

## Between the Lines—Va-yetzei

### Insights from Midrash with Rabbi Andy Shugerman

Genesis Rabbah 68:9

ויפגע במקום ר"ה בשם ר' אמי אמר מפני מה מכנין שמו של הקב"ה וקוראין אותו מקום שהוא מקומו של עולם ואין עולמו מקומו מן מה דכתיב (שמות לג) הנה מקום אתי

א"ר אבא בר יודן לגבור שהוא רוכב על הסוס וכליו משופעים אילך ואילך הסוס טפילה לרוכב ואין הרוכב טפילה לסוס

"[Jacob] came upon the Place . . ." (Gen. 28:11). R. Huna said in R. Ammi's name: Why do we give a changed name to the Blessed Holy One as 'the Place'? Because He is the Place of the world, but the world is not His place, as it is written, "Behold, there is a place near Me" (Exod. 33:21). . . . R. Abba bar Yudan said: [God can be compared to] a warrior riding a horse, his robes flowing over on both sides; the horse is subsidiary to the rider, but the rider is not subsidiary to the horse.

Few of us today would claim to have had epiphanies like those of Jacob and Moses as referenced in this midrash. At the same time, our God-language (the names for God that we have inherited, especially from biblical and rabbinic literature) reflects experiences we all have had in which our sense of reality has suddenly and irrevocably shifted. The midrash above seeks to express that insight through a comparison of human encounters with the divine that inform the rabbinic understanding of how God relates to the world.

The midrash opens with a playful citation from the second verse of this week's Torah portion, in which Jacob arrives at an unnamed location. After having a vision within a dream of an angel-transporting ladder extending from the ground to the heavens, Jacob awakes and declares, "Surely *Hashem* is present in this place, and I did not know it!" (Gen. 28:16). The repetition throughout this passage of the term for *place* (*ha-makom*) strongly influences the early rabbis in choosing to adopt it as a euphemism for the ever-present God. R. Ammi claims, therefore, that Jacob discovers God not within "that place," but as "that Place," the totality of this world.

This theological assertion that God encompasses all of existence presents a problem for R. Ammi, who must explain that God nonetheless transcends as well as fills our reality. In order to establish that God dwells within and beyond the created world, R. Ammi cleverly selects a verse in which the term *ha-makom* figures differently in another revelation scene. When Moses asks to see God's Presence (Exod. 33:18), God provides "a place" nearby as a safe location from which he may see God's back only. That partial viewing imparts the sense of an immediate yet incomplete grasp of God's being in this world.

One of the common challenges to this theology is the question of free will, the question of human destiny independent of fate. In an interesting conclusion to this discussion, R. Abba bar Yudan chooses to illustrate his response to this problem through a metaphor in order to convey his conception of God's omnipresence existing along with human free will. Just as a warrior rides on top of his horse with partial control over its gait, so too God travels with and directs us as we move about the world without determining for us how we act.

May we find God's Presence similarly within and around ourselves as we continue Jacob's journey through the world, seeking to find places and moments of clarity.

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**Rabbi Marc Wolf**  
Vice Chancellor and Chief Development Officer  
(212) 678-8933  
[mawolf@jtsa.edu](mailto:mawolf@jtsa.edu)



# Torah from JTS

Parashat Va-yetzei

Genesis 28:10–32:3

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11 Kislev 5770

## Parashah Commentary

**This commentary was written by Dr. Walter Herzberg, assistant professor of Bible and Professional and Pastoral Skills, JTS**

Michael Fishbane's book *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology* is a scholarly work that I find compelling, especially in those instances where the author places emphasis on *experiencing* the act of biblical interpretation, which "is understood to foster diverse modes of attention to textual details, which in turn cultivate correlative forms of attention to the world, and divine reality." In other words, paying close attention to the *details* in the Torah is the path to deriving *meaning* from the Torah.

