

Vayaetze

Yaakov, Jewish Continuity, and Reclaiming Shabbat

The central problem now of American Jewry is Jewish continuity. Will the Jews in America be able to survive with any meaningful numbers beyond the next generation or two? The whole issue of Jewish continuity has become the central focus of almost all Jewish organizations. Because of our low Jewish birthrate, the mean average age of the Jew is 49+, we know that our numbers have to precipitously drop in the next 50 years. Also, because of our 52% intermarriage rate, the American Jewish community's prospects in the next century do not look promising.

The whole problem of Jewish continuity is not new. It goes back to Abraham when only one of Abraham's 8 children remained Jewish. It also affected Yitzchak; only one of his children remained Jewish, too. It was only Yaacov who was able to assure Jewish continuity by having 13 children, all of whom remained Jews.

In the *Torah* portion *Vayaetze* we learn how Yaacov went into exile and what he did in order to maintain his and his family's Jewishness in the face of the pressures of the non-Jewish environment to assimilate him. Yaacov was fully aware of the fact that it was possible for him to forsake his Jewishness and forget about the whole Jewish enterprise. At the beginning of this *Torah* portion, we have the very famous story of how "he took the rocks of the place and put them under his head and he dreamed, and, behold, there was a ladder standing on the ground with its head reaching toward the heaven and, behold, angels were ascending and descending on it and, behold, G-d stood above that ladder and G-d promised Yaacov that He would be with him, He would guard him, and that He would return him to the land." However, when Yaacov woke up, he took the rock which he had placed under his head, and he made it into a monument. He poured oil on it, and he called the name of that place Beth El, and he took a vow. He said, "If G-d will be with me and will guard me and give me food to eat and clothes to wear and G-d will be for me a G-d all which Thou will give me, I will give to You ten percent." We see from here that Yaacov was not at all sure that when he would be in Mesopotamia, in exile, that G-d would still be his G-d. He was fully aware that, even if G-d kept all His promises

to him, he might still assimilate and choose another god. He knew that in order to stay Jewish, he would have to do many things, and he was not sure at this time that he would be able to do them. He, first of all, would have to be able to hold onto his Jewish dreams and aspirations. Yaacov's dream of angels ascending and descending a ladder has many interpretations, but the one the rabbis stress most is the one which speaks about the fact that all the nations of the world have a guardian angel, each of whom ascend as far as he can up to the throne of G-d, so to speak, before he is forced to come down because of the fatal flaws in his civilization. Some mount up very high, but all of them eventually descend. Only at the end of time will the Jewish people ascend all the way up the ladder and the Messianic era will be ushered in. Yaacov was not sure that he or his descendants would be able to wait that long. After all, personally, he might be able to make great progress in his own life by attaching himself to the guardian angel of another people.

At the end of this *Torah* portion, we learn how when Yaacov returns to the land of Israel, angels meet him. The rabbis comment, why, when he returned to the land of Israel, the angels met him but when he left Israel, he only dreamed of them; they did not meet him? The answer they give is because when he left, he left as an individual, but when he returned, he returned as a family, as a community. This is to teach us that, in order for Judaism to survive, we must not only feel that it is worthwhile on an individual level, but also that it is worthwhile on a family and community level. Individual Jews alone, no matter how pious and committed, cannot assure the continuation of Judaism. Only Jews who are committed both to Judaism as an individual and to Judaism as the basis of their families and communities can assure Jewish continuity.

It is interesting to note that the very next episode recorded in the *Torah* portion after Yaacov's dream is Yaacov coming to a well in Mesopotamia. There, he was to meet his future wife, Rachel. This is exactly the same thing that Moshe did when he fled Egypt. The well is a favorite symbol used throughout the *Torah* of Jewish continuity. Every Jewish king had to be coronated by a well or spring. Water is a symbol of Jewish continuity. The king had to be coronated by a well of water to signify the fact that he was a continuation of Jewish history.

That's also why on *Rosh Hashona* we go to the bank of a river or well or spring to cast our sins into it during a ceremony, called *Tashlich*. This signifies the fact that we, in spite of our sins, are still a part of the golden chain of Jewish history which stretches back to Abraham and forward to Messianic days. We claim before G-d that we have assured Jewish continuity by remaining Jews ourselves and by trying to assure that our children and grandchildren remain Jews. Flowing water always replenishes itself. A river, in order to be a river, must not only have direction and depth but also water. The water we see in the river this moment is not the water which was there the moment before or which will be there the next moment, but the river still persists and is continuous because new water always flows into it. Yaacov knew that, in order for there to be Jewish continuity, there had to be new Jewish generations born which would continue until the Messianic era. The most important ingredient of Jewish continuity is to establish a Jewish family, to make sure that Jews marry people who want to be Jews.

