

Shavua Tov

Weekly  Parsha

A Rood Awakening! Torah Commentary
By Glenn McWilliams

Torah Portion: *Vayetze* **וַיֵּצֵא** “And He Went Out”

Jacob left Beer-sheba and headed toward Charan

Vayetze Ya'akov mi-Be'er Shava vayelech Charanah

Scripture for study: *Bereshit (Genesis) 28:10 – 32:2*

If the Torah is an inspired writing, then we must recognize that there are no unnecessary words contained within it. Therefore, when we encounter what appear to be redundant or superfluous words in the Torah, we must search for the Author’s reason for including such words in the narrative. Such is the case with the opening sentence of this week’s Torah portion.

“And Jacob went out from Beersheba, and went toward Haran.” (Genesis 28:10)

As we read this portion, we realize that there is no overt reason given for the inclusion of the apparently superfluous detail that Jacob left from Beersheba as he journeyed to Haran. It would have been sufficient for the telling of the story to simply and economically state that Jacob went to Haran. Thus we are left with the question as to why the Torah tells us that Jacob left Beersheba. Geographically, Beersheba is in the wilderness of the Negev and west of the Dead Sea, in the land of Gerar.

The sages teach that the reason the Torah mentions the place of departure is because any time a righteous person lives in a town, he is its magnificence and its glory. The tzadik’sⁱ departure from the town likewise impacts the town. Rashi wrote,

“It need only have written, ‘And Jacob went to Haran.’ Why does it mention his departure? But it tells us that the departure of a righteous person from a place makes an impression, for at the time that a righteous person is in a city, he is its magnificence; he is its splendor; he is its grandeur. Once he has departed from there, its magnificence has gone away; its splendor has gone away; its grandeur has gone away. Similarly this is

implied by 'And she departed from the place [where she was],' which is said in the story of Naomi and Ruth."ⁱⁱ

The Scriptures likewise support this thought.

"When it goeth well with the righteous, the city rejoiceth." (Proverbs 11:10)

"Blessings are upon the head of the just: but violence covereth the mouth of the wicked." (Proverbs 10:6)

"The mouth of a righteous man is a well of life: but violence covereth the mouth of the wicked." (Proverbs 10:11)

"The labor of the righteous tendeth to life: the fruit of the wicked to sin." (Proverbs 10:16)

"The tongue of the just is as choice silver: the heart of the wicked is little worth. The lips of the righteous feed many: but fools die for want of wisdom." (Proverbs 10:20-21)

"The mouth of the just bringeth forth wisdom: but the froward tongue shall be cut out. The lips of the righteous know what is acceptable: but the mouth of the wicked speaketh frowardness." (Proverbs 10:31-32)

"The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life; and he that winneth souls is wise." (Proverbs 11:30)

Here we see many of the blessings that a tzadik brings with him to wherever he dwells. We may recall the impact of the tzadikim upon their cities in two other stories recorded for us in the Torah. First let us recall Abraham's dialogue with the Holy One, who revealed His intention to judge the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. In this wonderful example of the ministry of intercession, Abraham pleads for the sparing of the cities for the sake of the tzadikim living within them.

"And Abraham drew near, and said, Wilt thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked? Peradventure there be fifty righteous within the city: wilt thou also destroy and not spare the place for the fifty righteous that are therein?" (Genesis 18:23-24)

Abraham continues to plead as YHWH concedes finally to spare the city if there were to be ten tzadikim found there.

"And he said, Oh let not the master be angry, and I will speak yet but this once: Peradventure ten shall be found there. And he said, I will not destroy it for the ten's sake." (Genesis 18:32)

Another somewhat subtle reference to the power of the tzadik to protect and bless a city is found in Moses' instructions to the spies who were about to scout out the Promised Land.

