

- Perl (Page 1)
- Gotlieb (Page 5)

## VAYETZE

### A MODERN ORTHODOX HEDGEHOG FOR A POSTMODERN WORLD: PART ONE

**GIL S. PERL is the Head of School at Kohelet Yeshiva in Merion Station, Pennsylvania.**

#### INTRODUCTION

Modern Orthodoxy is in need of a Hedgehog Concept.

Jim Collins, the best-selling business writer, coined this term almost two decades ago when he looked at companies that made the leap from “good” to “great.”<sup>1</sup> More often than not, these organizations had something at their core that they passionately believed they did better than anyone else in the world. And their success resulted in large measure from orienting the organization’s “resource engines” toward this singular goal.

While Collins didn’t extend his analysis to the realm of religion, a brief glance at the sub-denominations that constitute contemporary Orthodoxy suggest the same might well be true. That is, each of them seems to have an authentic Torah value at their core, which they believe they do better than anyone else in the world. The Yeshiva world has *talmud Torah*. The Hasidic world has *dveykus*. The Dati Leumi world had *yishuv Eretz Yisra’el*. Chabad has *kiruv*. Though each community advocates full-fledged adherence to all 613 *mitzvot*, a single value is elevated above the rest. And, more often than not, the community’s schools and shuls, their curricula and customs, their choices of where to live, who to marry and what professions to seek are all oriented towards this particular goal. Like in the business world, this focus becomes a point of pride for members of each community and fuels a passion for their chosen way of life that often translates to the next generation.

American Modern Orthodoxy has no Hedgehog. Whether by design or by default, it emphasizes moderation in all things. A little bit of this and a little bit of that, but not too much of anything. The result has been painfully clear in our schools and our shuls for quite some time now. It’s hard to be passionate about a little bit of anything.

Some might contend that *Torah U-Madda* (Torah and secular knowledge) is Modern Orthodoxy’s Hedgehog. I have [argued elsewhere](#), though, that *Torah U-Madda* is fatally flawed as a Hedgehog Concept because unlike the Torah values at the center of the other sub-denominations, *Torah U-Madda* can only be actualized by the community’s intellectual elite. While the Yeshiva community’s

Hedgehog of *Talmud Torah* (Torah study) also falls within the intellectual arena, it can be fulfilled through the study of an Artscroll Mishnah, reviewing Chumash with Rashi, or by writing a check to one’s local Yeshiva or Kollel.<sup>2</sup> It’s a far cry from the academic aptitude and higher order thinking necessary to synthesize the worlds of secular learning and culture with that of Torah and *mesorah* (tradition), as demanded by the ideology of *Torah U-Madda*. Indeed, one could well argue that on an average day in a Modern Orthodox Yeshiva day school, each student engages in the *mitzvah* of *Talmud Torah* - the Hedgehog Concept of the Yeshiva World - through their study of Chumash, Navi, Mishnah, or Gemara. Very few, however, despite the school’s rigorous dual curriculum, engage in the act of *Torah U-Madda*.

Perhaps more importantly, though, when I first presented this idea at the Orthodox Forum in 2010, someone raised this very contention. And, before I could respond, a reply came from a far more qualified authority: Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm, who quite literally wrote the book on *Torah U-Madda*. He stated rather emphatically that “*Torah U-Madda* is not an ideology, it’s a pedagogy.” That is, *Torah U-Madda* is a means toward an end. It’s a way of arriving at knowledge of the Creator through the avenues of science and the arts. It’s not an end unto itself nor was it ever intended to be. The goal of *Torah U-Madda* is an intimate knowledge of and relationship with God. The study of Shakespeare and Milton, Kant and Kierkegaard, molecular biology and quantum mechanics, coupled with Rambam and Rav Chaim, Penei Yehoshua and Pitchei Teshuvah, may well be the most sophisticated, nuanced, insightful, and inspiring way to arrive at such. But even the founding fathers of Modern Orthodoxy would agree that there are other paths and other methods for getting there. *Torah U-Madda*, then, becomes a point of privilege for those select few who can achieve it, and is either discarded or distorted by those who cannot.<sup>3</sup>

As such, if Modern Orthodoxy is to succeed in stoking the flames of religious pride and passion so that the next generation is eager to embrace and extend it, the search for a Hedgehog must go on.

#### Identifying the Hedgehog

At its most basic level, a Hedgehog Concept for Diaspora Modern Orthodoxy must qualify as an “authentic Torah value.” That is, it must

<sup>1</sup> Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap ... and Others Don't* (New York: Harper Business, 2001), 90.

<sup>2</sup> And even so, the extreme emphasis on a value that is ultimately cognitive in nature has disenfranchised its fair share of young people in that community over the years.

<sup>3</sup> Rav Aharon Lichtenstein famously quipped “In this setting, the Rambam frequently does not so much compete with Michelangelo as with Michael Jordan, or even, lamentably, Michael Jackson.” See his *Leaves of Faith, The World of Jewish Learning*, vol. II (New York: Ktav Publishing, 2004), 324.

be something that all streams of Orthodoxy recognize as part of the Divine Will, even if their community chooses not to highlight it. *Kiruv*, for example, is recognized as furthering the Divine mandate even in the *dati yishuvim* of Yehuda and Shomron, while *yishuv Eretz Yisrael* - in some form - is regarded as a Torah value even in the Chabad outposts of Phnom Penh.

In addition, it must be something that capitalizes on Modern Orthodoxy's unique positioning at the intersection of religious and secular, isolation and immersion, fidelity to the past and faith in the future.

For this Hedgehog Concept to energize movement, it must also be a Torah value that is, for lack of a better word, transcendent. It must provide fertile ground for intellectual exploration in both the theological and *halakhic* realms; be actionable in a wide array of scenarios and circumstances by a different types of people; and must speak both to those steeped in the current intellectual and cultural ethos and those who are not.

Lastly, this value has to hold some degree of preexisting pre-eminence in the minds of Modern Orthodox Jewry. It must be something to which the present and historical culture of Modern Orthodoxy accords particular weight.

In Part 1 of this essay I will suggest that a compelling case can be made that the value of *Or Goyim* (light of the nations) fits the above definition remarkably well. In Part 2 I will offer a description of how it could look in practice if the Modern Orthodox community were to take this idea to heart.

