

Between the Lines

Weekly Midrash Learning with Rabbi David Levy

בראשית פרק כח פסוק יג

וְהִנֵּה יְהוָה נֹצֵב עָלָיו וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אֲבֹרָהֶם אֲבִיךָ וְאֵלֵי יִצְחָק הָאָרֶץ
אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה שׁוֹכֵב עָלֶיהָ לְךָ אֶתְנַנָּה וְלִזְרַעְךָ:

Genesis 28:13

And, behold, the Lord stood beside him [Jacob], and said: "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father, and the God of Isaac. The ground on which you are lying I will assign to you and to your offspring."

מדרש הבאור

הלא יצחק אביו? אלא בשביל שלמדו תורה קראו אביו ללמדך שכמו שהבן מכבד את אביו כך התלמיד מכבד את רבו

Midrash Ha-Baur (Rabbi Sa'adia b. David, 15th-century Yemen)

Wasn't Isaac his [Jacob's] father? [Abraham] is called his father on account of his teaching him Torah. This is to teach us that just as a son honors his father, so too a student honors their teacher.

This little midrash carries big significance for us as modern readers. Picking up on the surprising mention of Abraham as Jacob's father, we learn an important lesson about the roles different people can play in our lives. Each of us who has been taught by someone is obliged to honor him/her as we would our parents. And the extension of this teaching is that each of us has the potential to play this important role in someone else's life. No matter our family situation, each of us has a job to do in "parenting" the next generation. We all need to find ways to share our gifts and teach others so that they may lead in the future. In that way our legacies live on regardless of how many children we have, and even if we have none at all.

The extension of this is found at the end of the *pasuk*. God tells Jacob that he will give the land to his offspring. Of course, we could contort this text to mean that only those who are direct descendants of Jacob have a share in the covenant. However, by understanding Abraham, who is not Jacob's father, to be his father by virtue of teaching him, we create room for all those who wish to join the covenant. The covenant can be entered by learning, and this tradition is beautifully carried on today by Jews by choice, who call themselves in Hebrew *ben/bat Avraham Avinu* (son/daughter of Abraham our father). Abraham is their father in the sense that in converting they have studied his lessons and joined in his destiny.

May it be our blessing that we all rear students, and remember, Abraham is father to all of us because we have learned from him to be in covenant with God.

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Torah from JTS

Parashat Va-yetzei

Genesis 28:10–32:3

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Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Marc Wolf, vice chancellor and chief development officer, JTS.

At the age of nine, Dante Alighieri fell in love with Beatrice di Folco Portinari. From that moment on and through the writing of his *The Divine Comedy*, begun when he was around age 42, Dante strove to write a love poem that adequately captured the fulfillment that came from his relationship with Beatrice. But writing in the High Middle Ages, when medieval Christendom presented a structured world with clear hierarchies, Dante was forced to answer the quintessential question whether human love could or, more importantly, should be comparable to the love between humanity and God. Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly, in their book *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age*, address the challenge that Dante's love for Beatrice presented to the convention of that time—that "human beings, in particular, are born to be fulfilled by the direct experience of God. To let your love be averted from Him and aimed at anything else—even the Lady Beatrice—is to have lived an unfulfilled life" (124).

For Parashat Va-yetzei, although the times are different, the convention is the same and, for us, the question all the more poignant: What is the role of Jacob's romantic love for Rachel? Does romantic love set us up for an unfulfilled life?

