Inquire And Explore With Wisdom

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Talking Torah תורה שבעל פה

How Torah Talks to Us when We Talk Torah

A case presentation of the Process of Midrash through generations, which shows how the basic ideas of Judaism were mined and refined from the gold lode of Torah.

בראשית

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BOOK OF GENESIS

Parashat Breisheet **בראשית**

This is the first parasha of the Torah. It is certainly most significant, how does it all begin? Mysteries of creation and history are revealed, and Jewish tradition sought to delve deeply into those mysteries of the story, into the text itself, letters, words, and phrases in order to wrest all the possible meaning from the Torah.

***Gen. 1:2**
"and the earth was unformed and void (תהו ובהו) and darkness was the face of a deep void, and a spirit ("wind" "ruah" רוח) from God hovered over the face of the waters."

The creation story is one of great power. The story begins with God's creation of Heaven and Earth, and it continues: **"and the earth was unformed and void and darkness was the face of a deep void, and a spirit ("wind" "ruah") from God hovered over the face of the waters." (Gen. 1:2)** The description is of a chaotic world, as creation is beginning. No form or rules of nature, darkness and bottomless void. The only sense of potential for good, is a spirit, a wind or wave that is of God or from God, and this spirit hovers, does not even touch the unformed chaotic whirl of materiel that will become the world.

Indeed, Rabbinic tradition debates the formation of the waters and the spirit mentioned here. They seem to be pre-exisent, and there is no mention in the story of how THEY were created. [**Otzar ha-midrashim, 180,2**] This Midrash comes to the conclusion that: "thus, the world can only exist by virtue of the spirit ("ruah"), which is excellent and praiseworthy."

Rabbinic Midrash develops the idea of the "spirit" ("ruah") of God, as being an element in the world which is not materiel, and which enables life to come into being. It is also the spirit of holiness, a force which can calm turmoil, and create order and meaning out of seeming chaos. [**Gen. R. 8,1**] Indeed, the generation of the flood is a generation of moral chaos, equivalent of the chaotic physical world before creation. The calming of the waters of the flood is also described as "a spirit of God passed over the waters and they subsided." [**Gen. 8, 1, cf. Gen. R. 2,3**]

Indeed, this particular exegetical tradition follows consistently interpreting the "ruah" as spirit, in the sense of order, meaning, holiness, morality. The darkness is the darkness of evil, of wicked government that refuses to recognize the rights of human beings, that denies freedom to people, and it has no bounds, it is deep and dark. Only a spirit of God, of goodness and legality can tame this deep darkness. [cf**. Gen. R. Albeck 2**]. In this same vein the spirit of this verse is depicted by the great rabbi Resh Lakish, as the "spirit of a redemptive force" [**Gen. R. 8, 1**].

These traditions became very real for me these past 10 days. During the period of mourning and loss of my very dear father, Marion Graetz, the first feeling is one of void and darkness. I felt as if standing on the edge of a deep dark void, and in that feeling this verse was a great source of comfort. It reminds us that one must always search for the spirit in times of darkness. The spirit that can bring calm to chaos, that the spirit can create meaning out of the void, and that can propel us away from death

and evil toward life and goodness. It is that spirit of God that calls to us as an inherent force in creation. God has created the world with the possibility of triumph over sadness and darkness. It is this knowledge that sustains me in these days, and it is a beacon that leads us all to work for goodness and justice in this world.

Part of my eulogy for my father was explaining how his life influenced me. My father was a deeply religious person, the best embodiment of what a truly religious Jew should be. He observed ALL the commandments, not only part of them. He kept Kosher, attended all the prayer services, studied Jewish history and tradition, observed holidays, all while NEVER ONCE implying to anyone that he was a better Jew than them for so doing, NEVER ONCE bragging about his observance or publicizing it. He was kind to every person, helped people to live, was compassionate to every person whatever their faith or race. He saw the "*tzelem elohim*" the divine imprint in every person. He truly tried to embody the "spirit", the redemptive force in everything he did.

I realized that my religious philosophy and teachings come directly from my father's being. His theology is mine. On Sukkot my sermon had to do with why the Torah gives a reason for the command of sitting in the Sukkah, "so that your generations will know that I had them sit in Sukkot when they left Egypt." Almost no other ritual command in the Torah has a reason attached to it. Why is this one so important to "know" the reason? Because it represents the Torah's ultimate theology. It is the final transfer from being totally dependent on God's miracles, as the 10 plagues, to being a minor partner, as in the splitting of the sea, and now to full partnership.

The people are hot in the sun of the desert, will God shelter them miraculously? He tells them to build Sukkot, out of branches and leaves. The people ask, what do we need God for then? And God replies, who do you think provides the trees with the branches and leaves?! Dad knew that we humans have to build and make our life better, but he also knew that we were able to build only because God provided the raw material and the intelligence with which we could do the building. Unlike so many "modern" people, he knew that all of our life was not ONLY of our own doing. Unlike others, he knew that we could not rely ONLY on God for whatever we accomplished. He never forgot that God had provided the wherewithal, particularly intelligence [cf. Pesahim 54a], to enable our developing meaningful life, and he never forgot that we have the responsibility to develop what God has given us. TTT 1

***Gen. 1, 27**
"And God created man ("adam") in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them."

There is no doubt that one of the main issues concerning the accounts of creation in Genesis is the question of relative status of men and women. The account in Gen. 1 has male and female created together as the last things created, and they are designated by the Hebrew word "adam". The verse in question is: "**And God created man ("*adam*") in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them." (Gen. 1, 27)** Note that the traditional translation of the masculine gender pronoun for God, namely "His" or "He", and the translation of "*adam*" as "man" causes dissonance in the verse. God created "*adam*" in God's image, male and

female! So, presumably God's image is either male or female or both. Just what can this mean?

Genesis 2, on the other hand, has a male also designated by the Hebrew word "*adam*", created first before anything else; and only when this "*adam*" can find no partner, God takes part of "*adam*" and creates a female, who is designated as "isha". God knows that it is not good for "*adam*" to be alone, so God makes the partner, woman.

Now, it is interesting that the command which God issues upon creation of "*adam*" in chapter 2 is that he is allowed to eat from every tree of the garden except for one; whereas, in chapter 1, the command issued is to procreate. Presumably, "*adam*" in chapter two cannot procreate since there is no female partner; whereas, in chapter 1 since both male and female are created together, procreation seems natural. The issue of the different commands, and the views of humanity implied is an interesting topic, but not for now.

A question which is often discussed in our time concerns what these two accounts imply about the relative status of women and men. It is, by now, commonplace to praise chapter one as presenting an egalitarian reading of the creation of humanity, and to disparage chapter 2 as a male chauvinist reading of that event. There is no doubt that it is easy to read male domination on the surface of the text in chapter 2 and 3. I was studying about Havdalah and came across a fascinating comment by R. David b. Yosef Abudarham that the three blessings recited at havdalah all mention the word creation "*bara*": "*borei pri ha-gefen*", "*borei atzei besamim*", and "*borei meorei ha-esh*". He calls these blessings "the three creations", and he comments that they are echoes of the three mentions of the word "create" in Gen. 1, 27. (Sefer Abudarham, seder motzei Shabbat)

It occurred to me that there are three creations in chapter one and two of Genesis. One is the creation of "male and female", the second is the creation of the male, and the third is the creation of the female. Each one is a creation in itself. But, why couch the creation of humanity is such a complex and seemingly repetitive way?

I wish to suggest that the Torah is spelling out in detail the idea that every person, male or female, is worth the whole world. This is, of course, the lesson of **Sanhedrin 4:5**, but it seems to me imbedded in the text of the Torah in a way that makes the Mishnah into an additional way to interpret the text. The story in the Torah is not one of mere equality, but of equal worth, and as the Mishnah states, this is based upon the idea of the absolute uniqueness of each human, male or female. Equality is established because there is no "worth" that can be placed on a human being, each one is worth the whole; and as such no one can be "replaced" by another, because each one is unique.

R. Yosef Albo added an important piece to my understanding. Albo explains that before "*adam*" the heavenly creatures had individuality, and the earthly creatures had none, but were characterized by species only. Individuality is a function of intelligence and the ability to make moral decisions, and materiel form is a function of belonging to a collective species. Humanity has both characteristics. That is, each individual is unique, and thus, Albo explains, the whole idea of holding humans

responsible for actions. Thus, humans are created singly to signify that each one is equal in worth to the whole, and each one is responsible for their own actions, and they are also created as a species, male and female together, to show that they are part of a materiel species. (**Sefer Ikkarim I, 11**)

Now, there are, no doubt, those who will think of the personality of their cat or dog, but still we do not think of animals as "responsible" for their actions in the same way as we do for humans. The point is that the Torah's multi-part account of the creation of humans is, in itself, meant to convey the uniqueness and the equality of every human as an individual, irrespective of gender. It is deeply egalitarian in that respect. But, the account also includes the materiel social aspect of being part of a collective species. It is in this area that male chauvinist interpretations arose and were blindly applied to the whole story producing the artificial readings of the past.

Another discovery will bolster our understanding of the creation of humanity, men and women. My son, Tzvi Graetz made this discovery. It is something which I had always dreamed of during my days as a student, but never had the fortune to discover myself. He discovered a SIGNIFICANT variant in a manuscript of Bereshit Rabbah from the printed text. What is even stranger is that this variant does not appear in the listings of Theodore-Albeck in their critical edition of Gen. Rabbah. My son was careful to caution me not to imply that T-A were careless in overlooking this variant, I think that is due to his good training from the Talmud faculty at Hebrew U.

The story of creation is complex. In chapter 2, God creates man and places him in the Garden of Eden, and commands him concerning which trees to eat and which he may not eat. Then: "**The LORD God said, "It is not good for man to be alone..." (2:18)** Suddenly, the careful planning of the world seems to have gone awry. Man has no partner, and God takes it upon Himself to create one. Now this situation seems out of place in the flow of the story up to this point (I am assuming that we are dealing with one story). Up to now, everything necessary for every creature has been created along with the creature, so that there is a certain harmony in the way the world was created. Now, there is a problem concerning a suitable partner for the creature, man.

At this point it is well to note the accepted distinction today between chapter one and chapter two of Bereshit concerning the creation of men and women. It is commonplace to say that in chapter one there is told of ONE creation of "*adam*", humanity, which is male and female, "in the image of God". Whereas, chapter two introduces a DIFFERENT point of view, man is created first and woman second, in order to indicate the inferior status of women. However, as our colleague Prof. Shalom Paul points out, if in the first chapter we say that humanity is the pinnacle of creation because it is created last, then in the second chapter we must perforce hold that women are the pinnacle of creation because they are created last. Furthermore, the method of creation in chapter two clashes, in the rabbinic conception, with that of the chapter one. The rabbinic conception was that God created the world through speech.

Now, we come to the Midrash which tries to stuff all of these issues into one solution. This is the famous Midrash of **Gen. R. 17**, which has its antecedents in Mishnah **Avot 5:1**, and is found in **Avot de-R. Nathan B, 36**.

"We have learned (Tzvi: apparently in the Mishnah) 'the world was created through 10 acts of speech ("sayings")', namely:
"when God began to create" (1:1);
"a wind from God sweeping over the water" (1:2);
"God said, let there be light" (1:3);
"God said let there be an expanse" (1:6);
"God said let the water" (1:9);
"God said let the earth" (1:11);
"God said let there be lights" (1:14);
"God said let the waters bring forth" (1:20);
"God said let the earth bring forth (1:24);
"God said let us make man" (1:26)".

Now, up to this point the Midrash seems to be merely supplying the 10 sayings that constitute the speech that brought about creation. One of the problems with this selection is, as Tzvi points out, the first two do not include the word "said". Although the first, is clearly part of creation, what about the second statement?

So, the Midrash text continues:
"Menahem bar Yose removes [from the list] "a wind from God sweeping over the water" (1:2); and inserts instead "It is not good for man to be alone..." (2:18). Said R. Yaakov bar Kirshai, a special saying was uttered for the wind by itself ("*maamar nitan le-ruach bifenei atzmah*")".

Tzvi points out that R. Menahem bar Yose is bothered by the lack of the word "said" in the verse about the wind, but he is also bothered why the creation of women is NOT included in the list as part of the acts of speech of creation, especially since the verse 2:18 DOES include the word "said"! So he removes the wind from the list and inserts God's saying that men must have a partner, i. e. women. Tzvi thinks that this may also be a polemical attack on the idea that men and women were created as one being and separated (cf. **Gen. R. ff**.).

But, what is the point of R. Yaakov bar Kirshai? According to the printed texts, he is disagreeing with R. Menahem, and saying that the wind was indeed part of creation and was created in a separate and distinct fashion on its own. However, Tzvi found in **Vatican Mss. 30**, one of the clearest and most famous of Gen. R. manuscripts, the following: "*maamar nitan le-Chavvah bifnei atzmah*" "a special saying was uttered for EVE by herself". It is clear that the printers mixed up the "*resh*" and "*het*" of "*ruach*", wind, for the "*chet*" and "*hey*" of "*Ḥavvah*", Eve.

With this reading we can now see that Yaakov bar Kirshai is adding something much more significant. He is not objecting to Menahem, but is supporting his inclusion of "It is not good for man to be alone..." as one of the constitutive sayings of creation. He is adding that the creation of Eve is indeed central to the story, and a special saying on its own, much in the line of Prof. Paul. Perhaps, Tzvi argues, the phrase "*bifnei atzmah*" implies as if Eve's creation is equivalent to all of the rest of creation, as is implied in the continuation of this chapter of the Midrash, namely that without women the world is not complete.

It seems to me that all of this points to one school of thought which did NOT accept the idea that the creation story, as told, EVEN IN CHAPTER TWO, implies an inferiority of women. On the contrary, it sees the creation of women as a specific act with a specific "saying" because it is only when that is done, that humanity can truly become partners with God in continuing the creation of humans! Perhaps this school also is not comfortable with the rabbinic idea that women are not really commanded or obligated to engage in procreation. In this view, women are independent beings, created in a special act, just as men were created in a special act, and thus are equal to men in all of their relationships to God.

I think that by saying "*maamar nitan le-Ḥavva bifnei atzmah*" Yaakov Bar Kirshai is specifying that the creation of women is NOT MERELY in relationship to men or in relationship to procreation. That is, if we only had Menahem's replacement of Ruah with "lo tov heyyot ha-*adam*...", we might think that Ḥavva's creation is only for the SAKE of MEN. So Yaakov is adding that Ḥavva's creation is complete in its own right. The word "*adam*" in "*lo-tov heyyot ha-adam*", does not refer to "men" alone, but like the word "*adam*" in Chapter One, refers to humanity. Loneliness is NOT a good thing for humanity. But, Yaakov says, just as men are created in their own right so women are created in their own right, and the genders are NOT MERELY adjuncts to each other. **TTT 2**

***Gen. 3, 7**
"Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they perceived that they were naked; and they sewed together fig leaves and made themselves loincloths."

Nakedness and clothing play a major role in the story of the Garden of Eden. First, we are told that the man and woman were naked, **"yet they felt no shame". (Gen. 2, 25)** Presumably, the shame of being naked was not an inherent part of human nature at creation. One tradition uses this element to explain the serpent's approach to the woman. The serpent saw the man and woman engaging in sexual intercourse, and desired the woman, thus prompting his speaking to her. (cf**. Rashi on Gen. 3,1**)

After eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge: "Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they perceived that they were naked; and they sewed together fig leaves and made themselves loincloths." (**Gen. 3, 7**) Whatever this fruit was it caused the humans to feel a sense of shame at their nakedness. Their reaction is to create the first clothing in history, which appears to be something like mini-bikinis. The purpose of this clothing is to cover the sexual organs, perhaps, according to Rashi's comment, to prevent others from desiring one's spouse.

When God looks for them, they hide. When questioned why they hide, the reply is that they were naked and thus hid from God's sight. God affirms our understanding above by asking: **"Who told you that you were naked? Did you eat of the tree from which I had forbidden you to eat?" (Gen. 3, 11**) It is clear from this response that there is no need for clothing, as there is no sense of nakedness, before eating from the fruit. What is important to note is that the humans, upon feeling a sense of shame about their nakedness, create clothing to solve their problem.

So, when they are sent out of the garden it is surprising to read**: "And the Lord God made garments of skins for Adam and his wife, and clothed them." (Gen. 3, 21)**

What is the need for these garments? Are the garments that they made not good enough? What kind of garments are they, that is, what does 'of skin' signify?

These divinely tailored garments are the subject of much discussion in the midrashic tradition. Rav and Shmuel, the great talmudic sages, argue about this. One says it is a kind of garment that the skin gets pleasure from, and the other says it is a garment made out of skin, like rabbit fur. (**Sotah 14a, cf. Rashi on Gen. 3, 21**) One tradition even assumes that it is an extra layer of skin on the human body. Perhaps these traditions simply assume that the need for clothing outside of the garden is great, and that the flimsy loincloths they made were not enough to protect them in the outside world.

One major tradition sees the action of God in the context of providing clothes for the naked, and it uses that action to explain the basis of the morality of the Torah. "R. Hama son of R. Hanina further said: What means the text: "You shall walk after the Lord your God" (Deut. 13, 5)? Is it, then, possible for a human being to walk after the Shechinah; for has it not been said: "For the Lord your God is a devouring fire?" (Deut. 4, 24) But [the meaning is] to walk after the attributes of the Holy One, blessed be He. As He clothes the naked, for it is written: "And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife coats of skin, and clothed them," so do you also clothe the naked. The Holy One, blessed be He, visited the sick, for it is written: "And the Lord appeared unto him by the oaks of Mamre," [when Abraham was recovering from his circumcision Gen. 18, 1) so do you also visit the sick. The Holy One, blessed be He, comforted mourners, for it is written: "And it came to pass after the death of Abraham, that God blessed Isaac his son," (Gen. 25, 11) so do you also comfort mourners. The Holy one, blessed be He, buried the dead, for it is written: "And He buried him in the valley," (Deut. 34, 6) so do you also bury the dead." **(Sotah 14a**)

According to this approach the important part of our verse is not just the clothes, but that the purpose of the clothes was to clothe the naked. Perhaps the humans could have made do with the clothes they had fashioned, or perhaps they would have figured out how to make rabbit skin coats on their own. What God does is not because of any lack of imagination or creativity on the part of humans, but it is to establish a model of moral behavior for the world. The midrash singles out four actions of God which we are to emulate: clothing the naked, visiting the sick, comforting mourners, and burying the dead.

This is a very crucial point. The Torah teaches us not only laws, but it also offers us actions of God which we are to take as models of behavior. Morality is not only following laws, but there are principles that can help guide us in choosing how apply the laws. Humans cannot BE God, nor should they play God, for that can be dangerous. The doctrine of "imitatio Dei", in this Jewish version, does not exactly mean to imitate God either, rather it means to emulate God's qualities by performing the acts which God performs.

Indeed, in this passage it is R. Simlai who draws the general principle from these specific acts: "Torah begins with an act of loving kindness and compassion ("gemilut hasadim") and ends with an act of loving kindness and compassion ("gemilut hasadim"). It begins with an act of benevolence, for it is written: "And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife coats of skin, and clothed them"; and it ends with an

act of benevolence, for it is written: "And He buried him in the valley"." [**Sotah** 14a] As if to say that the A to Z of the Torah is loving kindness and compassion ("gemilut hasadim"). It is the principle which should guide our choices in life, and actions which make this principle manifest follow in the path of God. **TTT 3**

This is a very crucial point. The Torah teaches us not only laws, but it also offers us actions of God which we are to take as models of behavior. Morality is not only following laws, but there are principles that can help guide us in choosing how apply the laws. Humans cannot BE God, nor should they play God, for that can be dangerous. The doctrine of "imitatio Dei", in this Jewish version, does not exactly mean to imitate God either, rather it means to emulate God's qualities by performing the acts which God performs.

There is another astonishing tradition on our verse. We read: ""And the Lord God made garments of skins for Adam and his wife, and clothed them", in the Torah of R. Meir it was found written "garments of light", these are the garments of the first humans which were like lanterns…" (**Gen. R. 20, et al**). The difference between "skin" and "light" in Hebrew is one letter, and both words sound the same. Skin is 'Or' written with an 'ayin, and light is 'Or' written with an aleph.

One could make a case that the tradition which has God clothe the people with skins understands this as an act of physical protection of the weak, as we have seen. But, this other tradition has God clothing people with spiritual protection, light symbolizing enhanced awareness or even closeness to God. Perhaps this version has God concerned not so much with their physical protection, for they have already shown that they know how to make clothes, but God is concerned that living outside of the garden they will lose contact with God, they will become too absorbed in the world they set out to conquer.

Indeed, the reading "skin" can be taken to imply that God gives humans a "thick skin" so that they can cope with the rigors of living, but the danger of that is moral dullness. The Hebrew 'ayin vav resh, 'Or, skin can also be read as "Eever", which means blind. I might boldly suggest to read the verse, "God made them as if they were blind, and he clothed them", slightly emending the text to read "ke-nitaver", as if blind.

For some this was not a palatable way to read the text. They saw God as protecting humans from moral degeneration by giving them the ability to be a source of light, just as God is. Thus, the reading, "garments of light". In any case such a small change textually is a major change in meaning. The fact that there were these different traditions in use illustrates the breadth and depth of Torah. (cf. the exciting article of Rabbi Reuven Kimelman, in Proceedings of the Rabbinical Assembly, 1997 p. 143 ff.)

***Gen. 4:1**
"And Adam knew Eve, his wife, and she became pregnant and bore Cain, and she said: "I have acquired a man with the Lord" ("kaniti ish et adonai")

The sentence which Eve says has caused a great deal of commentary, because of its difficult syntax. "Kaniti ish" seems to be intelligible, "I have acquired a person", but what does "et adonai" mean? Rashi assumes that "et" in this verse means "with" ,

since "et" often has the same meaning as "im" "with". Rashi explains Eve's statement thus: "with the Lord, when He created me and my man, He alone created us, but in this creature we are partners with God". According to Rashi, Eve is expressing the amazement and wonder at the process of giving birth, of creating human life, that before only God could make by Himself. She is marveling at her partnership with God in this act of creating an "ish".

This comment of Rashi may be based on a midrash in **Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 21**, in which Adam and Eve marvel that the creature which they produce does not look like any earthly, animal creature, but is in the image of the upper world, God's image, as they are. There is another way of interpreting this verse, as found in **Gen. R. 22:2**, namely that the word "ish" in this verse applies to Adam and NOT to Cain. Eve is saying, that with this birth she has acquired Adam with God's help. This is reminiscent of other Biblical stories which are predicated on the wife's relationship to her husband being dependent upon her giving birth, and to male children at that.

Ramban [on Gen. 4, 1], however, sees this verse in another light altogether. He explains that Eve is saying the son is a kind of "kinyan", acquisition, of myself to God, i.e. placing myself in a godlike category. "For when we die he will be in our place to serve his Maker", says Ramban. He interprets the "et" to mean "toward, or like" "el", and brings prooftexts.

In these three comments we find different ways in which people view their children. As expressions of the wonder of being a partner with God, as a means to achieve a better relationship between husband and wife, and as insuring a kind of immortality for us through them. Only the first idea is free of seeing the child as some kind of instrument for the parents. In each of them, however, there is a sense of responsibility which goes along with the point of view. There are the responsibilities of being parents and of raising the child to be a part of the family relationship, and also the responsibility of teaching the child to be part of the tradition, and to learn to serve God. There is a tremendous amount of food for thought in these three comments about how parents relate to children. Zil gemor. **TTT 4**

There remain more problems with the verse about the first born humans: **"Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have gained ("kaniti") a male child ("ish") with the help of the Lord." She then bore his brother Abel. ("va-tosef la-ledet et ahiv et Hevel")" (Gen. 4, 1-2)**. The JPS translation smoothes over the complexity and the problematics of the Hebrew. The Hebrew word "ish" usually refers to a full grown man, and not really a male child. The second verse is so complex in Hebrew that the translation is almost a paraphrase. Hebrew has the word "et" which is known as an object marker, in that it marks objects of verbs. So, a literal translation of verse 2 would be something like: "she continued to give birth to ("et") his brother to ("et") Abel". The word "va-tosef", here seems to mean continue, and it literally means "to add". So the second birth includes some sort of addition to the first.

This complex language leads the Rabbinic tradition to understand that Abel's birth is a direct continuation of Cain's birth, that is, the addition is to the birth not to another pregnancy. (**Gen. R. 22, 3**) Indeed, this understanding leads to the conclusion that Cain and Abel were twins, that is, Cain is born, and the birth continues with the

coming out of another son, Abel. (**Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer 21**) This theme, that the two sons were twins, is one stream of interpretation. I wonder if the later tendency in Genesis to give more strength to the younger brother is in a way to make up for the primal murder of the younger twin by the first born?

The theme of a natural tendency of the older brother to kill the younger was highlighted for me when Naomi and I were on a trip to the Galapagos Islands. We saw the nesting grounds of the albatross. Our naturealist explained that each year the albatross couple, who maintain a monogamous relationship during their lifetime, lay one or two eggs. But, when there are two the first one to hatch always pecks the younger one to death, so that there is really only one child per year from each couple. Clearly the ablbatross is never confronted with the moral implications of this "natural" action.

The same textual interpretation is the basis of a different stream of interpretation. In this stream there are twins born, but they are male and female. The addition here is taken to mean something beyond the birth of a male, that is, a female. In the words of one Midrash **"the addition is greater than the primary" (Midrash Aggadahh on Gen. 4, 2).** The textual basis of this interpretation is our object marker, the word "et". Since the sentences could stand very well without the "et", this stream sees that word as signifying an addition of a different order. Indeed, there is a rule in rabbinic interpretation that the word "et" indicates a profusion of variety, so it would be clear that "et" cannot point to another male child. On this basis this Midrash specifies that Cain had one twin sister that was born with him, and Abel had two, since there is one "et" connected with Cain, but two with Abel. Eve, according to this, gave birth to twins, and then gave birth to triplets!!

This stream of interpretation is fascinating, for it finds its way into the halakhic discussion over the quantity of children necessary for a person to fulfill the commandment of procreation. According to Bet Shammai the commandment is fulfilled only if a person sires two males and two females. The proof text is our verse, as it is understood in the midrash, that the standard set by Adam and Eve was just that. Apparently, the extra sister of Abel was above and beyond the requirement. (cf. **Yevamot 62a**) Now, there is a more extended discussion of the quantification of this commandment, but the fact that our midrashic interpretation was taken to have halakhic implications is fascinating. **TTT 5**

Another interesting problem of these verses is that Eve gives a name to Cain, with an etiologic explanation. His name is associated with the Hebrew word "kanah" which signifies ownership, but in this case signifies belonging to by virtue of creation. In this way the world belongs to God, "koneh shamayim va-aretz", by virtue of God's creating it. The point is that Eve's status is that of creator of Cain and thus the word signifying the relationship of belonging to the creator is applied.

The idea that Able's name just appears as if it was already known leads Maharal, R. Judah Loewe of Prague, to interpret the name, which literally means "nothing" or "a puff of air", as referring to human deeds which are usually not significant. Since that is the default and well known feature of human deeds there is no need to mark Able's name. Cain's name, on the other hand, attests to deeds which are significant. True, they are motivated by the evil impulse in humans, but they are not

insignificant. Only with the third son, Seth, who replaces Able, do we get a name that points to human deeds that are significant because of their goodness. (**Drashot ha-Maharal le-Shabbat ha-Gadol**)

The Hasidic commentary on the Torah, Be'er Mayim Hayyim, of R. Hayyim ben Solomon Tyrer of Czernowitz returns to the theme of the number necessary to fulfill the mitzvah of procreation. He points out that one might conclude that since God created one couple, a man and a woman, that this should be the model ever after. Each couple would produce one more couple, and this would be enough to fulfill God's desire that the world be populated by humans. Thus, when Eve says, after Cain's birth, "I have gained ("kaniti") a child ("ish")", she meant that the model had been perpetuated. Here the word "ish" refers to a whole couple created as God created the first couple (he takes for granted the midrash that twin sisters were born with the boys). Thus, when the Torah says "she continued to give birth", it meant that despite the fact that Eve had replicated God's model, she still became pregnant again and had another birth. God created only one couple, but Eve did even more. Eve added to the creation on her own, and in this sense was more than a mere partner with God, but also a creator in her own right. (Be'er Mayim Hayyim on the verse)

***Gen. 4, 25-26**
Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and named him Seth, meaning, "God has provided me with another offspring in place of Abel," for Cain had killed him. And to Seth, in turn, a son was born, and he named him Enosh. It was then that men began to invoke the Lord by name."

After the expulsion from Eden we read an account of the first murder. Cain, who kills his brother Abel, is not slain by God, but is banished and made to wander the earth. Yet, after this tale we read of Cain's progeny, and the impression is that despite his deed and punishment, life goes on.

Immediately after the account of Cain's future, we return to Adam and Eve. The Torah tells us: "Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and named him Seth, meaning, "God has provided me with another offspring in place of Abel," for Cain had killed him. And to Seth, in turn, a son was born, and he named him Enosh. It was then that men began to invoke the Lord by name." (**Gen. 4, 25-26**)

Perhaps we are meant to be comforted by this record. Adam and Eve had undergone the worst fate that can befall parents. They have "lost" both sons, and now God has provided another offspring ("zera aher") in place of Abel.

That we are meant to infer this is clear from the list of generations provided in Genesis 5. **"This is the record of Adam's line.—When God created man, He made him in the likeness of God; male and female He created them. And when they were created, He blessed them and called them Man. When Adam had lived 130 years, he begot a son in his likeness after his image, and he named him Seth." (Gen. 5, 1-4)**

In the summary of generations Cain and Abel do not even appear! The Midrash understands the name "Seth" as meaning "foundation", for humanity's foundation is from Seth, because Abel and Cain were removed from the world. (**Num. R. 14, 12**)

Not only is Seth important as the bearer of humanity, but Seth's offspring, Enosh, begins something new. In Hebrew, "az huhal likro be-shem adonai" (**Gen. 4, 26**), which JPS translates "began to invoke the Lord by name." What does this mean? Did people not invoke the Lord before Enosh? Or, did they invoke God by other names?

The tradition of our translation sees the word "huhal" as meaning "to begin" from the Hebrew root hll. In this same vein Rashbam (ad loc) interprets the verse to mean that humans began to pray to God at that time because "troubles were renewed". The implication is that something happened that created an atmosphere of trouble, perhaps of terror, and then people began to turn to God in prayer. We know that there was a growing amount of violence and iniquity in human society, because after a few more generations God decides to wipe out humans and begin again. If the phenomenon of evil began to be felt in Enosh's generation, and people turned to God in prayer, it did not seem to be too effective in the long run.

The Midrash preserves another tradition of interpretation for our verses. As usual the Midrash is well aware of the usages of this word, or its root, in the Biblical text. This tradition views the Hebrew word "huhal" as deriving from the Hebrew root 'hly', sickness or malady, and interprets the word to mean "rebellion". The verse would translate "[people] began to rebel against God's name". Rabbi Simon identifies three verses where this usage occurs. One is our verse, the second is at the end of our parasha: ""When men began ("heiheil") to increase on earth and daughters were born to them." (Gen. 6, 1). He understands "began" to mean rebel against God, and indeed this verse is the key to God's anger that brings about the decision to flood the world. The third verse has to do with a further rebellion against God, the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11, 6 "hahilam"), which is connected with Nimrod, whose name implies rebellion. (Gen. 10, 8 where the same word, "heiheil" occurs). (**Gen. R. (Theodore-Albeck) 23, 26)**

Rather than see our verse as a pious reaction to the spread of iniquity, this tradition sees our verse as describing the spawning of iniquity, the malaise of humanity. But, what does this malady, this rebellion consist of? An answer may be found in one of the most fascinating of the paragraphs of the Sifrei on Deuteronomy. In the second paragraph of the Shema we are warned not to "serve other gods" ("ve-avadetem elohim aherim" Deut. 11, 16). The Sifrei is puzzled, how is it that these idols are referred to as "Elohim", the same name used for God?! (**Sifrei Deut. 43**).

Rabbi Yose explains that this is to prevent people from claiming that if these false gods were called "God" they would be worth something. Look, he says, they were called "God", and still they were worthless! What the generation of Enosh did was to rebel by calling idols God. Now our verse is perfectly understandable, in clear Hebrew: "when people rebelled by calling [false gods] by the name of God." Our teacher Rabbi Louis Finkelstein, zts"l, explains in his commentary on the Sifrei that this passage reflects the "strange belief", in his words, of the ancients that a name is not separate from its subject, but rather an essential part of it. So, if the work of human hands was to be called "God", it would be as God.

The Midrash understands the words of our story to reveal that the malady of humanity begins with misnaming. Human corruption begins with corruption of language, with applying the word "Divine" to objects of our own desire and making. Indeed, in this same passage, Rabbi Eliezer explains that they are called "other gods" because each day some "other" substance is proclaimed divine. "For if [a person] had a god of gold and he needed the gold, he would make the god of silver, if of silver, he would make one of copper, if of copper he would make one of iron, if of iron he would make one of tin, if of tin he would make one of lead, if of lead, he would make one of wood."

This explication of our verse infers that what happened was that people stopped relating to God as an external standard of truth or goodness towards which humanity should strive. Rather, people discovered that they could use the name of God to turn products of their own convenience into divinity, and by doing this they could rule over others. This point is made clear in our passage by the comment of Rabbi Hanina ben Antigenos, who points out that the biblical name for these "other gods" is Molekh, a word which implies kingship, and he explains that this refers to "whatever you allow to rule over you, no matter how transient".

The corruption of language which is used to rule over humans, used to create "fear of God" in people of objects which are not godlike at all is still part and parcel of the human malaise. If this is what began with Enosh, it is still going on. The Torah is meant to be an instrument that helps us cope with this great temptation, and it is our task to make sure that we do not turn the Torah itself into "another god". The values of modesty and intellectual honesty, which are so central to Conservative Judaism are major tools in preserving us from false naming. Still, we must always be on guard, and perhaps this is the major lesson of these verses. **TTT 6**

* **Gen. 6:3**
The LORD said, "My breath shall not abide ("yadon") in man forever, since he too ("b'shagam") is flesh; let the days allowed him be one hundred and twenty years."

Two wonderful aspects of Torah study are the complexities of the Hebrew language, and the creativity of Midrash, the Jewish process of creating meaning from the text. One verse in this week's parasha combines these two aspects in a most illustrative fashion. Indeed, a common comment in the JPS translation is "Meaning of Heb. Uncertain". In simple terms it seems as if this comment means that a Hebrew word is not clear or unknown. But, for the spirit of the Oral Torah, of the Midrash, this comment means that the meaning of the Hebrew is PURPOSEFULLY uncertain, so that a myriad of meanings can be understood. That means that as long as we study, the Torah will never become irrelevant, nor be confined to one meaning only. TTT 7

The verse in question is almost at the end of the parasha, where God decides to bring a flood on sinful humankind. "The LORD said, **"My breath shall not abide ("yadon") in man forever, since he too ("b'shagam") is flesh; let the days allowed him be one hundred and twenty years." (Gen. 6:3**) The JPS comment is on the word "yadon". Many commentators, such as Rashi and Rashbam, take the word as being connected to the Hebrew root "din". God is saying, My spirit will not struggle forever with human's sinful nature. I will not go through an internal "din", judging process, with

myself over humankind. Even though humans are merely "flesh" they defy God. This approach understands the second difficult word, "b'shagam", as a contraction of "bishvil she-gam", "because they are merely flesh". God decides to put a limit on human lifespan.

God is conflicted within about humans' beastly behavior. For another group of commentators, the problem is within humans. They spurn the Divine spirit within them, and prefer to be drawn after the desires of the flesh. In either case, the result is the same. God puts a limit on the quantity of human years. If we see the dispute in these terms, it becomes a dispute of deep theological interest. Is the breakdown of God/human relationships because of inner conflicts within God resulting from abhorrent human behavior, or does the abhorrent behavior of humans result in objective penalties?

One Midrash takes another approach altogether. One astonishing comment is by R. Aybo, who "blames" God for the human rebellion against God's laws! "R. Aybo said: 'who caused them to rebel against Me? Is it not because I did not connect them to each other by common suffering? The door only stands up because of its splines" (**Gen. R. 26, 3 T.-Albeck**). R. Aybo understands our word, "b'shagam", as being the Hebrew word "Sheegaym", which is a verb form (cf. Mishnah Kelim 22:10) of the noun, "shegem" (cf. Mishnah **Kelim 10:6**). "Shegem" is a spline, a protusion on a board which fits into a groove of another board to connect the two boards together. There was no bonding or concern for each other between humans. They rebelled against God because they had no sympathy for each other. They had no sympathy for each other, because God caused no suffering. Perhaps the idea is that God did NOT properly punish transgressors, and let humans get away with everything. Even Cain is let off the hook. Or, perhaps the idea is that God went too easy on humans, there was no real suffering, and so no one developed any empathy for anyone else. In this approach God is like a parent whose setting of limits and administering of justice helps create moral character in children. When those are lacking, the children can be totally wild.

Finally, in this same Midrash, the word "b'shagam" is understood not as a word at all, but as a "gematria", or in the words of the Midrash itself "Hushban", a numerical rendering of the letters. R. Hanina bar Pappa remarks that even Noah was not really worthy of being saved, but God saw that Moses was to arise from Noah in the future. Thus, mankind was saved for Moses' sake, the sake of a future human who would be most close to God. This is because the numerical values of "b'shagam" and "Moshe" are the same. The Midrash comments that the Rabbis learned this same lesson from the specification of 120 years as the lifespan of the person whose worthiness saves the world, and Moses lived 120 years. In this view the relationship between God and man is one that is dependent on hope. A slightly better relationship is worth preserving, since it can lead to even better ones in the future.

***Gen. 6, 5**
"The Lord saw how great was man's wickedness on earth, and how every plan devised by his mind was nothing but evil ("rak ra") all the time ("kol ha-yom")."

The Torah begins with the magnificent account of God's creation of all things that exist. The end of the parasha, however, is grim because God is vexed by one of his

creatures, humans. Their wickedness and corrupting influence on other creatures is so great that God decides that he has to blot them out and start over again. The Torah puts it this way: **"The Lord saw how great was man's wickedness on earth, and how every plan devised by his mind was nothing but evil ("rak ra") all the time ("kol ha-yom")." (Gen. 6, 5)**

This verse seems to be the antithesis of chapter one where the word "good", "tov", is a dominant word. Here the word "bad", "ra", is the dominant word. Man's mind plans "nothing but evil ("rak ra")". The Hebrew word "rak" is used to indicate "only that and nothing else". The translation could have been "only evil", but the translators apparently wanted to give a sense of evil that was more extreme, thus the rendition "nothing but". The other point is that this planning goes on "kol ha-yom", which literally means "all the day time", and here the translation makes the phrase less ambiguous, but by so doing it loses the complexity of the verse.

One theme that is connected to our verse has to do with the power of the tendency to evil. Indeed, the very Rabbinic term "yetzer ha-ra" is molded out of our verse. This term has been interpreted in many different ways, but I want to concentrate on the notion that it represents the power of attraction to forbidden acts. One of the common interpretations of "kol yom" is not "all the time", but "each day". The powerful pull of the yetzer ha-ra asserts itself anew every day. The power begins with thought, with planning, as our verse specifies, and the thought spawns lust. Lust for some forbidden object or action produces a sense of affection for that thing, and this affection makes one want to pursue it. The pursuit leads one to act on the plan, and thus we see how difficult it is to stop this process. The best way is to monitor ones thoughts and plans. (cf. **Masekhet Kallah Rabati 2, 6**)

The "yetzer ha-ra" is so difficult that even it's creator calls it "evil". (**Kiddushin 30b**) One rabbinic tradition advises us that God has given an antidote that is as spicy as the drive of the "yetzer", and that is Torah. (ibid.) The idea that study of Torah, and performance of mitzvoth, is a way to overcome the powerful attraction of the yetzer ha-ra implies that Torah has some of the qualities of intoxication and seduction that are found in the Yetzer. The cautionary tale of R. Eleazar, whose intoxication with his own ego after intense Torah study leads him to immoral deeds, is clearly meant to warn of the "yetzer"-like qualities of Torah study. (cf. **Taanit 20a-b**) In a sense the fire of the yetzer is to be fought with the fire of Torah, and that is not a foolproof method of control. Still, it is clear that Torah offers a path for coping with the drives of the yetzer.

The most important point, in my view, is the distinction which enables us to assess when our normal tendency to think of and plan evil actions will produce bad results, and when it may not be so bad. After all the "yetzer ha-ra" is part and parcel of humanity, and it is the drive which enables creativity, innovation and what is loosely called "progress". This will be crucial in determining when Torah is useful as a tool for good, and when it becomes an instrument for immorality. The distinction rests in the small two-letter word "rak", "only".

Resh Lakish states that Satan is the same as Yetzer ha-Ra and the same as the angel of death. He identifies all three negative figures as being identical. It seems to me that Resh Lakish is describing a multi-faceted identity which has several qualities, and

when these qualities are found all together, then evil ensues. His midrash starts with the verse from Job which has Satan "departed from the presence of the Lord" (**Job 2, 7**). That is, the first quality is a departure from God. Seeing oneself as out of the range of the Lord, or literally pitted over against God, the literal use of the word "satan", is the first part of the equation. (**BB 16a**)

The yetzer ha-ra is interpreted by the appearance of the word "rak" in the verse "only ("rak") do not stretch your hand out against him" (**Job 1, 12**), and the use of this same word in our verse which describes the yetzer ha-ra. The word "rak" is also assumed to be the synonym of the word "akh", "only ("akh") guard his life" in **Job 2, 6**. Resh Lakish has created a midrash in which the word "rak" stands for "yetzer ha-ra" and for the angel of death. It seems to me that he might feel that the word is superfluous in our verse. Is it not enough to say that humans plan evil all the time? Is it not a pure exaggeration to say that they plan ONLY evil all the time? Surely, people plan and execute good and productive thoughts as well as evil ones?

There is something about this word "rak" which leads him to make it bear the weight of turning good intentions into evil ones. Apparently Resh Lakish takes the word literally. If one's thoughts are "rak" totally and exclusively committed to anything, even Torah, with no flexibility and no nuance or complexity, then they will produce evil and in the end death. Any extreme commitment that does not allow for nuance and circumstance, even if couched in terms of admirable and worthy goals will end up serving the ungodly. **TTT 8**

Rabbi Yitzhak understands this when he interprets: "Satan's torment was worse than that of Job; he was like a servant who is told by his master, 'Break the cask but do not let any of the wine spill.'" (ibid.) Satan is so intent on harming Job that when God commands him "only keep him alive", that his torment is even greater than that of Job. The extreme fanatic dedication turns out to make this task seem impossible. It is torture for Satan to make a distinction between fulfilling his heart's desire totally and observing some boundaries concerning that desire. When one senses that one has made a commitment to a worthy goal, one still needs to constantly assess that commitment. When it seems to become obsessive and so single minded that no consideration of human feelings or of justice is allowed to steer away from one's goal, then one must be aware that a line has been crossed and no good will come out of it.

Parashat Noah **נח**

Humans are established on earth. The grandeur and mystery of creation narrows down to focus on one particular item, human beings. One of the mysteries of creation is God's will that humans have free will, and that they are able to make moral choices that result in destruction and evil. What happens when almost all of humanity chooses the way of corruption of morality? Is the only thing that can save that situation the existence of even one person who disavows the path which spurns the good? If that is so how does this impact on all the rest of human history?

***Gen. 6:9-10**
This is the line of Noah.—Noah was a righteous man; he was blameless in his age; Noah walked with God.— Noah begot three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

What's in a name? This week's parasha is the name of a person, Noah. We first meet Noah in Chap. 5, in the list of the first ten generations of humanity. His name is auspicious, for his father infused his hopes for comfort from travail in the name he chose for his son. The hope for Noah is that he will provide comfort against the curse of the soil which God pronounced when Adam left the garden of Eden. (**Gen. 5:29**) Then, in chapter 6, we are told that humanity had become so corrupt that God was sorry about having created them. But, in the last verse of parashat Bereshit we read that **"Noah found favor with the Lord" (6:8)** In Hebrew, "noah matza hen", resonates, since the two Hebrew letters nun het, when reversed to het nun, make up the word "favor". So, it seems as if Noah fulfills his father's prophecy.

And with this background, our parasha begins with the verses: **"This is the line of Noah.—Noah was a righteous man; he was blameless in his age; Noah walked with God.— Noah begot three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth. (Gen. 6:9-10)** If we count verse 8, the name Noah appears 5 times in three verses. Each time it is given in full, no pronouns. This is reminiscent of the 5 times that God's name is mentioned, in full, in 3 verses, before the redemption from Egypt begins. (**Ex. 2:23-25**) This seems to be a pattern of foreshadowing redemption. TTT/ **pattern in Bible of foreshadowing redemption**

So, why do we all have in our minds a clear ambivalence towards Noah? At one of the few lectures of Rabbi Soloveichik, ztz"l, that I attended, I heard him say that some Midrashim have "mazal". They become part of folklore and are repeated over and over. Kind of a Midrashic "best seller". Eventually, they become a kind of "norm" of understanding. (He was referring to R. Simlai's Midrash about 613 commandments in the Torah. Of course, he said, there are not exactly 613 commandments in the Torah, but since that Midrash had "mazal", everyone accepts that number and uses it as a point of reference.)

I apply this notion to a discussion in the Talmud between R. Yohanan and Resh Lakish. (**San. 108a**) Each one interprets the word "be-dorotav", "in his age". R. Yohanan says it means relative to his age, Noah was righteous, and Resh Lakish says it means that if in his wicked age he was righteous, it means he was totally righteous. Thus, the ambivalence is created. Rashi summarizes this discussion in his commentary, and it is one of the first clever interpretations that we all learn as youngsters. So, Noah's being a tzaddik is open to interpretation.

On reading the first verse of our parasha again, I was struck by another factor. The name, Noah, is doubled: "This is the line of Noah.—Noah was a righteous man". Indeed in Hebrew it looks like a dittography, "noah noah". Perhaps, I thought, R. Yohanan and Resh Lakish were also looking at this, namely, there are TWO "Noahs", or two sides to Noah.(cf. Below)

But, upon further investigation it turns out that the Midrash sees this repitition as proof of Noah's absolute righteousness: "R. Kahana says: one whose name is doubled is [a tzaddik] both in this world and the next world." (**Gen. R. 30, 4**) Indeed, the same applies to our understanding of the reversal of Noah's name to the word "hen" "grace". One Midrash says: "Noah Noah, reverse the letters and interpret: grace for heaven, and grace for the creatures, as we read: "And you will find favor and approbation In the eyes of God and man" (Prov. 3:4)" (**Midrash Yelamdennu, Talmud Torah, Gen.29, 21a**). This Midrash goes on to note that the name Noah appears THREE times in this one verse. To teach us that Noah saw the world in its established state, in its destruction, and again in its reestablishment.

Many Midrashim stress Noah's righteousness with no qualifications whatsoever. They bring verse after verse from the Bible which praise the righteous, such as: "When the storm passes the wicked man is gone, But the righteous is an everlasting foundation" (Prov. 10:23); and apply them to Noah. (**Gen. R. 30, 1**) Indeed, R. Elazar b. Azariah seems to answer R. Yohanan's agrument about the relativity of Noah's righteousness implied by the words "in his generation". R. Elazar says that this is a case of the principle that one should not say ALL of a person's praise in their presence. (**Sifrei ba-Midbar 102**)

Other Midrashim stress that Noah's righteousness is proven by the fact that Shem, his son, was also righteous, and the progenitor of Abraham. (cf. **Gen. R. 30**) In short, the overwhelming consensus seems to be that Noah was a perfectly righteous person. The influence of the Talmudic discussion and Rashi seems to have created a bum rap for Noah. Indeed, Rashi himself points out that the phrase which we use, "zecher tzaddik li-veracha" "the name of the righteous is invoked in blessing" (**Prov. 10:7**), is applied to Noah!! (**on Gen. 6:9**) He goes on to comment that the generations of the righteous are their good deeds.

Indeed, this verse, "zecher tzaddik li-veracha" "the name of the righteous is invoked in blessing" (Prov. 10:7), is applied to Noah while he is living, not after he is dead! This fact appears in a fascinating responsa of Havot Yair (R. Yair Bacharach), in which he is asked if a letter concerning a certain man, containing this appelation after his name, can be construed as proof that the man is dead, thus, allowing his wife to remarry. Bachrach does not allow her to remarry on this basis, since, he points out that even though it is commonly used for the dead, it might also be used for the living, as in the case of Noah!! (**Havot Yair, 71**)

Now, you will say, so Noah was such a great "tzaddik", what about his drunkenness and shame of exposure at the end of chapter 9? After what Noah had been through, surely a little drink was not unappropriate. Still, it is clear that even a very righteous person like Noah, can slip and be less than righteous. Like every person, Noah has

more than one side. What is most important in the personality of Noah is that despite this slip, he is called a 'tzaddik".

One midrashic tradition stresses that Noah is called a "tzaddik" because he cared for and sustained God's creatures, and thus it was as if he had "created" them himself. This tradition warns us specifically: "do NOT ponder the matter and conclude that he was righteous only in his generation". Noah's concern for all creatures, his total commitment to 'saving the world' is what makes him a tzaddik for all time. Joseph is also called a "tzaddik" because he fed the world, and made sure that people did not starve to death. (**Tanhuma, Buber, 4**)

Indeed, God compares Noah to Abraham, because his name is repeated! But, more than that, because of Noah's deeds, God's compassion towards the world was magnified, and God swore not to destroy the world again.(**Tanhuma, Buber, 6**) This tradition stresses that acts of compassion, feeding the needy, concern for the welfare of all creatures and tireless commitment to those goals are the hallmarks of a "tzaddik". Noah deserves the title, he earned it. TTT/**how midrash by bringing parallel usage from all over the Bible, reveals Biblical thinking including its inherent ambiguities!**

***Gen 7, 2**
Take from all of the pure animals seven, seven couples, husband and wife, and from the animals which are not pure take two couples, husband and wife.

The process of Midrash is the essence of Oral Torah. It is the way that the Jew is in constant contact with "revelation", turning the written words of the Torah into a living guide to everyday behavior. Any opportunity to learn moral lessons is seized upon, even if, from a purely academic point of view, the text seems totally unrelated to the moral lessons derived.

A classic case of this is found in parashat Noah. Noah is told to bring animals to the ark, to save all the species from extinction in the flood. "Take from all of the pure animals seven, seven couples, husband and wife, and from the animals which are not pure take two couples, husband and wife" (**Gen 7:2**). This verse has many difficulties, starting with the most obvious one of just how many animals of each kind Noah is to find (my translation smoothes over this difficulty).

Our Midrash is impressed with the lack of symmetry in the designation of the different kinds of animals. The verse starts out designating "pure animals" ("ha-behemah ha-tehorah"), so we might expect that the parallel designation for the other kind should be "impure animals" ("ha-behemah ha-temeah"). But, that is NOT the case. The Torah speaks of "animals which are not pure" ("ha-behemah asher lo tehorah he"), using 4 words in Hebrew rather than one. In general the Midrash expects the Torah to be careful in its wording, and not to banter on when one word would do. If Torah seems to be bantering, there must be a special lesson to be learned. In this case the Midrash learns the moral lesson of how we should not embarrass or run down others by speech. Rather than give the impression that all these animals are inferior and besmirching their name, the Torah is willing to speak in a more fuller fashion.

This Midrash assumes that the designation "pure" and "impure" have to do with the fitness of the animal for eating according to the dietary laws found in the Torah. Since the same designations are used in Lev. when the laws of Kashrut spell out which animals may be eaten and which are forbidden. The Midrash finds that the same sensitivity to not besmirching the animals is applied in Leviticus! There two signs are specified to a "pure" animal, namely that it have a cloven hoof and chew its cud. But, when the Torah goes into specifics it does NOT say "the camel doesn't have a cloven hoof", rather it says "the camel does chew its cud, but since it does not have a cloven hoof it is considered impure for you" (Lev. 11:4). Even when spelling out why the camel is included in the "impure" category, the Torah starts out positively by giving the "pure" quality of the camel first, and saying, almost reluctantly, but it lacks the other quality. This sensitivity of speech is applied by the Torah to animals, and it is clear that we are to learn the moral lesson that it is even more important to apply these rules when speaking about fellow humans. (**Gen. R. 32:4, Vilna**) So really, the midrash shows how language imparts moral lessons. It's assumption is that the language of the Torah is not the result of editing mistakes or incompetence, but rather is meant to enable people to derive lessons from it**.**

The assumption was that animals were also corrupted along with humans by unlimited fornication (cf. Sanh. 108a). It is interesting to note that there is another interpretation of the meaning of the classification "pure" in Noah. This interpretation is found in the Talmud (**Sanh. 108b**), and it is based on the use of the phrase "husband and wife" ("ish ve-ishto"), in reference to the animals. The Talmud quite properly is surprised that the language of matrimony is applied to the animals. The assumption was that animals were also corrupted along with humans by unlimited fornication (cf. Sanh. 108a). R. Yonatan explains that the usage of language of family is meant to refer to those animals who were not forced into promiscuous sexuality during the lawless and immoral period before the flood.

Our midrashic tradition understands this wickedness as being one of promiscuity, as one of blurring the lines of families. It interprets God's creation of animals "according to its kind" ("le-minah" **Gen. 1, 25**) to mean that the animals are commanded not to mix among species. In this tradition the implication is that the animals are corrupted by human promiscuity. The animals who were chosen to go on the ark were the "righteous" ones, the ones who had not mixed their types. The adding of the sobriquet "husband and wife" was meant to tell Noah that he was to find those animals that had maintained the moral standard of faithfulness during this period of moral anarchy. Mankind's depravity could affect the animals, and cause them to be depraved as well. Some animals, however, apparently refused to go along with the human scandal. This interpretation puts the animals which Noah was to find, from a moral point of view, on the same level as Noah, who was apparently the only righteous person in the mass of evil surrounding him. They were the only animal couples who avoided the general corruption. According to this passage, the ark itself would either accept or reject an animal couple as it approached it, so that Noah could tell which animals were pure and which were not.

I have no idea if dinosaurs were promiscuous or not, but according to this tradition, the world after the flood had a different potential than it did before the flood. On the one hand the power of licentiousness and license was diminished, and the animal world mirrored the fidelity to family that God saw as a positive virtue in the world.

On the other hand the sense of responsibility of humans to care for the environment was made clear to them, and those who would take on this burden were praised so that it would become an ideal activity of mankind ever after.
The Rabbinic tradition actively sought out moral lessons in every word and nuance of the Torah, lessons which can actively be applied by us today. TTT/ **midrash shows how language imparts moral lessons, language of torah is not editing mistake or incompetence, but is meant to enable people to derive lessons from it**

***Gen. 7, 16**
"Thus they that entered comprised male and female of all flesh, as God had commanded him. And the LORD shut him in. ("va-tisgor adonai ba'ado")".

After Noah has collected all living things and herded them onto the ark, the Torah tells us: "Thus they that entered comprised male and female of all flesh, as God had commanded him. And the LORD shut him in. ("va-tisgor adonai ba'ado")". (**Gen. 7, 16**) Noah expends enormous energy and funds, presumably, to build the ark; collect the animals; and herd them onto the ark. Obviously there is a door to the ark, so that the animals can enter. Anyone who saw Fantasia 2000 (since my grandson Itamar loves it, for me that's about 200 times) knows that the door of the ark was on a winch with a rope that lowered and raised it. Donald Duck gets thrown about by becoming entangled in the rope.

Even without the Midrash of Beit Disney, it seems obvious by any measure of thinking that the door of the ark must have a way to close and open it from the inside. So, what can "And the LORD shut him in. ("va-tisgor adonai ba'ado")" possibly mean? Did the door miraculously close by itself? Did God seal the door after Noah had closed it?

The Midrash is also bothered by such questions. One Midrash even relates these words not to the ark, but to light. God caused the sun and the moon to stop shining for the 12 months that Noah was in the ark. According to this Midrash, God revealed to Noah a stone which gave off light so that there would be light within the ark, while there was no light outside of the ark. The image of the inside of the ark as an embryonic world is fascinating. The hope for the future of the world is transferred to the world inside, while the world outside is gone dark.