"And Moses sent them to spy out the land of Canaan, and said unto them, Get you up this way southward, and go up into the mountain: And see the land, what it is; and the people that dwelleth therein, whether they be strong or weak, few or many; And what the land is that they dwell in, whether it be good or bad; and what cities they be that they dwell in, whether in tents or in strong holds; And what the land is, whether it be fat or lean, whether there be trees therein, or not." (Numbers 13:17-20)

At first glance, this may appear to be merely a geological survey. But the question concerning trees may have a yet deeper meaning. Trees are often used as a metaphor for the tzadikim.

"And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper." (Psalm 1:3)

"But I am like a green olive tree in the house of Elohim: I trust in the mercy of Elohim forever and ever." (Psalm 52:8)

"The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree: he shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon. Those that be planted in the house of YHWH shall flourish in the courts of our Elohim." (Psalm 92:12-13)

Moses' interest in trees may well have been an inquiry as to whether there were any tzadikim in the land of Canaan that may have merited the protection of the Holy One, making the land more difficult to conquer.

Clearly we must consider the impact of the righteous upon their lands, towns, villages, and cities. We must also consider our own impact upon our homes, neighborhoods, and cities. We have all been called as the children of Abraham to be a blessing. We should question ourselves regularly as to what impact we are having in our homes, in our neighborhoods, and in the towns and cities where we live. Are we a positive influence? Are we a light to our small corner of the world? When we leave, is the glory or magnificence of the town diminished by our absence? If we truly desire to be tzadikim, then we must live our faith in such a way that our presence is felt and appreciated. We must become positive forces in our neighborhoods. We should not simply be hiding in a dark, quiet corner of our study. We have been called to be the image of Elohim in the world. This calling has within it two fundamental aspects. The first aspect is that we not be just any image, but that we embody the image of Elohim. The second fundamental aspect of this calling is that we be seen in the world. The Torah is not a calling to asceticism or isolationism. We are not called to perfect ourselves for the sake of ourselves. Rather, we are called to be separate from the world, and yet visible in the world. Our separateness in the world is defined for us by the Torah. As tzadikim we should bring wisdom, light, life, justice, compassion, mercy, righteousness, and peace to the world around us. As tzadikim, we are to embody all of the attributes of YHWH ELOHIM in our homes, neighborhoods, and cities. We are to pray for our neighbors and our communities,

remembering that YHWH hears the prayers of the righteous. By such behaviors we may change our communities, enlarge the reign of Messiah, and leave a legacy of tz'dakah, or righteousness, behind us when we leave.

*"The memory of the just is blessed; but the name of the wicked shall rot."
(Proverbs 10:7)*

While all of this may very well be the reason for the Torah reporting the place of Jacob's departure, I believe that there is yet another reason for the mentioning of Beersheba. Let us take a closer look at the role that Beersheba has played in the lives of the patriarchs as reported thus far. It is in this area that Hagar and Ishmael wandered after they were put out of Abraham's home.

*"And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and took bread, and a bottle of water, and gave it unto Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, and the child, and sent her away: and she departed, and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba."
(Genesis 21:14)*

Near death from exhaustion and dehydration, Hagar and Ishmael were saved by a well that Elohim revealed to them.

"And Elohim opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water; and she went, and filled the bottle with water, and gave the lad drink. And Elohim was with the lad; and he grew, and dwelt in the wilderness, and became an archer." (Genesis 21:19-20)

It was at this same well that Abraham and Abimelech entered into a covenant with each other, promising not to harm one another; and there they also settled a dispute concerning the well that Abraham had dug there. It is from this event that the area takes its name.

