

Parashah Twenty–Seven

Genesis 28:10–29:30; Hosea 12:12–14; Ephesians 6:5–9

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Establishing the Covenant

The narrative that is before us today in our Parashah is a familiar one: Yaacov’s dream, the ladder, the angels—it’s not necessarily the “stuff” that Hollywood makes into box office hits, but it’s familiar nonetheless. But how does this story fit into the flow of the Genesis narrative?

The pericope just prior to this one has highlighted the sovereign choice of Yaacov over Esau, obviously not because one was better than the other, but because God was at work to bring about His purposes. Using even the wayward methods of Yaacov and his mother, HaShem weaves the events of this history together to form the tapestry of His design.

But it is not so much about Yaacov and Esau, or Yitzchak and Rivka. It is about the covenant. The Promise of the coming One (Gen 3:15) is being worked out event by event, unfolded to us in the pages of Moshe’s writings, filling in the picture by each stroke of the divine brush. It is the covenant that is central—Yitzchak, Yaacov, Yehudah, these are just the vehicles who carry it from one generation to the next.

Consider the setting as our narrative opens: Yaacov leaves Ber Sheva and travels toward Haran. Then the text says (28:11) “And he came to a certain place...” but the Hebrew has וַיָּפֹגַע בְּמָקוֹם, “and he arrived at the place.” What place is this? The Sages maintain, almost with a unified voice, that it is Moriah, the same place where Avraham was ready to sacrifice Yitzchak, and the place where eventually David would buy the threshing-floor—where Sh'lomo would build the Temple. It was the place where Hashem had chosen to place His Name—to reveal Himself in specific and special ways. We are not surprised, then, when the story which unfolds before us is one of God revealing Himself and His plan for the descendants of Avraham.

The first thing Yaacov does upon arriving at the place for his night stay was to choose a rock to lean against as he slept. This rock, a foreshadowing of the stones which would be used to build the Temple in this exact location, would soon become a temporary altar upon which a libation offering is given. (The so-called history of this “rock,” as the stone upon which the European monarchs were crowned is pure mythology.) The Hebrew term for a stone set up as Yaacov does to this one is מַצֵּבָה, *matzevah*, some of which are prohibited in the Torah (Lev 26:1; Dt 16:22). Those which are prohibited are those used as an idol to bow down to. Those which are allowed are stones set up as markers or as testimonials to covenants, agreements, or boundary lines (cf. Gen 31:13, 45, 51; 35:14, 20; Ex 24:4). This stone, which Yaacov set up as a מַצֵּבָה is undoubtedly so erected as a witness or testimony of the covenant which was renewed at that place.

The dream which Yaacov has is of a ladder. The Hebrew word is סֻלָּם, found only here and meaning either “steps” or “ladder,” perhaps even the steps of a ziggurat with its long stair case. The Sages note that this word has the same numerical value as סִינַי, “Sinai.” By this they emphasize that this revelation of God was like the Torah at Sinai. The ladder is pictured as extending from earth to heaven, with the Angels or Messengers of Elohim (the plural construction “angels of God” is found only here and in Gen 32:2) ascending and descending. Most importantly, Adonai stands upon its head. The word for “stand” is not the common עָמַד, but is נָצַב, which is better understood to mean “station for a purpose,” and when used with the following preposition עַל, as here, it means “to preside over.” This meaning of the verb is further verified by its participle form meaning “deputy” or “prefect.” Thus Adonai presides over the whole, the Angels ascending and descending as symbolically accomplishing His work and purposes.

Why the order of “ascend” and “descend”? It must be to emphasize that the Angels are appointed to dwell with the covenant members, but they regularly “report in” to Adonai as the Great King. The whole scene is symbolic of the on-going maintenance of the covenant, the Great King sending and receiving His ambassadors in order to assure the on-going success of the covenant.

It should be noted at this point that Yeshua claimed that He was the ladder in this picture (John 1:51). In other words, it was the work of the Messiah to bridge heaven and earth in order that the

covenant could be established. The Messiah is the “means” of the covenant—apart from Him there is no access to Adonai, and there is no covenant. It is in this covenant context that the words of Yeshua (John 14:6) should be understood: “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father but by (on) Me.”

