

## דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



## “And Shall We Do It?” / “ונעשנה?”

Louis Polissou, Student, The Rabbinical School, JTS

It is not in Heaven  
And I did not know  
I said: “Who shall go up for us to  
heaven?  
I don’t want to, I don’t care  
I don’t understand...”

And now I know  
That there is Torah in this place  
But I’m still not sure  
If there is God  
In Beth-El, or in Hebron

If the word is very close to us  
And I believe that it is in your mouth  
and in your heart  
Why are we not doing it?

If Luz was the name of the city at first  
Then he called the name of the place  
Beth-El  
Why can’t we remember Luz as well?  
And remember that in the image of  
God the One created them, too  
To fulfill it  
With us

And shall we do it?

לא בשמים היא  
ולא ידעתי  
אמרת “מי יעלה לנו השמימה  
אני לא רוצה, לא אכפת לי  
לא הבנת”

ואנוכי יודע עכשיו  
שיש תורה במקום הזה  
אבל אני עוד לא בטוח  
אם יש אלוהים  
בבית אל, או בחברון

אם קרוב אלינו הדבר מאוד  
ואני מאמין שהוא בפוך  
ובלבבך  
למה לא עושים אותו?

אם לוז היה שם העיר  
לראשונה  
ויקרא את שם המקום ההוא  
בית אל  
למה לא יכולים לזכור גם את  
לוז?  
ולזכור שבצלם א-לוהים ברא  
גם אותם  
לעשותו  
איתנו

ונעשנה?

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## TORAH FROM JTS

## Parashat Vayetzei 5776

פרשת ויצא תשע"ו



## Family

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This week’s Torah reading, Vayetzei (Genesis 28:10-32:2), opens and closes with flights of angels accompanying our forefather Jacob (aka Israel, though, he won’t get named that until next week), as he flees from and returns to the Promised Land. When Jacob leaves, he is running in fear for his life. For our father Jacob has cheated his macho older brother Esau once too often, so much so that he has threatened to kill him. Of course, Esau isn’t that much older, for the two brothers are twins. But as any set of twins will tell you, the one who came first, even if by mere seconds—that one is the elder. We might assume, along with the Bible, that birth-order matters. But Genesis is all about the younger supplanting the older and we are on solid ground suggesting that this sibling rivalry stuff is at the very heart of this week’s Torah lesson.

Our biblical patriarchs famously upset birth order as they struggle for ascendancy over one another. Baby brother Isaac, thirteen years younger than his half-brother Ishmael, assumed the mantle of covenant when he supplanted his elder. Jacob actually bought Esau’s birthright for a bowl of lentils and then through fraud, stole his father’s blessing. It is the latter theft that made Esau see red. So as our portion begins, Jacob flees to his mother’s brother’s family. The Torah regales us with the way Uncle Laban serves Jacob his just deserts when he repeatedly changes Jacob’s wages as a shepherd. In a coup of measure-for-measure punishment, Laban deceptively marries Jacob to weak-eyed Leah in place of her younger sister: the beloved, beautiful Rachel.

Laban insouciantly informs him, “We don’t put the younger before the elder here” (Gen. 29:26). The Talmud (BT Bava Batra 123a) works very hard to make the sisters Rachel and Leah complicit in Laban’s deception of Jacob. It reports how Rachel explained to Jacob that her father would try to deceive him and give him Leah instead. Jacob, the Talmud says, tells her that he is an old hand at deception, and he doubts that Laban can pull the wool over his eyes. To be sure, however, Jacob gives his adored Rachel certain signs by which he can know that it is her and not Leah. Jacob cannot imagine that Rachel might have compassion for her elder sister—after all, he had not a shred of consideration for his older brother.

Yet, the Talmud tells us, Rachel actually supplied Leah with the signs that Jacob had given her. Although Jacob thought he was bedding Rachel, surprise, surprise, “in the morning, it was Leah!” (Gen. 29:25). I love how the rabbis re-read the Genesis account not only to give Jacob his comeuppance, but to emphasize the love and sympathy sisters share with one another. It appears, if but for a brief moment, that the men of the Talmud understood women’s emotional solidarity and even applaud it. Unfortunately, it is emphatically not the story that Genesis tells us. Leah remains the hated sister, pitifully naming her sons after her varying states of emotional distress. Rachel, for her part, however beloved and pretty she may be, remains barren. In a society that values women for their offspring, Rachel, bereft of children, is reduced to begging her husband, “Give me children or I’ll die!” (Gen. 30:1). Jacob, who remains as thoroughly unsympathetic to his family as he is to his descendants—we who read about him—pushes her off and blames God for her abject state. It turns out that Rachel getting married is yet one more family tragedy.

Throughout the Torah reading, the women compete for their husband’s attention through sex and children. The competition is intense enough that each sister pathetically goes so far as to offer Jacob her handmaid as a way of providing more offspring and keeping his interest. By the end of the portion, Jacob has four wives, 11 sons (Benjamin will be born in next week’s Torah reading), and many daughters (all unnamed except for Dinah—we’ll hear more about her next week, as well). If you think the

sibling rivalries have finally burnt themselves out, well, there is still a lot of Genesis to read. Jacob’s sons, the tribes of Israel, are chips off the old block when it comes to supplanting one another. Reuben even goes so far as to supplant his father Jacob (see Gen. 35:22, also next week).

As will be clear from this last paragraph, a great deal of the story is waiting to unfold. Meanwhile, next week we all will experience the gathering of the clans that we call Thanksgiving. Around our table we shall sit with siblings, parents, step-parents, half brothers and sisters, children and step children, the entire blended family of Israel. There may be those who are no longer invited to our tables. There are others whose absence we mourn. Each adult at the table carries within him or her secrets, resentments, family history, and, God willing, love. As we look around that table and recall our ancestors Jacob and his many wives and children, let us give thanks for what we have. All these generations after Jacob, we still are, at times, neurotic, dysfunctional, or in other words: family. Let us rejoice with love that we are still here, and give thanks to God for all we share.

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