As it happens, Dr. Steven Kepnes (Murray W. and Mildred K. Finard Professor in Jewish Studies and Religion at Colgate University) and I are currently writing a book on reading and interpretation, the working title of which is *How to Read the Bible for Meaning*. In this work we are proposing a simple three-stage reading model: (1) identifying the textual question(s), (2) examining different interpretive solutions to the textual question(s), and consequently, (3) deriving and articulating moral and/or theological possibilities. Through a close reading and analysis of a recurring phrase in this week's Torah portion (Gen. 29:10), I will attempt to demonstrate the method.

Jacob heeds his mother Rebekah's request to "flee" to "Laban my brother" (Gen. 27:44) in order to escape the wrath of his brother Esau, and his father Isaac's directive that he "go" to his mother's family and find himself a wife from among the daughters of "Laban his mother's brother" (Gen. 28:2).

When Jacob approaches his destination, he encounters a group of shepherds congregating at a well (Gen. 29:3), waiting for the assistance of another group of shepherds in removing the large stone sealing the well so that they might water their flocks. Jacob inquires about his uncle Laban and is told by the waiting shepherds that Rachel, Laban's daughter, is actually "approaching with the sheep."

**Gen. 29:10** And it happened when Jacob saw Rachel the daughter of **Laban his mother's brother**, and the sheep of **Laban his mother's brother** that he stepped forward and rolled the stone from the mouth of the well and watered the sheep of **Laban his mother's brother**.

**:11** And Jacob kissed Rachel and lifted up his voice and wept.

**:12** And Jacob told Rachel that he was her father's kin, and that he was Rebekah's son, and she ran and told her father.

### Stage One: Identifying the textual question(s)

Commentators and close readers throughout the ages have been intrigued by the occurrence of the phrase “Laban his mother’s brother” three times in the space of one verse.

Primary question: Why is the phrase “Laban his mother’s brother” repeated when one mention would have been more than sufficient? We are well aware that Laban is indeed Jacob’s mother’s brother.

Additional question: Why does Jacob kiss his cousin Rachel (Gen. 29:11) before he introduces himself (Gen. 29:12)? Would it not have been more appropriate to first mention that Laban, her father, was his mother’s brother?

### Stage Two: Examining different interpretive solutions to the question(s)

Or Hahayim (R. Hayim Ben Attar, 1696–1743) directly addresses our question, noting that the text mentions the phrase “his mother’s brother” three times without apparent justification because Jacob wished to allay the suspicions of the shepherds that he was assisting Rachel because of some ulterior motive. The repetition, according to Or Hahayim, represents the words spoken when Jacob saw Rachel, *and* when he removed the stone, *and* (for the third time) when he watered the flock. In other words, Jacob mentions his family connection to Rachel and Laban three times “to remove any suspicion” of impropriety. Therefore, continues Or Hahayim, there was no need for Jacob to announce that he is Rachel’s relative before kissing her.

Rabbeinu Bahye (R. Bahye ben Asher, c.1255–1340) also speaks to our question, noting that the text mentions the phrase “Laban his mother’s brother” a few times to indicate that Jacob’s helping Rachel—by removing the stone from the well and then watering her flock—was not done for Laban’s sake, but “rather for his mother’s honor.” “Therefore,” R. Bahye continues, “Each time the text mentions Laban’s name . . . it mentions [that he is] *his mother’s brother*, because “in his heart [Jacob] remembered that it was his mother’s love for him that caused her to advise him to go to Laban” (Gen. 27:43).

### Stage Three: Deriving meaning from the text

Interestingly, both Or Hahayim and R. Bahye anticipate the same technique of modern literary analysis: reading the details of a seemingly objective narrative description of events from the subjective *perspective* of one of the characters. They both understand the threefold narrative repetition of the phrase “his mother’s brother” from Jacob’s perspective. Or Hahayim insists that the repetition represents the words that Jacob had actually uttered, while Bahye proposes that it represents Jacob’s inner voice, his unspoken words. Or Hahayim sees Jacob motivated by his keen sense of awareness that a stranger or newcomer must be especially cognizant of the effect that his behavior (proffering assistance to a woman he does not know) may have upon others. Bahye, on the other hand, sees Jacob motivated to help Rachel, Laban’s daughter, and Laban’s sheep because the young woman and her father are related to his mother. In essence, Jacob is honoring his beloved mother Rebekah by assisting her brother’s daughter and her brother’s flock. Or Hahayim’s Jacob is concerned with the propriety of his actions, and how it will reflect upon him and might affect him. Bahye’s Jacob is more concerned with selflessly assisting members of his family. Clearly, their understanding of Jacob’s motivations is very different.