"And it came to pass at that time, that Abimelech and Phichol the chief captain of his host spake unto Abraham, saying, Elohim is with thee in all that thou doest: Now therefore swear unto me here by Elohim, that thou wilt not deal falsely with me, nor with my son, nor with my son's son: but according to the kindness that I have done unto thee, thou shalt do unto me, and to the land where thou hast sojourned. And Abraham said, I will swear." (Genesis 21:22-24)

And Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock by themselves. And Abimelech said unto Abraham, What mean these seven ewe lambs which thou hast set by themselves? And he said, For these seven ewe lambs shalt thou take of my hand, that they may be a witness unto me, that I have digged this well. Wherefore he called that place Beersheba; because there swear both of them." (Genesis 21:28-31)

The name Beersheba is constructed from two different Hebrew words: "beer" (Bet, Aleph, Resh), which means "well" or "spring," and "sheva" (Shin, Vet, Ayin), which means "seven." It should be noted here, however, that the word "sheva" is similar to the word "shvu'a" (Shin, Vet, Vav, Ayin, Hey), which means "oath." So we may understand Beersheba to mean either

“The Well of Seven,” referring to the seven ewe lambs, or as “The Well of the Oath,” referring to the oaths sworn by Abimelech and Abraham.

We should also note that there is a sense of presence in this place. In the first story, we read that Elohim was with Ishmael and Hagar, and that their lives were spared by divine intervention. In the second story it is Abimelech and Phichol that recognize and declare the presence of the Holy One with Abraham and all that he does, and therefore they desire to make covenant with Abraham, desiring to continue the blessing of His presence. Again let us remember the lesson learned above concerning the impact of a tzadik upon the area where he dwells. The Torah also tells us that it was at Beersheba that Abraham planted a grove.

“And Abraham planted a grove in Beersheba, and called there on the name of YHWH, the everlasting Elohim.” (Genesis 21:33)

This story took place shortly after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The Hebrew word translated here as “grove” is the word “eshel” (**Aleph, Shin, Lamed**). There is great debate as to what this word means. Some argue that it is indeed an actual orchard or grove of trees planted by Abraham so that he could provide fresh fruits and shade to visitors. Others claim that Abraham built an inn to receive visitors, and that the word “eshel” is merely an acronym from the first letters of the words “eating” (**achilah-Aleph**, Kaf, Yud, Lamed, Hey), “drinking” (**sh’tiyah-Shin**, Tav, Yud, Hey) and “lodging” (**linah-Lamed**, Yud, Nun, Hey).ⁱⁱⁱ Here once again we see the tzadik being a blessing in the place of his dwelling. Clearly the blessing experienced and shared by the tzadik, in this case Abraham, was due to the unique relationship between the tzadik and the presence of the Holy One. It was the clear blessings of YHWH upon Abraham that caused Abimelech to recognize the presence of YHWH with Abraham.

By telling us that Jacob left Beersheba, the Torah is telling us that Jacob is leaving the place where the presence and blessings of YHWH have been known to be experienced. Clearly it is understood by Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Hagar, Ishmael, and even Abimelech that YHWH is present in Beersheba. Now, with the blessing of his father, and yet under duress from the threats of his brother, Jacob is exiled from this protected place of life and blessing, and headed back to the land of his mother. Jacob does not journey with ten camels full of treasures, as Abraham’s servant did, but alone with only his staff in hand. Jacob confessed this reality in his prayer of thanks given on his return journey.

“I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies, and of all the truth, which thou hast shewed unto thy servant; for with my staff I passed over this Jordan; and now I am become two bands.” (Genesis 32:10)

So it is we see a picture of a very vulnerable Jacob leaving his family and the place of blessing, and heading into the wilderness. It is this reality that adds to the sense of shock and awe that Jacob feels when he dreams this revelatory dream.

“And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of Elohim ascending and descending on it. And, behold, YHWH stood above it, and said, I am YHWH ELOHIM of Abraham thy

father, and the Elohim of Isaac: the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it and to thy seed; And thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and thou shalt spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south, and in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed. And behold I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest, and will bring thee again into this land; for I will not leave thee until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of.” (Genesis 28:12-15)

First of all, let us look at the place where this dream took place. There is nothing in the text itself that tells us specifically where this dream occurred. We only know that it was somewhere between Beersheba and Haran. What route Jacob walked is not illuminated, but based upon the repetition of the phrase “the place,” which occurs three times in verse 11, the sages make a connection with the same phrase as it is found in the story of the binding of Isaac on Mount Moriah.

