



Torah Reflections on Parashat *Vayetze*

Genesis 29:1 – 32:3

Parashat Vayetze is an epic family drama, literally of Biblical proportions. Deception, sibling competition and betrayal, infertility, forgiveness and homecoming are a few examples of the themes found in this week's Torah portion. In reading *Vayetze*, we encounter several reminders that even in the midst of family drama and physical challenges, God is present and abiding with us.

Jacob is continuing on his journey when he discovers a well in the open field. The well was not hidden behind a grove of trees, but directly in his line of vision. Three flocks of sheep were lying beside the well; having drunk from it, now they were resting.

There was a great stone, *even g'dolah*, on the mouth of the well (Genesis 29:2). The stone would be rolled from the mouth of the well, so the flocks could drink (be replenished), and then the stone would be put back in its place on the mouth of the well. *G'dolah* can be translated to refer to the large size of the rock, but it can also be understood as a description of the stone's greatness and importance in this story.

The stone moves when we need to drink, and covers the well when we have had our fill. I am reminded of *Asher Yatzar*, the prayer for our bodies, found in the morning liturgy, in which we pray that all that should be open is open, and all that should be closed is closed. *Asher Yatzar* (which literally means "the One who formed") expresses blessing and gratitude for the complexity of the human body, and for the daily miracle of all of our arteries, organs, cavities, bones and flesh. The great rock at the mouth of the well is a boundary and an opening, as well as a comforting reminder of God's steady presence and care during times of need.

As *Vayetze* continues, *flesh and bone* are named aloud when Laban hears of the arrival of his nephew Jacob (his sister's son). He runs to greet him, embraces him, kisses him and says, "You are truly my flesh and bone" (29:14). Yet immediately following this tender family reunion, a family drama fit for a daytime soap opera unfolds.

Jacob is utterly smitten with the beautiful Rachel, so much so that he actually causes the rock to roll from the mouth of the well. In order to secure Rachel as his beloved, he serves Laban for seven years, which feel like but a few days because of his love for her. However, after he has served Laban for seven years and approaches him to ask that Rachel be given to him, Laban instead tricks

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Jacob and gives his daughter Leah to him. After all, Leah is the oldest daughter and therefore the first in line to marry and bear children. He confronts Laban about this, and Laban agrees to give Rachel to Jacob only after he serves an additional seven years!

Our own families are sometimes similarly fraught with struggle and suffering, misunderstanding and miscommunication. People lie to one another; they put their own needs ahead of others' or of the family as a whole. In loving relationships, often things do not go as we might wish or imagine. Although Jacob and Rachel are finally able to be together, she is initially bereft because unable to conceive a child with him. Her distress is particularly painful because her sister Leah had able to give Jacob four sons and she feels like she has no role or value within her family or in ancient near eastern society. Only after years of suffering, is Rachel's womb opened (30:22) and she is able to get pregnant.

Sometimes the rules of a family or a society bring great sorrow and disappointment; yet as Jacob's life story unfolds in this Torah portion, we also learn of his spiritual dreams, and his encounters with angels of God. Above all, we learn about the power of enduring relationships with one another and with God.

Near the end of this story Laban says to Jacob (regarding his treatment of Laban's daughters): *"May Adonai watch between you and me, when we are out of sight of each other. (31: 49) God will be watching over how you treat my daughters, and ultimately you will have to answer to me and to God."*

We often experience grief and sorrow when dealing with family strife, or our physical health and limitations, whether due to infertility or other medical conditions. However, as long as our loved ones or the Divine is watching our back, as Laban watches over his daughters, there is solace. The comforting presence of the Divine, of a loved one, or of a supportive caregiver, can bring great reassurance even during the toughest times. May we be blessed with patience and compassion in our complex family relationships, and may we remember God's unwavering presence as a consistent source of strength and comfort.

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This Torah Reflection was written by Karen Erlichman, a social worker in private practice providing psychotherapy and spiritual direction. The Torah Reflections series is published by the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center, a beneficiary of the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties. More information and healing-oriented resources can be found at www.JewishHealingCenter.org.

