

עץ חיים

ETZ HAYIM

TORAH AND COMMENTARY

THE RABBINICAL ASSEMBLY
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¹⁰Jacob left Beer-sheba, and set out for Haran. ¹¹He came upon a certain place and stopped there for the night, for the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of that place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. 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

וַיֵּצֵא יַעֲקֹב מִבְּעַר שֶׁבַע וַיֵּלֶךְ חָרָנָה׃
וַיִּפְגַּע בְּמָקוֹם וַיֵּלֶן שָׁם כִּי־בָא הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ
וַיִּקַּח מֵאֲבֵנֵי הַמָּקוֹם וַיִּשֶׂם מֵרֹאשֵׁיתוֹ
וַיִּשְׁכַּב בְּמָקוֹם הַהוּא׃¹² וַיַּחְלֵם וְהִנֵּה
סֹלֶם מֵצֵב אֶרְצָה וְרֹאשׁוֹ מַגִּיעַ הַשָּׁמַיְמָה
וְהִנֵּה מַלְאָכָי אֱלֹהִים עֹלִים וְיֹרְדִים בּוֹ׃
וְהִנֵּה יְהוָה נֹצֵב עָלָיו וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנִי יְהוָה׃¹³

JACOB'S ENCOUNTER WITH GOD (28:10–22)

Jacob has embarked on a long, perilous journey that will take him from Beer-sheba in southern Canaan to Haran in northern Mesopotamia.

THE DREAM REVELATION (vv. 11–15)

10. Jacob left Beer-sheba We are given no details about anything that happened to Jacob in the course of his trek; we are told only of his encounter with God.

11. He came upon a certain place Jacob stops at an unnamed “place” because it is impossible to travel in this region after sunset. The Hebrew word for “place” (*makom*) frequently has the connotation of “a sacred site” in later interpretations, but to Jacob it is a place with no

tradition of holiness, and he treats it with indifference.

12. He had a dream While Jacob sleeps, he has a dream revelation.

a stairway The Hebrew term “*sullam*” is related to the Akkadian word “*simmltu*,” which means “ladder” or “steps.” *Sullam* could, therefore, be a ladder or a stairway ramp. The image of a ladder ascending to heaven is also known from Egyptian and Hittite sources.

angels of God They play no role in the dream and probably reflect the notion of angelic beings who patrol the earth and report back to God.

13. beside him Or “it,” the stairway.

CHAPTER 28

In this *parashah*, Jacob leaves home to spend the next 20 years at the home of his mother's brother Laban (whom we met briefly in chapter 24). He marries two wives and fathers several children there. Jacob's journey begins with a setting sun and concludes (Gen. 32:27) with a rising sun. This has prompted one contemporary commentator to consider the 20 years at Laban's house as a “dark night of the soul,” years spent struggling with the dark forces represented by Laban's treachery and Jacob's confronting his own attraction to deceit (Zornberg). When the Sages attribute to Jacob the institution of the evening prayer (*Ma-ariv*), they may be crediting him as the first person able to find God in the midst of darkness.

10. Jacob left Beer-Sheba Why does the Torah, ordinarily so sparing of words, include this detail? When a good person leaves a com-

munity, it is no longer the same place (Gen. R. 68:6).

12. a stairway We ascend toward God one step at a time, making one small change in our lives and stabilizing it before we take another step. Sometimes we slip and miss a step, falling back, but we recover and keep climbing. Most people do not leap toward God in one great burst of enthusiasm.

angels of God were going up and down on it From this we learn that one set of angels was leaving Jacob and a different set would accompany him outside the Land (Gen. R. 68:12). Jews have different concerns and different priorities outside the Land than they do when living in it. We need different “angels” to guide us (Mordecai Kaplan).

13. We can speculate that Jacob was a frightened young man, away from home for the first time and embarrassed by the circumstances that forced him to leave. To have God appear

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.”

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

אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם אֲבִיךָ וְאֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק הָאָרֶץ
אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה שׁוֹכֵן עָלֶיהָ לָךְ אֶתְנַנֶּה
וְלְזַרְעֶךָ: ¹⁴וְהָיָה זֶרְעֶךָ כְּעֹפֶר הָאָרֶץ
וּפְרָצְתָּ יָמָה וְקִדְמָה וְצָפְנָה וְנִגְבָּה
וְנִבְרָכוּ בְךָ כָּל־מִשְׁפְּחוֹת הָאָדָמָה
וּבְזַרְעֶךָ: ¹⁵וְהָיָה אֲנֹכִי עִמָּךְ וּשְׁמַרְתִּיךָ
בְּכָל־אֲשֶׁר־תֵּלֵךְ וְהִשְׁבַּתִּיךָ אֶל־הָאָדָמָה
הַזֹּאת כִּי לֹא אֶעֱזָבְךָ עַד אֲשֶׁר אִם־
עֲשִׂיתִי אֵת אֲשֶׁר־דִּבַּרְתִּי לָךְ:
¹⁶וַיִּיקֶץ יַעֲקֹב בְּמָקוֹם הַזֶּה וַיֹּאמֶר אֵיךְ יִשׁ
יְהוָה בְּמָקוֹם הַזֶּה וְאֲנֹכִי לֹא יָדַעְתִּי:
¹⁷וַיִּירָא וַיֹּאמֶר מַה־נּוֹרָא הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה
אֵין זֶה בִּי אִם־בֵּית אֱלֹהִים וְזֶה שַׁעַר

I am the LORD For this self-identifying formula, see Comment to 15:7. The use of the divine name *YHVH* has special importance here, because it serves to disengage the revelation from any connection with El, the head of the Canaanite pantheon, whose name is a component of Bethel, the name soon to be given to the place.

Abraham . . . Isaac The revelation confirms Jacob as the heir to the divine promises made to his father and grandfather.

the ground on which you are lying Just as he is about to leave the Land, his title to it is affirmed.

14. Your descendants The wording of these divine promises shows a clear affinity with the promises made to Abraham in 13:14–17.

15. I am with you The national promises

that project into the distant future end on a personal note directed to Jacob.

BETHEL (vv. 16–19)

The next morning Jacob gives the site a name and makes a vow to God. The sanctuary at Bethel was of major importance in the later history of Israel.

17. Shaken Jacob is profoundly affected by the overwhelming mystery of the encounter with God.

abode of God The site where He has manifested His presence. The building or consecration of a sanctuary is not mentioned.

the gateway to heaven The place where the angels ascend to and descend from heaven. The notion that such “gateways” existed was widespread. One of the titles of the high priest of

reassuringly, promising him a successful journey and a safe return home, must have been what Jacob needed most at that moment. Years later, at the end of his life (48:3), this is one of only two incidents that Jacob recalls, cherishing the memory that when he was young and afraid, God assured him that he would achieve great things in his life.

16. and I did not know it How often do we find ourselves in the presence of God, not only in synagogue sanctuaries but at crucial mo-

ments of our lives or in the midst of natural beauty, and remain unaware of it?

17. Shaken We tend to speak casually of coming into God’s presence. Jacob’s response here reminds us that to truly encounter God in our lives is a soul-shattering experience. We are shaken to the core of our souls, and we are never the same person afterward. Jacob’s encounter changes him from a frightened young man to a man prepared to take responsibility for his life.

heaven.”¹⁸ Early 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.¹⁹ He named that site Bethel; but previously the name of the city had been Luz.

²⁰Jacob then made a vow, saying, “If God remains with me, if He protects me on this journey that I am making, and gives me bread to eat and clothing to wear,²¹ and if I return safe to my father’s house—the LORD shall be my God.²² And this stone, which I have set up as a pillar, shall be God’s abode; and of all that You give me, I will set aside a tithe for You.”

Thebes in Egypt was “the Opener of the Gates of Heavens,” and the name of the city of Babylon was interpreted by the Semites as derived from *bab-ilim*, “gate of the god.”

18. a pillar The Hebrew “*matzevah*” derives from the stem meaning “to take a firm position” (נצב). It denotes a single, upright slab of stone. Because the stone is by Jacob’s head while he sleeps, it not only marks the spot but also functions as a sort of witness to the dream and the accompanying divine promises.

and poured oil on the top of it Oil was used in the ancient Near East in international treaty relationships and business contracts as a token of peace, friendship, and assumed obligation. Here the anointing is a symbolic act of dedication that establishes a contractual bond between Jacob and God.

19. Luz The name may mean “an almond tree,” as in 30:37; the region is ideal fruit and nut country. Or it may derive from the Arabic *laudh*, “a place of refuge,” a name highly appropriate to the present circumstances.

הַשָּׁמַיִם: ¹⁸וַיִּשְׁכֶּם יַעֲקֹב בְּבֹקֶר וַיִּקַּח אֶת־הָאֶבֶן אֲשֶׁר־שָׁם מֵרֹאשְׁתּוֹ וַיִּשֶׂם אֹתָהּ מַצֵּבָה וַיִּצֹק שֶׁמֶן עַל־רֹאשָׁהּ: ¹⁹וַיִּקְרָא אֶת־שֵׁם־הַמָּקוֹם הַהוּא בֵּית־אֵל וְאוּלַם לְזוֹ שֵׁם־הָעִיר לְרֵאשֻׁנָה: ²⁰וַיִּדַר יַעֲקֹב נֶדֶר לֵאמֹר אִם־יְהִיֶּה אֱלֹהִים עִמָּדִי וּשְׁמֹרְנִי בַדֶּרֶךְ הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי הוֹלֵךְ וְנָתַן־לִי לֶחֶם לֶאֱכֹל וּבְגָד לְלַבֵּשׁ: ²¹וְשִׁבְתִּי בְשָׁלוֹם אֶל־בֵּית אָבִי וְהָיָה יְהוָה לִי לֵאלֹהִים: ²²וְהָאֶבֶן הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר־שָׁמַתִּי מַצֵּבָה יְהִיֶּה בֵּית אֱלֹהִים שְׁנִי וְכָל אֲשֶׁר תִּתֵּן־לִי עֹשֶׂר אֶעֱשָׂרְנוּ לָךְ:

THE VOW (vv. 20–22)

At this critical moment, still under the effect of his dream experience, Jacob takes on certain obligations. His vow is best understood not as a bargaining with God, because all that he asks for has already been promised (v. 15). Rather, he pledges himself to a certain course of action as an expression of gratitude to God after the promises will be fulfilled.

21. the LORD shall be my God Jacob obligates himself to exclusive allegiance to YHVH.

22. And this stone The stone shall function as a witness to Jacob’s vow. An 8th-century-B.C.E. Aramaic treaty inscription terms each upright stone on which the treaty is inscribed as *ntzb*, the same as the Hebrew “*matzevah*” (see v. 18).

a tithe The institution of tithe giving to temples and the royal court is known throughout the ancient Near East. The text is silent on who is to receive the tithe and what is to be done with it. Normally, one offers the tithe only to a king or to a sanctuary with an established clergy.

20–21. This is one of the first instances of someone making a promise to God in return for God’s blessings. Does it represent a posture of gratitude or is it an attempt to manipulate God with promises of worship and generosity? Is Jacob excessive in his demands, asking that God give him everything he will ever need and grant him a life free of problems? Or is he simply asking for food, clothing, and safety, the minimum he needs to survive? Although Jewish prayer is predominantly about thanking and

praising God for what we have, Judaism is not so other-worldly as to be embarrassed by prayers for material sustenance.