## Historical Roots

*Israel was called in His exalted name for His honor and His dominion; in order that His honor and His dominion will be revealed through them across the entire world. And if it is impossible to reveal the honor of His dominion in any way other than this (i.e., through exile), we must not protest, for it is for this purpose that we were created.*

*And it is like a human king who constantly engages his troops in the labor of war - night and day they know no rest! - and they are put at risk and suffer casualties. They cannot protest even the slightest, for such did not stem, Heaven forbid, from evil intentions of the king. Rather it is because he must expand his kingdom, and his rule in the provinces depends upon it, and they [the troops] enlisted for the express purpose of protecting the kingdom with their bodies and souls.*

*So it is with the King of Kings, the Holy One Blessed Be He. He created His world for the express purpose of filling all of creation with His honor, as I wrote in Bereishit (2:4). And it is for this purpose that we were taken to be His nation and His servants: so that this purpose would come to fruition through our hands. As such, no matter what circumstances are necessary for us to arrive at such, we must not protest even the slightest.*

This is a transcendent call to arms. It identifies *Or Goyim* not merely as another mitzvah, but as the primary task of the Jewish people, the purpose for which they were created, and the singular vehicle through which the world can arrive at God's intended *telos*. It is both

larger than life and the essence of life. It offers direction, meaning, and mission to a Jew's time upon this Earth, not to the exclusion of other *mitzvot*, but as a way of framing and encapsulating them. And, perhaps most radically, it implies that the Torah's loftiest ideal can only be achieved by those who are "expanding His kingdom" beyond the cloisters of the Land of Israel, thereby spreading "His honor and His dominion...across the entire world." In other words, according to this text, the act of winning honor for God amongst societies of the Diaspora ranks amongst the Torah's highest callings; one for which a Jew ought to spare no expense and fear no sacrifice.

If forced to guess, a learned reader might suggest this text has Hasidic roots. Due to its vague similarity to the Lurianic idea of uncovering the Divine sparks scattered throughout the world. Others might suggest a Western European origin. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch is one of the few Torah luminaries over the past two hundred years who was known to extol the virtue of *Or Goyim* seemingly over and above the Zionist ideal. Given no other context at all, though, it would not be surprising if many well versed *talmidei hakhamim* (Torah scholars) suggested that this passage derives from a work that is not "Orthodox." Roshei Yeshiva don't talk this way. Orthodox communities don't act this way. It's not a *perek* (chapter) in the Rambam or a *siman* (clause) in Shulchan Aruch. It's not what we teach in our schools or preach in our shuls.

It would surprise them, no doubt, to learn that the author of this paragraph was not just *a* Rosh Yeshiva, but *the* Rosh Yeshiva. It was written by Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (Netziv), Rosh Yeshiva of the world's largest and most renowned yeshiva for nearly half of the 19th century. And it isn't tucked away in an unpublished manuscript. It is sitting on the shelf of every Yeshiva, in the *Devarim* volume of *Ha'amek Davar*, *perek* 29, *pasuk* 1.<sup>4</sup> Even more surprising, perhaps, is the fact that this passage is not a singular aside or tangential comment by any means. It is but one of many comments running throughout Netziv's Torah commentary that emphasizes the unique and powerful role of *Or Goyim* in Jewish life.

For example, Avram has his name changed to Avraham, according to Netziv, not to reflect God's blessing that many nations will descend from him, but to reflect

*God's instructions to Avraham that His will is that he [Avraham] share his knowledge in order to be a father to many nations, so that they will come to recognize God. And for this he was called 'av hamon goyim,' like a father who sets his son [on the path] of proper thinking. (Ha'amek Davar, Genesis 17:4)*

In the book of Shemot (Exodus), this individual instruction to Avraham becomes the destiny of the entire Jewish people. Netziv therefore explains that the *sefer* is referred to in the geonic *Halakhot Gedolot* as the "Second Book" not merely because it finishes the story of the Jewish people's transformation from a family clan into a nation, but because it is part and parcel of the creation story:

*Meaning, the purpose of the world as a whole was that there would be one nation, God's portion, His people. And this was not fulfilled until Israel was taken out of Egypt and arrived at their purpose, to be worthy of becoming a light unto the nations and to strengthen them regarding knowledge of the God of the Universe...this is the purpose of*

---

<sup>4</sup> Translation is my own.

creation which was created for His exalted honor. (Ha'amek Davar, Introduction to Exodus)

And, if the Jewish people became worthy of this noble task when they stood at the foot of Har Sinai, they further committed themselves to it standing atop of Har Eival:

*Just like at Har Sinai there were burnt offerings and peace offerings and rejoicing over having been taken as God's nation and into His service, so too at Har Eival, which is where we were chosen as a "covenantal people." Like Isaiah the prophet said (42:6) "I created you and appointed you as a covenantal people, a light of nations." Meaning, to engage all nations in the covenant (which is faith) so that they abandon paganism and adopt monotheism. And a covenant was already established on this matter with Avraham our forefather, as I wrote in Bereishit (17:4), and today it was established with all of Israel. And it started at Har Eival with the writing of the Torah in seventy languages. But this noble purpose would only ultimately be reached through exile and diaspora... And because it is now that they merited this task of the honor of God being revealed through them throughout the world, they therefore were commanded to build altars and to rejoice. (Ha'amek Davar, Deuteronomy 27:5)*

As Netziv was developing, teaching, and writing these ideas in the tiny Lithuanian hamlet of Volozhin, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch was penning very similar sentiments in the enlightened German city of Oldenberg:

*Indeed, Yisrael's loss of its outward glory will appear to you now as being part and parcel of its destiny through which God's providence was to be manifested. Moreover, Yisrael's mission was not hindered by its exile, nor was its greatness diminished, for it became evident that "greatness" has different meanings and Yisrael's state of dispersion opened a new and unique field for the fulfillment of its mission.*

*...Is it not the highest level of human greatness to be the bearer of the Almighty's teachings regarding God and man's mission? To teach, by one's destiny and way of life, that there is a higher goal than wealth and pleasure, science and culture, and that all these should serve as a means to the fulfillment of that goal?... After all, Yisrael has no other task than to acknowledge as its God the One Who calls and educates all human beings to His service, and to make Him known as such, through its destiny and way of life!<sup>5</sup>*

The notion that Jews are called upon to share the Torah's teachings with the world at large, and that doing so speaks to the very essence of a Jew's mission in this world, was expressed not only in the Yeshiva world of Netziv and the Neo-Orthodox world of Rav Hirsch, but in 19th century Hasidic circles as well. Reb Nosson of Breslov, the great scribe and teacher of the Breslover community following the death of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, records the following in his *Likkutei Halakhot*:

*Yet, in truth, it is known that all of the worlds were created only in order to recognize and know the Exalted One, as it*

*says in the Zohar (2:42, 2:5) "in order to know Him." Therefore everything was created so that the Jewish people would accept His Torah, which is the holy knowledge with which one recognizes and knows the Exalted One. And therefore all greatness and royalty is reserved for Jews who perform His will, who merit this knowledge for which everything was created. And therefore only they are called "man," as our sages said, because one who doesn't have [proper] knowledge is an animal in the form of a man, as explained in the beginning of the Torah as written above. And for this reason everyone is obligated to engage in settling the world (yishuv ha-olam). That is, in bringing true knowledge to others - for this is the essence of settling the world as is explained there and as I mentioned above. And when the Jewish people merit to do His will, they are obligated to try with all of their power to bring this knowledge to the Nations of the World as well, as it is written "tell of his Honor amongst the nations, etc.." And it is written "proclaim His wonders amongst the nations, etc.," and likewise in many other verses. (Yoreh De'ah, Laws of Redeeming the Firstborn, 5:13)*