“And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and clave the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up and went unto the place Elohim had told him. Then on the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off... And they came to the place which Elohim had told him of...” (Genesis 22:3-4, 9)

“And he [Jacob] came into the place and tarried there all night, because the sun was set; and he took of the stones of the place, and put them for his pillows, and lay down in the place to sleep.” (Genesis 28:11)

By this similarity of expression, the sages teach that the place of Jacob’s dream was none other than Mount Moriah, the very place where his father was offered up to YHWH. One may even suggest that these very stones were once the altar stones upon which Isaac was laid.

But more important than the place of the dream is the meaning of this dream. As usual, there are varying interpretations of Jacob’s dream. I will share several of them with you.

“The ladder alludes to Sinai, since the words ‘Sinai’ and ‘Sulam’ [ladder] both have the numerical value of 130; the angels represent Moses and Aaron; and God stood atop the ladder just as He stood atop Mount Sinai to give the Torah (Midrash). Accordingly, the Torah given at Sinai and taught by the sages, such as Moses and Aaron, is the bridge from heaven to earth.

The Four Kingdoms- Jacob was shown the guardian angels of the four kingdoms that would ascend to dominate Israel. Jacob saw each angel climbing a number of rungs corresponding to the years of its dominion, and then descending as its reign ended: Babylon climbed seventy rungs and then went down; Media’s angel, fifty-two; Greece 130; the angel of Edom/Esau kept climbing indefinitely, symbolizing the current exile, which seems to be endless. Jacob was frightened until God assured him (v.15) that he would receive divine protection and eventually return to the land. (Vayikra Rabbah 29:2; Rambam citing pirkei D’ Rabbi Eliezer)

The Land's Greatness- Jacob was shown that the angels that protected him in Eretz Yisrael were going back up to heaven and were being replaced by lesser angels, which would escort him outside the land. This process was reversed when he returned (32:2), and the angel of the Lord returned to him. This vision instilled in him a recognition of great holiness of the land, and a desire to return to it (Rashi). By speaking of angels ascending and being replaced by others, the Torah indicates that God extends his protection to his righteous ones, though the angels are unseen by anyone, perhaps even those they escort.

Jacobs' Uniqueness- The angels, which are God's agents in carrying out God's guidance of earthly affairs, constantly go up to heaven to receive His commandments and then come back to earth to carry them out, as it were. Jacob and the Jewish nation, however, are under the direct guidance of God, who is atop the ladder (Ramban; Ibn Ezra)"^{iv}

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch teaches that there are three sets of ideas that are transmitted through this dream and the surrounding events. On the purpose of the ladder, Rabbi Hirsch writes,

"Its purpose, however, is not merely to descend from heaven to earth, but to ascend from earth toward heaven. This is the first of three sets of ideas which are shown Jacob. First, he is shown that the destiny of all life on earth and thus also the life of man, including his own, is not to be sought below – or in the case of Jacob, in a journey from Beer Sheva to Haran – but should be sought above, where it has been set. Hence all things, all creatures on earth, have been summoned from above to work themselves up toward a lofty heaven-set goal."^v

Based upon the use of the word "behold" in these verses, Rabbi Hirsch goes on to describe the remaining two ideas found in this text.

"'Behold'- This word introduces a second set of ideas... He sees angels of God, messengers of God. These messengers of God ascend the ladder in order to obtain above the image of what ideally this man should be like. They then descend and set this ideal image against the character of the man as he is in reality, so that they can 'stand over against him' as a friend or as a foe, depending on how his actual character compares with the divinely-set ideal."^{vi}

"'And behold'^{vii}- this word introduces the third set of ideas; [God stood beside him] Adonai stands beside him. It is Hashem, this Divine love which is revealed primarily in the education of man, a love which has in mind not only the past and present, but which also looks and works toward the future; a love which sees each man in terms of what he will be in the future, and if it notes within him a seed of purity, will seek to preserve this seed and to develop it."