Several commentators are troubled by Jacob’s saying, “if [God] protects me” when God has just promised to do so in his dream. Also, how can Jacob say “the LORD shall be my God” only if God helps him prosper? The first comment may reflect Jacob’s doubts about the validity of his dream. Was it real or just wishful thinking? Can Jacob, like his grandfather Abra-

29 Jacob resumed his journey and came to the land of the Easterners. ²There before his eyes was a well in the open. Three flocks of sheep were lying there beside it, for the flocks were watered from that well. The stone on the mouth of the well was large. ³When all the flocks were gathered there, the stone would be rolled from the mouth of the well and the sheep watered; then the stone would be put back in its place on the mouth of the well.

⁴Jacob said to them, “My friends, where are you from?” And they said, “We are from Haran.” ⁵He said to them, “Do you know Laban the son of Nahor?” And they said, “Yes, we do.” ⁶He continued, “Is he well?” They answered, “Yes, he is; and there is his daughter Rachel, coming with the flock.” ⁷He said, “It is still broad daylight, too early to round up the animals; water the flock and take them to pasture.” ⁸But they said, “We cannot, until all the flocks are

כט וישא יעקב רגליו וילך ארצה בני־קדם: ² וירא והנה באר בשדה והנה שם שלשה עדרי־צאן רבצים עליה פי מן־הבאר ההוא ישקו העדרים והאבן גדלה על־פי הבאר: ³ ונאספו־שמה כל־העדרים וגללו את־האבן מעל פי הבאר והשקו את־הצאן והשיבו את־האבן על־פי הבאר למקמה: ⁴ ויאמר להם יעקב אחי מאין אתם ויאמרו מחרן אנהנו: ⁵ ויאמר להם הידעתם את־לבן בן־נחור ויאמרו ידענו: ⁶ ויאמר להם השלום לו ויאמרו שלום והנה רחל בתו באה עם־הצאן: ⁷ ויאמר הן עוד היום גדול לא־עֵת האסף המקנה השקו הצאן ולכו רעו: ⁸ ויאמרו לא נוכל עד אשר יאספו כל־

JACOB'S MARRIAGES (29:1–30)

Jacob's arrival at the well is reminiscent of what had occurred many years earlier (in chapter 26) when Abraham's servant came to this same place intent on finding a wife for Isaac. What a glaring contrast between the well-laden camel train of the grandfather's servant and the lonely, empty-handed Jacob who arrives on foot!

1. resumed his journey Literally, “lifted up his feet,” a Hebrew phrase found nowhere else in this connection. It has been interpreted to mean: (a) the going was now easier; (b) he directed his feet, that is, he went with resolve and confidence; or (c) he had to force himself to leave the site of the revelation.

the Easterners In Hebrew: *b'nei kedem*. The word “*kedem*” refers to the Syrian-Arabian desert east of the land of Israel.

3. the stone would be rolled The stone restricted the use of the well to a closed group, and

outsiders were required to pay for water. At the same time, the cover would serve as a protection against dust and filth and as a guard against accidental fall by person or beast.

4. where are you from Jacob does not realize that he has arrived at his destination.

5. Laban the son of Nahor Bethuel, Laban's actual father, is ignored here, as he largely is in chapter 24. The grandfather, Nahor, was the head of the clan and its most notable figure.

6. Rachel Her name means “a ewe lamb.”

7. and take them to pasture Quite likely, Jacob wants the shepherds out of the way so that he can greet Rachel and converse with her alone.

8. But they said The shepherds suddenly become talkative, for Jacob touches a raw nerve when he insinuates that they are shirking their duties.

ham, trust God to fulfill the divine promise? The Midrash resolves the second question by taking the words “the LORD shall be my God”

as part of Jacob's prayer, not as a promise. Along with food and safety, Jacob is praying for a sense of God's presence (Sifrei Deut. 31).

rounded up; then the stone is rolled off the mouth of the well and we water the sheep.”

⁹While he was still speaking with them, Rachel came with her father's flock; for she was a shepherdess. ¹⁰And when Jacob saw Rachel, the daughter of his uncle Laban, and the flock of his uncle Laban, Jacob went up and rolled the stone off the mouth of the well, and watered the flock of his uncle Laban. ¹¹Then Jacob kissed Rachel, and broke into tears. ¹²Jacob told Rachel that he was her father's kinsman, that he was Rebekah's son; and she ran and told her father. ¹³On hearing the news of his sister's son Jacob, Laban ran to greet him; he embraced him and kissed him, and took him into his house. He told Laban all that had happened, ¹⁴and Laban said to him, “You are truly my bone and flesh.”

10. his uncle Literally, “his mother's brother.” The repetition of this phrase links the incident to the instructions of his parents (27:43, 28:2) and contains a hint that this is the girl who is to become his wife.

rolled the stone Single-handedly, apparently as the result of a surge of strength he experienced at the sight of Rachel and in the knowledge that he is meeting with his own kin at last.

watered the flock Rachel is certainly dumbfounded by this preferential treatment at the well (see Exod. 2:16–19). And by a total stranger! Jacob's act establishes a bond between them.

11. kissed Because Jacob already knows her to be his cousin, his kiss, even before he discloses

הַעֲדָרִים וַיִּגְלֹל אֶת־הָאֶבֶן מֵעַל פִּי הַבְּאֵר
וַיִּשְׁקֵנוּ הַצֹּאֵן:

⁹עוֹדָנוּ מְדַבֵּר עִמָּם וְרַחֵל | בָּאָה עִם־
הַצֹּאֵן אֲשֶׁר לְאִבֶּיהָ כִּי רָעָה הוּא:
¹⁰וַיְהִי כַּאֲשֶׁר רָאָה יַעֲקֹב אֶת־רַחֵל בֵּת־
לָבָן אַחֵי אִמּוֹ וְאֶת־צֹאֵן לָבָן אַחֵי אִמּוֹ
וַיִּגֶשׁ יַעֲקֹב וַיִּגַּל אֶת־הָאֶבֶן מֵעַל פִּי
הַבְּאֵר וַיִּשֶׁק אֶת־צֹאֵן לָבָן אַחֵי אִמּוֹ:
¹¹וַיִּשֶׁק יַעֲקֹב לְרַחֵל וַיִּשָּׂא אֶת־קֻלּוֹ
וַיִּבְרַךְ: ¹²וַיִּגַּד יַעֲקֹב לְרַחֵל כִּי אַחֵי אִבִּיהָ
הוּא וְכִי בְּוֶרְבֵּקָה הוּא וְתַרְךָ וְתִגַּד
לְאִבֶּיהָ: ¹³וַיְהִי כִשְׁמוֹעַ לָבָן אֶת־שְׁמוֹעַ |
יַעֲקֹב בְּוֶאֱחָתוֹ וַיִּרְץ לְקִרְאָתוֹ וַיַּחֲבֹק־לוֹ
וַיִּנְשָׁק־לוֹ וַיְבִיאָהוּ אֶל־בֵּיתוֹ וַיְסַפֵּר לְלָבָן
אֵת כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה: ¹⁴וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ
לָבָן אַךְ עֲצָמִי וּבָשָׂרִי אַתָּה

his identity, is a natural and innocent act. Kissing is mentioned twice in The Song of Songs (1:2, 8:1), but this is the only instance in a biblical narrative of a man kissing a woman who is neither his mother nor his wife.

12. and told her father Either because her mother was dead or because it was the duty of the father to welcome strangers.

13. the news Of Jacob's arrival.

all that had happened It is hardly likely that Jacob reported that he had deceived his brother and father. Probably, he told how his parents had sent him to find a wife from among his kinfolk and that misadventures on the journey had left him empty-handed.

14. You are truly my bone and flesh Re-

CHAPTER 29

9. One commentator, reading between the lines, deduces that at this point, Laban's flocks were so few that a young girl could manage them alone. Only under Jacob's guidance did Laban's affairs flourish (*Or Ha-Hayyim*).

13. The Midrash interprets Laban's excitement at the news of Jacob's arrival as issuing from his greed. Remembering how Abraham's servant brought many gifts, he imagined Abra-

ham's grandson coming even more heavily laden. Seeing Jacob empty-handed, Laban kisses him, thinking he may have hidden jewels in his mouth to foil robbers. Upon hearing the circumstances of Jacob's leaving home, he says resignedly, “you are my relative and I must let you in.” One month later, Laban puts him to work (Gen. R. 70:13). When Laban, hearing of Jacob's difficulties at home, calls him “truly my bone and flesh,” is he thinking, “You are a deceiver even as I am”?

When he had stayed with him a month's time, ¹⁵Laban said to Jacob, "Just because you are a kinsman, should you serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?" ¹⁶Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older one was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. ¹⁷Leah had weak eyes; Rachel was shapely and beautiful. ¹⁸Jacob loved Rachel; so he answered, "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel." ¹⁹Laban said, "Better that I give her to you than that I should give her to an outsider. Stay with me." ²⁰So Jacob served seven years for Rachel and they seemed to him but a few days because of his love for her.

וַיֵּשֶׁב עִמּוֹ חֹדֶשׁ יָמִים: ¹⁵וַיֹּאמֶר לְבָן לְיַעֲקֹב הֲכִי־אָחִי אֵתָהּ וְעַבְדְּתָנִי חִנָּם הַגִּידָה לִּי מַה־מְשַׁכְּרָתְךָ: ¹⁶וּלְלֵבָן שְׂתֵי בָנוֹת שָׁם הַגְּדֹלָה לְאָה וְשָׁם הַקְּטָנָה רָחֵל: ¹⁷וַעֲיִנֶי לְאָה רַבּוֹת וְרָחֵל הָיְתָה שְׁלִישִׁי יְפַת־תְּאֵר וַיִּפְתַּ מְרֹאֶה: ¹⁸וַיֹּאֲהֵב יַעֲקֹב אֶת־רָחֵל וַיֹּאמֶר אֶעֱבֹדְךָ שִׁבְעַ שָׁנִים בְּרָחֵל בְּתוּךָ הַקְּטָנָה: ¹⁹וַיֹּאמֶר לְבָן טוֹב תַּתִּי אֵתָהּ לָךְ מִתַּתִּי אֵתָהּ לְאִישׁ אֲחֵר שְׁבָה עִמָּדִי: ²⁰וַיַּעֲבֹד יַעֲקֹב בְּרָחֵל שִׁבְעַ שָׁנִים וַיְהִיו בְּעֵינָיו כִּיָּמִים אַחָדִים בְּאַהֲבָתוֹ אֵתָהּ:

cognition of kinship involved formal obligations of solidarity and determined social behavior. It meant acceptance of Jacob as a member of Laban's household.

15. serve This word, which occurs seven times in the narrative, is the essential term in the blessing that Jacob fought so desperately to obtain. The original oracle to the pregnant Rebekah forecast that "the older shall *serve* the younger" (Gen. 25:23). The stolen blessing contained the phrase, "Let peoples *serve* you" (27:29), which Isaac confirmed, saying to Esau, "I have given him all his brothers for *servants*" (27:37) and "You shall *serve* your brother" (27:40). Now—what irony!—it is Jacob who must serve.

16. Now Laban Jacob's response is delayed by the narrator to provide us with background information essential to the understanding of subsequent developments.

Leah The name may mean "cow" or "weak."