Visionary and creative as Netziv, Rav Hirsch, and Rebbe Nachman were, they certainly did not invent the notion of *Or Goyim's* pivotal role in the thought and practice of observant Jewry. It is latent in Abaye's interpretation of the command to love God that we must make God beloved amongst His creatures,<sup>6</sup> in R' Hanina's homiletic that the windows of the Beit Hamikdash are narrow on the inside and wide on the outside in order to let the light shine outward onto the world,<sup>7</sup> and in Rashi's comment that Shabbat is intended as a sign "for the nations" of God's relationship with the Jewish people.<sup>8</sup> It is made explicit when Rambam writes that the essence of the mitzvah of Kiddush Hashem is to "publicize this true faith in the world" and when Seforno interprets the Jewish people's call to be a "kingdom of priests" as a call "to teach and instruct the entire human race to call in the name of God."<sup>9</sup> In other words, these 19th century authors inherited a long, though often dormant, *mesora* that stretches back to the concepts of *am segulah* (chosen people) and *mamlechet kohanim* (kingdom of priests) in Exodus and Deuteronomy. The *mesora* works its way beyond the iconic verses in Isaiah and the universalist motifs of the book of Psalms, ultimately manifesting itself in eschatological passages of our liturgy and the halakhic and aggadic material of Hazal. And as much as we know today of that *mesora*, there is undoubtedly much more that has yet to be uncovered.

## 20th Century American Modern Orthodoxy

Despite the fact that the American Modern Orthodox community that blossomed in the second half of the 20th century drew heavily on both the Eastern European world of the Yeshiva and the Western European world of *Torah Im Derekh Eretz*, the concept of *Or Goyim* did not retain the hallowed place it had in the worldviews of Rav Hirsch and Netziv. Instead of focusing on what Judaism could give to society, a niche claimed by and quickly associated with Reform Judaism, American Modern Orthodoxy, under the banner of *Torah U-Madda*, focused on what it could - or should - get from the society around it.

<sup>6</sup> See Yoma 86a.

<sup>7</sup> See Vayikra Rabba 31:7.

<sup>8</sup> See Rashi on Exodus 31:13.

<sup>9</sup> See Seforno on Exodus 19:6.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Elias, *The Nineteen Letters: The World of Rabbi S.R. Hirsch* (New York: Feldheim, 1995), 198.

Twentieth century Modern Orthodox thought, therefore, is dominated by the largely unspoken question of how best to navigate and marshal the intellectual and cultural opportunities offered by modernity's unprecedented advances in philosophy, science and technology - in a context of unprecedented political freedom and tolerance - in order to strengthen one's personal *avodat Hashem*. Thus the central motifs in the writings of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Rabbi Norman Lamm, and Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, amongst others, are the development of one's relationship with God through *teshuva* (repentance), prayer, and Torah study; on finding the proper balance between ethics and law, intellect and experience, autonomy and submission, individual and community; and on which elements of the broader culture to let in and which ones to keep out.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's *Kol Dodi Dofek* offers an illustrative example of the contrast. Much like Netziv, Rabbi Soloveitchik refers to two "covenants" forged by the Jewish people prior to their entry to the Land of Israel. Whereas Netziv locates these covenants at Har Sinai and then Har Eival, Rabbi Soloveitchik locates the first one in Egypt prior to the exodus and the second one at the foot of Har Sinai. Far more important than the location of the covenants, though, is their content.

Netziv sees the covenant at Har Sinai as the Jewish people's induction ceremony. It was where they were "betrothed" to God and informed of what it looks like to live as God's people. As described above, though, it was only at Har Eival that they received their "mission." It was at that second covenant that they were called on to be an *Or Goyim*.

Rabbi Soloveitchik's understanding of the pre-conquest covenants, as articulated in *Kol Dodi Dofek*, is quite different. The covenant in Egypt was about national solidarity forged by the shared experience of oppression and hardship. This is where the Jewish people became distinctly aware of their "otherness" and keenly sensitive to the plight of their brethren. This is what Rabbi Soloveitchik calls the Covenant of Fate. Once this covenant was in place, the Jewish people were ready to be elevated through the Covenant of Sinai, which he calls the Covenant of Destiny. And whereas one might have expected a Covenant of Destiny to continue the themes of "Yisrael's mission" as articulated by Rav Hirsch, or the higher "purpose" as spelled out by Netziv, Rabbi Soloveitchik moves in a different direction completely. The Jewish people's destiny, according to Rabbi Soloveitchik, is to freely and passionately draw near to God.

*How does destiny differ from fate? In two respects: fate means a compelled existence; destiny is existence by volition. Destiny is created by man himself, who chooses and makes his own way in life. Fate is expressed in a teleological sense, in a denuded existence, whereas destiny embodies purpose and objectives. Shared Fate means an inability to rebel against fate. It is, as with the tragedy of Jonah the prophet, about the lack of alternatives to escape the God of the Jews; "And God hurled a great wind into the sea, and there was a mighty tempest in the sea, so that the ship was about to break apart" (Jonah 1:4). Shared Destiny means having free will to strive for a goal (a decision freely willed to be sanctified to an ideal) and a yearning and longing for the Master of the Universe. Instead of the blind fate that pursued him, Jonah in the end chose the exalted*

*destiny of the God of Israel. "I am a Jew, and I fear the Lord, the God of the heaven" (Jonah 1:9)<sup>10</sup>*

This, in a word, has been the project of American Modern Orthodox theology. It has sought to move beyond an existence forged by fate, by actively leveraging the freedoms of modernity in order to construct a life of sanctity and proximity to the Creator of the World. Its focus has been on shaping its own destiny, rather than the destiny of those around them.

Perhaps the most glaring absence of the concept of *Or Goyim* emerges from the pages of "[Confrontation](#)," Rabbi Soloveitchik's influential essay on interfaith dialogue. The piece is best known for the restrictions that Rabbi Soloveitchik put, and which the Rabbinical Council of America later adopted, on what subject matter should or should not be engaged in an interfaith context. However, there is no mistaking the fact that Rabbi Soloveitchik, in the same essay, clearly articulates those areas in which we ought to join forces with our non-Jewish peers:

*We, created in the image of God, are charged with responsibility for the great confrontation of man and the cosmos. We stand with civilized society shoulder to shoulder over against an order which defies us all. (p. 20)*

This obligation for the betterment of mankind, however, is decidedly universal in Rabbi Soloveitchik's thinking. That is, our obligation is no different than the obligation of monotheists of other religions, which is precisely why we can band together to carry them out. In areas, though, where Jews differ from Christians, we must, according to Rabbi Soloveitchik, keep to ourselves. In this dichotomy it is hard to find space for the concept of *Or Goyim*; that is, the notion that we, as Jews, are uniquely obligated to bring the core values of Torah Judaism to the world at large. If these are universal values relating to the human condition, then, in Rabbi Soloveitchik's conception, it would seem that others are as obligated as we are. If they are particular values relating to one's relationship with God, then, according to Rabbi Soloveitchik, they don't belong in the public square. In fact, Rabbi Soloveitchik goes so far as to say that the story we must tell the Christian community is less about our sense of duty to "to perfect the world under the Sovereignty of the Almighty," and more about our need to remain distant and apart.