The high-point of the dream is the actual revelation of Adonai to Yaacov. First, He identifies Himself as Adonai (יהוה), the God of Avraham and Yitzchak. This makes the covenant connection explicit. Though the meaning of the Name in terms of its “life-experience” revelation would await the exodus event, the Name itself was already known by Avraham and Yitzchak, and had taken on specificity as the Name of the unique God of Avraham. What is meant in Exodus 6 (that before this time God had revealed Himself as El Shaddai, but by the name יהוה He was not known) is that Israel, up to the point of the exodus, had seen the meaning of the Name El Shaddai worked out in the events of their history, but the meaning of יהוה had not yet been so revealed. In this case, the word “know” is given its proper Hebraic meaning, namely, “have covenant relationship with,” not “be aware of something.” Israel knew that the four-letter Name attached to the God of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaacov, but its meaning *as revealed in the course of historical events* had not yet been made known.

After identifying Himself (common in all covenant forms), Adonai reiterates the aspects of the Avrahamic covenant to Yaacov. It is not a new covenant, but is a “renewing” of the covenant already established to Avraham and then to Yitzchak.

The first aspect is the giving of the Land. Here, once again, the covenant is clearly a Land Grant Covenant, a type of covenant used by kings of the Ancient Near East to bequeath a parcel of land to a favored vassal in perpetuity. Such a covenant required the oath of the Great King, not the vassal, and secured the rights of the vassal, not those of the Great King. The covenant was secure on the basis of the King’s word, not on the actions of the vassal. Thus, the Land is mentioned first to alert us, once again, that this covenant is a unilateral covenant dependent upon God and not upon man.

The second covenant promise is that of innumerable seed, “like the dust of the Land.” This great host of people would spread out in all directions of the compass and inhabit the Land.

The third and final covenant blessing is “and in you and your seed I will bless all the families of the earth” (28:14). Here, in somewhat cryptic language, is the promise of the Messiah, and the ingathering of the nations to worship the One true God. Put last for emphasis in each of the enumerations of the Avrahamic covenant (12:1-3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4), this is what Paul considers to be the Gospel (Gal 3:8). The blessing for all mankind was both through the nation of Israel in every generation (through the living out of Torah, teaching of Torah, etc.) as well as (and ultimately) through the “seed,” that is, the Messiah. It is thus the realization of the Avrahamic covenant that the multitudes of redeemed people, from every tribe, kindred and tongue, are seen in the eschaton as the people of God. The picture of all the nations worshipping the God of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaacov was not one which was drawn by the later Apostles, but was part of the blueprint from the very beginning. The covenant given to Avraham and his seed always envisioned the nations.

What follows in 28:15ff is not technically part of the covenant reiteration. The presence of הִנֵּה, “behold,” signals an additional statement. This additional statement speaks to the maintenance of the covenant member to the end that he would fully receive all of the blessings promised. And what is this blessing? Nothing less than the presence of God with Yaacov wherever he would go, a promise to guard or keep him, and to bring him back to the Land. God promises never to forsake Yaacov, but rather to fulfil or do all that which He had promised.

Yaacov’s response to all of this is cast in what sounds like modern lingo: “This place is really awesome!” (28:17). “This is nothing less than God’s house, and the very gate of Heaven!” The inner response of Yaacov can be variously understood: most translations begin v. 17 “and he was afraid,” but the verb ירא, “to fear,” can also describe worship: “Worship Adonai in fear” עֲבָדוּ אֶת יְהוָה בְּיִרְאָה. Perhaps we should understand from this that true worship has some measure of awe mixed into it—a sense that the God we worship is beyond us, greater than us, awesome.