The second symbol that is stressed throughout this *Torah* portion is the symbol of the rock. Before Yaacov laid down and had his dream about the ladder, he took the rocks of that place and put them under his head. When he woke up, he made that rock into a holy monument. We also learn how he single-handedly rolled off the rock from the mouth of the well when he saw Rachel coming with her sheep. Some shepherds had gathered earlier around the well, but they could not roll off the rock until all the shepherds would have gathered there. Also, at the end of this *Torah* portion, we learn how, after Yaacov flees from Laban to return to the land of Israel, Laban overtakes him and remonstrates with Yaacov because he did not give him the opportunity to give a proper farewell to his daughters and grandchildren. He, then, has them gather stones and set up a pillar as a witness between himself and Yaacov that they will not harm each other and that G-d should watch between them when they are absent from one another. The symbolism of these rocks teaches us what is required in order for Jewish continuity to take place, in order for a Jew to remain a Jew, especially in exile. These four incidents of the rocks, one, before the dream, the second after the dream, the third at the well, and the fourth when Laban and Yaacov parted, also stand for the letters of the word "*Hemshech*,"

“Hay” stands for “G-d.” The first time Yaacov took a rock and put it under his head, he was concerned about his relationships between G-d and man. To be a Jew, you have to know that G-d loves you and cares about you and is concerned about you and will forgive you if you do wrong, if you repent. Yaacov had just wronged his brother, Esau, and was in need of repentance. That first letter “Hay” also stands for “Habrios,” “people.” The second rock stands for the second letter of the word “Hemshech,” “Mem.” He poured oil over the rock. *Shemen*, or oil, is also a symbol of Jewish learning. The “Mem” of “Hemshech” stands for “learning,” “Midrash,” and “Masseh,” “deeds.” Not only did he pour oil over the rock, but he also agreed to pay 10 percent of his income to charity. The third rock, the rock that he pushed off the well, stands for the third letter of “Hemshech,” “Shir,” “song,” and “Shaim.” He knew that with a strong family he would be able to face the world with song and joy, and one of the most important elements in forging a strong family is learning how to appreciate one another, to realize that everybody has a “Shaim”, a “name,” that everybody has wonderful qualities, and that it is important that we related to each other joyfully. This will allow us to do great things for each other. The fourth rock stood for the last letter of the word, “continuity,” “Kuf,” which stand for “Kood,” “dignity,” and “Kainim,” “honesty.” That fourth pillar stood for the fact that he did not feel at all in any way inferior to Laban, that he had dignity and, also, that he had honesty. In spite of the fact that Laban had tricked him many, many times, he always dealt honestly with Laban and gained his grudging respect. Yaacov was able to endure the exile because he was able to build a strong family. Alone, Jews cannot withstand the exile, but if they are grouped in strong families and communities, they can. This, however, requires that: (1) we nurture within each of us a great love for G-d and for our fellow human beings; (2) that we display a great love for Jewish learning which results in the doing of charity and good deeds; (3) that we display great joy in relationships, especially our family relationships, which will give us the strength to overcome all the problems of life; and (4) that we develop inner dignity and always deal honestly with every human being.

One of the reasons why I am so excited myself about the reclaiming *Shabbat* program is because when a Jew celebrates *Shabbat*, he empha-

sizes over and over again these basic Jewish values. As Achad HaAm said, "It is not so much that the Jew has kept the *Shabbat* but the fact is that the *Shabbat* has kept the Jew." Without the *Shabbat*, the Jew no longer becomes man the appreciator. He becomes just man the creator. He no longer learns how to appreciate those things which cannot be measured--love, devotion, integrity, dignity--and he comes estranged from the Jewish tradition. We all live in 7 dimensions, 6 material ones--north, west, south, east, up, down--but, most importantly, we live in a spiritual dimension. That is what *Shabbat* emphasizes, the seventh dimension. That's, too, why it is the seventh day. *Shabbat* teaches us the importance of family, the importance of relating joyfully to others, the importance of enjoying what we have honestly labored for. It gives us dignity and assures us that we can have a loving relationship with G-d and with our fellow human beings. Yaacov was able to keep his family because he understood all these *mitzvahs* which are encapsulated in the *Shabbat*.

Let us hope that we will all be able to keep our children and grandchildren Jewish because we understand these concepts, too. By keeping the *Shabbat*, we not only demonstrate our love for Jewish learning and *mitzvahs* by especially developing joyful family relationships, but we also assure that our essential Jewish spiritual nature will be nurtured so the Jewish people can continue as a mighty stream until Messianic days.