*As a charismatic faith community, we have to meet the challenge of confronting the general non-Jewish faith community. We are called upon to tell this community not only the story it already knows - that we are human beings, committed to 'the general welfare and progress of mankind, that we are interested in combating disease, in alleviating human suffering, in protecting man's rights, in helping the needy, et cetera - but also what is still unknown to it, namely, our otherness as a metaphysical covenantal community. (p. 20-21)*

It is interesting to note that some forty years after Rabbi Soloveitchik wrote "Confrontation," his great nephew, Rabbi Dr. Meir Soloveitchik, took up the issue again in an essay entitled "[A Nation Under God: Jews, Christians, and the American Public Square](#)." After building upon the foundations of his uncle in arguing that there is, in

<sup>10</sup> Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "[Kol Dodi Dofek, The Vision of the Religious Zionist Movement; Loneliness and Separateness 6](#)." Sefaria.

fact, a place for Jews to engage Jewishly in the public square, the younger Soloveitchik makes a move his uncle did not:

*The Jewish people, as God's representatives here on earth, are uniquely obligated to ensure that society continues to define itself as one that is under God; but the truth is that the Rav's writings indicate that this is also a universal obligation incumbent upon all "men of God."*<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, the Rav did see it as a "universal obligation." The time may have come, however, for the Modern Orthodox community to refocus itself on the fact that we "as God's representatives here on earth, are uniquely obligated" to carry this mission forward.

Some might justifiably argue that the passionate Zionism of American Modern Orthodox communities will create an impenetrable barrier for a Hedgehog Concept that is inherently suited for the Diaspora. Those communities, though, would do well to consider both the paucity of actual *olim* (émigres) from the United States each year<sup>12</sup> and the newly documented ideological frailty of those who stay behind.<sup>13</sup>

Others may argue that the original vision of *Or Goyim* was an eschatological one. It was offered as a prophetic vision of what God would bring about in the End of Days, not a vision for action in our day. It may be so. But such arguments are at least equally valid, if not more so, regarding the earliest sources for Zionism. If they have been overcome once, they can be overcome again. The most compelling objection, however, might simply be that *Or Goyim* won't resonate in the minds and souls of today's youth. A Hedgehog Concept that doesn't tug at the heartstrings, is no Hedgehog Concept at all. How then, the Modern Orthodox community might embrace such an idea in a way that authentically actualizes its ancient ideals while simultaneously appealing to the postmodern sensibilities of Modern Orthodoxy's up and coming generation, will be the focus of Part II.

## IN GOD WE TRUST OR DO WE? THE FEARS OF ISAAC AND JACOB

**MESHULAM GOTLIEB is an independent writer, translator, and editor living in Jerusalem, Israel.**

**T**he At the beginning of *Parashat Vayetze*, Jacob dreams about a ladder whose base rests upon the ground and whose top is in the Heavens. Angels ascend and descend the ladder and God looms above it. In the dream, God promises Jacob the land given to his forefathers and blesses him. God concludes with a promise to watch over Jacob wherever he goes and bring him back safely to the Land of Israel (Genesis 28:11-15). *Midrash Tanhuma* (*Parashat Vayetze*, 2) expands Jacob's dream in the following way:

Rabbi Berakhiyah said in the name of Rabbi Helbo and R. S. ben Yosinah: This teaches us that God showed our forefather Jacob the minister [angel] of Babylonia ascending and descending, and of Medea ascending and

descending, and of Greece ascending and descending, and of Edom ascending and descending.

The Holy One, blessed be He, asked Jacob: "Jacob, why are you not ascending?"

At this moment, Jacob became frightened and said, "Just as these descend, [perhaps] I too will descend."

The Holy One, blessed be He, replied: "If you ascend, you will not descend."

And he did not believe and he did not ascend (*ve-lo he'emin, ve-lo alah*)....

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: "If you had ascended and had faith in me, you would have never had a descent, but since you did not have faith, your descendants will be enslaved by four kingdoms..."

Jacob replied: "Forever?"

He replied [quoting a verse from Jeremiah]: "But you, have no fear, my servant Jacob; do not fear Israel for I will deliver you from far away and your seed from the lands of their captivity."<sup>14</sup>

The crux of this midrash is the conversation between the Holy One, blessed be He, and Jacob: God tells Jacob (representing the nation of Israel) to climb the ladder to Heaven and even promises that he will not fall like the other nations. Jacob is afraid, does not believe, and does not ascend. The angels in the dream, representing the other nations, go up and down the ladder—gaining and losing power over the course of history. God seems to be teaching Jacob that in the course of normal human history nations rise and fall. This should be the fate of the Jewish nation as well; however, if Jacob makes this leap of faith and climbs the ladder, the Jewish people will be able to circumvent the vicissitudes of history and always remain ascendant. God is, as it were, offering Jacob and his progeny a shortcut to obtaining eternal ascendancy—an opportunity to trick the norms of fate—without their having to go through the trials and tribulations, the ups and downs of normal history.<sup>15</sup> In the face of God's offer, Jacob is afraid; he refuses to ascend and he rejects God's reassurances, as "he does not believe."

This midrash has often troubled me. Firstly, why was Jacob afraid? Secondly, even if Jacob had misgivings about ascending the ladder, with God's reassurance that everything would be alright, how could he not climb? How could he "not believe"? How could the grandson of Abraham, who hastened to bind Isaac, whose belief was considered meritorious by God (Rashi on Genesis 15:6), not believe, not trust in God when he received an explicit command to ascend?

<sup>14</sup> This article discusses the version of the midrash found in *Tanhuma*. Any differences in the parallel version in *Vayikra Rabbah* 29:2 do not impact upon the arguments made herein.

<sup>15</sup> Rabbi Yitzhak Hutner expands upon Jacob's fear that his progeny would sin and descend: Jacob feared that like any other nation, when the Jewish people became mighty, they would become divorced from their core values and fall. Hashem reassures him that since the Jews do not "finish off their fields"—over farm or overuse the material world—they will not fall into the trap of wealth and over-consumption. See a summary of this idea at <http://torahdownunder.blogspot.co.il/2011/12/parshas-vayetze-dream-of-ladder.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Meir Soloveichik, "A Nation Under God: Jews, Christians, and the American Public Square," *The Torah U-Madda Journal* 14 (2006–07): 81.