But Yaacov's statement of fear or worship is preceded by an admission: "Surely Adonai is in this place and I did not know." What is meant by this? The Sages seem to simply understand this to mean that Yaacov did not properly prepare for receiving of such a revelation. But I think this remarkable statement by Yaacov deserves further explanation. It is unique in the patriarchal narratives, where in every other place the appearance of God to Avraham or Yitzchak is met with fully reception and not as something strange. Only Yaacov is shocked that God would meet with him. Several explanations may offer themselves: one is that Yaacov had somehow thought God was regional, like the pagan gods. Since he was away from the region of his family, he may have considered that he was outside of the jurisdiction of his father's God. A second possibility, and one which I think has greater weight, is that Yaacov was carrying guilt for deceiving his father, and causing a breach between himself and his brother. He was therefore surprised to learn that not only was God going with him on his journey, but that God had come with blessing, not punishment. It is not as though Yaacov did not deserve punishment—this is not the point of the narrative. The point of the narrative is that *the blessings of the covenant are not ultimately dependent upon the lives of the covenant people. The blessings come as a result of God's character, not Israel's.*

The oath which Yaacov makes (28:20-22) as a result of his dream/vision has not ceased to bother commentators and students alike. It appears as though Yaacov strikes a bargain with God. If He will supply protection, food, and clothing (i.e. keep Yaacov from poverty) then Yaacov will confess Him as his God and pay tribute to Him in the form of a tithe. The implications are obvious: if God were, for one reason or another, to allow Yaacov to experience poverty, then he would deny God. Thus, it appears on the surface that Yaacov's confession is based entirely upon whether or not God supplies him with material blessings. But the Hebrew conditional terminology can also be understood in another way, as indicating the basis of the oath *as that which had already taken place* (see the comments of Midrash Rabbah *ad. loc.*). God had already provided for Yaacov those things he mentioned (clothing, food, guarding, etc.). Thus, we could understand the two verses this way: "So Yaacov vowed a vow saying, 'Will not God be with me and guard me on this way which I am going, and will He not give to me food to eat and clothes to wear, and will I not return in peace to the house of my father? Yes, Adonai will be my God, and this stone which I have set up as a memorial will be the House of God. Thus (Oh God), everything which you give to me, I will render a tithe to You.'"

It is here, for the first time in Genesis, that the "house of God" phrase is used. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that Yaacov was given a vision of the Temple which would, in time, be built on this very spot.

After the experience of the vision and theophony, Yaacov leaves "the place" and "lifts up his feet" to head toward the east. The phrase "lift upon one's feet" is found only here and could mean several things: 1) he was "light footed" meaning he went on light-hearted, 2) he directed his feet, i.e., he went with resolve, or 3) he had to force himself to leave the place he now knew was sacred. Perhaps he had a sense that he was going now to fulfil his part of the unfolding covenant, i.e. obtain a wife, have children, and enjoy the covenant blessings in the context of family. Perhaps he had a renewed hope of experiencing the blessings of community, something he thought he may have forfeited by deceiving his father. In fact, the narrative may suggest that Yaacov had been given previous disclosure by HaShem regarding Rachel (her name means "a ewe lamb") as his wife. When he sees her at the well, he rolls the stone away, waters (וַיִּשְׁקֵה) her flock and kisses (וַיִּשָּׂק) her. This is the only place in the Torah where a man kisses a woman in public who is not either his wife or mother. The narrative plays on the whole idea of "kiss," for it was with a kiss that Yaacov deceived Yitzchak (27:26-27), yet here Yaacov comes to see that God has indeed led him to the very place where he would find, in Rachel, a true renewal of his soul, for he would be able to express love in the context of God's blessings.

The story which now unfolds is also very familiar to us. Like Eliezer, who finds Rivka at the well, and Moses who likewise finds Zipporah at a well, Yaacov will find Rachel as she comes to water her flock. His kissing her is innocent, and should be understood as a family greeting.

However, as noted above, the watering of the flock and the kiss are surely a foreshadowing of his willingness to take her as his wife. The text later informs us that Rachel was the one Yaacov loved and thus from the beginning there is a knitting together of their souls. That Yaacov was able to act as a “superman” and roll the rock away from the well (something which could otherwise be accomplished only by a group of men) had to impress Rachel. But what is more important from a narrative standpoint is that Yaacov had found his own clan, and thus the covenant promises which were linked to the “seed (off-spring) of Avraham” are clearly in view. That Laban would respond with “you are surely my bone and flesh” (29:14) hints at the words of Adam to Chavah (2:23) and reinforces the close knit relations of the clan.