This Midrash goes on to develop the picture of the evil people outside who realize that they are doomed, presumably because the sun has stopped shining. They attack the ark by sending lions to devour the inhabitants, but the lions are vanquished. The verse which supports the lions attacking is from the book of Daniel, which recounts Daniel being thrown into the lion's den: "My God sent His angel, who shut the mouths of the lions so that they did not injure me, inasmuch as I was found innocent by Him, nor have I, O king, done you any injury." (**Daniel 6, 23**) Just as God shut the mouths of the lions in the den, so he shut the mouths of the lions attacking the ark. This is the meaning of God's "closing" the ark. (cf. **Yalkut Shimoni Noah, 57**)

This Midrash interprets God's closing the ark not as drawing up the rope to physically close the door, but as special protection from the ravages of the outside world. Furthermore, it hints at a parallelism between Daniel, falsely accused of

mocking the king, and Noah. Noah, like Daniel, is a person who keeps his faith in God and in justice alive despite living in a world in which everyone is corrupt.

This Midrash seems to answer the question of why was Noah chosen to be the instrument for saving the world. Yet, the question still nags. Did God not see that ALL flesh was corrupted? (Gen. 6, 12) The "all" presumably includes Noah as well. Or, is the "all" a hyperbole, along the lines of the well-known theory that when over 25% of society stops obeying the law, a society turns into a lawless one? Perhaps our Midrash is based upon this latter view. And yet, it seems to me that Noah might have been included in the decree of destruction as the school of R. Ishmael believed. This source thinks that God just "liked" Noah, with no clear cut "reason" for it. (cf. **Sanhedrin 108a**)

Let me suggest another possibility. It is not necessary to accept the idea that EVERY single person was a murderer or a thief. But, when over 25% or more are lawless than everyone DOES become jaded about keeping the law, everyone DOES become apathetic about making any difference. Everyone does stop caring enough to try and change things, or to do something that will salvage the situation. So, perhaps Noah was the one person who still believed that God's world was worth saving, and worth expending a lot of energy on saving. Noah, finds favor, because he is the only one who would take seriously enough the command to build an ark, and the difficult and demanding work that the whole enterprise entailed. Noah was the only one who did not lose interest in making a world of justice and decency.

The process of being very involved in social action or education of children, and slowly losing interest is common to all of us. It is an endemic condition of Synagogue and school life. Not that we become "evil" but we just lose interest, stop caring enough about spiritual or educational issues. In order to regain our passion and concern we need to regain faith in our ability to do something. We need to rekindle the passion to build our children, even if they are high school age. Perhaps it takes a "great project" to kindle that spark again, but that should not be necessary. We need to become infused with the understanding that in the end we are alone in being able to make the difference, and shoring up our resolve and commitment to do so is a primary demand of life.

***Gen. 7, 22**
All in whose nostrils was the merest breath of life, all that was on dry land, died.

The flood tells of a cataclysmic disaster, the kind that film makers love to portray. In our case it is not a matter of the earth being destroyed or smashed by some stray asteroid, for example, but the end of life on earth is the issue here. In our parasha the world is not saved in the end, but living creatures are given a new start at living in the world. There is, however, one catch to this association. We read that "All in whose nostrils was the merest breath of life, all that was on dry land, died." (**Gen. 7, 22**) From this our tradition infers that the fish did not die! So, not ALL life on earth was threatened. Not a very exciting movie.

There is, however, another tradition which is based upon a Midrash in the Talmud. R. Hisda explains that the corruption of the generation of the flood was so horrible that they were literally boiling hot to sin. So, the punishment for that corruption,

namely the waters of the flood, were also boiling. (**San. 108b, et al**) We tend to think of the flood waters as some kind of gentle rain that just got out of hand. It is kind of like Disney's version of The Sorcerer's Apprentice in Fantasia 2000. Yet, this interpretive tradition has much more malevolent waters, boiling water raining down. By the time of the Ramban the Midrash of the boiling water had developed so that it not only kills life, but it dissolves all creatures so that the bodies blend in with the water. (**Ramban on Gen. 7, 23**) This would excite movie makers.

So, which is it? Do the fish live through the flood, or are they boiled into oblivion along with all the other creatures not in the ark? Well, one attempt to harmonize these two extremes has some of the fish being boiled alive, but others fleeing into the deep ocean where they are saved. This tradition interprets the fact that the waters were "on the earth" (**Gen. 6, 17**) to mean that the flood waters fell ONLY on the earth, but not into the ocean! Ramban cleverly says that perhaps the boiling water did fall into the ocean, but it only heated up the top part of the ocean, and some fish managed to dive down into the depths where the water was normal, and they were saved. (ibid.) In the end he concludes that the fish must have been saved, because there is no mention of fish going onto the ark, whereas all other types of creatures are mentioned specifically as being in the ark. (**Gen. 9, 9-10**) And, there are still fish around today.

Now, all of this is interesting as an exercise in Biblical interpretation. But, there is one statement in the Talmud that draws a moral lesson from this conundrum about the fish. "R. Yehuda said in the name of Shmuel: "one who does not know the peculiar nature of divorce and betrothal should have no business with them, R. Assi said in R. Johanan's name: And they are more harmful to the world than the generation of the flood". (**Kidd. 13a**) The peculiar nature ("tiv") of divorce and betrothal is an interesting phrase. It has been usually interpreted as referring to the complex nature of the halakha, the details of Jewish law, concerning these matters. Thus, this phrase has been taken to mean that only people who have totally mastered all of the minutia of law of marriage and divorce should deal with them.

The Hebrew word "tiv", however, can mean not "the details", but "the nature" or more clearly "the essence" of these social institutions. It seems to me that in this statement the idea is that a person who knows the law needs to also understand the essence of marriage and divorce. A person needs to understand the human needs and desires that are part of the complex business of human relationships. Particularly in our day when halakha is an impediment to many women, and some men, in matters of divorce it is clear that knowledge of the details of the law does NOT constitute understanding of the essence of the institution. So, only people who have empathy with others, and who know the intricacies of the human heart should deal with divorce.

Furthermore, it is this understanding of the statement that gives sense to the continuation that those people without this empathy bring greater destruction to the world than the generation of the flood! The proof for this astonishing statement is precisely that in the flood the fish were not destroyed. While, at the same time, the prophet Hosea says of those corrupt leaders of his day who brought about suffering in society by lack of care for individuals that they bring about such misery and sadness that even the fish are gathered up in the general malaise. (**Hosea 4, 3**) Social

corruption stemming from the callous indifference to people's sufferings is such a great disaster that even the fish suffer, and this makes it worse than the flood.

***Gen. 8, 11**
"The dove came back to him toward evening, and there in its bill was a plucked-off olive leaf! Then Noah knew that the waters had decreased on the earth."

There is something about the story of Noah and the ark which cries out to be applied to environmental issues. The picture of the world in miniature inside the ark implies the necessity for cooperation among all of the species in order to survive.

Several Midrashim expand this understanding, and seem to point the way to direct application to our modern understanding of environmental issues. For example, the interpretation of the verse: **"The dove came back to him toward evening, and there in its bill was a plucked-off olive leaf! Then Noah knew that the waters had decreased on the earth." (Gen. 8, 11)** There is probably no more overused symbol than the dove with an olive leaf (or branch) in its bill. It is almost always seen as a symbol of peace, a cessation of destruction. This fits nicely with the verse, for it is the very ability of the dove to find a tree branch which clues Noah in to the fact that the destroying waters of the flood have abated.

Yet, this is NOT the lesson that the Talmudic midrash draws from this verse. Here the olive branch is not a message to Noah, but to God: "the dove said before the Holy One: **'Master of the World! Let my sustenance be as bitter as the olive, but in Your charge, rather than sweet as honey and in the charge of flesh and blood'." (Sanhedrin 108b)** The olive, rather than a symbol of peace, is a symbol of God's sustenance to the creatures of the world through nature. Humans will destroy species; only God can be counted on to keep all alive. In this Midrash the dove and olive branch represent a warning to humans that they are responsible for the future of animal life, and their irresponsible utilization of resources can lead to extinction of forms of life. Perhaps the experience of the dove of human care in the ark was not very good.

Indeed, this very source continues to spell out the problematics of human care for the natural world. Noah and his sons confess that they had a very hard time taking care of the animals in the ark. They had to work shifts feeding those animals that eat at night in the nighttime, and those that feed in the day during the day. There were some animals where they were not sure at all what their eating needs were, and they were hard pressed to discover how to take care of them.

In short, caring for the whole world is not an enterprise that humans can easily undertake. The tone of this section of Talmud is that the responsibility of environmental care may be too much for humans. We, human beings, must develop our sensitivity to all life, we must strive for righteousness even towards animals, and this internal struggle with ourselves is necessary for us to succeed in caring for the world.

The sons of Noah are praised precisely because they were able to rise to the occasion, and became righteous like their father. Here righteousness is defined as overcoming their own needs and desires and taking care of the animals. This Midrash is puzzled

why the Torah tells us that the sons of Noah who left the ark were Shem, Ham and Japheth etc. (**Gen. 9, 18**) We already know their names, and we already know that they left the ark. By what special merit does the Torah repeat and spell out this information? "All 12 months they were in the ark, they fortified themselves to sustain the animals and beasts, and because of this merit they left the ark." (**Tanhuma, Buber, Noah, 19**) The Torah is not just telling us that they left the ark, but that they earned the right to return to the world because they proved their ability to care for it. TTT/ **midrash shows how language imparts moral lessons, language of torah is not editing mistake or incompetence, but is meant to enable people to derive lessons from it**

***Gen. 8, 15-19**
God spoke to Noah, saying,"Come out of the ark, together with your wife, your sons, and your sons' wives. Bring out with you every living thing of all flesh that is with you: birds, animals, and everything that creeps on earth; and let them swarm on the earth and be fertile and increase on earth." So Noah came out, together with his sons, his wife, and his sons' wives. Every animal, every creeping thing, and every bird, everything that stirs on earth came out of the ark by families.

Parashat Noah could, perhaps be called a "recreation" story. We are all familiar with the notion that the Ark is a microcosm of the world that God had created, and in that sense the Noah story is a kind of third creation account, where the microcosm enlarges and becomes the real world, almost like the image we have of the universe being included in every atom. But, this account is inherently different from the others, in that humans are mutual partners in the process of creation, and they assume responsibility for the functioning of the micro-world. Viewed this way the Noah story establishes the themes of mutuality, partnership, and responsibility with God. These themes move from implications to being overtly stated in the covenant, "brit", that God makes with humanity.

Another element which brings out this change in the relationship between humanity and God, is the blessing which God gives to Noah and his family upon leaving the Ark. If we compare this blessing (**9:1-7**) with that given to Adam and Eve in chapter **1:28-30**, we see that there are several differences, but the one that is new is that in chapter 9 humanity is given the responsibility for administering justice (**9:6**), and in chapter 1 that is not mentioned at all. This change in the blessings stresses our three themes of mutuality, partnership, and responsibility.

A midrash makes this point even stronger, in midrashic tradition, in a bold parable. The Midrash notes that the sequence of Noah's entering the ark, and his leaving the ark are quite different. Noah is told to enter the ark, and how to do it, and he does as he is commanded, there seems to be no hesitation on his part (**chap. 7 beginning, and 7:5**). But, the leaving of the ark (**chap. 8**) is a different story.

Noah is not sure when the waters have receded. He comes upon a brilliant test (the beginning of scientific experimentation?). He sends out birds to see if they return to the ark or not. Clearly, he cannot send out an animal, for if the water has not receded they will drown. A bird can fly above the waters, and will not return if it can reproduce on the ground (**cf. 1:22**), otherwise it will return to the ark, finding no place to nest. Noah waits 40 days, thinking that then perhaps the waters will have

receded. This is a logical hypothesis, since it took 40 days for the waters to reach their present height. He then sends out a raven, which returns to the ark. He waits, apparently 7 days, and then sends a dove, which also returns immediately. He waits another week, and sends the dove out again, but this time the dove returns with an olive branch in its mouth.

Noah now knows that the top of the trees are dry, but is not sure about the land. So, he waits another 7 days, and sends the dove again and this time it does not return at all. Noah now knows that it is safe to leave the ark, But, just to make sure, to check his experimental data, he opens the windows of the ark and actually sees that the land is dry, verifying his experiment by direct vision (**8:13**). Yet he does not leave the ark. Why?

The midrash senses a reluctance on Noah's part, something which holds him back from leaving, even when he knows it is safe to leave. In Genesis, despite Noah's experimentation and his subsequent knowledge gained by it, God commands him to leave explicitly, and only then does the family leave the ark (**8:16-18**). The midrash creates a bold scene stressing humanities sense of responsibility for the world, through Noah and his family's experience of organizing and caring for the world in microcosm. It describes a parable of a governor, God, who goes away and leaves his second in command, Noah, in charge of the state. But, in the midrash, Noah is reluctant to return power to God when he returns from his trip. Note, the sense of God's abandoning the world, of His mercy being invisible during the flood.

In the Midrash (**Gen. R. 34:6**) Noah would not leave the ark at God's "return". He says to him: "should I leave the ark and go out and reproduce for nothing?" Noah tell God that he will not leave the ark until God will swear to him that He would no longer bring such total destruction like the flood on the world again, as it is written in **Isa. 54: 9**, which is our Haftarah. This Midrash sees the covenant which God makes with mankind, and His promise to never bring a flood again, as a result of Noah's proving his sense of responsibility for the world, and his adamance in not accepting God's "governership" if it is based on fierce punishment. It turns the "brit" of Genesis into the "shevua" of Isaiah, and finds room for both in the text. (For lack of space I will not delve into the difference between "brit" and "shevua", e.g. "brit" is mutual and "shevua" is one-sided, but it deserves your attention).

A brilliant animated cartoon by, an Israeli student at Bezalel Art Academy, shows the pain, suffering and tears of young animals, presumably innocent, who are destroyed by the flood since only couples could board the ark. Noah just carries out God's orders in this cartoon, ignoring the parent's pain over leaving their children behind. This cartoon, called "The Other Side of the Story", offers an fascinating opportunity to understand our midrash. What does Noah see or experience from the start of his journey that causes him to demand accountability from God at the end of the sailing? Perhaps it was just what the cartoon causes us to experience: undeserved suffering of innocent young, and the anguish of parents over their loss.

The halakha codified this story in fixing the beracha for seeing a rainbow, as an expression of the covenant. With the Midrash's understanding of the origins of the covenant we can now recite the beracha whenever we see a rainbow, and realize that

the covenant includes our mutual partnership with God in being responsible for the safety and beauty of the world.

The process which we call "Midrash" is a central pillar of Jewish religious life. It is the mental process of entering into dialogue with Torah, hearing Torah speak, and allowing ourselves to reply. From the dialogue we gain meaning and mentality which aids us in understanding what we must do. Many times when we analyze one of the received Midrashim, we are astounded at the boldness and creativity of the process, and the possibilities of understanding that open up before us as a result of Midrash.
TTT/ **One Main recurring theme in the Midrash is cultivating the theology of three themes of mutuality, partnership, and responsibility**

***Gen. 9, 6**
"Whoever sheds the blood of man, By man shall his blood be shed; For in His image Did God make man."

After the flood, Noah and his family leave the ark. At this point, the history of humanity starts over again. God blesses Noah and his sons. This is similar to the blessing God gives Adam at the first beginning in chapter one. There have been many expositions of the similarities and differences between these two blessings. The blessing to Noah contains the core of the basic commandments of humanity, known traditionally as "sheva mitzvot b'nei Noah", the seven mitzvot of the sons of Noah.

One of the commandments is to establish courts of justice in order to try and punish offenders of the laws. This is based upon the verse in the blessing: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, By man shall his blood be shed; For in His image Did God make man." (**Gen. 9:6)** (I refer readers to our teacher Rabbi Moshe Greenberg's seminal article on postulates of biblical criminal law for an exposition of the sense of this verse in a criminal justice system).

What is striking in this verse is the use of the phrase "For in His image Did God make man", "ki be-tzelem elohim asah et ha-adam". It is striking because this is the phrase used in Chapter one when God contemplates the creation of humans, called "adam" in that chapter. What Rabbi Akiba noticed was that before Noah, humans were NOT aware that they were created in God's image, "be-tzelem" (cf. **Avot 3:14**). Although God uses this term in discussing the creation of humans, God nowhere reveals to humans that this is the case. Here, for the first time, God tell humans that they are created in God's image. Perhaps, the reason is that God has just made humans full partners in the dispensation of justice. Up to this point God alone had dispensed justice. Now, Noah and his descendants are commanded to do it themselves. Perhaps this "extra affection", to use Akiba's phrase, is meant to say to humans that the extra responsibility placed upon them is because of their special status as creatures made "be-tzelem".

By this account, the phrase "in God's image" implies special power, status and partnership with God. However, we find another use of this verse in the piquant story of Hillel the Elder who would leave his students in a rush. When they asked him why he was in such a hurry, he replied that he had to fulfill a mitzvah. What mitzvah, they queried him. To go to the baths, was his reply. When Hillel's students

expressed surprise that this was a mitzvah, Hillel told them: "if someone is paid a salary to wash and clean the statues of the kings, and that person is honored by the kings, should not we who are created in the image of God be entrusted with washing and cleaning our bodies?" **(Lev. R. 34:3**) Here humans are "likenesses" of God, but this fact is meant to teach us that we must take care of our bodies.

Now both of these sources, and many others, understand the term "adam" in this verse as "humanity". Yet, a certain later tradition changes that understanding. One of the most striking examples is the statement of R. Shimon b. Yohai that idolators are not called "adam", but only Israel is called "adam" (**Yeb. 60b-61a**). Perhaps, R. Shimon thinks that just as one who transgresses the commandment of murder, forfeits the right to be thought of as "adam", so one who transgresses the commandment of idolatry forfeits the right to be thought of as "adam". (Both are part of the 7 commandments of Noah). Be that as it may, R. Shimon declares that because the idolaters are not "adam", their bodies do not transmit ritual impurity to others in a tent with the body.

It is clear from the Talmudic passage there that the Rabbis do not agree with R. Shimon, and yet his dictum is found over and over in rabbinic literature. One example is the story of Rabbah bar Avuha who met Eliyahu, who was standing in a gentile graveyard. At one point Rabbah asks Eliyahu, since you are a priest how can you stand in a graveyard. Eliyahu, in this tale rebukes Rabbah for not knowing the "halachot" of Tohorot, specifically R. Shimon's dictum. (**BM 114a-b**) This dictum is also brought as a prooftext why one who pours anointing oil on a non-Jew is free from the punishment of karet, it is because the non-Jew is not an "adam". (**Keritot 6b**). As I have pointed out the majority does not accept this dictum. Indeed, the Mishnah itself is full of passages which assume that gentile bodies do pass on impurity (cf. **end of Ohalot). Tosafot on Yev. 61b** also goes to great lengths to show that this is not halakha le-maaseh, and yet there are many instances where R. Shimon's statement is used.

In some of the Kabbalasitic literature (cf. **Midrash Shemuel, R. Samuel Uceda, on Avot, there**), and in the Tanya (cf. **Likkutei Amaraim, part I, end of chap. 1; end of chap. 6**) this statement is accepted in a literal way, and it is extended so that it is claimed that the non-Jew is not only not called "adam", but is not created "be-tzelem". This kind of thinking was attacked forcefully by the Tifereth Israel **[**Israel ben Gedaliah Lipschutz (1782–1860)] in his commentary on Avot. In order to get a wide view of the views which did NOT accept these pronouncements it is best to read the article on this subject by our teacher Rabbi Moshe Greenberg in his volume, "al ha-mikra ve-al ha-yahadut" (p. 55ff. I am told that this is also in English, but I have no details on it.)

The widespread acceptance of the general idea may be the impulse behind one of the most famous changes from manuscript to printed edition. In the Mishnah of Sanhedrin 4, it is clearly spelled out that human life is of ultimate value and importance. Indeed, the manuscript texts clearly say that if one saves a human life, it is as if one had saved an entire world. However, the printed additions of the Talmud add the word "mi-yisrael", changing the text to "if one saves a life of a Jew, it is as if....". (cf. **Rabbinovicz, Didukei Soferim, , Sanhedrin, reprint Jerusalem 1960, p. 100. cf. also Adin Steinsalz, Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin, Jerusalem, 1974, p. 161**

(girsaot), and above all Prof. E. Urbach in Tarbiz 40 (5731), pp. 268-284 also in his book Me-Olamam shel Hahamim, Jerusalem, 5748, pp. 561-577.) It seems to me that the printed editions were influenced by the popular Kabbalistic ideas that gained ground in those days.

There are two competing traditions in Jewish tradition, one which denies the common divine nature of all humanity. The other one clearly affirms that common nature, and sees that divine commonality as the basis for human cooperation and end of war. I believe that the former view is wrong and should be exorcised from Jewish consciousness, and that the latter view should be developed and cultivated.

***Gen. 11:1-2**
"Everyone on earth had the same language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there."

Towards the end of parashat Noah we read the story of the Tower of Babel. This cryptic story begins: "Everyone on earth had the same language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there." (Gen. 11:1-2) After the flood, we expect a harmonious and peaceful world. Indeed, a kind of idyllic sense is created in the reader by verse 1. Everyone speaks the same language and understands each other. What could be better than that? At first glance we would think that there is no need for any revision in the way the world works. God can relax; at last humanity is at peace and united. Yet, the story implies rebellion against God, some need for God to intervene in order to prevent the total corruption of humanity. Apparently, unity of language and purpose is not a guarantee of goodness, not even a guarantee of lack of decadence.

What hints does the text give us to understand what is wrong? Enter the Midrash. **"And as they migrated ("be-nasa'm") from the east" ("mi-kedem") (Gen. 11:2)**, R. Elazar b. Shimon said: they rebelled against ("moved away from") the Ancient one of the world (God="kadmono shel olam")." (**Gen. R. 38:7**). The Midrash senses the use of the word "nasa", "to move", is always used in a sense of moving AWAY from something. Indeed, the Talmud even goes out of its way to interpret the verse in **Num. 10:33**, "they traveled ("nasu") three days..." to mean that the verse implies that Israel moved away from God. R. Elazar specifies what they said: "we can't accept Him, not Him and not His Divinity".

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***Gen. 11, 27-29**
"Now this is the line of Terah: Terah begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran begot Lot. Haran died in the lifetime of his father Terah ("va-yamot Haran al pnei Terah aviv"), in his native land, Ur of the Chaldeans. Abram and Nahor took to themselves wives, the name of Abram's wife being Sarai and that of Nahor's wife Milcah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah and Iscah."

At the end of parashat Noah, we meet Abram and his family. (Gen. 11, 27-29) Abram is the eldest of three brothers, and the youngest brother, Haran is mentioned specifically because he "died in the lifetime of his father Terah ("va-yamot Haran al pnei Terah aviv")." The Hebrew text is ambiguous about when Haran died. The words "al pnei" are translated here simply as "in his lifetime". This usage is commonly accepted, although there are those who felt that it implies after Terah's

death. This opinion cites the use of the word "pnei" to describe what happens after Sarah's death. (cf. **Lev. R. 20, 11**) Let us accept the rendering of our translation, still questions remain: how did Haran die, was there a reason for his death, why is it specifically mentioned in our verse?

We have seen the imaginative and multi-vocal nature of midrash, and the answers to our questions about Haran's death are an exquisite example of those characteristics. One of the most well know midrashim, because it is taught in kindergarten and early Hebrew school years, is the one about how Abraham understood that the idols which his father Terah made and sold were not really the powers that made the universe. In this midrash Abraham is put in charge of selling his fathers idols. A man comes to buy one, and Abraham asks him his age. The man replies that he is 50 years old, and Abraham rejoins: "you are fifty years old and you worship a one day old object?!".

This midrash continues to tell of a woman who brought an offering of fine meal to the idols. Abraham takes a stick and breaks all the idols, and places the stick in the hand of the largest idol which he did not break. When Terah returns he is aghast that all his idols are broken. Abraham explains that the idols fought over which one would eat from the meal first, and the big one prevailed over all the other ones. Terah exclaims: "Why do you make sport of me, have they then any knowledge!". To this Abraham responds "Should not your ears listen to what your mouth is saying!". (**Gen. R. 38, 28 ed. Theodore - Albeck**) The fact that this tale is in Genesis Rabbah indicates that it is an old legend, and the fact that it is in Aramaic indicates that it was well known and repeated often by the people. So, no wonder that it is still beloved until today, and taught as an appropriate lesson for all Jews from a very young age.

This midrash assumes that Abraham through his own power of intellect understands that the statues have no life, and thus cannot cause life. Our teacher Rabbi Simon Greenberg ztz"l published a Hebrew reader entitled "ha-yehudi ha-rishon" which embellishes the legend by filling in precisely this gap in the Midrash. Indeed, Abraham is described as one who achieved understanding of the One God, the real power behind creation, not by learning from other teachers but through his own intuition. (**Otzar ha-Midrashim p. 1**)

However, in Gen. R. the midrash continues. This continuation is NOT taught in Hebrew school, and it is the beginning of our fascinating journey through the many facets of an exegetical tradition. Terah, perhaps because of Abraham's 'blasphemy", or perhaps because of his disrespectful tone in speaking to his father, or perhaps just to teach Abraham a lesson and to 'straighten him out', turns Abraham over to Nimrod, the king of Ur Kasdim, as a blasphemer. Here is the expurgated part of our famous midrash:

"Thereupon he [Terah] seized him [Abraham] and delivered him to Nimrod. 'Let us worship the fire!' he [Nimrod] proposed. ' Let us rather worship water, which extinguishes the fire,' replied Abraham. ' Then let us worship water! ' ' Let us rather worship the clouds which bear the water.' ' Then let us worship the clouds! ' ' Let us rather worship the winds which disperse the clouds.' ' Then let us worship the wind!' ' Let us rather worship human beings, who withstand the wind.' 'You are just

bandying words,' he [Nimrod] exclaimed; 'we will worship nothing but the fire. Behold, I will cast you into it, and let your God whom you adore come and save you from it.' Now Haran was standing there undecided. If Abram is victorious, [thought he], I will say that I am of Abram's belief, while if Nimrod is victorious I will say that I am on Nimrod's side. When Abram descended into the fiery furnace and was saved, he [Nimrod] asked him [Haran], 'Of whose belief are you?' 'Of Abram's,' he [Haran] replied. Thereupon he seized and cast him into the fire; his inwards were scorched and he died in his father's presence. Hence it is written, "and Haran died in the presence of ("al pnei") his father Terah."

Apparently the midrash connects the Hebrew "al pnei" to the common usage "mipnei" which means "because of". Thus, Haran's death is caused by his father Terah! This riveting account implicates Terah in the death of his son Haran, but it also justifies Haran's death because of his own moral inadequacy. Unlike Abraham, who has achieved faith in God on his own, Haran is waiting for a sign. Whoever wins the battle between Abram and Nimrod will be his sign how he himself will believe. In short, Haran is thinking that if it 'pays' to accept God, that is, miracles are done for those who believe, then he will accept the belief. Haran takes the position, so familiar to us today, that if God will do for me what He does for X over there, then I will be loyal to God. But, our midrash seems to say, not everyone is protected from the fire. Rarely a person escapes what seems to be certain disaster, and then he might describe his survival as a 'miracle from God', but most of the time fire burns, and you cannot be saved from it. Haran's "sin" in this midrash is that of non genuine faith in God, or a cynical utilitarian attitude to faith in God both of which ignore physical reality.

A midrashic tradition that accepts the basic premise of this legend that Haran's death is connected to Abraham's being thrown into Nimrod's fire grew up which gives other reasons and explanations for his demise. A second variation in this tradition describes Haran as a righteous person, a tzaddik. The people see that Abraham is not burned up in the furnace, and they think God favors Abram on account of Haran's righteousness. At that moment a spark jumps from the furnace and consumes Haran. In this telling, Haran dies for Abraham, in an act of altruism. (**Midrash Yelamdenu (Mann), Yalkut Talmud Torah, Gen. 55**)

A third thread sees Haran as even more guilty than the first source. He is said to be a worshipper of fire, and the people say that Abraham is favored by the fire because his brother Haran is a high priest of the fire. At that point, the spark consumes Haran. Here the idea is that his death combats the people's belief in the fire as God. Haran is killed by his own god. This represents a form of the rabbinic dictum of "midah keneged midah", that one is punished in kind to one's transgressions. (**Midrash Aggadah (Buber) Gen. 11, 28**)

Another midrash in this trend is even more damning of Haran. In this source Haran is among those jealous of Abraham and fanatically wishes to participate in his murder. Haran is the one, in this text, who is in charge of stoking the fire in the furnace, and he stands by it feeding the fire when the flames shoot out and consume him. (**Pesikta Zutrata (Lekah Tov) Gen. 11, 28**). Here Haran, and Terah, are just evil people out to kill Abraham. Haran takes glee in making the fire as hot as possible so

that killing Abraham will "make his day". Again, the punishment is thus appropriate and poetic justice.

Another text is found in which Haran is described as a great magician who can tame the fire and make it do what he wants it to do. (**Otzar Ha-Midrashim p. 1**) Apparently in this version Haran is trying to help Abraham. This midrash presents Haran's attempt to tame the fire in language that implies a positive act. Only after Haran is inadvertently destroyed by the fire does God come down to save Abraham directly. Perhaps one can view Haran here as a "righteous gentile" who uses his abilities to try and save Abraham, but is destroyed in the process.

Finally, another trend tries to spin a "happy end" out of this tale. Terah reads the stars and sees in the stars that Haran is burnt to death and that Abraham's destiny is to fill the world with belief in God. But, according to these texts, Terah is not sure by whose merit will the world be filled with faith. The reason for this is that Abraham marries his cousin, Haran's daughter. The midrash identifies Sarah with Haran's daughter Yiscah (**Gen. 11, 29; cf. Megillah 14a et al, also cf. Otzar ha-Midrashim p. 126 where Terah's reading of the stars is reversed**.) All the texts in this tradition agree that the merit of filling the world with faith is credited to the side of Sarah. So, even though Haran dies, it is his daughter who is the one who is credited with filling the world with the knowledge of God. In this way his child imparts honor and glory to his name.

Parashat Lekh Lekha **לך לך**

The narrative scope of the Torah narrows down even further, and now we concentrate on just one nuclear family out of all of humanity. The patriarch of this family is named Terah. The main human protagonists of all of the rest of the Torah, indeed of the whole Bible, are Terah's offspring, Abraham and Sarah and their descendants. It is significant that we first meet them because God directs them to leave their native land, Terah's territory, and journey to a new land. It is this experience which reverberates throughout the whole of the Bible.

***Gen. 12:2-3**
I will make of you a great nation,And I will bless you;I will make your name great,And you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you And curse him that curses you;And all the families of the earthShall bless themselves by you."

The opening verses of parashat Lekh Lekha are among the most widely known verses in the Torah. God tells Abram to leave his homeland, the environment to which he was accustomed and to go to an unnamed land which God will show him. Abram is told that even though at first glance this journey might seem to be detrimental to him, it will benefit him greatly. Indeed, the root "brkh", signifying "blessing" is used in four different phrases in **Gen. 12:2-3**.

This is a most unusual usage of one word, and the different forms which the word "brkh" takes in these verses further emphasizes the centrality of the idea of "blessing" which is attached to the outcome of Abram's willingly accepting God's command to go forth to a new land. The usage's are:
1. "I (God) will bless you" "ve-avarekheha"
2. "You will be a blessing" "ve-heyay berakha"
3. "I (God) will bless those who bless you" "va-avarkha mevarekhekha"
4. "all the families of the earth will be blessed through you" "ve-nivrekhu vekha kol mishpehot ha-adamah"

There are numerous difficulties in interpreting just what each one of these expressions means, as well as with the fact of repetition. However, to me, the fourth expression is almost a total surprise. The first three expressions have to do with Abram and those surrounding him. They seem to be part of God's attempt to calm Abram's fears, and they foretell of a future in which Abram, despite the rigors and trauma of his journey, will be surrounded by "blessing". But, what purpose could the fourth phrase serve? How is it that "all of the families of the earth" will benefit from Abram's journey?

The sudden introduction of this universalistic element in the story is very striking. True, up to now the Torah has dealt with all of humanity, but here from the very first time in the Torah narrative that the focus narrows down to one family, the Torah reminds us that it is a universal book, that Abram's journey is somehow related to the well-being of all humanity! Lest we think that this is merely a literary figure of speech, the same phrase is used when Jacob is about to leave the land of Israel, the reversal of Abram's journey. God appears to Jacob during the dream of the ladder and calms his fears about his journey. This vision also ends with the exact same phrase ""all the families of the earth will be blessed through you" "ve-nivrekhu vekha

kol mishpehot ha-adamah", with the addition of one word: "and your descendants" "u-ve-zarekha" (**Gen. 28:14**).

This repetition of the phrase makes it clear that the universal concern for the well-being of all humanity is AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD, AND THAT IT MUST BE PASSED ON AS SUCH FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION.

Whether the Jews are coming to the land of Israel or leaving the land of Israel in order to return, part of their covenant with God is to strive to be a blessing for all humanity. But, exactly how is the blessing to be conveyed? R. Yehudah and R. Nehemiah in the Midrash discuss this question (**Gen. R. 39:12 end, Vilna**). Both of them accept the premise that part of Israel's covenant with God is to be a blessing for humanity. They even see the transmission of this idea as alluded to in the verse: "I have gained more understanding than my elders, for I observe your precepts." (**Ps. 119:100**). They interpret this verse to mean that each generation gains in understanding by observing the precept of being a blessing for the world. They bring examples of how succeeding generations have brought blessing to the nations. Jacob blesses Pharaoh (**Gen. 47:7**), Joseph reveals the meaning of Pharaoh's dreams to him, Daniel reveals God's word to Nebuchadnezzar, and even Esther passes on the knowledge of the plot to kill Ahasuerus to the king.

R. Nehemiah comments that if you think that the word "blessing" means some kind of magical bestowing of wealth or materiel benefit on the nations, that is absurd, since "they are wealthier than you ever were". Rather, when they ask for our good advice, for the insights and wisdom which we can supply them from our Torah and our spiritual tradition, we do not hold it back, but reveal it to them. The "blessing" which Israel must be seen as bestowing upon the world is the same blessing that we have in our tradition, through our Torah and spiritual treasures. Those are not for Jews alone. Any God given understanding which is ours should be shared, and that is part of Abram's covenant with God.

The Jewish covenant with God concerning the Land of Israel is one which is meant to EMPHASIZE the humanity of all "the families of the earth", and to strive to include them in the spiritual blessings which are part of that covenant. It is that spirit of "lekh-lekha" which should be our guiding principle in the recreation of Jewish sovereignty.
TTT/ **universalism as an integral part of Jewish worldview**

***Gen. 12:7**
And he built an altar there to the LORD who had appeared to him."

God's command to Abram to leave his place and journey to a land which God will show him is usually taken to show Abraham's faith, in that he sets out on a journey without knowing the exact destination. Indeed, Abram reaches Canaan and passes through its northern border all the way to Shechem, where: "The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "I will assign this land to your heirs." And he built an altar there to the LORD who had appeared to him." (**Gen. 12:7**)

God speaks to Abram to set out on a journey to an unknown destination. How does Abram know when he has reached the place? Verse 7 tells us that God "appeared" to Abram. Presumably, this is a different experience of God, an experience of a visible presence. This must be the sign that reveals to Abram that he has reached the land of his destination. In addition, God again speaks to Abram confirming the "vision" that the land of destination is also the land of destiny. Abram's destiny, that of his heirs, is tied to this land. Abram's response is to build an altar to the Lord which he had "seen" there.

This response seems to match perfectly our view of Abram as a "man of faith". His response to experiencing God's presence is Divine service. But, what is behind this service? What is the meaning of this altar?

Before we can begin answering these questions, any possible answer is confounded by the following verse, verse **8**: "From there he moved on to the hill country east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and he built there an altar to the LORD and invoked the LORD by name." Abram has moved around a bit in "his" land. He reaches a certain spot, and builds another altar! But, in this case there is no revelation or Divine speech to Abram. What is behind this altar? To complicate matters even more, God again reveals to Abram that the land is his "kinyan", it is his and an inheritance to his offspring forever. At this revelation Abram builds another altar! (Gen**. 13:14-18**)

The language is the same in each of these three cases at Shechem, between Bet-El and Ai, and at Hebron: "he built there an altar to the Lord" ("va-yiven sham mizbeah la-adonai"). The Hebrew word "sham" "there", appears in each verse. But, in the style of classical Midrash we must ask is this word not superflous? Where else would he build the altar, if not at the spot where he had an experience of God? Indeed, the three spots comprise a kind of triangulation of the land, north, center and south.

Let us return to the meanings of the altars. One Midrash, in the name of R. Elazar, enumerates the three altars which Abraham built. One is a response to news that the land of Israel was his (**12:7**), the second is a response the news that the land is his responsibility ("kinyan"; **13:18**), and third is as a petition before God that his desendants not fail to conquer the land at Ai (**12:8**).(**Gen. R. 39**) According to this Midrash, Joshua recalls the merits of Abraham in building this altar. The sin of Ai is mitigated by the merits of the ancestors. When Joshua and the elders put dirt on their heads (**Josh. 7:6**), this was meant to remind God of Abraham who had compared himself to the dust (**Gen. 18:27**).

This Midrash illuminates for us the idea that each altar had a different meaning. The first constitutes praise to God for his faith in Abraham, and the great gifts which God gave to him. The second pledges faithful commitment to cultivating and developing those gifts. The third is a petition asking for protection. The potential of the gift of the land may be endangered by greed and complacency.

TTT/ **"Kinyan" as meaning responsibility**
In the light of these Midrashic traditions it is fascinating that Rashi adds on his own that Abraham built FOUR altars. The fourth of course, is at Mt. Moriah for the Akedah. (**Rashi on Num. 23:4**) The classical Midrash clearly thought of this as

another case. Not every altar is in the same category. This might be because the language in Chapter **22** is not the same as in our parasha. In the Akeda we read "va-yiven sham Avraham et ha-mizbeah", literally "built there Abraham the altar". Unlike the other three cases, Abraham is specified as the builder, the altar is specified as "the" altar using the specifying word "et" and the article "ha", and the Torah does not say it is "for the Lord", as in the other three. Apparently the Midrash views the purpose of this altar as being different. The three which Abraham builds in this parasha are all out of his own experience of the Divine, they are responses to Divine promise and partnership, whereas the Akedah altar is part of a ritual which Abraham perceives as a Divine command. In that sense it is a ritual altar in the sense that it's purpose is not formed by a reaction to a divine experience, but it is an attempt to invoke the divine by human action.
Here we see the sensitivity of the Midrash to specific language of the Torah, as opposed to a more general relationship to the language of the later commentators. Note that this is a hallmark of Midrash, and is one of its characteristics which leads me to see Midrash as a realistic interpretation of the Biblical text.
TTT/ **Midrash as a realistic interpretation of Biblical text.**

***Gen. 13:7-8**
And there was quarreling between the herdsmen of Abram's cattle and those of Lot's cattle. ... Abram said to Lot, "Let there be no strife between you and me, between my herdsmen and yours, for we are kinsmen."

God tells Abram to leave his ancestral home and journey to another land. God does not tell Abram any details about this new land, except that God will make it known to Abram when he gets there. He does say that this land will become the ancestral land which will be that of Abram's descendants.

Now, Abram, with no clear cut directions or maps, and not even a name for the country could go in any direction. But, he chooses a west by south-west course and eventually ends up in Canaan. Then God announces that this is the land, and tells Abram that all of this land is Divinely ordained to be his and his descendants. Abram travels throughout this land and sees most of it with his own eyes. Now, at this point a famine erupts in the land, and Abram, like many inhabitants of Canaan go to Egypt. There, Abram is embroiled in an affair concerning Sarah, but in the end they leave Egypt with great wealth and return to Canaan. (**Gen. 12**)

Before Abram left Ur, he had added his brother's son, Lot, to those in his party. Lot's father had died, and so Abram cares for his nephew. Now we learn that Lot had accompanied him on all of these travels, to Egypt etc. Furthermore, we learn that Lot, like Abram, had been enriched by the experience. Now, we are told, that the land did not seem big enough for them. Just two members of the large family which was to inherit the whole land, and already they found it confining! What is to be done? How can God's promise of a huge multitude of offspring living on this one land become a reality, if just two families feel that it is too small?

Abram's reaction is worth pondering. "And there was quarreling between the herdsmen of Abram's cattle and those of Lot's cattle. ... Abram said to Lot, "Let there be no strife between you and me, between my herdsmen and yours, for we are kinsmen." (**Gen. 13:7-8**) Abram knows immediately that there must be peace; that

strife must be avoided at all costs. Even though God has promised Abram the WHOLE land, he does NOT say to Lot "this is my land by Divine promise, so I will give you the part I want to give you". Why? The JPS version above translates Abram's reason as: "for we are kinsmen". The Hebrew is "kee anashim achim anachnu", literally for we are people ("anashim") who are brothers "achim".

The Hebrew is problematic, for as a matter of fact, Abram and Lot are NOT brothers. The translation neatly uses another word for "achim" to obviate this difficulty. But, the Midrash does not take this easy way out.

One Midrash states that a person's nephew is considered a brother (**Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer, 35**). This Midrash fortifies this point by quoting what Abram hears when he finds out that Lot is captured "his brother had been captured" ("kee nishbah achiv" **Gen. 14:14**, JPS "kinsman"). This teaches us that our brothers children are as our own. Another Midrash uses the latter verse, 14:14, as a proof of Abram's modesty and magnanimous behavior. For, after the big quarrel which had caused Abram to "give up" so much of the land promised to him, he still views Lot as "his brother". In the words of this Midrash Abram "did not fester on the quarrel but called him 'brother'. (**Tanhuma, Lekh Lekha, 16, 16**)

This interpretation reveals qualities of character which may be among the most important ones when we think of Abraham, the first patriarch of the nation. He is magnanimous and will be willing to give up what is his in order to prevent violence and strife within his family. We might learn a lesson from Abraham's behavior here, namely, that the priority of preventing strife within the family is so high that one must give up what one considers one's divinely approved portion to achieve that goal. The qualities of tolerance and largesse are crucial to maintain peace in the family. It is a measure of Abram's solid faith and trust in God's promise that he is NOT fearful that he will "lose" from his appointed portion by being magnanimous.

There is yet another Midrash which explains this phrase. At first glance, it seems quite odd. "Kee anashim achim anachnu", "for we are people ("anashim") who are brothers "achim", he was not his brother, but rather his countenance was similar to Abram's" (**Gen. Rabbah 40**). Abram's motivation for his munificent behavior is NOT family ties, which we all instinctively understand, but seemingly frivolous, Lot resembled him! I understand this Midrash to reveal a deeper and more moral motivation behind Abram's act. Lot resembled him, that is, was a human being whose plight could NOT be ignored. That is, Abram understood that Lot resembled him in terms of his existential situation, in terms of his humanity. Lot was unsure of the future, worried about how to care for his flock, in short, he possessed all of the same human needs that Abram did.

I understand this by appealing to the way in which Metzudat David (R. David Altschuler 18th cent.) interprets **Job 31:15**. In this chapter Job talks about what his standards in life were; how it was that he was a righteous person. "Did I ever brush aside the case of my servants, man or maid, When they made a complaint against me? What then should I do when God arises; When He calls me to account, what should I answer Him? Did not He who made me in my mother's belly make him? Did not One form us both in the womb? Did I deny the poor their needs, Or let a

widow pine away, By eating my food alone, The fatherless not eating of it also?" (**Job 31:17**)

Job is saying that he always was generous with his possessions, helping every person, because "Did not One form us both in the womb?" Metzudat David writes: "the One who made me in my mother's womb also made the other person in his mother's womb, and prepared all of us in one womb, the womb of Eve, who was the mother of all living persons, and thus "anashim achim anachnu"." (**on Job 31:15**)

By this account Abram was the founder of universal ethics. The fact of human fraternity means that we must seek ways to avoid war and strife, even if that means some accommodation of what we consider our own possessions. Abram saw Lot's countenance and realized that God had made him too. Abram thus understood that the Divine promise, although given to Abram, was given to him in trust to administer in a way which did not lead to war.
TTT/ **universal attitude to all humans.**

***Gen. 14:4**
Twelve years they served Chedorlaomer, and in the thirteenth year they rebelled

Chapter 14 of Genesis, the war of the kings, is worked and reworked in both traditional and modern interpretations of the Torah. I am attracted to the names of the kings, especially to Chedorlaomer, king of Elam. Modern scholars seize upon our knowledge of Elamite texts to search for historical evidence of this king (for the Elamite meaning of the name cf. EJ). But, for me the attraction is the appearance of "omer" in his name. It is not an easy burden to be the rabbi of Omer, for I am attracted to interpreting that word.

The Midrashic tradition on this king turns out to be fascinating, and ambivalent. First, he is cited for being one of the bravest and strongest kings of the region. He and his allies were able to defeat the most fortified and strongest cities. Rabbeinu Bahya explains that the Torah deals at greater length than seems necessary with this story and with Chedorlaomer's might. The whole reason, he says, is to emphasize the overwhelming greatness of Abraham, for he defeated these most victorious of kings! (**Rabbeinu Bahya on Gen. 14, 5**)

Now this approach clearly identifies Chedorlaomer as an evil king, at least a vicious one. He is not worth mentioning in the Torah, except that by playing up his strength and conquests, one learns of the true might that Abraham possessed. So, Chedor, as he was known by his friends, is merely a foil against whom the power of Abraham is made known to the reader. Of course, this also emphasizes the source of Abraham's power, namely God.

Another Midrashic tradition in this same vein views the four kings mentioned in our parasha as a foreshadowing of the four kingdoms which will rule Israel in the future as predicted in the later prophets and in the book of Daniel etc. This tradition sees Abraham's freeing himself as a foreshadow of Israel's redemption from the four kingdoms in the end of days. (e.g. **Koheleth Rabah 5, 21**) Here too, Chedor is a symbol of evil or oppression, and appears only in order to enable us to understand Israel's eventual triumph.

Despite this clear approach, there is another way that this king is interpreted. I am tickled by one of the explanations of the Ari (Yitzhak Luria), as reported by Hayyim Vital, in **Sha'ar ha-Pesukim**. The first three Hebrew letters of Chedorlaomer's name, kaf, dalet, resh, when rearranged make the word "derekh", "path" or "way". The second part of his name "laomer" is, in numerical calculation (gematria), equivalent to the word "shem", which is an appellation of God. That is, his name can be understood to mean "the way of God" or "God's path".

Lest we think that Ari is hallucinating, in this case, the Talmud preserves a tradition in which the name Chedorlaomer is written as two words "chadar" and "laomer" (cf**. Hullin 64b-65a**). Apparently, in some texts of the Torah, particularly those based on Occidental or Palestinian tradition, this name is written as two words. Perhaps, that was the Sefer Torah which the Ari used.

Now, all of this astonishes enough, for it implies that Chedorlaomer may be a positive symbol for us in his own right, and not merely a foil to tout the greatness of Abraham or of God's deliverance of Israel. The clincher is that Ari (or Vital) says that the lesson of the name Chedorlaomer is found in the verse from Psalms: "and to him who improves his way ("ve-sam derekh"), I will show the salvation of God." **(Ps. 50, 23)**

To someone who is used to the use of Hebrew as the medium of Midrash all of this is clear. The transposition of letters, the seeing of "sam" and "shem" as related, and the connection to a Biblical verse where the same letters appear is all standard procedure. The impression of the Midrash is exciting. Chedorlaomer is the kind of king about whom Ps. 50 is written. It is about powerful people who think that their power makes them gods, or able to conquer God, and who eventually see that their own power merely cages them. Their true freedom is in recognizing God, and improving their ways in the direction of the path of God. TTT/ **Midrashic techniques using Hebrew**

Psalm 50 describes the kind of power hungry king that Chedorlaomer seems to be: "And to the wicked, God said: "Who are you to recite My laws, and mouth the terms of My covenant, seeing that you spurn My discipline, and brush My words aside? When you see a thief, you fall in with him, and throw in your lot with adulterers; you devote your mouth to evil, and yoke your tongue to deceit; you are busy maligning your brother, defaming the son of your mother. If I failed to act when you did these things, you would fancy that I was like you; so I censure you and confront you with charges." (**vs. 16-21**) They think that God is like them, since they have power. But, something happens. They feel a censure; a spark of conscience moves them to understand that they are NOT on God's path.

Perhaps the name Chedorlaomer, as understood by the Ari, was applied to him as the result of some understanding that he was not going in God's way. Perhaps it was the defeat at the hands of Abraham that caused his turn of heart. At any rate, this view holds out hope for all people that the path to God is attainable to those who sincerely set out to improve their ways.

***Gen. 14, 7**
On their way back they came to En-mishpat, which is Kadesh, and subdued all the territory of the Amalekites, and also the Amorites who dwelt in Hazazon-tamar."

In the story of the war of 4 kings versus 5 kings we are informed that Lot, Abraham's nephew, is seized as part of the battle. There is much detail about the battle and areas conquered. One verse which details this account states; "On their way back they came to En-mishpat, which is Kadesh, and subdued all the territory of the Amalekites, and also the Amorites who dwelt in Hazazon-tamar." (**Gen. 14, 7**) This verse describes the warring and plundering of the 4 kings during this period. The place names mentioned are presumably merely for information so that the reader will know the exact towns conquered.

Rabbinic tradition of biblical interpretation, as we have seen constantly, extracts meaning out of names which impart to the bland text moral lessons and philosophical content beyond a simple reading of a place name. In addition, our exegetical tradition many times expands the educational lesson so that the words impart information about one of the heroes of the story, and thus connect the seemingly superfluous verse to the story line directly. In our case the place referred to in the text as "En-mishpat, which is Kadesh" is the hook upon which our midrashic process turns.

Our first Midrash want to understand why did these kings decide to make war. It connects the episode to the Abraham story by interpreting the account of these wars as starting by a desire to destroy Abraham. Abraham is seen as the center of justice in the world, the apple of God's eye. Indeed, part of the play on words here is the word "en", which literally means "eye". The phrase "En-mishpat" is not interpreted as a place name, but literally "the eye of judgment'. These kings are jealous of the kings in whose territory Abraham lives: "This may be compared to a king's friend who dwelt in a province, and on his account the king used to visit the province and showed it favor. But when barbarians came to attack him [this friend] they lamented, 'Woe to us, for the king will no longer show favor to this province as was his wont, [if his friend is killed].' Thus it is written, 'And they turned back and came to En-mishpat'. R. Aha said: They came only in order to attack the eyeball of the world; the eye which executed judgment in the world1 they desire to blind! 'The same (hi) is Kadesh'. (**Gen. R.42, 3**)

If the prophet who stands for justice is killed, then justice will not be done in the world. The literal interpretation of the phrase 'En-Mishpat' as eye of justice lends itself to the metaphor of blinding the eye, which is obliterating justice. The metaphor is based upon the idea that God's justice is based upon God's all-seeing eye. The point is that God's all-seeing eye needs human eyes in this world, and the visitation of justice is in the territory where the human eyes that are extensions of God's eyes are operating. If Abraham can be destroyed, then perhaps justice will not be done in the world, and the eye will be blinded.

This Midrash stresses that God's judgment needs eyes that will not be clouded in this world. Abraham is "kadesh", a sanctified one, precisely because he is "En-mishpat", willing to see with God's eyes. Such unbribable eyes are a threat to kings who wish to impose their desires on others with no regard for the consequences.

Another Midrash uses the same technique of literal interpretation of the place names, but does it in connection with Moses. "'These are the waters of Meribah'(**Num. 20, 13**). From this [that it sounds as if it was always known why they are called the waters of Meribah] you learn that it was ordained from of old that Moses should be punished on account of water, for see what is written in Scripture: 'And they turned back, and came to En-mishpat--the same is Kadesh' … (**Gen. 14, 7**). 'En-mishpat' signifies the fountain of the judgment ('en mishpato) of Moses." (**Num. R. 19, 14**) The Hebrew word "en" can also be understood as a form of the word for fountain. This Midrash sees our verse as foretelling the locus of the idea that Moses will fail over water, and will be punished on account of water. The fact that the place where Moses sinned was also connected to Kadesh only adds to the basis of this Midrash.

What is intriguing in this Midrash, however, is not the identification of this place and incident with Moses, but the continuation of the Midrash which also uses the metaphor of eye and blindness. It goes on to say: "This may be illustrated by the case of a son of kings who took a stone and blinded his eye therewith. His father used to say of every stone: 'This is the one that blinded my son's eye.' For this reason it says: "These are the waters of Meribah". (ibid.) The idea seems to be that the verse is implying that all waters are responsible for Moses death outside of the land of Israel!

The parable is fascinating. The king blames all rocks because one rock blinded his son's eye. He cannot look at a rock without being reminded of his sorrow. Is this Midrash implying that God sometimes does not make complex distinctions between one body of water and another; just as the king cannot distinguish between one rock and another? It is clear that king's emotional trauma at the blinding of his son is what causes this condemnation of all rocks. Is God sometimes too emotionally involved by human sin that a similar phenomenon comes to pass?

This is a challenging Midrash which indicates that God's emotional involvement can be so great that blanket condemnation ensues. At that point even the Divine mind loses the ability to make complex distinctions. If that is the picture, than how much more so do we humans need to take caution? How much more do we humans need to overcome our emotional desires and angers in order to avoid blanket condemnations? It is a difficult but necessary task.
TTT/ **Midrashic theology the pathos of God, or basing interpretation of an assumption of God's emotional involvement**

***Genesis 15:7-9**
Then He said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to assign this land to you as a possession." 8And he said, "O Lord GOD, how shall I know that I am to possess it?" 9He answered, "Bring Me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old she-goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young bird." 10He brought Him all these and cut them in two, placing each half opposite the other; but he did not cut up the bird.

One of the axioms among egalitarian Jews is that the covenant made by God with the patriarchs included the matriarchs. That is, the God of Abraham etc. is also the God of Sarah etc., because the covenant which established God's relationship to Abraham also established God's relationship to Sarah. For a modern person it is not logical that

the events recounted in the Torah could not include the matriarchs. Yet, are there any textual references that can support this intuitive understanding?

This is an important question, because the changes made in tradition by us egalitarian Jews need textual support, even if it is minor, as part of our counterclaim to the patriarchal tradition. This point is made eloquently in the following passage, which, it seems to me, elegantly sums up the approach of Conservative Judaism: "According to the conservative view there is a strong presumption in favor of beliefs that are anchored in tradition. A belief backed by tradition is held as true unless there is a counterclaim supported by weighty reasons. These reasons must include the fact that the counterclaim is itself based on a tradition, even if it is not as strong a tradition as the one supporting the original claim." (M. Halbertal and A. Margalit, Idolatry, Harvard U. Press, 1992, p. 118)

Parashat Lekh Lekha includes the account of the "covenant of pieces", in which Abraham cuts animals into two pieces and God appears to him between them. The description of this event is dramatic and mysterious (cf. **Gen. 15**). But, it is clear that this is a covenant (**v. 18**), and that it is the covenant of God's relationship to all of Abraham's descendants forever, and the promise of the land of Israel to those descendants. Indeed, it is Abraham's questioning about how he will be certain that his offspring will inherit the land which prompts the ritual and the revelation recounted in this chapter.

The Midrash is troubled by the sequence. God promises many descendants and the land to Abraham. Abraham wants some sign or proof that will convince him that this will take place. God, responds with the demand to cut up animals in sacrifice. So, the Midrash wonders, are the cut up animals really needed to establish what we read in verse 18, "on that day God made a covenant with Abram saying ("leymor") 'To your offspring I assign this land'…"? What is the purpose of this strange ritual? (**Sekhel Tov (Buber ed.) Gen. 15**)

At first the Midrash renders Abraham's question not as a question about inheriting the land. Presumably, Abraham accepted God's promise without any need for a covenant. But, it interprets Abraham to query God about future salvation for his descendants, especially if they come under foreign rule. This is why God affirms to Abraham that his children will be servants in another land. God's promise of redemption for Abraham's offspring is the result (cf. **v. 13-16**). This part of the covenant is related to the verse in Isaiah **51:1** "Look to the rock you were hewn from"; namely "Look back to Abraham your father" (**ibid. v. 2**).

But, then the Midrash goes on to query the pieces. Why cut the animals into two? The Midrash reveals to us that "most of the covenants in the Bible, where the word "karat" is used, are done by dividing something into half." It gives a list of the covenants which are accompanied by dividing something into half, for example, the covenant at Sinai by dividing the blood of the sacrifices into half.

