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Beyond Flag-Waving: Educating Toward Religious Zionism in North American Jewish Day Schools

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Introduction: When Crisis Accomplishes What Curriculum Does Not

In the weeks after October 7, many Jewish educators observed a change that no planned curriculum had produced. Students who knew the history of the conflict, had visited Israel, and could identify its political leaders ceased to relate to Israel primarily as observers. They grieved as participants. News about people they had never met felt personally consequential. Educators described, sometimes with bewilderment, that students had acquired in weeks the sense of implication that years of programming had sought to cultivate.

This response was necessarily marked by tension: horror at the events themselves alongside the recognition that they had deepened students' connection to Israel. Yet that recognition should also lead us to examine our educational approach. If catastrophe shapes Zionist commitment more powerfully than curriculum, our institutions may have developed what is more a coherent emergency response than a sustained educational philosophy.

Catastrophe will always move people more intensely than curriculum can. No lesson plan can match the emotional force of October 7, and none should try. Crisis generates a powerful sense of belonging, yet it does not supply that belonging

with content, and it does not make it last. The problem is not that crisis moved students more deeply than school did. It is that crisis did the forming, and schools had no clear account of what that response should become once the crisis passed.

Rav Aharon Lichtenstein identified the same pattern in twentieth-century Jewish history through a Talmudic comparison. Rav Abba bar Kahana observes that Achashverosh's removal of his signet ring accomplished what forty-eight prophets and seven prophetesses could not: danger moved the Jewish people to return when exhortation had failed. Rav Lichtenstein called this "the summary of twentieth-century aliyah." [1] Threat moves Jews. Education, apparently, moves them less. For educators, that conclusion should be intolerable.

This may well be a fact of human nature, which is precisely why educators cannot accept it. Education presupposes that people can be formed beyond their default instincts. No school treats "students naturally avoid learning" as the last word on Torah study, or "people are naturally selfish" as the ceiling of character education, and Zionist identity formation deserves no lower expectation. The stakes are also more than pedagogical. If only danger reliably moves Jews, then those who wish Jews harm set the timing and content of Jewish identity. And a commitment built on fear tends to be narrow and short-lived: intense while the threat persists, fading when it recedes.

North American day schools often teach about Israel very well, and that success can obscure a deeper uncertainty about educational purpose. Teaching about Israel and educating toward Zionism are distinct but complementary enterprises. I am not arguing for a uniform curriculum. A Modern Orthodox school in New Jersey, a pluralistic school in Florida, a community school in Seattle, and a school serving a large Israeli-American population should not define the same graduate. Educational pluralism is appropriate; conceptual vagueness is not. Each school should be able to state the Zionist commitments it seeks to cultivate and the educational practices through which it intends to cultivate them.

1. The Achievement - and Limitation - of Contemporary Israel Education

Israel education in North American day schools is more developed than it has ever been. The field now has professional organizations, shared conceptual frameworks, curricular resources, immersive experiences, and pedagogies capable of addressing complexity. The iCenter's Aleph Bet of Israel Education distinguishes among Eretz Yisrael, Medinat Yisrael, and Am Yisrael and treats Hebrew and Israeli culture as intrinsically valuable. Prizmah convenes schools around Israel and Zionism education. Unpacked, OpenDor Media,

[1] Megillah 14a; Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, "Diaspora Religious Zionism: Some Current Reflections," Orthodox Forum paper, published in Chaim I. Waxman, ed., *Religious Zionism Post-Disengagement: Future Directions* (Orthodox Forum Series, 2008). Available at etzion.org.il.

Write On For Israel, and the Shalom Hartman Institute provide materials for history, advocacy, ethical inquiry, and contemporary debate. Shinshinim, bnot sherut, youth movements, and the post-high-school year in Israel create relationships and experiences that classroom teaching alone cannot reproduce.

