



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Family Edition

FINDING FAITH IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

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Vayetse 5780

Laban the Aramean

** KEY IDEA OF THE WEEK **

We can face the future without fear if we know we have been here before and we are not alone.



PARSHAT VAYETSE IN A NUTSHELL

In this week's *parsha*, Jacob ran away from home, because his brother Esau had promised to kill him for sneakily getting the Firstborn's blessing from his father. On his way to his Uncle Laban's home in Charan, he stopped for the night on Mount Moriah. While asleep, he dreamed of angels climbing up and down a ladder that reached heaven. During this vision, Hashem promised that he would become father to many children and that his family would inherit the Land of Israel.

He awoke and realised it was a prophetic dream, then continued his journey towards Charan. He met Rachel, the daughter of Laban, at a nearby well, and fell in love with her. Rachel had older sister called Leah. Laban agreed to let Jacob marry Rachel (although she was the younger sister) if Jacob worked for him for seven years. After the wedding finally took place, Jacob realised that Laban had tricked him and he had really married Leah. Laban said that he had done this because the custom was to marry the older child first, but if Jacob agreed to another seven years of work, he could

also marry Rachel. They married, but both Rachel and Leah became unhappy. Leah felt unloved, but had many children (6 sons and 1 daughter). Rachel was deeply loved by Jacob, but could not have children. Both wives asked their maidservants to also be wives to Jacob, and Jacob became father to 4 more sons. Eventually Rachel had her first child, a son who she called Joseph.

There was tension between Jacob and Laban over the flocks, as Laban often changed the agreement of who owned which sheep. Eventually Jacob decided to leave with his wives and children. Laban followed behind and tried to stop him, but they finally parted ways in peace, and 20 years after leaving home, the 4 wives, 12 children and all their sheep journeyed together, led by Jacob, towards the place of his birth - Israel.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. How do you think Jacob kept going despite the many difficulties he experienced?



THE CORE IDEA

The Sages understood something important about the stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs. They explained it using this principle: *ma'asei avot siman lebanim*, "What happened to the parents was a sign for the children." They saw that certain stories in Bereishit must be seen as an early forerunner, a parallel to similar, later events.

The classic example is in Bereishit 12 when, almost immediately after arriving in the land of Canaan, Abraham and Sarah were forced into exile in Egypt. Abraham's life was

at risk. Sarah was taken by Pharaoh. God then struck Pharaoh's household with plagues, and Pharaoh sent them away. The parallels between this and the story of the Exodus are obvious.

Something similar happened again to Abraham and Sarah later on in Gerar (Ber. 20), as it did, also in Gerar, to Isaac and Rebecca (Ber. 26). But did Jacob undergo his own earlier version of the exodus? We know that he did, late in

life, go down to Egypt with his family. But this was not in anticipation of the Exodus. It was the Exodus itself.

Earlier, in our *parsha*, he was in exile after he ran away from home to live with his uncle, Laban. But this was not because of famine, it was from fear of Esau. Nor was it to a land of strangers. He was travelling to his mother's own family. Jacob *seems* to be the only one of the patriarchs *not* to live out in advance the experience of exile and exodus.

The Sages, however, realised otherwise. Living with Laban, he lost his freedom. He became, in effect, his father-in-law's slave. Eventually he had to escape, without letting Laban know he was going. He knew that, if he could, Laban would keep him in his household as a kind of prisoner.

In this respect, Jacob's experience was closer to the Exodus than that of Abraham or Isaac. No one stopped Abraham or Isaac from leaving. No one chased after them. And no one treated them badly. It was Jacob's experience in the house of Laban that was the closest experience to the actual Exodus. "What happened to the parents was a sign for the children."

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. How does it help us to know that our ancestors went through similar events to us?
2. Can you think of any events in more modern times that have happened before in some way in Jewish history?



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

While in the Janowska Road Concentration Camp, Nazi SS officers forced the Bluzhever Rebbe and his fellow prisoners on a death march. The Rebbe walked with a maskil, a man he had befriended who did not believe in God. As they approached several huge ditches, the prisoners were ordered to jump across. It was an almost impossible feat, but all had to try their best, for those that landed in the ditch would be shot.

"Well Spira," said the maskil to the Rebbe, "it looks like we've reached our end."

"Just hold onto my coat and we'll jump across together," replied the Rebbe. They closed their eyes and jumped.

They opened their eyes, shocked that they had leapt safely to the other side. The man turned to the Rebbe and exclaimed, "Rebbe, we're alive, we're alive because of you! There must be a God!"

How did you do it, Rebbe?" The Rebbe replied, "I had zechut avot (ancestral merit). I held on to the bekeshe (Hasidic coat) of my father and his father and all of my ancestors. But tell me," the Rebbe asked the man, "how did you reach the other side?"

The man answered, "I was holding on to you!"