Here we witness classic Hebraic exegesis which does not seek absolute meanings but rather pursues as many possible applications of a text as possible. While we may agree with the rabbis and sages, or discover our own meanings, what is clear is that Jacob offers no such interpretation. What is important for Jacob is the reality that YHWH was in that place. What is

possibly most enlightening is the reality that YHWH was in that place and Jacob did not even know it. Upon awaking from this most splendid dream Jacob confesses:

“And Jacob awaked out of his sleep, and he said, Surely YHWH is in this place; and I knew it not.” (Genesis 28:16)

This is a very bold confession coming from the man exiled from the place where the presence of YHWH was known and enjoyed by all. Now, however, far from the well at Beersheba, Jacob discovers that YHWH is not confined to the place where he left, but is here in the place where he now dwells. Oh that we would all understand this reality. YHWH is not contained by wells or mountains, tabernacles or temples. The Eternal One cannot be contained in time or space, or in a box or a vessel; not even when that vessel looks like the Ark of Testimony, or Solomon’s Temple, or a human body. While YHWH may indeed manifest Himself in all of these places, none of them contain Him. The Eternal One is everywhere and in all things. What Jacob learned in the place of his dream was that YHWH was there, even though he was quite unaware of His presence. Every step that Jacob took from Beersheba to Mount Moriah (if this is where the dream took place), he was in the presence of the Eternal One. Understanding this reality is at the heart of being a tzadik. When we understand that everything we do is done under heaven; that is to say, in the presence of the Eternal and Holy One, then our choices, words, thoughts, deeds, and responses will be measured. We are less likely to fall to sin and temptation if we are conscious of the fact that YHWH is wherever we are. We are less likely to be anxious or afraid if we are aware that YHWH is with us. We are more likely to fulfill our calling when we are aware that the one who called us is walking with us. In the Mishnah tractate “Aboth” (Fathers), it is written:

“Consider three things and thou wilt not fall into the hands of transgression: know what is above thee – a seeing eye and a hearing ear and all thy deeds written in a book.”^{viii}

The psalmist likewise understood this reality when he wrote,

“Whither shall I go from thy spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me. If I say, surely the darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light about me. Yea, even the darkness hideth not from thee; but the night shineth as the day: the darkness and the light are both alike to thee.” (Psalm 139:7-12)

Does this reality change Jacob? Indeed it does. YHWH emboldened Jacob by His promises.

“And behold, YHWH stood about it, and said, I am YHWH ELOHIM of Abraham thy Father, and the Elohim of Isaac: the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed; And thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and thou shalt spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north and to the south: and in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed. And Behold I am with thee and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest,

and will bring thee again into this land; for I will not leave thee until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of.” (Genesis 28:13-15)

There are two sections to this promise, both of which were great encouragement to Jacob. The first half of this revelation focuses upon the seed of Jacob. This would indeed be received as good news to a man who is on his way to find a wife. The revelation that Jacob would have seed implies success in his purpose to find a suitable wife (little did he know that he would in fact find four of them). YHWH also prophesied in this vision that Jacob’s seed would be numerous, and would in fact possess the land of promise. Also implicit in this revelation is that the children of Israel would be persecuted and trodden underfoot like the dust of the earth. This is merely a reiteration of the revelation given earlier to Jacob’s grandfather, Abraham.