Yaacov was treated as a guest for a full month (חֹדֶשׁ יָמִים) though his willingness to work put Laban in the place of feeling like he should be compensated. There may be legal ramifications in all of this: Laban did not want any of Yaacov’s voluntary work to “count” toward the eventual bride-price. That the whole issue of bride price may be in view is taken from the fact that the notice about Laban’s two daughter immediately follows. (Note also that in 29:15 we have another example of the use of אָח, “brother” meaning “relative,” much like the use of בֶּן, “son.”)

The description of Laban’s two daughters is straightforward: Leah (her name may mean “cow,” “strong woman,” or even “mistress”) is the older of the two, and she also has עֵינֵי רְכוּחַ, usually translated “weak eyes.” This most likely does not describe poor vision but a lack of luster or beauty, cf. 1Sa 16:12; *Shir HaShirim* 4:1, 9. Rachel, on the other hand, is יְפֵת-תֶּאֱרָר וְיִפֶּת מְרֻאָה, “beautiful of form and appearance.” Because Yaacov loved Rachel, he was willing to serve Laban seven years in lieu of the normal bride price he would have to pay. His wages as an indentured servant were accumulated and reckoned as the sum paid. This would indicate the value of a bride-price, yet for Yaacov the difficulty of working for seven years was mitigated by his deep love for Rachel.

Having completed his seven years, Yaacov asks Laban for the arrangement of the ceremony, and the giving of Rachel as his full wife. The well-known “switch” is made possible because of the “drink-fest” which Laban made for the ceremony. Yaacov has had too much to drink, and is in no shape to make discerning choices. Never suspecting that Laban would stoop to such a thing, Yaacov leaves himself vulnerable to a man who has no scruples. Instead of bringing Rachel to Yaacov’s tent, he brings Leah. The narrative gives us no hint as to what had been done with Rachel, but one has to imagine that she was restrained by Laban’s people.

29:23 makes it clear that Yaacov had relations with Leah, and thus the bond was fixed and could not be broken. In the morning, awakened in sobriety, Yaacov learns of the deception (רַמְיָה, cf. 27:35) and confronts Laban (29:25). Laban’s excuse for his deception was that the local tradition did not allow the marriage of the younger daughter in advance of the first-born daughter. This brings to mind the divine decree regarding Yaacov and Esau, that the older would serve the younger in reverse of what would be the normal custom.

The only alternative that Laban would given to Yaacov is that he work another seven years, and receive Rachel as well. One has to wonder if the later Levitical law (Lev 18:18) prohibiting a man marrying a sister of his wife while both were living did not in some measure reference the pain that Yaacov’s arrangement would eventually bring. Should Yaacov have settled for Leah and given up hope of having Rachel, the one he loved? Though God would work His plan in spite of the misdeeds of mankind, it appears that the path of righteousness would have been for Yaacov to realize that the tables had been turned upon him, and that as the deceiver he himself had been deceived. Interestingly enough, the Messiah comes through the line of Leah (Yehudah), not Rachel. Granted, the narrative will continue to follow the sons of Rachel (Yoseph and Benyamin), but God honors the sanctity of marriage as prescribed in Genesis 2:24 by assigning to Leah the line of the enduring covenant. God may graciously override the consequences of sinful choices, but it does not make such choices any less sinful.

In the end, the primary emphasis of the story is simply that God maintains His covenant, passing it to the next generation, and assuring that it accomplishes His determined will. What is more, the covenant continues to be unfolded as an unconditional covenant (at least in its eternal aspects),

for even the wayward deeds of those involved do not overturn or somehow derail the covenant. God's promises will stand secure whether or not His people walk as they should or not. Granted, for an individual to receive the blessings, he must engage in personal obedience. But as far as the overall covenant is concerned, it is secure to this generation and the next, because the covenant depends upon God, not man.