From *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust* by Professor Yaffa Eliach

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. How is *zechut avot* (ancestral merit) connected to *ma'asei avot siman lebanim*, (what happened to the parents was a sign for the children)?
2. Sir Isaac Newton, the great inventor, once said that the heights we reach are possible because we are "standing on the shoulders of giants". What did he mean, and how is it connected to this story?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

Jacob's flight to Laban, his stay there, and his escape, pursued by his father-in-law gave rise to a strange passage in the Haggadah: "*Arami oved avi*. Go and learn what Laban the Aramean sought to do to our father Jacob, for Pharaoh condemned only the boys to death, but Laban sought to uproot everything."

There are three problems with this text. **First**, it understands the words *arami oved avi* to mean, "[Laban] an Aramean [tried to] destroy my father." But the phrase, literally translated, means, "My father was a wandering Aramean." The "father" refers to either Jacob (Ibn Ezra, Sforno), or Abraham (Rashbam), or all the patriarchs (Shadal). Aram was the region from which Abraham set out to travel to Canaan, and to which Jacob fled to escape the anger of Esau. The general sense of the phrase is that the patriarchs had no land and no permanent home. They were vulnerable. They were nomads. Laban, *does not appear in the verse at all*, except by a very forced reading.

Second, there is no evidence that Laban the Aramean actually harmed Jacob. Pharaoh, by contrast, did not merely contemplate doing evil to the Israelites; he actually did so, ordering the killing every male baby and enslaving everyone.

Third, and most fundamental: the Seder night is dedicated to retelling the story of the Exodus. We are charged to remember it, engrave it on the hearts of our children. Why then diminish the miracle by saying in effect: "Egypt? That was nothing compared to Laban!"

All this is very strange indeed. Let me suggest an explanation. We have here a phrase with two quite different meanings, depending on the context in which we read it.

Originally the text of *Arami oved avi* had nothing to do with Pesach. It appears in the Torah as the text of the declaration to be said on bringing first-fruits to the Temple, which normally happened on Shavuot.

“Then you shall declare before the Lord your God: ‘My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt ... Then the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm ... He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey; and now I bring the first-fruits of the soil that You, Lord, have given me.’” (Devarim 26:5-10).

In the context of first-fruits, the literal translation, “My father was a wandering Aramean,” makes absolute sense. The text is contrasting the past when the patriarchs were nomads, forced to wander from place to place, with the present when, thanks to God, the Israelites have a land of their own. The contrast is between homelessness and home. But that is specifically when we speak about first-fruits – the produce of the land.

At some stage, however, the passage was placed in another context, namely Pesach, the Seder and the story of the Exodus. The Mishnah specifies that it be read and expounded on Seder night. Almost certainly the reason is that same (relatively rare) verb *h-g-d*, from which the word Haggadah is derived, occurs both in connection with telling the story of Pesach (Shemot 13:8), and making the first-fruits declaration (Dev. 26:3).

But the reading of the verse found in the Haggadah is not easy. The words *aram* and *oved* are radically reinterpreted.

How can we read Laban into the phrase, *Arami oved avi*, “A wandering Aramean was my father”? Answer: only Laban and Laban’s father Betuel are called *Arami* or *ha-Arami* in the whole Torah. Therefore *Arami* means “Laban.”

How do we know that he sought to do Jacob harm? Because God appeared to him at night and said “Beware of attempting anything with Jacob, good or bad.” God would not have warned Laban against doing anything to Jacob, had Laban not intended to do so.

How can we read this into the verse? Because the root *a-v-d*, which means “lost, wandering,” might also, in the *piel* or *hiphil* grammatical tenses, mean, “to destroy.” Of course, Laban did not destroy “my father” or anyone else. But that was because of

Divine intervention. Hence the phrase could be taken to mean, “[Laban] the Aramean [tried to] destroy my father.” This is how Rashi understands it.

What then are we to make of the phrase, “Pharaoh condemned only the boys to death, but Laban sought to uproot everything”? The answer is not that Laban sought to kill all the members of Jacob’s family. Quite the opposite. He said to Jacob: “The women are my daughters, the children are my children, and the flocks are my flocks. All you see is mine” (Ber. 31:43). Jacob had worked for some twenty years to earn his family and flocks. Yet Laban still claimed they were his own. Had God not intervened, he would have kept Jacob’s entire family as prisoners. That is how he “sought to uproot everything” by denying them all the chance to go free.

This interpretation of *Arami oved avi* is not the plain sense. But the plain sense related this passage to the bringing first-fruits. It was the genius of the Sages to give it an interpretation that connected it with Pesach and the Exodus. And though it gives a far-fetched reading of the phrase, it gives a compelling interpretation to the entire narrative of Jacob in Laban’s house. It tells us that the third of the patriarchs, whose descent to Egypt would actually begin the story of the Exodus, had himself undergone an exodus experience in his youth.