“And he said unto Abram, Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years; And also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge: and afterward shall they come out with great substance.” (Genesis 15:13-14)

It is through this persecution that the seed of Jacob will ultimately be scattered to the four corners of the earth. One may think that this prophetic word would be a source of discouragement, but we must understand that even in this dispersed state, YHWH will be with the children of Israel and they shall be a blessing to every nation. Here we must make the connection with our lesson at the very beginning of this study. The children of Israel will only be a blessing to the place where they dwell if they are indeed living as tzadikim among the nations. Israel will only live as tzadikim if they remember that they live their lives always in the presence of the Eternal and Holy One of Israel. While fear and awe are the proper responses to the realization that YHWH ELOHIM is present in our midst, we should not be afraid, for the purpose of YHWH is not to coerce into service by fear of punishment and reprisal, but to honor us by the calling and responsibility placed upon us. We should realize this truth in the second half of the blessing, where YHWH promises Jacob that He will be with him, protect him, and guide him in all that he does in fulfillment of this divine calling. Let us be very careful to understand that YHWH is not giving Jacob license to do whatever he wants or to go wherever he wants. YHWH specifically promises to protect and provide for Jacob, as long as he is intending to fulfill the calling as a son of Abraham and Isaac. That Jacob understood this qualification is made evident in the vow that Jacob imposes upon himself after receiving this revelation.

“And Jacob vowed a vow, saying, If Elohim will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on, So that I come again to my father’s house in peace; then shall YHWH be my Elohim: and this stone which I have set for a pillar shall be Elohim’s house: and of all that thou shalt give me I will surely give the tenth unto thee.” (Genesis 28:20-22)

At first glance this may appear as if Jacob is now bargaining with YHWH. Nothing could be further from the truth. Instead, we should understand this vow to be a bold confession of faith and an act of worship. Jacob is declaring that if YHWH is willing to be Elohim to him, and does indeed keep him and protect him, give him food to eat and clothes to wear and bring him

home again in peace, then there is no reason that all that YHWH has promised concerning his seed will not come to pass. The translation can be misleading in this passage. The addition of the word “then” tends to make this statement read like a conditional clause beginning with “if” and ending with the “then.” But this is only in the English translation. Let me give a suggested and somewhat literal translation from the Hebrew.

“And vowed Jacob a vow, saying, If be Elohim with me and keeps me in the way, this which I travel, and gives to me bread to eat, and garment to wear. And I return in peace to the house of my father, and be YHWH to me for Elohim: and this stone which I have set up a pillar be the house of Elohim, and all which you give to me, tenth I will tithe to you.” (Genesis 28:20-22)

Notice that Jacob is not bargaining, but vowing to tithe. There is no condition given; simply a restatement of all that YHWH promised to do for him. Jacob is simply responding with an act of worship. Jacob’s only fear is that he may disqualify himself from receiving this promise by his own shortcomings. Again, recognizing the willingness of YHWH to bless, protect and prosper Jacob, combined with the reality that YHWH ELOHIM is not left behind in Beersheba, Jacob is a bolder and stronger man. We see evidence of this new-found strength and purpose in the very next verses of our portion.

“Then Jacob went on his journey, and came into the land of the people of the east. And he looked, and behold a well in the field, and, lo, there were three flocks of sheep lying by it; for out of that well they watered the flocks: and a great stone was upon the well’s mouth. And thither were all the flocks gathered: and they rolled the stone from the well’s mouth, and watered the sheep, and put the stone again upon the well’s mouth in his place.” (Genesis 29:1-3)

We are told in the story that it took all of the shepherds to remove the stone so that all of the flocks could be watered. But when Jacob saw Rachel bringing the flocks of Laban, he went by himself and removed the stone from the well’s mouth, and watered the flock of Laban, his mother’s brother. Here we should understand that water is often a metaphor for the Torah. Just as water gives life to the desert, so too does the Torah give life to those whose souls dwell in an arid place. Jacob, as a tzadik, has the power to remove the stones of ignorance, deceit, and religion that keep people from being able to drink of the word of life. A single tzadik can bring life and light to the flock that waits and thirsts for truth. Since YHWH is with Jacob, he brings with him the blessings of YHWH to the flock and family of Laban. Regardless of how wicked and deceitful Laban is, he is blessed by the presence of the tzadik. The Torah gives us the evidence of this truth. The fact that Rachel, Laban’s daughter, was shepherding the sheep, indicates that he either had no sons, and/or that he was too poor to hire shepherds. Nonetheless, his flock was very small. Later Jacob himself, in his rebuke of Laban, reveals the condition of Laban’s assets prior to his arrival.