But, what of our covenant? The Midrash is also bothered by the word "leymor". Why is this word necessary, what does it teach? The Midrash spells it out: "The wise person will heed and draw the lesson, the word "leymor" teaches us that God promised also to Sarah: "To your offspring I assign this land'. My decree is for both

[Abraham and Sarah], and this is similar to what is written: "For the Lord will ransom Jacob…" (**Jer. 31, 10**)"

The two halves signify that the covenant is made with two people, Abraham and Sarah. The Midrash probably had in mind the continuation of the verses from Isaiah 51: "[Look] to the quarry you were dug from", namely, "to Sarah who brought you forth". It is obvious that to Isaiah Abraham and Sarah are the equal progenitors of Israel; the models to whom Jews are to look for inspiration as models of covenantal relationship with God. The Midrash establishes that this is not merely a biological fact, but that Sarah was specifically included in the covenant, the physical symbol of which is the dividing of the animals into two pieces.

Furthermore, this Midrash sees a parallel confirmation that God's covenant is with both the patriarch and the matriarch in Jeremiah's account of Jacob's ransom, and probably assumes that we will realize that Jeremiah goes on to ascribe the redemption of the land of Israel for Abraham's, and Jacob's, offspring to Rachel: "Restrain your voice [Rachel] from weeping, Your eyes from shedding tears; For there is a reward for your labor - declares the Lord: They shall return from the enemy's land." (**Jer. 31, 15**) It is Rachel whose actions enable Israel to return to its land. Her merit is that of enabling the covenant which God made with her and Jacob to be fulfilled. For our Midrash, Isaiah and Jeremiah God's covenant is clearly with both patriarchs and matriarchs.

TTT/ **Egalitarianism in Midrash, Bible and commentaries**

***Genesis 17:1-2**

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am El Shaddai. Walk in My ways and be blameless. I will establish My covenant between Me and you, and I will make you exceedingly numerous.

Another central theme of Lekh Lekha is the concern for progeny. Abram finally, at age 86, fathers a son, Ishmael, and he seems to be quite content. (**end of Gen. 16**) Thirteen years pass, and presumably Abram spends that time as a good father, raising and enjoying his son. Nothing is told in the Torah of those years. Perhaps they are the humdrum years of child rearing, when each day seems like the next, and there is no outstanding event that needs to be retold.

Then, when Abram is 99, God speaks to Abram: "When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am El Shaddai. Walk in My ways and be blameless. I will establish My covenant between Me and you, and I will make you exceedingly numerous." (**Gen. 17, 1-2**) God, after all this, decides to enact a special covenant with Abram. It seems as if the covenant is made manifest in physical terms by circumcision of the foreskin of all males in Abram's household. A clear sign of change in status is that Abram's name is changed to Abraham. In addition, God announces that Abram will have another son with Sarah, whose covenantal circumcision must take place on the eighth day of his life.

God enters into covenantal relationships with people from the beginning of the Torah. It seems as if the notion of God and humans being covenantal partners is basic to the Torah's worldview, it is inherent in God's relationships with humans from the very beginning. What is interesting here, is that this covenant is symbolized

physically on the body of each person. Previous covenants also had symbols, but they were remote, natural phenomenon, such as the rainbow that symbolized God's covenant with humanity in the day of Noah. (cf. **Gen. 9, 12ff**.)

What is the nature of this covenant? What is so special about it? There are two parts to the answer. One is the uniqueness of the physical sign and its own symbolism, and the other is the personal and individual nature of the covenant as a paradigm of all covenantal relationships.

As to the first part, the removal of the foreskin is an act of openness, of creating receptivity by removing skin which separates us from others. Indeed, one Midrashic tradition knows of four organs which have coverings that need to be removed. They are: the ear, the mouth, the heart and the male organ. This tradition quotes verses in which the removal of the "orlah", skin covering, of the ear, mouth and heart signifies openness and receptivity to God's laws and to the needs of other people. (**Gen. R. 46, 5**)

Not only do the verses clearly spell out the metaphor of skin covering as obstruction to the outside world, but they also show it as impermeability so that the outside cannot enter to us. The Midrash makes the point that the sexual organ is the most in need of being made more perfect in relationship to others, and requires the most wisdom to control its desires.

This tradition stresses that covenant is in order to perfect ("tamim") human personality. Abraham knows that he is not perfect, but God makes the covenant in order to give us an aid that will enable us to move in that direction. Abraham has checked his astrological horoscope and seen that he will not have a son, but God scolds him: "Stop being so spoiled, Israel has no astrological sign!" Part of being able to be receptive to God is to rid oneself of speculations that lead one to be spoiled. (**Nedarim 32a**)

The second part of our answer is the vast Midrashic tradition on covenant as being personal and individual, while at the same time applying to all members of the group. Indeed, in the **Mishnah Nedarim 3, 11**, which praises the covenantal breadth and depth of the commandment of circumcision, R. Yishmael tells us that circumcision is great because 13 covenants attend it ("she-nichretu aleha shelosh esrai britot"). R. Yishmael pays attention to the fact that the word "brit", covenant, appears 13 times in our chapter. It is indeed the leitmotif of the story.

This language is used and expanded in our tradition. Each blessing and curse implies a covenantal relationship. Each one occurs in both general and specific form, that is four covenants. For each there are four actions which one takes on them to learn, to teach, to keep and to do, that is eight for each blessing and eight for each curse, a total of sixteen. There are three major instances of covenant with the nation, Sinai, the plains of Moab, and Mt. Grizim and Mt. Eval, so that the rabbis could announce that there are 48 (3 x 16) covenants attached to each mitzvah of the Torah. (**Sotah 37a-b**)

R. Shimon further states that each of the 48 covenants is multiplied by 603, 550, the number of males who left Egypt.

The multiplication of covenants is fascinating, for it stresses the inherent nature of responsibility which each person has for their own actions as a "member of the covenant", "ben brit", but in the latter midrash we begin to see that personal responsibility is only part of the story. The whole nation of Israel is linked by covenant not only to God, but to each other. The nature of this deep linkage is the central theme of Jewish religion. The combination of mitzvot, concrete actions of the body, and covenant, a pursuing of moral perfection in relationships with others and with God is the field of play of this covenant.
TTT/ **Theology of Midrash partnership, covenant etc.**

***Genesis 17:15-16**
As for your wife Sarai, you shall not call her Sarai, but her name shall be Sarah. I will bless her; indeed, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she shall give rise to nations; rulers of peoples shall issue from her.

At the end of Lekh Lekha, Abram's name is changed to Abraham, and Sarai's name is changed to Sarah. "And God said to Abraham, "As for your wife Sarai, you shall not call her Sarai, but her name shall be Sarah. I will bless her; indeed, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she shall give rise to nations; rulers of peoples shall issue from her." (**Gen. 17:15-16**) What is in a name? Both of these "new" names indicate that Abraham and Sarah will become parents. Indeed, we refer to them as the first in the line of heroes known as matriarchs and patriarchs.

It is clear that this change of name symbolizes something other than the mere fact of biological parenthood. That is, to be considered a "mother" or "father" of the nation requires more than merely being the first in line of progeny. One clear cut example of the meaning of being a matriarch or patriarch can be discerned from the verses in the prophet Isaiah: Listen to Me, you who pursue justice, You who seek the LORD: Look to the rock you were hewn from, To the quarry you were dug from. Look back to Abraham your father And to Sarah who brought you forth. For he was only one when I called him, But I blessed him and made him many." (**Isa. 51:1-3**, haftarah for Ekev).

The prophet points to Sarah and Abraham as examples to be emulated both in matters of faith, "You who seek the Lord", and in matters of practice, "You who pursue justice". Although the verse 3 is in the singular, the English rendition of "he" misses the possibility in Hebrew of seeing the couple as a singular expression. Such usage is found in **Gen. 1:27** and **5:1-2**, where singular and plural are both used to refer to a man and woman couple.

The parallel word to Abraham's being called "your father" is for Sarah "teholelchem", which is translated as "who brought you forth", a rather roundabout way of saying "mother". The Hebrew word implies giving birth, but it includes the connotation of "bringing up" in the sense of "creating". It seems to me that the word refers to Sarah in a manner of an educator, who not only gives birth to the children but "raises" them as well. Her values and her actions are important for the future personalities of the children.

Radak, in his comments on this verse, stresses that the word is NOT in the past tense, as our translation has it. But, "teholelchem" is in the future tense. In Radak's own

words: “look at them, and walk in their paths, and consider what I did for them.” That is, the status of patriarch or matriarch is not merely biological, but their deeds, their faith, their pursuit of justice, and their closeness to God, in short, their lives, each in their own way, constitute examples that are constitutive of the nation. We should all strive to bring up our own children in their model.
TTT/ **theme of egalitarianism in Bible, Midrash and commentaries**

***Genesis 17:22**
And when He was done speaking to him, God was gone from Abraham

Abraham is incredulous that Sarah will bear him a child, but God makes it clear that the covenant will be transmitted through Sarah's child (17:21), thus, making it clear that Sarah is included in the covenantel promise (as a sign her name is changed). "And when He was done speaking to him, God was gone from Abraham" (**17:22** JPS; "va-ya'al Elohim me-al Avraham"). The translation here smoothes over the difficulties of this verse. Literally, it says "God arose from being on Abraham". This is clearly a difficult sequence of words to imagine just what is being referred to.

The Midrash (**Gen. R. 47:22**), at first merely wants to learn a halakha from this verse, and uses it as a prooftext for the rule that one must always take leave from a friend with permission. Abraham was talking with God, and sees the angels coming toward him (**18:1 ff**.), so, the Midrash says, seeing that he had talked with God all that was necessary, he took leave of God, and, God took leave of Abraham. One question that arises out of this comment is, how does one know when you have talked enough with God? We might assume that there is no end to such talk, yet the Midrash here assumes that there is a necessary conclusion to conversation, even if it is with God.

However, this Midrash also quotes Resh Lakish's statement, that "the patriarchs (we would add the matriarchs) actually are the Merkavah" ("ha-Avot hen hen ha-Merkavah"). On the face of it, Resh Lakish understands the verse literally, namely that God "arises up out of Abraham"!! He also brings similar verses about Jacob (**35:13**, when Jacob returns from Aram, and **28:13**, the ladder). This phrase, "ha-Avot hen hen ha-Merkavah", was used over and over by the Zohar and other kabbalistic works, often taken as a literal statement. However, it was used in a different way by two of the greatest rishonim, Rashba (**R. Shelomo b. Adret**, 1235-1310, **part I, siman 423**) and Tashbetz (**R. Shimon b. Tzemach Duran**, 1361- 1444, **part I, siman 1**).

Rashba used this statement to explain why the first berakha of the Amidah begins by addressing God, as the "God of Abraham" etc., and not as "God of the heavens and God of the earth". He discusses the question of kavvanah in prayer, and the assumption that there is a special knowledge and expertise needed before one can say the prayers properly. Rashba attacks that idea, saying that every one, in HIS language "even the women and amei ha-aretz", even those who do not know the intention of the words, or who mix up one word with another, EVERY ONE gets the reward of prayer merely for the general kavvanah of praying. He says: "Heaven forbid that we stop anyone from praying on the grounds that they do not know the inner kavvanah of the great sages, and we should not weaken their desire to pray...". In this context he understands the phrase "ha-Avot hen hen ha-Merkavah" to mean: THE MENTION OF OUR ANCESTORS AS A FORM OF ADDRESSING GOD IN PRAYER IS EQUIVALENT TO MENTIONING THE CREATION OF HEAVEN AND

EARTH!! Or to put it another way THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN OUR ANCESTORS AND GOD IS AS GOOD A WAY TO THINK ABOUT GOD IN PRAYER AS IS THE MAJESTY AND MYSTERY OF GOD'S CREATING THE UNIVERSE.

TTT/ **Egalitarianism in Midrash, Bible and commentaries, also openness in religion, leniency rather than strictness**

Rashba puts this idea in the context of every person's ability to relate to God in a general way, making it possible to pray. He says that it is most appropriate to mention "zechut avot", the positive things we inherited from our ancestors, at the beginning of our prayer. Perhaps he has in mind the Midrash in which God appears to Moses speaking in the voice of his father, Amram. The word "avoteinu", our ancestors, in the prayer, according to this Midrash, means literally our own parents (**Ex. R. 3:1** etc.). We first learn of our Jewishness, the lessons of life, and first experience love and "zechut" from our own parents. They are our direct connection to the patriarchs and matriarchs, and the most immediate way we have to pray. Prayer can be universal, not just for scholars, because everyone can relate to some positive feelings about their parents.

Tashbetz expands this notion, and views our relating to the stories of our ancestors as a kind of creation of Jewish life, values and discourse about the world. Their creation was so great that I, the individual Jew thousands of years later, can still find a place to define myself within what I know of their lives. When I define myself Jewishly, I enter their company, and studying their lives, and learning the values and criteria of living that such study teaches me, enables me to purify my own doubts and enables me to even deal with my own wrongdoing. The spiritual rewards of living in accord with the ways of our ancestors, studying tradition and making it our own, is equivalent to God's creating the universe. Thus "ha-Avot hen hen ha-Merkavah", implies that LIVING A TRADITIONAL JEWISH LIFE IS OUR OWN CREATION STORY. We create the world, through our ancestors, with their help, and it is a world which we can pass on to our own children.

***Genesis 17:26-27**

Thus Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised on that very day ("be-etzem ha-yom ha-zeh" בעצם היום הזה); and all his household, his homeborn slaves and those that had been bought from outsiders, were circumcised with him

At the end of Lekh Lekha Abraham is instructed by God to circumcise himself, all the males born in his camp, and all newborn males at 8 days. The act constitutes the sign of a covenant between God and Abraham. It is also the prelude to the announcement that Abraham, will sire a son with Sarah. The Torah tells us that Abraham carried out this command, and summarizes: "Thus Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised on that very day ("be-etzem ha-yom ha-zeh"); and all his household, his homeborn slaves and those that had been bought from outsiders, were circumcised with him." (**Gen. 17, 26-27**)

Since we are already informed that Abraham and his son, Ishmael, were circumcised "on that very day ("be-etzem ha-yom ha-zeh")" (**v. 23**), what does verse 26 come to add? Here is a case where the words seem superfluous, and thus the midrash much explain of what use they are. The midrashic tradition is drawn to the emphasis of the

phrase "on that very day ("be-etzem ha-yom ha-zeh")". One well known interpretation is that circumcision must take place in the daytime, and not at night. (cf. **Rashi on Gen. 17, 23**, and **YD 262, 1**)
TTT/ **Midrash and principle of 'superflous' words**

Ibn Ezra adds that the repetition of the phrase "on that very day ("be-etzem ha-yom ha-zeh")" indicates that all of the members of Abraham's household were so motivated to perform this mitzvah that they all came the same day without waiting. This shows, says Ibn Ezra, that Abraham did not force them to undergo circumcision, but rather that they were enthusiastic about keeping God's command by their own choice. (**on Gen. 17, 26**) Thus, the phrase "on that very day" expresses the idea that when someone is ready, by their own choice, to keep even one mitzvah, that there should be no delay in accommodating their desire. When we see the delays and obfuscations piled up in the matter of conversion by the state rabbinate in Israel it becomes clear that those rabbis are violating this principle.

Another approach in the midrash is to stress that Abraham carried out the circumcision in the daytime as a demonstrative act to the world concerning his devotion to God. God commands Abraham to circumcise the males of his household in broad daylight so that no one who objects can claim that he did it at night so that no one would notice. Those who object can come forward and try and stop Abraham since they will witness his action. (**Gen. R. 47, 9**) In this version the lesson is that one cannot hide one's strongest convictions. If Abraham believed that his action was like signing a covenant with God, then he cannot do it surreptitiously, rather it must be "be-etzem ha-yom", here understood to mean "in broad daylight". Indeed, another version of this same midrash adds that God joined His right hand to that of Abraham in performing the circumcision. The covenant was mutual, not only in a symbolic way, but also in action. This is based upon the verse in **Nehemiah 9, 8** "ve-charot imo ha-brit", which is taken literally by the midrash, "you performed the brit [milah] together with him". (**Song R. 4, 1**)

Another approach is to understand our phrase as indicating brisk promptness. Despite the nature of the request, which would result in pain and discomfort, Abraham did not hesitate for a second, but immediately carried out God's command "on that very day ("be-etzem ha-yom ha-zeh")". One midrash contrasts this attitude with the attitude of carrying out the command as if it was forced labor, some kind of "public service" ("anagriah") punishment of the courts. Abraham carried it out joyfully, not as a forced burden. The proof is that he made a party with food and drink, and this teaches us that when a brit milah is performed there needs to be joy and refreshments. (**Midrash Tehilim 112, 2**)

A tradition exists which connects the phrase "on that very day ("be-etzem ha-yom ha-zeh")" used here with the same phrase used in reference to Yom Kippur (**Lev. 23, 21 and 28-30**). The conclusion is that Abraham's festival of circumcision was done on the 10th of Tishri, on Yom Kippur. Indeed, it is God's seeing of the blood of that day that moves God to forgive Israel its transgressions. The spot where Abraham performed this mass ceremony was the very spot upon which the altar was to be built, and thus the spilling of blood on the altar is part of the ritual. In some ways this reminds us of the blood put on the door posts of Israel's homes in Egypt, and it is also the basis of the motif of blood in the circumcision prayers which culminate in

Ezekiel's verse: "I said to you: “Live in spite of your blood.” Yea, I said to you: “Live in spite of your blood.” (**16, 6; cf. Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer 28**)

Midrash Tannaim (to **Deut. 32, 48**) identifies four primary places where our phrase is used in the sense, mentioned above, that it represents the firm commitment of the person devoted to God who carries out his commitment "in broad daylight" against the protests of those in the world who reject God's notions. The first is Noah (**Gen. 7, 13**) describing the day that he and his family entered the ark. Those who were against the building of the ark came to protest. Here it seems to me that the ark symbolizes the saving of the world from corruption in the sense of overuse. The ark is thus a symbol of ecological awareness, of relationships between animals and humans in a way which preserves all the species rather than let them perish. Those who protest are the one's who want their own convenience or power, and it matters naught to them that it comes at the expense of nature.

The second case is our case of Abraham. Here Abraham's expeditiousness in beginning his journey represents fidelity to devotion to God. Those who object want to remove notions of God or of transcendent values from human discourse. The third example is in Egypt (**Ex. 12, 17**) where God, "on that same day", takes Israel out of Egypt in the sight of those who object. Those who object are those who oppose giving up rule over another nation. They oppose the notion that God has declared that humans are meant to be free, and that oppressive slavery is wrong. The final case is that of Moses (**Deut. 32, 48**) when God tells him to enter the cave on Mount Nebo and die. Those who protest do not want to continue to take responsibility for the nation's welfare. They want the old leaders to continue without end. Moses did miracles for the nation, who can compete with that? But, God wants the nation to know that Moses will not last forever, and each one must realize that the future of the nation depends on them. Miracles are the responsibility of all.

Parashat Va-Yera **וירא**

This parasha begins with messengers, who may be angels, and ends with messengers, who may be angels. The Hebrew word, malakh, means a messenger and it also means angel. There are many tales crammed into this one parasha, the announcement of the birth of Isaac, Abraham's argument with God over the fate of Sodom, the destruction of Sodom, the birth of Isaac, the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael from Abraham's company, the binding of Isaac, the Akedah, and at the end another announcement of births, among whom is Rebeccah.

***Gen. 18:1-2**

"*The LORD appeared to him by the terebinths of Mamre; he was sitting at the entrance of the tent as the day grew hot.* 2*Looking up, he saw three men standing near him. As soon as he saw them, he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them and, bowing to the ground. he said, "My lords, if it please you, do not go on past your servant.*"

The language and the sequence of events in the opening verses of this week's parasha are very confusing. God appears to Abraham who is sitting by his tent (**18, 1**). Abraham looks up and sees three people approaching. He runs to invite these people into his tent and bows down to them (**18, 2**). Then "he [Abraham] said, "My lords (adonay), if it please you, do not go on past your servant." (**18, 3**) The Hebrew word "adonay" can also mean God, the Lord, and indeed, JPS notes this possibility. If we understand the word in the first meaning, this is a continuation of Abraham's pitch to the men to come and rest in his tent. If, however, we understand it in the second sense; then Abraham is talking to God, and saying, please don't go away while I make dinner for these weary travelers.

The second sense is spelled out in a Midrash on the verse: "You have given me the shield of Your protection; Your right hand has sustained me, Your care has made me great." (**Ps. 18, 36**) The verse is describing Abraham, "who was sitting while the Shekhina was standing and waiting for the guests to finish eating". From this interpretation our Midrash learns: "that hospitality to guests is greater than receiving the presence of the Shekhina, as is written: 'my Lord (God) do not take leave of your servant' (Gen. 18, 3)". (**Midrash Tehillim 18:29**)

This Midrash learns a lesson of proper behavior from Abraham's actions. The needs of guests need to be tended to before any revelation can take place. It is a powerful lesson and one which might seem to be counterintuitive to the Bible. If encounter with God is such an important goal in life, and it is, then what does one do when that encounter clashes with some hungry and weary people who happen to show up just as the divine encounter is beginning? Our Midrash has a clear answer, the needs of human's takes precedence.

But, our Midrash does not stop there. R. Berakhia in the name of R. Levi adds the following: "Abraham tried to stand up [to honor God, but that would mean leaving the guests alone] and the Holy One told him to sit down, and said to Abraham that he is a portent for his descendants that they will sit in Synagogues and Houses of Study, and I [God] will stand, as is written: "God stands upright in the community of God" (**Ps. 82, 1**)" One might think that during prayer or study we should be standing up out of respect for God or the Torah. But, the priority which Abraham established, namely, that human needs come before the encounter with God is maintained every

day in the Synagogue service or in the lesson in the Bet Midrash, they are "the community of God" which God honors by standing up.

After the announcement to Sarah that she will give birth, it is revealed to Abraham that God is planning to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. The meal is over, the announcement of Abraham and Sarah's progeny has been made, and then God reveals his plan to Abraham. And then the Torah tells us: "The men went on from there ("va-yifnu misham ha-anashim") to Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the Lord." (**Gen. 18, 22**) Now, Abraham stands before God, because he is requesting something. It is the protocol of the Amidah prayer, which is based on petition.

At the same time the guests leave, and the Hebrew word is "va-yifnu". This can literally mean they turned around, presumably Sodom was in the opposite direction; or, it can mean that they turned their backs on Abraham. One Midrash learns from these words the esoteric fact that angels have no backs, only fronts.

Their task is to bring destruction on Sodom. Abraham is fighting with God over saving Sodom, and the men, angels, have turned away from Abraham in order to carry out the task that he is trying to prevent. One Midrash interprets the word "va-yifnu" in a chilling way: "The men went on from there ("va-yifnu misham ha-anashim"), God emptied out of them all mercy and compassion." (**Midrash Aggadah, ed. Buber, Gen. 18, 22**) The Hebrew root "panah" can mean to remove or to empty. The Midrash explains that the total destruction of Sodom, even with not a single righteous person left inside of it, required that any quality of mercy or compassion had to be evacuated. One cannot take lightly the destruction of life, even if absolutely sure that the one being destroyed is evil and worthy of destruction. But, this Midrash also cautions us that when taking life, even in a just cause, we are in danger of losing qualities of mercy and compassion, and that is exactly the opposite of Abraham.
TTT/ **Multi-meaning available in Hebrew verbs [words] imparts multi-possible moral lessons to scriptural narrative**

***Gen. 18, 17-21**
Now the LORD had said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, 18since Abraham is to become a great and populous nation and all the nations of the earth are to bless themselves by him? 19For I have singled him out, that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is just and right, in order that the LORD may bring about for Abraham what He has promised him." 20Then the LORD said, "The outrage of Sodom and Gomorrah is so great, and their sin so grave! 21I will go down to see whether they have acted altogether according to the outcry that has reached Me; if not, I will take note."

God hears the cry of oppressed people from Sodom, and inspects the deeds of the Sodomites to determine their punishment. (**Gen. 18:20-21**) God considers revealing this to Abraham. The Torah portrays a kind of vacillation on God's part: "shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?" (**Gen. 18:17**) At first we might be astonished at the fact that God should even consider discussing such matters with any mortal. Why and in what sense is Abraham a partner of God in doing justice?

The answer is given together with the question: "since Abraham is to become a great and populous nation and all the nations of the earth are to bless themselves by him, for I have singled him out, that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the Lord BY DOING WHAT IS JUST AND RIGHT..." (**Gen. 18:18-19**). Abraham IS God's partner in perpetuating and cultivating justice and righteousness in the world. As a moral partner, God does not want to carry out justice without involving the partner in the process of decision making. From this point of view the Torah is revealing the absolute depth of the idea of God's partnership with Abraham.

The Midrash analyzes the nature of Abraham's partnership with God in being responsible for justice and righteousness in the world. One Midrash (**Tanhuma, Buber, 7:7**) puts the case of Sodom in the perspective of God's previous moments of justice, namely the "Era of the Flood" ("dor ha-mabul", Gen. 6ff.) and the "Era of the dispersion" ("dor ha-pelagah" - Tower of Babel, Gen. 11). In both of those cases God metes out justice to ALL the people, with just one exception. Presumably, ALL mankind deserved the punishment, and this is made clear in the Torah (e.g. cf**. Gen. 6:5,11**).

This Midrash makes a striking assumption, namely that Abraham was troubled by these incidents. He anguished over them, and called into question God's justice, thinking to himself "is it possible that there were no righteous people then?". The Midrash uses Abraham's response to God when told that Sodom will be destroyed because of its wickedness as proof of its assertion about Abraham's thoughts. When God reveals to him the fate of Sodom, Abraham blurts out: "Will you sweep away the innocent along with the guilty?" (JPS translation). Abraham's reaction reveals his inner turmoil, and his doubts about Divine justice. Does the Midrash chide Abraham for those doubts? On the contrary, it praises him by comparing him to Job. Job said the same thing, but it was an unripe thought (cf. **Job 9:22**) merely stating that it seems as if God makes no distinction between righteous and evil people. Abraham's thought, on the other hand, was ripe and valid, for he not only raised the question, but DEMANDED justice from God: "Far be it from you to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike." (**Gen. 18:25**) The goal of partnership is to take responsibility. The partner can be rebuked if they seem to act unjustly! Merely to grumble about it is not the valid way to act, one MUST speak up and make their query known.

Another Midrash (**Tanhuma, Buber, 10:10**) specifically designates Abraham a "hero" ("gibor") for calling God's justice into question. The reason that Abraham is so outspoken about how God's justice appears in the world is because he is afraid that people will draw the conclusion that God runs the world cruelly. Abraham is a "hero" because he takes the job of promoting justice seriously. Even if it appears to him that God is not doing justice, he will NOT GIVE UP ON THE NEED FOR JUSTICE, therefore, because of that need Abraham argues.

If we feel that there is no justice in the world, how does that affect our psychology? Is there not a danger that we will reach the conclusion that it is "not worthwhile" to be just? Is there not a subtle danger of eroding Abraham's, and thus Jewish tradition's, ultimate commitment to justice and righteousness by concentrating on what appears to be God's lack of justice during the Holocaust? Is there not a danger that we will

quietly and internally reach the conclusion that there is no Divine justice in the world by constantly thinking about what happened there?

Abraham's greatness was that he DID think about what happened, and YET DID NOT GIVE UP ON HIS COMMITMENT TO JUSTICE. We can and must think about the eclipse of justice in history, but we must fight with ourselves, as Abraham fought with God, to maintain our own ultimate commitment to justice and righteousness. If we are obligated to argue with God over what is perceived to be God's injustice, HOW MUCH MORE SO must we admonish ourselves when we perceive injustice in our midst.

The implication is that it is our DUTY to challenge God's justice vis a vis the injustice in the world, as for example, the Holocaust. The plain Biblical view is that God is not omnipotent and that we are partners in bringing justice to the world. Abraham takes that partnership seriously. However, it seems that the Midrash is saying that there might be a price to pay for the constant challenging of God's justice, namely that we develop, even subconsciously, a disregard for justice altogether. That we become cruel in our relationships, or at the very least uncaring about the suffering of others. The greatness of Abraham in the Midrash is that he BOTH challenged God's justice as a partner, and at the same time challenged any complicity in injustice that subtly arises because we challenge God's injustice.

To illustrate: I sense that for many Jews today, of all ages, it is axiomatic that God's justice failed during the holocaust. They hurl this challenge out as if it was self evident. I also sense that because of this "axiom", they tend to belittle the need for Jews to be VERY careful about doing injustice to others. It seems as if the inner thought process is something like: "God does not do justice, witness the Holocaust. The lesson I learn from that is that it does not matter too much if Jews are unjust, as long as that helps Jews." It seemed to me as if our Midrash is warning against that thought process, and it grounds the source for this warning in Abraham.

TTT/**partnership of God and man, with emphasis on responsibility of one for the other, including moral behavior, validating human moral autonomy, although not alone, and warning of how concentrating on injustice, God's wrath or destructiveness, can lead to an immoral position.**

***Gen. 19:15**
As dawn broke, the angels urged Lot on, saying, "Up, take your wife and your two remaining daughters, lest you be swept away because of the iniquity of the city."

The story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is another example of God's punishment by destruction. The first instance was the total destruction of the world by flood. The instance in our parasha, of Sodom and Gomorrah, is "small" compared to the flood, yet when one considers the centrality of Deity in the process of human perception of the world, it too can be disturbing. (for the thorny problem of "the violent God" cf. David Blumenthal's "Facing the Abusing God", and Naomi Graetz's "Silence is Deadly").

There is a Midrashic tradition which, it seems to me, can be interpreted as expressing dismay at the thought that mass destruction might become viewed as possible,

because God does it. Such a conclusion would assume that humans could decide on the basis of strict justice who is worthy of such punishment and who is not. The fact that such a determination is impossible for humans might not stop the forces who "identify" with God, and use that "identification" to justify their destruction of others.

The story as told in our parasha starts out with: "As dawn broke, the angels urged ("va-yaitzu") Lot on, saying, "Up, take your wife and your two remaining daughters, lest you be swept away because of the iniquity of the city." (**Gen. 19, 15**) The Hebrew "va-yaitzu" implies immediate urgency, it is a word of extreme haste. Yet, the destruction of Sodom is not immediate. Lot gathers his household and they depart for the nearest city, Zoar, to escape.

We then read: "As the sun rose upon the earth and Lot entered Zoar, (then) the Lord rained upon Sodom and Gomorrah sulfurous fire from the Lord out of heaven." (**Gen. 19, 23-24**) The Talmud notes that there is a long time between "dawn", when things seemed urgent, and "as the sun rose". If things were so urgent, why did God wait until Lot and family had reached Zoar before destroying the cities? Indeed, this passage defines the walk from Sodom to Zoar as a "long distance". (cf. **Pesahim 93b**) The Midrash here clearly suspects that God waits with the actual destruction until Lot and family are safe. But, why?

The answer is enigmatic and even a bit disturbing. "It is like a married woman who has gone astray, and she is ashamed of her deed, and does not wish others to see her pregnancy (born of adultery), so she ends it at night so that it cannot be viewed by sunlight, as it is written: "As the sun rose upon the earth and Lot entered Zoar"." (**Gen. R. 51, 1**)

Who is the woman in this parable? Some interpreters of the Midrash read it as the people of Sodom. But, it seems to me that it can be read differently. God does not want the destruction to be witnessed. Thus, God waits for Lot to reach Zoar, out of range of sight, before raining the fire down. Perhaps that is the rationale behind the command not to look back. According to this interpretation, even though the punishment is "legal", that is just, God senses that if people see it they will be aghast, they may recoil from God. In some sense an atmosphere of shame attaches to mass destruction, even if it comes about out of justice. I can't help but think about the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It may be that those acts could be arguably "justified" acts of war, but there is wide consensus today that shame attaches to them.

This reading is reinforced by another Midrash on the first two verses of **Psalm 57**: "For the leader; do not destroy ("For the leader, *al tashheth*. Of David. A *michtam;)* when he fled from Saul into a cave. Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me…" The Midrash reacts to David's plea to God "do not destroy", and connects it with Lot. David was saved by going into a cave, and so was Lot. The Midrash expands David's plea thus: "until I entered the cave you were merciful to others for my sake, as it is written "and Lot entered Zoar" and dwelt in a cave; may it by Your will not to destroy". (**Yalkut Shimoni, Psalms, 775**)

David's prayer to God is that God should NOT destroy for David's sake, rather God should show mercy. Perhaps, this Midrash thinks that until Lot left Sodom God had mercy on the people for Lot's sake. The Torah says that God had mercy on Lot for Abraham's sake (cf. **19, 29**). Implied here is a chain of mercy from person to person, and David prays that this chain not be broken.

This Midrash continues to expound the beginning of verse 2: "Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me". Why is the plea for mercy repeated twice? "Have mercy on me that I not fall into the hands of Saul, for he will not spare me. Have mercy on me that Saul not fall into my hands, for my evil impulse might incite me and I will kill him."

David fears falling into the hands of an "unbalanced" enemy who he knows will show no mercy and kill him. On the other hand, he is afraid of "losing control" over his own sense of mercy, giving in to his own violent urges, and killing. The model of mercy that David wants God to be, is so that he would be spared this dilemma. Perhaps there is an implied criticism of God's violence, not that it is unjust, but that it sets a bad example for God's creatures. The examples of destruction are thus problematic. While the idea of absolute justice meted out against evil seems satisfying, but, in human terms, it oversimplifies the mixture of good and evil in most human actions, and depends on God's absolute knowledge, to which humans have no access.
TTT/ **warning of how concentrating on injustice, God's wrath or destructiveness, can lead to an immoral position.**

***Gen. 19:29-35**
29Thus it was that, when God destroyed the cities of the Plain and annihilated the cities where Lot dwelt, God was mindful of Abraham and removed Lot from the midst of the upheaval. 30Lot went up from Zoar and settled in the hill country with his two daughters, for he was afraid to dwell in Zoar; and he and his two daughters lived in a cave. 31And the older one said to the younger, "Our father is old, and there is not a man on earth to consort with us in the way of all the world. 32Come, let us make our father drink wine, and let us lie with him, that we may maintain life through our father." 33That night they made their father drink wine, and the older one went in and lay with her father; he did not know when she lay down or when she rose. 34The next day the older one said to the younger, "See, I lay with Father last night; let us make him drink wine tonight also, and you go and lie with him, that we may maintain life through our father." 35That night also they made their father drink wine, and the younger one went and lay with him; he did not know when she lay down or when she rose.

We know little of Lot, but, he seems to be one who is always making trouble for Abraham. He seems to be, relative to Abraham, greedy and materialistic. He is also always getting into trouble, being captured etc., and Abraham is always bailing him out. Even though he is the only righteous person in Sodom, in comparison to Abraham, the meal he offers God's messengers is meager. Still, Lot is righteous compared to the rest of Sodom, as he is saved. But even that may be called into question by **19:29** where Lot's being saved is related to Abraham's favor with God.

In any case, the fate of Lot and his family is quite tragic. His two married daughters and their husbands think he is crazy about leaving Sodom and stay behind only to perish in the inferno (19:14). Lot's wife looks back and becomes a pillar of salt. These

events set one of the most intriguing episodes of this week's very full parasha, the incest between Lot and his two remaining daughters. These are presumably the two virgin daughters whom Lot thought to send out to the mob in order to spare his guests. The guests, perform a miracle and save Lot's daughters from defilement (**19:4-10**). Ironically, it is Lot himself who, in the end, defiles them, and not the "evil" townspeople of Sodom:

"Lot went up from Zoar and settled in the hill country with his two daughters, for he was afraid to dwell in Zoar; and he and his two daughters lived in a cave. And the older one said to the younger, "Our father is old, and there is not a man on earth to consort with us in the way of all the world. Come, let us make our father drink wine, and let us lie with him, that we may maintain life through our father." That night they made their father drink wine, and the older one went in and lay with her father; he did not know when she lay down or when she rose. The next day the older one said to the younger, "See, I lay with Father last night; let us make him drink wine tonight also, and you go and lie with him, that we may maintain life through our father." That night also they made their father drink wine, and the younger one went and lay with him; he did not know when she lay down or when she rose." (**19:30-35**)

The Biblical story is the locus of one of the most fascinating of Rabbinic discussions of action and intent. The discussion centers on the last verse of Hosea (**14:10**) "For the paths of the LORD are smooth; The righteous can walk on them, While sinners stumble on them." R. Yohanan is puzzled by the verse. Literally it says that the Lord's path, the very SAME path, can be a path of either a righteous person or a sinner! How is it possible for two people to both perform the same action at the same time, and one be considered righteous and the other a sinner?!

The answer will be that the way the person is considered depends not ONLY on the action, but also on the intent behind the action. Thus, two people can do the same action, but if the intent of one is for a divine purpose, that person will be considered righteous. Whereas, the same deed performed with base intent leads one to be considered a sinner. This is also a well known exercise in moral philosophy. Indeed, modern philosophers might answer that if the intentions are indeed different, then it is not the same action (thanks to my friend Prof. Alex Blum). I claim that maybe this is the point of the Talmudic discussion as well. That is, because of the different intent even though both people participated in the same deed, one is doing a righteous act and the other a sinful act, that is, two different actions.

The Talmud suggests two cases that might be examples of applying our verse, but rejects each one. The third example is our story of Lot and his daughters: "...it [the verse] is illustrated by Lot when his two daughters were with him. To these [the daughters], whose intention it was to do right, [applies], 'The righteous can walk on them', whereas to him [Lot] whose intention it was to commit the transgression [applies], 'While sinners stumble on them'. (**Nazir 23a-b**; cf. the magnificent and expanded treatment of this same issue in **Horayot 10b ff**.) The Talmud suggests here that since the daughters thought that the whole earth had been destroyed, and that if they did not produce children all of humanity would come to an end, that they had to sleep with their father. But, Lot knew that humanity had not come to an end. He was merely filled with incestual lust for his daughters.

The daughters motivation is spelled out in the text, **v. 31-32**. But, how can we so simply assume Lot's intention was sinful? There are three arguments given to bolster this assumption. One is that of R. Yohanan who interprets all of the phrases about Lot as being phrases which imply base lust. The second is the comment of R. Yose ben R. Honi, who points out that the Hebrew word referring to when the elder daughter got up from sleeping with Lot has an unusual dot over the letter "vav". This shows that Lot was aware of what was happening. And finally, if Lot was aware of why his daughters had plied him with wine the first night, he should have refused to take more wine the next night!! (v. **34-35**) Lot plays dumb in order to indulge his bases appetites.

In the continuation of this section the Talmud brings further cases of the same principle, and in the end R. Nahman b. Yitzhak formulates the principle that: "A transgression performed with good intention is better than a precept performed with evil intention" (**Nazir 23b**, "gedolah aveirah li-shemah mi-mitzvah she-lo li-shema").

This astounding formulation seems to be quite different from our usual conception of Talmudic halakha. The weight of intention in these cases seems to be at odds with the rest of the Talmud. Indeed, the discussion there attempts to soften R. Nahman's dictum and to limit its meaning to a great extent. Still, it is clear that the question of intent as a major part of judging the righteousness of an act is clearly spelled out in this sugya.

Indeed, Maharil (Rabbi Jacob ben Moses Moellin) uses this formulation to allow women who had been abducted by gentiles during the Hussite wars in Austria to return to their husbands with no penalty. The problem is that there is an halachic presumption that a married woman might have let herself partake in sex with her captor, and thus be forbidden to return to her husband. Maharil boldly writes that they are permitted to return unconditionally on the grounds that it is unthinkable that a woman would willingly allow herself to commit adultery. It must be that her only intention was to save her life, and Maharil quotes our Talmudic passage that in matters of sexual transgressions "A transgression performed with good intention is better than a precept performed with evil intention" (**teshuvot Maharil, 72**). Marahil teaches us that it is proper to think the best about a victim of sexual violence.
TTT/ **power of intention in Rabbinic tradition, not only action, and complexity of moral judgment that does not take intention into account.**

***Gen. 21:33-34**
33[Abraham] planted a tamarisk at Beer-sheba, and invoked there the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God. 34And Abraham resided in the land of the Philistines a long time.

Parashat Va-Yera is very familiar because it includes the readings for Rosh Hashanah. In particular, this week's parasha includes the story of Abraham's pact with the Philistines at Beer Sheva. The story ends: "[Abraham] planted a tamarisk ("Eshel") at Beer-sheba, and invoked there the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God. And Abraham resided in the land of the Philistines a long time. (**Genesis 21, 33-34**)

Abraham's exact location is a source of discussion for the commentators. In chapter 22 he travels to mount Moriah with Isaac, and in the chapter after that he travels to

Hebron to bury Sarah. Ramban specifies that the command of the Akedah is given in Beer Sheva. Ramban deduces this from our verse: namely, that Abraham planted a tree in Beer Sheva, then follows the command of the Akedah, and at the end of the Akedah he returns to beer Sheva (**Gen. 22, 19**).

In addition, Ramban points out that the Torah specifically tells us that Abraham lived a long time in Philistine country, that is, in the Beer Sheva area. He also explains that this is the reason that it takes him three days to reach mount Moriah, for if he was living in Hebron at the time, it would not take that long to get to the mountain. Ramban also infers from all of this that Sarah did not die at this same time. If that were the case that would mean that Abraham lived in Beer Sheva and Sarah lived in Hebron, and this is not possible.(**Ramban on Genesis 23, 2**) Abraham lives a longtime in Beer Sheva, and at a certain point moved to Hebron, where Sarah died. This comment, that denies immediate proximity between the Akedah and Sarah's death is problematic for many midrashim which calculate ages assuming proximity, as well as for other midrashim which make homiletic capital out of Sarah's role in the Akedah.
TTT/ **proximity in narrative can be used to infer meaning**

Another midrashic tradition interprets our verse simply saying that Abraham lived in Philistine country more time than the lived in Hebron. He lived, according to this tradition, in Hebron 25 years, and in Beer Sheva 26 years. (**Genesis Rabbah 54,6**)

A more well known Midrashic tradition is the one on Abraham's planting of the Eshel tree. A summation of this tradition is found in the **Yalkut Shimoni on va-yera, 95**. This Midrash portrays a discussion among the sages as to the meaning of the word "Eshel". The first opinion, which has no attribution, is simply that Abraham planted a forest with all kinds of beautiful and fruitful trees. This comment clearly understands the word "Eshel" to be a type of tree, but sees its as representative of an ongoing action of planting. This Midrash understands that the Torah is telling us that Abraham did not plant just one tree, but he planted a whole forest of many different kinds of trees.

This interpretation fits very nicely into the announcement that Abraham spent many years in Philistine country. The idea of cultivating a whole forest shows that he related to Beer Sheva as to his home. He had come to settle permanently, and wanted beauty and fruitfulness to be part of his life and the life of his children. According to this tradition, Abraham's actions here are the actions of a person who is making a homeland for himself and for the future. Afforestation is a clear sign of connection to the land and of caring for the land.

Then follows a debate between Rabbi Judah and Rabbi Nehemiah. One of them says that the word "Eshel" is a forest, and the other says it is a caravanserai. The one who says that's the word implies a forest, is supported by the verb "to plant" which is associated with the word "Eshel". But how does the one who interprets the word as caravanserai justify the word "plants"? This opinion points to a verse in Daniel where the word "plants" is used in the sense of erecting a structure: "He will pitch ("va-yita") his royal pavilion between the sea and the beautiful holy mountain" (**Daniel 11, 45**).

This opinion bolsters it view by appealing to the continuation of our verse: "[Abraham] invoked ("va-yikra") there the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God". Our Midrash uses one of the most fascinating midrashic techniques, reading a Hebrew word in another conjugation. It says we should not read "invoke" ("kara") but rather "caused others to invoke" ("hikri"). By changing the simple conjugation to an active one, we understand that the verse is saying that Abraham teaches everyone who visits his caravanserai to call on the name of God. After the lodger had eaten and drunk they would rise to praise Abraham, who then told them "Have you eaten of my food? No, you have eaten of the food of the One who spoke and brought the world into being. Praise and thank Him."

This reading of the word shows that Abraham not only sees Beer Sheva as his home, and not only cares for the physical nourishment of his surroundings, but also that he is concerned with the spiritual nourishment as well. It is not only the notion of God, but the sense of gratitude and thankfulness towards God's bounties which Abraham teaches by his presence in Beer Sheva.

Another opinion in this Midrash is that of R. Zeira, in the name of R. Yehuda b. Simon. They say that "Eshel" means a Sanhedrin. Quoting the verse from **I Sam. 22, 7** in which Saul's judgment is acted out under an Eshel tree. According to this opinion, Abraham worries not only for the physical and spiritual condition of his new homeland, but also for responsible citizenship for all who live there. The enactment of laws and a legal judiciary system, and the protection of that system against corruption are essential to the development of a society based on awareness of God and of God's bounties. It is precisely God's command to share his bounties fairly, and to support all who may falter in securing those bounties for themselves, that impels us to create and maintain judicial systems.

All of the interpretations of Eshel taken together give a picture of Abraham creating physical, spiritual and communal resources for a homeland. This creation is not only for Abraham and his descendants, but also for the Philistines who live there as well. This is clear because the covenant with them is the very meaning of the name Beer Sheva, "well of covenant" (**Gen. 21, 31**).

In the Talmud we learn that all that is said of Abraham applies to Sarah as well. Since the verse "Happy is the man who fears the Lord" (**Ps. 112, 1**) is applied to Abraham, the Talmud asks: "happy is the man, and not happy is the woman?". The answers there show that the sages understood this verse to apply to anyone, man or woman, who is engaged in repentance and who teaches and fulfills God's commands. The answer in the Talmud to its own rhetorical question is "no, of course, a woman is included in the use of the word "man" here." (**AZ 18b-19a**) Thus, it seems clear that Sarah is included in the enterprise of building the society described as "Eshel".
TTT/ **Midrashic practice of using similar language is an attempt to reach a "plain" meaning of the text, but since Hebrew can work in many ways, there may be more than one "plain" meaning**

***Gen. 22:13-14**
13When Abraham looked up, his eye fell upon a ram, caught in the thicket by its horns. So Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in place of his son.

14And Abraham named that site Adonai-yireh, whence the present saying, "On the mount of the LORD there is vision."

The Akedah is one of the most suspenseful episodes in the Torah. The denouement is almost an anti-climax. "When Abraham looked up, his eye fell upon a ram, caught in the thicket by its horns. So Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in place of his son. And Abraham named that site Adonai-yireh, whence the present saying, "On the mount of the LORD there is vision."" **(Gen. 22:13-14)**

After the stress of not knowing if Abraham will offer Isaac up as a burnt offering, we are told that he happened to see a ram, caught in the shrubbery by its horns, and he decided to offer that up in place of Isaac. I have written elsewhere about Abraham's decision to offer the ram in place of Isaac. But, this time I want to concentrate on the very fact of the ram's existence! Isaac poses a most logical question to his father: "Here are the firestone and the wood; but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?" (verse 7) They have brought things from home, but the most difficult thing to find in a mountain wilderness, an animal, they have not brought! Wood could be hewn, a firestone could be found. Almost anyone who has trekked through Israel knows that these items are around in almost every part of the country. But, a sheep or ram just wandering around - that is not very common. Yet, the Torah tells us Abraham just looks up and there it is!

Our translation reveals the disadvantages of NOT working with the Hebrew text. The Hebrew verses are full of difficulties, which the translation smoothes over (as it must). The most difficult word in the Hebrew is the word "'ahar", literally "behind, other, follows", which describes the ram ("'ayil 'ahar" lit. "a ram following behind" or "other ram"). The JPS translation, in a footnote, confesses to reading the word AS IF it was written "'ahad", "a ram", citing manuscript versions. Indeed, every Jew who recites the Shema knows this trap, which is why we elongate the "dalet" of "'ehad", to make sure that we are saying that God is "'ehad" "one", and NOT that God is "'aher", "another". Still, the text of the Akedah uses the difficult word, "'ahar". We also lose in translation the Hebrew play on the words "yireh", "will see" and "yayraeh", "will be seen". But, I wish to concentrate on the "other ram".
TTT/ **Translation problems, needing to chose one equivalent which destroys the mulit-layered complexity of Hebrew, and then, of course, might chose the one which is least fruitful.**

The Yerushalmi asks the question what this word means in the context. (**Yerushalmi, Taanit 2 hal. 4**) The answer is: "after ("'ahar") all these generations, your children are destined to become entangled in sin, but they will eventually be redeemed from their sins by the horns of this ram, as we read: "My Lord GOD shall sound the ram's horn And advance in a stormy tempest" (**Zech. 9:14**) The horns of the ram are caught in the thicket. The ram is Israel in the future, and the word "'ahar" means "after" in the sense of the future. The horns of this ram will be made into a horn, that God will sound when Israel is redeemed.

This same idea is repeated in many Midrashim, and a variation is found in connection with Rosh Ha-Shanah. In one Midrash, God tells Abraham that when the descendants of Isaac are judged on Rosh Ha-Shanah they should blow the shofar to remind God of the merit of Isaac and Abraham. Abraham asks God: "what is a

shofar?" God tells him to look behind him, and suddenly Abraham sees the ram and its horns, which is the shofar. (**Tanhuma, va-yera 23**, the verse from Zechariah also figures prominently in the liturgy of Rosh Ha-Shanah.)

But, still the question haunts us, where does this ram come from? The above Midrash cites a common saying in Rabbinic midrash that the ram was one of the 10 things created in the twilight between the end of the 6th day of creation and Shabbat (cf**. Avot 5:6** for locus of the tradition). What is the sense of this tradition? Why can we not just assume that some ram got lost and was wandering around until it got caught?

One of the most interesting of all commentators on the Torah is Eliezer Ashkenazi, known as "ha-Rofe". In his commentary "Ma'asei ha-Shem" he writes:

"you already know what the sages were wont to say that it [the ram] was created from the time of the 6 days of creation, and they intended in saying thus to inform us that there was NO theft involved [in taking the ram].... Now, according to the plain meaning of the text one could say that the ram was Abraham's property to begin with. When Abraham went off to Mt. Moriah, the ram followed him ("'ahar"), and this is our verse: "when he looked up he saw a ram had followed him", that is, he saw that the ram had come after him and was now caught in the thicket. Now this explains the sense of the Rabbinic tradition. For they did not say that the donkey [of Balaam] was created during the six days, but rather that "the mouth of the donkey" was created. For their interpretation was that the change in the laws of nature was not the donkey itself, but that it should open its mouth to speak! Also, in our case, that the ram should separate itself from the flock and walk three days after Abraham required that special wisdom be implanted in the ram, and this inordinate wisdom [for a ram] was created during the 6 days."

Ha-Rofe gives plain sense to the difficult word. It does indeed mean "to follow" or "to go after". But, the ethical connotation from this explanation is that Abraham did not steal anything in order to perform his sacrifice. Many times deeds performed in times of stress cause people to not be fastidious about their moral behavior. The stress of the incident and the weighty decisions that must be made can lead people to play loose with morality, to "justify" stealing because of the "needs" of the moment, or to feel "entitled" to steal because of a personal triumph.

Ha-Rofe enlightens us to a subtle small point in the large and dramatic story of the Akedah. The ram belongs to Abraham. This is a poignant and highly moral end to the story. After passing the test of the Akedah, finding favor and blessing directly from God, we might think that Abraham might use his new status and approval from God to ignore basic tenets of God's law. Now, we see that he REFUSES to bend the rules of proper behavior. Abraham would NOT have made the sacrifice if he had not recognized the ram! There is no excuse for unjustified immoral behavior, even in extreme situations of stress or of triumph.

*** Gen. 22:20-23**

20Some time later, Abraham was told, "Milcah too has borne children to your brother Nahor:
21Uz the first-born, and Buz his brother, and Kemuel the father of Aram; *22and Chesed, Hazo, Pildash, Jidlaph, and Bethuel"—23Bethuel being the father of Rebekah. These eight Milcah*

bore to Nahor, Abraham's brother. 24And his concubine, whose name was Reumah, also bore children: Tebah, Gaham, Tahash, and Maacah.

At the end of the dramatic account of the binding of Isaac, Abraham returns to Beer Sheva. We then read that Abraham is told that his sister-in-law has given birth to children. "Some time later ("va-yehi aharei ha-devarim ha-elah"), Abraham was told, "Milcah too ("gam he") has borne children to your brother Nahor…". (**Gen. 22, 20**) The list of children includes Rebekah, even though she is not one of Milcah's children, but her grandchild. Milcah gives birth to Bethuel, and we are informed that Bethuel gave birth to Rebekah ("u-vetuel yalad et rivka", **Gen. 22, 23**).

Several questions present themselves about this passage. One question has to do with the timing of it. Was this told to Abraham right after the Akedah? Why did he not hear of it before hand? Did these births take place before Isaac was born, or after? These questions are prompted by the Hebrew "gam he" when referring to Milcah's children. She "too" bore children, and the question is why specify "too"? The connection with Sarah and the difficulty of her birth is apparent. Did Milcah also have problems conceiving?

Our passage begins with the phrase "some time later ("va-yehi aharei ha-devarim ha-elah")" which is almost identical to the phrase that opens the account of the Akedah: "some time afterward ("va-yehi ahar ha-devarim ha-elah")". The JPS translation differentiates between the two phrases based upon the difference in the Hebrew "aharei", which is rendered "later", and "ahar", which is rendered "afterward". Apparently the attempt is to distinguish between something that took place later, a longer time after, as against something that took place right away, that is, afterward.

One midrash takes our phrase to indicate that the message arrived even as Abraham is coming down from Mt. Moriah. He is agitated by what almost occurred because it graphically illustrated the uncertainty of the future, the fragility of life and continuity. So, Abraham is made tranquil by the notification that his son's partner in life has been born. (**Gen. R. 57, 1**) This approach also appears in another Midrash which gives examples of the rising and setting of the sun. Before Sarah's sun had set, before her death, Rebecca's sun had already risen. (**Gen. R. 58, 2**)

Be that as it may, one midrash enquires about the phrase which implies that this happened after something had taken place. What is the thing that took place? It seems quite simple to say that it was the Akedah, but that is too simple. One Midrash latches on to the Hebrew word "davar", thing, which can also mean a matter which is spoken or thought. So, the message to Abraham comes after Abraham had thought about the Akedah. In the aftermath he considers the consequences of this episode. The Midrash has Abraham thinking: "If he [Isaac] had died on Mt. Moriah, he would have died childless! Now what should I do, I will marry him off immediately to the daughters of Aner, Eshkol and Mamre, for they are righteous women, and I do not care about their lineage." (**Gen. R. 57, 3**) Abraham is in shock over the implications of the Akedah. There will be no continuity through Isaac. His reaction is to immediately arrange a marriage so that Isaac's future will be assured. The fact that the daughters of his cohorts, who are fine people, are not of his lineage, and are outside of the nation is seen as less of a problem when faced with the possibility of no continuity at

all. If the choice is between no grandchildren and marrying out, then for Abraham, at this point, he chooses the latter.

In a sense the messenger, or however he hears about it, saves the day. Abraham is assured that he will not have to make this difficult choice. The woman meant for Isaac has been born, with the proper lineage, and she is waiting for Isaac. In a sense this Midrash treats the message to Abraham like the ram of the Akedah story. Just as the choice to slaughter Isaac is brought to the forefront, a messenger tells Abraham that he does not have to make that choice, and a viable solution is shown to him. According to this approach, Milcah had given birth after Sarah. Both of them had difficulties conceiving, and just as God had favored Sarah with pregnancy, so to had He favored Milcah. (cf. **Lekah Tov on Gen. 22, 24**)

The point is that Abraham should not pursue the solution at hand, but he should know that God will provide a suitable bride for Isaac, just as God provided the ram. True, Abraham will have to work harder to make it happen. He has to send his servant and lay out large sums in order to make sure that his son marries in the fold, but it is possible. Abraham should not dismiss it as an impossible task, and just acquiesce to the easy solution at hand just because it is not a totally bad solution.

Another Midrash gives us an account of conception. If the woman climaxes first, the child will be a male, but if the man is first, the child will be a female. R. Hiyya bar Abba explains that this means that the male children take after the mother, and the female children take after the father. Milcah bore sons, but Bethuel sired Rebecca. Now the Hebrew "yalad et rivkah" can be translated literally "gave birth to Rebecca". It seems strange to say that man can give birth?! So, the verse must be talking about characteristics. In some sense both parents are the formers of their children, and this folklore of conception is used to explain the passage. (**Tanhuma Tazria 4**)

The whole passage is designed to show the workings of God's power in history and in family matters. The saving of children, the coupling of young people, and the continuity of future generations all need support and strengthening from above.

Abraham – A Masorti perspective

God can surprise us. God's messages can be contradictory.

God tests Abraham (**Gen. 22,1**). What is the test? Most interpretations of the Akedah say that the test is: will Abraham obey God's harsh command without criticism. I want to suggest another interpretation: the test is will Abraham criticize God's command!! Will Abraham know on his own how to mold God's command into an ethical and just way of living?! This is a test because it demands giving up security for insecurity. Let me explain.