The pedagogy has matured alongside the infrastructure. Serious schools no longer reduce "teaching the conflict" to the distribution of talking points. Students may encounter Palestinian narratives, Mizrahi history, religious-secular tensions, Israeli political divisions, and moral questions raised by occupation and war. Alex Sinclair's call to educate toward a "loving critique" of the real Israel has influenced liberal Zionist education, while many Orthodox schools have moved in a similar direction.[2] Barry Chazan has supplied the field with a person-centered philosophy in which Israel education cultivates the learner's capacity for reasoned, emotional, and ethical judgment.[3]

This infrastructure matters because it has changed both the content and the professional status of the field. Forty years ago, Israel education in many schools consisted primarily of symbols, celebratory performance, and a simplified national story. Such practices created warmth, but they often left students unprepared for sustained encounter with Israeli society or for the contradictions they would meet in college. Contemporary programs are more likely to distinguish knowledge of the land from knowledge of the state, and both from a relationship with the Jewish people. They also recognize that Israel is not only an object of historical study or political advocacy but a Hebrew-speaking culture whose literature, music, religious creativity, and social divisions deserve study in their own right.

The field has also learned that relationships often matter more than purchased curriculum. Schools consistently report that shinshinim and bnot sherut exercise an influence disproportionate to their formal instructional role. Their importance lies partly in proximity: they allow students to know young Israelis rather than merely to discuss "Israelis" as a category. Youth movements such as Bnei Akiva and NCSY, and the post-high-school year in Israel, can extend that relational formation beyond the school day. These programs are not interchangeable, and their ideological premises differ. Collectively, however, they form a pipeline of contact, practice, and experience that few other areas of Jewish education can match.

Available outcome data also suggest that day school graduates are deeply attached to Israel. Prizmah's analysis of Eitan Hersh's survey of Jewish college students reported that 61 percent of day school alumni felt "very much" connected to Israel, compared with 16 percent of peers who

[2] Alex Sinclair, *Loving the Real Israel: An Educational Agenda for Liberal Zionism* (Ben Yehuda Press, 2013).

[3] Barry Chazan, *A Philosophy of Israel Education: A Relational Approach* (Springer, 2016). Available Open Access under a CC-BY license.

had not attended day school; among alumni from Orthodox homes, the figure reached 80 percent.[4] The design cannot isolate school effects from family selection, and the duration of day school attendance was not reported. Even so, the findings support a modest but important conclusion: day school graduates frequently arrive on campus with strong Jewish identities and strong connections to Israel.

The central problem is therefore not that schools have failed at the goals they set. It is that those goals may be too limited.

The most comprehensive study of the field, *Hearts and Minds: Israel in North American Jewish Day Schools*, surveyed 95 schools, approximately 350 educators, and 4,030 students. When educators named their goals, the leading aspirations were affective: students should love Israel, understand it as the homeland of the Jewish people, and feel pride when they think about it. The authors accordingly characterized day school Israel education as, to a large extent, "a practice of working on the heart."[5]

That emphasis has genuine educational value. Love, pride, belonging, and identification are not trivial outcomes. Yet the list of goals contains little about obligation, action, or the claims that Israel and Jewish peoplehood might make upon a student. Its most explicitly behavioral aspiration is that graduates voluntarily visit Israel - an important outcome, but still principally an experience of travel.

Three additional findings from *Hearts and Minds* sharpen the concern. First, Israel often serves as institutional glue. It is among the few Jewish commitments shared across otherwise diverse parent bodies. That consensus creates an incentive to remain at the level of attachment: affection unites, while obligation exposes disagreement. Second, parental participation in Jewish communal life predicted students' Israel connection more strongly than participation in an Israel trip. Immersive travel matters, but it does not displace the formative power of the home and community. Third, students in more traditional schools were more likely to perceive Israel as endangered and vulnerable, a finding the researchers tentatively connected to communal practices such as reciting Tehillim after attacks. Such practices express solidarity, but repeated crisis-centered formation may also teach students to encounter Israel primarily through danger.

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[4] Odelia Epstein, "Jewish Day School Alumni on Campus" (Prizmah: Center for Jewish Day Schools, January 2025), analyzing a three-year study of Jewish college students conducted by Eitan Hersh of Tufts University in partnership with College Pulse and funded by the Jim Joseph Foundation; n=1,006, of whom 220 attended Jewish day school (90 raised Orthodox, 130 non-Orthodox). Reported in Judah Ari Gross, *eJewishPhilanthropy*, January 30, 2025. Note two limitations: respondents did not report duration of day school attendance, and the design cannot distinguish school effects from family selection.

