepresented in Congress and the White House staff), and not intellectually (the Bible is once more respected by those who set cultural norms, the Talmud is admired by scholars in multiple disciplines, and even belief in God is once more taken seriously in circles that scorned faith not long ago). We are finally settled here in the land of our ancestors' sojournings. We need not send our children or our students away to carry on the tradition that matters most to us (as Jacob seems to send off Joseph, at the start of our parashah, to the kind of learning he knows from experience can only be acquired the hard way, far away from home).

Our task is different, I think: to live this Torah, here and now. To figure out what it means, here and now, bringing all our full participation in the larger culture to bear. To make Torah an effective force for justice and compassion in our communities, our society, and our world. To build communities of Torah that don't just preach those virtues but practice them. In a word: to *settle into Judaism the way our parents and grandparents settled into America*. To use the home we have as a base from which to take Torah to new places and in new directions.

Jews may never again have the set of resources currently at the disposal of this Diaspora, including the chance to lend meaning and purpose through Torah to millions of individuals in search of them.

“Your turn,” the Torah seems to say as we reach the story of the final family ancestor whose life is chronicled by the Torah. Join the story of the nation founded at Sinai. Write the page not yet imagined, the one only you can write. Take Torah where no child of Israel has ever had the chance to take it before: tomorrow.

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## A Taste of Torah

### A Commentary by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, director of Israel Programs, JTS

**Genesis 37:18–22** They saw him from afar, and before he came close to them they conspired to kill him . . . But when Reuven heard it, he tried to save him from them. He said, “Let us not take his life.” And Reuven went on, “Shed no blood! Cast him into the pit out in the wilderness, but do not touch him yourselves”—intending to save him from them and restore him to his father.

**B'khor Shor, “But when Reuven heard it, he tried to save him”** At first Reuven said to them, “Don't do this terrible thing to sin against the lad,” and they didn't listen to him. This was proven when they got to Egypt; for Reuven said to them, “Didn't I tell you not to sin against the lad” (Gen. 42:22), . . . and Reuven also said, “Let us not take his life.” When he saw they would not listen to him, he “joined” them and instead of saying “Do not take his life!” he said, “Let *us* not take his life.” In other words, “I am on your side,” and so the brothers did not realize that he was trying to save Joseph . . .

Parashat Va-yeishev opens the Joseph narrative. Jacob, failing to learn from the pitfalls of favoring one child over another—note the actions of his parents (Isaac and Rebekah) and his grandparents (Abraham and Sarah)—gives Joseph a richly adorned tunic. That, in addition to Joseph's dreamy delusions of grandeur, leads to fraternal jealousy, deceit, and exile. The brothers scheme; Joseph is ambushed and cast into a pit—awaiting transport down to the land of Egypt. While the brothers' scheming beforehand and feasting afterward paint a disturbing picture of enmity and evil, there is a ray of hope in the midst of the darkness. Reuven, the eldest brother, is reluctant to participate in his brothers' plan. What can we learn from Reuven's words and actions?

Joseph B'khor Shor listens perceptively to the use of language in this passage. Part of the conversation, the B'khor Shor observes, is missing. We are given the whole picture only once the brothers are (unknowingly) facing their brother Joseph in Egypt. Recognizing the cause of the misfortunes confronting the brothers once they are attempting to procure rations in Egypt, Reuven remarks, “Didn't I tell you not to sin against the lad” (Gen. 42:22). Triggered by this comment, the B'khor Shor argues that Reuven made a concerted and conscientious attempt to save his brother. At first, he is accusatory and objectifying in approach—lecturing his brothers and linguistically separating himself from them. And then there is a strategic decision on the part of Reuven. He says, “Let *us* not take his life.”

Reuven realizes that if he is to have any impact on the decision-making of his brothers, he must be seen as part of this cabal. Lecturing them from the outside will only make them dig their heels in even further. Talking to them as if he is part of the “their” community opens their ears to his message. And perhaps it is this brilliant maneuver that ultimately saves Joseph. How often do we behave and speak in ways that separate us? To what extent do we use the language of Reuven—the language of “us”—investing ourselves deeply and wholly in community? Reuven gives us pause—to think about the power of language, familial bonds, and the need to lead.

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