

# The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

Parshat HaShavua  
Yeshivat Har Etzion

---

## PARASHAT VAYETZE

"Mei-Hashem Yatza Ha-davar" Perceiving Providence

By Rav Reuven Taragin

### I) Vayetze - An Independent Cohesive Unit

Although Parashat Vayetze presents stories covering more than twenty years, it contains no breaks. This presentation highlights the parasha's status as an independent unit and reflects the relationship between its various stories.

### A) Framework

The relationship between the stories is reinforced by the parallels between the beginning and end of the parasha. The parasha opens with Yaakov's voyage from Canaan on the heels of an angelic dream within which God promises to be with and protect him in exile and eventually return him to Canaan and concludes with the ultimate fulfillment of these promises - Yaakov's return. The journey back ends as the first one began, with Yaakov's encounter with malakhim.

Additional textual similarities link the conclusion of the parasha to its beginning:

#### Perek 28

Vayelekh Charana  
Vayalen Sham (10)  
Vayifga ba-makom (11)  
ein zeh ki im bet elokim (16-17)  
Vayashkem Yaakov ba-boker  
Vayikach et ha-even  
vayasem ota matzeiva (18)  
Vayikra shem ha-makom ha-hu Bet El (19)

#### Perakim 31-2

Ve- Yaakov halakh le-darko  
Vayalinu ba-har  
Vayifge'u bo malakhei Elokim  
Machaneh elokim zeh (31:2)  
Vayashkem Lavan ba-boker (31:55)  
Vayikach Yaakov even...  
vaye'rimeha matzeiva (31:45)  
Vayikra et shem ha-makom ha-hu  
Machanaim(32:2)

## B) Structure

Within the framework of Yaakov's departure from and return to Canaan, the Torah presents five stories pertaining to the interim exile years. Like the opening and concluding portions of the parasha, these stories also exhibit a distinct relationship:

- A 28:10-24 - Yaakov's departure / angels
- B 29:1-14 - Yaakov's escape to Lavan
- C 29:15-30 - Yaakov's labor for his wives
- D 29:31-30:24- The birth of the children
- C 30:25-42- Yaakov's labor for money
- B 30:43-31:55- Yaakov's escape from Lavan
- A 32:1-2- Yaakov's return / angels

The births at the center of the parasha's structure seems at first glance to be out of place. How does the birth narrative, which seems to convey mere technical data, function as the parasha's turning point? We will see that in addition to expressing Yaakov's ability to flourish in exile, the births also re-define the preceding stories and introduce the following ones. This point becomes more evident after a careful study of the birth narrative.

## II) The Birth Narrative

### A) Structure

The birth narrative, like the entirety of the parasha, subdivides into two chiastically related sections:

- A 29: 31-5- Birth of four children to Lea
- B 30: 1-2- Story (Not of birth)
- C 30: 3-8- Birth of two children to Rachel's maid
  
- C 30: 9-13- Birth of two children to Lea's maid
- B 30:14-16- Story (Not of birth)
- A 30:17-24- Birth of four children to Lea/Rachel

### B) Message

Both sections describe God's favoring of one sister and the reaction of the other. The difference between the two sections lies in the sister chosen as benefactor. In the first section God "opens the womb" of Lea while closing that of Rachel. Lea chooses names for her children that reflect her recognition of and thanks to God for his

merciful intervention. Rav Shimon Bar Yochai highlighted this thanks by identifying Lea as the first to offer thanks to God (Berakhot 7a).

After listing Lea's four births, the Torah depicts Rachel's reaction. Instead of turning to God, the sole granter of child, she assails Yaakov. The latter stresses her error by angrily retorting - "Am I in place of God, Who has denied you fruit of the womb" (30:2). Only after her misplaced complaint does Rachel grudgingly offer her maid in her place.

The second section opens with Lea's realization of the termination of God's providence on her behalf - "Lea saw that she had ceased to give birth" (30:9) [1]. Although we now expect Rachel to be the next to give birth, God "hears" her (22) only after "hearing" Lea (17). One wonders why Rachel is heard so late in the story and in far lesser proportion than Lea?

The answer lies in the structure of the narrative which focuses on the divergent reactions of the two sisters to the same circumstances. As opposed to Rachel who offers her maid only after having incorrectly complained to Yaakov, Lea immediately presents her maid in her place. Like the first matriarch - Sarah, as soon as Lea realizes that she can no longer contribute personally, she selflessly steps aside and hopes to continue to do so vicariously.

The difference between the two is expressed through the second story - that of the mandrakes - as well. Notwithstanding the symbolism of the mandrakes, Rachel's sale of a night with Yaakov reflects a denigrating lack of appreciation of the sanctity of the conception experience. The Ramban's appraisal of the mandrakes as fertility flowers attributes new significance to the transaction. Rachel has not yet realized the need to rely on God. There is no reason not to utilize the available medicine, but doing so at the expense of a night with her husband reflects once again Rachel's improper value system (see Sforno).

Leah, on the other hand, recognizes God's exclusive role as bearer of the "birth key" and happily exchanges the flowers for an additional night with Yaakov and another window for God's providence. God rewards Lea's faith with three more children - two boys and Dina. Based on the parallel to the first section and a fair basis of distribution, all four boys should have been born to Rachel; two were given to Lea in recognition of her exemplary faith.