<sup>12</sup> According to the Jewish Agency, there were [3,052 new olim](#) from the United States in 2018. According to Brandeis University, the [total Jewish population](#) of the United States is 7.5 million.

<sup>13</sup> See Nishma Research, [The Successes, Challenges, and Future of American Modern Orthodoxy](#), November 4, 2019.

[Rabbi Mordecai Kornfeld](#), a contemporary Israeli Torah scholar, was so troubled by Jacob's inexplicable refusal to ascend that he allegorizes the midrash itself. In his Weekly Parasha-Page on [Vayetze 5758](#), he explains the midrash not to be referring to events that took place on the night of Jacob's dream. Rather, it is a prophecy allegorically referring to the events that transpired when Jacob eventually did return to Israel and met Esau. He legitimizes Jacob's fear in the midrash by claiming that it refers to Jacob's meeting with Esau, an event in which the Torah explicitly mentions Jacob's fear (Genesis 32:7). As Rabbi Kornfeld writes, "[Jacob] did not realize the meaning of his dream until too late. Instead of unabashedly returning to his homeland [safe in the knowledge of God's protection from Esau, because he is afraid,] he makes elaborate plans to flatter Esa[u] and to appease his anger." Rabbi Kornfeld is so shocked at the plain meaning of the midrash—that Jacob would be too fearful to climb the ladder despite God's reassurances—that he must claim that the story in the midrash was an allegory meant to prepare Jacob for his eventual homecoming.

When a midrashic exposition appears surprising, it often pays to examine the text it is expanding upon. Perhaps, there is an anchor in the text which can supply a source or motivation for the midrashic idea. Indeed, in discussing Jacob's ladder dream and its aftermath, the classical commentators note that Jacob's reaction the following morning to God's promise to protect him seems less than enthusiastic. In the biblical text, Jacob responds to God's promise: "If [*im*] you will protect me... then You will be my God" (Genesis 28:20), seemingly indicating that he is not sure that God will be with him. Perhaps Jacob's apparent lack of belief in the Bible itself is reflected in and even compounded by the midrash.

However, before we get carried away by this hypothesis we should note that the midrash itself, in *Genesis Rabbah* 76:2, and later medieval commentators manage to resolve the issue of Jacob's apparent mistrust without damning him for unbelief. They explain that Jacob was right to be afraid because no Divine promise is inviolable—even a righteous man may sin and release God from His oath.<sup>16</sup>

So though at first glance Jacob's conditional response in the Bible seems to be the basis for the midrash, this need not be the case. Indeed, *Tanhuma's* redactor would have been well aware of the exculpatory midrash in *Genesis Rabbah*—a canonical work by his period<sup>17</sup>—so his decision to impute a lack of belief to Jacob in order to expand upon or resolve the verse goes beyond the bounds of necessity and, perhaps, even plausibility (that is to say, beyond the bounds of what we think it plausible for Jacob to do or say).<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> This logic is adopted by Rashi and Ibn Ezra. The rabbis employ the term *shema yigrom ha-het*. Nahmanides explains that the word "*im*"—translated as "if" above—is not introducing a condition, but making a declaration about the future, "when x happens, y will be the case."

<sup>17</sup> By the time *Tanhuma* was redacted in the medieval period, *Genesis Rabbah* was a canonical work. Though not every Master of the Midrash in Antiquity knew what every other one had said, it is extremely unlikely that the *Tanhuma* redactor would have been ignorant of this line of thinking.

<sup>18</sup> Rabbi Yehuda Herzl Henkin describes *peshat* commentary as restricting itself to "the necessary, the plausible, and the minimal." Midrash, in contrast, expands upon the verse unnecessarily, implausibly, and maximally. [Equality Lost: Essays in Torah Commentary, Halacha, and Jewish Thought](#) (Urim Publications, 1999). Our midrash here is a case in point since instead of resolving the problem linguistically as Nahmanides does by re-reading the word "*im*," it chooses to present a dramatic interplay between God and Jacob

Furthermore, even if this verse was the midrash's basis, Jacob's hedging his belief in the Divine promise to protect him found in the Bible is far less problematic than his fear, followed by his absolute refusal to follow an explicit Divine command, in the midrash. So the fear in the verse does not provide a solid enough justification for the midrash's audacious claim.

Another candidate for the midrash's textual anchor is the verse with which the *Tanhuma* midrash ends: "But you, have no fear, [*al tira ve-al tehat*] my servant Jacob...I will deliver you from far away" (Jer. 30:10). While any literal reader of this verse would identify "my servant Jacob" as a term of affection for "the people of Israel," the midrash, always attuned to other possible layers of interpretation, identifies "my servant Jacob" as the patriarch Jacob and even posits that this verse refers to his actions when he was at the foot of the ladder.

How does the midrash manage to relocate this verse to the foot of the ladder? Curiously, there is a very promising linguistic anchor in the verse for doing so. Jeremiah's advice, *al tira ve-al tehat*, seems repetitious, as it literally means "do not fear and do not fear." I would like to suggest that the midrash picks up on this superfluity. Furthermore, it also notices that the word *tehat* sounds very much like the Aramaic word *nahat*, to descend. The presence of fear and descent in this verse about Jacob echo strongly in the midrashic imagination. Where else in Jacob's life might we find these elements?

Ultimately, the Masters of the Midrash come up with an answer. The superfluity, the fear, and the phonological association of *tehat* with *nahat* prompt them to read this verse as hinting at what happened in Jacob's ladder dream. God told Jacob not to fear ascending as he would not descend, saying, quite literally, *al tira ve-al tehat*. "If you are not afraid of ascending, you will not descend," or, alternatively, "Do not fear ascending and then you will not have to fear descending." Rereading the verse in Jeremiah this way to expand the biblical story elsewhere is a time-honored, homiletical technique. However, knowing how the Masters of the Midrash accomplished their sleight-of-hand, does not explain how they could make the audacious claim they do regarding Jacob's unbelief!

On a personal note, my own experience on the Temple Mount may suggest a different resolution to our conundrum. Perhaps the midrash is using the word *yira* to denote "awe" and not "fear." When I first ascended the Temple Mount—the very place where tradition teaches us that Jacob had his ladder dream<sup>19</sup>—I was struck by a sense of holiness that prompted the very words Jacob had spoken when he awoke from his ladder dream to rise unbidden to my lips: "Surely the LORD is in this place; and I knew it not... How full of awe is this place! this is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven" (Genesis 28:16-17). The words perfectly expressed the surprise and awe I felt at suddenly being at the gate of heaven.

Tellingly, the words I skipped in the above verses describe Jacob's mood: "and he was afraid." Jacob's fear or awe, in this case, like Moses' when God speaks to him from the burning bush (Exodus 3:6), and like Manoah's when he realizes that the man he has spoken to is an angel (Judges 13:22), may have led him to recoil in surprise. Perhaps, his stubborn refusal to ascend reflects this awestruck backwards movement: his sense of his own personal unworthiness,

---

that makes Jacob's lack of belief even more difficult to understand—though, perhaps, true to character, as we will see below.