It is a basic source of security to trust in God's commands. Security is based on familiarity and past experience. Abraham probably developed a theory of custom and law based on his past talks with God, and his general knowledge of how gods are worshipped all around him. He worships God, builds altars, "and Abraham planted an Eshel in Beersheba and called on the name of the Lord, God of the world" (**Gen. 21, 33**) Thus Abraham builds security for himself.

God tests Abraham: will Abraham risk insecurity if God's command is offensive to his sense of justice and ethics? The first test is with Ishmael. Abraham was sorry about Ishmael, and didn't think it fair or just to send him away. But when God says: "Listen to Sarah's bidding..." (**Gen. 21, 12-13**) -- he doesn't protest. He just does it. He is secure that what he does is right, even though it pains him.

But God thinks Abraham has failed. He surprises him and gives him another test. God realizes that Abraham's sense of security is so precious to him that he will not give it up even for Ishmael, his son. In order to really test Abraham, God must make his demand even harsher. As if He says: "if it was so easy for you, Abraham, to accept my commands, and give up your son. Lets do it again, only for higher stakes. For Ishmael is driven away, and might live or might not, but Isaac, I will demand that you offer him up with your own hands".

Abraham complies!! In those days it was common and known that a proper way of worshipping gods was to sacrifice what was dearest to you. The sacrifice of children was acceptable and was considered in those days as the most praiseworthy of them all. In the context of Abraham's times, he is doing the right thing by following God's specific command. Abraham's god is just demanding what the other gods demand. Thus this command seems to be even more in the realm of the known and secure. God's commands turn into "law", fixed secure patterns of behavior that don't have to be questioned. Abraham doesn't hesitate, and arrives at the mountain and prepares to sacrifice his son: "he stretched out his hand and raised the knife to slaughter his son" (**Gen. 22,10**)

God is astonished at Abraham's continued failure, and decides to make the test even more complex. While Abraham's hand is stretched out for slaughter He gives him a second command, totally contradicting the first!! "The angel of God cried out from heaven and he said...don't touch the lad, do nothing to him" (**Gen. 22, 11-12**) Now what is Abraham to do? His hand is frozen. God is contradicting himself! To which command is Abraham to listen? The Midrash describes his perplexity: "'don't touch the lad', Abraham said: I will just wound him a little. 'do nothing to him', not even a wound." (**Gen. R. 56,7**) Abraham wants to carry out what was a secure clearcut command. After all the command to sacrifice was given by God, and the command to not sacrifice only by an angel! Abraham wants to be certain, and he is confounded. There is NO certainty, when God's commands contradict conscience, morality and our sense of justice. Anyone who thinks that there is certainty in that situation, opens the door to perpetuate evil.

Abraham is faced with the fact that he must challenge God's commands, for they are contradictory. Both cannot be acted upon! If he totally disregards the first one, he is destroying a revelation from God, and breaching his own sense of security. If he totally disregards the second he is violating his own sense of justice and ethics, and also ignoring a Divine revelation. Abraham is brought up short. He now realizes that he must apply the criterion of conscience, morality and sense of justice to criticizing God's commands. He realizes that God's commands are only raw materiel which Abraham must make livable.

By this criterion Abraham makes a bold choice. He follows the second command which accords better with his conscience, morality and sense of justice. But what

about the first command? He sees a ram caught by its horns in the thicket and he offers it as a sacrifice, in place of his son. (**Gen. 22, 13-14**) God did not tell him to do that!! In the two chapters we read on Rosh Hashanah this is the only action Abraham takes on his own initiative with no specific command from God. He made the decision by himself, that some direct commands of God should not be obeyed literally, but are best carried out only symbolically!! We learn, perhaps the greatest lesson from this narrative! Man has the right and responsibility to monitor God's commands using the criterion of his own conscience, morality and sense of justice. Man can alter God's commands, even to the point of carrying them out only symbolically. The ram is tahat beno, in place of his son, but that is Abraham's decision.

Abraham is the model who shows us how to relate to God's commands. He establishes the autonomy of man's conscience, morality and sense of justice. It is is an autonomous realm of righteousness (Mishpat u-Tzedakah) by which God's commands can be weighed and examined. Commands which offend the autonomous realm of righteousness can, perhaps must, be turned into symbolic ones.

That Abraham chose correctly, is confirmed in the text: "The angel of God called out a second time...for having done that thing..." Abraham is blessed. Which thing? The ready trip to Mt. Moriah, stretching out his hand to kill, or not harming Isaac at all and deliberately offering up a ram in his place. Clearly, the praise is for the second path; praise for Abraham's ability to guard the spirit of God's commands while turning the practice of religion into something which more closely coincides with the moral and the spiritual. The angel adds: "and you did not spare your only son" (**Gen. 22, 17**), the 'and' meaning, you did not spare him by virtue of the substitution. You did not spare him, symbolically. Abraham codifies the second command, which states that Abraham's God does not require human sacrifice, for all generations; leaving the first command to be performed symbolically. Because of his ability to make decisions like that "all the nations of the earth will be blessed in your seed" (**Gen. 22, 18**)

Abraham is the first Masorti Jew. He accepts a priori, the received traditions and laws. But he always is willing to subject them to the test of his own conscience, morality and sense of justice. He will make decisions about received rules, and if they offend his conscience, morality and sense of justice he may choose to make them symbolic. The rabbis showed us that our power was even greater than that, they fixed the rule that the Sages have the power to uproot a Divine command from the Torah. The reality was that no Takkanah really 'uprooted' a Divine command, but turned it into a symbolic deed, or even just a rule that should be studied but not performed. (cf. **Mishnah Sheviit chap. 10, Talmud Bavli Sanhedrin 71a**).

The Masorti Jew should strive to base his life on tradition. That is what Masorti means. We can change received law and make it symbolic. Today there are candidates for this treatment, e.g. the status of women as regards not being able to testify and not having power of initiating divorce. But this need for change does not free us from the need to fulfill God's commands. We must strive to live a Jewish life, which simply means by the rules and traditions which have been accepted. We do have the power to live it in accord with our conscience, morality and sense of justice. This does not mean living it with our sense of convenience or common sense. To

downplay our conscience, morality and sense of justice in favor of meticulous observance of God's laws is to risk becoming insensitive and foregiving to injustice. To downplay God's laws for meticulous adherence to what we think our conscience, morality and sense of justice is telling us, is to risk turning subjectivity into corrupt power. Like Abraham we must do both: live God's law and be willing to change it.

Sarah dies, and Abraham must procure a fitting place for her burial. It is this need that motivates Abraham to begin to fulfill his mission to settle the land of Israel. Buying land for a cemetery is one of the steps of any community that is set on permanence in a place. After burying Sarah Abraham worries that his son Isaac will not continue the line, as he is not married. Abraham sends his servant back to his ancestral home to obtain a wife for Isaac. The servant succeeds in finding Rebecca, who agrees to return to Canaan and to be Isaac's wife. They return, and there is an immediate bond between them. Abraham takes another wife, Keturah, and has many children with her. Abraham dies and is buried by his sons Isaac and Ishmael. Ishmael's progeny are recounted.

***Gen. 23:3-4**
Then Abraham rose from beside his dead, and spoke to the Hittites, saying, "I am a resident alien ("ger ve-toshav") among you; sell me ("tenu lee") a burial site among you, that I may remove my dead for burial."

The beginning of parashat Hayyei Sarah is very familiar. We learn of the death of Sarah, and of Abraham's major efforts to afford her a proper burial. The parasha begins: "Sarah's lifetime—the span of Sarah's life—came to one hundred and twenty-seven years. Sarah died in Kiriath-arba—now Hebron—in the land of Canaan; and Abraham proceeded to mourn for Sarah and to bewail her. Then Abraham rose from beside his dead, and spoke to the Hittites, saying, "I am a resident alien among you; sell me a burial site among you, that I may remove my dead for burial." (**Gen. 23, 1-4**)

One unusual phrase catches our eye: "Then Abraham rose from beside his dead" ("va-yawkam Avraham mei-al penei meito"). What does this mean? The word "to arise" has many meanings in the Bible. It does mean simply to arise, but it also has the meaning of battle, to rise up against someone. One Midrash uses this nuance to comment that this phrase tells us that "Abraham felt that the Angel of Death was attacking him" (**Gen. R. 58, 6**).

This comment adds a dimension to the text that is lacking on the surface. How did Abraham feel? What was his reaction to Sarah's death? The Midrash makes it clear that he was outraged at Sarah's death. Abraham felt as if he was being attacked, as if he had become an "enemy" of the Angel of Death. This is a common feeling among those whose closest loved ones have died. There is a feeling of being singled out for unfair attack.

This Midrash also aids us in making sense of the sequence of events in the verses. Sarah died, Abraham proceeded to mourn her, and "Then Abraham rose from beside his dead". The mourning which is described here, is connected with the feeling of grief which leads one to feel attacked. It is not the formal mourning of Jewish custom, which can not precede the burial.

This understanding further enhances our grasp of the next sequence. Immediately after Abraham has buried Sarah, he engages in finding a wife for Isaac. Clearly, Abraham's pain and deep sense of Sarah's death being untimely is enlarged by the added loss of Sarah not being able to see Isaac wed. Perhaps Abraham feels remorse for not having taken steps before now to find a match for Isaac. The fact that Sarah

will not be at the wedding just adds to his grief, and propels him to act swiftly and forcefully to ensure Isaac's future. Indeed, viewed in this way, the Torah's foreshadowing of Rebeccah's existence immediately after the Akedah (**Gen. 22, 23**), may be seen as a rebuke of Abraham for not acting immediately on behalf of Isaac. It is the Torah's way of saying "don't wait too long when life affirming possibilities arise."

Another Midrash raises a further possibility. There is a dispute over the verse **Num. 3, 4**: "So it was Eleazar and Ithamar who served as priests in the lifetime ("al penei") of their father Aaron" (**Lev. R. 20, 11**) R. Hiyya bar Abba says that since the phrase "penei" is used, it means that they served after Aaron's death. The proof is our verse. R. Yitzhak, however, says that the operative phrase is "al penei", which means they served in Aaron's lifetime. The proof is the verse of Gen. **11, 28**: "Haran died in the lifetime ("al penei") of his father Terah".

But, this dispute only serves to heighten the ambiguity of our verse, which uses a different version of the phrase in dispute. Abraham here rises "me-al penei meito", and the implication is that perhaps this is before Sarah actually dies. Indeed, there are a number of places in the Bible where the text says that a person has died, and it is clear they have not, or a Midrash interprets them as not yet dead. That is, the simple use of the verb "to die" CAN mean "is in the process of dying". In that case, Abraham's anger against the Angel of Death might be timelier, and it also might explain why he needs to procure a gravesite as soon as possible.

Still, the majority of opinions accept the literalness of Sarah's death. Indeed, our verse is the locus of the Halakha that as long as one's dead has not been buried, one is not obligated to perform any of the ritual mitzvot. The Mishnah makes it clear that one is absolved from Shema, the Amidah and Tefillin until the dead are buried. One must totally be immersed in taking care of the burial. The Talmud even goes so far as to apply this absolution to those who watch the body. The high priority which Halakha attaches to burying the dead, and for properly guarding the body is very clear. One is absolved from performing mitzvot until one's own dead is buried, even if you are not guarding the body, and one who guards is similarly absolved, even if the body is not his own relative. (**Ber. 18a**)

Now, lets take a closer look at how Abraham acquires a burial site. He approaches the local citizens of Hebron and says to them: "I am a resident alien ("ger ve-toshav") among you; sell me ("tenu lee") a burial site among you, that I may remove my dead for burial." (**Gen. 23:4**). The JPS translation of "tenu lee" as "sell me" seems to be beyond the literal meaning of "give me". Abraham is asking for a plot to bury Sarah, a physical space. The Hittites respond by offering him the use of an existing burial site. Abraham then insists on buying a site that would be his alone, and not have to bury Sarah in an existing burial site of some other family. In the end they agree, and Ephron sells a plot of land to Abraham for a burial site.

What is the meaning of the term "resident alien" "ger ve-toshav"? It seems to be composed of two contradictory terms "ger", meaning alien or stranger, and "toshav" meaning resident or citizen. Is the person a stranger or a citizen? In the Bible the word "ger" means an alien, only in later Jewish texts is the meaning of the word transformed to mean "convert to Judaism". In the Bible the verb associated with the

noun "ger", alien, is "la-gur", i.e. to dwell, but not permanently. That this meaning was also clear to the Midrash is obvious from the well known passage in the Passover Haggadahh where "la-gur" is specifically shown to mean that Jacob did not come to settle permanently in Egypt but only to dwell temporarily. In later Jewish texts, new verbs are coined to reflect the new status of the noun "ger", convert, "le-hitgayyer" to become a convert.

It is clear that Abraham is not claiming to be a convert to Hittite religion, thus the meaning of his using the word "ger" is to describe himself as an alien who happens to live among another people. Ramban explains this plain meaning in his comment on our verse: "The custom was that each extended family had a cemetery site for their family, and all of the aliens "gerim" were buried together in one separate field. Thus Abraham said to the Hittities, I am an alien from another land, and thus I have no family site which I inherited from my forefathers in this land. However, I am now a resident with you, for I desire to live in this land. Please grant me land for a permanent family site just as you have." [ad loc]

Abraham asks for equal treatment in terms of burial rights from the local inhabitants. The implication is that his choice and desire to live in this land should construe some basic rights as to burial sites, such as the local citizens have. What is astonishing is that the Hittites accept Abraham's basic plea, and offer to sell him land. Ramban says that since Abraham had said "give me" ("tenu lee") they thought he meant for free, but once it was clear that he meant to buy the land, they agreed to his terms, and that must mean that they agreed that the land would represent "the right of a citizen" just as they were.

The Hittities agree to sell Abraham a permanent family plot, that is, they agree to Abraham in a sense changing status from alien to citizen, even though he is not of their nation! Furthermore, when seen in this way, it is clear that Abraham is taking a concrete step to fulfill God's promise that this land will be the "citizen territory" of his progeny. But, Abraham does not want to take that step, and start the fulfillment of God's promise, without gaining agreement from the present citizens, inhabitants, of the land!

Still the question remains, on what basis does Abraham expect citizens to give the same consideration to aliens as they give to themselves? One of the great interpreters of the Bible, R. Hayyim b. Moshe Attar, "Or ha-Hayyim", comments that "the sense of Abraham's claim "I am an alien resident" can be understood on the basis of the halakha found in Rambam's **Mishneh Torah, hilchot zechiyah u-matana, 3:11**. This is Rambam's formulation: "one can give a gift freely to a resident alien, because it is a commandment to support them, as it is written (**Lev. 25:35**) "the resident alien shall live with you" (lit. "be alive with you"). Or ha-Hayyim goes on to explain his comment by saying that our holy Torah is based on moral sense, and particularly the laws having to do with social behavior. So we behave toward the aliens in our midst as our moral sense compels us to behave toward citizens, and to make sure that everyone living in the land which we control can live and be supported for life.

Abraham is appealing to the basic human moral sense which is in all men created in God's image. The Hittites should respond to it, and they do. As with many such rules which we know "intuitively" by our moral sense, the Torah also commands them to

us so that we know that they are not only morally sensible but also reflect the Divine will. Rambam makes his position clear also in his **Sefer Mitzvot (positive 195**), by saying that the general mitzvah to be charitable and support the needy in a broad fashion appears in the Torah in several different formulations which, when taken together, support the idea that this mitzvah must be applied not only to Jews, but also to the resident aliens who live under Jewish rule.

One of the verses commanding us to care for the life of the stranger ends with the admonition "you know what it means to be an alien" (**Ex. 23:9**). One Midrash takes this to mean that we must use our imagination and put ourselves in the frame of mind of the alien. This is learned from Abraham, who even though according to the Divine promise was the sovereign over the land, nevertheless describes himself as an alien, and it is learned from David, who even though he was king of Israel, said of himself "I am an alien in this land" (**Ps. 119:19; cf. Mechilta de-R. Ishmael, Nezikin, Mishpatim, 18**). Perhaps it is particularly timely for us to remember that the Torah, in addition to showing God's promise to Abraham that the land will be for him and his progeny, also shows us that the basic moral sense of fair treatment and concern for the life of the non-citizens in our midst is part of the only way that the Divine promise can be fulfilled in human society.
TTT/ **finding moral rules in narrative, the propensity of midrash and Jewish tradition to stress moral values**

***Gen. 24:14**
"let the maiden to whom I say, 'Please, lower your jar that I may drink,' and who replies, 'Drink, and I will also water your camels'—let her be the one whom You have decreed for Your servant Isaac. Thereby shall I know that You have dealt graciously with my master."

Abraham's loyal servant is entrusted with the major task of bringing a wife for Isaac from Abraham's ancestral home. The servant not only has the job of finding a suitable woman, but she must be from Abraham's family, and she must be willing to leave her comfortable and familiar surroundings, and give up the parental protection of being close to her family. She really must be willing to do what Abraham did, go forth from her ancestral home to a new and unknown land.

The servant comes in for a lot of criticism in our sources, primarily because of an unseemly oath that he makes: "let the maiden to whom I say, 'Please, lower your jar that I may drink,' and who replies, 'Drink, and I will also water your camels'—let her be the one whom You have decreed for Your servant Isaac. Thereby shall I know that You have dealt graciously with my master." (**Gen. 24:14**) The Midrash scolds the servant for taking an improper oath (**Gen. R. 60:3**). What would have happened if an unworthy woman, who happened to love camels, would have appeared and responded as the servant had set as his sign that this woman would be taken for Isaac's wife? Indeed, the question of making an oath based upon some external sign that people will say or do something seems to be an improper appeal to God's mercy.

But, the story of the servant is more complicated than that. There seems to be an internal contradiction in how the choice of Rebecca came about. Rebecca shows up, and sure enough, responds as the servant had set as the sign. She volunteers to water the camels. In verses **22-24** we are told: "When the camels had finished drinking, the

man took a gold nose-ring weighing a half-shekel, and two gold bands for her arms, ten shekels in weight. 23"Pray tell me," he said, "whose daughter are you? Is there room in your father's house for us to spend the night?" 24She replied, "I am the daughter of Bethuel the son of Milcah, whom she bore to Nahor." After she finishes watering the camels, the servant gives her jewelry, and then asks her about her family. When the servant hears that this beautiful and kind woman is a member of Abraham's family he praises God for showing kindness and fulfilling his oath.

But in verse **47**, we read: "I inquired of her, 'Whose daughter are you?' And she said, 'The daughter of Bethuel, son of Nahor, whom Milcah bore to him.' And I put the ring on her nose and the bands on her arms." When the servant recounts the events to Bethuel, he changes the order, implying that he asked her family connection BEFORE he gave her the jewelry!

Rashi explains simply that the servant trusted in God so much that he gave her the jewelry BEFORE asking her family ties. Later he changed the story so that he would NOT be accused of fulfilling his mission improperly! He was not aware that the narrator had already informed the reader of the slip up. Rashi assumes that trust in God, and also in Abraham's credit with God, enables the servant to count on his improper oath being fulfilled. Still, he is aware of how it looks to someone else, so he fudges a bit on the story when he tells it again. It is not an uncommon occurrence in life to make a decision based on a feeling or belief, of which one is certain, and then afterwards to explain that decision based on signs that one took to indicate the correctness of the decision. Or, if one is afraid that onlookers will not understand, to make up other versions so that one does not look bad.

Ramban, on the other hand, notices that the text does NOT actually say that the servant GAVE the jewelry to Rebecca, but merely that "the man took a gold nose-ring weighing a half-shekel, and two gold bands for her arms, ten shekels in weight". That is, he took them out in preparation to give to her, IF she gave the right answer to the question about her family. Only when he heard that she was the daughter of Bethuel, did he actually give her the jewelry. Indeed, Ramban does not understand the rebuke of the Midrash. He sees nothing improper about the way the servant behaved. One can look for signs that will help them make decisions about a person, provided that one carefully analyses the signs and does NOT use them as a PURELY miraculous device.

Ibn Ezra adds an interesting slant to this discussion. The sign that the servant requests is a showing of mercy and tenderness. Since the servant believed that this was the main quality of Abraham and his family, someone who exhibited such qualities would certainly be from Abraham's family. That is, the sign is NOT a toss of the coin, but it is a defined quality which a person either exhibits or doesn't. Ibn Ezra contrasts this with **I Sam. 14:9-10**. There Jonathan uses a sign to decide whether to attack a Philistine garrison. "If they say to us, 'Wait until we get to you,' then we'll stay where we are, and not go up to them. But if they say, 'Come up to us,' then we will go up, for the LORD is delivering them into our hands. That shall be our sign." I believe that Ibn Ezra is interpreting Jonathan's sign as a coin-toss. He has decided arbitrarily that if they say one thing that he will attack, and if another that he will not attack. But, the servant is defining a sign which is not arbitrary. There is sense in what he has determined. Signs in this case are not totally "miraculous" events out of

our control, but they are part of a thought out system which help us make a decision based on a larger base of knowledge and based on the goal that we know we wish to achieve.

TTT/ **How later commentators argue over meaning of Midrash, also question of reason over magic**

***Gen. 24:23-24**

"I am the daughter of Bethuel the son of Milcah, whom she bore to Nahor." And she went on, "There is plenty of straw and feed at home, and also room to spend the night."

One of the central characters in the history of Israel is Rebecca. (For a fuller and fascinating treatment of her character cf. Menorah Rotenberg, "A Portrait of Rebecca", CJ , Winter 2002) We are first told about Rebecca's existence immediately after the Akedah (**Gen. 22, 23**) when Abraham, and the reader, gets her birth announcement. We know nothing about her except that she was born, until Abraham's servant, sent on a mission to find a wife for Isaac, arrives in her home territory. Here we find out that she is beautiful, a virgin, and very hospitable and compassionate. (**Gen. 24, 16-20**) Because the servant thinks that she might be the one meant for Isaac he takes out gifts of silver and gold in preparation to give to her. But, before he gives her the gifts he has one last test. He asks her who she is, that is, who are her parents, and if her father's house has room for lodging. (**Gen. 24, 21-23; and cf. Ramban on v. 22**)

Her reply is: " "I am the daughter of Bethuel the son of Milcah, whom she bore to Nahor." And she went on, "There is plenty of straw and feed at home, and also room to spend the night."" (**Gen. 24, 23-24**) Now, the servant is convinced that Rebecca is the one, the intended woman for Isaac. Rebecca's reply reveals another facet of her character, she is very smart; she shows the sign of true intelligence.

This conclusion constitutes a tradition in our exegetic literature. This tradition is based upon the well known rabbinic saying that describes 10 qualities of the boor and 10 qualities of the wise. (**Avot D'R. Natan [ADRN] B 40, cf. Avot 5, 7 where 7 qualities are listed, including this one**) One of the qualities of the wise person is that he answers first things first and last things last. This is taken to mean that an intelligent person responds in the order in which they are asked. ADRN says: "this is Rebecca the daughter of Bethuel…". The point is that she responds to the first question by telling the man who she is, and her patronymic, and she responds to the second question after that saying that there is plenty to eat and plenty of space for lodging. Our text is satisfied that Rebecca fulfills this criterion of the wise person by answering in the order asked.

I presume that the point is that a person who confuses the order of conversation, and who cannot keep a straight line of thought when relating to what was said, is lacking in understanding. Thus, a person who can keep the flow of conversation straight shows intelligence. Rebecca seems to fulfill this criterion admirably. However, there is a rub. She replies in order, but the man did not ask about food! She adds a point that was not in the original question by telling him that there is "plenty of straw and feed at home". Is it a sign of wisdom to answer unasked questions? (cf. **Rashbam on Gen. 24, 25**)

In his Torat Moshe, a commentary on Genesis, Moshe Alshekh writes that Rebecca specifically mentions ONLY animal fodder, and not food for humans. The reason is that her great compassion, shown by watering the camels, impels her to feed them just as she gave them water. The servant's question about lodging only applies to humans, and she wants to remind him that the animals also need care. Rebecca is saying "it goes without saying that I will provide food for the humans, because I tell you there is plenty of food for the animals". Furthermore, human food is always being prepared for the family, but it will take a special effort to prepare more animal fodder for the large entourage of animals. (**Torat Moshe on our verse**) According to this explanation, Rebecca's answer shows wisdom but it stresses her compassion, even above and beyond her bringing of the water to the thirsty animals.

I mentioned that the text about the characteristics of the wise person appears in the Mishnah Avot. Our text of ADRN amplifies the 7 qualities mentioned in the Mishnah to 10. In addition, it gives an example for each quality, and, as we have seen, Rebecca is the example given for the quality of answering in the order asked. In the commentary of R. Yosef b. Moshe Alashkar to Avot he refers to Rebecca being the example of this quality. He then quotes Maimonides saying that this quality implies that a wise person learns about priorities and about matters that apply to the issue at hand. That is, it is not just answering in order that shows wisdom, but understanding other aspects of the question, even if not asked, and inserting them in the right place in the answer! The wise answer takes into account a wider area than just the question and thus, provides a more complete suggestion of an appropriate answer.

Indeed, Rambam notes that in such a wise answer one might even put an earlier matter later, or a later matter earlier, if this reorganization helps to formulate a more realistic and complete answer to the question. Rebecca gives an answer which includes the need to eat in addition to the need for lodging. Thus, her wisdom is shown to be even more complete than the simple matter of keeping the order of the conversation straight. Her answer shows a formidable intelligence which can foresee steps necessary to complete a plan. Is her wisdom in this also part of her undoing as the story develops? This is a question for discussion.
TTT/ **How later commentators argue over meaning of Midrash**

***Gen. 25:11**
"*After the death of Abraham, God blessed his son Isaac.*"

The end of Sarah's life is recorded at the beginning of parasha Hayyei Sarah, and the end of Abraham's life at the end. Before his death Abraham distributes his wealth to his offspring. "Abraham willed all that he owned to Isaac; but to Abraham's sons by concubines Abraham gave gifts while he was still living, and he sent them away from his son Isaac eastward, to the land of the East." (**Gen. 25, 5-6**) Then after Abraham's death, we read: "After the death of Abraham, God blessed his son Isaac." (**Gen. 25, 11**)

Our exegetical tradition wonders what is the nature of this blessing? Why are we specifically told that God blesses Isaac after Abraham's death? One beautiful midrash interprets this to mean that God paid a condolence call on Isaac. In the famous passage which interprets the commandment to walk in God's ways to mean that one is to imitate God's qualities, the quality of comforting the bereaved is connected to

our verse. The blessing that God gives to Isaac is "after the death of Abraham", that is, it is what is known in modern parlance as a "shivah visit". The point of the midrash here is that God is the one who comes to Isaac to offer comfort and companionship after his father's death. (**Sotah 14a**)
TTT/ **Midrash reveals Divine actions as part of developing a specific course of actions that imitate God's actions, thus formulating concrete ways for imitation Dei**

Another aspect of the interpretive traditions surrounding our verse is that Abraham was given the power of blessing. When God charges him to leave his homeland, he ends by saying "and you shall be a blessing". (**Gen. 12, 2**) If the idea is that Abraham is a source of imparting blessings in the world, why does God have to come and bless Isaac? Didn't Abraham do that before he died? Does not the verse that states that Abraham gave "everything" to Isaac (**25, 5**) imply also blessing and not only materiel wealth?

One Midrash attempts to explain this seeming contradiction. Indeed, Abraham's blessings are given, but not only to Isaac. The Midrash tells a striking parable: "This may be illustrated by a king who had an orchard, which he entrusted to a steward. Now this orchard contained two trees which were intertwined, and of which one yielded life-giving fruit and the other a deadly poison. Said the steward: 'If I water the life-bearing tree, the death-bearing one will flourish with it; while if I do not water the death-bearing tree, how can the other exist?' On reflection, however, he decided: ' I am a steward; I will do my duty, and whatever the owner of the orchard wishes to do, let him do.' In like manner Abraham argued: 'If I bless Isaac, the children of Ishmael and of Keturah are included; while if I do not bless the children of Ishmael and of Keturah, how can I bless Isaac?' On reflection, however, he decided: ' I am but flesh; I will do my duty, and whatever God wishes to do in His world, let Him do it.' Consequently, when Abraham died the Holy One, blessed be He, appeared to Isaac and blessed him. Thus it is written, "And it came to pass after the death of Abraham, that God blessed Isaac his son". (**Gen. R. 61, 5**).

A parent cannot bless one child without blessing the others. Even if the parent thinks that one is no good, and the other very good what they must do in the world is bless all their children. According to this Midrash, Abraham did bless Isaac, and also Ishmael and the sons of Keturah as well. What will be in the future is up to God, and perhaps up to how the children act upon the blessings that they are given. In any case, according to this view, God blesses Isaac specifically because Abraham has behaved justly with all of his children.

The contrast between humans and God is fascinating. Normally, we might expect that the human would show preference and act on personal likes and dislikes, while God remains neutral and treats all equally. But, the Midrash implies that God is the one who metes out justice according to God's standards, while humans, who presumably cannot judge in any absolute fashion, need to strive to be fair and just to all.
TTT/ **in a similar vein to imitation Dei is the attempt to distinguish which parts of common human actions are NOT like those of the Divine**

Another Midrash fixes on the implication of the above that God's blessing indicates that Isaac became the leader, the heir of Abraham's leadership. This Midrash recounts, in the name of R. Simon, that in every passage which writes "and it came to pass after", that this signifies that the world returns to a previous state. So, after Abraham dies, the Philistines fill up all the wells that he had dug (**Gen. 26, 15**). The same phrase appears when Moses dies, and the well dries up and the clouds of glory disperse. More examples are given to show that the phrase implies that after an important leader dies, things revert to the chaotic state that they were in before the leader arose. That is, the achievements of the leader are reversed after their death. After every big transition the brink of chaos appears again.

But, the Midrash goes on to explain that the chaotic state does not last. For after the death of every leader, another leader arises and continues forward. Thus, in our case God's blessing to Isaac is what enables him to assume Abraham's mantle of leadership, which in his case meant that he had to act and redig the wells. That is, the chaotic state after the death of a leader can be reversed back to the original. The achievements of the dead leader can be recouped, and even expanded. All of that depends on those who assume leadership. The situation may appear to be out of control, but it all depends on those who inherit the legacy of the former leader. The responsibility for continuity falls upon those who assume the mantle of leadership.

***Gen. 25:11**
"*…And Isaac settled near ('im) Beer-lahai-roi."*

Immediately after we read of Abraham's burial, we read the following verse: "After the death of Abraham, God blessed his son Isaac. And Isaac settled near ('im) Beer-lahai-roi." (**Gen. 25:11**)

The verse presents two immediate difficulties. One, is what does the location of Isaac's home have to do with his being blessed by God? Two, what is the meaning of the Hebrew word "'im" in this context. The difficulty is that the Hebrew word "'im" usually means "with", and NOT "near". What could it mean to say that someone settled "with" a particular place? Our English translation assumes the usage here to mean "near". This is the way that Ramban understands it, and he specifies that perhaps because the place is not a city, one cannot say that Isaac was "in" Beer-lahai-roi, but that he was close to it. That is, "'im" means, as in modern English slang, "with it". The well (Beer) was a landmark that one went to in order to find Isaac. "Just go to Beer-lahai-roi and ask for Isaac." Radak finds other usages of "'im" in the same sense, such as **2 Sam. 13:23**, where the verse has "'im Ephraim", and this means near the area of Ephraim.

While this simple geographical explanation seems plausible, it is not the only way that this phrase is explained. Furthermore, these commentators do not explain how the geographical information is connected to the beginning of the verse about God's blessing Isaac. The Kabbalistic tradition, from the Zohar on, treats this verse in a different way. One of the great Hasidic commentators, R. Kalonymus Kalman Epstein of Cracow (died 1823), in his commentary Maor va-Shemesh, summarizes this tradition of understanding our verse, and puts it in his own way.

He starts by asking why the word "'im" is used instead of the expected "bet", which would signify that Isaac dwelt IN this place. The Hebrew word "'im" really signifies "with" here, but with what is Isaac identifying? Maor va-Shemesh quotes the Zohar tradition that as a result of Isaac's willing participation in the Akedah, any harsh judgments that were coming to him were commuted. To my way of thinking, the phrase used can be read actively not passively. That is, Isaac's harsh judgments toward himself were mitigated by the Akedah. That is, as a result of Isaac's going through the Akedah, he learned not to be so fervent to sacrifice himself! ("nimtak Yitzhak mi-dinav ha-kashim") One might also say that these two understandings are two sides of the same coin.

I base my reading of the phrase on such Midrashim as **Gen. R. 56, 4** where Satan tells Isaac that he is the sacrifice, and Isaac readily agrees. Or, **Gen. R. 56, 8** where Isaac tells Abraham to tie him up very well so that he will not flinch and perhaps become an invalid sacrifice. Isaac's fervor to be sacrificed, and his full assent is stressed in these Midrashim. It is not clear if his fervor is because he feels guilty about something and wants to "give himself up" as atonement, or because he is just an extreme believer. One thing is clear from the comments of Maor va-Shemesh, and that is that the experience softens Isaac's worldview on this issue.

The continuation of Maor va-Shemesh's comments applies to either one of the two ways of understanding the phrase: "he [Isaac] agreed to Abraham's opinion that the world must operate first and foremost according to the principle of mercy, forbearing, patience ("erekh apayim"); namely, that God should not punish so swiftly, and because of this the world can continue to exist." (Maor va-Shemesh, ad loc). According to this view, at some point in the Akedah story, Isaac becomes the one who pushes Abraham. Perhaps that is why the journey from Beer Sheva to Moriah takes three days, namely, Abraham is stalling! But, after going through the incident, Isaac accepts Abraham's premise that one must always strive for mercy and forbearance. Isaac is "with" Beer-lehai roi, which in this tradition stands for God, who is "hai olamim", the sustainer of life, the ongoing provider of life.

***Gen. 25:12**
"This is the line of Ishmael, Abraham's son, whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah's slave, bore to Abraham."

This week's parasha, Hayyei Sarah, begins with the death of Sarah, and ends with the death of Abraham. The death of Sarah, the matriarch, and Abraham, the patriarch, brings forth the issue of inheritance. Even though Ishmael and his mother, Hagar, were sent away from Abraham's household, and even though Abraham, with God's advice, accepts Sarah's decree that "the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son with Isaac" (**Gen. 21, 10**); still after Abraham's death the Torah recounts Ishmael's line. Furthermore, this account begins: "This is the line of Ishmael, Abraham's son, whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah's slave, bore to Abraham." (**Gen. 25, 12**)

Sensitivity to Torah's style will lead one to feel that the emphasis in this verse is on the fact that Ishmael is Abraham's son. Perhaps it is merely a strengthening of God's remarks to Abraham, which include a rejoinder to Sarah: "As for the "son of that slave", I will make a nation of him, too, for he is your seed." (**Gen. 21, 13**) I have

interpreted God's use of the phrase "ben ha-amah" as directed against Sarah's snide referral to Ishmael. It is clear that in God's plan, Ishmael has standing as Abraham's offspring.

Our tradition stresses that Abraham's only true heir is Isaac, and that Ishmael has no claim. It has adopted Sarah's position, with which some verses of the Torah itself seems to be at odds. Indeed, the Midrash is at pains to interpret Sarah's objection to Ishmael's getting any part of Abraham's legacy as total. The Midrash has Ishmael scoffing at the joy the world showed at Isaac's birth. "Fools", he says, "do you not know that I am the first born, and thus will inherit a double portion." It is to this bragging that Sarah replies: "the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son with Isaac ("im beni im yizhak")." The Midrash interprets the double use of the word "with", "im", as having Sarah say: "with my son, even if he would not be Isaac", and "with Isaac, even if he would not be my son." (**Gen. R., Albeck, 53, 9-10**) That is, Ishmael has no share under any circumstances.

There seems to be, as we have seen, discomfort with this absolute position in the Torah. Perhaps the strong patriarchal traditions of the Torah find it impossible to simply alter rights of inheritance that exist because of patrilineal descent. Perhaps the fact that a woman, Sarah, is imposing her desire to change those tradtions makes it even more unpalatable.

One Midrash hints at another reason that God seems so intent on granting some rights of legacy to Ishmael. This Midrash ties Ishmael into the verse where God begins to help Leah: "The Lord saw that Leah was hated…" (**Gen. 29, 31**). Ishmael, in this Midrash, has done no wrong, and because of his mother, he is hated by Sarah. God, thus, saves him by showing Hagar the well in the desert, and promises him wealth, territory, and greatness. (**Tanhuma va-Yetze 5**)

So it seems as if there is a certain amount of ambiguity in our tradition about Ishmael's status as inheritor of Abraham. Most sources deny Ishmael that status entirely, while some others tend to grant him some status as part of the normal patriarchal line of legacy. Indeed, **I Chronicles**, which states these things, says simply: "The sons of Abraham are Isaac and Ishmael" (**1, 28**). Note that even here, Ishmael comes second, even though he is the first born.

What is behind the enmity of Sarah towards Hagar? Many answers are given in the Midrashim, but I want to point to one direction indicated in halachic discussion. The Tosefta locates the enmity in what Sarah said to Abraham: "The Lord decide between you and me" (**Gen. 16, 5**). It is clear from the context that there is tension between the two women over the favors of Abraham, and the bearing of children. The Tosefta (**Sotah 5, 12 Lieberman**) brings this as the locus of the halakha that if a woman says to her husband "the heavens are between you and me" that this is a sign of breakup of the marriage, and the couple needs intervention to prevent divorce. (cf. **Mishnah end of Nedarim**)

This complaint by the woman is interpreted to mean that the husband is not capable of ejaculation, and thus she is prevented from bearing children by him. The halachic discussion is to what extant this is grounds for divorce. Many of the commentaries

interpret the phrase “heavens between you and me” and the halakha that such a complaint requires “intervention”, to mean a course of prayer for children.

Bet Yosef interprets the phrase to be a complaint, not only of sexual dysfunction, but also of estrangement. The woman is saying that an unbridgeable distance is grown between us. Karo specifically applies it to Sarah, saying: “[you have] grown distant from me because of Hagar.” (**Bet Yosef EH 154, 7**) The point here seems to be that intervention is used both because the husband can have an erection, but cannot ejaculate, and perhaps that is due to the emotional distance between himself and his wife. If the husband could not have an erection, the halakha would be that that would be grounds for divorce.

The question of legacy depends not only on physical generation, but also on closeness of family ties, of relationships of spirit and love. Legally, Ishmael deserves proper shares of the inheritance, and he is given them. Still, the inheritance that Sarah defends and promotes is one of closeness, of real family ties, and those ties depend on both mother and father. There is a sense in all of this that Ishmael has proper rights, and those must be strictly acknowledged and protected, but with that, the true heir and bearer of the family legacy, of the legacy of intimacy with both Abraham and Sarah, is only Isaac.

Parashat Toldot **תולדות**

Abraham and Sarah have died. The generation of immigrants to the land of Israel has ended, and now it is the turn of the native born. The story of Isaac and Rebeccah and their relationships with the Canaanites begins. But as in every one of the chapters of Genesis, the internal relationships within the family are central. The family configuration of opposite personalities of brothers in conflict continues. Manipulation and tricking seem to be part and parcel of the family drama. All on the background of gaining what God has promised to the family.

***Gen. 25:19**
[19]*This is the story of Isaac, son of Abraham. Abraham begot Isaac.*

The name of our parasha is "toldot", which literally means "begettings". That is, the word signifies the generations descended from a parent, that is, descendants. The first verse could be literally rendered: "Now, these are the descendants ("ve-eleh toldot") of Isaac the son of Abraham, Abraham sired Isaac." (**Gen. 25, 19**) The exegetical problem in this sentence is clear. If the Torah announces that it is going to tell us about Isaac's (the son of Abraham, so we know it is not some other Isaac) descendants, then why does the continuation of the verse go back to Abraham who begat Isaac? Furthermore, the continuation of this section does, eventually, get to Isaac's progeny, but through the whole story of his marriage to Rebecca, and their struggle to conceive and have children.

The Hebrew phrase "ve-eleh toldot" is not uncommon, and it always precedes a listing of progeny. Why is the use here so different? Furthermore, just a few verses before, at the very end of last week's parasha, the same phrase appears in connection with the progeny of Ishmael, Abraham's other son. There the list of Ishmael's sons follows just as expected.

Does the different textual treatment of the recounting of Ishmael's and Isaac's progeny signify a deeper difference in attitude towards the respective progeny of these two? There are other factors in the text which indicates that this is the case. Indeed, the proximity and identical nature of the two phrases is the basis for a lawsuit by the descendants of Ishmael and Ketura, Abraham's other wife, against the descendants of Isaac. This suit is described in the Talmud **Sanhedrin 91a**:

"On another occasion the Ishmaelites and the Ketureans came for a lawsuit against the Jews before Alexander of Macedon. They pleaded thus: 'Canaan belongs jointly to all of us, for it is written, "Now these are the generations of Ishmael, Abraham's son" (**Gen. 25, 12ff**.); and it is [further] written, "Now these are the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son." (**Gen. 25, 19**) Thereupon Gebiha b. Pesisa said to the Sages: 'Give me permission to go and plead against them before Alexander of Macedon. Should they defeat me then say, "You have defeated one of our ignorant men; while if I defeat them, say, "The Law of Moses has defeated you."' So they gave him permission, and he went and pleaded against them. 'Whence do ye adduce your proof?' asked he. 'From the Torah,' they replied. 'Then I too,' said he, 'will bring you proof only from the Torah, for it is written, "And Abraham gave all that he had unto Isaac. But unto the sons of the concubines which Abraham had, Abraham gave gifts" (**Gen. 25, 5-6**) if a father made a bequest to his children in his lifetime and sent them

away from each other, has one any claim upon the other? What gifts [did he give them]? — R. Jeremiah b. Abba said: This teaches that he imparted to them the name of impurity ("shem tumah")."

On its own the equivalent phrases describing the relationship of the descendants of Ishmael and of Isaac imply equality of relationship to Abraham. Thus, Abraham's assets, in this case the land of Israel, should be equally divided between them. But, the simple hero of this tale, Gebiha b. Pesisa shows that the text tells us that Abraham distributed his assets in his lifetime. Even though the relationship to the father is equal, the relationship to the different mothers is not. It is that relationship which is implied to be the one upon which the distribution of assets is based. Isaac, the son of Sarah, gets it all; while the sons of the secondary wives get "gifts" ("matanot").

The Talmud asks, what gifts did Abraham give them? The answer of R. Jeremiah is quite astonishing. He gave them something called "shem tumah", literally "the name of impurity". Just what is this? Rashi, and most other commentators on the Talmud, interpret this to mean magic and demonology. Some interpret it as the knowledge of astrology (cf. **Num. R. 19**) This interpretation seems to imply that Abraham not only sloughed off some of his progeny from inheriting the land, but that he also made sure that they would not inherit his spiritual legacy. He gave them a spiritual tradition that would be antithetical to his own monotheistic tradition. In short, as R. Yehudah Loew of Prague argues, he gave them nothing. (cf. **Gur Aryeh on Gen. 24, 10**)

But, the phrase "shem tumah" is fascinating. It does seem to impart some mystical or mysterious power to impurity itself, just as the phrase "shem ha-meforash" implies the power of the Divine name to work miracles. The Rebbe of Gur explains this phrase in the context of the verse from Job: "who can acquire the pure from the impure, only one" (Job 14, 4). He cites the Zohar's explication of the phrase "ve-nitmeitem bam", "you shall become impure by them" (**Lev. 11, 43**). The Zohar notes that the word "ve-nitmeitem" lacks the letter "aleph". Usually, the word for impure "tame" is written with an aleph as part of its root, but in Lev. 11, 43 the construct lacks the aleph.

The Sefat Emet, following a well known rabbinic saying, says that there are 49 aspects of impurity. The number 49 in Hebrew letters is "mem" and "tet". He goes on to explain: "the 50th aspect is the area of unity wherein there is no difference between purity and impurity, rather in that realm all is unified. Only when that unified force becomes diffused is the name of impurity "shem tumah" applied to it. And one point of this root of unity is found in each of the 49 aspects, and thus to the letters "mem" and "tet" which are 49, is added the letter "aleph" which is 1, and the name of impurity is born." (**Sefat Emet on Ex. Parashat Parah**).

Sefat Emet explains that impurity is not impurity unless it has a bit of purity in it, one fiftieth to be exact. That is, impurity, because of the spot of purity in it, can look just like purity. It is very hard to distinguish between the two, or at least, one can become confused. But, he goes on to say: "in the verse from Leviticus where the word impurity is written without an aleph, this refers to evil without any purity mixed in to it, and this is what distinguishes between permitted impurity and forbidden impurity." Pure evil has not even a semblance of purity.

It is a challenge to our simplistic ways of thinking. Impurity does not necessarily mean "forbidden", since most impurity has a spot of purity mixed in, and thus becomes something that can be tolerated. On the other hand, there is, paradoxically, pure impurity, that is evil which has no purity mixed in at all. This is forbidden and should not be tolerated. The rub is how to be able to tell the difference. Sefat Emet implies that one who knows how to tell the difference is one who knows the name of impurity, "shem tumah".

If that is our understanding of R. Jeremiah, then Abraham taught something very valuable to his progeny. He did NOT dispossess them from his spiritual inheritance. On the contrary, he taught them the most important lesson the ethical monotheism has to teach, how to recognize pure evil from other kinds of evil. It is a lesson which is hard to learn, and we are still learning it.
TTT/ **how many times Midrash goes counter to "accepted" ideas**

***Gen. 25:21-22**
21Isaac pleaded with the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD responded to his plea, and his wife Rebekah conceived. 22But the children struggled in her womb, and she said, "If so, why do I exist?" She went to inquire of the LORD, 23and the LORD answered her,

One of the recurring themes in the lives of our ancestors, as told in Genesis, is the coping with infertility. With the exception of Leah, all of the matriarchs have difficulty in bearing children. In our parashah, the term "'akarah" "barren, infertile" is used for Rebecca, on the other hand, prayer seems to be a cure, and she becomes pregnant.

It is clear that the process of conception, giving birth to children and keeping them alive is not an easy one. There are many possible problems and complications. Even though humans were given the privilege of procreation, it is never an automatic or simple process. Today, we see the growing sophistication of modern medical science that can help a couple have children, even where there exists medical "infertility". When we study the process of conception, growth and birth, it is clear that we are witnessing a miraculous process. It is also clear that it is a very complex process that cannot be taken for granted, and that requires of people vast resources, both materiel and spiritual.

In the case of Isaac and Rebecca, the Torah reports that prayer was the simple instrument of recovery. This is the first time that prayer is mentioned as a means of coping with infertility. This theme will reappear in the Bible, e.g. Hannah. But, this case attracted the attention of the commentaries, because the verses which describe the scene are not totally clear. "Isaac pleaded ("va-ye'tar") with the Lord on behalf of his wife ("le-nochah ishto"), because she was barren; and the Lord responded to his plea, and his wife Rebekah conceived. But the children struggled in her womb, and she said, "If so, why do I exist?" (JPS note, 'meaning of Heb. uncertain) She went to inquire ("li-derosh") of the Lord," (**Gen. 25:21-22**; JPS).

The word "'atar", "plead", is unusual, although it does appear as a synonym to "pray". But, the usage "le-nochah ishto" "on behalf of his wife" is even more unusual. It can literally mean "in his wife's presence", where the word "nochah" means "presence".

What is being conveyed by these words? Furthermore, the reason for this special prayer or pleading is given only as a subclause, "because she was barren", whereas, logically, it should be the first thing stated! Finally, Rebecca goes to "inquire" of the Lord. What is the import of that statement?

The phrase, "le-nochah ishto", is interpreted in two opposite ways. Hizkuni, takes the word "nochah" to imply "remedy", as we find in **Judges 18:6**, where the word is used in the context of "repairing" or fixing. Thus, Hizkuni learns from this usage that Rebecca was the sterile one. On the other hand, a prior tradition is found in the Talmud. There R. Yitzhak states that Isaac was also sterile, from the same word! (**Yeb. 64a**) He apparently takes it to mean: "they prayed together", that is, both present during the prayer. Perhaps Isaac's prayer was vocal and Rebecca's silent, as was the prayer of Hannah.

In both cases the subclause, "because she was barren", is merely saying that she had not given birth. At a certain point, the man begins to pray out loud, whereas the woman prays silently. Ramban also assumes that Rebecca prayed, but he thinks that her prayer is not before her conceiving, but during her pregnancy when she is suffering and "She went to inquire ("li-derosh") of the Lord". Ramban rejects Rashi's interpretation that "li-derosh" means to find out what the end of it will be. He states that he does not find the word "derisha" except in the meaning of "to pray". For Ramban, man's prayer is just for the pregnancy, whereas women's prayer is to be able to complete the process successfully and to be able to bear the stress that accompanies it.

In all of these interpretations there is a patriarchal quality which we find does not give us guidance today. Today we put the emphasis on the couple, both man and woman, being partners in the process of conception and birth from beginning to end. There is one point, however, in the Talmudic passage which explains the word "'atar" as a certain quality of prayer. It is not a simple prayer, but one which is like an "'atar", which is a kind of hoe or rake that is used to transfer wheat from one place to another. Thus, the 'atar type of prayer is one which transfers "the Divine quality of irritation, or anger to the Divine quality of tenderness or mercy".

One of the desired outcomes of prayer is to amplify Divine qualities in our own lives. Prayer can produce a kind of empathy between man and God which is mutual. The response which prayer elicits in the Divine soul, is evoked in our own soul in a kind of feedback loop. From this explanation we can picture a most beautiful setting. Isaac and Rebecca pray, each in their own way, that their barrenness end. The tension and irritation which the situation had caused in both of them ceases, and is transferred by their prayers into tenderness and care. God's response to the "hoe" ("'atar") is to cause his mercy to flow to them. Rebecca then conceives.

***Gen. 26:3-4**

[3]Reside in this land, and I will be with you and bless you; I will assign all these lands to you and to your heirs, fulfilling the oath that I swore to your father Abraham. [4]I will make your heirs as numerous as the stars of heaven, and assign to your heirs all these lands, so that all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your heirs

Parashat Toldot opens with a famine. Abraham, and Jacob, left the land of Israel and went to Egypt when there was a famine. But, Isaac is told by God to stay in the land. Isaac is the only one of the Patriarchs never to leave the land of Israel. But, God's announcement to Isaac includes more: "Reside in this land, and I will be with you and bless you; I will assign all these lands to you and to your heirs, fulfilling the oath that I swore to your father Abraham. I will make your heirs as numerous as the stars of heaven, and assign to your heirs all these lands, so that all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your heirs. [or: shall find blessings from your descendents.]" (**Gen. 26, 3-4**)

Ramban is astonished that God has to tell Isaac that he will fulfill the oath that He swore to Abraham. Did we think that God would not fulfill an oath? The oath is the covenant with Abraham, which includes a promise of many offspring, of inheriting the land of Israel, and of being a source of blessing for all of the nations. God emphasizes that this covenant is not only with Abraham specifically, but with all of the generations that issue from him. Then, why does God have to tell Isaac that He will fulfill the covenant? (**Ramban on Gen. 26, 3**)

Ramban thinks that this verse is ANOTHER oath to Isaac, stressing that Isaac too will continue to be a blessing to all the nations. Indeed, if it is not so, then there is no covenant with Isaac at all. Ramban stresses that even though God could have relied on the oath, covenant with Abraham for all generations, and NOT have to make another covenant with any one else, God did not WANT to do it that way. God may be unchanging, but humans are not. God purposefully wanted each one to find their own way to God, use their own talents and minds, and thus God has to make a covenant with each one. This is so even though the content of the covenant is similar, and each one stresses that one of the goals of the covenant is to bring blessing to others.

After this incident, we read that: "Isaac dug anew the wells which had been dug in the days of his father Abraham and which the Philistines had stopped up after Abraham's death; and he gave them the same names that his father had given them." Then we read that Isaac found new wells. Those wells were also stopped up, until the last one, Rehovot, which was not disputed. Abraham had brought blessing to others, both in the case of Abimelech (**Gen. 20, 17-18**); but also in the wells which he had dug, and which were open to all to come and take water. Isaac was confronted with a retreat from the cooperation of Abraham's days. But, by reopening Abraham's wells, and by continuing his own digging, eventually cooperation and peaceful sharing of the water was achieved.

Indeed, Ramhal (R. Moses Hayyim Luzzatto) specifies that Abraham's digging of the wells which he shared with all was the fulfillment of God's covenant. Abraham's fulfilling of the covenant was the spreading of compassion in the world. Water is the symbol for compassion. When those who oppose compassion arose, Isaac had to be strong and look for the ways to negotiate and reach understanding that would repair the loss of compassion. Isaac's digging of his own wells, in addition to those dug by Abraham, shows that he was able to bring that repair about.

Up to this point we have two main ideas about these comments on the parasha: one is that each person has to seek their own way to a covenant with God, while

maintaining connection with those of the past, and secondly that one of the main goals of the covenant is to be a blessing for others by spreading compassion.

These elements play a striking role in the comments of Rabbeinu Bahya on our text. He writes that "some explain" that the wells signify the converts which Abraham [and Sarah] converted, for they accepted faith as the well accepts water. He writes: "opening the closed heart to real faith is called "digging" ("hafirah")". Then, there arose people who tried to invalidate the faith which the converts had assumed. Isaac was able to renew their commitment, and the sign of his success was that the converts assumed the names of the ancestors (e.g. Abraham and Sarah, cf. **Ramban on Num. 10, 29; Zohar ha-Hadash on Ruth**).

This comment opens up our understanding. The "spade work" of "digging" into one's soul and spirit, to accept a new faith is central. Compassion and blessing is spread by helping people who so desire do that spade work, and open their souls to the waters of Torah.

Each person has ways of finding their way to God and to Torah. This is clear, not only from the comments of the Ramban above, but even more so by a comment of R. Simchah Bunem of Parsyshcha: "[Abraham] dug five wells standing for the five books of the Torah. Isaac dug more wells, taking himself on a new path. For each one of the Ancestors had their own special way in Torah. AND SO IT IS WITH EVERY SOUL OF ISRAEL, EACH ONE HAS THEIR OWN SPECIAL PORTION IN THE TORAH, AND A SPECIAL WAY TO KNOW GOD, AND EACH ONE MUST DIG AND FIND THEIR WAY." (Emphasis mine, **sefer Kol Mevasser, part 1, toldot)**

The process of helping a convert "dig" and find their own special path to know God and their own portion of the Torah is a true fulfillment of the covenant. It is always a source of inspiration to me to meet those people who have converted to Judaism in the Masorti Bet Din in Israel. They know that their conversion will not be formally recognized by the State powers. They are truly interested in finding a way to Judaism which is: theologically not fundamentalist; which acknowledges historical consciousness; which is true to halakha in keeping alive traditions; which stresses compassion (mitzvot bein adam le-havero); which cultivates Jewish learning and respects the individuals thoughts and input into that learning. To enable such people to convert in a framework which believes and lives this way is a privilege and it would be a sin to remove this framework, or even to diminish it in any way.

It is clear that the forces of the Israel government want to deny us this privilege. The so-called "compromises" all boil down to "only one way to Torah". This is the way of the Philistines, who tried to stop the "digging". We should take heart from Isaac, who did not give up, who kept on digging so that the potential of each individual to find their portion in the Torah would be preserved and strengthened.
TTT/ **Pluralism and seeing each person as an individual with their own potential to walk with God are hallmarks of Midrash and subsequent tradition**

***Gen. 26:12-22**
12Isaac sowed in that land and reaped a hundredfold the same year. The LORD blessed him, 13and the man grew richer and richer until he was very wealthy: 14he acquired flocks and herds, and a large household, so that the Philistines envied him. 15And the Philistines stopped

up all the wells which his father's servants had dug in the days of his father Abraham, filling them with earth. [16]*And Abimelech said to Isaac, "Go away from us, for you have become far too big for us."* [17]*So Isaac departed from there and encamped in the wadi of Gerar, where he settled.* [18]*Isaac dug anew the wells which had been dug in the days of his father Abraham and which the Philistines had stopped up after Abraham's death; and he gave them the same names that his father had given them.* [19]*But when Isaac's servants, digging in the wadi, found there a well of spring water,* [20]*the herdsmen of Gerar quarreled with Isaac's herdsmen, saying, "The water is ours." He named that well Esek, because they contended with him.* [21]*And when they dug another well, they disputed over that one also; so he named it Sitnah.* [22]*He moved from there and dug yet another well, and they did not quarrel over it; so he called it Rehoboth, saying, "Now at last the LORD has granted us ample space to increase in the land."*

The relationships between the Israelite patriarchs and the inhabitants of the land, for example the Philistines, is complex and seem to be full of contradictions. Abraham, and his son, Isaac, are portrayed on the one hand as single families, and on the other hand as rather large camps with military might (cf. **Gen. 14**). There are disputes between the Hebrews and the Philistines, over water rights, for example, and yet they end up making covenants of peaceful coexistence.