In an ironic note, the midrash concludes:

"One lost and the other lost; one gained and the other gained. Lea lost the mandrakes and gained two tribes and the firstborn; Rachel gained the mandrakes and lost tribes and the firstborn" (Bereishit Rabba 72,2).

Eventually, even Rachel concedes that God, not Yaakov or mandrakes, grants child and beseeches Him with the birth of her first child for a second. Her request, rooted in her painfully learned lesson, is eventually granted, but at the cost of her life.

### C) Role as Turning Point

The message of the birth narrative facilitates the transition from the first to second section of the parasha. Despite God's promises to Yaakov at the parasha's inception, the first section brings Yaakov only frustration. Although he safely reaches his destination, his stay with Lavan soon turns into backbreaking work on behalf of a wife he doesn't actually receive. The reader cannot help but wonder how God allowed such a thing? What happened to the promised protective aid?

While the first part of the parasha reinforces the hidden nature of God's providence within it by not mentioning His name, the birth narrative compensates by mentioning His name fourteen times. Within the narrative, we are presented with Lea's recognition of God's exclusive control of nature. Appropriately, Yaakov's unintended wife directs Yaakov and us to recognize God's hand, even in its obscurity.

Only after Lea's clarification does God reveal His providence - first in the form of the angel who assists Yaakov in outsmarting Lavan and finally by personally intervening to secure Yaakov's escape.

### III) The Second Part of the Parasha - Providence Perceived

The second part of the parasha leaves no doubt as to providence's presence by depicting its recognition by all characters.

#### A) Yaakov and Family

First Yaakov realizes (after sensing Lavan's unwarranted jealousy) that it has been "only the God of fathers" (31:5) who has cared for him. The angel's aid in outsmarting Lavan proved to Yaakov that the angels he had seen at his journey's inception had indeed remained with him all along.

Yaakov makes this point to his wives - Lavan's daughters - and challenges them to fulfill God's command to abandon their home and family. Lea and Rachel, the first to have recognized God's providence, of course immediately concede (31:17). By doing

so they reaffirm their place in the family of Avraham and Rivka, who likewise abandoned their families in compliance with God's will.

## B) Lavan

The ultimate recognition of God's providence comes from Lavan in the context of his pursuit of Yaakov. Despite God's demand that Lavan refrain from telling Yaakov "good or bad" (31:24), Lavan proceeds with his verbal attack. Although Lavan realizes that he will not succeed in repossessing his family and possessions, he feels that he bears a just claim. Was he not the catalyst of Yaakov's growth? Did he not offer Yaakov refuge, work, and a wife when the latter had nowhere to turn? Did he not deserve at least to be informed of Yaakov's migration? Additionally, Lavan is intent on finding his gods who he views as responsible for his, as well as Yaakov's, success.

When Lavan first arrives, Yaakov allows him to vent his frustration, but his aggressive, suspicious search of Yaakov's possessions as if they were his own forces Yaakov to respond. Yaakov reminds Lavan that despite Yaakov's faithful service, Lavan took every opportunity to deceive him - "Had not the God of Avraham and the Fear of Yitzchak been with me, you would have sent me now away empty-handed. God saw my plight and the toil of my hands and He showed it last night" (31:42).

Yaakov explains the true significance of the heavenly revelation. God's protection of Yaakov reflected His exclusive role in his success. By protecting Yaakov God was merely asserting his deserved right to Yaakov; Lavan deserved not even the right to give his blessing. God used the phrase "tov ad ra" (good or bad) to remind Lavan of the conclusion he himself had reached as a youngster after having heard the providential story of Avraham's servant - "And Lavan and Betuel said: It has come from God; we cannot tell you anything bad or good (ra o tov)" (24:50). In addition to God's revelation to Lavan, his inability to find his own gods was meant to signify their and his own irrelevance to Yaakov's success.

## C) Yaakov's Matzeivot

The meeting ends with Lavan's request to formalize a treaty. Yaakov responds by constructing two stone structures - a "matzeiva" (45) and a "gal" (46). Significantly, the creation of the matzeiva precedes that of the gal and is carried out by Yaakov alone. Before assenting to Lavan's request and joining him in the construction of the gal, which symbolized their mutual treaty, Yaakov expressed his thanks to the one truly responsible for his success - God. The matzeiva created here parallels the one Yaakov constructed in response to God's promises at the beginning of the parasha. By constructing this second matzeiva, Yaakov expressed his appreciation of God's

fulfillment of the promises He made during the angelic vision which Yaakov had commemorated by creating the first.

Yaakov's recognition of the consistent providence shown to him during his years in exile with Lavan readied him for his return to Canaan and his encounter with Eisav and serves as the precedent for his descendants - a nation whose ideology centers on the belief in providence's universal consistency.

Note: [1]This difference between the two sections accounts for the alternative usages of God's various names. In the first section Lea calls God "Hashem" while Rachel calls him "Elokim," whereas in the second section Lea calls Him "Elokim" while Rachel employs both names. Chazal's association of "Hashem" with justice and Elokim with mercy explains the switch. In the first section Lea realizes that her exclusive births are the expression of God's merciful intervention on her behalf, while Rachel claims what she sees as hers by right. In the second section Leah realizes that now she is being discriminated against and that she receives children in merit of her faithful actions and therefore refers to God in her thanks as Elokim. Since Rachel surely deserved at least one child, she thanks Elokim for Yosef, but beseeches Hashem to graciously grant her a second.