In both narratives, our heroes set out to differentiate their love from the common variety, insisting that what they are experiencing is an intimacy and connection more fulfilling than ordinary desire or lust. As Dreyfus and Kelly describe Dante's descent into the first circles of Hell: "The sin they share is to have wasted all their love on something that couldn't in the end offer spiritual fulfillment" (123). For Jacob, the differentiation comes in his moment of "love at first sight" with Rachel:

And when Jacob saw Rachel, the daughter of his uncle Laban, and the flock of his uncle Laban, Jacob went up and rolled the stone off the mouth of the well, and watered the flock of his uncle Laban. Then Jacob kissed Rachel, and broke into tears. (Gen. 29:10–11)

Seeing Rachel, Jacob performs the superhuman task of single-handedly removing the stone covering of a well (that, earlier in Genesis 29:2, the text made a point to describe as "large"), and then embraces Rachel and cries the first actual tears that we see in the book of Genesis. These tears are very different from the sobbing that bursts forth from Esau after learning that his blessing has been stolen a couple chapters ago. Beyond the verb choice, there is a linguistic connection between the action of Jacob and Rachel's embrace and the tears that follow, suggesting that the moment itself is unique. Commentators have struggled with Jacob's tears, and Rashi himself presents two options: "And broke into tears": Because he foresaw, through sacred inspiration, that Rachel would not be buried together with him. Also:

because he had come with empty hands” (Rashi on Gen.29:11). Aviva Zornberg connects both options to a sense of loss that came with that moment of embrace: “In both readings, Jacob’s tears are connected with death. On the one view, he cries *because* of his love for Rachel, and because of their eventual separation: not only death, but even burial will divide them. There is an anguish at the very heart of love . . .” (*The Beginning of Desire*, 203).

I would suggest we read these tears not in light of the tragic end of Jacob and Rachel’s love affair, but as springing from the same vulnerability that gave him the strength to move the stone off the well and to work for Rachel’s love. “So Jacob served seven years for Rachel and they seemed to him but a few days because of his love for her” (Gen. 29:20). As Zornberg writes, “For to work for someone is to make oneself vulnerable, dependent on approval for one’s fundamental sense of self” (205). It is harnessing his depth of love for Rachel and allowing it to motivate his success and inspire his daily life that leads Jacob to the point of admitting to his brother that he has a life that has reached fulfillment: “There is to me, everything” (Gen 33:11). Bringing us back to Dante, Dreyfus and Kelly write:

Love can draw one to another person so that she becomes the center of one’s world. If one is blessed enough to be drawn into such a love, then everything in one’s life makes sense in relation to her, and the sense it all makes is shining and glorious and completely satisfying. One understands oneself completely and happily in terms of the definition this love gives to one’s life.” (130)

For Jacob and Rachel, as for Dante and Beatrice, their love is substantially different from any experienced previously. They make the case through their actions, emotions, and vulnerability to each other that one can achieve fulfillment of life through human love.

However, as much as we can make our case for the spiritual fulfillment of romantic love, the texts in both cases lead us in a different direction and insist upon the opposite conclusion. Dreyfus and Kelly follow Dante’s journey through *The Divine Comedy* and ultimately conclude that “we are free to retrain our desires so that they are directed toward what ultimately sustains and fulfills them—so that they become attuned, in other words, to the meanings that are already out there in the world . . .” (119). In the end, Beatrice is Dante’s way to God—she takes her place as the savior, and is his ladder to God. As the third cantica of *Paradiso* concludes, Dante leaves Lady Beatrice behind and cleaves not to her, but to God’s Love: “But now my will and my desire, like wheels revolving with an even motion, were turning with the Love that moves the sun and all the other stars” (*Paradiso*; Princeton Dante Project. Canto 33, lines 143–145).

What for Dante is a moment of enlightenment, for Jacob is a series of tragic turns. The most obvious of these is when his love for Rachel is thwarted by his father-in-law, Laban. A victim of the deception that brought him to Rachel, Jacob begins his life not with his intended love, but with Leah, the wife he will ironically be bound to for eternity. In a heartbreaking scene later in the narrative, Rachel dies in childbirth and is buried on the road to Ephrath—not in the family plot at Makhpelah (Gen. 35:19). God seems to be sending a harsh message to the lovers. Love is not the purpose; progeny, achieving your place in the bloodline through devotion to God is what matters. Our proof is in the recurring blessing in Genesis, “Be fertile and increase; a nation, yea an assembly of nations, shall descend from you. Kings shall issue from your loins. The land that I assigned to Abraham and Isaac I assign to you; and to your offspring to come will I assign the land” (Gen. 35:11b–12). As Zornberg writes, “The struggling, complex couple, with their many children, remain forever together in the Cave of Makhpelah, the Cave of Couples; while Rachel, the only true wife of intention and desire, is buried separately, on the road to Bethlehem” (212).