Ma’asei avot siman lebanim, “the act of the fathers are a sign to their children,” tells us that what is happening now has happened before. That does not mean that danger is to be treated lightly. But it does mean that we should never despair. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and their wives experienced exile and exodus as if to say to their descendants, this is not unknown territory. God was with us then; He will be with you now.

I believe that we can face the future without fear because we have been here before and because we are not alone.

QUESTION TO PONDER:

How does *Ma’asei avot siman lebanim* connect to our future?



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

“I am a Jew because, being a child of my people, I have heard the call to add my chapter to its unfinished story. I am a stage on its journey, a connecting link between the generations. The dreams and hopes of my ancestors live on in me, and I am the guardian of their trust, now and for the future.”

Radical Then, Radical Now, p.217



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Was Laban a bad person?
2. Why do you think the author of the Haggadah chose this biblical passage (*Arami oved avi*) to begin the telling of the story of the Exodus?
3. What can we learn for our lives today from the concept of *Ma’asei avot siman lebanim*?



QUESTION TIME

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EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

IN A NUTSHELL

1. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche famously said " One who has a *why* to live for can bear almost any *how*." Jacob was driven by the knowledge that he was an integral part of the plan for the covenant between God and his grandfather Abraham and father Isaac, as God had told him directly when this covenant was renewed with him. He had deep faith that the covenant would ultimately be fulfilled despite the twists and turns of his life. The fact that similar chaotic events had precedence in the lives of his father and grandfather allowed him to feel the presence of God and to therefore imbue his life with purpose and faith (this is the core message of this week's *Covenant & Conversation*).

THE CORE IDEA

1. It is reassuring to understand that personal and national events have occurred previously, and that our ancestors have come through these events with the guidance and protection of God. Despite the trepidation and fear that a meandering narrative can cause, precedence in history provides a foundation for faith in our future.
2. There are themes that repeat themselves throughout Jewish history. These include antisemitism, persecution, expulsion and exile, as well as resilience, creativity, golden ages, return and redemption. In our generation we are witnessing a resurgence of antisemitism that seems all too familiar, but we can also reflect on the resilience, creativity, and golden ages of Jewish communities around the world, as well as a strong homeland dedicated to the wellbeing of Jews wherever they live.

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. *Zechut avot* suggests that our lives are influenced by the merits of our ancestors. Because God had a close relationship with our forefathers, and committed to a covenantal relationship with them and their descendants, our national narrative is influenced by God for the positive. *Ma'asei avot siman lebanim* is a related concept, but not identical. It suggests that trials and tribulations in our national story have been faced by previous generations, and just as God protected our ancestors, so He will be with us, and we will prevail.
2. Newton said this in reference to scientific knowledge and progress. Every generation makes scientific knowledge and technological advances, but they do so based on the discoveries of the previous generations. The concepts of *zechut avot* and *ma'asei avot siman lebanim* are the spiritual equivalent of this. Our relationship with God and the role He plays in our national story has its foundation in His relationship with our ancestors.

THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. The future can be a scary proposition. Facing an uncertain future takes courage and faith. *Ma'asei avot siman lebanim* helps us with that. Whatever we may encounter, the knowledge that as a nation we have already faced the same trials and challenges, is reassuring. Just as God was there accompanying us then, He too will be with us in the future. Believing this provides a strong foundation for us to find the faith and courage necessary to face an uncertain future.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

These questions are all open, to encourage thought and debate. There are no wrong answers. However, here are some thoughts to consider:

1. Commentators and Jewish thinkers have grappled with this for many generations. The Torah describes Laban as a wheeler-dealer willing to use trickery to his own advantage. But does this make him a bad person? Rabbi Sacks here suggests that he did seek to do Jacob harm. We know this because "God appeared to him at night and said 'Beware of attempting anything with Jacob, good or bad.' God would not have warned Laban against doing anything to Jacob, had Laban not intended to do so." Perhaps Laban's greatest crime here was that despite the fact that Jacob had worked for twenty years to earn his family and flocks, Laban still claimed they were his own, and had God not intervened, he would have kept Jacob's entire family as prisoners. This was an attempt to "uproot everything" by denying them all the chance to go free.
2. Despite the passage originating from the declaration made at the time of the bringing of the first-fruits, the author of the *haggadah* chose to incorporate this passage into the *maggid* (using this radical interpretation) probably because of the use of the verb *h-g-d* in the passage, which links the two *mitzvot* of first-fruits and Seder night. However, the reinterpretation explored here also links the two through the concept of *ma'asei avot siman lebanim* where we now see this narrative as Jacob's own exodus experience.
3. That there is nothing truly new under the sun and that our national story has precedent. God made a covenantal commitment to our ancestors and to their descendants, so just as He was always there for our ancestors, He will also be there for us, whatever we face.