“And he said unto him, Thou knowest how I have served thee, and how thy cattle was with me. For it was little which thou hadst before I came, and it is now increased unto a multitude; and YHWH hath blessed thee since my coming.” (Genesis 30:29-30)

Laban himself also confesses that the wealth and prosperity that he has come to know is not his own doing, but because of the tzadik in his midst.

“And Laban said unto him, I pray thee, if I have found favor in thine eyes, tarry. For I have learned by experience that YHWH hath blessed me for thy sake.” (Genesis 30:27)

Jacob likewise realizes that it is his righteousness that has allowed YHWH to work through him and to make him a blessing even in the aridness of Haran.

“So shall my righteousness answer for me in time to come, when it shall come for my hire before thy face.” (Genesis 30:33)

Within this we witness the fulfillment of YHWH’S promise to Abraham - that through him and his seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.^{ix}

While all this blessing and being blessed may seem like a very positive experience, we must also see a very tragic pattern developing that has far-reaching consequences. For Israel to fulfill its calling to be a blessing, Israel must indeed be blessed. The true tzadik understands that the blessing is not exclusively his own, nor for his own exclusive pleasure. The true tzadik realizes that we are to love the Holy One with all of our heart, with all of our mind and all of our resources. In other words, that tzadik recognizes that the purpose of the many blessings he receives is to be a blessing to those around him. The tzadik is merely the vessel by which YHWH funnels His love and mercy to others. This is what it means to be a priestly people.^x As priests, we are the mediators of YHWH’S mercy, grace, and blessings.

While Israel is indeed blessed to be a blessing, the unbelieving nations do not always understand this. They are often happy to benefit from the presence of righteous people in their midst, but then, when they realize that the blessings they are receiving are not of their own doing and merit, but from Israel, they begin to realize that their meal ticket is tied to Israel. If Israel goes, there go their blessings. Finally, these nations begin to realize that they have become somewhat dependant upon or even in bondage to Israel for their sustenance. This begins to make these proud nations feel somewhat inferior to Israel. This seems always to lead to envy, resentment, hatred, and at last a desire to conquer the very ones who blessed them. So it seems at some point there will be an attempt to bind Israel to themselves, then to ensnare or enslave them, and finally destroy them in hopes of collecting all of Israel’s blessings as booty. There are several examples of this peculiar process in the Torah.

The first example is the covenant between Abimelech and Abraham.

“And it came to pass at that time, that Abimelech and Phicol the chief captain of his host spake unto Abraham, saying, Elohim is with thee in all that thou doest; Now therefore swear unto me here by Elohim that thou wilt not deal falsely with me, nor with my son, nor with my son’s son; but according to the kindness that I

have done unto thee, thou shalt do unto me, and to the land wherein thou hast sojourned.” (Genesis 21:22-23)

Here we hear Abimelech acknowledge that Elohim has indeed blessed Abraham. Now Abimelech wants to assure that the one who has been blessed remains a blessing in the area. Abimelech binds Abraham through three generations.

Later with Isaac, Abimelech, again fearing how blessed the descendants of Abraham have become, asks Isaac to leave. Realizing later that the blessing resides with the tzadik in their midst, he comes again and seeks a covenant with Isaac.