Rachel She is mentioned again only because it was necessary to introduce Leah and to ex-

plain the order of birth, an item of vital importance to the narrative.

17. weak eyes This does not describe poor vision, but eyes lacking in luster or lacking in tenderness and sensitivity.

18. seven years The seven years of service are to be in place of the usual "bride-price," known as *mohar* in Hebrew and *terhatum* in Akkadian, an institution discussed in the Comment to 24:53. Jacob, working to pay off the bride-price, will have the status of an indentured laborer (see Exod. 21:2–3).

19. Laban said Laban's reply is a statement of consummate ambiguity naively accepted by Jacob as a binding commitment.

Better that I give her to you Marriage between relatives was regarded as highly desirable: It safeguarded tribal property and the welfare of the daughter.

20. but a few days An echo of Gen. 27:44, where Jacob's mother sends her son to Laban "for a short while" (literally, "a few days") on the pretext of finding a wife. Grim reality now mocks her words.

17. Leah had weak eyes This was the result of weeping after she heard a rumor that she would be married off to Esau, Rebekah's older son, while her younger sister would marry Jacob (Gen. R. 70:16).

18. Jacob loved Rachel This is an unusual instance of romantic love in a world where

marriage was typically an economic arrangement between two families.

20. they seemed . . . but a few days We might think that the time would pass all too slowly. A person looking forward to attaining a goal, though, welcomes everything that brings him or her a step closer to that goal.

21Then Jacob said to Laban, “Give me my wife, for my time is fulfilled, that I may cohabit with her.” 22And Laban gathered all the people of the place and made a feast. 23When evening came, he took his daughter Leah and brought her to him; and he cohabited with her.—24Laban had given his maidservant Zilpah to his daughter Leah as her maid.—25When morning came, there was Leah! So he said to Laban, “What is this you have done to me? I was in your service for Rachel! Why did you deceive me?” 26Laban said, “It is not the practice in our place to marry off the younger before the older. 27Wait until the bridal week of this one is over and we will give you that one too, provided you

21וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב אֶל-לָבָן הֲבֵה אֶת-אִשְׁתִּי כִּי מָלְאוּ יָמֵי וְאִבּוֹאָה אֵלַיָּהּ: 22וַיִּקְרָא לָבָן אֶת-כָּל-אֲנָשֵׁי הַמָּקוֹם וַיַּעַשׂ מִשְׁתֶּה: 23וַיְהִי בַעֲרֵב וַיִּקַּח אֶת-לֵאָה בִּתּוֹ וַיָּבֵא אֹתָהּ אֵלָיו וַיָּבֵא אֵלַיָּהּ: 24וַיִּתֵּן לָבָן לָהּ אֶת-זִלְפָּה שִׁפְחָתוֹ לִילָאָה בִּתּוֹ שִׁפְחָהּ: 25וַיְהִי בִבְקָר וַהֲנִיָּה הוּא לֵאָה וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-לָבָן מַה-זֹּאת עָשִׂיתָ לִּי הֲלֹא בְרַחֵל עֲבַדְתִּי עִמָּךְ וְלָמָּה רַמִּיתָנִי: 26וַיֹּאמֶר לָבָן לֹא-יַעֲשֶׂה כֵן בְּמִקוֹמֵנוּ לָתֵת הַצְעִירָה לְפָנֵי הַבְּכִירָה: 27מִלֵּא שָׁבַע זֹאת וְנִתְּנָה לְךָ גַם-אֶת-

21. my wife A betrothed woman has the status of a wife in the laws of Hammurabi as well as in Deut. 20:7 and 22:23–24.

23. When evening came Either it was the custom to hold weddings in the evening or Laban deliberately chose that time of the day.

he took his daughter Leah This is intelligible only if Leah wore a veil; in the ancient Near East, the bride was indeed veiled when presented to her husband.

24. his maidservant In ancient Mesopotamia it was the custom for a father to present his daughter with a maid on her marriage.

Zilpah The name has been connected with the Arabic word *zulfah*, “dignity,” or *dhulifā*, “to be small” (said of a nose).

25. there was Leah Jacob’s masquerading

as his brother meets its counterstroke in the substitution of Leah for her sister.

Why did you deceive me? The Hebrew stem “רמה” (for “deceive”) is the same used by Isaac in 27:35 to describe Jacob’s own act of deception.

26. It is not the practice Laban feigns outrage, as though Jacob were the guilty one! In justification of his conduct, he invokes the importance of tradition.

younger . . . older This remark, an instance of dramatic irony, whose underlying meaning is perceived by Jacob and the reader, returns us sharply to the Jacob–Esau rivalry. It so stuns Jacob that he doesn’t even reprove Laban for never having informed him about that local custom.

27. the bridal week Literally, “the week of

25. there was Leah A Rabbinic *midrash* tells of Jacob and Rachel devising a code to make sure that the deceitful Laban could not substitute Leah for Rachel. But on the wedding night, Rachel, feeling compassion for Leah and not wanting her to be shamed, shares the code with her sister (BT Meg. 13b). As a result, Jacob is deceived in the darkness, even as his father Isaac had been fooled in his blindness.

26. It is not the practice in our place That is, I have heard stories of younger siblings rushing ahead of older ones as you yourself did, but we don’t do that here. Jacob has just learned why it was wrong for him to deceive his father. Rather than moralize, the Torah lets Jacob discover that people who give themselves permission to lie and cheat find themselves in a world where no one can be trusted.

HALAKHAH L’MA-ASEH

29:27 bridal week On each of the seven nights after a wedding, it is traditional to invite at least one new individual to join family and friends at a festive meal with the bride and groom. If at least 10 adults are present, grace after meals culminates with the recitation of the *sheva b’rakhot* (the seven blessings pronounced during the wedding ceremony) with the blessing over the wine recited last.

serve me another seven years.”²⁸ Jacob did so; he waited out the bridal week of the one, and then he gave him his daughter Rachel as wife.—²⁹ Laban had given his maidservant Bilhah to his daughter Rachel as her maid.—³⁰ And Jacob cohabited with Rachel also; indeed, he loved Rachel more than Leah. And he served him another seven years.

³¹ The LORD saw that Leah was unloved and He opened her womb; but Rachel was barren.

³² Leah conceived and bore a son, and named him Reuben; for she declared, “It means: ‘The

זאת בעבדה אשר תעבד עמדי עוד
שבע־שנים אחרות: ²⁸ ויעש יעקב בן
וימלא שבע זאת ויתן־לו את־רחל בתו
לו לאשה: ²⁹ ויתן לבן לרחל בתו את־
בלהה שפחתו לה לשפחה: ³⁰ ויבא גם
אל־רחל ויאהב גם־את־רחל מלאה
ויעבד עמו עוד שבע־שנים אחרות:
³¹ וירא יהוה כי־שנואה לאה ויפתח
את־רחמה ורחל עקרה: ³² ותהר לאה
ותלד בן ותקרא שמו ראובן כי אמרה

this one,” that is, the seven days of feasting in celebration of a marriage, also mentioned in connection with Samson’s wedding (Judg. 14:12,17).

28. Jacob did so His action violates the law of Lev. 18:18, which prohibits a man from mar-

rying a sister of his wife during the latter’s lifetime. No attempt was made to rewrite this ancient narrative in the light of the morality and law of a later age.

29. Bilhah The Arabic word *balihah* means “innocent, foolish, unconcerned.”

THE BIRTH OF JACOB’S CHILDREN (29:31–30:43)

LEAH’S FOUR SONS (29:31–35)

Jacob’s greater love of Rachel is understandable in the context of his experience with Laban, but that makes the lesser-loved Leah the innocent victim of her father’s duplicity. For this reason, it would appear, she is the beneficiary of God’s compassion and is blessed with many children.

31. unloved The Hebrew word translated here as “unloved” (*s’nu-ah*) literally means “ha-

ted.” When paired with the word meaning “beloved” (*abuvah*) in a context of a husband’s relationship to his co-wives, it does not mean “hated” as against “beloved.” It refers to a degree of preference (see Deut. 21:15).

opened her womb Apparently, she had been childless for a while.

Rachel was barren This remark prepares us for the next episode.

32. Reuben The simplest explanation of

31. unloved The word translated here as “unloved” (*s’nu-ah*) generally means “hated.” Did Jacob hate Leah or only love her less than he loved Rachel? One commentator suggests that Leah hated herself for having tricked Jacob into marrying her. Knowing what we know of human psychology, we can also suspect that Jacob did indeed hate Leah because, by reminding him of the fraudulent circumstances of their wedding, she reminded him of his most shame-

ful memory, the time he deceived his father. We often hate people for confronting us with what we like least about ourselves.

The LORDS saw that Leah was unloved Some human beings abandon their friends when misfortune strikes, but God draws closer to the rejected, the marginalized, the unloved (Tanh. B.) We can only imagine the complicated relationship between the sisters, bound to each other by family ties but competing for the love

HALAKHAH L’MA’ASEH

29:32 named him In the biblical period, the name of a child was chosen for its symbolic meaning. Nowadays, Ashkenazic Jews customarily name children after deceased relatives; and Sephardic Jews, after relatives who are still alive.

LORD has seen my affliction?; it also means: ‘Now my husband will love me.’”³³She conceived again and bore a son, and declared, “This is because the LORD heard that I was unloved and has given me this one also”; so she named him Simeon.³⁴Again she conceived and bore a son and declared, “This time my husband will become attached to me, for I have borne him three sons.” Therefore he was named Levi.³⁵She conceived again and bore a son, and declared, “This time I will praise the LORD.” Therefore she named him Judah. Then she stopped bearing.

כִּי־רָאָה יְהוָה בְּעֵינַי כִּי עָתָה יֵאָהֲבֵנִי אִישִׁי: ³³וַתֵּהָרַע עוֹד וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַתֹּאמֶר בְּיָ- שְׁמַע יְהוָה בִּי־שְׁנוּאָה אֲנֹכִי וַיִּתֶּן־לִי גַם־ אֶת־זֶה וַתִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ שִׁמְעוֹן: ³⁴וַתֵּהָרַע עוֹד וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַתֹּאמֶר עָתָה הִפְעַם יִלְוֶה אִישִׁי אֵלָי כִּי־יִלְדָתִי לוֹ שְׁלֹשָׁה בָנִים עַל־ בֶּן קָרָא־שְׁמוֹ לֵוִי: ³⁵וַתֵּהָרַע עוֹד וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַתֹּאמֶר הִפְעַם אוֹדָה אֶת־יְהוָה עַל־כֵּן קָרָאָה שְׁמוֹ יְהוּדָה וַתִּעְמֹד מִלְדָּת:

30 When Rachel saw that she had borne Jacob no children, she became envious of her sister; and Rachel said to Jacob, “Give me chil-

וַתֵּרָא רָחֵל בִּי לֹא יִלְדָה לִי־עֵקֶב וַתִּקְנֶא רָחֵל בְּאַחֲתָהּ וַתֹּאמֶר אֶל־יַעֲקֹב

the name derives it from two Hebrew words: *r’u ben*, “See, a son!”—a joyous exclamation by parents at the time of birth. Here the name is given a folk etymology that roots it in a Hebrew phrase that sounds like the name: *ra-ah b’onyi*, “He (God) has seen my affliction.”

it also means This is the force of the Hebrew word “*ki*” in this context. The double explanation of a name is a recurring feature in the Torah’s birth narratives.

will love me The last two syllables of the Hebrew word “*ye-ehavani*” (*vani*) echo the final syllable of “*r’uven*,” thereby revealing Leah’s as-

piration to become the *ahuvah*, “the preferred wife.”

