

Jacob's Covenant With God

A D'var Torah on *Parashat Vayitzei* (Gen. 28:10 – 32:3)

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*Vayitzei Ya'akov mi-B'eir Shava vayelech Charanah.
Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran.*

In last week's *parashah*, Jacob stole his brother Esau's birthright by tricking their father Isaac into giving Jacob the blessing of the first-born. This week, Jacob, fleeing from his furious brother, begins his long journey, both physically and spiritually, from his home and family. Shortly after Jacob leaves home, God appears to him in a dream. God speaks to Jacob and promises him protection, offspring, and the land on which he lay.

Jacob then travels on to Haran, where he meets and falls in love with his cousin Rachel, the daughter of his mother's brother Laban. Jacob agrees to work for Laban for seven years to marry Rachel. However Laban, a shady character, substitutes his older daughter Leah for Rachel on Rachel's wedding night. When Jacob confronts Laban, Laban tells Jacob that, according to accepted practice, the older daughter must marry before the younger. Jacob agrees to work seven more years for Rachel.

Years pass and the sisters, as well as their servants, who are given to Jacob as concubines, bear Jacob twelve sons and a daughter. These sons will become the ancestors of the 12 tribes of Israel. At the end of the *parashah*, Jacob and his family leave Laban, depart from Haran, and begin their journey back to Canaan.

Let's take a closer look at Jacob's experience in the wilderness as he flees from Esau's wrath. Bedding down on the first night, Jacob has a bizarre dream. God speaks to him from the dream and assures Jacob that he is not alone; God will be with him, will take care of him, will return him to his home, and will bless him and his descendants.

Upon awakening, Jacob perceives that something important has happened, but he is not quite sure. And so Jacob responds cautiously with a vow: "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, and if I return safely to my father's house — the Eternal shall be my God."

What's going on here? Is Jacob putting conditions on God? After all, God has already vowed to care for Jacob, to grant him many descendants, and give him the Promised Land as a home. So by stating "If God does everything that He promised to me, then I will be faithful to God," could Jacob possibly be doubting God?

A Midrash (B'reishit Rabbah 70:4) casts Jacob's response in a very different light, as an exclamation of joy over God's protection: "If God does all of these things for me, then I will be protected from temptation and sin, and will have no problem being faithful to God." In other words, Jacob does not doubt that God will keep the covenant; Jacob doubts whether he himself will be able to uphold his commitment. And with God's support, he reasons, it should not be difficult.

Ramban (Moses Ben Nahmanides) reads the passage a little differently as well. He translates "if" as "when." That is, when all these conditions are met, there can be no doubt that the Eternal is God. And therefore the passage is not conditional, but rather a vow that, upon his return to his home, the fulfillment of God's promise, Jacob will set up a monument for the worship of God.

Our patriarchs and matriarchs stand as examples of how we can establish an individual relationship with God. But, as with any healthy relationship, a relationship with God must be built on trust. It can't be conditional. In relationships with God, it is we who are getting the better end of the deal. If God is willing to enter into a covenantal relationship with us and trust us, despite all of our shortcomings, how much more so should we put our trust in God?