One of the best examples of the latter is the well-known pact made between Abraham and Abimelech, the Philistine King of Gerar. In this pact a particular well is declared the sole property of Abraham, and the Philistines promise not to make war over it, and Abraham promises not to make war with them. The well is called "Beer Sheva", literally, "the well of the oath", the oath being the mutual promise of living in peace with each other. (**Gen. 21:21ff.**)

Yet, in this week's parasha, we read a continual series of disputes over water, and the Philistines go so far as to fill up the wells which Abraham had dug with dirt. In the end, the Philistines ask Isaac to move away from them on the pretense that he has become too numerous, and the land cannot support all of them. (**Gen. 26:12-22**) Isaac reopens the wells, and renames each well by the same name Abraham had called them. (v. 18) Then Isaac goes to the place called "Beer Sheva", where the original peace treaty had been made. He worships God, and God reaffirms that the land will belong to Isaac's descendants and that he will be protected by God.

At this point, Abimelech comes to visit Isaac. Isaac is surprised that they are coming to him, as they hate him, having driven him away from them. We read: "Isaac said to them, "Why have you come to me, seeing that you have been hostile to me and have driven me away from you?" And they said, "We now see plainly that the LORD has been with you, and we thought: Let there be a sworn treaty between our two parties, between you and us. Let us make a pact with you that you will not do us harm, just as we have not molested you but have always dealt kindly with you and sent you away in peace. From now on, be you blessed of the LORD!" Then he made for them a feast, and they ate and drank. Early in the morning, they exchanged oaths. Isaac then bade them farewell, and they departed from him in peace. That same day Isaac's servants came and told him about the well they had dug, and said to him, "We have found water!" He named it Shibah [Heb. "shiva'ah"]; therefore the name of the city is Beer-sheba to this day." (**Gen. 26:27-33**)

All of the contradictions mentioned above are manifest in this short passage. Is Isaac a small, weak family, or is he a powerful tribal chieftain? Do the Philistines want to live in peace with Abraham and his descendants or don't they? Are they interested in everyone's welfare or only concerned with being attacked?

Ramban interprets this passage in this way: we, the Philistines, have sent you away, but that was not physical attack, we merely asked you to leave, and you did so. That is, we have no intention of physically harming you, but we did want distance between us. But, if you, Isaac, decide to make war against us, than the pact will be void, and we will have to reclaim the territory we let you move to, and we will fight back. Therefore, we are coming to renew the peace pact made with Abraham to prevent any of these other things from taking place. That is, the Philistines really wanted to live peacefully, but were afraid that Isaac might attack them, because they had asked him to move. Realizing this, they returned to him to ask for a further ratification of the original "oath" of peace that Abraham made at Beer Sheba, the well of the oath.

Ramban goes on to say that the fear of Isaac attacking them may not be a literal fear of attack. But, it may be that because they knew that Isaac's ancestors would inherit all of the land, that they might, in the future, use this incident to justify retribution on the Philistines for what their past ancestors had done to Isaac.

The point of the oaths is thus: a peace treaty was reached, a later generation did something which was peaceful, not war, but could be interpreted as a hostile act and thus a breach of the treaty. In order to forestall future recurrences of this, and in order to forestall a cycle of retribution for each sides sense that the other had violated the agreement, the agreement had to be renewed, and with all of this spelled out.

I understand Ramban to view this incident as showing that the peace treaty with the Philistines was one which always needed renewal and the overcoming of misunderstandings and alleged violations of the agreement. **TTT / use of historical incidents to draw general principles about how people should interact, and about which values are prior and central as opposed to derived and peripheral**

The well called "Shiva'ah" [Shibah, in the JPS translation above], is, according to most of the Rabbinic commentaries none other than Abraham's Beer Sheba, and here also means "well of oath", as if to read the word "Shevuah", that is, "oath". Isaac restores it, and renames it the same name as his father, and for the same reason. Thus, the place of Beer Sheba, is the place of "oaths of peace", literally "a well of [the process] of swearing". The word "sheva" here stands for the root of the word meaning "to take an oath". This understanding of the name makes the name Beer Sheba into a symbol for the need for constant attention and cultivation so that a process of peaceful coexistence can work.

***Gen. 26:32-33**

32That same day Isaac's servants came and told him about the well they had dug, and said to him, "We have found water!" 33He named it Shibah; therefore the name of the city is Beer-sheba to this day.

TTT Hebrew language is the main ingredient of our Midrashic tradition. Language and the ramifications of language are the building blocks of the multi-leveled understanding which characterizes Midrash. On the other hand, since Hebrew is the common spoken language here in Israel many people assume that their every day usage enables them to understand the Torah text. But, when the text takes pains to tell us what a word is "supposed" to mean, it clearly was meant for Hebrew speakers who might otherwise have "misunderstood" the meaning. That is, our Torah text is meant for a Hebrew speaking audience. Knowing that this audience would misread a word according to common knowledge, the Torah provides us with instruction on how we are to read it.

One classic example is the name of my city Beer-Sheva. When I first started teaching in Kaye Teachers College I found that many teachers in the public school system explained to their students that Abraham dug 7 wells, and this well was the seventh. Thus, the name was Beer-Sheva, the 7th well, or well number seven. I am sure that if you stopped an Israeli on the streets of Beer Sheva and asked the meaning of the cities name that the answer would be the same. My custom was to ask the teachers to please open their Bibles and count the number of wells that Abraham is said to have dug. It is a lot less than seven. Perplexity ensued, until I asked them to look at **Gen. 21, 31** where it is written: "Hence that place was called Beer-sheba, for there the two of them swore an oath".

Their eyes would light up and they would realize that "sheva" is also the word for oath. But, they would say, it says here that there are 7 ewes as a sign of the pact. There is no doubt that the number 7 and the idea of taking an oath are related by the three letter root of the word sheva. So, the well of the 7 (ewes) is the well of swearing an oath, of which the 7 ewes are a concrete sign. But, I pointed out the Torah does not want us to flippantly think of this well in terms of the number 7, but it goes out of its way to make sure that we understand the significance of this well as being a place where a solemn oath of peace and cooperation was sworn between Abraham and Abimelech, and that they kept their oath!

In this week's parasha it seems as if the oath has been violated. The Philistines stop up the wells that Abraham had dug, and Isaac must dig them again. But, note that the well called Beer Sheva is apart from those other wells. This implies that the oath had been kept in relation to this one well. In **Gen. 26, 32** the well is called merely "shivah", and the name of the city Beer Sheva is related to this name. Many commentators and midrashim understand the word "shivah" here to mean oath, and thus, as always in this chapter, Isaac calls the wells that he finds by the names that his father used. This tradition understands that Isaac also swore an oath at this well.

What was the oath that Isaac swore? This tradition sees it as the same oath that his father Abraham had sworn with the Philistines. The last well of conflict is Rehovot, which Isaac names because it means that the land is wide enough and big enough to accommodate both him and the Philistines. It is the same oath of cooperation and peaceful coexistence which Abraham swore with Abimelech. The connection is that in the next verse "[Isaac] went up from there [Rehovot] to Beer Sheva" (**Gen. 26, 23**) What is the point of telling us that after having finally achieved peace that he "went up" to Beer Sheva? The verb 'to go up' ("alah") implies something not only physical,

but also spiritual. As if to say that Isaac rose up to the occasion and swore an oath of mutual cooperation.

The name Beer Sheva is thus firmly associated with swearing an oath of good neighborliness that is to be kept. As if to hammer home this point one Midrash relates to the beginning of next week's parasha "and Jacob went out ("va-Yetze") from Beer Sheva". Jacob is fleeing the possible wrath of his brother Esau after having tricked him out of his blessings. So he leaves ("va-Yetze") home, Beer Sheva, to go to Aram. Our Midrash is troubled by the opening of the Haftarah for next week's reading "Jacob fled ("va-yivrah") to the fields of Aram" (**Hosea 12, 13**). The word "va-Yetze", is a neutral word and implies a leisurely journey, Jacob departed, as if going on a cruise. The word "va-yivrah" means to flee, and implies guilt or fright. Why does the prophet Hosea understand Jacob's leaving Beer Sheva as flight?

This Midrash puts its answer this way: "[Abraham took an oath at Beer Sheva and kept it, Isaac took an oath at Beer Sheva and kept it] even Esau took an oath to Jacob [to give up his birthright and meant to keep it], But, when [Jacob] took his [Esau's] birthright he thought in his heart: 'if he will come to me and say to me swear to me that you did not take my birthright by deceitfulness, what can I say to him!? It is best that I leave this place which is distinguished by its oaths" (**Tanhuma va-yetze 9**).

Thus, our Midrash says that Jacob's leaving was really a fleeing, and the prophet has spelled that out for us. It was a fleeing from the obligation of the place, from the tradition that had been fixed there of honest oaths that were to be kept. The name encapsulated the finest and most noble of the aspirations of Abraham and Isaac, and it had to be maintained. Better to flee than to sully the name of Beer Sheva, and with it the ancestors who had called it thus. The moral challenge of Beer Sheva fixed by brave and fine deeds of Abraham and Isaac remains a challenge and a goal.

***Gen. 27:38-40**

38And Esau said to his father, "Have you but one blessing, Father? Bless me too, Father!" And Esau wept aloud. 39And his father Isaac answered, saying to him,"See, your abode shall enjoy the fat of the earthAnd the dew of heaven above.40Yet by your sword you shall live,And you shall serve your brother;But when you grow restive,You shall break his yoke from your neck."

We are all familiar with the morally problematic story of how Jacob got his father, Isaac, to give him a blessing by pretending that he was Esau. The Torah portrays Esau, the macho hunter, as highly affected by it. He cries at the thought that his father's blessing, meant for him, was given to his brother. What is intriguing is the portrayal of this hunk of a man, being so emotionally upset. It seems that he cries and is hurt not only because of his brothers trickery, or out of a sense of being robbed, but also because of his brother's usurping his relationship with his father.

Esau sobs on his father's bed, and pleads with him "do you have only one blessing to give [to two sons], bless me also my father" (**Gen. 27:38**). Isaac summons up presence of mind and says to Esau: "your dwelling will be in the fattest places of the earth....you shall live by your sword and serve your brother....but in the end you will remove his yoke from you" (**27:39-40**). Isaac's words are taken to be his blessing to Esau, in response to Esau's plea in v. 38. This is thus known as "Esau's blessing", even

though the word blessing does not occur in these verses (cf. **v. 27**, what Isaac says to Jacob).

The upshot is hatred. "Esau hated Jacob on account of the blessing which his father had blessed him..." (**v. 41**). Which blessing? What is the reason for Esau's hatred?

Almost all of the commentators on the Torah explain that the blessing referred to in v. 41 is the blessing which Isaac gave to Jacob. Esau believes that it is the blessing which Isaac had in mind for him, and thus Esau hates Jacob for having stolen "his blessing". This is also the sense of the Midrash which talks of "blessings" which end in controversy and strife. This Midrash says specifically that Esau and Jacob were in competition for this blessing (**Pesikta deRav Kahana, nispakhim, 1**). The Midrash is intrigued by the fact that something which is known by the name "blessing" can be a source of strife. It goes on to say that Jacob gave blessings to his children, and they also ended in strife. If the blessing is not given in and of itself, but as a kind of "prize" for a competition, than the competition continues, and the blessing resolves nothing.

However, to my mind the more interesting possibility is that suggested by Hizkuni, a 13-14th cent. commentary by Hizkiah b. Manoah. "Esau hated Jacob on account of the blessing which his father had blessed him..." (**v. 41**) Hizkuni writes: "the blessing which his father had blessed him does not refer to the blessing given to Jacob, but to the one given to Esau, namely, "you shall live by your sword". For Esau (was burdened) with having to trust only in his sword." This is an unusually sympathetic portrayal of Esau in rabbinic commentary. Esau hates Jacob, for because of his trickery, he will be forced to be a violent person in the future.

Midrash Tehillim (**109:3**) takes this idea even further. On the verse "words of hatred surrounded me...", the Midrash makes the point that the hatred mentioned here was a kind of hatred passed on from fathers to sons, "Esau hated Jacob...", which led to Edom going to war against Israel when they left Egypt (cf. **Num. 20**). Isaac's "blessing" to Esau was a source of divisiveness, and not real blessing because it was based on Esau's past performances. The blessing for the future, the projected expectations for Esau, were not what Esau really hoped for himself, but some kind of projection from his past. It may have been logical for Isaac to bless him in that way, based on his knowledge of Esau, but it was NOT spiritually helpful to Esau, and thus the "blessing" turned into hatred.

In order for a blessing to really be that, it must project a future of goodness and of being able to overcome limitations or difficulties of the present. If the blessing just perpetuates faults, it ends up being a self-fulfilling prophecy of dysfunctional behavior, and misses being an ingredient for spiritual health. It is very unhealthy to judge others ONLY by their past deeds, if we truly want to bless them. This does not mean that we can blithely ignore past deeds, but in THE PROCESS OF BLESSING we must talk in terms of healing wounds and in terms of achieving wished for goals of wholeness.TTT 36

***Gen. 27:41, 42, 45**

"Now Esau harbored a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing which his father had given him, and Esau said to himself ("va-yomer esav be-libo"), "Let but the mourning period of my father come, and I will kill my brother Jacob." When the words of her older son Esau

were reported to Rebekah ("va-yugad le-rivkah"), she sent for her younger son Jacob and said to him, "Your brother Esau is consoling himself ("mitnahem") by planning to kill you.... until your brother's anger against you subsides—and he forgets what you have done to him. Then I will fetch you from there. Let me not lose you both in one day! ("lamah eshkal gam sheneikhem yom ehad")"

In the world of Jacob and Esau there is enmity and hatred. How is it that such violent dislike develops? The elements include an aging and sightless father, Isaac, and an active and manipulating mother, Rebecca. But, Jacob goes along with his mother's schemes, and he is the one who extracts the promise of Esau's first born status for lentil pottage. More to the point, Jacob goes along with taking Esau's blessing from Isaac. All of this is not unknown in families, but not every person with these elements in their history develops a violent hatred of their siblings. So, what are the mechanisms that bring such hatred about?

We read in this week's parasha:
"Now Esau harbored a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing which his father had given him, and Esau said to himself ("va-yomer esav be-libo"), "Let but the mourning period of my father come, and I will kill my brother Jacob." When the words of her older son Esau were reported to Rebekah ("va-yugad le-rivkah"), she sent for her younger son Jacob and said to him, "Your brother Esau is consoling himself ("mitnahem") by planning to kill you.... until your brother's anger against you subsides—and he forgets what you have done to him. Then I will fetch you from there. Let me not lose you both in one day! ("lamah eshkal gam sheneikhem yom ehad")" (**Gen. 27:41,42,45**).

The first problem in this passage is who tells Rebekah the words of Esau? (**v. 42**) In v. 41 we are told that Esau "said to himself" ("va-yomer esav be-libo", lit. "Esau said in his heart"). How can Rebecca, or anyone else for that matter, know what Esau thought, what he 'said in his heart'? Indeed, the Midrash assumes that Rebecca, along with the other matriarchs, was a prophetess. So, she knew Esau's innermost thoughts by the holy spirit of prophecy. (**Gen. R. 67:1**) Rashi follows this Midrash as well.

Ramban, however, has another explanation. He quotes Ibn Ezra to the effect that perhaps Esau revealed his thoughts to one of his comrades, and his thoughts thus became public. But, Ramban says that one does not need this explanation to arrive at the same conclusion. He shows that the use of the word "heart" ("lev") in Hebrew merely means "will", a person's desire, and it does not at all preclude speaking out loud our promulgating one's desire in public. That is, to speak to one's heart, does NOT imply MERELY thinking with no sounds being uttered (**cf. Ps. 12:3; I Chron. 12:38; I Ki. 12:26** where the phrase is coupled with speaking!; etc.). Thus, it is perfectly reasonable to assume that Esau not only thought about killing his brother, but that he talked about it in public, and did not hide his violent feelings.

Indeed, Ramban stresses that the important part of this verse is: "Your brother Esau is consoling himself ("mitnahem") by planning to kill you". Ramban stresses the severity of this idea. Esau's consolation over losing the blessing is achieved by making peace with his feelings of being cheated and overlooked and by giving in to his anger, and finally to accepting the idea that sprung into his head to kill Jacob. In

Ramban's words: "he made peace with the evil in his heart." What a striking formulation. One may have thoughts of revenge and even murder, but one must overcome the natural resistance to such thoughts in order to really put them into practice. It is an effort to "make peace with evil thoughts". It is the first step that leads to bragging about what one will do to the perceived enemy, even to a brother. Bragging cannot be bottled up, it is spread around, and Rebecca hears of it. TTT 37

But, there is another problem in these verses. Rebecca ends her speech to Jacob saying: "Let me not lose you both in one day! ("lamah eshkal gam sheneikhem yom ehad")". Who are the two people she is referring to? What is the scenario that she has in mind? In the plain context of the verses, she is referring to Jacob and Isaac. This is because Esau has said that he will wait for his father to die before killing Jacob. Rebecca seems to think that the day that Isaac will die, will be the day that Esau will make good on his threat to kill Jacob. This is the understanding of Hizkuni, for example (on **Gen. 27:45**).

Esau's thoughts and his acceptance of them, leads to even more immoral ideas. Once the evil of the heart has become acceptable, one continues to plan even more cruelly. Esau thinks to himself how poorly Cain timed his murder of Abel, while his father was still alive. Esau thinks, 'did he not forsee that his father would have more children?' Esau plans to 'improve' on Cain's fratricide by waiting till his father is dead (**Yalkut Shimoni, Toldot, 116**). This comment shows that Esau is fixated on the inheritance, on the land, and on not having any rivals. His evil impulse has lead to a kind of megalomania. What starts out as acceptance of murder develops into a fantasy of sole ownership and control.

Other Midrashim read Rebecca's words as a fearful prediction. They depict a full story around her 'prophetic' utterance. One story is that Judah kills Esau on the day that Isaac is buried. In this account, the two whom Rebecca loses in one day are Isaac and Esau. She unwittingly predicts the tragic outcome of Esau's acceptance of his evil thoughts, namely that Jacob, and his sons, can view Esau ONLY as evil. To Esau's acceptance of his murderous impulses, they can only respond with murder. Obviously, the subtext is that the plan of Esau to murder Jacob on the day of his father's death is turned around onto himself. But, this result is another aspect of this whole syndrome. The one who is comforted by murderous thoughts will become a victim of those same thoughts of others.

In this Midrash, on the day of Isaac's death, his sons and their sons came to bury Isaac (cf. **Gen. 35:29**). When Jacob's sons left the burial cave so as not to embarrass their father, and to leave him to weep as much as he wanted, Esau entered the cave. Judah, seeing this, assumes that Esau is entering the cave to kill Jacob, as his bragging would lead one to believe. Judah enters the cave, after Esau, and sees that he does wish to kill Jacob, and so he kills him from behind. It is this which prompts Jacob's praise of Judah "your hand shall be on the nape of your foes" (**Gen. 49:8**).

The language of this Midrash is ambiguous. It does not say that Judah saw Esau "killing" Jacob, but merely that he saw he still wanted to do so. Under the influence of this vicious cycle, Judah acts. Indeed, the Midrash explains that Judah killed him from behind: "because his countenance looked like that of Jacob, so he paid him tribute by killing him from behind" (**Yalkut Shimoni, Va-Yehi, 162**). This

astounding comment implies a criticism of Judah, who could not face his Uncle and kill him frontally, because he looked too much like his father! The tragedy of the cycle of repressing feelings of compassion, giving in to feelings of violence, creating a persona based upon murder and rule, which causes a counter cycle of suspicion and murder is fully expressed in this comment. The two are so alike, and yet only acts of animosity connect them together. And this cycle of animosity is passed on to their children.

Finally, another Midrash interprets Rebecca's mournful prophecy as applying to Esau and Jacob, her two sons. This scenario is also used in a comment in the Talmud (cf. **Sotah 13a**). This Midrash plays out when Joseph takes Jacob's body back to Israel for burial. He goes to the cave of Machpelah, and there Esau, who still is burning about being cheated out of his part of the land, tries to prevent Jacob's burial. Esau is angry and thinks that since Israel has left the land, they cannot come back to reclaim it. Joseph says that there is a valid deed of sale for the cave, but it is back in Egypt. Naftali, who is swift as a hind (**Gen. 49:21**), swoops back to Egypt bring back the deed, and thus presumably to have a contractual end of the argument. But, while he is gone, Hushim the son of Dan, who is deaf, pounces on Esau and kills him. He sees the gesturing and posturing going on, and being deaf does not understand that a solution might be on its way back from Egypt. He simply thinks that the evil Esau is trying to prevent Jacob's burial, and he takes matters into his own hands (**Gen. R. 97**). Hushim is deaf and thus cannot hear that there may be a way to work out their differences. He can only proceed on the stereotypes and negative propaganda that he was exposed to while growing up.

These texts portray a cycle of violence, of bragging about destroying the other side or of clear rule over them, of suppressing any feelings of brotherhood, of making peace with feelings of violence, of ignoring the common human face, of being deaf to any reasonable legal or contractual solution to the dispute. This cycle breeds a similar cycle of reaction in the other side. All of this combines for a tragic fulfillment of a mother's worst fears, that two of those she loves will die on the same day. TTT 38

The lesson seems to me to be clear. People must do all that is in their power to break these habits and to disrupt the cycle: to cultivate feelings of brotherhood, to refuse to make peace with emotions of violence, to stop giving in to feelings of frustration at being mastered by others, to stop being deaf to solutions that might allow brothers to live together. These are gigantic emotional steps, and not easy to do, but these Midrashim show us the tragedies that can ensue by not paying attention to these matters of the soul.

***Gen. 28:5**

5Then Isaac sent Jacob off, and he went to Paddan-aram, to Laban the son of Bethuel the Aramean, the brother of Rebekah, mother of Jacob and Esau.

One of the qualities of religious greatness of the Torah is that it presents the actions of its players without apology, in the sense of that word which has come to mean "an explanation", and stretched further to mean "a justification". We see what they do, but there is no outward explanation or justification. Since the Torah itself does not supply "apologia", the midrashim and commentaries have done that. Much of our exegetical tradition has focused on providing rationalizations for the actions of

biblical heroes and heroines. Indeed, many times our tradition attempts to justify what appear to be churlish or even immoral actions. TTT 39

In parashat Toldot, we have an instructive example. Isaac sends Jacob off to his mother's family to find a wife. The Torah tells us: "Then Isaac sent Jacob off, and he went to Paddan-aram, to Laban the son of Bethuel the Aramean, the brother of Rebekah, mother of Jacob and Esau." (**Gen. 28, 5**) We have been told before that Isaac is to go to Rebekah's family, and we certainly know that Rebekah is the mother of Jacob and Esau! Just why is this old and well known information repeated here? What does it add? Indeed, Rashi was stumped by this, and he comments: "I do not know what this teaches us". (**Rashi ad loc**, Rashi says this only one other place, on Gen. 35, 13)

Ramban, among others, tries to supply an answer for Rashi. He comments that the verse reminds us of the importance that Isaac and Rebekah placed on not marrying Canaanite women, rather that they wished their children to go to Aram for that purpose. When Esau hears this, he acts improperly. He does not go to Rebekah's brother, but rather goes to Ishmael, Abraham's sibling, for a wife. Furthermore, says Ramban, he does not divorce the evil Canaanite women, for "he followed his hearts lust more than his father's will." Thus, our verse, according to Ramban, comes to show the base behavior of Esau, who disregards his father and mother, does not make the trip to Aram, and even when pretending to please them he is motivated only by his own desire.

Bahya ibn Pakuda raises a fascinating question about this verse. He starts from the opposite premise from that of the Ramban. The verse comes to show the proper behavior of Jacob, who goes on the long journey to Rebekah's family. But, Rabbenu Bahya asks, if Jacob does follow his parents' desire, and they forgive him for all he had done, why is Jacob punished for the transgression of NOT honoring his parents for his 22 years in Aram? He is punished by being separated from Joseph for 22 years (cf. **Meg. 17a**).

Bahya answers his own question by saying that Isaac and Rebekah wanted him to marry Leah and return immediately, but he was attracted to Rachel's beauty. He offers to work for 7 years to obtain Rachel, which is against his parents desires, and this draws him into a prolonged stay. All the time he stayed in Aram, says Bahya, was because of his own lust for Rachel, and thus he was punished for not heeding his parent's desires.

But, now we must ask, if that is the case what is the difference between Esau and Jacob? Both seem to be transgressing the command to honor parents! Our tradition struggles mightily to "justify" Jacob's actions, and to make him a righteous person, while at the same time painting Esau as a total evil scoundrel. Yet, these two commentaries lead us to the conclusion that there is not much difference between them!

One of the more well known Midrashim offers an apologetic explanation for both Rebekah and Jacob by quoting the verse from **Song of Songs 2, 2** "Like a rose among thorns".(**Lev. R. 23, 1**) They are the rose, the righteous people, among thorns, among evil swindlers. Yet, even here the end of this Midrash has another opinion, based

upon our verse: "R. Berekhiah in the name of R. Simon … "Then Isaac sent Jacob off, and he went to Paddan-aram, to Laban the son of Bethuel the Aramean, the brother of Rebekah, mother of Jacob and Esau." (**Gen. 28, 5**) [the verse] includes them all in the practice of swindling." This Midrash, perhaps simply reflecting the written text, notes that all of these characters have their moments of cheating! No one is free from transgression and ignoble behavior.

So, even within our exegetical tradition there are occurrences of comments which do not give in to the perceived need to "justify". Perhaps R. Berekhiah knows that all people, especially in conditions of stress and demand, may not be able to control their own desires, and may cheat or fudge on ethical standards in order to satisfy their own desires. Indeed, perhaps our verse ends with the words "mother of Jacob and Esau" as a rebuke to Rebekah, who shows favoritism towards Jacob which leads to family tensions. This tradition shows us the power of Torah to be a mirror of existence. It becomes a text which enables us to pit ourselves against our own weaknesses, and join in the same struggle we discern among biblical characters. This is the struggle to cope with our human desires while striving to strengthen our ethical sensitivity and resolve. TTT 40

***Gen. 28:6-9**

6When Esau saw that Isaac had blessed Jacob and sent him off to Paddan-aram to take a wife from there, charging him, as he blessed him, "You shall not take a wife from among the Canaanite women," 7and that Jacob had obeyed his father and mother and gone to Paddan-aram, 8Esau realized that the Canaanite women displeased his father Isaac. 9So Esau went to Ishmael and took to wife, in addition to the wives he had, Mahalath the daughter of Ishmael son of Abraham, sister of Nebaioth.

At the end parashat Toldot we read the most complex and disturbing tale of Jacob's theft of his brother's blessings. Esau is angry and vows to kill Jacob after his father's demise. Rebecca, hearing of Esau's rage, pulls another trick out of her bag, and convinces Isaac that Jacob should be sent to her family to find a wife. The deep involvement in domestic matchmaking, seems to totally overshadow the rage and extremism of the previous verses. All of a sudden, Esau wants to emulate Jacob, and please his father. We read: "When Esau saw that Isaac had blessed Jacob and sent him off to Paddan-aram to take a wife from there, charging him, as he blessed him, "You shall not take a wife from among the Canaanite women," and that Jacob had obeyed his father and mother and gone to Paddan-aram, Esau realized that the Canaanite women displeased his father Isaac. So Esau went to Ishmael and took to wife, in addition to the wives he had, Mahalath the daughter of Ishmael son of Abraham, sister of Nebaioth." (**Gen. 28, 6-9**)

The dissonance of the first verse is striking. Jacob has just stolen Esau's blessings, and Esau is burning with enough rage to want to kill him. So, when our verse starts out "When Esau saw that Isaac had blessed Jacob" we might expect a further explication of Esau's torment and anger. Instead what grabs Esau's attention, is that Jacob "sent him off to Paddan-aram to take a wife from there". What happened to Esau's anger? How is sending Jacob away for a wife connected to the blessing which Isaac had given to him? The answer seems obvious, for we read "So Isaac sent for Jacob and blessed him. He instructed him, saying, "You shall not take a wife from among the Canaanite women." (**Gen. 28, 1**) The blessing which Esau "sees" here is not the one

stolen from him, but another blessing which is connected with not marrying Canaanite women.

Yet, this very clear cut answer raises a bigger problem. Was Jacob blessed twice, once in secret, by his and Rebecca's stealth, and now in the open? R. Menahem ben Solomon, the author of Sekhel Tov, writes that Esau perceives that this is all part of the same blessing. Part of the blessing is in secret, but the part that confirms the whole is in public. Esau even imagines that the secret part was not given wholeheartedly by Isaac, and so he adds the later blessing expressing his true wishes. Esau understands that the second blessing is that Jacob go to Paddan-aram "even if it means that he will not return, it is better that he stay there with a proper wife, rather than return here and marry a Canaanite woman." (**Sekhel Tov on Gen. 28, 6**)

If this is how Esau views Isaac's words to Jacob, no wonder that he immediately seeks out Ishmael in order to find a wife from the line of Abraham. Indeed, Seder Olam Rabbah points out that Esau goes to Ishmael for a wife, but Mahalat is given to him not by Ishmael, her father, but by Nebaioth, her sister. The reason is that Ishmael dies just as the match is being made. (**Seder Olam Rabah 2**) Sefer Torat Moshe, by R. Moshe Alshekh, adds that precisely when Esau goes away to seek out his wife, that Jacob has the opportunity to escape, and at that time he leaves Beer Sheva. (**on Gen. 28, 10-12**)

The moist poignant interpretation of the whole episode comes from Rabbeinu Nissim of Gerondi (ha-Ran). The whole incident bothers him, because he knows that Isaac loves Esau (**Gen. 25, 28**), but Ran is also sure that he loves Jacob. Since, the Torah tells us specifically that Isaac loves Esau it is not possible that he would give a blessing to Jacob that would be harmful to Esau. So, according to Ran, the blessings which Isaac gives to whoever it is that is standing in front of him, because he does not see he is not sure who it is, must be a blessing that would be good for either son. So, while Isaac thinks that he is blessing Esau, although not totally sure, he blesses in such a fashion that if it turns out to have been Jacob, Esau would not be harmed, and if it is Esau, Jacob will not be harmed! (**Drashot ha-Ran 2**)

The idea is illuminating. Isaac's blessings are meant NOT to favor one son or another. He believes that God will bring to pass what God wishes, and that God will find a way not to contravene Isaac's blessings while at the same time fulfilling the Divine will. What is important is that the notion that the tradition which finds praise for Jacob and scorn for Esau in the blessings misses Isaac's intent. Human beings fall prey to their baser instincts when they think that they must favor one child over another. Even if they are not sure of their own feelings, they must try and bless their children in a way that the others are not harmed by their thoughts and words. It is a powerful lesson of principles: humility, knowing that God also has a role in how things turn out, of compassion, and of justice.

Jacob's flight from home and return to home is framed by encounters with angels. Jacob flees the wrath of his brother Esau after having tricked him out of his primal rights of inheritance, and of the first blessing of their dying father. His flight is dramatically emphasized by a mysterious dream of angels climbing up and down a ladder whose feet are planted near Beer Sheva, but whose top reaches to heaven. He then is tricked himself by Lavan, Rebeccah's brother, so that he can marry off both his daughters. Finally, after 20 years and 11 children, Jacob flees from Lavan so that he can return to Israel. His fortune is made by tricking Lavan, and producing mostly spotted sheep at the birthing time of the flock. An angel appears to help Jacob achieve that remarkable agricultural and biological feat. As he approaches the land of Israel, once again his return is punctuated by the appearance of angels.

Gen. 28:10, 12-15
10Jacob left Beer-sheba, and set out for Haran
12He had a dream; a stairway was set on the ground and its top reached to the sky, and angels of God were going up and down on it. 13And the LORD was standing beside him and He said, "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac: the ground on which you are lying I will assign to you and to your offspring. 14Your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you and your descendants. 15Remember, I am with you: I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.".

We tend to treat each parasha as a discrete entity. But, the fact is that there is narrative connection between Parashot. For example, this week's parasha starts out "Jacob left Beer-sheba, and set out for Haran." (**Gen. 28, 10**) Out of context, this might seem like a simple journey. Jacob wants to do a little sight seeing, so he decides to visit the ancestral country and city. However, in context the reader knows that Jacob is fleeing Beer-sheba, because of family tensions.

He stops to sleep, and dreams: "He had a dream; a stairway was set on the ground and its top reached to the sky, and angels of God were going up and down on it. And the LORD was standing beside him and He said, "I ("ani") am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac: the ground on which you are lying I will assign to you and to your offspring… Remember, I ("anokhi") am with you: I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." (**Gen. 28, 12-15**)

On the surface, this is another instance where God makes or reaffirms His covenant with one of the ancestors. There does not seem to be any indication about how God relates to Jacob's part in the deception of his father. Indeed, one could claim that the fact that God speaks to Jacob and reaffirms the covenant with him shows approval of Jacob.

The Midrash, however, picks up on a nuance of language which is not available to the English speaker at all. I have indicated the switch in first person pronouns in Hebrew, whereas in English there is only one such pronoun "I".

In Midrash Genesis Rabbah, Rabbi Hanina in the name of R. Pinhas notes that the mention by God of the patriarchs occurs 18 times, each occurrence is represented in the daily Amidah prayer of 18 blessings (**Gen. R. 69**). R. Hanina goes on to say that if someone objects, and says that there are 19 times that the patriarchs are mentioned in the Torah, the answer is that our verse, "I ("ani") am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac" is NOT considered to be a proper mention! And, if someone says that there are only 17, the answer is that the verse "In them may my name be recalled, And the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac" (**Gen. 48, 16**) is a proper mention.

The mention of the patriarchs by God, signifies the special relationship of closeness. Each blessing in the daily prayer, serves to highlight the ideal of getting close to God, of "devekut", clinging to God, which is a central aspect of the ancestral covenant. If our verse is NOT such a mention, then clearly, the use of "ani" in our verse signals some disapproval, some lack of closeness to Jacob on God's part!

This suspicion is made clear in the Midrash Pesikta Rabbati (**33**). In this Midrash (cf. **Ibid. 21** and others) the word "anokhi" is interpreted to express the side of mercy, compassion, closeness, affection of God's being. The world is created with "anokhi" (**Isa. 44, 24**), humanity is created with "anokhi" (**Isa. 45, 12**), the covenant with Abraham (**Gen. 15, 1**), and with Isaac (**Gen. 26, 24**). All of this is a build up to the exception. In the words of the Midrash: "But, when God was revealed to Jacob , it was not with "anokhi", rather with "ani"….Thus Jacob was afraid…(**Gen. 28, 17**). Why was he afraid? He said [to himself] God revealed Himself to my ancestors only using "anokhi" [the word of affection], what sin have I committed so that he speaks to me in the [formal] language of "ani"."

The reader can supply an answer to Jacob. Look at what you did to your father and brother. Clearly, Jacob is not worthy at this minute of the same closeness and affection as his ancestors. He will have to learn to be a better moral agent in order to earn God's affection. Yet, as the Midrash goes on to say, God, seeing his remorse, takes that as a sign that Jacob wants to mend his ways. Thus, he speaks to him in verse **15,** using "anokhi", "I ["anokhi"] will be with you".

Many languages have a distinction between familiar and formal pronouns. But, to the best of my knowledge, all of those distinctions are in the second person, "you". Hebrew is the only language, that I know of, that has such a distinction in the first person "I". The nature of relationship to God, it seems to me, is the reason for that.

Jacob has to decide on his moral and ethical path. In order for the covenant with God to be as close and compassionate as it was with his ancestors, he has to learn to be compassionate with others. One cannot claim to be part of an intimate relationship with God, and, at the same time, exploit others. TTT 41

***Gen. 28:16-19**

16Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is present in this place, and I did not know it!" 17Shaken, he said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of God, and that is the gateway to heaven." 18Early in the morning, Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. 19He named that site Bethel; but previously the name of the city had been Luz.

The beginning of this parasha, va-yetze, contains one of the most famous dreams in the Bible, "Jacob's ladder". Jacob is fleeing from an angry brother who is thinking of killing him. He knows that he will be in exile from his family and his land for some time. Even though he has set out on his journey under the ruse that he is going to search for a wife, he knows the real reason for his quick departure. It is hard to imagine that Esau does not suspect the same thing. Thus, as night falls Jacob does something astonishing, he makes camp ("va-yalen sham" **Gen. 28:11**) and goes to sleep, he does not press on to put a little more distance between himself and Esau, to cross the border of Erez Yisrael.

Jacob lies down and dreams (**v. 11-12**). Does he sleep or is this a waking dream? The text does not tell us, leaving it ambiguous. But, verse 16 says that he "awoke from his slumber" ("va-yikatz me-shenato"). Jacob suddenly is awake, and he is astonished "God is in this place and I did not know it". One Midrashic tradition assumes that the word "me-shenato" means literally, "from his slumber", and thus what Jacob means is: if I had known that this was a Holy place, a place of God, I would not have fallen asleep here. One is not allowed to sleep in a holy place, but the implication here is that because Jacob is a tzaddik his faux pas leads to a prophetic dream.

Another Midrashic tradition, however, finds it hard to think of Jacob as being able to sleep at all under the circumstances. R. Yohanan interprets the word "me-shenato" as if it was written "me-mishnato" "from his study" (**Gen. R. 69:7**). Jacob is studying, he is repeating the Torah he was learning in the Bet Midrash of Shem and Ever. The dream intrudes on his learning. He was not "asleep" in the physiological sense, but his mind was not attentive to the place.

This early Midrashic tradition appears as the basis for two comments by later Hasidic masters. R. Levi Yizhak of Berdichev interprets Jacob's mindset as "if it was asleep" (Sefer Kedushat Levi on va-yetze). Jacob wonders if God will be with him, and by extension the Jewish people, in galut. Will God leave Israel because they have left Erez Israel? The significance of the dream is that God's presence and care may be based in Israel but it extends beyond. The Shekhinah will be with the people in exile, as she was with Jacob in his exile.

R. Nahman of Bratzlav sees Jacob's "awakening" as directed to "the heart of all souls until this very day." The vision and realization which accompanies it are meant "even for those sunken souls who suppose that God is not found in their place... and that any of their attempts to raise their souls up towards holiness are worthless." Jacob is teaching them that God is in every place, even if we do not "know" it. In a sense he is using the explication of the verb "to know" in the same way as when it says that Pharaoh did "not know" Joseph, that is, "did not want to know". (**Sefer Meshivat Nefesh, 32**). Jacob is saying: "God was here but I was unreceptive to His presence."

R. Yohanan's statement in the Midrash reveals a deep truth. Many times we are so ensnared in our certainties, in what we have learned and "know" to be the case, that we are unaware of God's presence. The Talmud states that one who says "there is nothing but Torah", "doesn't even possess Torah" ("ha-omer ein li eleh Torah ... afilu Torah ein lo" **Yev. 109b**). One can be totally emerssed in Torah, but if the conclusion is that there is nothing else to life or to holiness but Torah, you run the danger of

being "asleep" to the presence of God. Jacob's awareness teaches us that in order for Torah to be a path to holiness, one must be awake to the presence of God both in others and in our surroundings wherever we happen to be. TTT 42

***Gen. 29:30**
[30]And Jacob cohabited with Rachel also; indeed, he loved Rachel more than Leah. And he served him another seven years.

Small words in Hebrew can have many meanings, and thus create textual issues. In English words such as, "and" or "also" seem to be easy to understand in their contexts. But, a Hebrew word such as "gam", usually understood to mean "also", is not so simple.

Take one verse in parashat va-yeitzei: "And Jacob cohabited with Rachel also["gam"]; indeed ["gam"], he loved Rachel more than Leah. And he served him another seven years." (**Gen. 29, 30**) The word "gam" appears twice in this verse. Our JPS translation translates it first as "also" and then as "indeed". Our phrase reads "va-ye'ehav gam et Rachel me-Leah", literally "he also ['gam'] loved Rachel than Leah". The difficulty of this phrase is amply illustrated.

Rashbam understands this phrase in the same fashion as our translation. He points out that many times the word "gam" signifies an opposite relationship, and here it is that Jacob loved Rachel and did not love Leah. Indeed, the following verse says explicitly that Leah was "unloved", literally "hated".

This understanding is too harsh for most other commentaries. Ramban explains that the nature of men is to love the first woman that a man has relations with more than other women. The Torah here is pointing out that Jacob, who 'knew' Leah first, is acting against this nature in loving Rachel more than Leah. He says that the significance of the word "gam" is to emphasize that this is not usual. His comment seems to understand the word "gam" in the sense of "extraordinary".

What is different here is that Ramban sees Leah as loved also, but not in the ordinary way. In commenting on verse 31, he quotes Radak who says that when one wife is loved in an extraordinary fashion, the other may be called 'unloved' relative to the first. Leah was not hated, but she was embarrassed by Jacob's overwhelming affection for Rachel. It was this embarrassment which caused God to manifest kindness towards her. (**Ramban on 29, 31**)

This same approach is amplified in an interesting responsa of Rabbi Yosef Hayyim ben Eliyahu Elhakim, who was born in Baghdad in 1833. He is the author of "Ben Ish Hai", the Sephardi kitzur Shulhan Arukh which is so influential among Edot Mizrah until today. He answers questions about Biblical verses, and on our verse he writes: "Jacob did not hate Leah, except once on the morning after he saw that she had tricked him and come in place of her sister. [He hated her because] he thought that Rachel was lost to him for good. He wanted Rachel more because he thought she was his intended partner according to his root and soul, which at that time was the level of Jacob, and not yet Israel. He feared that Laban would not give Rachel to him, and thus his hatred continued for the wedding week. But, in the second week when he was able to marry Rachel, his hatred for Leah did not continue, for then he

understood that it was God's doing. And, thus in the second week it says "and he loved Rachel more than Leah", that is, he loved Leah, but he loved Rachel more. For if Leah was hated, this language would make no sense, for one cannot say, "this thing is better than that thing", unless they are both on the same plane, and not when they are opposites…" (**Rav Pa'alim, part 3, OH 10**)

***Gen. 30:25**
[25]After Rachel had borne Joseph, Jacob said to Laban, "Give me leave to go back to my own homeland. [sic ***אל מקומי ולארצי****]*

One of the most well known devices of the Midrash tradition is the interpretation of "superfluous" words in the Torah text. The assumption is that the Torah would not write a word which is not necessary for the simple understanding of the story. Thus, any word which appears to be unnecessary must be there to make us understand something beyond the obvious meaning of the sentence. This basic postulate of Midrash usually spawns many different versions about what we are to understand from the "superfluous" word. However, in parashat va-yeitzei there is a classic case of an extra word which has almost no recognition in the Midrashic tradition. TTT 43

We read of the birth of Jacob's 11 sons. The last one born is Joseph, the son of Rachel. Then the Torah tells us: "After Rachel had borne Joseph, Jacob said to Laban, "Give me leave to go back to my own homeland. ("el mekomi u-le-artzi"; **Gen. 30, 25**). The translation smoothes over the difficulty of the extra word. The word "homeland" in the Hebrew is "mekomi u-le-artzi", which are two words and not one word. Literally Jacob asks Laban to let him return to "my own place" ("mekomi") AND to "my own land" ("u-le-artzi"). It seemed to me that the double words for the place where Jacob wanted to return would spawn many comments. But, that is not the case. There are very few comments, however, they are quite important and interesting.

The one classic Midrash on these words is quoted over and over by most commentators. This Midrash reads as follows: "AND IT CAME TO PASS, WHEN RACHEL HAD BORNE JOSEPH (**30, 25**). As soon as Esau's adversary [Joseph] was born, JACOB SAID UNTO LABAN: SEND ME AWAY, THAT I MAY GO UNTO MINE OWN PLACE, AND TO MY COUNTRY. For R. Phinehas said in the name of R. Samuel b. Nahman: It is a tradition that Esau will fall at the hands of none other than Rachel's descendants, as it is written, Surely the youngest of the flock shall drag them away (Jer. 49, 20). And why does he call them ' The youngest of the flock '? Because they were of the youngest of the tribes." (**Gen. R. 73, 7** Soncino translation)

Jacob has fled from Esau. He feels that he cannot return to his own country, the place that is promised to him by virtue of the birthright he obtained from Esau and by the blessings he wrested from Isaac. This Midrash assumes that Jacob does not want to return out of fear that he will not be able to contend with Esau over the land. Only when Joseph is born, does Jacob realize that a proper contender with Esau exists. Perhaps Jacob is reluctant to confront Esau because he himself feels morally flawed. But, Joseph has the character and the moral power to return Israel to its land. The character of Joseph here is symbolic of the power of Israel's return to its land. Joseph's line will be able to contend; to keep the goal of the people of Israel living in the land promised to it alive even against adversaries such as Esau's descendants,

Edom, as the verse from Jeremiah suggests. In his commentary on this Midrash, R. Menahem b. Solomon, points out that this scenario is also proved by the verse that has Edom consumed by the house of Jacob and the house of Joseph (**Obadiah 1, 18; Sekhel Tov on our verse**).

It seems to me that the premise underlying this Midrash is our two words. Place and land are not merely synonyms here, but the land which is Jacob's own land is also his place in the world. That is, each word represents one function of homeland. Homeland is land, but it is also home. It is a place, but it is my place, and it is a land, but it is my land. Jacob refers to a time when "my land" and "my place" fuse into one entity. For him, Joseph is the precursor of that possibility. I am always struck by how so many Jews visiting Israel say how much at home they feel. This last summer I taught at a USY encampment, and those teenagers who had been in Israel all said that they felt more at home in Israel. I thought it strange, and yet there is some aura of "my land" which goes beyond merely being in a particular place.

This understanding of the locution "el mekomi u-le-artzi" is bolstered by the one other tradition on this verse that I found. This tradition is in the Kabbalistic literature and is based on a comment in the Zohar that Jacob asks to return to the land of Israel after Joseph is born because he did not want the completion of the birth of the 12 tribes to take place anywhere except in the Holy land. (**Zohar Va-yeitzei 158a**) The nation cannot be completed, it cannot be whole, in the diaspora, even if the diaspora is "mekomi", my place, as Laban's house undoubtedly was for Jacob. The integrity of the nation can be whole only in "my place" which is also "my land", the land of Israel. Jacob knew from the name that Rachel called Joseph that another son would be born (**Gen. 30, 24**). When she became pregnant again, then Jacob knew that he had to leave to return to the Holy land.

This tradition also understands our locution as specifying that Jacob did not merely want to leave Laban, not even that it was so bad in Laban's house, and not even that Jacob did not feel that this was not his place. But, rather Jacob specifies that he is to go to "his own place and his own land", for that is what will make his family, his nation, whole and complete. The first tradition has Jacob requesting to leave because Joseph is born, and a protector of the vision of living in the land is existent. The second tradition has Jacob leaving because of the future birth of Benjamin, when a sense of wholeness will prevail and this can only be in the land. TTT 44

***Gen. 31:30**
30 Very well, you had to leave because you were longing for your father's house; but why did you steal my gods?

We have seen elements in the traditional commentaries which did not engage in blanket condemnation of Esau and Laban. Those traditions reverberate in another incident in parashat va-yeitzei. When Jacob decides to leave and return to the land of Israel, he feels the need to avoid confrontation with Laban and his sons. Unknown to him, Rachel has taken the "traphim", family idols, from Laban's house.

Now, there is no doubt that Jacob fears Laban, and that he knows that Laban has swindled him in the past. In short, he does not trust Laban at all. But, it is also clear that Jacob is certain that his compensation that he has taken from Laban is fair. He is

certain that even if Laban does catch up to him and confronts him, that Laban can be persuaded to behave justly and fairly. At the least, Jacob harbors the hope that Laban will honor the agreement that he himself had made with Jacob. That is, Jacob counts on the fact that if Laban knows the facts, makes the calculation, and can be shown that Jacob has not swindled him, that Laban has enough basic human integrity not to harm Jacob.

Jacob does not know, however, that what seems to be troubling Laban is not Jacob's compensation, but that his traphim have been stolen. Whatever the meaning of the traphim, and there are many explanations of it, it means a great deal to Laban, and it is their disappearance which sends him off to catch Jacob. All of this becomes clear because when Laban does catch up to Jacob, it is the traphim that he is after: "Very well, you had to leave because you were longing for your father's house; but why did you steal my gods?" (**Gen. 31, 30**)

Finally, after searching Jacob's camp thoroughly, an exasperated Jacob reprimands Laban: "Now Jacob became incensed and took up his grievance with Laban. Jacob spoke up and said to Laban, "What is my crime, what is my guilt that you should pursue me? You rummaged ["ki mishashta"] through all my things; what have you found of all your household objects? Set it here, before my kinsmen and yours, and let them decide between us two." (**Gen. 31, 36-37**)

One Midrash uses this incident to explain the difference between precise, pedantic speech when trying to appease, and weak and subordinate language. Jacob is praised for his strong stand, based on what is his knowledge, of reproving Laban for being a false accuser. Jacob speaks precisely and forcefully. Since Laban can find no evidence to the contrary, he does honor Jacob's plea. So, even the swindler, when confronted with hard facts in a strictly precise and firm way, will accept the situation, and make peace. (**Pesikta d'Rav Kahana 14, 1; cf. Gen. R. 74, 10**)

Our Midrash contrasts it with David, who spoke meekly and out of fear: "David fled from Naioth in Ramah; he came to Jonathan and said, "What have I done, what is my crime and my guilt against your father, that he seeks my life?" (**I Sam. 20, 1**) David uses the same language of innocence when speaking about his relationship to Saul, "what is my crime, my guilt". Yet, in his speech he mentions bloodshed. He reveals his fear, and thus makes it more difficult to achieve appeasement.

Our Midrash continues with another opinion. R. Simon remarks that in this world is it not possible for a son-in-law to live with his wife's parents and then leave without having some article of theirs in his possession, perhaps a needle or a small knife. But, Jacob left with nothing of Laban's, not even a needle. Thus, Jacob can precisely say: "You rummaged ["ki mishashta"] through all my things; what have you found of all your household objects?"

This strict language, which is praised in the first part of our Midrash comes under critique from R. Simon. He remarks: "The Holy One said to him [Jacob]: by your life, in the same language which you have reproved your father-in-law, in that very same expression will I reprove your descendants, "Thus said the Lord: What wrong did your fathers find in Me that they abandoned Me?" (**Jer. 2, 5**) R. Simon is precisely

offended by what the first opinion finds praiseworthy. He senses scorn in Jacob's words "what have you found?".

R. Simon replies to the first opinion, "Laban is not looking for a needle or knife, he is looking for his gods". Even if Jacob did not know that they had been taken, when he hears Laban's accusation, why does he not wonder if there is some truth in it? Why does he not himself begin to investigate the actions of his own people? Perhaps because he knows that Laban is a swindler, and he is not ready to believe him on anything?

But, this stance precisely leads Jacob to passively overlook the possible thievery in his own camp. R. Simon seems to say, that just as God rebukes Israel saying, you are looking in the wrong place to understand your transgressions, you must look into yourselves.

This approach stresses that Jacob's indignation is misplaced. He is finding fault in Laban, because he knows he is a swindler, and he projects Laban's past performance on everything, even though this time Laban is justified in his search. Jacob needs to acknowledge the possibility that his own people have something to do with the problem. Israel attributes their troubles to God, ascribing fault to God for not protecting them, while using that very accusation to abandon God. They do not look into themselves, and thus do not realize how much their own actions are the cause of their troubles. Rather than abandon God, they need to move closer to God by acknowledging their own faults and seeking out God's help in achieving the moral strength to amend their ways. TTT 45

***Gen. 31:27-29**
27Why did you flee in secrecy and mislead me and not tell me? I would have sent you off with festive music, with timbrel and lyre. 28You did not even let me kiss my sons and daughters good-by! It was a foolish thing for you to do. 29I have it in my power to do you harm; but the God of your father said to me last night, 'Beware of attempting anything with Jacob, good or bad.'

Parashat va-yeitzei spans 20 years of Jacob's life, from the time he leaves the land of Israel, alone, until his return to Israel with wives, children and fortune. The period that Jacob spends in Aram with his father-in-law, Laban, is given to us in great detail. There are a myriad of fascinating and interesting incidents in this chapter, but the one which draws our attention this week is at the end of the parasha. Jacob has run away from Laban, and Laban tries to bring him back. He pursues Jacob, and tries everything, threats, pleading, offer of the good life, to get Jacob to give up his return to Israel and to stay with him in Aram.

In the Passover Haggadahh a Midrash is quoted which compares Laban the Aramean with Pharaoh. It concludes that Laban was worse than Pharaoh, for Pharaoh only sought to kill the male children, but Laban sought to uproot the whole nation of Israel. When Jacob fled to Aram, he was taken in by his mother's relative, Laban. Jacob lived with Laban and even married his daughters. Jacob earned his fortune, and helped his father-in-law to prosper as well. True, Laban at first cheated Jacob by giving him Leah as his wife instead of Rachel, but even so, the Midrash's comparison is surprising. How is it possible to argue that Laban was worse than

Pharoah? On the very night when we celebrate leaving Egypt, it seems very strange to 'praise' Pharoah who merely ordered to kill all male children. Even more surprising is to say that Laban was worse in that he
wanted to uproot everything.

In the Torah Laban is not portrayed as wanting to destroy Jacob! But, it is the incident which we are analyzing which lies behind this Midrash. Laban asks only one thing of Jacob, that he not return to the land of Israel. Laban wanted Jacob to stay with him in Aram. The Midrash understands this as equivalent of making Jacob relinquish the Divine promise of the land of Israel, as well as the spiritual inheritance of his ancestors Abraham and Isaac. The Midrash portrays Laban as the archetype of the assimilationist approach, which demands that Israel relinquish its uniqueness. This Midrash strengthens the opinion that spiritual destruction is a greater danger to Jewish people than national enslavement or even than physical destruction. (cf. **my commentary to and translation of the Passover Haggadahh, Masorti Movement, Jer. 1993**)

Finally, Laban sees that he cannot keep Jacob in Aram, and he lets him and all of his entourage go back to the land of Israel. But, he demands a covenant. This covenant is puzzling. "Come, then, let us make a pact ("nikhrata berit"), you and I, that there may be a witness between you and me.... And Laban said to Jacob, "Here is this mound and here the pillar which I have set up between you and me: this mound shall be witness and this pillar shall be witness that I am not to cross to you past this mound, and that you are not to cross to me past this mound and this pillar, with hostile intent." (**Gen. 31:44;51-52**)

This is clearly an instance of "berit", covenant. Laban sets up a mound of stones and Jacob sets up a monument of stones, and these represent a boundary which neither side shall cross with intent to harm the other side. What is the nature of this covenant?

One answer to this question is found in the Sefer Ikkarim of Joseph Albo. Albo says that a covenant is a kind of oath between two parties, to create a relationship of love between them. The parties set up some "sign" which symbolizes the covenant and which testifies to its existence. Under this interpretation the covenant is more than a kind of pact of the end of hostility between Jacob and Laban, but rather a turning to a contractual relationship of loving care between them.

But, this idea is rejected by R. Joseph Hayyim b. Elijah al-Hakam (d. 1909), the author of "Ben Ish Hai", one of the most popular Torah commentaries in the Sephardi communities. Ben Ish Hai is bothered by the fact that this covenant is different from every other covenant "in the world". For every covenant is about relationship, friendship etc., as Albo points out, BUT this covenant is clearly meant for separation of the two parties. The fact that the purpose of the covenant being that there be NO relationship between the parties bothers Ben Ish Hai. He interprets this covenant as unique, in that it precisely avoids the idea of loving relationships, and seems to imply simply "good fences make good neighbors".

Here are two contrary notions about the nature of Jacob and Laban's agreement. In both cases the covenant is meant to insure peace and prosperity for both sides. One

interpretation sees that goal as being achieved by cultivating positive fraternal relationships, and the other sees the goal being reached by keeping the parties apart from each other, live and let live.