[5] Alex Pomson, Jack Wertheimer, and Hagit Hacohen-Wolf, *Hearts and Minds: Israel in North American Jewish Day Schools* (The AVI CHAI Foundation with Rosov Consulting, April 2014), esp. 1-4, 9-12.

Each finding has institutional implications. Israel's role as communal glue makes an affective curriculum not only educationally appealing but organizationally convenient. A school that asks families to love Israel can preserve broad agreement; a school that asks what Israel requires of those families will quickly discover different positions on aliyah, military service, philanthropy, political advocacy, and religious authority. The point is not that schools should manufacture conflict. It is that the avoidance of conflict silently shapes educational goals.

The finding about parents similarly cautions against attributing outcomes to the most visible program. An eighth-grade trip may be transformative, but it operates within patterns of speech and practice established at home. If parents follow Israeli news, use Hebrew, sustain friendships in Israel, give to Israeli institutions, and deliberate openly about the place of Israel in family decisions, students learn that Israel is a dimension of adult Jewish life. If the adults outsource Israel to the school, even an excellent trip may remain an episode.

The vulnerability finding is more difficult. Reciting Tehillim after an attack is an expression of covenantal solidarity and should not be abandoned. Yet two decades of assemblies organized around victims may form students to understand Israel chiefly as endangered. Crisis can intensify belonging while narrowing its content. Israel becomes the place for which one mourns and mobilizes rather than a society whose language, law, religious creativity, and exercise of power one must also understand. The educational challenge is therefore not to reduce solidarity but to place it within a fuller account of national life.

Rav Soloveitchik supplied vocabulary for what such an education tends to produce. Shared fate, he argued, generates a *machaneh*, a camp: a defensive formation constituted by threat and cohesive for as long as threat persists. Shared destiny generates an *edah*, a congregation constituted by what its members undertake together.[6] Both are authentic, and the Rav insisted that a Jew who feels no share in Jewish fate has damaged his Jewishness. A camp, however, is not a curriculum. An education that reliably produces solidarity under threat and comparatively little else leaves graduates dependent upon hostility for their sense of belonging and effectively cedes the initiative in Jewish formation to those who wish Jews harm.

The field can therefore document that many graduates know Israel, care about it, and perceive its vulnerability. It cannot yet show that it produces Zionists, because "Zionist" has rarely been defined as an educational outcome. We aimed at love and pride and often achieved them. The question is whether those aims exhaust the educational task.

[6] Soloveitchik, *Kol Dodi Dofek*. The distinction between *machaneh* and *edah* corresponds to the covenants of fate and destiny discussed in section 3 below.

The evidentiary base itself should also trouble the field. *Hearts and Minds* was published in 2014, before the political developments and communal shocks that have reshaped Israel education, most dramatically October 7 and its aftermath. That is not a criticism of the study's authors. It is an observation about the absence of a comparable successor. A field that has invested heavily in programming has invested far less in determining whether its purposes and outcomes have changed.

2. From Learning About Israel to Being Claimed by Zionism

Teaching about Israel and educating toward Zionism are not rival projects. They are distinct enterprises that correct one another's characteristic failures.

Israel education supplies the content of a commitment: history, Hebrew, culture, politics, religious life, and the disciplined encounter with competing narratives. Zionist education supplies the claim: it asks whether the learner understands herself to be implicated in the Jewish national project and what that implication requires. Content without claim produces a well-informed spectator. Claim without content produces an unreflective loyalist. The educational task is to join knowledge and obligation without collapsing either into the other.

The distinction matters because much of the field's language is intentionally learner-centered and relational. That language reflects a justified concern about indoctrination. A relationship, however, is something a learner has; an obligation is something that addresses and constrains the learner. Deepening a relationship does not necessarily produce obligation, just as intensifying emotional response does not itself produce *chiyyuv*.