33. Simeon The narrative here connects this name with the Hebrew stem שמע, “to hear.”

34. Levi A similar word in inscriptions from the ancient Near East designates a special class of temple slaves, but here the name carries no sacred nuances and simply articulates the mother’s yearning for her husband’s companionship. The name itself means “attached to.”

35. she stopped bearing No reason for this is given, but 30:14–15 indicate that Jacob had ceased sleeping with her.

of the same man. One sister had his love but was infertile, the other had his children but longed for his love. Each diminished the value of what she was blessed with and focused on what she lacked.

35. This time I will praise the LORD The names of Leah’s first three sons reflect her frustrating rivalry with her sister for the love of the husband they share. The reasons given for her choice of names for the first three children say nothing about her hopes for them but focus solely on how the births will affect her marriage. Now, with a fourth son, her mood changes from rivalry to gratitude, so she names him Judah (*Y’hudah*), from a Hebrew root

meaning “to praise.” In the future, the descendants of Jacob will be known as Judeans, or Jews (*Y’hudim*). Yoḥanan stated, “From the beginning of time, no one ever thanked God as Leah did” (BT Ber. 7b). Her heartfelt prayer of thanks reflects her having grown from self-concern and a focus on what she lacked to a genuine sense of appreciation for what was hers.

CHAPTER 30

1. Give me children, or I shall die Is this simply exaggeration, born out of Rachel’s rivalry with Leah? Or is she saying that, without the vicarious immortality conferred by children, her life will disappear when she dies?

dren, or I shall die.”² Jacob was incensed at Rachel, and said, “Can I take the place of God, who has denied you fruit of the womb?”³ She said, “Here is my maid Bilhah. Consort with her, that she may bear on my knees and that through her I too may have children.”⁴ So she gave him her maid Bilhah as concubine, and Jacob cohabited with her.⁵ Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a son.⁶ And Rachel said, “God has vindicated me; indeed, He has heeded my plea and given me a son.” Therefore she named him Dan.⁷ Rachel’s maid Bilhah conceived again and bore Jacob a second son.⁸ And Rachel said, “A fateful contest I waged with my sister; yes, and I have prevailed.” So she named him Naphtali.

THE FOUR SONS OF THE HANDMAIDS (vv. 1–13)

1. or I shall die My life is worthless without children.

3. Here is my maid Rachel, like Sarah before her, resorts to the device of concubinage. See Comments to 16:1–3.

that she may bear on my knees In the ancient Near East, as well as in ancient Greece and Rome, placing a child on or near the knees of another signified acknowledgment of physical parenthood or adoption. Here, because Bilhah is to act as a surrogate mother for Rachel, her offspring have to be accepted and legitimated, which calls for the appropriate symbolic gesture on Rachel’s part.

4. as concubine The text reads literally “as a wife,” but in 35:22 Bilhah is called “a concubine” (*pilegesh*). Zilpah is designated “concubine” in 30:9, and both women are termed “wives” in 37:2. The difference between a con-

הָבָה לִי בָנִים וְאִם-אֵין מִתָּה אָנֹכִי:
וַיַּחַר-אַף יַעֲקֹב בְּרַחֵל וַיֹּאמֶר הֲתַחַת
אֱלֹהִים אָנֹכִי אֲשֶׁר-מָנַע מִמּוֹךְ פְּרִי-בֶטֶן:
וַתֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה אִמְתִּי בְלָהָה בָּא אֵלַיָּהָ
וַתֵּלֶד עַל-בְּרָכִי וְאֶבְנָה גַם-אֶנְכִי מִמֶּנָּה:
וַתִּתֵּן-לוֹ אֶת-בְּלָהָה שִׁפְחָתָהּ לְאִשָּׁה
וַיָּבֵא אֵלַיָּהּ יַעֲקֹב:⁵ וַתְּהַר בְּלָהָה וַתֵּלֶד
לְיַעֲקֹב בֶּן:⁶ וַתֹּאמֶר רַחֵל דָּגַנִּי אֱלֹהִים
וְגַם שָׁמַע בְּקוֹלִי וַיִּתֵּן-לִי בֶן עַל-כֵּן קָרָאת
שְׁמוֹ דָּן:⁷ וַתְּהַר עוֹד וַתֵּלֶד בְּלָהָה שִׁפְחָתָהּ
רַחֵל בֶּן שְׁנֵי לְיַעֲקֹב:⁸ וַתֹּאמֶר רַחֵל
נִפְתּוּלֵי אֱלֹהִים | נִפְתַּלְתִּי עִם-אֶחָתִּי
גַם-יִכְלְתִּי וַתִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ נַפְתָּלִי:
וַתִּרְאֵ לֵאמֹר כִּי עָמְדָה מַלְדָּת וַתִּקַּח אֶת-

cubine and a wife is that no bride-price (*mohar*) is paid for the former. The interchange of terminology shows that in the course of time the distinction in social status between the two often tended to diminish or disappear.

5. Jacob The word *lya-akov*, “to Jacob,” which does not appear in the account of the birth of the previous sons, is placed in an emphatic position in the word order because the paternity of a child born to a maidservant may be uncertain.

6. Dan The name is derived from the stem *ḏn*, “to judge, vindicate, or to bring victory” (see 49:16).

8. Naphtali The name is explained by a unique noun, *naftulim*, usually understood to mean “contest.” The rendering “fateful contest” is based on the occasional use of *elohim*, “God,” to intensify a word. The phrase could also mean “a contest for God,” that is, for divine favor.

9. she had stopped bearing This connects with 29:35. Leah’s resort to concubinage is un-

Ironically, Rachel is destined to die in the act of giving birth to a second child.

2. The Sages criticize Jacob for his insensitive response (Gen. R. 71:10). Might it be that Jacob is disappointed to learn that his love is not enough to satisfy Rachel, that Rachel’s primary passion is to be a mother, not just a wife? (Sforino). Compare the response of another hus-

band, Elkanah, to his wife Hannah in a similar situation, centuries later: “Am I not more devoted to you than ten sons?” (1 Sam. 1:8, in the *haftarah* for the first day of *Rosh ha-Shanah*). The Midrash pictures Rachel reminding Jacob that he was born only after his father Isaac had prayed that his mother be blessed with children (Gen. 25:21; Gen. R. 71:7).

⁹When Leah saw that she had stopped bearing, she took her maid Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as concubine. ¹⁰And when Leah's maid Zilpah bore Jacob a son, ¹¹Leah said, "What luck!" So she named him Gad. ¹²When Leah's maid Zilpah bore Jacob a second son, ¹³Leah declared, "What fortune!" meaning, "Women will deem me fortunate." So she named him Asher.

¹⁴Once, at the time of the wheat harvest, Reuben came upon some mandrakes in the field and brought them to his mother Leah. Rachel said to Leah, "Please give me some of your son's mandrakes." ¹⁵But she said to her, "Was it not enough for you to take away my husband, that you would also take my son's mandrakes?" Rachel replied, "I promise, he shall lie with you tonight, in return for your son's mandrakes." ¹⁶When Jacob came home from the field in the evening, Leah went out to

זְלִפְהָ שִׁפְחָתָהּ וַתִּתֵּן אֹתָהּ לְיַעֲקֹב לְאִשָּׁה: ¹⁰וַתֵּלֶד וַתֵּלֶד לְיַעֲקֹב בֶּן: ¹¹וַתֹּאמֶר לְאִמָּהּ בְּגַד בָּא גָד וַתִּקְרָא אֶת־שְׁמוֹ גָד: ¹²וַתֵּלֶד וַתֵּלֶד שִׁפְחַת לְאִמָּהּ בֶּן שְׁנֵי לְיַעֲקֹב: ¹³וַתֹּאמֶר לְאִמָּהּ בְּאוֹת בָּאוֹת וַתִּקְרָא אֶת־שְׁמוֹ אֲשֵׁר:

¹⁴וַיֵּלֶךְ רְאוּבֵן בְּיָמֵי קְצִיר־חֹטִים וַיִּמְצָא דוּדָאִים בַּשָּׂדֶה וַיָּבֵא אֹתָם אֶל־לֵאָה אָמָּו וַתֹּאמֶר רְחֵל אֶל־לֵאָה תִּנְיֶנָּה לִּי מִדוּדָאֵי בְנֶיךָ: ¹⁵וַתֹּאמֶר לָהּ הֲמַעֲטָ קַחְתְּךָ אֶת־אִישִׁי וְלָקַחְתְּ גַם אֶת־דוּדָאֵי בְנֵי וַתֹּאמֶר רְחֵל לָכֵן יִשְׁכַּב עִמָּךְ הַלַּיְלָה תַּחַת דוּדָאֵי בְנֶיךָ: ¹⁶וַיָּבֵא יַעֲקֹב מִן־הַשָּׂדֶה בָּעֶרֶב וַתֵּצֵא לְאִמָּהּ לְקָרְאָתוֹ וַתֹּאמֶר אֵלַי תָּבוֹא כִּי שָׁכַר שְׂכָרְתִּיךָ

explained. Perhaps she sensed that Jacob wanted more children. Convinced that Rachel could not provide them and facing the fact that her husband did not find her desirable, Leah was prepared to sacrifice her pride and gave her maid for that purpose.

11. Gad The name of the god of fortune and good luck in several ancient Near Eastern cultures. To Leah it is simply a word meaning "luck."

13. Asher This name is derived from the Hebrew stem meaning "happy" (אשר).

THE FOUR SONS OF RACHEL AND LEAH

(vv. 14–24)

THE MANDRAKES (vv. 14–16)

The chronicle of births is briefly interrupted by a minor episode.

14. at the time of the wheat harvest Around May. The dating of events by agricultural seasons is common in the Bible. Ancient Near Eastern archives provide abundant evi-

dence for the involvement of pastoralist nomads in seasonal agricultural activity in the fields near their grazing grounds.

mandrakes The Hebrew term *duda-im* has long been identified with the mandrake—a small, yellow, tomato-like fruit that grows wild in the fields and ripens during March and April. It contains purgative and narcotic substances and was widely used for medicinal purposes in ancient times. It was also believed to have aphrodisiac powers.

15. my husband . . . mandrakes The pairing of these two words intimates that the fruit was to be used to induce Jacob to resume his conjugal duty.

he shall lie with you The nature of this barter arrangement is underlined by the fact that in Genesis when the verb "to lie with" (שכב) is used with a sexual nuance, it never connotes a relationship of marital love but one that takes place under unsavory circumstances.

16. I have hired you The Hebrew word for

HALAKHAH L'MA-ASEH

30:14 mandrakes Rachel apparently wants Reuben's mandrakes as a means to overcome infertility. The CJLS has approved several rulings about current treatments to help infertile couples.

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. ¹⁷God heeded Leah, and she conceived and bore him a fifth son. ¹⁸And Leah said, “God has given me my reward for having given my maid to my husband.” So she named him Issachar. ¹⁹When Leah conceived again and bore Jacob a sixth son, ²⁰Leah said, “God has given me a choice gift; this time my husband will exalt me, for I have borne him six sons.” So she named him Zebulun. ²¹Last, she bore him a daughter, and named her Dinah.