In Midrash Psalms, we find that the covenant was abrogated by Aram. When Joab marches against Aram (**II Sam. 10**), they complain that Joab, a descendant of Jacob, is not living up to the agreement made with their ancestor Laban! How dare he make war on them. Joab does not know what to answer the Arameans. He returns to David, who convenes the Sanhedrin to ponder the issue. They reply that the Arameans have already broken the pact. Once by cooperating with the King of Moab and sending Balaam to curse Israel (**Num. 23:7**), and a second time by subjugating Israel under king Cushan (**Judges 3:8**). Once Joab finds out that the Arameans have already violated the covenant twice, he feels that he is justified in continuing the war against them. This last account shows that no matter which of the versions of the purpose of the covenant we accept (or some combination of the two), the whole matter depends upon faithfully guarding the purpose of the covenant, namely keeping the peace, by both sides. TTT 46

***Gen. 31:46-47**
46And Jacob said to his kinsmen, "Gather stones." So they took stones and made a mound; and they partook of a meal there by the mound. 47Laban named it Yegar-sahadutha, but Jacob named it Gal-ed. And Laban declared, "This mound is a witness between you and me this day." That is why it was named Gal-ed;

One of the most dramatic moments in parashat va-yeitzei is when Lavan catches up to Jacob. This meeting starts out as very threatening for Jacob, but ends up with a covenant made between them (perhaps a foreshadowing of the meeting and wrestling with the man-angel, and the meeting with Esau - giving three similar episodes in the story cycle).

As a sign of the covenant between them, Jacob and Lavan collect stones and make a marker, Lavan giving it an Aramaic name, "yagar sahaduta", and Jacob calling it "Galed". Both names mean the "marker of witness" (**Gen. 31:46-47**). This seems very obvious, as Lavan is the Aramean and Jacob is the Hebrew. However, in a puzzling sequence, the Torah continues to tell us about the name of this marker. According to the following verses, Lavan calls the marker "Galed" (**48**)! Verse **49** seems to refer to the same pile of stones, "The lookout ("mitzpah") of which he said "the Lord will watch between me and you, for we will be hidden from each other ("ki nisater ish me-re'ehu")". By all accounts this is a very difficult verse, and it is not at all clear who says these words or to what it is referring.

Rashi explains that "mitzpah" is yet another name for the same marker of the covenant. He also explains that each one, Jacob and Lavan, said to each other that God will watch over each one if they violate the covenant. Rashi is apparently basing his explanation on the Midrash of R. Abbahu, "'we will be hidden from each other'", until now we had watched over each other, now we will each be on our side of the boundary and cannot watch each other", thus, God will have to observe how each of us keeps the pact (cf. **Gen. R. 74:14**).

The force of the covenant is that an agreement of separation can bring about the end of hatred and war. But, each side wants to feel that there are observers who watch the other side, and make sure that they keep their part of the bargain. If there is real separation, there must be reliance by both sides on a neutral power, in this case God's help, to achieve that sense of watchfulness.

Rabbeinu Bahye develops this even further by saying that the two basic qualities of the world, justice and mercy, are being invoked in this covenant. Mercy is invoked by the word "ve-hayah", in v. **44**, which are the same letters as in the name of the Lord, which is mentioned specifically in our verse, "the Lord will watch ("yitzef", i.e. mitzpah). The quality of mercy is symbolized by the four letter name of the Lord. Thus, "mitzpah" is not merely to watch, but to observe with mercy, with understanding. Afterwards, the quality of justice is mentioned through the name Elohim (v. **50**).

The benefits of such a treaty of separation depend not only on the observers who watch over compliance with the treaty, but depend also on the application of those basic qualities of justice and mercy, by both sides to the other. TTT 47

Jacob finally is ready to cross into the land of Israel, and to return home. One big obstacle weighs heavily on him, namely, the wrath of his brother Esau, and Esau's threat to kill him. He sends presents in order to placate Esau, and the night before his meeting he wrestles with a mysterious figure, and his name is changed from Jacob to Israel. When he meetst Esau he finds out that Esau has forgiven him, as he has become wealthy in his own right. With relief Jacob, Israel, now begins to explore the land of his inheritance, and he builds an altar to the Lord. Then the affair of Dinah, his daughter, is recounted. Simeon and Levi trick the men of Shechem into circumcising themselves so that their prince may marry Dinah. Then they kill all of the men. Jacob is astonished and berates them. He feels he must flee possible retaliation. He returns to Beth El and builds an altar there, and forces all of the idols in possession of his entourage to be buried there. The parasha ends by enumerating the lineage of Esau.

***Gen. 32:4-9**
4Jacob sent messengers ahead to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom,
5and instructed them as follows, "Thus shall you say, 'To my lord Esau, thus says your servant Jacob: I stayed with Laban and remained until now; *6I have acquired cattle, asses, sheep, and male and female slaves; and I send this message to my lord in the hope of gaining your favor.'"* *7The messengers returned to Jacob, saying, "We came to your brother Esau; he himself is coming to meet you, and there are four hundred men with him."* *8Jacob was greatly frightened; in his anxiety, he divided the people with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two camps,* *9thinking, "If Esau comes to the one camp and attacks it, the other camp may yet escape."*

Jacob is returning home after 22 years in Aram. His trip to Aram was a hastily arranged flight as he had just swindled his brother Esau, who was intent on killing Jacob. It was not an optimal way to begin a trip abroad. Thus, it is no surprise that when Jacob returns we read: "Jacob sent messengers ahead to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom … The messengers returned to Jacob, saying, "We came to your brother Esau; he himself is coming to meet you, and there are four hundred men with him." Jacob was greatly frightened; in his anxiety, he divided the people with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two camps, thinking, "If Esau comes to the one camp and attacks it, the other camp may yet escape."" (**Gen. 32, 4-9**)

Jacob sends messengers to his brother with placating words, indicating that he wishes to make up to Esau. The messengers tell Jacob that Esau is approaching with a large entourage, and Jacob goes into a panic. He is frightened and prepares for war and for the possibility of flight from Esau once again. Who would blame him? Well, Rabbi Isaac Arama, for one.

In his monumental commentary on the Torah, Akedat Yizhak (AY), Rabbi Arama asks a simple question: since God has promised Jacob that the land is his, and since God has promised Jacob that he will protect him forever (**Gen. 28, 15**), what has Jacob got to be afraid of? Does Jacob not rely on the clear cut and simple promise of God? Suddenly Jacob seems to me to be a bit like Woody Allen's character in "Love and Death"; would you trust an angel to save you from a firing squad?

Rabbi Arama's simple question is the impetus for him to launch into a long and complex discussion about how things that happen in our world happen. He states simply that "human actions cannot escape being what they are". AY spells out four factors in causing things to be the way they are: 1) God's personal providence; i. e. the supervision of each person; 2) laws of nature; 3) human enterprise; 4) chance. The point is that nothing that happens in the world is the result of just ONE of these four factors. AY states that it is obvious to our intelligence and experience that everything that happens is the result of some admixture of ALL four of these factors. (**AY sha'ar 26**)

Now, the point of AY's entire long essay on this topic is to clarify how much investment of human enterprise is necessary in order to bring us closer to the constructive and move us further from detriment. The upshot is that deficiency in enterprise brings about a deficiency in God's personal providence for that person. AY points out that our experience is that sometimes we try very hard and end up empty-handed. Sometimes that is because we try so hard, that we create a situation that becomes compulsive, so that the harder we try the more we are snared in the web of failure. This, he says, is what lies behind the tangled web of the relationships between Joseph and his brothers, and why it does not succeed at first. Still, he points out, that if our efforts are worthy, that is not for evil purposes, and consistent most of the time they pay off to some extant in everything we do.

Now, since that is true about human enterprise, and since we know that everything that happens has ALL four factors involved in how things turn out, it is therefore obvious that one cannot rely on God's providence alone! God's promise alone cannot move events to a good or a bad conclusion without the factor of human enterprise, laws of nature, and chance. And, he adds, if a person is negligent and lazy in striving for a good outcome, the other factors are also weakened making it even harder to achieve the wished for outcome. TTT 48

Thus, it is clear why Jacob does not rely on God's promise to save him from Esau; why he is frightened and takes action both to placate Esau and at the same time to save what he can in case that does not work. It is clear that Jacob knows AY's analysis of things, and acts accordingly. It seems to me that Jacob knows that he cannot rely on God's promise to protect him from Esau's anger precisely because he, Jacob, has done nothing to make amends these 22 years! It is his lack of enterprise in trying to make up to his brother that makes God's promise, according to AY's formula, almost worth nothing. Thus, Jacob embarks on a forceful and consistent set of actions to make up to Esau. He sends the messengers with notes of contrition, gifts to compensate for financial loss, and takes steps to protect himself just in case. AY has indeed helped us understand Jacob's actions, his fears, and also his hopes for a peaceful and humane future relationship between him and his brother.

***Gen. 32:25**

25 *Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn.*

Jacob returns to the land of Israel, and is worried about meeting his brother Esau. He fears that Esau still wishes to kill him. He has a plan that will enable at least part of his family and possessions to survive such an attack. The plan is quite simple. He

divides his family, and his possessions, into parts, "…thinking, "If Esau comes to the one camp and attacks it, the other camp may yet escape."" (**Gen. 32, 9**).

At last, after sending the various camps on their respective ways, "Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn…" (**Gen. 32, 25 (24 in Koren)**). This is the famous story of Jacob's name being changed to Israel after an all night struggle. Two questions come to mind. One, why did Jacob return to the original campsite and thus, remain alone? Two, what is the nature of the struggle with the mysterious "man"?

In the Talmud, Jacob's return is seen as the source of a moral lesson. "Said R. Eleazar: He remained behind for the sake of some small jars. Hence [it is learnt] that to the righteous their money is dearer than their body; and why is this? Because they do not stretch out their hands to robbery." (**Hullin 91a**) According to this explanation Jacob was very concerned about some jars that had been left behind. He was very protective of his possessions, and the reason that he was so concerned with them was that all of them had been acquired by honest work, nothing was taken by thievery.

In the sixth Homily of Derashot ha-Ran, this source is the basis for an explanation of the centrality of "intent" in all of our actions. The Darshan says that Jacob's behavior is the source of a major fallacy in the way that people think. People see Jacob so concerned about little bottles (reminiscent of the Seinfeld episode of returning the bottles for deposit to another state), that they think that money or possessions are the most important things in life. If Jacob, a righteous person, is so concerned about these matters, then they will be perceived as central to life.

This is a great fallacy, for people do not see the "intent", the purpose of the action, they only see the external action. He goes on to quote one of the translations of Aristotle, to the effect that people see a good physician and a bad one, both doing the same thing. They do not understand how to discern which is good and which is bad. The only way that could be discerned is to know the "kavvanah", intention that the physician has in mind when supplying medicine. In this case, the term "kavvanah", intention, seems to mean not merely intent, but also what knowledge is brought to bear upon the situation in terms of deciding how to act to achieve a specific goal.

Let us say that one physician had studied and done research, and had seen similar symptoms, and was up to date on the latest treatments for such symptoms. This doctor applies this knowledge in terms of the examination of the patient. the doctor's actions are based on all of this,. This is the good "intention", and the good physician. But, another physician, not having the same knowledge, also prescribes treatment. This is bad "intention". The term here does NOT mean "intent", since both have the intent to heal the patient. But, because of "kavvanah" in the sense of "direction" or "directed understanding", one physician is better than the other.

So it is with materiel possessions, or with any mitzvah or aveirah, commandment or transgression. If one is concerned about possessions because one thinks they are an end in themselves, that thinking is mistaken. Jacob is so concerned, because he knows that his possessions make the difference in survival of part of his family. His "intention" is for the sake of life and of being able to serve God. The same can be applied to keeping a mitzvah. If the goal is only for power or to establish position in

a certain community, that is not a worthy act, even if it is halakhically perfect. It is only worthy if keeping a mitzvah is out of commitment to a worthy goal.

As to our second question, what is the nature of the struggle with the mysterious "man", Ramban summarizes different approaches. The Hebrew word "va-yeiaveik" is usually translated "wrestled". Ramban, based on Talmudic and other sources, offers the following interpretations: "became dusty" (from the word "avak" which is dust); "connected up with him" (from the Aramaic "avik" to connect); "embraced him" since alef and het interchange; or "implored him, tried to seduce him" following Onkelos' translation. Each one of these possibilities is intriguing. It is clear that not all of them see the "man's" actions as threatening to Jacob, at least not physically. (**Ramban on Gen. 32, 25**)

Rabbeinu Bahya has two explanations. In the first he understands that the "man" is trying to find sins in Jacob, which he can use to end his credibility as a righteous person (**on Gen. 32, 24**). More intriguing is the second explanation, which he quotes from an Arabic commentary on Song of Songs, most likely one of Saadiah Gaon. (**on Gen. 32, 29**)

Jacob remained alone with his rational self, but was not sure if his mind would partake of the active soul, the mind of God. During his inner struggle, Jacob sees that only when his rational soul can detach itself from materiel desires can it become one with the active soul. The active soul is free of materiel desires. On this reading, Jacobs concern for his materiel goods, had to become "pure". That is, in order for him to truly be attached to God, he had to make sure that his possessions were not only acquired honestly, but that they were used only for the purpose of being attached to God. This is a challenge of major proportions, and is depicted as such in the Torah's account of the struggle.

***Gen. 32:26-29**
26When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he wrenched Jacob's hip at its socket, so that the socket of his hip was strained as he wrestled with him. 27Then he said, "Let me go, for dawn is breaking." But he answered, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." 28Said the other, "What is your name?" He replied, "Jacob." 29Said he, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed." AC1

***Gen. 35:9 - 10**
9God appeared again to Jacob on his arrival from Paddan-aram, and He blessed him. 10God said to him,"You whose name is Jacob,You shall be called Jacob no more,But Israel shall be your name."Thus He named him Israel. AC2

Jacob's name is changed to Israel, twice in our parasha. The first time, it is as a result of the dramatic struggle which Jacob carries on with an unnamed assailant, which Jacob later takes to be an angel of the Lord (**Gen. 32:25-33**). The second time, is after Jacob expresses anger at the killing of the Schechemites by Shimon and Levi. God tells him to return to Bet El, from whence he left the land of Israel, and to build an altar there. Jacob realizes that there are idols in his camp, and removes them all before building the altar in Bet El (**Gen. 35:1-11**)

In account one (AC1), Jacob is described as "alone". His encounter with the Divine is out of a sense of loneliness, and it is a struggle. One can imagine Jacob at the border of the land of Israel, he has sent all his possessions ahead of him (v**. 24**), and he is alone. He has no possessions that can define his life in terms of materiel success, his family is gone, so he cannot describe his life in terms of his family connections.

The words "Jacob was left alone" ("va-yivvater ya'akov levado") imply, in Hebrew, one who is a remnant from total destruction, a "sole survivor". Jacob is alone in that he is also questioning if he will be a "soul survivor". He has spent 20 years in an environment of idolatry and luxury. From the reports of his messengers he thinks that his brother still wants to kill him. He is not sure if his mother and father are still alive, and if so if they are prosperous or not. He is leaving a settled neighborhood, wealth and a secure future, to go to the land which God promised to his ancestors and to himself, but with no guarantee of success, with only faith to sustain him. But, he is struggling with that faith. He must be wondering if he was not better off as a wealthy man even in surroundings where his family believed in idols.

What is unique in AC1 is the language of the change "lo ya'akov yeiameir od shimekha", literally "not Jacob will your name be said". Hebrew does NOT use the verb "amar" "to say" for talking about someone's name. As in English it uses the verb "kara" "to call", in Hebrew you say "eich korim lekha?" "how are you called?", not "eich omrim lekha?". So what is the man/angel saying to Jacob? Furthermore, in account two (AC2), the standard usage for name changes IS found: "lo yikarei shimekha od ya'akov" (**35:10**; for the same expression see **Gen. 17:5, 16** for the change of Abraham and Sarah's names). In AC1, an explication of the name Israel is given "for you have struggled with God ("elohim") and with men ("anashim") and have prevailed." In AC2, no explication is given. Apparently, the explication of AC1 is already known and accepted by the time of AC2, but, the actual change of name does not officially take place until AC2.

So, then what is the purpose of AC1, what is the meaning of the name Israel? The incident of Jacob's struggle and the new appellation reverberates throughout the Bible (cf. **Jer. 31:10, Hos. 12:3-5**). But, the one place where it is connected to another historical event is in the account of the struggle over monotheism in the time of Elijah. Elijah confronts the prophets of idolatry, and "Elijah takes 12 stones, the number of the sons of Jacob, to whom God spoke saying: "Israel will be your name"(**I Ki. 18:31**) in order to rebuild the destroyed altar of God. The altar is made up of a number which signifies Israel, the changed name of Jacob. Somehow, Elijah is making a connection between the name Israel and his own struggle to teach the people faith in the One living God.

Metzudat Tziyon, (David and Yehiel Altschuler), explicates the meaning of the man/angel's words to Jacob in the following way: "you have struggled with other gods ("elohim aherim") and with their prophets ("anshei neveei ha-ba'al") and have prevailed". Elijah sees the name Israel as one which denotes a constant struggle with idolatry and its priesthood. The meaning is that Jacob has against all materiel consideration remained faithful to the monotheistic belief which includes his living in the land of Israel. But, Elijah knows that even IN the Land of Israel, idolatry can take hold. The King can establish a religious establishment which leads the people astray from the Torah of God, to a kind of unethical idolatry. Thus, the name Israel is

invoked as a symbol of the struggle to maintain ethical monotheism in a world which can easily become idolatrous.

Radak (R. David Kimhi) seconds this understanding of the name Israel, and its place in the account of Elijah. But, he adds a most interesting reading of the original verses. The man/angel says to Jacob: "lo ya'akov yeiameir od shimekha, ki-im Yisrael, ki sarita im Elohim ..." (**32:29**). The use of the word "ki" or "ki im" is ambiguous. It can mean "rather", but it can also be used as an introduction to a condition "only if" or "on condition that". Radak sees this usage in our verse, so the meaning is "you will not be known as Jacob any longer, if you act like Israel, that is, on condition that you struggle against idolatry and prevail against it." If Jacob and his descendants cleave to faith in One God and God's Torah, then they will have earned the appellation "Israel".

Jacob is told in AC1 that his inner struggle over belief in God and with the surrounding cultures is a struggle which has a name, it is called "Israel". If you carry it on successfully you will achieve that title. In AC2, after Jacob has taken steps to remove idolatry from his camp, and has dedicated an altar to God, he can then be "called Israel", he has earned the title.

***Gen. 33:5**

[5]Looking about, he saw the women and the children. "Who," he asked, "are these with you?" He answered, "The children with whom God has favored your servant."

In parashat va-yishlah Esau and Jacob meet. The meeting is complex and dramatic. Jacob divides his family up, he sends messengers and gifts, in short, he does everything to placate Esau while at the same time preparing to fight and/or run. When the actual meeting takes place, Esau seems overjoyed to see his brother, and apparently has forgotten all about killing him over the purloined blessings. Jacob stands opposite his brother with all of his wives, children and cattle. Suddenly Esau is aware of this crowd: "Looking about, he saw the women and the children. "Who," he asked, "are these with you?" He answered, "The children with whom God has favored ["hanan"] your servant." (**Gen. 33, 5**)

Esau is obviously impressed by the numbers of women and children and asks about them. What is he asking? Clearly these people are with Jacob. Sekhel Tov (R. Menahem ben Solomon) understands that Esau is asking about the status of the women and children: "are these your wives or are they maidservants, are these children your own or are they slaves?" This implies that Esau has nefarious designs on these people. Perhaps he wants to extort some of them from Jacob, or to demand that they be given to him rather than the cattle that are proffered. (**Sekhel Tov on Gen. 33, 5**)

Sekhel Tov also points out, as does Ramban, that Jacob does not really answer the question fully. He ignores the question about the women and relates in his answer only to the children: "The children with whom God has favored ["hanan"] your servant." This emphasizes the suspicion about Esau's seemingly innocuous question. Ramban also suspects that Esau has designs on the women, and Jacob indirectly lets him understand that all of them are his wives, note even the maidservants, so that Esau will not attempt to take them. Since the children are arranged each with their

own mother, it is clear that if all of these are the children that God gave to Jacob, so these women are their mothers. **(Ramban on Gen. 33, 5**)

One question remains. What exactly does Jacob mean by saying that God "favored" ("hanan") him with these children. The word "hanan" does mean to favor or to be merciful towards. It could just be a circumlocution to describe the feeling of being granted God's mercies. Still, to use the word "hanan" here needs to be explained. One would expect the word "bereikh", "blessed", or the word "natan", bestowed. Indeed, one Midrash specifically asks what Jacob had in mind by using precisely this word to describe the 11 sons and 1 daughter that were standing before Esau.

The answer is that the root "hanan" is precisely in the middle of the priestly blessing. This blessing consists of 15 words, and the word in the middle, "vi-huneka"), from the root "hanan", has 7 words before it and seven words after it. (cf. **Num. 6, 24-26**) This adds up to 14, which is the number of years that Jacob served Laban to acquire his wives. (**Pesikta zutrata, Lekah Tov, on Gen. 33, 5**) Indeed, the word "hanan" is a special word applied to each son who was the progenitor of a tribe of Israel. The proof is that when Benjamin is born and brought to Jacob for his blessing he says "may God favor you ("yahenekha") my son", using the root "hanan". (cf. **Gen. 43, 29, and Gen. R. 78, 5 in Theodore-Albeck**)

So the word "hanan" is used especially for the children who represent the tribes of Israel. But, what exactly does this word mean in this context? A great Midrash on the priestly blessing reveals to us that the word "hanan" is a special plea for knowledge and understanding. These children are blessed, they are protected and the Shekhina dwells among them. What they need is knowledge and understanding, as we say every day in the fourth blessing of the Amidah prayer "God favor us with wisdom and understanding" ("atah honen la-adam …"). So, this word is precisely in the middle of the priestly blessing because blessing, protection and peace rest upon wisdom and understanding. The center pole which holds up the blessing is "vi-huneka", which this Midrash understands as the prayer for wisdom. (**Num. R. 11, 6**) All the benefits that God can bestow on us are empty if we do not bring wisdom and understanding to them. TTT 50

Our Midrash, as usual, has another explanation of the root "hanan" in this context: ""vi-huneka" May God give you the wisdom to be compassionate with each other ("honenim zeh et zeh"), and merciful with each other ("u-merahamim zeh et zeh")…" The wisdom which is at the center of the priestly blessing is the wisdom of how to behave towards each other. In this account God's blessings to the nation through the priest depend upon the moral wisdom of the nation. The priestly blessing is an empty shell without this word in the middle that strikes home the need for compassion and mercy between every person and their fellow. This is the basis of the relationships between the members of Israel, they are born under this sign, so to speak, and the legacy of compassion and decency towards one another is what is transmitted by the priestly blessing from then on forever.

***Gen. 35:1-4**

God said to Jacob, "Arise, go up to Bethel and remain there; and build an altar there to the God who appeared to you when you were fleeing from your brother Esau." 2So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, "Rid yourselves of the alien gods in your midst,

purify yourselves, and change your clothes. [3]Come, let us go up to Bethel, and I will build an altar there to the God who answered me when I was in distress and who has been with me wherever I have gone." [4]They gave to Jacob all the alien gods that they had, and the rings that were in their ears, and Jacob buried them under the terebinth that was near Shechem.

The process of Midrash and commentary that constitutes Jewish tradition produces varied readings of events recounted in the Torah. I call this process "Talking Torah". It is the way I translate "Torah she-be'al peh", usually translated as "oral Torah". I prefer "Talking Torah" because it expresses the delightful ambiguity of "talking about Torah" and "Torah talking to us", which is exactly what happens in the Midrashic process. It is precisely such dialectical talking, which allows for the variety of understandings and lessons that the process produces. TTT 51

There is a striking example of this in our parasha this week. Jacob has returned to Israel, made up with Esau, gone through a disastrous event when his daughter, Dinah, is raped, and his sons massacre the town responsible. At this point, and after all that, we read: "God said to Jacob, "Arise, go up to Bethel and remain there ['aleh bet el ve-shev sham"]; and build an altar there to the God who appeared to you when you were fleeing from your brother Esau." So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, "Rid yourselves of the alien gods in your midst, purify yourselves, and change your clothes. Come, let us go up to Bethel, and I will build an altar there to the God who answered me when I was in distress and who has been with me wherever I have gone." They gave to Jacob all the alien gods that they had, and the rings that were in their ears, and Jacob buried them under the terebinth that was near Shechem." (**Gen. 35:1-4**)

What a strange juxtaposition! After rape and mass murder Jacob is bidden to go to Bethel and build an altar. Jacob, according to the text, understands that this is a wake up call from God to rid his whole household of idols and idolatry! The revelation that Jacob's household was rife with idols is astonishing. God reminds Jacob of his departure from Israel, of which we read last week. The dramatic story of his resting at Bethel, of the ladder, of Jacob's recognition of God's presence, and of Jacob's vow consciously returns. (cf. **Gen. 28:10-22**)

What is behind God's demand of Jacob to go to Bethel and build an altar? Is Jacob's understanding the correct one; for if it is, why does God tell him to "remain there"? After all of these catastrophic events, is idolatry the only issue?! These questions bother Ramban who gives an uncharacteristically personal comment on this verse: "I did not know why [God told Jacob] to remain there." Perhaps, Ramban opines, God first told Jacob to remain there, and afterwards to build an altar in order to purify himself from idolatry. But, Ramban is not satisfied with his own answer. It is too close to the surface of the text. Ramban intuits that Jacob's understanding of God's command was too simple. Purification from idolatry is only part of the reason, perhaps the part that is connected to building the altar.

Ramban offers another possibility. That Jacob needed purification for the slaughter of the Shechemites. Ramban cites the rule "You shall then stay outside the camp seven days; every one among you or among your captives who has slain a person or touched a corpse shall cleanse himself on the third and seventh days." (**Num. 31, 19**) Those who kill, even in war, need to be purified. Jacob needs to remain there, at least

the 7 day period of purification, in order to "clear his mind to concentrate on cleaving to God". (**Ramban on Gen. 35:1**)

For this approach, the building of the altar and the respite at Bethel is not merely a matter of fighting idolatry. It is also an ethical matter, a need to know that bloodshed, under any circumstances of justification, causes impurity. It requires time and thought to return to a path that can bring one closer to God.

I spoke of varieties of understandings. There is another approach to this command to Jacob. This approach sees God's command as a reproach to Jacob, who had vowed that if he would return safely and be assured of a future that he would build a monument to God. (**Gen. 28:22**) Well, he had returned and done a lot of things, and had NOT kept his vow. Indeed, this view ascribes the tragedy of Dinah as a "punishment" to Jacob for not fulfilling his vow.

What is most fascinating is how the Midrash describes Jacob's behavior. It connects his negligence in keeping his vow to the verse: "If you have been scandalously arrogant, If you have been a schemer, Then clap your hand to your mouth." (**Prov. 30, 32**) The Midrash cites a dispute between Ben Azzai and R. Akiba. Ben Azzai says that if you have been scandalous regarding words of Torah, in the end you will become arrogant. R. Akiba says that what causes one to be scandalous regarding Torah is arrogance. In support of R. Akiba the case of R. Levi b. Sissi is cited. He was appointed rabbi in the city of Simonia, and they built him a fine throne to sit up high above the people. At that point R. Levi lost all knowledge of Torah, and the verse of Proverbs was applied to him. (**Gen. R. 81, 2**) TTT 152

R. Levi has undertaken an oath, that is, his study and appointment as rabbi is seen as a kind of oath to keep the integrity of Torah. But, when one is swollen with ambition or allows arrogance of status to become a motivation, the oath is ignored. The implication is that Jacob had ignored his oath because he had been such a success. Despite his worry about the reaction of the local population, he might have secretly assumed that what his sons did was necessary. He had, after all, bested Laban, become very wealthy in the process, made up with Esau, and now had struck fear into the hearts of the locals.

Indeed, this Midrash reproves Jacob: "Jacob you have forgotten your oath, arise to Bethel… and if you shall not do so, you are just like Esau. For as Esau vows and does not keep his vows, so you have vowed and have not keep it." There is supposed to be a moral difference in Jacob's behavior, but up to this point there is none. Building the altar, and remaining there are means to break Jacob out of his arrogance, to remind him that many of his and his children's actions have been scandalous, and that is not fitting to one who is meant to cleave to God.

There is one more approach that I wish to put before you. R. Yosef b. Shlomo Kolon (Maharik, d. 1480) was a famous rabbi of northern Italy, and the teacher of Ovadiah of Bartinuro. In one of his responsa he relates to Jacob's forgetting his oath. He deals with this story in the context of the halakha of annulment of oaths, and specifically that oaths made in time of trouble cannot be annulled. (**Resp. Maharik ha-hadashim, 6**)

How could a pious person, such as Jacob, have stalled fulfilling his oath. Maharik answers that Jacob thought that he might find a rabbinic court, and have the oath annulled. The reason that he thought this was that Jacob was insensitive to God's help all along the way. He survived getting to Aram, and did not discern God's help. He survived the plots of Laban, he became wealthy, and still did not discern God's help. Since his oath was that if God helped him, he would build a monument to God, and since he did not discern God's help, he felt that he could seek to annul the oath.

Perhaps this is another form of arrogance, or perhaps it shows just how people can become insensitive to God's presence and help which surrounds them all the time. The problem is that this insensitivity breeds more insensitivity, and leads one to permit themselves to partake in immoral actions. This is the reason that God reminds Jacob that he is the God who was with him all the while, and Jacob then begins to remember God's assistance. For Jacob is reminded that he was always in trouble, and he always managed to get out of trouble. He survived and even prospered. No matter how long we survive, we must realize to be grateful for it. Oaths taken in moments of great trouble must always be paid, and can never be annulled, for to allow that is to cover up God's presence in the world; it is to accept insensitivity to that presence as a norm. Precisely to force ourselves to see God's presence such oaths must be kept at all cost.

***Gen. 35:9**
9God appeared again to Jacob on his arrival from Paddan-aram, and He blessed him. 10God said to him, You whose name is Jacob,You shall be called Jacob no more,But Israel shall be your name."Thus He named him Israel

Jacob wrestles with a man all night. As a blessing the man says that Jacob's name will be changed to Israel. Jacob later takes the man to have been an angel of God, implying that the change of name is from God. (**Gen. 32:24 ff.**) This dramatic tale is, however, not the only time that this change of name is recorded. Later on in our parasha, God speaks directly to Jacob and informs him that his name is changed to Israel. (**Gen. 35:9-10**) In this latter incident the fact of Jacob's new name is stated twice! Verse 10 ends by saying, "Thus He named him Israel". The verse goes out of it way to stress that this time God is the one who changes the name. It is almost as if Jacob did not hear the first time his name was changed. Perhaps, the Torah is hinting that the first change was not a complete one, and it is only completed by the second change.

This view is the one expressed by Radak (R. David Kimhi) in his commentary on the other place in the Bible where this name change is referred to, namely in **2 Kings 17:34**. There we read: "To this day, they follow their former practices. They do not worship the LORD [properly]. They do not follow the laws and practices, the Teaching and Instruction that the LORD enjoined upon the descendants of Jacob—who was given the name Israel." Nations that set up settlements continued to worship their own gods, in addition to the God of Israel. The verse points out that such syncretism is NOT the way that the descendants of Jacob, called Israel, are to behave.

Radak sees this very issue as the meaning of the name Israel. For God's direct calling of Jacob's name Israel comes after Jacob has made his whole camp remove the idols

in their midst. “So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, ‘Rid yourselves of the alien gods in your midst (“asher be-tochechem”), purify yourselves, and change your clothes. Come, let us go up to Bethel, and I will build an altar there to the God who answered me when I was in distress and who has been with me wherever I have gone.’ They gave to Jacob all the alien gods that they had, and the rings that were in their ears, and Jacob buried them under the terebinth that was near Shechem.” (**Gen. 35:2-4**) It is only at this point that Jacob has made the vision of monotheism manifest.

Radak understands this to mean that until this point Jacob and all those with him had not wholeheartedly embraced God with no other gods mixed in. In some sense the first time that Jacob was called Israel had not brought this about. Only now is Jacob’s faith whole, and only now can God make the name change directly. Indeed, Radak seems to imply that just being born a Jew does not entirely entitle one to the appellation “Israel”. Only after removing any other gods which are within you, can one be truly called Israel. It seems to me that he is interpreting the words of the verse “in your midst (“asher be-tochechem”)” in a spiritual manner. Only when one removes the false gods that are within us (“asher be-tochechem”) can we claim the name Israel.

This understanding fits the comment on this incident made by Rabbeinu Bahayya (on **Gen. 12:5**). Bahayya quotes the well known Midrash that Abraham and Sarah actively made converts. But, he goes on to show that all of the ancestors did the same. His prooftext for Jacob is our verse, the one in which Jacob calls for everyone to remove the idols in their inner being (“asher be-tochechem”). But, in that case Jacob himself and his sons and whole family are included in the conversion process!

We can understand from this that converts and born Jews are equal in the sense that both must remove all idolatry from their inner selves before they can truly claim the name Israel. Just because Jacob had been named Israel by an angel, did not mean that he had cleansed his soul of idolatry. He, along with all of those whom he had converted, had to do that. Only then was the name Israel applied. TTT 53

***Gen. 35:17-19**

17When her labor was at its hardest, the midwife said to her, “Have no fear, for it is another boy for you.” 18But as she breathed her last – for she was dying – she named him Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin. Thus Rachel died. She was buried on the road to Ephrath – now Bethlehem.

Parashat va-yishlah ends with the return of Jacob and his extended family to Israel. The only son to be born in the land of Israel is Benjamin. The story of his birth is connected to Rachel's death. "She was in distress while giving birth ("be-hakshota be-lideta"), and the midwife said to her: "do not fear this is another son for you". And as her soul ("nafsha") left her, for she died, she named him "ben oni" and his father called him Benjamin". And Rachel died and was buried on the way to Efrat, which is Bet Lehem" (**Gen. 35:17-19**) The word used to describe Rachel's distress during the birth of Benjamin is "be-hakshota", from the word "kashe", which is used in rabbinic literature as a technical term for a kind of birth-distress which is life threatening.

The Midrash assumes that our ancestors kept the halakha. Many Midrashim are based on this assumption, which although anachronistic, is nevertheless a source of understanding. I was reminded of the Mishnah in **Ohalot 7:6**, in which a women is having distress in birth, "maksheh le-leyd". The halakha there is that the fetus is aborted in order to save the life of the mother. Only if the head and major part of the child is already outside of the mother is nothing done. I could find no Midrash which asked the question, but it seems to me a good Midrashic kushya, "what was the situation with Rachel?" Why was Benjamin not aborted?

There are several possible answers in the Midrash, which might have assumed this question, even though it is not stated directly. In the Mechilta of R. Ishmael, this text is used as an example of where the text says "died", but it does not mean really death (**be-Shallah, 6**). Many of the Biblical commentaries repeat this perush, and perhaps it is because the verse says that she gave her son a name, which is not possible if someone is already dead! Furthermore, the next verse says "and Rachel died...", someone does not die twice! They must have understood "ki metah" in **v. 18** as "was in the process of dying" or "was afflicted as in death", something like the comment on Pharaoh in Ex. Chap. 2, or the Egyptians who died "on the sea shore" as in the Midrash above. Indeed, by this interpretation **v. 19**, where Rachel actually dies and is buried may have happened long after the birth. Thus, there was no need for an abortion according to the halakha.

This interpretation and sense of the outcome of Rachel's giving birth is the basis for a beautiful Midrash for women who are having trouble during the birth process. Midrash Tehillim (**20:4**) brings the following in the name of Resh Lakish: "a parable of a women who is in distress during birth ("maksheh le-leyd"), and we say to her "we do not know what to say to you" (i.e. we don't know how to apply the halakha), "but, may the One who answered your mother (Rachel) during her distress ("kushyata"), answer you in this time of your distress..." It seems to me that this kernel of a women's prayer, on the same model as the prayer we know "mi she-anah le...., hu ya'aneinu", assumes that Rachel gave birth and lived. It is a prayer of hope that the halakha would not have to be applied, and that the birth process, although difficult in this case, will have a good ending.

***Gen. 36:6-8**

6Esau took his wives, his sons and daughters, and all the members of his household, his cattle and all his livestock, and all the property that he had acquired in the land of Canaan, and went to another land because of his brother Jacob. 7For their possessions were too many for them to dwell together, and the land where they sojourned could not support them because of their livestock. 8So Esau settled in the hill country of Seir – Esau being Edom.

Parashat va-yishlah contains another account of separation between kin. Genesis has many such accounts, Abraham separates from Lot, Ishmael from Isaac, Jacob from Esau, and after Jacob and Esau reunite at the beginning of this week's parasha, at the end Esau separates from Jacob for good. "Esau took his wives, sons and daughters, and all of his household servants and his flocks, and everything he had acquired in Canaan, and he went to a land ("va-yelekh el eretz") because of his brother Jacob. For their possessions were too many to dwell together, and the land they occupied could not sustain all their flocks. Esau dwelt in Mount Seir, Esau is Edom." (**Gen. 36, 6-8**)

It is clear that there is a formal reason for Esau to separate from Jacob, namely, that the grazing areas available to them are not fertile enough to support both of their flocks. Still, the verse demands interpretation because of the strange phrase "va-yelekh el eretz", "he went to a land". Which land? Onkelos merely translates "to another land", but in this way he adds the word "another" which is not found in the original. Rashi says that it means "to somewhere", that is, the first place he finds with enough pasture for his flocks. Ramban, on the other hand insists that the intention of the verse is to tell us that Esau went to Seir, and Ramban points to other verses where a place word is missing, and in every case, it is clear from context which place is meant.

Another comment uses these verses to praise Jacob as wise, for when he left he took his children first and then his wives (**Gen. 31, 17**); whereas Esau takes his wives first and then his children, which shows that he is a fool. (**Gen. R. 82, 13**) Leaving this male chauvinist remark aside, the real problem in our verses is the inconsistency in explaining why Esau parts from Jacob. For, even though the needs of their flocks is cited, still verse 6 specifically states that Esau departs "because of his brother Jacob". This implies that the real motivation is not merely economics, and that there is a deeper more personal motive.

This same Midrash presents a debate over the meaning of the phrase: "because of his brother Jacob". R. Eliezer says that Esau did not want to be part of the open writ of obligation which was pending against the descendants of Abraham. God told Abraham: "Know well that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years" (**Gen. 15, 13**) This fate had not yet come to pass, and Esau, as one of Abraham's descendants should have been part of this fate. Esau, however, decided that he did not want to buy into this destiny, and thus departs from Jacob to avoid this experience.

R. Yehoshua b. Levi comments that this means that Esau could not face Jacob daily because of his own shame in that he had sold his birthright to Jacob. According to this view, Esau always felt a sense of disgrace when near Jacob, and even if Jacob said nothing or did nothing to remind Esau that he "spurned his own birthright" (**Gen. 25, 34**), he nevertheless felt opprobrium in Jacob's presence.

It seems to me that these two sages illumine two sides of the same issue. It is Esau's reluctance to assume the responsibility of his birth that works to distance him from assuming the responsibility of historical lot. In this manner, Esau appears to be a totally selfish individual, for whom family duties and historical destiny have no place in his world. He is not like Jacob.

Jacob is among the patriarchs because he is a person "who consults God". This phrase, in Hebrew "bnei adam she-hen mishtamshim be-ha-kadosh barukh hu", is very strange. (**Ex. R. 38, 4**) Prof. Lieberman translates it as "consults", and shows that it is a Hebrew translation of a Greek term. (Hellinism in Jewish Palestine, p. 195) I understand it to mean a sense of God's presence in life and in history. One who "consults" God, in this phrase, is one whose life and whose choices in life are informed by a sense of being in a flow of time upon which God impinges. Thus, no choice can be totally self-centered, not if it is informed by a sense of being a partner of God in the flow of time. TTT 54

In some ways Esau is a sad figure, for whom his personal sense of shame cannot be overcome. If it were overcome, perhaps he would be much more willing to partake in the fate of his family. His hatred of Jacob would be mitigated if he no longer felt personal disgrace in Jacob's presence. Indeed, the Ktav ve-ha-Kabalah of R. Yaakov Tzvi Meklenberg, imparts positive motivation to Esau. He leaves so that his personal enslavement to the relationship with Jacob will be no longer, and he separates from Jacob so that the hatred between them will be cancelled. (on **Gen. 27, 40, but cf. Yalkut Shimoni, va-yishlah 133**)

In all of these commentaries one thing is clear, that the sense of obligation and responsibility towards family and national destiny is a complex thing. It is tied up with internal personal family relationships, and depends heavily on an individuals own sense of worth within their family structure. Being willing to identify with one's own people, up to and including being willing to suffer with them in times of trouble, depends upon the feeling that others are willing to stand by you in your own time of trouble, perhaps that others will not take advantage of you whenever they are capable of so doing. There is much to learn from analyzing these texts.

Parashat Va-Yeshev **וישב**

In this week's parasha we are introduced to Jacob's family having finally settled down in their land. We are thrust into a large extended family with many problems, continuing the saga of family struggle, but since we are talking about 12 brothers, and some sisters, the struggles are more varied. Joseph is at odds with his brothers, Judah has problems with progeny, and Simeon and Levi kill the men of a whole community because they think that their sister has been raped. Jacob, having gotten through his own conflict with his brother Esau, is not embroiled in many conflicts within his family. He feels he must move around, and take extreme measures to hold his family together. In the end, he faces an enormous tragedy when his beloved son Joseph goes missing, and he feels that Joseph has been killed by a wild beast. We the reader, knows the more bitter truth, that Joseph has been sold into slavery by his own brothers.

***Gen. 37, 1-2**
Now Jacob was settled in the land where his father had sojourned, the land of Canaan. 2This, then, is the line of Jacob: At seventeen years of age, Joseph tended the flocks with his brothers, as a helper to the sons of his father's wives Bilhah and Zilpah. And Joseph brought bad reports of them to their father.

The story of Joseph begins this week, and the first thing we are told is: "At seventeen years of age, Joseph tended the flocks with his brothers, as a helper to ("ve-hu na'ar et") the sons of his father's wives Bilhah and Zilpah. And Joseph brought bad reports of them to their father." (**Gen. 37, 2**) The smoothness of the English translation belies the difficulties of the Hebrew text. One difficulty is the phrase "ve-hu na'ar", which literally means "and he is a youth". So, instead of our translation "as a helper to the sons of his father's…", we have an unintelligible "and he is a youth with the sons of…". What can that mean? Joseph tends sheep with and is a youth with his brothers? Now, it is true that the word "na'ar" means youth, but in this case it would be better if it could be read as a verb, some action that Joseph is doing with his brothers. TTT H

Most of the Midrashim on these first verses of our parasha note that the verse seems to relate separately to the brothers from Leah, Jacob's wife, and to the brothers from the two handmaidens. These Midrashim have Joseph helping his brothers from the "gevirah", the lawful wife, tending flocks; and doing something else with his brothers from the handmaidens. But, just what is that something else which the word "na'ar" indicates?

One tradition sees the word "na'ar" as indicating something negative. For example, Joseph behaves like a teen-ager, he "blinks his eyes [suggestively], affects a swaggering walk, and is always changing his hair-style" (**Gen. R. 84, 7**). This is presumably annoying to his older brothers, and is the beginning of their hatred of Joseph.

Another approach sees this word as describing the relationship between Joseph and his brothers from the handmaidens. The word "na'ar" here denotes a status of servitude; much like the use of "boy" in the old South. Joseph is the gofer boy for his brothers. It is this subservient relationship which is the source of the bad reports Joseph brings to his father. Ibn Ezra even comments that were Joseph to be

subservient to his brothers from Leah this would not be a bad thing. He also comments that the various transgressions which Joseph reported to his father found in the exegetical tradition are only Midrash. The only evil thing his brothers from the handmaidens actually did was to not treat Joseph according to his station. (**Ibn Ezra on Gen. 37, 2**)

These approaches fall into line with the idea of Joseph the tzaddik who did nothing terribly wrong, except maybe acting obnoxiously now and then. The brothers from the handmaidens are cast as inferior and evil. So, it is surprising to find a very strong tradition which approaches the word "na'ar" in a positive way and learns from it that Joseph was a malicious gossip whom the Lord had to teach some lessons.

Rashbam summarizes this tradition in **his comment on Gen. 37, 2**: "his youthful enthusiasm, his familiarity and his friendship was for the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, and thus, his brothers, the sons of Leah, began to hate him." The astonishing idea here is that the word "na'ar" denotes a positive youthful exuberant fellowship. It is only the sons of Leah who hate Joseph, and part of that hatred is formed because of his closeness to the sons of the handmaidens.

The Midrash is even more specific in describing the dynamics of the relationships. When Jacob speaks about his sons at the end of his life, he remarks: "Shimon and Levi are brothers" (**Gen. 49, 5)** The Midrash is surprised by this and asks the obvious question: "but they are all brothers!?" (**Gen. R. 97 Albeck**). The reason for this specific language is to tell us that they are two of a kind in thought and plotting. They conspired together and killed off the men of Shechem, and they conspired together to kill Joseph, as we read: "They said to one another ("ish el ahiv"), “Here comes that dreamer! Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits…" (**Gen. 37, 19-20**)

This verse has, grammatically, two brothers talking about killing Joseph ("ish el ahiv", literally "one to his brother"). Our Midrash asks which two are they? Reuven and Judah are not possible because they each try to save Joseph. The sons of the handmaidens are not possible because they were good friends with Joseph, as our verse informs us! Thus, it must be Shimon and Levi, of whom the verse in Gen. 49 continues to say: "their weapons are tools of lawlessness" (literally "stolen tools"). They have stolen Esau's violent methods, and they have stolen his weapons to implement those methods. By taking on the qualities of the violent Esau, they are "brothers" only to themselves; they have betrayed the brotherhood of the whole family. (cf. **Gen. R. 99, 6 et al and Rashi on Gen. 49, 5**)

Another Midrash also understands our verse to indicate that Joseph and the handmaiden's sons are buddies. This Midrash relates to Joseph's tale telling, but it spins the story in a fascinating way. Joseph is punished for each incident in which he brought tales of his brother's transgressions to Jacob, that is, Joseph is guilty on three counts of lashon ha-ra, malicious gossip, and he suffers for each one. The first case of malicious talk is this: Joseph reports to his father that the sons of Leah are treating the sons of the handmaidens like slaves, and that they are taunting them by calling them slaves, but, says Joseph, "I treat them like brothers". (**Tanhuma Va-Yeshev 7**, the Midrash quotes our verse as proof.) God punishes Joseph by having him sold as a slave.

The other two cases are that Joseph reports that his brothers are eating flesh from a living animal. God makes Joseph see his brothers properly slaughtering the goat (**Gen. 37, 31**) whose blood they will use to swindle Jacob into believing that Joseph has been devoured by a wild beast. Joseph reports that his brothers are lusting after the Canaanite women, and God makes him the object of the lust of Potiphar's wife (**Gen. 39, 7**).

In the second case, Joseph's suffering highlights the fact that his tale is not true. His brothers scrupulously slaughter animals, even when doing it for a transgression. In the third case, we are not sure if Joseph's tale is a lie or just mean spirited tattling. Perhaps the case of Judah and Tamar indicates that it was true. But, in the first case, we know that, according to this tradition, it was true. Still, this Midrash insists that Joseph's tattling or lashon ha-ra is punished by God. What is Joseph to do? If it was all lies, one could understand, but since what he says about the relationships between all the brothers is true why is he punished for that tale?

Perhaps, the Midrash comes down so hard on Joseph because if faults him for not standing up to his brothers and confronting them directly. The hatred that developed perverted the relationship between them, and prevented them from being able to admonish one another or to work out a way of living civilly with each other. As one Midrash puts it, the word hatred, "sinah", is written with a "shin", even though it could be written with a "samekh". The reason is because hatred, "sinah", changes the heart from one degree to another. The word for change ("meSHaneh"), rests upon the letter shin. TTT H Joseph later proves that he has the goods to stand up to his brothers and to enable them to change, or at least to challenge them to behave civilly to one another. But, the combination of youth and hatred prevents this from happening until much suffering and violence have gone by.

***Gen. 37, 18-25**

18They saw him from afar, and before he came close to them they conspired to kill him. 19They said to one another, "Here comes that dreamer! 20Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; and we can say, 'A savage beast devoured him.' We shall see what comes of his dreams!" 21But when Reuben heard it, he tried to save him from them. He said, "Let us not take his life." 22And Reuben went on, "Shed no blood! Cast him into that pit out in the wilderness, but do not touch him yourselves" – intending to save him from them and restore him to his father. 23When Joseph came up to his brothers, they stripped Joseph of his tunic, the ornamented tunic that he was wearing, 24and took him and cast him into the pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

25Then they sat down to a meal. Looking up, they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, their camels bearing gum, balm, and ladanum to be taken to Egypt.

The story of the hatred between Joseph and his brothers reaches its first crescendo when they see him coming to visit them in the pasture, and decide to kill him. Reuven saves him from death by pleading with his brothers not to kill him, but to throw him into a pit. After they do this, they sit down to eat, and see a caravan of Ishmaelites coming towards them. (**Gen. 37, 18-25**) "Then Judah said to his brothers, "Go forth, [Heb. "lechu", literally "go away"], let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, but let us not do away with him ourselves. After all, he is our brother, our own flesh." His brothers agreed." (**Gen. 37, 27**)

Passing Midianite traders spot Joseph in the pit, and they pull him out and sell him to the Ishmaelite caravan on its way to Egypt. (**v. 28**) When the brothers realize that Joseph is missing, they kill a goat and dip Joseph's famous tunic in it. They send it to Jacob, innocently asking if he recognizes it, and, of course he does. He jumps to the conclusion that Joseph has been devoured by a wild animal, and goes into deep mourning. (**v. 29-35**)

Jewish tradition has seen the actions of the brothers as the locus of primal sin. The planning of fratricide, even if not carried out, is weighty. The planning of selling a brother into slavery is weighty. Indeed, the goat used to cover up their sinful intentions is the locus of the sacrifice atonement (including of Yom Kippur, cf. **Sifra, shemini, 1 et. al.**). Atonement must be made through all generations for such evil thoughts.

But, does our tradition apply the need for atonement to thoughts? Is there not a strong tendency to concentrate only on deeds? According to Gen. 37, the brothers did not, with their own hands, kill Joseph, nor did they actually sell him. They talk about both, but DO neither. The only action they take is stripping his tunic and throwing him in a pit. How does the strong universal and eternal condemnation of the tradition fit their actions? TTT 56 M

One provocative answer can be found in a book of sermons called **Binah le-Ittim, by R. Azariah Figo (Picho)**. Figo (1579 - 1674) was an Italian rabbi and preacher, born in Venice. In his youth he devoted himself largely to secular studies, but later, regretting the time he had spent, he applied himself wholly to rabbinic studies. At the age of 28 he was appointed rabbi of Pisa. Figo wrote Talmudic commentaries, but after the burning of the Talmud he had to borrow copies from different communities. He returned to Venice in 1627 and became preacher to the Sephardi community. He criticized the members of his community for usury, flaunting their wealth, internecine wrangling, laxity in ritual observances, and sexual irregularities, Figo was active in redeeming Jewish captives, and defended the Marranos, declaring them to be Jews. His most important work is his *Binah le-Ittim* , a collection of sermons delivered in Venice. They are based on the festivals and fasts of the Jewish calendar. This bio is by one of the great Conservative Rabbis of the last generation, Rabbi Chayim Reuven Rabinowitz ztz"l, who wrote about Figo and other classical darshanim. His books are treasures of Jewish homiletics.

Figo starts out by showing that the first murder was between brothers. When God says to Cain, "where is Abel your brother?", he is reproving him saying "where is the law of fraternity which demands love for and action on behalf of a brother's life?" The breaking of God's law of concern for one's kin is the root of this sin. Figo goes on to say that it is just this argument which Judah uses when he speaks to the brothers: “Go away ["lekhu"], let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, but let not our hands be on him ["ve-yadeinu ak tehi bo"]. After all, he is our brother, our own flesh.”

Figo writes: "One should pay attention to the word " Go away ["lekhu"]", at the beginning, and why does he say "let not our hands be on him"? Why did he not spell it out clearly, saying, "let us not kill him"?… The meaning of "let not our hands be on him" is we need to have no physical contact with Joseph at all. The actual selling of

Joseph, by the Midianites, was with great physical contact, for they pulled him up out of the pit…. We find that the brothers never, themselves, sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites. But, the Midianties passed by there, and perhaps they heard the voice of Joseph crying out for help, and they approached the pit. When they saw him they brought him up and sold him to the Ishmaelites on the condition that they take him to Egypt, a place from which no slave ever escapes, so that the matter would never be known."

"So, why is the sale accounted to the brothers? For they are the reason for its happening. But, even worse is when we understand why Judah said "Go away ["lekhu"]". Judah is saying: 'I will give you a good advice and a lovely plot on how we can take our revenge on Joseph, and at the same time we will be able to say [to ourselves] that we sold him as a slave to the Ishmaelites, but not by direct action will we sell him ourselves, with our own hands. For it is unspeakable that "our hands be on him", that we be the ones to sell him as he is our brother, our flesh. How can we violate the covenant of fraternity and sell him with our own hands. But, what is proper to do is "Go away ["lekhu"]", we will go away from here and not stay around the pit or even close to it. For if we stay here, no one will come and take him out and sell him, for they will be afraid of us. But, if we go away from here, there are always passersby who will take him out of the pit, and will sell him to the Ishmaelites. Thus we will be the reason to 'set him up' for the sale, and we will gain that our hands will not have touched him…". (**Binah le-Ittim, Part II, sermon for 2 Elul**)

Figo creates a possible understanding of the darkness of the heart that leads to the trampling of others. The acts of the brothers is not by "their hands", but in their scheming and in exploiting others for evil ends. They know that caravans pass by this spot, and that one of them will fetch Joseph out of the pit and take him or sell him for a slave. They can rely on it. They do not have "to get their hands dirty", the market forces will do it for them.

The debate in Israel over the coming year's budget is joined. The PM believes in market forces, growth will occur, and then after that the poor and hungry can be taken care of. No one asks him, why if the proportion of the budget spent on social relief is so small up to now, how can one believe that it will grow AFTER financial success?

Others respond that the priorities of the State must be changed immediately. Human beings are our greatest resource, and they must be cared for first. It is not enough to say "our hands did not make them poor directly", when you know why they are poor, and why they remain that way. The critics of the proposed budget see it as a case of putting the poor in a pit and going away to let what happens happen, rather than adopt the principle that we ARE our brother's keeper, and it is our duty to help them flourish.

This idea is expressed beautifully by Figo in another one of his sermons. On the verse from the Psalm for Shabbat: "planted in the house of the LORD, they flourish ["yafrihu"] in the courts of our God." (Ps. 92, 14) He notes that there is an imbalance between "planted" and "yafrihu", which really means "will cause to flourish". If the Hebrew was "yifrehu", then it would be flourish. Figo says that the Psalmist tries to "assign a reason and a motive for man's existence in this terrestrial world." Once

humans are "planted" in the world, their job is to "serve others besides themselves ["yafrihu"], to cause others to grow and blossom." [cf. **Israel Bettan, Studies in Jewish Preaching, HUC, 1939, p. 247**]

***Gen. 39, 1**
When Joseph was taken down to Egypt, a certain Egyptian, Potiphar, a courtier of Pharaoh and his chief steward, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him there.

In this parasha we begin the cycle of Joseph stories. It begins with the bitter relationships between Joseph and his brothers. The climax of this enmity is the fact that Joseph is taken to Egypt as a slave, that is, he is separated from his brothers and family and put into a dangerous situation in a foreign environment. The Haftarah for this parasha includes the accusation of Israel selling its righteous people, and this seems to be Hosea's way of relating to the "selling" of Joseph.

What exactly takes place? Joseph tells tales about his brothers (**Gen. 37, 2**) But, is this bad? He sees his brothers doing something bad, should he not let his father know of these actions? Jacob favors Joseph (**vs. 3-4**), and when his brothers feel this they hate Joseph. But, what is being described is their feelings. Is it correct to hate another person because they are favored in some way? In short, one can take the attitude that Joseph is a passive victim. It is not ONLY what he is doing that causes hatred, but the problem is the caused by the unhealthy reactions of his brothers. This seems to fit the Haftarah's description.

On the other hand, one could claim that Joseph is not a passive victim, but that he contributes to the bad relationships by doing things that he knows will anger his brothers. Yet, against that view one can point to the fact that Joseph seems to be unaware of the animosity they hold towards him. He goes blithely to meet them, alone in Dothan, not suspecting that they might wish to harm him. Which is it? Is Joseph passive or active in creating the bitter relationships? And, furthermore what can be done about it?