<sup>19</sup> *Hullin* 91b, Rashi on Genesis 28:11.

and of any human-beings essential unworthiness. He quite simply cannot bring himself to accept God's words and ascend; the midrash recognizing this all-too-human reaction explains that Jacob "could not believe," no matter what the consequences might be.

While this explanation speaks to me, the rabbis elsewhere do seem to recognize an ongoing problematic pattern of Jacob's fearfulness giving rise to the lack of belief or trust that may be reflected in our midrash. For instance, even though the midrash in *Genesis Rabbah* does legitimize Jacob's fear following the ladder dream, the Gemara in *Berakhot* 4a questions another event in Jacob's life that seems to indicate his apparent lack of belief. The Gemara asks why after God has explicitly promised to protect Jacob wherever he goes (Genesis 28:15), Jacob is afraid before he meets Esau (Gen 32:7). In this case, the Gemara again explains Jacob's fear by citing the possibility that his sins subsequent to God's promise may have abrogated it. This Gemara uses the rabbinic phrase "*shema yigrom ha-het*" to explain this idea: Jacob might have lost the merit of miraculous Divine intervention if he sinned after the promise was made.<sup>20</sup>

Could this notion explain all the occasions on which Jacob is fearful? I think not. Jacob's fear at meeting Esau is unique because it reflects the depths to which he had sinned against Esau: "conscience makes cowards of us all." Even though God had promised to protect him *after* he had sinned against Esau, it was natural for him to fear that other subsequent sins might vitiate God's protection when it came to such grievous transgressions. Even more importantly, he might have been particularly afraid that a subsequent transgression he *knew* he had committed against Esau—marrying Esau's intended, Leah<sup>21</sup>—could have abrogated God's gracious promise of protection. The midrash even relates that Jacob explicitly fears Esau's wrath over such a betrayal (*Tanhuma*, ed. Buber, *Vayetze* 12): "When I stole the blessings, Esau sought to kill me. Now, when I take his intended wife, he will leave Mahalath, the daughter of Ishmael [whom he had married], and he will come to me and say: 'Was it not enough for you, that you took my birthright and my blessing, you have also taken my intended?'" Even though, according to this midrash, Jacob tried to prevent this from happening by requesting Rachel's hand-in-marriage, Laban tricked Jacob into marrying Leah, and Jacob wound up marrying and, more problematically, remaining married to Esau's intended.<sup>22</sup>

Accepting that in Esau's case there might be a unique reason for concern, as reflected in *Berakhot* 4a, our original questions on the

---

<sup>20</sup> This concept is also utilized by the midrash to explain Avraham's fear after he won the battle against the four kings.

<sup>21</sup> See *Bava Batra* 123a; *Tanhuma*, ed. Buber, *Vayetze* 12. While this was not literally a sin, it was certainly another instance in which Jacob appropriated that which was meant for Esau.

<sup>22</sup> Although the Bible explicitly attributes Jacob's desire to marry Rachel to his love for her (Genesis 29:18), this midrash clarifies that he specifically asked to marry Rachel, the younger daughter, because he knew that Leah was promised to Esau. According to this midrash Jacob had initially intended to divorce Leah (*Gen. Rabbah* 96:31, [ed. Theodor-Albeck, MS. Vatican, p. 1241]). He ultimately chose not to because she was extremely fertile, forcing him to exclaim, "Will I divorce the mother of these?" (*Gen. Rabbah* 96:31 [ed. Theodor-Albeck, MS. Vatican, loc. cit.]). Curiously, God's decision to make Leah extremely fertile (Gen. 29:31-34) tested Jacob's resolve not to cross the line again where his brother was concerned. Jacob, for better or for worse, failed the test. The translation of *Tanhuma*, ed. Buber, above and the sources cited in this footnote are taken from Tamar Kadari "Leah: Midrash and Aggadah," *Jewish Women's Archives*, Encyclopedia. Accessed at <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/leah-midrash-and-aggadah>, December 1, 2019.

midrash regain their urgency: Why is Jacob afraid and why does he refuse to believe despite God's reassurance? I would like to suggest that the midrash feels comfortable in ascribing this fear and resultant refusal to ascend to Jacob because the Bible describes Jacob as an intrinsically fearful person on several occasions. Thus, in Gen. 31:31, we find Jacob telling Laban that he was afraid that Laban would "take his daughters by force"; in Gen. 32:7 we find Jacob "greatly frightened; in his anxiety...." of Esau, and even though Esau might be a special case, let's remember that God had just saved Jacob from Laban (Gen. 31:29, 42) and instructed angels to meet him at the borders of Canaan (Gen. 32:1)—actions that should have confirmed God's continued support;<sup>23</sup> and in Gen. 42:3 God reassures Jacob "Fear not to go down to Egypt...I Myself will also bring you back," thus implying that Jacob was afraid. Indeed, perhaps these verses form the context for the prophet Jeremiah's reassurances to the Jewish people, one of which the midrash already cited: "But you, have no fear, my servant Jacob...I will make an end of all the nations among which I have banished you" (Jer. 46:28); "But you, have no fear, my servant Jacob...I will deliver you from far away" (Jer. 30:10).

While the Bible does seem to characterize Jacob as fearful, the first time this occurs is following the ladder dream. Curiously, his fearfulness is not mentioned when he steals the blessing from Isaac. Surely Jacob must have been terrified when he walked into the tent and deceived his father! We must ask why this fear is only first mentioned in the Bible when Jacob reacts to his ladder dream and then several times later in his life? Did something happen when he stole the blessings that turned this apparently brave, stolid man into one prone to fear, and did the Bible picking up on this change, forevermore characterize him as a fearful man?

I would like to suggest that Jacob, like Isaac his father before him, suffered a very serious trauma, which led to this fear or anxiety. Isaac was traumatized by his father binding him to the altar on Mount Moriah,<sup>24</sup> with the midrash suggesting that his blindness was caused by the tears of the angels falling into his eyes.<sup>25</sup> Jacob, I would argue, was traumatized by his theft of the blessings and, in particular, by Isaac's reaction to this theft. As the Torah relates, at first, Jacob was only concerned about not getting caught and cursed for his troubles, but when Jacob, who barely made it out before Esau arrived (Gen. 27:30, 33), heard Esau enter the tent and cry out in great pain, and then, quite possibly, heard Isaac's "very violent trembling" (Gen. 27:33) and painful declaration, "Your brother came with guile and took away your blessing" (Gen. 27:35), he could not fail to be traumatized by the emotion in his father's voice. Jacob became fearful both of what he

---

<sup>23</sup> Of course, Jacob may have felt that God's recent salvation was precisely the reason for him to be concerned. Like Abraham following the battle against the four kings, he might have been afraid that he had used up all his merits (Rashi, Genesis 15:1), but even if this were the case, the angels meeting him do seem to imply that God is still on his side. Someone less prone to fear would have been reassured by this escort.