²²Now God remembered Rachel; God heeded her and opened her womb. ²³She conceived and bore a son, and said, “God has taken away my disgrace.” ²⁴So she named him Joseph, which is to say, “May the LORD add another son for me.”

²⁵After Rachel had borne Joseph, Jacob said to Laban, “Give me leave to go back to my own

בְּדוֹדָאֵי בְנֵי וַיִּשְׁכַּב עִמָּהּ בַּלַּיְלָהּ הַזֶּה: ¹⁷וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶל־לֵאָה וַתֵּהָר וַתֵּלֶד לַיֶּעֱקֹב בֶּן חַמִּישִׁי: ¹⁸וַתֹּאמֶר לֵאָה נָתַן אֱלֹהִים שְׂכָרִי אֲשֶׁר־נָתַתִּי שְׁפָחָתִי לְאִישִׁי וַתִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ יִשְׁשַׁכָּר: ¹⁹וַתֵּהָר עוֹד לֵאָה וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן־שְׁשִׁי לַיֶּעֱקֹב: ²⁰וַתֹּאמֶר לֵאָה זָבַדְנִי אֱלֹהִים | אֶתִּי וְזָבַד טוֹב הַפֶּעַם יִזְבְּלֵנִי אִישִׁי כִּי־יִלְדֵתִי לוֹ שְׁשָׂה בָנִים וַתִּקְרָא אֶת־שְׁמוֹ זְבֻלֹן: ²¹וְאַחַר יָלְדָה בֵּת וַתִּקְרָא אֶת־שְׁמָהּ דִּינָה:

²²וַיִּזְכֹּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת־רַחֵל וַיִּשְׁמַע אֲלֶיהָ אֱלֹהִים וַיִּפְתַּח אֶת־רַחְמָהּ: ²³וַתֵּהָר וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַתֹּאמֶר אֶסֶף אֱלֹהִים אֶת־חַרְפָּתִי: ²⁴וַתִּקְרָא אֶת־שְׁמוֹ יוֹסֵף לֵאמֹר יִסֹּף יְהוָה לִי בֶן אַחֵר:

²⁵וַיְהִי כַּאֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה רַחֵל אֶת־יוֹסֵף וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב אֶל־לָבָן שְׁלַחֲנִי וְאֶלְכָה אֶל־

“hire” (שכר) points to a folk etymology for Issachar, who is to issue from this rendezvous.

18. Issachar This explanation connects the name with the action of verse 9 and suggests “there is a reward” (*yesh sakhar*), an affirmation of belief in divine providence.

20. Zebulun Two folk etymologies are given for this name. The first is based on similarity of sound with the two initial consonants of the stem זבד, “to give, grant.” It appears as a verb only here in the Bible but is known from Syriac and Arabic. The second connects the name with the stem זבל, which is now known from Ugaritic and means “to raise up.”

this time Leah’s yearning for her husband’s attention and esteem following the birth of her sixth son echoes her plea after the arrival of the third son (29:34).

21. Dinah Her birth is announced in an

offhand manner and no explanation is given for her name.

22. God remembered For the significance of this phrase, see Comment to 8:1.

23–24. Joseph The two Hebrew verbs “*asaf*” (take away) and “*yosef*” (add) provide a double etymology for the name. The first looks back to the past years of shame and anguish, the second looks forward to an even greater measure of joy. With the announcement about Joseph, the birth narrative, which opens and closes with the use of the divine name *YHVH* (29:31, 30:24), is completed.

JACOB AND LABAN: A NEW CONTRACT (vv. 25–43)

25. Give me leave to go back Jacob formally asks Laban to permit him to return with his wives and children to his native land. By the

24. When Rachel finally bears a child, her response to one of the most physically painful experiences a person can undergo is to pray to undergo it again.

25–43. What does this complicated narrative represent? Jacob and Laban agree to a wager to determine Jacob’s compensation. The terms favor Laban, but Jacob relies on God to sustain

homeland. ²⁶Give me my wives and my children, for whom I have served you, that I may go; for well you know what services I have rendered you.” ²⁷But Laban said to him, “If you will indulge me, I have learned by divination that the LORD has blessed me on your account.” ²⁸And he continued, “Name the wages due from me, and I will pay you.” ²⁹But he said, “You know well how I have served you and how your livestock has fared with me. ³⁰For the little you had before I came has grown to much, since the LORD has blessed you wherever I turned. And now, when shall I make provision for my own household?” ³¹He said, “What shall I pay you?” And Jacob said, “Pay me nothing! If you will do this thing for me, I will again pasture and keep your flocks: ³²let me pass through your whole flock today, removing from there every speckled and spotted animal—every dark-colored sheep and every spotted and speckled goat. Such shall be my wages. ³³In the future when you go over my wages, let my honesty toward you testify for me: if there are among my goats any that are not speckled or spotted or any sheep that are not dark-colored, they got

מְקוֹמִי וְלְאֶרְצִי: ²⁶תִּנְּה אֶת־נְשֵׁי וְאֶת־
 יְלָדָי אֲשֶׁר עֲבַדְתִּי אִתְּךָ בְּהֵן וְאֶלְכָה בִּי
 אִתְּךָ יָדַעְתָּ אֶת־עֲבַדְתִּי אֲשֶׁר עֲבַדְתִּיךָ:
²⁷וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו לָבָן אִם־נָא מִצְאֵתִי חֵן
 בְּעֵינֶיךָ נְחַשְׁתִּי וַיְבַרְכֵנִי יְהוָה בְּגִלְלָהּ:
²⁸וַיֹּאמֶר נִקְבָה שְׂכָרְךָ עָלַי וְאֶתְנָה:
²⁹וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אִתְּךָ יָדַעְתָּ אֵת אֲשֶׁר
 עֲבַדְתִּיךָ וְאֵת אֲשֶׁר־הָיָה מִקְנֶךָ אִתִּי:
³⁰כִּי מְעַט אֲשֶׁר־הָיָה לְךָ לִפְנָי וַיִּפְרָץ
 לְרֹב וַיְבַרְכֶךָ יְהוָה אִתְּךָ לְרִגְלֵי וְעֵתָה
 מַתִּי אֶעֱשֶׂה גַם־אֲנֹכִי לְבֵיתִי: ³¹וַיֹּאמֶר
 מָה אֶתְּוֹן לְךָ וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב לֹא־תִתֶּן־
 לִי מְאוֹמָה אִם־תַּעֲשֶׂה־לִּי הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה
 אֲשׁוּבָה אֶרְעֶה צֹאנֶךָ אֲשֶׁמֶר: ³²אֶעֱבֹר
 בְּכָל־צֹאנֶךָ הַיּוֹם הַסֵּר מִשָּׁם כָּל־שֶׂה |
 נִקְדָּ וּטְלוֹא וְכָל־שֶׂה־חוּם בְּבָשָׂבִים
 וּטְלוֹא וְנִקְדָּ בְּעֵינִים וְהָיָה שְׂכָרִי:
³³וְעָנְתָה־בִּי צְדָקְתִּי בַּיּוֹם מִחֵר בִּי־תָבוֹא
 עַל־שְׂכָרִי לִפְנֶיךָ כֹּל אֲשֶׁר־אֵינְנוּ נִקְדָּ

חמישי

terms of the original contract with Laban (as explained in the Comment to 29:18), Jacob’s status was that of an indentured servant paying off a debt. In this case, the debt was the bride-price for his employer’s two daughters.

27. I have learned by divination This is the traditional rendering of the Hebrew word *nihashiti*. But there is an Akkadian verb *nahashu*, which means “to prosper”; and Laban is probably saying here, “I have become prosperous, seeing that God has blessed me on your account.”

28. Name the wages Laban is reluctant to lose the skilled services of Jacob, so he ignores

the request to depart and pretends to understand Jacob’s remarks as the opening bid in a haggle over the price of future service.

29. how I have served you Jacob disregards Laban’s question and astutely drives home the point about his own decisive role in Laban’s success.

32. every dark-colored sheep In the Near East, sheep are generally white and goats are dark brown or black. A minority of sheep may have dark patches, and goats white markings. It is these uncommon types to be born in the future that Jacob demands as wages for his unpaid services.

him. Laban, unsatisfied with natural advantage, tries to trick Jacob. Jacob responds with trickery to protect his interests. After 20 years

of living with Laban, Jacob has come to resemble Laban as a master of guile.

there by theft.”³⁴ And Laban said, “Very well, let it be as you say.”

³⁵But that same day he removed the streaked and spotted he-goats and all the speckled and spotted she-goats—every one that had white on it—and all the dark-colored sheep, and left them in the charge of his sons. ³⁶And he put a distance of three days’ journey between himself and Jacob, while Jacob was pasturing the rest of Laban’s flock.

³⁷Jacob then got fresh shoots of poplar, and of almond and plane, and peeled white stripes in them, laying bare the white of the shoots. ³⁸The rods that he had peeled he set up in front of the goats in the troughs, the water receptacles, that the goats came to drink from. Their mating occurred when they came to drink, ³⁹and since the goats mated by the rods, the goats brought forth streaked, speckled, and spotted young. ⁴⁰But Jacob dealt separately with the sheep; he made these animals face the streaked or wholly dark-colored animals in Laban’s flock. And so he produced special flocks for himself, which he did not put with Laban’s flocks. ⁴¹Moreover, when the sturdier animals were mating, Jacob would place the rods in the troughs, in full view of the animals, so that they mated by the rods; ⁴²but with the feebler animals he would not place them there. Thus the feeble ones went to Laban and the sturdy to Jacob. ⁴³So the man grew exceedingly prosperous, and came to own large flocks, maidservants and menservants, camels and asses.