Rachel’s loss is devastating for Jacob, and for God. Although his line is secure—and we are all named from him—he is broken with Rachel’s loss and mourns their love through his dying breath. After her death, Jacob is unable to imagine fathering another child. We cannot help but weep for Jacob and Rachel.

We can learn from the above that God does not value romantic love. God’s love—*hesed*—is one that is blind. God would like nothing more than for us to “love all, serve all.” But when it comes down to it, we are human. Our flaws include gradations of emotion, and we cannot turn a blind eye to our experience of humanity. It impacts what we think, how we feel, and how we live.

I would contend that this is the lesson of both Dante and Jacob. There is an essential role that romantic love plays, and one that God cannot comprehend. It is Dante’s relationship with Lady Beatrice that serves as the catalyst for Dante’s realization of Divine Love and eventually enables him to attain the level of intimacy with God that he achieves. Dante’s love for Beatrice leads him to the direct experience of God that is the moment of fulfillment. Similarly with Jacob, it is only through his love for Rachel that he gains an understanding of what it means to love and serve unconditionally and fulfill his destiny in the bloodline. His experience with Rachel, as tragic and heartbreaking as it is, is one where he truly learns what it means when God promises him, *Anokhi imkha*—I am with you.

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A Taste of Torah

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

Heeding the advice of his parents and triggered by the murderous intent of his brother Esau, Jacob leaves Beersheba and journeys to Haran in pursuit of a life partner and refuge. En route, he is embraced by a mystical experience of sorts. Undoubtedly exhausted by emotion and the journey, Jacob happens upon a place and falls into a deep sleep. He dreams of a ladder connecting heaven and earth, witnesses angels of God ascending and descending, and sees God rooted at the top of the ladder. God makes a critical promise to Jacob saying, “The ground on which you are lying I will assign to you and to your offspring . . . All the families of the earth will bless themselves by you . . . Remember, I am with you: I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land . . .” (Gen. 28:13–15). Even with this divine encounter and promise, our ancestor awakens from his dream shaken and frightened: “Shaken, he said, ‘How awesome is this place!’” (Gen. 28:17). Why is Jacob trembling at this moment of revelation?

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explains,

What made him afraid? Probably nothing more than the consciousness of this new idea and the new demands that it brings with it—that man, frail man, is to be and should be the bearer of the Glory of God on earth. This notion could have brought this overwhelming feeling of fear in him: “how awesome is this place.” What has been shown to Jacob is “the house of God.” . . . And every such house, in which a life is lived is the “gate of Heaven,” a gate through which we come to God and consummate the union between the earthly and the heavenly. (Hirsch, *Commentary on the Torah: Genesis*, 462)

New responsibilities and great anxiety are part and parcel of new ideas. Jacob realizes that he is no longer simply on a physical journey in pursuit of a spouse and refuge. From this moment on, Jacob is on a spiritual and national quest—building his life in microcosm and the life of a nation in macrocosm. If ever there could be an encounter that would evoke fear, awe, and great anxiety, it is a vision of angels, God, and promise. The challenge for Jacob, and ultimately the challenge for us, his descendants, is in living up to the expressed hope. While the journey involves living our lives as if each and every home is a potential “house of God,” it also requires linking these unique homes together toward creating a true “gate of Heaven.” Awe and fear are indeed the appropriate responses. But only vision, striving, and action will lead to the fulfillment of our divinely inspired dreams.

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