One way of dealing with these questions is to see how Jewish commentary relates to Joseph's being taken to Egypt. The culmination of the bad relationships with his brothers is that Joseph "was taken down to Egypt" ("ve-Yosef hurad Mitraymah") (**Gen. 39, 1**). The Hebrew word "hurad" is in passive form, and thus the English translation "was taken down". The active form of the word, "yarad", means to go down or to leave. But, "hurad" is clearly in a passive form. That is, the verse seems to indicate God's response to the bad relationships between the brothers, namely, remove Joseph from the situation. If, as Joseph says, God is the one who is pulling the strings behind the stage, his going down to Egypt is part of a Divine grand scheme (cf. Gen. **50, 18ff**).

However, many Midrashim interpret this word in an active sense! In the Talmud R. Elazar even indicates that the word should be read in the active sense, "al tikrei hurad eleh horid", for Joseph "brought down" all of Pharaoh's magicians (**Sotah 13b**). Another Midrash connects the word "hurad" with "control", citing the use of this word in speaking of God's control over the world (**Ps. 72, 8**) (**Gen. R. 86:2**). Or, in the same Midrash, it is connected with the word "rodeh", that is "master", citing **I**

Kings 5, 4. That is, these Midrashim see Joseph's descent as God's granting active power to Joseph.

But, this verse appears in an halachic discussion, and there the meaning is quite different. In Baba Metzia there is a discussion of damages caused by a person living a story above another person. The plaster on the ceiling of the lower apartment cracks, and water seeps into it from above. There is a dispute between R. Hiyya b. Abba who says that the upper dweller must make the repairs, and R. Elai, in the name of R. Hiyya b. Yose, who says the lower dweller must make the repairs. The Talmud explains that one can remember these opinions by associating R. Elai's opinion with the verse "and Joseph was brought down to Egypt"!

Now, at first glance, this is an odd way to insert a verse into an halachic discussion. It is true that the word "hurad" implies "the lower dweller", but that is a stretch to say that the two are connected. We only understand the insertion of this verse into this discussion because of the continuation, in which the Talmud explains the reasoning of the two opinions. R. Hiyya who says that the upper dweller repairs, thinks that the one who causes the damage must remove himself from damaging the other. Whereas, R. Elai thinks that the one who is injured must remove himself from the purview of the one causing the damage. The Talmudic discussion goes on to make other distinctions regarding whether the damage is direct or indirect. These issues are not central to our discussion.

What is most interesting is that R. Elai apparently thinks that God removes Joseph from his brothers, because he must be taken out of the abusive situation. There does not seem to be much hope that the brothers can be reformed or cured of their hatred. Thus his view about repair of indirect damage being the responsibility of the one injured, applies here to Joseph. In many human relationships it seems as if the injured party must be the one to take steps to remove themselves from the source of damage, or, in the words of the Talmud "to repair it". TTT 58 H and M

***Gen. 39, 12**
12she caught hold of him by his garment and said, "Lie with me!" But he left his garment in her hand and got away and fled outside.

When I was a kid we used to go to movies that had 15 episodes during 15 weeks. Each week ended with the hero being in a seemingly hopeless situation. We would leave wondering how he would ever get out of it, and come back eager next week to see the solution. This technique is as old as parashat ha-Shavua, for this weeks parasha ends with Joseph in jail, and his one road out, the wine steward who was to remember him to Pharoah forgets him (**Gen. 40, 23**). The word for jail "bet ha-sohar" (**Gen. 39, 20**), which is used in modern Hebrew as well, is the cause for many comments. Ibn Ezra is not sure if it is a Hebrew or an Egyptian word, since the text explains what it is, "the place where the King's prisoners are kept". Ibn Ezra shows that when the biblical text adds an explanation, the word is usually not of Hebrew origin.

The episode which led to Joseph's arrest is one of the many dramatic stories in this week's parasha, the episode of Potiphar's wife. There is a fascinating difference of opinion on this episode. Joseph refuses the advances of Potiphar's wife, and one day

as he flees her "va-ya'azov bigdo be-yadah" "he leaves his garment in her hand" (**Gen. 39, 12**). She siezes upon this "evidence" and cries that he has tried to rape her. Joseph is then handed over to jail, presumably based only on her story and his garment which she has.

For many years I believed that Joseph's garment had torn and a piece of it was in her hand. But, Ramban sees it differently, and with good reason. He comments that Joseph, out of respect for her, did not want to forcibly tear his garment away from her, so he left his whole cloak in her hand, presumably fleeing naked, or just in undergarments. The text does say "bigdo", his garment, and not a piece of his garment! Ramban further goes on to say that when Potiphar's wife realizes that Joseph might inform on her constant advances to him, she makes up the story that he stripped down to force himself on her, once she realizes that his garment is in her hand (**v. 13**). So she changes the narrative, and does NOT say, he left his garment "in my hand" as in **v. 12**, which might incriminate her by showing that she had started up with him. She says that he left "his garment with me" "etzli" (**v. 15**). TTT 59 H This reading does give good sense to the plain words in the text. However, it still leaves unanswered the basic questions of substance. Why is a Hebrew slave, who is accused and convicted of attempted rape of his Master's wife put into jail altogether? Why is Joseph not summarily executed?

For the answer to this we turn to the comments of Hizkuni, who has to understand the scene the way I always did, i.e. the garment tore. Hizkuni quotes an aggadahh (which I have not found, but hope maybe someone can give me a source) which says that the angel Gavriel appeared as a man before Pharoah. He told the king to check and see whose clothes were torn. If Potiphar's wife's clothes were torn, than that is proof that Joseph instigated a rape, but if his clothes are torn, that is proof that she tried to force herself on him Upon checking it was found that Joseph's clothes were torn, and so he was not executed, but thrown into jail. He was not set free in order not to embarrass the wife of a high courtier. And since the judges who reached this decision were Egyptian priests, Joseph did not take their land away during the years of famine (**47, 22**). The moral: the state of the evidence matters a great deal to the outcome of the trial, and if you have a very good lawyer you can escape the death penalty.

In parashat va-yeshev we read the dramatic story of the attempt of Potiphar's wife to seduce Joseph. "She caught hold of him by his garment and said, "Lie with me!" But he left his garment in her hand and got away and fled outside" (**Gen. 39, 12**). I have dealt before with the question of how Joseph left his garment in her hand. Was it whole or did a part tear off? The Hebrew contains a most amazing flexibility to evoke all themes with one linguistic root. The root of garment is bet gimel dalet, "beged"; and the same root is displayed in the verb "bagad", betrayed. Indeed the Hebrew writer Berdichevski coined a phrase "ba-beged bagad be-aviv; u-va-beged bagdu lo banav", "by means of a garment, "begged" he [Jacob] betrayed, "bagad" his father [Isaac]; and by means of a garment, "begged" his sons [Jacob's sons] betrayed, "bagdu", him [Jacob]. TTT 60 H

This time, I want to relate to the garment in a different way. In modern times we tend to be rather cynical about the aura which clothing is meant to convey. As I recently read in the Dilbert Book of Management, all managers must wear very fine

clothes, for if they don't respect you, at least they can respect your clothes. One of the symbols of youthful rebellion is clothing which parents consider outrageous. Indeed, the teenage flounting of jeans with holes in the knees, or some such fad, is a statement that they desire to fix the boundaries and dictates of taste for themselves. They do not necessarily accept those handed down to them.

Yet, we ARE impressed by fine clothes, uniforms, robes etc. Indeed, one source of outrage is to see someone dressed in a uniform or outfit that we think should be respected behaving in a reprehensible way. The image of Jews in Hasidic dress behaving badly seems to have an extra impact on our sensitivities. It is just this notion which lies behind the comment in the Talmud (**Sotah 36b**): "It was taught in the School of R. Ishmael: That day was their feast-day, and they had all gone to their idolatrous temple; but she had pretended to be ill because she thought, I shall not have an opportunity like to-day for Joseph to associate with me. "And she caught him by his garment, saying", etc. At that moment his father's image came and appeared to him through the window and said: 'Joseph, thy brothers will have their names inscribed upon the stones of the ephod and thine amongst theirs; is it thy wish to have thy name expunged from amongst theirs and be called an associate of harlots?'"

In this passage "she caught him by his garment" means that her proposal made him consider if he was worthy to be woven into the garments that would represent the highest and most worthy of the values of his faith and tradition. Indeed, the priestly garments can be instruments of atonement, just as well as the sacrifices (cf. **Jer. Talmud Yoma 7, 44b**). The garments here represent a point of contact between the person wearing the garment, and God, and the values which God represents. The Yerushalmi here notes that the priests wearing of a particular garment can bring about atonement for certain sins. The irony is that in the case of Joseph, by leaving his garment, by having it removed, he achieved a higher state than that of atonement, namely, of not sinning in the first place! (cf. **Sukkah 53a; also Berakhot 34b**)

The richness of understanding that we gain by this fuller search into the meaning of "the garment" is enhanced even more when we compare the story of Joseph with this week's Haftarah. The section from the prophet Amos that we read has many connecting points to Joseph. The reference at the beginning to a righteous person being sold for silver, brings Joseph to mind immediately (**Amos 2, 6**). The continuation of this chapter stresses that exploiting the poor causes the nation to crumble. Amos accuses the Israelites of not being faithful to the highest values of God's Torah. He cites corrupt practices, including: " They recline by every altar On garments taken in pledge, ("al begadim havulim") And drink in the House of their God Wine bought with fines they imposed." (**v. 8**)

Another point of contact with the Joseph story, the garments. The Hebrew, "al begadim havulim", is difficult. JPS translates in accord with Targum, Rashi and others. The word "Havulim" means pawned. Indeed, the prophet forcefully demonstrates the lack of compassion in society in this passage. The image of wealthy revelers lying down for a sybaritic feast on the pawned garments of the poor is striking. The poor are imprisoned by their poverty, and even the clothes on their back are mere sport for the powerful to play with. The garment of Joseph is

"pawned" to Potiphar's wife, who uses it for her own sport and amusement to lock him away.

This is in extreme contrast to God's law in the Torah: "If you take your neighbor's garment in pledge, you must return it to him before the sun sets; it is his only clothing, the sole covering for his skin. In what else shall he sleep? Therefore, if he cries out to Me, I will pay heed, for I am compassionate." (**Ex. 22, 25-26**) The compassion of God, which we are commanded to emulate, is expressed in making sure that the pawn of the poor never be used frivolously, and that his dignity never be taken from him because he is forced to pledge his belongings. The garment protects from the cold, and no social position can be a pretext to remove that protection. The attitude that one can do what one will with the poor, that they are only there to provide services or amusement is rejected totally, both by the narrative of the Joseph story, and by the prophet Amos. TTT 61 M and T

***Gen. 40, 6-8**
6When Joseph came to them in the morning, he saw that they were distraught. 7He asked Pharaoh's courtiers, who were with him in custody in his master's house, saying, "Why do you appear downcast today?" 8And they said to him, "We had dreams, and there is no one to interpret them." So Joseph said to them, "Surely God can interpret! Tell me [your dreams]."

So much of Joseph's story revolves around dreams (cf. my article in **PRA, 1994, footnote 4**). This week is the first indication that Joseph can interpret dreams. He is unjustly incarcerated, but even in jail his personality enables him to become a favorite. Two of his cellmates, courtiers of Pharaoh, dream. Each one is troubled by his dream, and Joseph senses their tension, for when he comes to them he sees they are distraught (**Gen. 40, 6**). He asks them what is the matter, and the Torah continues: "And they said to him, "We had dreams, and there is no one to interpret them." So Joseph said to them, "Surely God can interpret! ("halo lei-lohim pitronim" literally: "Does not God have interpretations") Tell me [your dreams]." (**Gen. 40, 8**)

Joseph's response causes great consternation among the commentators of our tradition. Our translation takes the Hebrew "halo" to be a word of emphasis, using the negative "lo" with the definite article "hey" to imply a positive, "surely" or "definitely". But, then why does Joseph immediately add "tell me". Is he playing God? One Midrash wants to make it clear that this is not the case, and merely says that Joseph ascribes the greatness to He who has it. (**Gen. R. 88**)

But, others are bothered by Joseph's seeming arrogance. They suggest that Joseph's ascribing to God the real knowledge of dreams is a kind of caveat that he states to the courtiers, in case his interpretation seems to them to be wrong. (cf. **Ibn Ezra, Ramban on Gen. 40, 8**) In this case, Joseph is not arrogant, but the opposite, modest. He is admitting that human interpretation of dreams may be faulty. Only God really knows the answer.

This approach seems to be what lies behind the section of Talmud **Berakhot 55b**, which is part of the discussion of many commentators on our verse. Rabbi Bena'ah relates that he once had a dream, and that there were 24 dream interpreters in Jerusalem. He went to each one to tell his dream. "What one interpreted the other one did not interpret". That is, each one gave him a different interpretation of his dream.

"And they all were fulfilled in my life, thus substantiating the saying: "all dreams follow the mouth [of the interpreter]".

The "professionals" all had a different take on his dream. Yet, he felt that each one had discerned some element that eventually seemed true to him. Interpretation of dreams is a subject that has no single definite answer. This is reflected in our verse by the word "pitronim", which is plural. If there were only one solution, Joseph should have said "halo lei-lohim pitaron", "Does not God have the solution".

One late commentator who takes this direction further is R. Jacob Tzvi Meklenburg, author of "ha-ketav ve-ha-kabbalah". He writes (on **Gen. 40, 8**):

"Surely God can interpret! ("halo lei-lohim pitronim" literally: "Does not God have interpretations")" Usually this verse is understood to mean that a human cannot interpret a dream definitively unless the Spirit of God rises up in him, thus people understand that Joseph asks them to tell him the dream on the hope that God's spirit will rise up in him and he will be able to tell them the solution. This [understanding] is not possible. For an incarcerated slave would not utter words that would imply that he was superior, and it is also against common manners to boast that you have the ability to absorb God's spirit. Rather, these words seem to me designed to minimize the whole matter of dream interpretation, so that there is no need to search for someone special to interpret them… Most dreams have many causes and aspects, and thus the understanding of them can fluctuate between good and bad among different people, and this is what our sages meant when they said "all dreams follow the mouth". … Thus, Joseph, having been close with these two for a long time, and knowing well the qualities of each one's personality, understood that they are not worthy of dreams by an angel, [according to Meklenburg this is the extremely rare type that does have meaning for the future, and only special people merit it] rather their dreams are from other sources, thus he said to them: "God has no interpretations", that is, there is no need for a man of God to interpret your dreams, any man can interpret them: "tell them to me". The word "halo" here is not like other uses, e.g. **Gen. 4, 7** "halo im teiteev se'eit", for there the "hey" is a question which turns the negative into a positive and affirms what follows. But, the "hey" here in this usage is the "hey" of wonder, and thus it does not turn the negative into a positive, but it remains negative, and is an expression of surprise. This is the meaning of "halo lei-lohim pitronim" "God has no interpretations?!", that is, there is no need for a man of God to interpret dreams, for dreams follow the mouth of the interpreter and the interpretation changes from bad to good and from good to bad depending on the words of the interpreter." TTT 62 H and M and T

R. Meklenburg ascribes to Joseph the powers of a Freudian psychoanalyst, who delves into the personalities of the courtiers, and uses this familiarity to explain their dreams. Aside from this he seems to downplay the whole enterprise of dream interpretation as prediction of the future. Joseph's interpretation, according to this, was of the inner wishes of the courtiers. One, the wine steward, wanted to return to work and the other, the baker, did not, perhaps he had "had it" with Pharaoh's demands and cruelty. It is this very attitude, of the baker, which Pharaoh discerns, and thus, ironically, applies his cruelty to hang him.

The congruence of Joseph's interpretation and what happens to them is "after the fact". Those looking from the outside attribute "magic" to his interpretations because they seem to so closely fit incidents that happen later. This is a bold commentary by a 19th century rabbi, and is another example of the richness and creativity of Torah interpretation.

***Gen. 40, 20-21**
20On the third day—his birthday—Pharaoh made a banquet for all his officials, and he singled out his chief cupbearer and his chief baker from among his officials. 21He restored the chief cupbearer to his cupbearing, and he placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand; 22but the chief baker he impaled—just as Joseph had interpreted to them.

***Gen. 40, 23**
23Yet the chief cupbearer did not think of Joseph; he forgot him.

This week we begin the story of Joseph. The parasha ends with Joseph in prison in Egypt, falsely accused by his master's wife. In prison Joseph interprets the dreams of two of Pharaoh's servants who are incarcerated with him. Each dream has a similar outline. In their dreams the chief cupbearer and the chief baker see three items relating to their position. Joseph interprets the number three to refer to three days, at which time the cupbearer will be returned to his post, and the baker will be impaled upon a post. Then the text informs us that the third day was Pharaoh's birthday ("yom huledet et Paroh"). He relates to each servant just as Joseph had foretold. (**Gen. 40, 20-21**)

Anyone who has any connection to modern Hebrew knows the phrase "yom huledet", birthday. Indeed, in our world birthdays are celebrated as a matter of course from the very first one. There might be a question of which calendar to use, Jewish or general, as the one to fix the celebration, but there is wide consensus that birthdays are meant to be celebrated. But, in reality the first mention of a birthday, our verse Gen. 40, 20, is not crystal clear on the meaning of the phrase. The phrase "yom huledet" means literally "the day of being born", and if this is meant to describe what we think of as the day of birth, then why does the phrase in Hebrew use the word "et"? This word implies that it is Pharaoh who is doing the birthing! If it would refer to Pharaoh's own birth one would expect the Hebrew word "shel", which would make it clear that the birth is that OF Pharaoh.

Indeed, Ibn Ezra in his comment on this verse says: "perhaps the Queen was pregnant". (on **Gen. 40, 12**) That is, the occasion was when the king announced that he had impregnated his wife. Rashi, on the other hand is clear that the phrase refers to Pharaoh's birthday, and points out that it is a known phenomenon in the world of kings to celebrate the day of the king's birth. The Hebrew phrase is in the passive form because, Rashi says, the birth is not of Pharaoh's (or anyone else for that matter) own doing, but it is done to him, or rather, for him.

Ibn Ezra actually asks how does Joseph know that the three items in the dream refers to three days, and not months or years. His answer is that Joseph, and the whole country, knew that Pharaoh's birthday party was in three days, so his interpretation of the dream is in relation to an event which he knows will occur in three days. The number three is Joseph's big clue, especially since on that day the king invites all of

his servants, even the ones that had been put away, and pays them in kind for what he thinks they deserve. It is like the day when the bonuses or the pink slip is given out.

R. Menahem ben Solomon, the author of Sekhel Tov, writes that most people are fond of their birthday, for it is a day in which they were given the most magnificent present of life. They make parties to celebrate this day. His words testify to a custom among Jews in his time, first half of the 12th century, of making birthday parties. He points out that the kings have birthday parties in which they read out the kings family tree, and in which his servants are judged regarding their service to the king, and appropriately rewarded or punished. The custom found in the Torah was still kept by kings in his day.

While in many orthodox and ultra-orthodox circles today the custom of birthday parties is not in favor, for, despite evidence to the contrary, it is considered to be a custom of the gentiles. Still, there are certain birthdays which are celebrated, the most well known being that when a person reaches the age of 70, they are enjoined to recite "shechayanu". (cf. **Havot Yair 70** etc.)

The matter was most discussed in recent times in relation to the bar or bat mitzvah year. It is clear that this celebration is tied to a person's birthday. R. Moshe Feinstein vigorously opposes celebrating the birthday of a girl and calling it a bat mitzvah, for it is "nothing but a simple birthday", and as such has no religious significance. (cf. **Iggrot Moshe OH, I, 104**) It is forbidden to mark the occasion in the synagogue, and if the father wants to make a party at home it is considered merely a birthday party. R. Ovadiah Yosef takes exception to this ruling. He points out that the girl does enter into the obligation to keep mitzvoth at that time, the ones which are obligatory on women, and he even suggests that the father make a blessing similar to the one for a boy, but without using God's name. (**Yabia Omer 6, OH 29, 4**)

Maftir for Shabbat Hannukah [sometimes an additional Torah reading is added to the parasha if it falls on a special Shabbat, as the case of Hannukah]

Dedicated to the memory of my mother: Miriam bat Yitzhak ve-Sarah Graetz le-beyt Finklestein, zts”l

For so much of Jewish tradition meaning is in the details. Indeed, the process of Midrash is, like the scientific process, a painstaking attention to detail. This close attention to detail reveals curiose gaps in the story, contradictions, problems of language and syntax which cry out to be explained. The process of science is to attempt to figure out how to understand the questions which looking at the details bring out. So, Midrash forces us to postulate meanings for details that seem out of place.

What could be more prosaic than the Torah readings for Hanukkah. The gifts of the chieftains of the tribes to the Tabernacle. Each day it is the same thing, the only thing that changes is the number of the day and the name and tribe of the bearer of the gifts. But, this impression ignores some details. This Shabbat we read: “On the second day, Nethanel son of Zuar, chieftain of Issachar, made his offering. He presented as his offering: one silver bowl weighing 130 shekels and one silver basin

of 70 shekels by the sanctuary weight, both filled with choice flour with oil mixed in, for a meal offering". (**Num. 7, 18-19**)

The Midrashic tradition notices that the description of the presentation is different here. Each day the Torah simple states: "his offering was…", and sure enough the offering is the same. But, on the second day, there is much more said, "Nethanel…. Made his offering" and "He presented as his offering", all of this is not said of any other chieftain. What is so special about Issachar or about Nethanel?

Now that our attention has been drawn to a detail of language which disrupts the seeming boring sameness of the list, we suddenly see another problem. What is the order here? Day one Judah, day two Issachar; what is the principle of organization? It is not what we might expect, namely birth order! The eldest is far down the list, and although one can make a case for Judah, the tribe of kings, for being first, how does Issachar rate second place?!

Different Midrashim deal with these questions, and each one has a slightly different contribution to make to our understanding. For example, the order is not the birth order, but the order of how the tribes encamped. Most of the Midrashim note that Issachar's priority is raised up above all the other tribes because of two things. (see for example, **Sifrei ba-midbar 52; Sifrei Zuta 7, 18; Gen. R. 72, 5; Tanhuma Naso 22**)

One is that they were the ones who knew and cultivated Torah, as it is written: "of the Issacharites, men who knew how to interpret the signs of the times ["yodei vinah la-itim"], to determine how Israel should act" (**I Chron. 12, 33**). It is interesting that this verse is taken to mean that Issachar were the ones who stood for Torah, who maintained Torah. The signs of being the ones closest to Torah is that they could see how Torah applied to the times, and could instruct on how to act according to the Torah in new circumstances. Tanhuma notes that the verb which states that Nethanel "presented" his offering, in Hebrew "hikriv", is written without a "yod", as if to indicate that the meaning is for him to "get closer" to the front of the line.

The second may be seen as an application of the first. The chieftains are not sure what to do. How are they to add something to the Tabernacle. Issachar, or in some texts Nethanel himself, suggest that what is missing is a way to transport the Tabernacle. So, they suggest to bring each gift in a wagon, and those can be used to transport the Tabernacle. What a marvelous interpretation of making Torah fit the times, fit the needs, and make life better for people. Instead of having to drag heavy items in back breaking labor, these scholars suggest a way to glorify the dedication of the Mishkan, and subsequently to make its transportation safer and easier.

Some Midrashim relate to the ending of the verse in I Chronicles: "their chiefs were 200, and all their kinsmen followed them". Not only were the Issacharites the carriers of the Torah tradition that fitted the times and worked for the benefit of Israel, but because of this "all their kinsmen followed them". In the words of Tanhuma: "all agreed to accept the halakha according to their decisions." This is the ultimate tribute to Issachar's devotion to studying, teaching, and applying Torah.

We left Joseph in jail, forgotten by the one person who could have helped him get out. We cut to Pharaoh, the king, whose sleep is disturbed by dreams. He needs a dream interpreter. At this point the wine steward remembers the Hebrew slave, Joseph, who so successfully interpreted his dreams. Joseph is rushed from prison to Pharaoh and successfully interprets the king's dreams. He is made second in command to the king, and the plan of action that he proposes to the king to overcome the looming seven years of famine is adopted, and Joseph is put in charge. Of course we then cut to his family who, like all of the region, was in need of the food stores of Egypt. His brothers come, and Joseph recognizes them, and we begin again with a family struggle, only this time the odds are reversed. Joseph, even though he is one, has the upper hand over the many, for he has power and knowledge which they lack. Joseph makes them pay in anguish for the anguish they caused him, and the story continues.

***Gen. 41, 1**
After two years' time, Pharaoh dreamed that he was standing by the Nile,

"After two years time, Pharaoh dreamed...." (**Gen. 41, 1**) The Hebrew word "mi-ketz" is translated as "after...time", and there is good philological reason for it. "Ketz" literally means the end, so "mi-ketz" could mean "at the end" or "after". Still, the form of the word is troubling. The usual Hebrew prefix for "at" is "bet", whereas "mem" often means "from". Still, the usage "mi-ketz" is well attested in the Bible as an expression denoting the passage of a certain amount of time (cf. **Gen. 3, 4; 8, 6; 16, 3; 41, 1; Ex. 12, 41**, and many others).

The previous parasha ended with Joseph in prison. He had interpreted the dreams of the baker and cupbearer, and his interpretations had come to pass. Joseph had told the cupbearer that he would be restored to his position and had urged him "think of me when all is well with you again ... mention me to Pharaoh" (**40, 14**). But we know that the cupbearer "did not think of Joseph; he forgot him" (**40, 23**). In the light of this, the opening of our parasha seems to be a stinging or even sarcastic reference to Joseph's predicament. Two more years he stays in prison. If the cupbearer had only done what was asked of him, Joseph would already be freed. But, Pharaoh dreams, and the association of the dream and Joseph means that he will not be forgotten forever.

One Midrash feels that Joseph's extra time is a punishment. According to God's justice, Joseph was to be in prison only 10 years, because he had defamed his 10 brothers. But, because Joseph did not totally rely on God to rescue him from prison, but had groveled before the cupbearer saying "think of me" and "mention me", God added on two years to his "sentence" (**Ex. R. 7:1**).

Another Midrash feels that the point is that it was necessary for Pharaoh's dream to take place in order for Joseph to be released. This text is based on the idea that God cures by the same means that He inflicts. Since Joseph was sold because of a dream, he can only be redeemed because of a dream (**Tan. va-yeshev 9, 9**). For this Midrash, the two years time is not a punishment for Joseph, but rather it is part of what makes his release possible. Indeed, if the cupbearer had done what Joseph asked, would he have been released? What chance would there be for a Hebrew slave, imprisoned for sexual offense against the wife of his master, to be cleared of all charges, just because

he said so? However, Joseph is brought before Pharaoh because of Pharaoh's NEED not because of Joseph's need.

The Hebrew language is very rich because of the associations of root letters and words. So "mi-ketz", the end, is connected to "va-yikkaz" "he awoke". Pharaoh awakes and realizes that he has been dreaming. The verb "le-hakitz", is related to "end", but it means the end of sleep, moving from the state of subconsciousness to the state of consciousness. How well that fits into the situation of Joseph whose plight was unknown, or had been subdued, and was now "rediscovered" by the intensity of Pharaoh's dreams. TTT 63 H and T

Indeed, this verb gives us the immediate connection to this week's Haftarah, which begins "va-yikkaz Shelomo" "then Solomon awoke" (**1 Kings 3, 15**). I have always been fascinated by the way the Rabbis created new texts by choosing where to begin and where to end Haftarot. Sometimes, this creative activity is what makes the Haftarah connect thematically or grammatically to the parasha.

In our case, the way the Rabbis present the text is highly provocative. Why do they start with the last verse of the previous section? The previous section talks of Solomon's dream in which God tells him he can request anything, and Solomon requests a wise heart. The end of the section is that he awakes and sacrifices to God. The next section begins the story of what is known as "Solomon's judgment". On the surface of things there is NO connection between these two verses, and yet the Rabbis create a new text in which what follows the opening verse can be taken to be a dream!! "Solomon awoke and here is his dream: he came to Jerusalem etc." 64 TTT Midrashic technique

This reading was brought to my attention by Or Meir, one of my Bar Mitzvah students, during our discussion of his derasha. I corrected Or, but afterwards it became clear to me that he had something. But, if the rabbis wanted us to at least have the possibility of seeing the story of Solomon's judgment as a dream, then, because of the connection to Mi-Ketz, the question arises: what is the interpretation of the dream??

My suggestion is that just as Joseph interprets Pharaoh's dream as foretelling the future of the kingdom, so we are to view Solomon's "dream". The meaning is: will the kings' arrogance of holding a trial without witnesses or inquiry or warnings (cf. the critique of Solomon by R. Judah b. Ilai, **Midrash Tehilim 72, 2**) carry over to all of his rule? If the king is arrogant in his entire rule and does not heed the needs of his people, will the country remain whole, or will it be cut in two!?

We all know that as a result of Solomon's rule and the continuation of his policies by his son, that the nation divided. Perhaps the centralization of worship created strong resentments in the various tribes with their own particular forms of serving God. Perhaps the rabbis wanted us to consider the story in this light.

***Gen. 42-7-8**

7When Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them; but he acted like a stranger toward them and spoke harshly to them. He asked them, "Where do you come from?" And they said,

"From the land of Canaan, to procure food." [8]For though Joseph recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him.

There are major themes in the Joseph stories that act as leitmotifs. These leitmotifs revolve around Hebrew words. The Hebrew language is based upon word roots, and the meaning of a particular word can change based upon how the root is conjugated. This fact allows the sound of a word to be prolific in its meaning, and these changes create a rich tapestry of irony and meaning. One of the Hebrew words which is a leitmotif in the Joseph cycle is the word "haker" "recognize". Recognition or lack of recognition is a central element in the story.

Jacob is asked if he recognizes Joseph's tunic (**Gen. 37, 33**), which, of course, he does. However, he reaches the false conclusion that Joseph has been eaten by a wild animal. Judah is asked if he recognizes a seal, staff and cord, and he, of course, does. Judah reaches a true conclusion that he has dealt unjustly with Tamar (**Gen. 38, 26**) In the first case, Jacob is afraid to admit the possibility that Joseph's brothers have killed him or harmed him, an admission which would call into question his own part in creating the unhealthy family situation. In the second case, Judah is not afraid to admit his culpability, and his recognition leads to reconciliation. 65 TTT H and T and M

In parashat mi-ketz the word "haker", 'recognize', reverberates again. Joseph's brothers come to Egypt to procure food, lest they perish in the famine that has gripped Israel. Joseph is in charge of doling out the grain. He is an Egyptian official, surrounded by the clothes and appurtenances of Egyptian officialdom. Thus: "When Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them ("va-yakeeraym"); but he acted like a stranger toward them ("va-yitnaker") and spoke harshly to them. He asked them, "Where do you come from?" And they said, "From the land of Canaan, to procure food." For though Joseph recognized ("va-yaker") his brothers, they did not recognize him ("heekeeruhu")." (**Gen. 42, 7-8**)

The Biblical commentaries revolve around two problems with these verses. One is the exact meaning of "he acted like a stranger toward them ("va-yitnaker")", and the other is why does the Torah repeat Joseph's recognition of his brothers. The rule is that there is no superfluous repetition in the Torah, so what seems to be such is really meant to tell us something new or different.

As to the first problem, we will start by looking at the word in the context of **Deut. 32, 27**. The word "yitnaker" is taken by Abraham Ibn Ezra, in his commentary there, to be the opposite of "haker". That is the word "yitnaker" means to deny what one recognizes, or to recognize in a way that sees the object recognized as something else. Ramban in his commentary on our verses cites the case of Jereboam's wife who is asked to disguise herself so that she will not be recognized as the king's wife. The word used to describe her disguise is "mitnakarah", and, sure enough, she is not recognized as the king's wife so that God has to reveal her identity to Ahijah. (cf. **I Kings 14, 2ff**)

So we may draw the conclusion that the play on words here describes the tension between recognizing a person for what they are, that is recognizing them as a specific person, and seeing the person as an "other", namely, not what they are. Indeed, Ramban, basing his commentary on the incident of Jereboam's wife, says that Joseph

put on his miter and bunched himself up to change his outward appearance. He also reports other commentaries which say that the change is in his manner of speaking to them, "and [he] spoke harshly to them". He forces them to say that they come from Canaan, and thus he is sure that they are his brothers. Thus, the second time he is sure they are his brothers for he has additional information as to their identity.

Yet two other commentaries provide a broader understanding of the process of "recognition". Ibn Ezra, in his comments on our verses, says that at first Joseph did recognize them as his brothers, "but after that he looked at each one separately and recognized him individually". According to Ibn Ezra the process was that he recognized his brothers as a group, "his brothers". This is the group who hated him, who forced him into a pit and sold him into slavery. As "his brothers", Joseph's reaction is "va-yitnaker", see them as others. But, afterwards he sees each one as an individual, and is able to treat them as human beings, not as a stereotyped group. So, the first step in recognizing our fellow humans as "human" and not as "other", is to overcome the stereotypes of groups, and strive to see them as individuals.

Yet, Joseph does NOT seem to behave much better to his brothers after the second recognition, which Ibn Ezra takes to be seeing them as individuals. Another Midrash helps me understand what happened here. "Joseph wanted to accept them with open arms, but an angel came and spoke harshly about them, saying to Joseph 'they are coming to kill you'. Joseph listened to him." (**Otzar ha-Midrashim, p. 222, #6**) Even when Joseph sees them as individuals, the bad experiences of the past rise up in his head and whispers to him, 'do not trust them'. It is not enough to see the "other" as "human" and not part of a group, but we also must overcome prejudice which may have some basis in reality. His brothers did actually try to kill him. It is very hard to rise above that fact, and to make an effort to accept them as they are NOW, as individual humans who can be given a chance to be recognized as themselves. If they have changed and have rejected their past animosity, then Joseph has to make the effort to overcome his legitimate fears in order to prevent them from being "othered" in his mind.

His bad thoughts, or his concentration on their past misdeeds causes him to see them as "other". It overrides his positive reaction to see them as individuals and not as a group. Joseph needs to concentrate on the positive things about them, on how they care for their father, and how they eventually show that they are taking care of each other. If he can concentrate on what turns out to be good behavior, he can then prevent their bad traits, which did exist, from turning them from human individuals into "the other". Joseph first overcomes the stereotype and sees them as individuals. Then he overcomes real bad behavior, replacing that in his mind with incidents of good behavior. This process does take place, but only in the continuation of our story. It is, however, the process which leads to reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers, and it is such a process which we all must go through to prevent "unfounded hatred" "sinat hinam".

Let us take another look at psychological and moral mechanisms which these verse reveal? Why does Joseph deal harshly with his brothers once he sees them? What is the use of the verb "hikir" (root=NCR) in this context? Another answer to all of these questions is supplied by a midrash (**Aggadaht Bereshit, Buber, 73**). This midrash assumes that when Joseph saw his brothers, he felt tenderness towards them, and the

first use of “hikir” means that he felt compassion. But, this midrash continues, at that point an angel appeared to Joseph in the form of a man (Ish). This “man” scolds Joseph, asking why he feels mercy towards these men who caused him so much trouble. Thus, Joseph immediately feels alienated from them (va-yitnaker).

This midrash uses the fact that “hikir”, which is taken to mean empathize, and “va-yitnaker”, which means removing all sense of empathy are based on the same root NCR. Feelings of compassion may be natural, but we all bear grudges, and if we dwell on what others have “done” to us the natural feelings of empathy can be turned to feelings of alienation. 66 TTT H and M

I am always amazed at what people tell me about how badly they have been treated by others. My sense of those incidents is usually much more benign. To some extant people must be dwelling on their private sense of pain, and going over and over it to develop such sense of estrangement and desire for revenge. Perhaps, Joseph’s reaction of mercy towards his brothers is naive, but mercy is naive. The sophistication of probing each action for sinister motivation makes mercy almost impossible. Mercy is predicated on faith, the faith in human beings being able to be good or improve their behavior. Perhaps, this is the essence of God’s faith in mankind, for God is the “merciful one”. Imitatio Dei, then would be cultivating the naivete of mercy.

***Gen. 44, 14-16**

14When Judah and his brothers reentered the house of Joseph, who was still there, they threw themselves on the ground before him. 15Joseph said to them, “What is this deed that you have done? Do you not know that a man like me practices divination?” 16Judah replied, “What can we say to my lord? How can we plead, how can we prove our innocence? God has uncovered the crime of your servants. Here we are, then, slaves of my lord, the rest of us as much as he in whose possession the goblet was found.”

There is no doubt that the development of the story of Joseph and his brothers is filled with literary devices that add to its depth and emotion. One of many such incidents occurs just at the end of parashat mi-ketz. Joseph sends his brothers back with food, but without Shimon, and he has stipulated that they cannot return to him for food without bringing their youngest brother Benjamin. But, the food runs out, and they reluctantly return with Benjamin. Once again, Joseph plays with them, and places his divination cup in Benjamin's sack. When they are brought back for stealing the cup, Joseph asserts that the one in whose sack the cup will be found will remain in Egypt as a slave to him.

The overtones are many. Is Joseph merely reminding them that they had sold him into slavery? He already knows from the first meeting that the subject has not left them (cf. **Gen. 42, 21-23**). Perhaps he does not believe them that Jacob is still alive, and he fears for Benjamin's safety, and thus, he desires to bring him to him for safekeeping. In any case, they are returned to Egypt as thieves and brought to Joseph's house. The Torah tells us: "When Judah and his brothers reentered the house of Joseph, who was still there, they threw themselves on the ground before him. Joseph said to them, “What is this deed that you have done? Do you not know that a man like me practices divination?” Judah replied, “What can we say ("nomar") to my lord? How can we plead ("nedaber"), how can we prove our innocence ("nitztadak")?

God has uncovered the crime of your servants. Here we are, then, slaves of my lord, the rest of us as much as he in whose possession the goblet was found."" (**Gen. 44, 14-16**)

One midrash is puzzled by the fact that the brothers, captured as thieves, are brought to Joseph's house. Usually thieves would be brought to the police station or to the court. This midrash indeed points out that Joseph would each day go out and set up a tribunal to enact judgment on those who had stolen from the state. But, in this case in order to not embarrass his brothers in front of the Egyptian public, he had them brought to his house. This midrash understands Joseph as wanting to teach a lesson to his brothers, but not to air their 'dirty laundry' in public. (**Tanhuma, Buber, Miketz 13**)

The other comment in this midrash relates to Joseph's accusation: "What is this deed that you have done?". They have stolen his divination cup. What purpose would these Hebrews have with such an instrument? The midrash supplies the answer: "why did the lad steal the cup to divine and find out what happened to his brother?" The midrash places the cup directly into the context of the relationships between the brothers. Benjamin must be constantly bothered by what happened to his brother, Joseph. Here is an amazing opportunity to find out. He can take a magic cup that reveals all, and with its powers find out the truth of the matter. Even if we follow the simple meaning of the text, and thus know that Benjamin did not really steal the cup, the brothers do not know that. And the explanation Joseph offers fits in with the dynamics and mutual recriminations that are flying among the brothers all these years.

Another commentary, that of R. Moshe Alshekh, a contemporary of Joseph Karo, adds another possible perspective on the Tanhuma midrash. When Joseph says: "What is this deed that you have done?", he is saying that he is puzzled by the stealing of the cup. It cannot be that it is stolen for its monetary worth, for the brothers have already proved that they are not out to steal money by returning the money that was returned to them on the first trip. Rather, Joseph, who has heard that a brother is missing (cf. **Gen. 42, 13**), accuses them of stealing his cup so that he, Joseph, will not use it to divine what really happened to the missing brother! (**Sefer Torat Moshe on Gen. 44, 18**).

Alshekh explains the incident in terms of the brother's great fear that their misdeeds will be found out and publicized. He thus explains their answer in this light. When the brothers say: "What can we say ("nomar") to my lord? How can we plead ("nedaber"), how can we prove our innocence ("nitztadak")? God has uncovered the crime of your servants.", they use three terms with which a guilty person uses to grapple with their guilt.

The first term, "nomar", "saying", implies speaking in terms of appeasement or reconciliation. The first move of the guilty party is to try and appease the offended one without relating directly to the misdeed. The second term, "nedaber", "asserting", implies that the guilty party attacks the offended one angrily. The second move is to accuse the offended party of having some part in the situation. They are saying that they are not the ONLY guilty one in the situation. The third term, "nitztadak", "self justification", implies that the guilty party attempts to explain and justify his actions.

The third move is to interpret the incident in a way that justifies the guilty party's actions altogether.

This is a wonderful analysis of the process of "cover-up". R. Moshe continues his analysis by trying to put the whole process of Joseph's behavior and the various reactions of the brothers into the context of our verse and the cry: "What is this deed that you have done?". He writes: "in Joseph's heart, [in using the word 'deed'] was the thought "for selling an innocent person for money". Thus, he justified his own actions of judgment. The irony is that the brothers insist that they all become slaves as a result of Joseph's pressure on them, and they intend to save Benjamin, who was not a party to the sale of Joseph into slavery. 67 TTT M

The difficult obligation to accept responsibility for our actions is highlighted in these comments. Not only is it usually difficult to accept responsibility, but it is even more difficult when a group has transgressed, and each member of the group exerts mutual pressure on all the other members to forget or suppress the transgression. In the end, when Joseph becomes convinced that his brothers are not lying about their father, and that their remorse at how they treated him is genuine, reconciliation can take place, and it is precisely this reconciliation which enables the nation of Israel to be created.

MAFTIR SHABBAT HANNUKAH [sometimes an additional Torah reading is added to the parasha if it falls on a special Shabbat, as the case of Hannukah]

What's in a name? Indeed, most names in the Bible have meanings that are spelled out in the text. For example: "She named him Moses, explaining, 'I drew him out of the water"" (Ex. 2, 10, the name Moshe is connected with the Hebrew verb "mashah", to draw out). Even when the name is not explicitly explained in the text, the Midrashic tradition takes care to create homiletical meanings for each name.

But, what happens when a name seems to change from place to place? I am not speaking of an intentional name change, like Sarai to Sarah, but where the text switches names! On Hanukkah we read from the Torah about the dedication of the Tabernacle. Each day a different tribe brought its sacrifice. This Shabbat Hanukkah we read the following: "On the sixth day, it was the chieftain of the Gadites, Eliasaph son of Deuel." (**Num. 7, 42**) This chieftain is mentioned in the general list of heads of tribes in **Numbers 1, verse 14**. The only problem is that in another listing of the chieftains, in **Num. Chapter 2**, his name is recorded as: " Eliasaph son of Reuel." So, who is his father: Deuel or Reuel? What meaning is implied by this change of patronym?

The simplest answer would be to merely say, in the style of modern Biblical scholarship, there are different versions of the text. The Hebrew letter D and R interchange often. For example, the sons of Yavan in **Gen. 10, 4** include "Dodanim". But, the same list in **I Chron. 1, 7** includes "Rodanim". Radak says simply that these are the same peoples, just sometimes called one thing and sometimes another (**on I Ch. ibid**). Rashi explains this change by homiletics. When Israel sins they are seen as "rodanim", that is 'tyrants' who rule over Israel because of their sins. But, when Israel is in power they act like "dodanim", that is cousins. They are all sweet and familial, until they get the chance to lord it over Israel (**on I Ch. Ibid**.). So, while the classical

commentators can see things in a simple way, at the same time, they never miss an opportunity to add meaning by exegesis.

Actually, Prof. Mordechai Cogan points out that since the people mentioned are inhabitants of the island of Rhodes, thus the name "rodanim" is clearly the correct one (private communication). Yet, in our case, even though this assesment is accurate, this answer is not enough. For the change in name is within the same book, and the names of the chieftains of the Israelite tribes must surely be significant.

Rabbeinu Bahya questions who "Reuel" could be. The only one found in the vicinity, Num**. 10, 29**, is Reuel the Midianite. Now, since it is not conceivable that the head of the tribe of Gad could be the son of a Midianite, the conclusion must be that it is the same person, but he had two different names. The reason is to express two different aspects of this person, which are one, namely, "he desired God, and he knew God". Rabbeinu Bahya clearly bases his understanding of "reu" on the Aramic root which means to desire. The Hebrew word "deu" clearly means to know. So, this particluar person desired to be close to God, and attained knowledge of God.

Or ha-Hayyim, R. Hayyim b. Moshe Ibn Attar, has a different understanding. He concentrates on the characteristics of the tribe of Gad, namely, that they went out first to help the other tribes conquer the land of
Israel (cf. **Num. 32 etc**.) He puts the emphasis on the name "Elyasaf", as if it read, "eli asaf", "My God with gather in". Minhat Shat actually reports a manuscript with an extra 'aleph' in the name, which would yield exactly
this reading. But, that is not a known manuscript. R. Hayyim's point is that Gad "added onto" God's promise.

Ramban stresses that when the text changes names it does so in a manner that leaves both names with the same connotation. He says that Eliasaf, knew God, and put all of the thoughts of his heart with God. That is the word 'reu' here is connected to the Hebrew word "ra'ayon", thought. According to all of these commentators, a person can have several aspects to their spiritual life, and can 'be known' for each one separately. But, still they are the same person.

Finally, the Midrash comments that each one of the tribes sacrificed in honor of a particular event. The sacrifice of Gad was in honor of the leaving of Egypt. Why do they have such a great honor? Precisely because they went in front of the camp to help all of Israel fulfill the promise of the land (**Num. R. 13, 19**). In this sense, the honor of being the one to celebrate the great event of leaving Egypt, is the one who is the first to bring this event to its successful conclusion. For, the leaving of Egypt was in order to live in the land of Israel. It was not a goal in itself, but a means to the goal. Since Gad put itself on the line by taking to the front lines in order to secure this goal, they are rewarded with being the ones to sacrifice in honor of leaving Egypt.

The maftir portion for Shabbat Hanukah recounts the sacrifice of Elyasaf ben De'uel, the head of the tribe of Gad. This is a seemingly uninspiring list of the items which he brought as thanksgiving for dedicating the Tabernacle (**Num. 7, 43-47**). However, the Midrash (**Num. R. 13:20**) turns this list into a great lesson of how to be thankful both for the good that has befallen us and for the tasks that we have accomplished.

The tribe of Gad was the tribe which spearheaded the entrance into the land of Israel, and did not leave the battle until their fellow tribes were settled. So, according to R. Berechiah, the sacrificial items which Elyasaf brings are a thanksgiving for all of the good things which befell Israel from the time that Jacob went down to Egypt until Israel had reached the promised land. Indeed, according to this Midrash the sacrifice is a detailed remembering and praise of God for the highlights of the Exodus. For example: "one silver bowl ("ka'arat kesef"), symbolizes Yocheved, the mother of Moses. For the word, "ka'ara", can be transposed to be "kera'ah", she was torn away from her husband. Silver, "kesef", symbolizes how Amram desired to take her back ("nichsaf" means desire). "Its weight 130", symbolizes that Yocheved was 130 years old when she gave birth to Moses.

The Midrash continues and describes every item of the sacrifice in terms of the Exodus from Egypt. One of these descriptions fits into Hanukkah perfectly. "70 shekel", symbolizes the 70 elders who helped Moses. "They were filled with the Holy spirit of Moses, but Moses was not lacking anything. Just as one who lights a lamp from another lamp, the lamp is lit and the other lamp does not lose its light" (**Num. R. 13:20**). Elyasaf's sacrifice becomes the way to explain that the commitment which the tribe of Gad had given to help their fellows was kept. Keeping a commitment to the community and for the community's benefit, is an example which should be emulated, a kind of beacon to Jews from that time till today.

MAFTIR SHABBAT 8TH DAY OF HANUKKAH [sometimes an additional Torah reading is added to the parasha if it falls on a special Shabbat, as the case of Hannukah]

The old joke asks which is the longest haftarah of the year. The answer is that of Va-Yishlah because we read the entire book of Ovadiah. But seriously folks, what is the longest maftir reading? It surely is the reading this week when the eighth day of Hanukkah falls on the second Shabbat of Hanukkah. Not only is the reading long, but it spans two normal parshiyot, Naso and Be-Haalotekha. The result is fascinating. The dedication of the altar in the Tabernacle is meant to foreshadow the dedication of the altar by the Maccabees. If this were all we could stop at the end of Naso. By adding on the beginning of Be-Haalotekha, the motif of the Menorah and its lighting is added to the historical overtones of Hanukkah.

The final verse of our Maftir reading is: "Now this is how the lampstand ["ha-Menorah"] was made: it was hammered work of gold ["miksha zahav"], hammered from base to petal. According to the pattern that the Lord had shown Moses, so was the lampstand made ["ke-mareh asher herah adonai et moshe ken asah et ha-menorah"] (**Num. 8, 4**). The instruction for the making of the Tabernacle and its vessels reads: "31You shall make a lampstand of pure gold; the lampstand shall be made of hammered work; its base and its shaft, its cups, calyxes, and petals shall be of one piece. ··· 37Make its seven lamps—the lamps shall be so mounted as to give the light on its front side… 39It shall be made, with all these furnishings, out of a talent of pure gold. 40Note well ["u-re'eh"], and follow the patterns for them that are being shown you on the mountain." (**Ex. 25**)

The two accounts appear to be compatible. The most striking features are that the Menorah is to be made of one piece of gold and that its shape and form are shown to

Moses on Mt. Sinai. The last verse of this week's Maftir reading is the subject of a dispute in a Midrash. The anonymous opinion is that its task is to sing the praise of Moses for following God's instructions. Rabbi Natan asks why this should be at all necessary?! It should be obvious that Moses will carry out instructions, and not something to specifically mention. Furthermore, this is already mentioned in **Ex. 25, 40**. R. Natan thus interprets our verse to mean that God showed Moses the completed vessels as we read: "According to the pattern that the Lord had shown Moses, so was the lampstand made ["ke-mareh asher herah adonai et moshe ken asah et ha-menorah"]. That is, it had already been made! (**Sifrei Ba-Midbar 61**)

The Hebrew phrase can be understood to inform us that the Menorah was made, but even more than that another Midrash in this tradition understands the verse to tell us that God made it! The Hebrew: "ke-mareh asher herah adonai et moshe ken asah et ha-menorah" can be translated literally as: "according to the plan which God had shown Moses he made the Menorah". The ambiguity of who made the Menorah is obvious. This Midrash takes it to mean that God made the Menorah and showed it already done to Moses. (**Sifrei Zuta 8, 4**)

This theme is expanded in the Tanhuma. We find that Moses had more difficulty with the Menorah than with any of the other vessels of the Tabernacle. Until finally God had to point with His finger to one to show him what it was. This is the meaning of "this is how the lampstand ["ha-Menorah"] was made: it was hammered work of gold ["miksha zahav"]". The word "this" ("zeh") implies a pointing and a showing of an example. The word "miksha" is from the same root as the word "kasheh", meaning difficult. Thus, the verse tells us that it was very difficult for Moses to figure out how to make the Menorah, until God finally pointed to one that had been already fashioned and said to him that this is it. (**Be-Haalotekha 4**)

This Midrash goes on to say that God told Moses to take the gold and throw it into the fire, and God worked a miracle so that the shape that came out was the shape of the Menorah. In **Ex. 25, 31** Moses is told "You shall make ("ve-asita") a lampstand of pure gold; the lampstand shall be made ("teiaseh") of hammered work". He is to make it, but on the other hand it will "be made". The Hebrew word for "will be made" is "teiaseh" which is passive. Indeed, our Midrash states that this word is written with a "yod" to clearly indicate that it is passive. In addition, this "yod", whose numerical value is 10, foreshadows the 10 Menorot that Solomon will make in the Temple in Jerusalem (cf. **I Kings 7, 49**). Indeed, according to this Midrash the Menorah is a miraculous creation by God.

This is reminiscent of the creation of the golden calf. Aaron explains how the form came about. He says: "So I said to them, 'Whoever has gold, take it off!' They gave it to me and I hurled it into the fire and out came this calf!'" (**Ex. 32, 24**) Our Midrash implies a connection between the calf and the Menorah. Both are of gold, and both are formed without intention in a miraculous fashion. The difference is that the calf is made from many discrete pieces of gold, and the Menorah is made from one lump of gold.

The great difference, however, is in the use of each one. The calf is treated as a god, and the Menorah is a vessel whose task is to give light. The calf is thought to have been the force which took Israel out of Egypt (**Ex. 32, 4**) The Menorah represents the

spirit of God, but is not confused with god. Both can claim that they were formed miraculously, so the mere fact of miraculous origin cannot determine worth nor validity. What determines worth and validity is NOT the fact that God made them, but human use and intention.

Ibn Ezra, the great linguist and rationalist, objects to this Midrash. He points out that other items in the Tabernacle are referred to in the passive, as if they came about miraculously, but it is clear that they were made by the priests. The examples he brings are the grain offerings fried in the pan, and the cherubim which were also made "miksha". The Menorah was made by humans just as the grain offering was fried by humans. The Cherubim were made by Bezalel. Furthermore, he says that the word "teiaseh" cannot be written with a "yod". He says that he had seen Torah scrolls which had been checked by the Tiberian scribes and had been authorized by 15 scholars, who examined each word and each vocalization three times, and which had the "yod" in that word. But, he says I did not find the "yod" in the Torah scrolls of Spain, France and England. Furthermore, anyone who knows Hebrew will know that by the rules of grammar no "yod" should be allowed. All of this, he writes in order to negate the idea that the Menorah was created miraculously by God. For him, it is a creation of humans, and as such can be appreciated and valued, but can never be venerated.

Last week's parashah *concluding with the shocking – and potentially disastrous – discovery of Joseph's silver goblet in Benjamin's knapsack. Judah steps forward and declares that the brothers will stand together and accept as one whatever punishment Joseph wishes to mete out, but Joseph, playing his role perfectly up until the very last moment, declares that nothing could be further from his mind: the thief shall pay for his crime and the rest may return home in peace.*

Parashat Va-yiggash *begins with what could easily be considered the most dramatic speech in all Scripture: the plea Judah makes to Joseph in which he begs for permission to bear his brother's punishment himself if only Benjamin might be allowed to return to their father safely. Our first lesson is based on two verses in that speech, the nineteenth and twentieth verses of Genesis 44. In recalling the ins and outs of the story to date, Judah reminds Joseph that it was he, Pharaohs' vizier, who had inquired about their family in the first place: "My lord asked his servants, 'Have you a father or another brother?' We told my lord, 'We have an old father, and there is a child of his old age, the youngest; his full brother is dead, so that he alone is left of his mother and his father dotes on him'."*

***Gen. 44, 18-20**

18Then Judah went up to him and said, "Please, my lord, let your servant appeal to my lord, and do not be impatient with your servant, you who are the equal of Pharaoh. 19My lord asked his servants, 'Have you a father or another brother?'[Ha-yesh lakhem av o akh?] 20We told my lord, 'We have an old father, and there is a child of his old age, the youngest; his full brother is dead, so that he alone is left of his mother, and his father dotes on him.'

The meetings between Joseph, the vizier of Egypt and his brothers are among the most dramatic and complex narratives in the Bible. In parashat mi-ketz, Joseph sees his brothers and knows who they are, and he remembers what they did to him, but they are in the dark.On the surface there is deception and harassment of the brothers by Joseph. He begins by accusing them of being spies: "You are spies, you have come to see the land in its nakedness." To this his brothers give a strange reply: "No, my lord! Truly, your servants have come to procure food. We are all of us sons of the same man; we are honest men; your servants have never been spies!" The brothers go on and offer again the information that they are all brothers of one man, and that a younger brother is with their father and another brother is no more.

It is as if the brothers want to recount what is on their conscience to this stranger, whose biting accusation of wrongdoing leads them to spill out hints at their own problematic past. Is the development of these conversations pitched to be a kind of unraveling of secrets of the past? Are there words or hints of language that cause the brothers to struggle with their own conscience in the presence of this "stranger". In a sense, just as Joseph has been "revealed", so now we have the brothers "revealing themselves". The words which seem to be unconnected to past history and past misdeeds reverberate with the very essence of that history.

In parashat Va-Yiggash, after Joseph's' harassment leads to Benjamin's incarceration, Judah steps forward to plea with Joseph. The hints at past history and the words which have only alluded to past events are now spelled out. Judah begins his plea: "My lord asked his servants, 'Have you a father or another brother?' We told my lord, 'We have an old father, and there is a child of his old age, the youngest; his full brother is dead, so that he alone is left of his mother, and his father dotes on him."

The whole story is spilled out, except for their part in the "death" of one brother. But, the fact is that Joseph did NOT ask them if they have a father or a brother, he merely declared that they were spies, and the whole confession developed from that.

Is there a deeper, internal, meaning to the brother's own understanding of what Joseph was asking them? I want to suggest that there are code words which reveal deeper questions. The most fascinating one, to me, is the way they understood Joseph's challenge as a question: "Have you a father or another brother?" Even someone with rudimentary Hebrew can understand these words. What is behind those words?