וּטְלוּא בְּעֵזִים וְחוּם בְּכִשְׁבִּים גָּנוּב הוּא אֲתִי: ³⁴וַיֹּאמֶר לְבָן הֵן לִי יְהִי כְדַבְּרְךָ: ³⁵וַיֵּסֶר בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא אֶת־הַתִּישִׁים הָעֶקְדִים וְהַטְּלָאִים וְאֵת כָּל־הָעֵזִים הַנְּקֻדֹת וְהַטְּלָאֹת כָּל אֲשֶׁר־לְבָן בּוֹ וְכָל־חוּם בְּכִשְׁבִּים וַיִּתֵּן בֵּי־בָנָיו: ³⁶וַיֵּשֶׁם דֶּרֶךְ שְׁלֹשַׁת יָמִים בֵּינוֹ וּבֵין יַעֲקֹב וַיַּעֲקֹב רָעָה אֶת־צֹאן לְבָן הַנוֹתְרָת:

³⁷וַיִּקַּח־לוֹ יַעֲקֹב מִקָּל לְבָנָה לַח וְלוֹז וְעֶרְמוֹן וַיִּפְצֹל בָּהֶן פְּצָלוֹת לְבָנוֹת מִחוּשָׁף הַלְבָן אֲשֶׁר עַל־הַמְּקָלוֹת: ³⁸וַיִּצַּג אֶת־הַמְּקָלוֹת אֲשֶׁר פָּצַל בְּרֵהֻטִים בְּשִׁקְתוֹת הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר תְּבֹאֵן הַצֹּאן לְשִׁתוֹת לְנֹכַח הַצֹּאן וַיִּחְמְנָה בְּבֹאֵן לְשִׁתוֹת: ³⁹וַיִּחְמוּ הַצֹּאן אֶל־הַמְּקָלוֹת וַתִּלְדֹּן הַצֹּאן עֶקְדִים נְקֻדִים וּטְלָאִים: ⁴⁰וְהַכְּשָׁבִים הִפְרִיד יַעֲקֹב וַיִּתֵּן פָּנָיו הַצֹּאן אֶל־עֵקֶד וְכָל־חוּם בְּצֹאן לְבָן וַיִּשֶׁת־לוֹ עֲדָרִים לְבָדוֹ וְלֹא שָׁתָם עַל־צֹאן לְבָן: ⁴¹וְהָיָה בְּכָל־יָחַם הַצֹּאן הַמְּקַשְׁרוֹת וְשָׁם יַעֲקֹב אֶת־הַמְּקָלוֹת לְעֵינֵי הַצֹּאן בְּרֵהֻטִים לְיִחְמְנָה בַּמְּקָלוֹת: ⁴²וּבַהֲעֵטִיף* הַצֹּאן לֹא יִשִּׁים וְהָיָה הָעֵטָפִים לְלְבָן וְהַקְּשָׁרִים לְיַעֲקֹב: ⁴³וַיִּפְרֹץ הָאִישׁ מְאֹד מְאֹד וַיְהִי־לוֹ צֹאן רַבּוֹת וּשְׁפָחוֹת וְעֶבְדִים וְגַמְלִים וְחֹמְרִים:

v. 42. ה' רבתי לפי מהדרות לעטעריס

34. Very well Laban readily agrees, believing that he is getting a bargain on account of the rarity of the animals that Jacob wants.

36. three days’ journey See Comment to 22:4.

38. The rods that he had peeled The folk-

lore of the time believed that sheep seeing striped rods would bear striped young.

43. exceedingly prosperous God’s promise has been fulfilled.

came to own Jacob was able to barter the rare sheep and goats for these other possessions.

31 Now he heard the things that Laban's sons were saying: "Jacob has taken all that was our father's, and from that which was our father's he has built up all this wealth." ²Jacob also saw that Laban's manner toward him was not as it had been in the past. ³Then the LORD said to Jacob, "Return to the land of your fathers where you were born, and I will be with you." ⁴Jacob had Rachel and Leah called to the field, where his flock was, ⁵and said to them, "I see that your father's manner toward me is not as it has been in the past. But the God of my father has been with me. ⁶As you know, I have served your father with all my might; ⁷but your father has cheated me, changing my wages time and again. God, however, would not let him do me harm. ⁸If he said thus, 'The speckled shall be your wages,' then all the flocks would drop speckled young; and if he said thus, 'The streaked shall be your wages,' then all the flocks would drop streaked young. ⁹God has taken away your father's livestock and given it to me.

לא וישמע את דברי בני לבן לאמר לקח יעקב את כל אשר לאבינו ומאשר לאבינו עשה את כל הפבד הזה: ² וירא יעקב את פני לבן והנה איננו עמו כתמול שלשום: ³ ויאמר יהוה אלי יעקב שוב אל ארץ אבותיך ולמולדתך ואהיה עמך: ⁴ וישלח יעקב ויקרא לרחל וללאה השדה אל צאנו: ⁵ ויאמר להן ראה אנכי את פני אביכון כי איננו אלי כתמול שלשם ואלהי אבי היה עמדי: ⁶ ואתנה ידעתי כי בכל כחי עבדתי את אביכון: ⁷ ואביכון התל בי והחלף את משפתי עשרת מנים ולא נתנו אלהים להרע עמדי: ⁸ אם כה יאמר נקדים יהיה שכרך וילדו כל הצאן נקדים ואם כה יאמר עקדים יהיה שכרך וילדו כל הצאן עקדים: ⁹ ויצל אלהים את מקנה אביכם ויתן לי:

JACOB AND LABAN: THE FINALE (31:1–32:3)

JACOB CONSULTS WITH HIS WIVES

(vv. 1–16)

1. he heard the things Jacob hears what is being said about him, and observes Laban's changed attitude.

3. the LORD said Any doubt as to his proper course of action is now dispelled by God's command and reassurance of protection.

4. called to the field While shepherding his flock in the open field, Jacob can summon Rachel and Leah without arousing suspicion. At

the same time, the locale affords protection from eavesdroppers. He must consult with his wives. The concubines are excluded because their lower social status makes it unnecessary for Jacob to seek their agreement to his plan.

7. time and again The Hebrew phrase *aseret monim*, literally, "10 times," is used here in the sense of "repeatedly."

9. taken away The verb *va-yatzel*, a form of *hitzil*, usually means "saved" but here it is used in the sense of "taking back."

CHAPTER 31

5–7. Jacob credits God for his good fortune,

even as he did in Gen. 27:20. There this manner of speaking was deemed "the voice of Jacob" by his father, Isaac (27:22).

HALAKHAH L'MA-ASEH

31:4 Rachel and Leah Whenever the two sisters are listed together in the Bible, Rachel is listed first. Consequently, Rachel is also listed before Leah in the parental blessing recited over daughters on Friday night, and in other prayers whenever the Matriarchs are included in Conservative movement liturgy.

¹⁰“Once, at the mating time of the flocks, I had a dream in which I saw that the he-goats mating with the flock were streaked, speckled, and mottled. ¹¹And in the dream an angel of God said to me, ‘Jacob!’ ‘Here,’ I answered. ¹²And he said, ‘Note well that all the he-goats which are mating with the flock are streaked, speckled, and mottled; for I have noted all that Laban has been doing to you. ¹³I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and where you made a vow to Me. Now, arise and leave this land and return to your native land.”

¹⁴Then Rachel and Leah answered him, saying, “Have we still a share in the inheritance of our father’s house? ¹⁵Surely, he regards us as outsiders, now that he has sold us and has used up our purchase price. ¹⁶Truly, all the wealth that God has taken away from our father belongs to us and to our children. Now then, do just as God has told you.”

¹⁷Thereupon Jacob put his children and wives on camels; ¹⁸and he drove off all his livestock and all the wealth that he had amassed,

וַיְהִי בְעֵת יַחַם הַצֹּאן וְאִשָּׁא עֵינַי וָאֲרָא
בַּחֲלוֹם וְהִנֵּה הָעֵתָדִים הָעֹלִים עַל־הַצֹּאן
עֹקְדִים נִקְדִּים וּבְרָדִים: ¹¹ וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלַי
מִלְאָךְ הָאֱלֹהִים בַּחֲלוֹם יַעֲקֹב וָאָמַר
הַנְּנִי: ¹² וַיֹּאמֶר שָׂא־נָא עֵינֶיךָ וּרְאֵה כָּל־
הָעֵתָדִים הָעֹלִים עַל־הַצֹּאן עֹקְדִים
נִקְדִּים וּבְרָדִים כִּי רָאִיתִי אֶת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר
לָבָן עָשָׂה לָךְ: ¹³ אֲנֹכִי הָאֵל בֵּית־אֵל
אֲשֶׁר מִשְׁחַתָּ שָׁם מִצְבֵּה אֲשֶׁר נָדַרְתָּ לִּי
שָׁם נָדַר עִתָּה קוּם צֵא מִן־הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת
וְשׁוּב אֶל־אָרֶץ מוֹלְדְּתֶךָ:

¹⁴ וַתַּעַן רַחֵל וְלֵאָה וַתֹּאמְרֶנָּה לוֹ הָעוֹד
לָנוּ חֵלֶק וְנַחֲלָה בְּבֵית אָבִינוּ: ¹⁵ הֲלוֹא
נִבְרִיּוֹת נָחַשְׁבָנוּ לוֹ כִּי מִכְרָנוּ וַיֹּאכַל גַּם־
אָכֹל אֶת־כֶּסְפֵנוּ: ¹⁶ כִּי כָל־הָעֶשֶׂר אֲשֶׁר
הֵצִיל אֱלֹהִים מֵאֵבִינוּ לָנוּ הוּא וּלְבָנֵינוּ
וְעִתָּה כֹּל אֲשֶׁר אָמַר אֱלֹהִים אֵלֶיךָ עָשָׂה:
¹⁷ וַיִּקַּם יַעֲקֹב וַיִּשָּׂא אֶת־בָּנָיו וְאֶת־נָשָׁיו
עַל־הַגְּמֵלִים: ¹⁸ וַיִּנְהַג אֶת־כָּל־מִקְנֵהוּ

10. I had a dream Jacob credits his sheep-breeding strategy to the inspiration of a dream vision.

12. for I have noted Literally, “saw,” a term frequently used to express God’s compassionate response to a suffering victim.

13. I am the God of Bethel The title is not intended to limit God to a specific locale but to call to mind the original revelation to Jacob, specifically the promise of constant protection and safe return.

14. Have we still a share A rhetorical question.

15. as outsiders By not giving them their share of the bride-price (*mohar*), Laban treated them from the beginning as though they were

not part of the clan. Hence, they considered themselves as “being sold,” rather than married off.

and has used up our purchase price Literally, “and has eaten up our money.” A similar statement is found in Akkadian sources, with the same meaning.

16. belongs to us The wives fully agree with Jacob’s claim of good title to his wealth.

THE ESCAPE (vv. 17–21)

18. that he had amassed . . . in his possession that he had acquired This cluster of phrases underscores Jacob’s claim to absolute and rightful ownership of all his possessions.

13. The angel’s message to Jacob is, “Once you dreamed of stairways leading to heaven. Now you dream of how to increase the number of sheep and goats you own. You have been corrupted by the values of Laban’s world. The

time has come for you to leave this place and return to the Land.”

15. he regards us as outsiders He did not treat us as daughters when he bartered us for 14 years of unpaid labor.

the livestock in his possession that he had acquired in Paddan-aram, to go to his father Isaac in the land of Canaan.

¹⁹Meanwhile Laban had gone to shear his sheep, and Rachel stole her father's household idols. ²⁰Jacob kept Laban the Aramean in the dark, not telling him that he was fleeing, ²¹and fled with all that he had. Soon he was across the Euphrates and heading toward the hill country of Gilead.

²²On the third day, Laban was told that Jacob had fled. ²³So he took his kinsmen with him and pursued him a distance of seven days, catching up with him in the hill country of Gilead. ²⁴But God appeared to Laban the Aramean in a dream by night and said to him, "Beware of attempting anything with Jacob, good or bad."