<sup>24</sup> Jewish tradition relates that the Temple was built on the site of the *Akedah*, on Mount Moriah. Clearly, the Temple Mount is another gateway to the Heavens. Cf. *m. Ta'anit* 2:4

<sup>25</sup> *Genesis Rabbah* glossing Gen. 27:1. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg artfully picks up on Isaac's trauma in A. Zornberg, *The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis* (Philadelphia/Jerusalem: JPS, 1995), 156 ff. She suggests that the *Akedah* triggered Isaac's "awareness of death," as demonstrated by his repeated references to death at the beginning of Gen. 27. This awareness henceforth fills every moment of his life. Following this exposition, Zornberg discusses the effect of the *Akedah* on Isaac's family, particularly Esau, who I might add would be termed "the identified patient," 160 ff.

had done and of others tricking him because he had tricked Isaac and Esau.

We are all familiar with the notion that certain character traits are passed on from father to son, thus a nervous father is likely to raise a nervous son. Turning to Abraham's family, as an example, let us look at intergenerational trust issues. Do these track from generation to generation? If so, might the parallel process of transmitting anxiety explain why Jacob's trauma at stealing the blessings is so immense? Would someone else have been less prone to be traumatized by the event?

According to the midrash Abraham was delivered into Nimrod's hands by none other than his father Terah. Nimrod then proceeded to throw Abraham into the fiery cauldron. Ishmael was exiled by his father Abraham (albeit at Sarah and God's behest). Isaac was bound on the altar by his father Abraham, and Jacob mistrusted his father to the degree that he felt compelled to trick him and steal the blessings. Jacob was repeatedly cheated by his proxy father figure, Laban. Jacob even expressed fear of his older brother Esau—the family breadwinner and seemingly destined heir. Any armchair psychologist would tell you that trusting one's father in these households was a loaded proposition; clearly this distrust was passed down from father to son. It would be no surprise if Isaac's anxiety and fearfulness at almost being slaughtered at the hands of his father was also transferred to Jacob over the course of their lives;<sup>26</sup> however, it took the trauma of Jacob's theft of the blessings to instill a full-blown case of anxiety in Jacob.

Recent scientific research—admittedly still in its infancy and some quite controversial <sup>27</sup>—on intergenerational and/or epigenetic transfer of trauma supports such a triggering of inborn or environmentally produced traits and suggests a number of ways it can occur. As [Lost in Transmission: Studies of Trauma Across Generations](#) summarizes: “what human beings cannot contain of their experience—what has been traumatically overwhelming, unbearable, unthinkable—falls out of social discourse, but very often on to and into the next generation as an *affective sensitivity* or a *chaotic urgency*.”<sup>28</sup> As Dr. Mary Castelloe notes: “Psychic legacies are often passed on through unconscious cues or affective messages that flow between adult and child. Sometimes anxiety falls from one generation to the next through stories told.”<sup>29</sup>

So whether the theft itself was the entire traumatic source of Jacob's fear (as the *Akedah* may have been Isaac's) or whether Jacob's fearfulness preceded his theft of the blessings, but was triggered into

---

<sup>26</sup> Indeed, Avivah Zornberg makes this claim, felicitously stating: “what cripples him [Jacob] is his sense of his father's crippling...[he] remains profoundly absorbed by his father's trauma” (Ibid., 238).

<sup>27</sup> The basic claim of epigenetics is that “trauma can leave a chemical mark on a person's genes, which then is passed down to subsequent generations. The mark doesn't directly damage the gene; there's no mutation. Instead it alters the mechanism by which the gene is converted into functioning proteins, or expressed. The alteration isn't genetic. It's epigenetic.” Benedict Carey. “Can We Really Inherit Trauma,” *New York Times* (December 10, 2018). Accessed online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/10/health/mind-epigenetics-genes.html>.

<sup>28</sup> *Lost in Transmission: Studies of Trauma Across Generations*, edited by M. Gerard Fromm (Karnac Books, 2012).

<sup>29</sup> Molly S. Castelloe. “How Trauma Is Carried Across Generations: Traumatic events can be passed onto the next generation.” *Psychology Today Blog*, May 28, 2013. Accessed at <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-me-in-we/201205/how-trauma-is-carried-across-generations>.

something much more devastating by this act,<sup>30</sup> following this event Jacob is characterized as fearful, in general, and especially fearful of engaging in further behavior that mimicked his theft of the blessing, in particular. Perhaps Francine Sharp, creator of Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) Therapy, best expresses the two types of trauma Jacob may have undergone. He may have experienced small-“t” trauma—“an accumulation of lesser or less pronounced events that exceed our capacity to cope and cause a disruption in emotional functioning,” or he may have experienced one big-“T” trauma—“a deeply disturbing or debilitating event” that leaves its psychological scar.<sup>31</sup> On the one hand, Jacob may have heard the the family story of the *Akedah* many times and/or implicitly intuited Isaac's abiding fear on a daily basis (both small-“t” traumas). On the other hand, he may have been radically traumatized in *Toldot* in the process of stealing the blessing (a big-“T” trauma). Either way, the small-“t” or big-“T” traumas may have triggered a genetically or epigenetically induced tendency to fear that became full-blown after the theft of the blessings.

The midrash, picking up on this characterization, seems to propose that Jacob's fear of taking a shortcut to success—avoiding the rocky road of life by engaging in trickery or guile, like stealing the blessings— is so extreme that he refuses to take any further dubious shortcuts, even if God guarantees that they are the right thing to do. He is no longer willing to listen to a future “Rebecca” commanding him to trick others and take shortcuts, and he is not willing to climb the ladder so he and his progeny can escape the vicissitudes of history and always remain ascendant. He prefers that he and his descendants gain their blessings through the appropriate, normative channels.

That Jacob's reluctance to engage in trickery or shortcuts even came into play when God spoke to him in the midrash, still seems difficult to understand. Perhaps it is related to the Abrahamic trust issues mentioned above. Perhaps Jacob was afraid to trust a God who was willing to allow him to skip the queue. Perhaps, he feared that listening to God and ascending was failing the test. He must have been well aware of the test God gave Abraham at the *Akedah*, which seemed to have been cancelled at the very last second—where passing the test might have meant objecting to God's command, in the first place, or completing the task despite the angel's order to cease and desist. Jacob refers to God as “the God of my father...the Fear of Isaac” (Gen. 31:42). Perhaps, his intense fear of not doing the right thing ultimately stems from his relationship with an inscrutable God, who is similar to his inscrutable father.