The phrase "av o akh" is used as an expression to distinguish God from the idolatry of the pagan world. God has no father and no siblings, unlike the gods of the pagan world. God is first, that is, has no father, and is last, that is, has no brother (cf**. Isa. 44, 6; Ex. R. 29:5**). So, there is a hint here that when the brothers are confronted with an accusation of wrongdoing they understand that they are confronted with the question of their faithfulness to God. Has the influence of idolatry obliterated any sense of guilt, any remorse that they might have had for what they did to Joseph and to their father?

They sinned not only against Joseph, their brother, but also against their father, Jacob, by leading him to believe that Joseph had been devoured by a wild animal. "Have you a father or another brother?", is taken by them to mean "can you say that you have a father or a brother in terms of God's law"? Can you still call Jacob a "father" having deceived him so, contravening God's command to honor your father? Can you still call Joseph a brother having contravened God's law "you shall not hate your brother in your heart"? Loyalty to God means keeping God's rules, it has moral consequences. When those rules are ignored, it calls into question the basic commitment to God. "Having a father and a brother" is a way of describing ones motivation in serving God and following the Torah. TTT 67 T

What is most fascinating is that the name of king Ahab is a conflation of this term "akhav" literally "brother father". The word "akh" here is taken to mean "calamity", and "av" to mean "loving". The Talmud interprets Ahab's name to mean: "a calamity to Heaven" and "a lover of idolatry". In THIS version the terms imply the opposite of loyalty to God, rather they imply a rejection of God in favor of idolatry. (**San. 102b**). This interpretation of Ahab is found in the framework of the discussion on the Mishnah Perek Helek (**Sanhedrin 10:2**). Ahab is one of the three kings who have no portion of the world to come, along with Menashe and Jereboam.

As part of this discussion we are told of R. Ashi, who finishes his daily lecture just before this Mishnah. R. Ashi mockingly refers to the kings saying that tomorrow the lesson will start discussing the three "buddies". That night king Menashe appears to R. Ashi in a dream, and says that since they are buddies, maybe R. Ashi can tell the king from what part of the bread does one take the piece for the motzi prayer. R. Ashi does not know, and the king rebukes him sarcastically saying are you really a rabbi when you do not know this simple halakha? R. Ashi begs to know and promises to teach it in the king's name. Menashe reveals that the part must be from the crust of the bread. R. Ashi is impressed and acknowledges Menashe's halachic wisdom, but in the light of this he wonders how the king could have worshipped

idols? Menashe replies: "if you were there, you would have picked up the fold of your cloak and run after me [to worship idols as well]". The next day R. Ashi began the lesson by saying, "now we will commence with our teachers" (the three kings). [**San. 102b**]

R. Ashi learns that it is not so simple to be judgmental about another persons' religious practice or even moral practice without having been in their place. He learns that even "evil" kings are concerned with Jewish law and worship of God. He learns that it is wrong to deprecate others, when it is possible to learn from them. He learns that Rabbis need much patience and optimistic vision and that they themselves are subject to the influence of their surroundings. Joseph tested his brothers to see if they still considered him a brother, and when he saw that they did he was able to forgive them. So R. Ashi when seeing that Menashe still considered himself a Jew, and was still proud of his ability to teach halakha, he learned that he had to give him due respect as a fellow Jew. TTT 68 B and P

Perhaps it was because of this dream that the Talmud, edited by R. Ashi, goes to great lengths to cite opinions contrary to the Mishnah which hold that these kings DID have a portion in the world to come! The Talmud there brings example after example where even these three "evil" kings, who left God and promoted idolatry, had some good deeds, deeds which could acquit them from being locked out of Olam ha-Ba. Just as Joseph's brothers could struggle with their own immorality and with their own belief and gain reacceptance, so can kings, and, indeed, any Jew.

***Gen. 44:34**
For how can I go back to my father ["eikh e'eleh el avi"] unless the boy is with me? Let me not be witness to the woe ["va-ra"] that would overtake my father!

Parashat va-yiggash opens with the moving speech of Judah, who has promised Jacob that he will be a pledge for Benjamin's safe return. The minister of the grain, Joseph, has told them all to leave Benjamin in Egypt. Just when all seems lost Judah steps forward and works on the minister's human emotions, ending with: "For how can I go back to my father ["eikh e'eleh el avi"] unless the boy is with me? Let me not be witness to the woe ["va-ra"] that would overtake my father!" (**Gen. 44, 34**) Indeed, the minister, Joseph, cannot take this appeal to human sympathy to regard the sufferings of an elder father and his beloved youngest son. So, he reveals himself to his brothers: "I am Joseph. Is my father still well?" (**Gen. 45, 3**) His brothers are dumbfounded and fall silent. Joseph repeats himself: "I am your brother Joseph, he whom you sold into Egypt." (**Gen. 45, 4**)

This scene is surely one of the most emotional scenes in the Torah. Joseph, who has toyed with his brothers up to now, can no longer keep up his charade. I imagine that all along he figured he would have to reveal who he was, but, perhaps out of anger and spite over what they had done to him, he wanted some revenge before that moment. I imagine that Joseph might have planned a more spectacular way of telling them rather than what he does, just blurt it out. One Midrash gives us an insight into just what that plan might have been, but more of that later. For now, look at the way he blurts it out. First, he says merely "I am Joseph". This is very curt, and he says it only in the context of concern over his father. Having just been told by Judah that his father would die, or worse, he is quite properly worried about his father's wellbeing.

Only when he sees his brother's catatonic state, does he emend his revelation "I am your brother Joseph". This new context for his accusation that they sold him seems to say: even though you sold me to Egypt, I remain your brother. Then, they can react to him and speak with him.

What is Judah really saying? What is it in his speech which finally draws Joseph to reveal himself? Joseph has withstood his emotions many times before to continue to harass his brothers. What button does Judah push that Joseph cannot withstand? The answer is in the climax of his speech with the words "for how can I go back to my father ["eikh e'eleh el avi"] and witness his woe ["va-ra"]. True, Ramban sees those words as a trick to draw sympathy for his request to replace Benjamin as a slave. Ramban feels that he mentions his grieving father as a ploy so that he will not be suspected of trying to replace Benjamin intentionally, since, as an adult, he could more easily escape Egyptian captivity. (**Ramban on Gen. 44, 34**)

However, there is another tradition. The Hebrew word "e'eleh", translated here simply as "go back", bears the meaning of ascending, of going up. The same root is at the base of the word Aliyah, used to denote ascending spiritually as well as physically to Erez Yisrael. As if Judah is saying, "how will I be able to give the proper honor and high place to my father because of his grief". Judah is convinced that the grief that would seize Jacob would drive him to suicide. One Midrash spells this out very graphically. Judah states that his father will kill himself over Benjamin's fate, and he, Judah, would then be prevented from honoring him as a parent. This is because Jewish law, in its basic form, fixes that one is not to mourn, or eulogize, or tear one's garments for a person who has committed suicide. Thus, if Joseph does not release Benjamin, he will cause not only his father's death by his own hand, but he will cause all of his sons, including Joseph who is listening, to disrespect their father because of the law! (**Sekhel Tov on Gen. 44, 34**)

In this reading of our verse, Judah deeply feels his father's pain, but more importantly, he reveals to Joseph that Jacob's sons really care about him. They are overcome with shame at what their schemes and transgressions have caused to their father, and they, at least Judah, are not willing to repeat them. Perhaps this realization is what finally pushes Joseph to the point where he can no longer toy with them.

Another Midrash expands this theme and creates a whole scenario that hints at what Joseph had in mind before his emotions overcame him. This Midrash recounts Jacob's fear that a calamity might befall Benjamin, "…perhaps a curse has been placed on Rachel that all her line should die out on the road. Rachel herself died on the road, Joseph died on the road, now if this one [Benjamin] should die on the road, I will die grieving after him." [**Gen. R. (Albeck) 93**] This Midrash continues that when Joseph reproves Judah for wanting to take Benjamin's place; Judah replies that he is tied by a knot to the young man by his bond that he gave his father. Joseph suggests that he will pay whatever it costs to free him from the bond. Judah makes it clear that it is his life, not money, that he has pledged. He responds to Joseph that he is older, stronger and more important than Benjamin, so it is to Joseph's benefit that Judah be kept as a slave; and, furthermore, this will prevent Jacob from being so sorely afflicted by grief.

This Midrash states specifically that Joseph could not stand to hear about his father's grief. So, Joseph says to them: "where is your brother you say is dead". They repeat that he is dead. Then, Joseph says: "why are you telling lies, you have sold him to me". He then gets up and starts to shout out to the corners of the room "Joseph son of Jacob come in here". The brothers begin to turn around and look for Joseph, and then Joseph says to them: "what are you looking for? I am Joseph your brother". They did not believe him, until he uncovered himself and showed them his circumcision. (ibid.)

What binds them all together is their common concern for the welfare of their father. A common fate and a common heritage are combined with concern for honoring and even elevating parents, as the word "e'eleh" implies. These are the elements which in the end bring about the capability of the brothers to live together. These concerns for binding Jews to one another by education about our common fate, heritage and Torah stand for the goals of Jewish education. This reads the verse in this fashion: "How can we elevate our Father, God, if the boy, the students, are not with us?". (cf. **Tzitz Eliezer 7, 36**) This reading of our verse makes it into a motto and into a challenge to educators, and indeed to every Jewish parent.

***Gen. 45, 28**
28"Enough!" said Israel. "My son Joseph is still alive! I must go and see him before I die."

***Gen. 46:1-4**
So Israel set out with all that was his, and he came to Beer-sheba, where he offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac. God called to Israel in a vision by night: "Jacob! Jacob!" He answered, "Here." And He said, "I am God, the God of your father. Fear not to go down to Egypt, for I will make you there into a great nation. I Myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I Myself will also bring you back; and Joseph's hand shall close your eyes.

Jacob finds out that Joseph is alive, and that he rules over the distribution of grain in Egypt. He decides that he must go to Egypt to see his son Joseph before he dies (**Gen. 45, 25-28**). But, Jacob is apparently ambivalent about leaving the land of Israel. After his life of wandering around, leaving the land for 20 years, and finally coming back, Jacob must feel that he should not leave the land again. Thus, we read: "So Israel set out with all that was his, and he came to Beer-sheba, where he offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac. God called to Israel in a vision by night: "Jacob! Jacob!" He answered, "Here." And He said, "I am God, the God of your father. Fear not to go down to Egypt, for I will make you there into a great nation. I Myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I Myself will also bring you back; and Joseph's hand shall close your eyes." (**Gen. 46:1-4**).

Jacob sacrifices to God, apparently wishing for a revelation about the move he is about to make. He receives a revelation, in which God alleviates his fears about leaving Israel, by putting his journey into the context of the future, in which a great nation will emerge from these events. God even promises Jacob that he will return to Israel in verse 4: "I Myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I Myself will also bring you back; and Joseph's hand shall close your eyes."

This is a fascinating verse. God promises that He will, personally so to speak, be with Jacob in his descent to Egypt, and that He will, personally so to speak, bring him

back to Israel. That, as we might say, is the good news. The bad news is: "and Joseph's hand shall close your eyes." That is, you will not come back to Israel alive, but rather you will come back to Israel to be buried, having died in Egypt. God promises Jacob His own presence, but he also includes the presence of Joseph in Jacob's life at the moment of his death. At least, this is one accepted understanding of "and Joseph's hand shall close your eyes" as referring to the custom of closing the eyes of a person who dies. (cf. **Ibn Ezra et al**)

Still, the Midrash tradition grappled with the syntax of the verse, the movement from God speaking in the first person to talking about Joseph and what he will do. Why are these mentioned in the same verse? What are the possible meanings of the phrase "and Joseph's hand shall close your eyes", since this is not necessarily an obviously literal statement. One Midrash tradition sees this phrase as revealing to Jacob the shortsightedness of how he views the events of his life. God is saying something like: "Jacob, you did not fully realize that I was always with you, both in your low times and your high times, and you also did not see the worthy actions of your son, Joseph". Indeed, one Midrash sees the phrase as a kind of reproval of Joseph's lack of faith in God's power to be with him and his family: "Jacob of whom it was said "and Jacob tore his garments [in mourning for Joseph]" (**Gen. 37, 34**); The Holy One said to him 'you have torn your garments for nothing, tomorrow [in the future] you will eat and drink with him', as is written: "and Joseph's hand shall close your eyes."" [**Sifrei d'aggadahta al Esther – Midrash Panim Aherim (Buber) Nusah B Parasha D 'va-yikra Mordecai…'**] TTT 69 T

There is another exegetical tradition which sees this phrase as one which expresses the complexity yet the essential nature of the relationships between parents and children. Baal ha-Turim sees the phrase as a comforting one to Jacob. He now knows that Joseph is not dead, but Baal ha-Turim adds that NOW he knows that Joseph will not die in his lifetime. One of Jacob's fears, the fear of any parent, is that their children may perish before they do. Life is hazardous and children do not always take the precautions that parents think they should take. Joseph has been particularly in danger throughout his life, and Jacob now knows that there will be physical continuation of his family. This is a comforting notion to him, and is surely one of the components of relationships between parents and children.

Hizkuni suggests that we read the word "your eyes" ("aynekhah") as the word "your affairs" ("inyanekhah"). Joseph will continue your affairs. It seems to me that Hizkuni also understands the phrase as a kind of comfort to Jacob. Joseph will continue the affairs of watching over his brothers, the course of Jewish history will not stop with you, Jacob, despite the fact that you die in Egypt, and none of your family has left the land of Israel. They will continue the legacy, and the return to Israel will be not only for you, but also for the whole nation. In addition to physical continuity there will be spiritual and cultural continuity. There is no greater comfort to parents and to children than to be of one mind about continuing the physical existence of the family and continuing the spiritual inheritance at the same time.

***Gen. 45, 26-27**

25They went up from Egypt and came to their father Jacob in the land of Canaan. 26And they told him, "Joseph is still alive; yes, he is ruler over the whole land of Egypt." His heart went numb, for he did not believe them. 27But when they recounted all that Joseph had said to them,

and when he saw the wagons that Joseph had sent to transport him, the spirit of their father Jacob revived.

Even more dramatic then when Joseph reveals to his brothers that it is he who is the Egyptian that sits before them is the scene when the brothers return to their elderly father, Jacob, and tell him the news. "And they told him, "Joseph is still alive; yes, he is ruler over the whole land of Egypt." His heart went numb ["va-yafag libo"], for he did not believe them. But when they recounted all that Joseph had said to them, and when he saw the wagons that Joseph had sent to transport him, the spirit of their father Jacob revived. ["va-tehi ruah"]" (**Gen. 45, 26-27)**

The words which describe Jacob's initial reaction are cause for comment. The words, "va-yafag libo", are not common words, and there is much discussion about the meaning of them. Rashbam, for example, takes it to mean that he changed his heart, that is, he suddenly went into a mode of disbelief about what his sons were saying to him. (**on Gen. 45, 26**)

This comment is most likely based on the moral lesson drawn from this episode in the tractate Avot d' Rabbi Natan. There Rabbi Shimon learns the moral that one who constantly lies will not be believed, even when telling the truth. He learns this from Jacob's sons. Jacob believed them when they brought Joseph's bloody coat to them (**Gen. 37, 31-33**), but as time went on he began to suspect they constantly lied to him. Thus, when they came and told him that Joseph was alive and a ruler in Egypt, his heart turned and he did not believe them. Their actions had caused this turn in Jacob's heart. At the hour of their greatest need to be accepted by their father, he could not accept their word as truthful. (**ADRN Ver. A, 30; cf. Gen. R. 94, 25-26**)

Another opinion in this Midrash is that since Joseph left home, Jacob had lost the gift of the holy spirit. He had become incapable of vision. But, at this moment the holy spirit returned to him, as it is written: "the spirit of their father Jacob revived". This view has Jacob losing his spiritual vision, or perhaps his will to live, and after getting evidence that Joseph was alive, his vision and will to live returned.

There is, however, another tradition concerning the meaning of "va-yafag libo". This tradition goes even further in describing what happened to Jacob. Ibn Ezra (**on Gen. 45, 25**), for example, takes it to mean that his heart stopped, and he compares it to what is written of Nabal "and his heart died" (**I Sam. 25, 37**)

Ramban goes to great lengths to explain that "va-yafag libo" means that his heart was stopped and that his breathing stopped. In other words, Jacob died! Ramban then explains: "This is a known phenomenon when joyous news is suddenly announced. The books of medicine comment that for old people and weak people, this sudden good news can cause them to faint… and thus, Jacob fell down and died. The Torah says that "he did not believe them" in order to tell us that he lay there for many hours in a dormant state. But, we know that if you yell the news in detail and slowly make the person hear the whole story, that they can return to living having assimilated the news, and this is why the Torah tells us that they told him about all of their conversations with Joseph, until finally his spirit returned to him, and his breathing returned and he lived." (**on Gen. 45, 26**)

Now, this is a fascinating line of commentary. What is the reason that this tradition exists. Why was it necessary to kill off Jacob and revive him? It all might be the fault of Rambam. In the Guide of the Perplexed, Rambam explains the terms "life" and "death", in order to deal with the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead. In this explanation he comments that the word "mavet", death, denote both death and a severe illness. He cites the case of Nabal, saying that this is a case of severe illness. He cites the case of the woman of Zarephath, showing that this too was not real death, but severe illness (**I Kings 17**). Rambam then says that: "Some [or: one] men of Andalusia interpret the verse as meaning that his breath was suspended so that no breath at all could be perceived in him-as happens to people struck with apoplexy or with asphyxia deriving from the womb, so that it is not known if the one in question is dead or alive and the doubt remains a day or two. (**Guide I, 42**)

Now, some took these words of Rambam to mean that Rambam was questioning cases of resurrection of the dead that appear in the Bible. In addition to the two cases mentioned in the Guide, these rabbis added their analysis of the case of the Shunamite woman (**II Kings 4**), and our case of Jacob. A dispute arose over whether there was literally resurrection of a dead person in each of these cases, or whether some of these cases were people who were very ill, and whose breathing had stopped, but they were not really dead! The question is who is this person (or persons) of Andalusia who posited this distinction. Some felt it was Rambam himself. But, this is very unlike Rambam to use such indirect reference to himself. He is not afraid to say outright that certain biblical stories were not literally true, but rather dreams or visions. Why would he be afraid to say that he thought that, medically, some of these stories might not be real death?

Kaffach, in his commentary on the Guide, points out that this dispute was well known in France and Provence in the hundred years or so after Rambam, and not from the Guide but from some other source. He traces its mention in Shittah Mekubetzet (**BM 114b**), and by R. Alfasi's pupil, who was also a student of Yehiel of Paris. (**p. 63, n. 10**) Perhaps this questioning of the biblical stories is part of the tradition of some of the Spanish courtiers, Hisdai ibn Shaprut and Menahem b. Saruk, who carried on correspondence with the Khazar kings at the end of the 10th century. This correspondence dealt with issues of faith and biblical interpretation, as well as with history and kingdoms. Ibn Shaprut calls himself "andalus".

At any rate this debate reverberates throughout Jewish literature. Hatam Sofer goes to great lengths to explain, in one of his responsa, that, despite what one seems to learn from Rambam and Ramban, all of the cases mentioned in the bible, including that of Jacob, were truly cases of resurrection of the dead, and one should not be led astray by comments to the contrary. Despite this later attempt to "defend the faith", I find it most enlightening and instructive that such precious investigation is an integral part of the Jewish tradition, and the way in which it studied and learned from the Bible. [**Hatam Sofer 2, YD 338**] TTT 70 K

***Gen. 46, 1-4**

So Israel set out with all that was his, and he came to Beer-sheba, where he offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac. [2]*God called to Israel in a vision by night: "Jacob! Jacob!" He answered, "Here."* [3]*And He said, "I am God, the God of your father. Fear not to go down to*

Egypt, for I will make you there into a great nation. [4]I Myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I Myself will also bring you back; and Joseph's hand shall close your eyes."

After revealing his true identity Joseph sends for his father Jacob, Israel, and has him brought to Egypt. Jacob is apparently conflicted about this move. On the one hand, he wants to see Joseph again, on the other hand after his lifelong struggle to come back to the land of Israel and prove his place as the bearer of God's promise to his ancestors to inherit the land he is reluctant to leave the boundaries of Eretz Israel. It is almost as if Jacob knows the Mishnah in **Ketubbot 13:11** that once you have come to Israel, you cannot leave it.

He stops in Beer Sheba on his way to Egypt and "offers sacrifices to the God of his father, Isaac" (**Gen. 46, 1**). The midrash wonders why Jacob relates to God only in terms of Isaac, and does not mention Abraham as well. After all, Beer Sheba is first associated with Abraham. There are several answers given in the Midrash (**Gen. R. 94:5**), but one answer is a debate between Bar-Kappara and Yosef ben Patros. One of them says: "just as father was influenced by his desire for food (sending Esau out to get food), so I am influenced by desire for food (to overcome a famine in Israel)". The other says: "Just as father favored one son over another, so I favor one son over the others".

Both of these amoraim see Jacob's need to sacrifice as a confession of weakness. He wants God to know his weaknesses in order not to lose the closeness with God that he had gained. He does not want this temporary "yeridah" to become an act which will cause God to rethink the promise of the land. His passions are what is causing him to leave, not an abrogation of the promise of the land on his part. God accepts his confession and gives him permission to go to Egypt, and reaffirms His promise to Jacob's sons to return them to the land of Israel.

Many times we have to be honest about our weaknesses, in order to gain a better relationship. It can be more destructive to ignore them or to cover them up. If we are honest about why we have done something wrong, even if it means confessing unpleasant character traits, that can be beneficial in keeping a relationship alive and well.

***Gen. 47:25**
You have saved our lives! ("heheyitanu") We are grateful to my lord, and we shall be serfs to Pharaoh."

After settling his family in Goshen, Joseph succeeds in his plan of centralizing all of Egypt's farm lands under his control. He does it in such a way that the nation even applauds him for this achievement. This is because that Joseph has all of the food and grain under his control, so that without his good will people will starve. No wonder that they seem to be fawning towards him, even as he takes their land away from them.

Still, the famine is so severe that the people need Joseph one more time. They flatter him again, and go so far as to pledge themselves into servitude for Pharoah. Their fawning words to Joseph are: "And they said, "You have saved our lives!

("heheyitanu") We are grateful to my lord, and we shall be serfs to Pharaoh.”" (**Gen. 47, 25**).

R. Menahem ben Solomon, the author of Sekhel Tov, writes simply "they said you have kept us alive – you have given us bread and livelihood during the famine and grain to sow so that we can live after the famine." (**on Gen. 47, 25**) His comments assume that the people feel that Joseph is doing this for them out of a sense of compassion. Their gratitude is so great that they are not agitated about the price that they will pay for the grain they have received.

There is, however, another approach that is fascinating. This tradition goes back to the time when Joseph began to collect the grain in preparation for the 7 years of famine. At that point we read: "And when all the land of Egypt felt the hunger, the people cried out to Pharaoh for bread; and Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians, “Go to Joseph; whatever he tells you, you shall do.” (**Gen. 41, 55**) One Midrashic tradition on this verse recounts that Joseph forced the Egyptians to circumcise themselves in order to get grain from him! (**cf. Gen. R. 90, 6**)

The details are given thus: "the famine was severe, and the Egyptians came to Joseph and said to him 'give us bread'. Joseph said to them: 'my God does not feed uncircumcised ones, go and circumcise yourselves and I will give it to you. They went to Pharaoh, and they cried out to him, he said “Go to Joseph; whatever he tells you, you shall do”. They replied, we went to Joseph and he said frivolous things to us, like go and circumcise yourselves. He replied: 'you fools, I told you to listen to him, do his bidding, and then you will acquire grain…" (**Gen. R. 91, 5**)

These surprising midrashim imply that Joseph wanted to force all Egyptian men to become circumcised, and this was his price for giving them the food. What could be the reason for such demands? This incident is part of the halakhic discussion about circumcising gentiles. The Talmud allows a Jew to circumcise a gentile for the purpose of conversion, but not for any other reason. There is much discussion of this, but the simple part is that if a Jew causes a gentile to be circumcised, the assumption is that it is for purposes of conversion.

There is a tradition that Joseph sinned by the act of forcing circumcision on the Egyptians. The only way to justify his actions would be to assume that he acted in order to convert them to his religion. Is this the subtext of the enormous growth of Israelite numbers in Egypt? Is the rapid expansion of the nation due to mass conversions? The idea that Joseph was engaged in conversion by virtue of his demand is derived from the interpretation of our verse. When the Egyptians say “You have saved our lives! ("heheyitanu"), they mean that Joseph has saved them in this world by giving them food so that they will not starve, and also in the world to come by bringing them to the service of God. (cf. **Yabia Omer, II, YD 19**)

The very notion that Joseph was engaged in an attempt to convert large numbers of Egyptians gives one pause. It has ramifications for both the size and strength of the Israelites, and for the hostility between Egyptians and Jews which led to the enslavement of Israel. In any case, there is a clear tradition that this was a wrong thing to do, and that Joseph was transgressing thereby. The ambivalent attitude of halakhic sources towards conversion is the basis for the ambivalent attitude towards

Joseph. On the other hand, accepting the premise of these midrashim does help account for the strength and the very formation of the nation of Israel. TTT 71 HA

Jacob and his family are ensconced in Egypt. Joseph has power and influence, and not only keeps them alive during the famine, but he also sees to their financial success. Jacob is near death, and the tensions within the family resurface. The brothers are afraid that Joseph will take revenge on them for their hatred of him. Joseph assures them that he harbors no ill will against them. Jacob feels the need to recount to each of his sons how he sees their character, and what this means for their future. Joseph tells his brothers that they will be visited by God and taken out of Egypt back to their land, the land of Israel. He makes them swear that when that happens they will take his remains with them for burial in the family plot purchased near Schechem. Joseph dies and is embalmed and entered in Egypt.

***Gen. 47, 28-33**

[28]Jacob lived seventeen years in the land of Egypt, so that the span of Jacob's life came to one hundred and forty-seven years. [29]And when the time approached for Israel to die, he summoned his son Joseph and said to him, "Do me this favor, place your hand under my thigh as a pledge of your steadfast loyalty: please do not bury me in Egypt. [30]When I lie down with my fathers, take me up from Egypt and bury me in their burial-place." He replied, "I will do as you have spoken." [31]And he said, "Swear to me." And he swore to him. Then Israel bowed at the head of the bed.

This week we finish reading the book of Genesis. Jacob has a sense of his impending death. He calls his son Joseph, in order to make him swear that he will see to it that Jacob is buried in the Land of Israel and not in Egypt (**Gen. 47, 29-31**). There are many interpretations and Midrashim on these verses which relate to the gaps and unclarities of the words. For example, why was Joseph the one trusted with this task, why did Jacob not call his eldest? Joseph was the one who had the ability to get the task done (cf. **Gen. R. 96:5**). Why was Jacob set against being buried in Egypt? Some say that it has to do with his foreseeing the plagues and knowing that his body would be especially ravaged by lice, others with his fear that he might become an object of worship, since he knew that the Egyptians venerated the dead (ibid. cont.).

In the end Joseph agrees and swears to Jacob that he will make sure that he is buried in the land of Israel, "Then Israel bowed at the head of the bed" (**Gen. 47:31**). This reaction is surprising. Why does Jacob, Israel, bow down? I wish to relate three different interpretations of Israel's act.

The first sees the bowing as a form of acknowledging the presence of God. As in many places in the Bible, bowing down is a reaction to the Divine presence. Since Joseph had sworn, presumably in the name of the Lord, God's presence filled the room, and Jacob bowed to the Shekhina, the Divine Presence that was in front of him (**Tanhuma va-yechi, 3,3**). This understanding is part of a larger conception that the Shekhina is at the head of the bed upon which a dying person lies. But, in this instance, the sworn intent to fulfill the wish of a dying parent creates a divine moment. This is, perhaps, the only time in the whole cycle of Jacob's life that there is no deceit, a promise is kept. Israel is grateful to God for Joseph's honor and obedience. He bows to God, thanking God for kept promises.

The second version of Jacob's action is found in the Talmud (**Megillah 16b**). Joseph's brothers bow down to him (**Gen. 50, 18**), and R. Benjamin bar Yefet says in the name

of R. Elazar that this is an illustration of the popular saying: "a fox in its hour, bow down to it." But, the Talmud objects to applying this saying in this case. How can you say that Joseph is somehow inferior to his brothers? It is proper that they pay him homage. Rather, the Talmud says, the saying applies to our verse, Israel bows down to Joseph because he swears to carry out Israel's request. This is a case of the superior, Israel, bowing down to the fox, Joseph. In this view, Israel is acknowledging his dependence on his child, and it is not a happy sign. It is a difficult situation when parents feel that they owe homage to a child because they are feeble and unable to take care of things themselves. There is a certain decline in the ideal relationship based on respect for parents. Israel's bowing here is not a sign of gratitude but, as in the popular saying quoted, a sign of resignation to reality.

The third interpretation goes in another direction altogether. It harkens back to the early days of Jacob's first marriage to Leah, which was based on trickery and deceit. "R. Hanin in the name of R. Shemuel b. Yitzhak says that when our ancestor Jacob saw that Leah had tricked her sister, he thought about divorcing her. But, when God granted her children, Jacob thought "how can I divorce their mother?" Now, he finally admitted (his mistake in being angry at Leah), as it says 'Then Israel bowed at the head of the bed', and what does the head of the bed represent for our ancestor Jacob? Only, Leah" (**Gen. R. 71, 2**).

According to this view, Jacob's bow is meant to correct a life-long hurt, to make up for uncalled for anger and resentment against Leah, who loved Jacob very much and was truly loyal and faithful to him. In this view, Jacob cannot end his life without "bowing down" to his wife Leah and publicly acknowledge the honor and respect which was her due, but which he had withheld from her for so long. It is a poignant scene filled with remorse, but with the promise of reconciliation.

Our rich Midrashic tradition preserves three thoughts about how Israel ends his life: with gratitude to God that his children will carry out his wishes, with resignation to the reality of dependence, with acts of making amends for wrongs done to others.

***Gen. 48, 16**
The Angel who has redeemed me from all harm - Bless the lads. In them may my name be recalled, And the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac, And may they be teeming multitudes upon the earth.

Joseph takes his two sons to visit their grandfather before he dies. Jacob then blesses the boys:

"And Jacob said to Joseph, "El Shaddai appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan, and He blessed me, and said to me, 'I will make you fertile and numerous, making of you a community of peoples ["li-kehal amim"]; and I will assign this land to your offspring to come for an everlasting possession.' Now, your two sons, who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt, shall be mine ["lee heym"]; Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine no less than Reuben and Simeon…. The Angel who has redeemed me from all harm - Bless the lads. In them may my name be recalled, And the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac, And may they be teeming multitudes upon the earth." (**Gen. 48, 3-5, 16**)

It is clear from the general context and wording of these verses that Jacob considers Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, to be his sons. This is more than just a normal grandfatherly doting on grandsons. The special warm feeling we have towards our grandchildren seems to be a bit extreme here, he sees them as his very own sons. This is the force of the two very short Hebrew words "lee heym", they "shall be mine". Furthermore, Jacob puts his grandsons into the framework of the blessing that he received from God, namely, they are part of the nation that God promised Jacob, just as surely as are his own twelve sons. Not only that, but Jacob himself blesses these two boys by way of the same angel that blessed him, and in the same context of the covenant with Abraham and Isaac. Indeed, it is THIS blessing with which we bless children in synagogue context until this very day, e.g. on Simhat Torah.

Jacob seems to be overly possessive. One Midrash hints at Jacob's excess by saying that Jacob lies to Joseph about what El Shaddai told him. Here Jacob tells Joseph that El Shaddai told him that he will be "a community of peoples ["li-kehal amim"]", but, when we look at what was actually said we see that it was: "a nation, yea a community of nations ["goy ve-kehal goyim"]" (Gen. **35, 11).** It is precisely the difference between these two which accounts for Jacob's co-opting his grandsons. This Midrash explains: "Jacob said [to himself] "when God said that thing I had 11 tribes, and when Benjamin was born, I thought the part about an assembly of nations had come to pass." (**Pesikta Rabbati 3**) Jacob still does not think that the prophecy of being a nation has come to pass. When he sees his two grandsons, born in Egypt and presumably quite comfortable and integrated there, Jacob decides that the prophecy about being a nation could be fulfilled, but they have to be "his", that is totally identified with Israel, the sons of Jacob.

Now, this is an interesting Midrash because it implies that Israel can only be a nation when it includes those who are marginal and sees them as "ours". Indeed, another Midrash goes even further and it is astonishing how far it goes. This Midrash is on the order of sacrifices for the holiday of Sukkot. The unique thing about these sacrifices is that the number of cattle sacrificed each day of the holiday is diminished by one. The first day 13, the second day 12, and so on. The total is 70. This Midrash says that this is to hint that the 70 nations of the world may be diminished because of events in history, particularly if they are enemies of Israel. But, the same sacrificial rules of Sukkot specify that each day 14 sheep are sacrificed. That number is the same and does not change. This is, say our Midrash: "to hint at the 14 sons of Jacob"! They do not become diminished, just as they were 14 when they were ordained as a nation, so they shall continue forever. The total of these sacrifices is 98, to show that when Israel is inclusive to all of its members then the 98 curses in Leviticus will be atoned for. (**Midrash Aggadahh, Buber, Num. 28, 26**)

This Midrash takes literally the idea that the grandsons are made part of the nation, and are equal to all others. Furthermore, their inclusion on an equal footing to all the rest of Israel is the key to Israel's survival of its own iniquity. It is a kind of inclusion which is premised on being a nation, IN ADDITION, to being an assembly of tribes. The sons of Jacob are twelve different tribes, each with its traditions and customs. But, they can only become a nation, when there is something that brings them together. This something is above and beyond each tribe, its is common and accepted, and this can be applied even to new elements coming in from the outside. It seems clear that the inference is to the Torah, and the need to leave Egypt so that

the force that could make for the assembly of nations, while remaining that, could ALSO at the same time be a nation. TTT 72 B and HA and U and P and M

***Gen. 48, 20**
So he blessed them ("va-yevarkheim") that day, saying, "By you ("bekhah") shall Israel invoke blessings, saying: God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh

There is a Jewish custom of producing an "ethical will" before death. This is both a summing up of central wisdom which the dying person has gleaned from life, and a statement of the dying persons' hopes for the future of their children. There are two scenes in parashat va-Yehi where Jacob, before his death, talks to future generations in a kind of "ethical will".

One is when Joseph brings his children, Ephraim and Menasseh to his dying father. He blesses them, and in doing so reverses his hands, putting his right hand on the head of the younger child. What is interesting is that in this episode Jacob says: "So he blessed them ("va-yevarkheim") that day, saying, "By you ("bekhah") shall Israel invoke blessings, saying: God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh." (**Gen. 48, 20**) The English seems smooth, but the Hebrew presents difficulties. Three people are standing before Jacob, Joseph and his two sons. So the difficulty is to whom are the pronouns referring? "So he blessed them" ("va-yevarkheim"), presumably refers only to the two sons, but maybe Joseph is somehow included in this blessing? Even more puzzling is the switch to the singular, "By you ("bekhah") shall Israel invoke blessings". The word "bekhah" is singular, a subtlety which the English conceals rather than reveals. If the idea is that Israel, i.e. Jews, will bless their children by invoking the names of Ephraim and Menasseh, then why does the verse not use the plural?

Indeed, Ramban, solves both of these problems in an elegant way. He interprets the singular "bekhah" as referring to Joseph! That is, Jews will bless their children using the example of your (singular), Joseph's, offspring. In this manner all the three standing before Jacob are the source of blessing which will reverberate down through Jewish history. Joseph is remembered through the mentioning of his sons. Joseph made his name in exile, and he was able to save his family from starvation, from physical destruction, by bringing them into exile. Yet, he knew that the future of the people was to return to Israel, and that the land would be inherited by his children, the names which we invoke to bless our children.

***Gen. 49, 5-7**
"Simeon and Levi are a pair; Their weapons are tools of lawlessness. Let not my person be included in their council, Let not my being be counted in their assembly. For when angry they slay men, And when pleased they maim oxen. Cursed be their anger so fierce, And their wrath so relentless. I will divide them in Jacob, Scatter them in Israel."
There is a second scene in which Jacob tells all of his children what "will befall them" in the future. This is more like an ethical will in the sense that it discusses the lessons to be learned from each child's behavior, and Jacob's judgment of it. Jacob not only praises, but also scolds. As for Shimon and Levi, who killed the people of Shechem (**cf. Gen. 34**), Jacob says: "Simeon and Levi are a pair; Their weapons are tools of lawlessness. Let not my person be included in their council, Let not my being be counted in their assembly. For when angry they slay men, And when pleased they

maim oxen. Cursed be their anger so fierce, And their wrath so relentless. I will divide them in Jacob, Scatter them in Israel." (**Gen. 49, 5-7**).

The above translation of Jacob's opprobrium to Shimon and Levi makes it clear that Jacob is condemning their act of deception and murder. Indeed, in the story itself Jacob reproves them saying that they have brought trouble on him and exposing the whole family to retribution by the other inhabitants of the land (**34, 30**). Indeed, the narrator of Genesis tells us that it was only because of fear of the Lord that the Canaanites did not pursue Jacob and his family (**35, 5**). In this verse there is another subtle reprimand for Shimon and Levi. Their action of mass murder revealed a LACK of fear of the Lord. The Canaanites, on the other hand, exhibited fear of the Lord, they could not see themselves committing mass murder.

However, one of the fascinating tensions in Jewish exegesis is the tension between those who always find a positive slant on every deed and those who condemn some deeds outright. Abraham Ibn Ezra's comment on these verses reveals to us that R. Aharon, who is identified with a Gaon who was head of Pumbeditha yeshiva and was the teacher of Hai Gaon, interprets the verses in a positive fashion. Aharon's exegesis of the Hebrew words leads him to have Jacob saying that he ALWAYS wants to be in their council, because they did a proper and heroic deed.

Ibn Ezra does not hold back on his scorn for this view. It is, he says, the opposite of what the verses mean. Jacob has already scorned them (**cf. 34, 30; 35, 5**). The language which Jacob uses, e. g. "tools of lawlessness" clearly shows disdain. Ibn Ezra says that such attempts to justify immoral deeds are "cold interpretations" ("peirushim karim"). This is his poetic but simple way to say that they are hard to accept. That is rather than warming the heart, these interpretations cause the heart to freeze over. Ibn Ezra closes this comment about the unacceptability of such interpretations by quoting the very verse: "Let not my person be included in their council". May I never be identified with such apology for murderous actions. TTT 73 M and U

This same tension is very much in evidence today in Israel. It shadows us in daily occurrences. May we learn from the forthright morality of Ibn Ezra not to be afraid to condemn immoral deeds, no matter who has done them and no matter what high ideals they claim justify what they have done.

Much of Jacob/Israel's last words to his sons are very hard to understand, and this difficult Hebrew text has been expounded in many different ways in order to make sense of it. When Jacob speaks to Shimon and Levi, he reminds them of their fanatical devotion to the family honor of their sister, Dinah. He criticizes their extremism, which led to their becoming murderers.

He clearly states that his soul wishes no part of their clan ("sodam"), and there is no honor at all in what they did: "for in their fanaticism ("apam") they killed people, in their wanton extremism (bi-retzonam) they castrated a bull ("`ikru shor") (**Gen. 49, 6a**). The last phrase is particularly difficult to explain. Why is a bull mentioned at all? The usual explanation is that this phrase is to be understood in parallelism to the first, and thus the bull is really a metaphorical way of referring to people, who

Shimon and Levi killed, and thus they have no progeny, just as a castrated bull would have no progeny.

In **Gen. R. 98:5**, R. Honiya and R. Yirmiyah in the name of R. Ahiya bar Abba interpret this phrase in a way which, once again, shows the audacity and creativity of Ḥazal. They take the word "shor" which literally means bull, and understand it as if it was vocalized "shur(ah)", a wall or a continuing line. Their comment is: "in order to satisfy your evil impulses, you uprooted a whole line of converts".

What a remarkable interpretation! R. Ahiya has Jacob repudiating Shimon and Levi for destroying a potential population of converts! He criticizes their short-sightedness, and implies that the story of Dinah's marriage to Shechem could have had another ending, if they had not acted so extremely. Jacob, in this midrash, is raising the possibility that the circumcision of all of the Shechemites might have led to a town of converts to Judaism. They had made the first step, why should they not be believed and trusted? Shimon and Levi's attack was heinous not only because of the act itself, but also because it was based on lack of faith in the act of conversion that the Shechemites had taken upon themselves. TTT 74 M and U and P

The implication of the midrash, "a whole line of converts", is that not only would they have become a positive addition to the Jewish people, but that their example might have inspired other cities to do the same. There are rabbis today who wish to discourage those Jews who are mistrustful of converts, and they wish to encourage conversion. This midrash speaks to us today, both in the U. S. where the goal of conversion should be high on our list of priorities, and in Israel, where the official conversion centers have all stopped functioning because of rabbinic stringincies and fear.

***Gen. 49, 14-15**
Issachar is a strong-boned ass, Crouching among the sheepfolds. When he saw how good was security, And how pleasant was the country, He bent his shoulder to the burden, And became a toiling serf

Here are Jacob's words to Issachar: "Issachar is a strong-boned ass, Crouching among the sheepfolds. When he saw how good was security, And how pleasant was the country, He bent his shoulder to the burden, And became a toiling serf." (**Gen. 49, 14-15**).

On the face of it this does not look too complimentary. What Jewish parent would say "my son is a laborer, really works like a donkey"? True, the virtue of hard work is a Jewish value, and physical labor is praised in our tradition. Still, the language here does not seem to bear the connotation of praise. In particular, the tradition which I mentioned, about the Issacharites as the bearers of Torah and the suppliers of sages to the Sanhedrin, does not seem to fit these words at all!

Indeed, the medieval commentaries, with the exception of Rashi, ignore the midrashic tradition and interpret Jacob's words into the reality of the tribe of Issachar as they gleaned it from the Biblical text. **Rashbam**, for example, understands the image of the strong-boned ass to imply that Issacharites are stay at home tillers of the soil. They do not want to sail the seas in search of adventure, as their fellow

Zebulun. (**on v. 14**) **Ibn Ezra** interprets verse 15 as telling us that Issachar, when he saw how good his land was for farming, gave all of his physical effort into tilling the soil, until he was like a serf. He even paid off the kings of Israel to avoid the draft so that they would not have to leave their plowing and tilling even in times of war; and they paid off foreign kings so that they would not make war on them. (**on v. 15**) **Rashi**, on the other hand, continues the Midrashic tradition of Issachar as the bearers of Torah, and following **Gen. R. 98, 12** interprets the words as working in the vineyard of the Lord, etc.

But, still the very image of Issachar as an ass is disturbing to those who cherish the image of Issachar as sage. How does this tradition interpret the words? The context which reveals an answer to this question is surprising. The Talmud discusses the thorny question of children who turn out bad, children whose own parents are driven to disown them. How is it that such untoward children are born? One suggestion is that there was some moral flaw at the moment of conception. It is this moral flaw which causes the child to become morally flawed. Examples are given: a hated wife, intercourse during intoxication, promiscuity, or a brazen woman. (**Nedarim 20b**)

The Talmud rejects this suggestion: "did not R. Shemuel bar Nahmani say in the name of R. Yonatan: 'One who is summoned to his marital duty by his wife will beget children such as were not to be found even in the generation of Moses?'" In other words, a brazen wife demanding her conjugal rights is not only NOT a cause of a morally flawed person, but, on the contrary, that union produces exceptional children, children who are sages. One example brought to prove this statement is our verse and the verse from Chronicles (**I Chron. 12, 33)** which shows that the Issacharites were great Torah scholars.

This Talmudic passage assumes that we understand that our verse "Issachar is a strong-boned ass" implies that Issachar was conceived as a result of Leah's demands on Jacob. For that piece of the puzzle we need to see the Talmudic passage in **Niddah 31a**. There the Hebrew words of our verse "yissachar hamor garem" are read in a strikingly creative way. The Hebrew word "garem" which we have translated until now as "strong-boned" could be read as the word "garam", that is, "was the cause of".

This Talmudic passage reads the verse that tells of Issachar's conception: "When Jacob came home from the field in the evening, Leah went out to meet him and said, "You are to sleep with me, for I have hired you with my son's mandrakes." And he lay with her that night." (**Gen. 30, 16**) Now the passage seems to clearly tell of a demanding woman, but R. Yohanan interprets our verse as a recounting of that night. He reads our verse in the following way: "a donkey [ass] caused Issachar to be born."

This astonishing Midrashic trip is completed when we realize that R. Yohanan's saying in the Talmud is based upon the interpretation found in Genesis Rabbah. There we read: "A donkey caused him [Issachar] to be born, how is that so? How did Leah know that Jacob had returned from the field? The donkey brayed as he returned, and when she heard the bray "Leah went out to meet him…"."

So, in the end, Issachar, is not only a sage and guardian of Torah, but his unique and splendid personality stems from his mother, from the combination of his mother's vigilance, strong will, and commitment to raising her children to be servants of God.

***Gen. 49, 28**
All these were the tribes of Israel, twelve in number, and this is what their father said to them ["va-yevareykh otam ish asher ke-virkhato beyreykh otam"] as he bade them farewell, addressing to each a parting word appropriate to him.

Since some of Jacob's words seem to be critical and reproving, describing them as "blessings" is problematic. However, at the end of the passage after each one hears the words of Jacob addressed to him the Torah tells us: "All these were the tribes of Israel, twelve in number, and this is what their father said to them ["va-yevareykh otam ish asher ke-virkhato beyreykh otam"] as he bade them farewell, addressing to each a parting word appropriate to him." (**Gen. 49, 28**) Thus, many people assume that these are words of blessing.

Clearly the JPS translation here wants to avoid using the word "blessing", even though the Hebrew says it clearly. The Hebrew phrase "va-yevareykh otam ish asher ke-virkhato beyreykh otam" is literally "he blessed them each one according to his own blessing, which he blessed him". The word blessing, "beyreykh" is used three times in a short phrase. This is a far cry from "as he bade them farewell, addressing to each a parting word appropriate to him".

Mishel Schlesinger, a rabbinic intern from Schechter at my synagogue, suggested that this verse shows a progression of conception about blessings being passed on from generation to generation. Up to this point the blessing passed on from father to son had been a point of contention. The blessing was a device that indicated who was included and who was excluded. Jacob changes the rules and blesses each son, irrespective of his mother's status, and irrespective of the child's actions with his own blessing. A new principle of inclusiveness in the nation of Israel is established.

Indeed, Ramban and most of the tradition, works hard to explain the number 12 here, when Joseph is not one of them, but is replaced by his sons! Ramban points out that the number 12 remains, but that other tribes may be counted as part of the original. Furthermore, once one has been counted as part of the 12, the actual number increases, but still all of the resources associated with being part of the original 12 apply! (**Ramban on Deut. 33, 6**)

The phrase "he blessed them each one according to his own blessing, which he blessed him" presents other exegetical difficulties. The repetition of the fact that he blessed them bothers the rabbis. One approach sees this as a general blessing for all of them. Once each one had their own blessing, now Jacob adds a general blessing which is equal for all of them. His blessing is that the qualities and talents of each one separately be made available to them all. This is a blessing which, after recognizing the uniqueness of each son, acknowledges that each quality and each talent can be used by all the others. (cf. Gen**. R. 99, 4**)

This idea has a fascinating spin which connects our verse with the verse in the **Song of Songs 4, 7** "Every part of you is fair, my darling, There is no blemish in you". This

verse refers to the tribes. But, our Midrash asks, since some of the blessings seem to be disapproval, for example Reuven, Shimon and Levi, so how can EVERY part be fair? Our Midrash states that: "even though he reproached the older tribes and blessed the younger ones, in the end, he returned and blessed them all with one blessing… blessing them that they cultivate each other and give sustenance to each other." (**Num. R. 13, 8**)

Another approach sees the repetition of the word blessing in our verse as a sign that Jacob's approach of inclusiveness, mutual aid, and egalitarianism will only be a blessing if carried on. The final use of the word blessing indicates this. (**cf. Sekhel Tov on our verse**) Indeed, one Midrash points out that the leadership of each generation continued the process of blessing the nation both individually and as a whole from the point that the previous generation had stopped: "From the word that Jacob ended with, "ve-zot" (our verse), Moses begins his blessing, and from the word that Moses ended with, "ashrekha", (cf. Deut. 33), David begins his blessing… (**cf. Ps. 1**)". (**Pitron Torah, p. 324, ed. Ephraim E. Auerbach**)

There is no automatic continuation of blessing from one generation to the next. It is the task of the leaders of each generation to allow for each individual Jew to express and cultivate their qualities and talents, and to make sure that each ones individual blessing be available to all. Only in this way will the nature of the blessings continue to flow.

***Gen. 50, 16-17**
15When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrong that we did him!" 16So they sent this message to Joseph, "Before his death your father left this instruction: 17So shall you say to Joseph, 'Forgive, I urge you, the offense and guilt of your brothers who treated you so harshly.' Therefore, please forgive the offense of the servants of the God of your father." And Joseph was in tears as they spoke to him.

One of the questions that has always troubled me the most about the Joseph stories is why did Joseph not notify his father that he was alive and well after having been rescued from jail and made a high official in Egypt. Even E. T. did everything in his power to call home, why not Joseph? One possible answer can be found in the ending of Genesis, in this week's parasha. Joseph's brothers say to him that their father, before he died, ordered him to forgive them and forbear their sin against him (**Gen. 50, 16-17**). The only problem is that such a request is not found except in the brothers recounting of it. Did Jacob really make such a request?

Seforno seems to think that he really did say those words to the brothers. Seforno thinks that Jacob had no suspicion that Joseph would in fact take revenge on his brothers, but in case they were living in fear that he would, they should tell him not to. Seforno interprets the words "before his death" to mean that he told them as he was dying, and the brothers had no time to transmit this message to Joseph until this point, as they were busy with the burial etc.

On the other hand, **Ramban** (**on 45, 27**) clearly thinks that the brothers never told Jacob that they had sold Joseph. They were afraid that he would be angry and curse them all for their immoral deeds, as he did with Reuven, Shimon and Levi (**49, 3-7**).

As for Joseph, Ramban says: "Joseph in his good morality, did not want to tell him". Ramban ascribes to Joseph a change of heart. At the beginning of the story, Joseph would tell his father everything bad that his brothers did (**37, 2**). Joseph changes to "good morality", and refuses to tell on his brothers. Ramban infers from this that the brothers made up this story because of their fear of Joseph's reprisals. They did not know of Joseph's change of heart, and did not know that he intended no harm to them. "They were not in danger, and did not have to make up things", concludes Ramban. From this understanding, we can infer that Joseph did not call home, so that he would not have to tell how he got to be where he was. He knew that events would bring them together again, and he waited for God's hand.

The Midrash also assumes that the brothers are making up Jacob's request. The Midrash is bothered by why the Torah would reveal such trickery on the part of the brothers. Furthermore, Joseph, a man of great insight and intuition, should have known that this was a phony story. Why does he accept their story so easily? The Midrash (**Devarim Rabbah 5:15**) sees this whole episode as written in the Torah for a specific moral lesson. "Reish Lakish says, "how great is peace, for the Torah writes down lies in order to have peace between Joseph and his brothers.... we find that Jacob made no such request, rather the Torah writes these lies to teach us the paths of peace". Sometimes in order to have peaceful relationships, both sides have to accept as facts things which are made up.

***Gen. 50, 15-21**
Have no fear! Am I a substitute for God? Besides, although you intended me harm, God intended it for good, so as to bring about the present result--the survival of many people. And so, fear not. I will sustain you and your children.

Joseph's brothers beg him not to be vengeful for all the evil they did to him. Joseph replies that God has arranged his whole life in order to be able to save them: "Have no fear! Am I a substitute for God? Besides, although you intended me harm, God intended it for good, so as to bring about the present result--the survival of many people. And so, fear not. I will sustain you and your children." (**Gen. 50, 15-21**)

I see this statement of Joseph's as his sudden realization and interpretation of the meaning of his dreams in **Genesis chap. 37**. Note that Joseph, the great interpreter of dreams, does not comment on his own dreams. Rather his brothers interpret them: that he will rule over them, and that Jacob and Rachel and they will bow down to him. Their understanding causes more enmity against Joseph. What is strange is that the pair of Joseph's dreams are unlike the other two pairs of dreams in the Joseph sequence. All the pairs of dreams deal with the same thing, they are essentially one dream about one subject. They are all based on some concrete aspect of reality in the dreamer's life, with the dreamer appearing in them doing what he normally does. But, as Rashi says, every dream has some nonsense in it. The two servants of Pharoah (**Gen. 40, 8ff**.) see themselves doing their jobs. Pharoah sees himself (**Gen. 41, 1ff**.) doing his job. Around these realities of their lives are other, symbolic elements, which Joseph interprets as the "meaning" of the dreams.

Joseph's dreams are unusual (**Gen. 37, 5ff**.), in that they do not reflect the reality of his, or his brothers' lives. Jacob and his sons are herders, indeed, that is their claim to fame in Egypt (**Gen. 46, 32**). They are not agriculturists. Yet Joseph dreams that they

are binding sheaves in a field! His second dream seems totally unrealistic, as sun, moon and stars bow to Joseph. Indeed, the fact that the official and 'correct' interpretation of the other pairs of dreams is left up to Joseph, leads us to think that the brothers' interpretation might be wrong. But when does Joseph interpret his own dreams? He is silent in the face of his brothers' assertion that Joseph is dreaming of "lording" it over them.

I suggest that it is only at the end of the story, when Joseph realizes that his job as the mashbir, the provider of wheat to all the world, is what is fortold in his dream of the sheaves. As to the second dream, he realizes that God sent him to save Israel, the stars. The stars represent Israel as formulated in God's promise to Abraham (**cf. Gen. 15, 5-6**). Thus, the fact that the whole constellation of sun, moon and stars is present in the dream, even though Rachel is dead, signifies that Joseph is destined to save Israel. He will be the one, through his saving of the grain of Egypt, to enable Israel to survive. The promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob will continue because of God's sending Joseph to Egypt.

Apparently, when Joseph first saw his brothers bowing down to him in Egypt he remembered their interpretation of his dreams, and he accepted it and "lorded" it over them (**Gen. 42, 9**). But, as time goes on, he begins to realize that there is more to the dreams than the external act of bowing down. He slowly begins to realize that his rising to his position of influence in Egypt served much greater purposes than those of revenge within the family. The dream that was thought to be personal, satisfying personal needs, turned out to have far reaching implications that sustained the whole Jewish nation. Many times dreams which seem to fulfill only personal needs and goals turn out to be meaningful for a much wider audience. It is an insight to be able to see the deeper picture. Joseph's brothers could not see beyond their vision of the dream, and thus worry about his "lording" it over them. Joseph sees that this aspect of the dream is <u>not</u> the main point.

This lesson from the parasha is appropriate to the celebration of 25 years of Magen Avraham. The dream of the founders was to have a congregation in which they and their families would feel comfortable. It was, for many of them, an attempt to recreate the positive Jewish community and religious experiences they had experienced as children and young adults in Conservative congregations in the United States. For many years, this was the dream that we aspired to. I even introduced customs from my childhood congregation, Tifereth Israel of Lincoln, Nebraska, such as teaching Bar/Bat Mitzvah children to lead the services.

But, today, after 25 years, it is more and more clear to me that our personal dream has much wider implications for the Jewish character of Israeli society. Magen Avraham is a vivid example of a Jewish community which lives according to the beliefs of pluralism, respect for others, social responsibility, egalitarianism, openness to the world, and compassion <u>together with</u> commitment to Jewish tradition and practice. This example has a positive effect on the whole town of Omer and its surroundings. There are many people who gain hope for the future of Judaism by observing Magen Avraham from the outside.

But, the major factor in the process of expanding the scope of the dream is the active participation of those Israelis who have themselves become dreamers. Their part in

the return of the Jewish people to Zion has expanded to include being active in a spiritual vision: "When the Lord restores the fortunes of Zion, we will do it as ins" (**Ps. 126, 1**) They have joined Magen Avraham and have added their own traditions and hopes to the life of the congregation. By doing this they have caused the dream to expand, and they have made the dream resonate to the promise of Jewish belief that we become a nation which chooses life and goodness. More and more Magen Avraham is being formed, following the words of Joseph, as an institution which inspires goodness, aids spiritual survival for many people, and gives sustaining meaning to the phrase "Jewish life in a Jewish State." May we continue to fulfill the dream and the promise. Amen.