²⁵Laban overtook Jacob. Jacob had pitched his tent on the Height, and Laban with his kins-

וְאֶת־כְּלֵי־רֶכֶשׁוֹ אֲשֶׁר רָכַשׂ מִקְנֵהוּ קָנְיָנוּ
אֲשֶׁר רָכַשׂ בְּפָדֵן אֲרָם לָבוֹא אֶל־יַצְחָק
אָבִיו אֶרְצָה בְּנֻעַן:

¹⁹וְלָבָן הָלַךְ לְגִזּוֹ אֶת־צֹאֲנוֹ וּתְגַנֵּב רְחֹל
אֶת־הַתְּרָפִים אֲשֶׁר לְאִבֵּיהֶּ: ²⁰וַיִּגְנֹב
יַעֲקֹב אֶת־לֵב לָבָן הָאֲרָמִי עַל־בְּלִי הַגִּיד
לוֹ כִּי בָרַח הוּא: ²¹וַיִּבְרַח הוּא וְכָל־
אֲשֶׁר־לוֹ וַיִּקָּם וַיַּעֲבֹר אֶת־הַנָּהָר וַיֵּשֶׁם
אֶת־פָּנָיו הַר הַגְּלָעָד:

²²וַיִּגַּד לְלָבָן בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי כִּי בָרַח
יַעֲקֹב: ²³וַיִּקַּח אֶת־אָחִיו עִמּוֹ וַיִּרְדֹּף
אֶחָיו דֶּרֶךְ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים וַיִּדְבֹּק אֹתוֹ
בְּהַר הַגְּלָעָד: ²⁴וַיִּבֹּא אֱלֹהִים אֶל־לָבָן
הָאֲרָמִי בַחֲלֹם הַלַּיְלָה וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ הַשְׁמַר
לְךָ פֶּן־תִּדְבֹּר עִם־יַעֲקֹב מִטּוֹב עַד־רָע:

²⁵וַיִּשָּׁג לָבָן אֶת־יַעֲקֹב וַיַּעֲקֹב תִּקַּע אֶת־
אָהָלוֹ בְּהָר וְלָבָן תִּקַּע אֶת־אָחִיו בְּהָר

19. to shear his sheep In Mesopotamia, sheep shearing took place in the spring. It entailed much hard work on the part of a large number of men who often had to labor at a considerable distance from their homes for extended periods of time. Thus Laban, his sons, and his menfolk would all be far away and busily preoccupied—an ideal time for Jacob to make his departure.

Rachel stole The text clearly describes her act as thievery.

household idols They are called *t'rafim* in Hebrew, derived from the Hittite word *"tarpi."* Ancient versions of the text, such as the Aramaic Targums and the Greek Septuagint, translate the word as "idols." They are believed to have been the household gods who ensured the well-being of the family.

20. the Aramean The emphasis on Laban's ethnic affiliation, here and again in verse 24, alerts the reader to the fact that Laban and Jacob are now totally alienated from each other and represent two distinct peoples.

21. the hill country of Gilead This disig-

nation is very general. Apparently it covers the entire plateau region east of the river Jordan between the Yarmuk, which flows into the Jordan just below the Sea of Galilee, and the northern shore of the Dead Sea.

LABAN IN HOT PURSUIT (vv. 22–35)

22–23. third day . . . seven days These are symbolic numbers that indicate significant segments of time. The distance of 400 miles (640 km) between Haran and Gilead could not have been covered by Jacob and his large entourage in 10 days. That would have involved an average rate of travel of about 40 miles (64 km) a day, and evidence from the ancient Near East suggests that a daily progress of no more than about 6 miles (9.65 km) could be expected in these circumstances.

24. attempting anything Once he has Jacob in sight, Laban encamps for the night without making contact. He then experiences the dream.

25. on the Height . . . in the hill country The contrast suggests two separate and adjacent

19. Although Rachel probably took the *t'rafim* because she believed in their power, the

Sages credit her with taking them to prevent her father from continuing to worship them.

men encamped in the hill country of Gilead.
²⁶And Laban said to Jacob, “What did you mean by keeping me in the dark and carrying off my daughters like captives of the sword?
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.’
³⁰Very well, you had to leave because you were longing for your father’s house; but why did you steal my gods?”

³¹Jacob answered Laban, saying, “I was afraid because I thought you would take your daughters from me by force.
³²But anyone with whom you find your gods shall not remain alive! In the presence of our kinsmen, point out what I have of yours and take it.” Jacob, of course, did not know that Rachel had stolen them.

sites that face one another, possibly Mizpah and Mount Gilead.

26. What did you mean Literally, “What have you done?” Laban opens with a phrase that invariably introduces an accusation of wrongdoing (see 29:25).

27. with festive music Laban is referring either to a farewell of a social nature or to some formal, ceremonious leave-taking procedure.

29. I have it in my power Laban apparently regards Jacob as a member of his clan who deserves punishment for violating its rules and mores. In deference to the divine admonition, however, he will not exact retribution.

30. why did you steal my gods In the first

הַגִּלְעָד: ²⁶וַיֹּאמֶר לְבָן לְיַעֲקֹב מַה עָשִׂיתָ וַתִּגְנֹב אֶת־לִבִּי וַתְּנַהֵג אֶת־בָּנֹתַי כְּשָׁבוּיֹת חָרֹב: ²⁷לָמָּה נִחַבְתָּ לְבָרַח וַתִּגְנֹב אֹתִי וְלֹא־הִגַּדְתָּ לִּי וְאַשְׁלַחְךָ בְּשִׂמְחָה וּבְשָׂרִים בְּתוֹךְ וּבְכִנּוֹר: ²⁸וְלֹא נִטְשָׁתָנִי לְנִשְׁק לְבָנַי וּלְבָנֹתַי עִתָּה הַסְּבַלְתָּ עֵשׂוֹ: ²⁹יֵשׁ־לֵאֵל יָדַי לַעֲשׂוֹת עִמָּכֶם רַע וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבִיכֶם אָמַשׁ | אָמַר אֵלַי לֵאמֹר הַשְׁמֹר לָךְ מִדְּבַר עַם־יַעֲקֹב מִטּוֹב עַד־רָע: ³⁰וְעִתָּה הֲלֹךְ הַלֵּכְתָּ כִּי־נִכְסָף נִכְסַפְתָּה לְבַיִת אָבִיךָ לָמָּה גִנַּבְתָּ אֶת־אֱלֹהֵי:

³¹וַיַּעַן יַעֲקֹב וַיֹּאמֶר לְלָבָן כִּי יָרֵאתִי כִּי אֲמַרְתִּי פְּוִתְגֹזֵל אֶת־בָּנוֹתַיךָ מֵעַמִּי: ³²עַם אֲשֶׁר תִּמְצָא אֶת־אֱלֹהֶיךָ לֹא יִחִיָּה נֶגְדַּ אֲחִינוּ הַכֹּרֵלְךָ מַה עִמָּדִי וְקַח־לְךָ וְלֹא־יָדַע יַעֲקֹב כִּי רָחַל גִּנְבָתָם:

part of the verse, Laban reinforces his false magnanimity with a show of empathy. Having lulled Jacob into a false sense of relief, he then proceeds to deliver the most serious charge of all: theft of his gods.

31. Jacob answered His flight was justified, Jacob claims, by his fear that Laban might have robbed him of his wives by force. To Jacob, this was a more realistic prospect than the joyous send-off that Laban had described in v. 27.

32. shall not remain alive Outright rejection of the final charge takes the form of a fearful condemnation. It is uncertain whether the phrase here has judicial or merely rhetorical force. Sacrilege was severely dealt with in the an-

30. why did you steal my gods When Jews imitate the religious practices of their neighbors, the neighbors may not be flattered. They may resent seeing things that are sacred to them used in a nonreligious manner (Israel H. Levinthal).

32. anyone with whom you find your gods

shall not remain alive Jacob's curse will find its fulfillment in Rachel's death in childbirth (35:19). On the other hand, the Hatam Sofer interprets the verse as “anyone who finds your idols will realize that they, the idols, are not alive and there is no reason to be upset about their disappearance.”

³³So Laban went into Jacob’s tent and Leah’s tent and the tents of the two maidservants; but he did not find them. Leaving Leah’s tent, he entered Rachel’s tent. ³⁴Rachel, meanwhile, had taken the idols and placed them in the camel cushion and sat on them; and Laban rummaged through the tent without finding them. ³⁵For she said to her father, “Let not my lord take it amiss that I cannot rise before you, for the period of women is upon me.” Thus he searched, but could not find the household idols.

³⁶Now 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? ³⁷You rummaged 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.

³⁸“These twenty years I have spent in your

וַיָּבֹא לְבָן בְּאֵהָל יַעֲקֹב | וּבְאֵהָל לֵאָה
 וּבְאֵהָל שְׁתֵּי הָאִמָּהוֹת וְלֹא מָצָא וַיֵּצֵא
 מֵאֵהָל לֵאָה וַיָּבֹא בְּאֵהָל רָחֵל: ³⁴ וַרְחֵל
 לָקְחָה אֶת־הַתְּרָפִים וַתְּשִׂמֵם בְּכַר הַגְּמַל
 וַתֵּשֶׁב עֲלֵיהֶם וַיִּמְשֵׁשׁ לְבָן אֶת־כָּל־
 הָאֵהָל וְלֹא מָצָא: ³⁵ וַתֹּאמֶר אֶל־אָבִיהָ
 אֶל־יָחַר בְּעֵינַי אֲדֹנָי כִּי לֹא אֹכֵל לְקֹם
 מִפְּנֵיךָ כִּי־דָרְךָ נָשִׂים לִי וַיַּחְפֹּשׂ וְלֹא מָצָא
 אֶת־הַתְּרָפִים:

³⁶ וַיַּחֲרֹ לְיַעֲקֹב וַיִּרֶב בְּלִבּוֹ וַיַּעַן יַעֲקֹב
 וַיֹּאמֶר לְלִבָּן מִה־פִּשְׁעֵי מַה חֲטָאתִי כִּי
 דָּלַקְתָּ אַחֲרָי: ³⁷ כִּי־מִשְׁשַׁתָּ אֶת־כָּל־כְּלֵי
 מַה־מִּצְאָתְךָ מִכָּל כְּלֵי־בֵיתְךָ שֵׂים כֹּה נָגַד
 אֲחִי וְאַחִירָה וַיִּזְכְּחוּ בֵּין שְׁנֵינוּ:
³⁸ זֶה עֲשָׂרִים שָׁנָה אָנֹכִי עִמָּךְ רְחֵלִיךָ

v. 35. מלא ו

cient Near East, but it did not always incur the death penalty.

34. camel cushion In a relief uncovered in northern Syria, dating from 900 B.C.E., a camel driver is shown seated on a boxlike object that serves as a riding saddle and as a pack saddle. It is secured to the camel by straps.

35. I cannot rise before you Rachel apologizes that her indisposition prevents her from paying her father proper filial respect.

the period of women Rachel’s condition deters Laban from searching the camel cushion. He cannot approach her, and he cannot imagine that she would ever sit on his “gods” in a state of menstrual impurity. The ancients regarded menstrual flow as a potently contaminating substance, and the menstruant was thought to be possessed by evil spirits, thus requiring her separation from other persons.

JACOB’S RESPONSE (vv. 36–43)

According to ancient law, the futility of Laban’s search for his property is proof of Jacob’s innocence. At that, 20 years of suppressed anger suddenly find expression in Jacob’s outpouring of righteous indignation.

36. became incensed By searching Jacob’s tent, Laban had shown that he really believed him to be guilty of theft.

took up his grievance It is Jacob who now becomes the aggrieved party, and Laban the accused.

37. What have you found Jacob believes that Laban used the issue of the *terafim* as a pretext and that he really suspected his son-in-law of stealing much more from him.

let them decide Jacob calls on the kinsmen of each side to form a tribunal and to decide which of the rivals is the real thief.