“And Abimelech said unto Isaac, Go from us; for thou art much mightier than we... Then Abimelech went to him from Gerar, and Ahuzzath one of his friends, and Phicol the chief captain of his army. And Isaac said unto them, Wherefore come ye to me, seeing ye hate me, and have sent me away from you? And they said, We saw certainly that YHWH was with thee: and we said, Let there be now an oath betwixt us, even betwixt us and thee, and let us make a covenant with thee; That thou wilt do us no hurt, as we have not touched thee, and as we have done unto thee nothing but good, and have sent thee away in peace; thou art blessed of YHWH.” (Genesis 26:16, 26-29)

We have already witnessed Laban’s confession recognizing that he has been blessed by Jacob’s presence in his midst. So Laban seeks to bind Jacob to another one of his ever-changing contracts. But even after Jacob serves Laban for another seven years, listen to the words of Laban’s sons:

“And he heard the words of Laban’s sons, saying, Jacob hath taken away all that was our father’s; and of that which was our father’s hath he gotten all this glory.” (Genesis 31:1)

Even Laban himself begins to reverse his thinking once Jacob leaves, and lays claim to all that Jacob has.

“And Laban answered and said unto Jacob, These daughters are my daughters, and these children are my children, and these cattle are my cattle, and all that thou seest is mine...” (Genesis 31:43)

How quickly Laban seems to forget what he had before Jacob arrived on the scene. Now suddenly it is Jacob who is accused of exploiting the blessings of Laban. We should note that earlier, while Laban was trying his hardest to ensnare Jacob in another contract, Laban boldly declared that he would give Jacob anything he wanted in order to get him to stay.

“And he said, Appoint me thy wages, and I will give it... And he said, What shall I give thee?” (Genesis 30:28,31)

Jacob remembered that the last time Laban gave him something, Jacob had to work for fourteen years to receive it.^{xi} Now Jacob, like Abraham before him^{xii}, refused to accept any gift from Laban. No one but YHWH would receive the praise for Jacob's good fortune.

Clearly the greatest example of Israel's blessing becoming a curse is that of Pharaoh and Israel's stay in Egypt. Here, once again, it was the presence of the tzadik Joseph that brought blessing to Pharaoh and the Egyptians. At first, Israel was a welcome guest among the Egyptians, but eventually, even within Joseph's lifetime, Israel's freedom to leave was being diminished. And so it became necessary for Jacob to swear Joseph to an oath to take his bones back to the land of Canaan. Eventually Israel's blessings caused later Pharaohs to fear and then to enslave. Only YHWH'S intervention delivered them from such affliction.

We too must be aware of how we are perceived. We need to be careful for what we pray. We must also realize that there is indeed a cost to this calling. For us to weather such storms, we must focus upon the promises of YHWH to see us safely home in peace. We must take comfort in the knowledge that the Eternal One is with us everywhere we go. We cannot hide, nor can we be hidden from His presence. We must be conscious of the fact that He is always aware of what is transpiring in our lives for good and for bad. We must trust that He will indeed deliver us from it. Therefore, in spite of the unbelieving world's response to our presence, we must always be ready to fulfill our calling and be a blessing.

SHAVUA TOV !

ⁱ "Tzadik" is the Hebrew word for a righteous or just person.

ⁱⁱ The Sapirstein Edition Rashi, Bereshit, Messorah Publication, Pg. 310

ⁱⁱⁱ The Kestenbaum Edition Tikkun, Messorah Publications, Pg. 45

^{iv} Stone Edition Chumash, Messorah Publications, Pg. 145

^v The Pentateuch, Samson Raphael Hirsch, Judaica Press, Pg. 134

^{vi} Ibid

^{vii} Ibid Pg. 135

^{viii} The Mishnah: Aboth 2:1, Hebert Danby, D.D., Oxford University Press, Pg. 447

^{ix} Genesis 12:1-3; 26:4; 28:14

^x Exodus 19:5-6; 1 Peter 2:9-10

^{xi} Genesis 29:18-30

^{xii} Genesis 14:22-23; 23:10-16