As many have noted, the biblical story of Jacob's life seems to stress the punishment he received for tricking his father: His uncle Laban tricked him and gave him Leah, instead of Rachel—rubbing the salt in Jacob's wound by noting that “in our place” we do not give the younger before the older (Gen. 29:26), and ultimately this led to Jacob's ten sons tricking him and selling Joseph into slavery. The trick Laban played on him (and Rachel's apparent complicity) must have made it quite clear to Jacob that those who engage in dissembling and trickery will be punished in kind. So even if he had neither been

---

<sup>30</sup> Jacob's description as a *yoshev ohalim*, a bookish type who did not go out hunting, may suggest a certain anxiety on his part about “biting off more than he could chew.”

<sup>31</sup> Elyssa Barbash. “Different Types of Trauma: Small ‘t’ versus Large ‘T’” *Psychology Today* March 13, 2017. Accessed at <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/trauma-and-hope/201703/different-types-trauma-small-t-versus-large-t> on December 1, 2019.



fully traumatized by his theft of the blessing and Isaac's reaction nor developed a full-blown guilty conscience over stealing the blessing until he had dealings with Laban (though I have argued that he most probably did), Laban's trickery would have pierced any residual denial and forced him to face his problematic behavior. The secondary trauma of Laban's behavior would have reinforced the primary trauma of the theft of the blessing and increased his anxiety surrounding trickery and shortcuts.

Indeed, one might further postulate that when Jacob realized the culture of dissembling and trickery that his mother, Rebecca, had come from in Haran, he might have had an epiphany. Most commentators agree that he had never been overly keen on tricking Isaac, he had trusted his mother's advice and done so. Perhaps, when he met Laban and realized that his mother's instincts to cheat might have been based on the way matters had been handled in her father Betuel's household—and not solely on her prophetic insight into his need to receive the blessings—he suddenly, figuratively speaking, was seized with very violent trembling of his own, realizing that this mode of behavior was not Abrahamic at all.

Indeed, Jacob seems to have learned to abstain from trickery for his life can be read as an attempt to flee a life of trickery, to become a paragon of truth, of following the normative path. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks masterfully demonstrates, Jacob comes clean and returns all three components of the blessing he stole to Esau (wealth, mastery, and land) when he meets him again (Jonathan Sacks, [Covenant and Conversation, Toldot 5775](#)). Jacob himself prays to God, stating that he is not worthy of "all the loving-kindness and all the truth" God had bestowed upon him (Gen. 32:11), while he sojourned in Laban's house. Jacob berates his sons for tricking the city of Shekhem and destroying Jacob's local reputation (Gen. 34:30). Jacob, ironically, rebukes Laban for constantly changing his wages (though he does reluctantly even the score by genetic manipulation, whose success he tellingly imputes to God, not to himself [Gen. 31:42]). Jacob maintains that he had no choice but to flee from Laban's house and certainly did not steal the household idols (Gen. 31:31-32). Finally, in Gen. 47:9, he tells Pharaoh the truth—he has had a hard and relatively short life—instead of praising the power and beneficence of his family God.<sup>32</sup> He even refuses to believe that the brothers harmed Joseph, preferring to turn a blind eye to their trickery.

Thus, perhaps Jacob did not climb the ladder in the midrash even though God told him to because he could not allow himself to trust God's reassurances or to take a shortcut, to cleverly bypass the normal course of human history *again*. Having done so once and already perceived some of the evil such a course had wrought, he could not allow himself to repeat this mistake. He was traumatized, fearful of, and obsessed with not being Jacob the trickster again, no matter what his mother or father figures—Rebecca or God—might tell him to do. Indeed, he names his father's God—"the Fear of Isaac" (Gen. 31:42). Perhaps, in doing so, he is expressing his difficulty in trusting God and projecting his fear of the ever-looming punishment for tricking Isaac onto God.<sup>33</sup> Or, perhaps, he is labeling Isaac's God as the source of his trauma and anxiety, which led to these actions.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup> *Genesis Rabbah* 95:9 (ed. Theodor-Albeck) notes this faux pas and criticizes Jacob harshly. In the footnotes *ad locum* Theodor cites additional complementary midrashim.

<sup>33</sup> Curiously, it is Moses who is brutally straightforward with Pharaoh who could climb up the ladder at Sinai and climb back down and allow human history to continue in its course. Indeed, Moses is the quintessential man of truth who struck the Egyptian taskmaster, rebuked the fighting Hebrew slaves,

LEHRHAUS EDITORS:  
YEHUDA FOGEL  
DAVID FRIED  
DAVIDA KOLLMAR  
TZVI SINENSKY  
MINDY SCHWARTZ ZOLTY

and finally asked to see God's face, without any thought of the consequences to himself.

<sup>34</sup> In this essay, I have focused on the biblical antecedents and psychological dynamics supporting the midrash's reading. However, setting the midrash in its historical context or the history of contemporaneous ideas might also bear fruit. Some might suggest that this trope was ascribed to Jacob by the rabbis in order to berate the lack of faith or to bolster the faith of those in their own day who were afraid to "climb the ladder." Indeed, God's reaction to Jacob's refusal to ascend—dooming his descendants to exile—supports the notion that the midrash is rebuking those Jews who are living or who lived in the Holy Land who do not or did not try to take back the Temple Mount (where Jacob's dream occurs according to the midrash) and rebuild the Temple. In fact, the historical context of this midrash might be Bar Kokhba's rebellion, which Rabbi Akiva famously supported and others did not. *Vayikra Rabbah* goes out of its way to attribute the midrash to Rabbi Meir who was Rabbi Akiva's student. While we do not know R. Meir's politics, the connection is suggestive.

Alternately, one might suggest that the harshness of this midrashic indictment implies that it is polemicalizing with another tradition: a mystical tradition, stemming from the *Hekhalot* literature that sees Jacob not only ascending to the Heavens but becoming like a god. Indeed, Elliot R. Wolfson in [Along the Path: Studies in Kabbalistic Myth, Symbolism and Hermeneutics](#) (SUNY, 1995) devotes an entire chapter, "The Image of Jacob," to a discussion of Jacob's iconic role in various mystical texts (including *Hekhalot Rabbati*) as "the link that connects heaven and earth... for he [Jacob] is in both places insofar as he is below but his image is engraved above" (18), as "a god in the lower entities" (22), and as a demiurge (30). From a mystical point of view, as Wolfson demonstrates, Jacob truly ascended the ladder and inhabits or spans the divine (and earthly) realms. Echoing this, Shamma Friedman has also remarked that "It is not surprising then that Jacob/Israel as God's chosen, was portrayed in rabbinic teachings as bearing the divine image in a unique sense, including exact facial features, the 'spit and image' of his Creator.... This is indeed the original meaning of the legend that Jacob's icon was engraved upon the Divine throne." (Overview of Shamma Friedman "Anthropomorphism and Its Eradication" in *Iconoclasm and Iconoclasm*, edited by Willem van Asselt, Paul van Geest, Daniela Müller, and Theo Salemink [Oxford UP, 2007], pp. 157-178). So perhaps, our midrash is making a point: there is no way that Jacob would have even ascended to Heaven, let alone become god-like and stayed there.