38–42 As Jacob finally stands up for himself to his father-in-law, our sympathies are enlisted on behalf of the laborer cheated by his master. Although there were laws protecting

the worker in Aramean society, there was no one to whom Jacob could appeal. The Torah consistently portrays God as protector of the weak and the vulnerable (cf. Lev. 19:13).

service, your ewes and she-goats never miscarried, nor did I feast on rams from your flock.³⁹ That which was torn by beasts I never brought to you; I myself made good the loss; you exacted it of me, whether snatched by day or snatched by night.⁴⁰ Often, scorching heat ravaged me by day and frost by night; and sleep fled from my eyes.⁴¹ Of the twenty years that I spent in your household, I served you fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for your flocks; and you changed my wages time and again.⁴² Had not the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, been with me, you would have sent me away empty-handed. But God took notice of my plight and the toil of my hands, and He gave judgment last night.”

⁴³Then Laban spoke up and said to Jacob, “The daughters are my daughters, the children are my children, and the flocks are my flocks; all that you see is mine. Yet what can I do now about my daughters or the children they have borne? ⁴⁴Come, then, let us make a pact, you and I, that there may be a witness between you and me.” ⁴⁵Thereupon Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar. ⁴⁶And Jacob said to his kins-

וְעֵזְרָךְ לֹא שָׁפְלוּ וְאֵילֵי צֹאנְךָ לֹא אֶכְלָתִי:
 39 טִרְפָּה לֹא־הִבַּאתִי אֵלֶיךָ אֲנֹכִי אֶחְטֹטָהּ
 מִיָּדִי תִּבְקֶשְׁנָה גִּנַּבְתִּי יוֹם וּגְנַבְתִּי לַיְלָה:
 40 הֵייתִי בַיּוֹם אֶכְלַנִּי חֹרֵב וְקָרַח בַּלַּיְלָה
 וְתוֹדַד שְׁנָתִי מֵעֵינַי: 41 זֶה־לִּי עֲשָׂרִים שָׁנָה
 בְּבֵיתְךָ עֲבַדְתִּיךָ אַרְבַּע־עָשָׂרָה שָׁנָה
 בְּשֵׁתִי בְנִתִּיךָ וְשֵׁשׁ שָׁנִים בְּצֹאנְךָ וְתַחֲלַף
 אֶת־מִשְׁכָּרְתִּי עֲשָׂרַת מָנִים: 42 לֹלֵאִי
 אֱלֹהֵי אָבִי אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם וּפְחַד יִצְחָק
 הָיָה לִּי כִּי עָתָה רִיקָם שְׁלַחְתָּנִי אֶת־
 עֵנִי וְאֶת־יָגִיעַ כְּפִי רָאָה אֱלֹהִים וַיּוֹכַח
 אִמְשׁ:

43 וַיַּעַן לָבָן וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־יַעֲקֹב הַבְּנוֹת בְּנֹתַי
 וְהַבָּנִים בְּנֵי וְהַצֹּאן צֹאנִי וְכָל אֲשֶׁר־אַתָּה
 רָאָה לִי־הוּא וְלִבְנֹתַי מִה־אֲעֹשֶׂה לְאֵלֶּהָ
 הַיּוֹם אֹו לְבְנֵיהֶן אֲשֶׁר יִלְדוּ: 44 וְעָתָה
 לְכֶה נְכַרְתָּה בְרִית אֲנִי וְאַתָּה וְהָיָה לְעַד
 בֵּינֵנוּ וּבֵינֶךָ: 45 וַיִּקַּח יַעֲקֹב אֶבֶן וַיְרִימָהּ
 מִצְבָּה: 46 וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב לְאַחֵיו לְקַטְּוּ

38. never miscarried This is another way of saying, “I was never negligent but always exercised tender care and due diligence with the flock.”

39. I myself made good the loss Jacob is accusing Laban of violating ancient Near Eastern law and custom, which stipulated that a shepherd under contract was liable for only lost or stolen sheep.

42. the God of my father On this title, see Comment to 26:24.

the Fear of Isaac This unique title of God, “*Pahad Yitzhak*,” found also in verse 53, conveys a double meaning: “The One Whom Isaac Reveres” and “The One of Isaac Who Caused Terror.” This latter nuance is a reference to Laban’s dream, the source of which he recognized to be the God of Jacob’s father (v. 29). It may also mean “the kinsman of Isaac.”

43. Then Laban spoke up Exposed as a

scoundrel, Laban tries to cover his loss of face with empty rhetoric. It is as though he were saying, “All the same, were it not for me, you would still be a nobody possessing nothing. Besides, how could you think I might harm my own offspring?”

THE PACT BETWEEN LABAN AND JACOB (vv. 44–54)

To show good faith, Laban now proposes that he and Jacob conclude a pact of mutual nonaggression. In legal terms, it means that he tacitly acknowledges Jacob as constituting a separate, independent social entity of equal status.

44. that there may be a witness Literally, “It shall constitute.” The pact itself is testimony to the state of relationships between the parties.

45. pillar See Comment to 28:18.

46. his kinsmen The term apparently embraces all present on both sides (see v. 54).

men, “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. ⁴⁸And Laban declared, “This mound is a witness between you and me this day.” That is why it was named Gal-ed; ⁴⁹and [it was called] Mizpah, because he said, “May the LORD watch between you and me, when we are out of sight of each other. ⁵⁰If you ill-treat my daughters or take other wives besides my daughters—though no one else be about, remember, God Himself will be witness between you and me.”

⁵¹And Laban said to Jacob, “Here is this mound and here the pillar which I have set up between you and me: ⁵²this 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. ⁵³May the God of Abraham and the god of Nahor”—their ancestral deities—“judge between us.” And Jacob swore by the Fear of his father Isaac. ⁵⁴Jacob then offered up a sacrifice on the Height, and invited his kinsmen to partake of the meal. After the meal, they spent the night on the Height.

they partook of a meal See Comment to 26:30. It is likely that only the principals, Laban and Jacob, ate at this time.

47. Yegar-sahadutha This is the first appearance of Aramaic in the Bible.

48. And Laban declared Having initiated the pact, he speaks first.

This mound is a witness See Comment to 28:18.

Gal-ed A folk etymology for the regional name Gilead, the site of the treaty making as recorded in verses 21, 23, and 25. The name probably comes from the Arabic word *jal'ad*, “hard, rough,” referring to the local limestone.

49. Mizpah See Comment to 31:25.

May the LORD watch Deities were appealed to as the highest authority for monitoring the enforcement of treaties in the ancient Near East.

50. or take other wives The restrictions imposed by Laban to safeguard the status of his

אֲבָנִים וַיִּקְחוּ אֲבָנִים וַיַּעֲשׂוּ-גֵל וַיֹּאכְלוּ
שֵׁם עַל-הַגֵּל: ⁴⁷וַיִּקְרָא-לוֹ לְבֵן יָגֵר
שָׁהָדוּתָא וַיַּעֲקֹב קָרָא לוֹ גַלְעָד:
⁴⁸וַיֹּאמֶר לְבֵן הַגֵּל הַזֶּה עַד בֵּינִי וּבֵינָהּ
הַיּוֹם עַל-בֵּן קָרָא-שְׁמוֹ גַלְעָד:
⁴⁹וְהַמְצַפָּה אֲשֶׁר אָמַר יִצְחָק יִהְיֶה בֵּינִי
וּבֵינָהּ כִּי נִסְתָּר אִישׁ מֵרֵעֵהוּ: ⁵⁰אִם-
תַּעֲנֶנָּה אֶת-בְּנֹתַי וְאִם-תִּקַּח נָשִׁים עַל-
בְּנֹתַי אִין אִישׁ עִמָּנוּ רְאֵה אֱלֹהִים עַד
בֵּינִי וּבֵינָהּ:

⁵¹וַיֹּאמֶר לְבֵן לִיעֶקֶב הַנֶּה | הַגֵּל הַזֶּה
וְהַנֵּה הַמְצַבָּה אֲשֶׁר יָרִיתִי בֵּינִי וּבֵינָהּ:
⁵²עַד הַגֵּל הַזֶּה וְעַד הַמְצַבָּה אִם-אֲנִי
לֹא-אֶעְבֹּר אֵלֶיךָ אֶת-הַגֵּל הַזֶּה וְאִם-
אָתָּה לֹא-תַעְבֹּר אֵלָי אֶת-הַגֵּל הַזֶּה
וְאֶת-הַמְצַבָּה הַזֹּאת לְרַעָה: ⁵³אֱלֹהֵי
אֲבֹרָהֶם וְאֱלֹהֵי נַחֹר יִשְׁפְּטוּ בֵּינֵינוּ
אֱלֹהֵי אֲבִיהֶם וַיִּשְׁבַּע יַעֲקֹב בְּפָחַד אָבִיו
יִצְחָק: ⁵⁴וַיִּזְבַּח יַעֲקֹב זֶבַח בָּהָר וַיִּקְרָא
לְאָחָיו לְאָכַל-לֶחֶם וַיֹּאכְלוּ לֶחֶם וַיְלִינוּ
בָּהָר:

daughters are not found elsewhere in the Bible but are similar to those in other Near Eastern texts.

53. May the God of Abraham and the god of Nahor . . . judge Everywhere in the ancient Near East, the national god was regarded as the protector of the boundary. The plural verb for “judge” in Hebrew indicates that Laban is invoking two separate deities.

their ancestral deities This phrase is the narrator’s explanatory comment. Literally, the Hebrew means “the deities of their father,” perhaps referring to Terah, who, according to Josh. 24:2, “worshiped other gods.”

Jacob swore In response, Jacob ignores Laban’s formula and invokes only the “Fear of his father Isaac.”

54. the meal The entire treaty-making process is sealed by a sacrificial meal in which all partake.

32 Early in the morning, Laban kissed his sons and daughters and bade them good-by; then Laban left on his journey homeward. ²Jacob went on his way, and angels of God encountered him. ³When he saw them, Jacob said, “This is God’s camp.” So he named that place Mahanaim.

ANGELS AT MAHANAIM (vv. 1–3)

The next morning, Jacob and Laban part, thus ending forever the patriarchal connection with Mesopotamia.

1. his sons That is, his grandsons (see Gen. 31:28,43).

לב מַפְטִיר וַיִּשָּׂפֵם לָבָן בְּפִקֹּר וַיִּנְשֹׁק לְבָנָיו וּלְבָנוֹתָיו וַיְבָרֶךְ אֶתְהֶם וַיֵּלֶךְ וַיָּשָׁב לָבָן לְמַקְמוֹ: ²וַיַּעֲקֹב הַלֵּךְ לְדָרְכּוֹ וַיִּפְגְּעוּבוֹ מַלְאֲכֵי אֱלֹהִים: ³וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב בְּאַשֵּׁר־רָאָם מַחֲנֵה אֱלֹהִים זֶה וַיִּקְרָא שֵׁם־הַמָּקוֹם הַהוּא מַחֲנַיִם: פ

3. God’s camp In 1 Chron. 12:22 this phrase connotes a vast throng.

Mahanaim According to other biblical references, the site is located in Transjordan (see 1 Chron. 6:65). Gen. 32:23 suggests that it is on the Jabbok River.

CHAPTER 32

2. Angels appear as Jacob prepares to cross the border into Canaan, as they appeared at the beginning of the *parashah* (28:12), as if setting the account of Jacob’s 20 years in the house of

Laban within parentheses. Have angels been accompanying Jacob throughout those 20 years, so that he prospered in all that he did, and only now as they take their leave of him is he able to see them?