We have seen how paying close attention to textual details can help us uncover the possible motivations of a character in the Torah text. As Dr. Fishbane suggests, we have examined “diverse modes of attention to textual details,” thereby “experiencing the act of biblical interpretation.” However, he also opines that this close attention to the details “cultivates correlative attention to the world . . .” Using Dr. Fishbane’s terminology (pp. 44-45), how can this hermeneutical theology of close reading lead to a transformative theology? The following is an attempt to respond to that challenge:

Perhaps, based on our analysis of the text and subsequently Jacob’s motivations, we too might be propelled to honestly consider our own motivations in analogous situations. Are

we acting out of self interest (Or Hahayim’s Jacob) or are we acting altruistically (Bahye’s Jacob)? Or, alternatively, what is the value of learning to protect ourselves from our own behavior (Or Hahayim’s Jacob) or contemplating both the positive and negative aspects of behavior based on family loyalty and honor (Bahye’s Jacob).

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### A Taste of Torah

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

**Genesis 28:11–12** He came upon a certain place and stopped there for the night, for the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of that place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. He had a dream: a stairway was set on the ground and its top reached to the sky, and the angels of God were going up and down on it.

**B’khor Shor, “and the angels of God were ascending and descending,”** According to my opinion, Jacob didn’t actually see the angels going up and down; rather, this is how they appeared to him in a dream. For the ladder was created for the angels and stood there for them to go up and down as they might need. And “going up” is stated first because it is the way of humans to first go up a ladder and then go down. It seemed to him as if the ladder was for going up then down in a normal human way. And if he had truly seen the angels they would have come down first and then gone up, for their dwelling place is in the heavens . . . [or] one can also say that it is the Hebrew linguistic style to say they were “going up” first, as other examples show. And finally there are those that say since he saw them going up and then coming down, he said to himself: they are coming from and returning to the land—that is the reason he said, “how awesome is this place!”—for it is a dwelling place of angels.

En route from Beersheva to Haran, Jacob has a mystical and dreamlike experience. He is fleeing for his life from his brother Esau’s murderous intent. His emotional and psychological states are thrown into insecurity and chaos. The outer world reflects the inner as the sun sets, signaling the end of one chapter in Jacob’s life. As night envelops him, Jacob takes a stone in “the place” and rests his head upon it. Immediately, he sees a vision of a ladder connecting sky and earth, and heavenly messengers journeying up and down upon this bridge. The image is later joined to the voice of God, assuring Jacob of his safety and of his ultimate destiny—that he will return to the land of Israel. What are we, the readers, to make of this episode?

Joseph B’khor Shor argues that Jacob did not actually “see” the angels of God. Rather, B’khor Shor believes, all of this happened in a dream. The divine prophecy is transmitted to the prophet through a dream sequence. To support his theory, B’khor Shor believes that the text is narrated from the dreamy perspective of Jacob—that is to say, had he actually seen the angels, they would have been coming from up above, not down below as humans typically climb ladders. Further, he entertains another striking possibility—perhaps, as others say, it is true that the angels first ascended, then descended. And if so, this would seem to suggest that their origin is from the earth below rather than the heavens above.

This final option is quite beautiful, suggesting that divine messengers are truly in our midst. How often do we think of the possibility of the word of God or godly acts springing forth from the earth below? Too often we humans have preconceived notions, believing godly acts are sent from one direction only. B’khor Shor compels us to adjust our spiritual vision and recognize the goodness that emanates from the world in our midst. Messengers of God are just as capable of coming from the earth as they are from the heavens. Maybe this is the lesson of Parashat Va-yetzei.

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