Knowledge and attachment must come first. Students cannot responsibly affirm a commitment they do not understand. Thin foundations do not generate durable obligation; they generate loyalties that can be redirected by whichever voice speaks most forcefully. The appropriate educational sequence is therefore knowledge, attachment, and then considered obligation. The problem is not the sequence but the absence of a telos beyond its first two stages.

If attachment in the elementary grades were intentionally preparing students for questions of obligation in high school, the stated goals and assessments would change with age. *Hearts and Minds*, however, found substantial consistency across grade levels in the affective emphasis. Complexity increases as students mature, but purpose does not necessarily change. Younger students receive symbols and narratives; older students receive conflict, political fracture, and moral ambiguity. Love remains the destination, now supported by more sophisticated information.

This is why the familiar language of scaffolding does not fully answer the concern. A scaffold is defined by what is eventually built upon it. If schools cultivate affection in the lower grades so that adolescents can later confront obligation, then high school should contain explicit

opportunities to reason about duty, sacrifice, and decision. Where no such shift occurs, affection is not a stage within the educational sequence; it is the sequence's unacknowledged endpoint.

The distinction also clarifies why excellent Israel education is indispensable to the argument advanced here. No student can responsibly judge the authority of Israeli courts, the status of minority citizens, the religious meaning of sovereignty, or the personal claim of aliyah without substantial knowledge of Israeli history, law, and society. The most demanding version of Zionist education therefore depends on the strongest possible education about Israel. The objection is not to knowledge or complexity, but to confidence that they will produce commitment without an educational moment in which commitment is explicitly considered.

The distinction can be tested institutionally. If a school claims to educate both about Israel and toward Zionism, where does the latter appear in its schedule, assessments, budget, or graduate profile? What questions are students expected not merely to understand but to answer for themselves? What practices require a commitment rather than display a preference?

This institutional test exposes a broader question about normativity in education. All schools educate toward something, even when they describe themselves as neutral or learner-centered. Decisions about required texts, the allocation of time, the organization of ritual, the selection of role models, and the conduct that receives praise communicate judgments about values and the good. The relevant choice is not between normative education and education without norms. It is between norms that are explicit enough to be examined and norms that remain embedded in institutional practice. A school that refuses to articulate what Zionism asks does not thereby avoid forming students. It allows the inherited routines of the school and community to supply the answer.

An academic account of Zionist education should therefore distinguish normativity from indoctrination. Indoctrination seeks assent while shielding a claim from criticism; normative education presents a claim as worthy of consideration and expects learners to respond to it with intellectual seriousness. The distinction is not whether the educator has commitments. It concerns whether evidence, disagreement, and the possibility of reasoned refusal remain available. A Religious Zionist school can teach that Jewish sovereignty bears religious significance while also requiring students to identify the strongest theological and moral objections to that claim. Indeed, the school's confidence in the seriousness of its commitment should make such scrutiny possible.

This approach also clarifies the status of student autonomy. Autonomy is not exercised in the absence of inherited commitments but through their examination. Students become agents when they can name the traditions that address them, understand the alternatives, and give an account of the positions they adopt. Merely offering information and withholding all claims may leave students less free, because the norms of family,

peers, media, and political culture continue to operate without being made visible. Educating toward Zionism, properly understood, is therefore not the replacement of agency with loyalty. It is the effort to bring a consequential inherited loyalty into the domain of study, argument, and choice.

The answer depends partly on what Zionism means after the establishment of the State. At least three accounts remain educationally viable. A political account, associated with Herzl, understands Zionism as the continuing maintenance and defense of Jewish sovereignty. A cultural account, associated with Ahad Ha'am, understands Israel as the cultural center of a global Jewish people and therefore demands Hebrew literacy and genuine engagement with Israeli cultural production. A covenantal account understands Zionism as the assertion that the Jews constitute a people bound by mutual obligation, with the State serving as the primary institutional expression of that peoplehood. Each account asks more than affection. A school's first act of Zionist education is to determine which account - or combination of accounts - it affirms.
These accounts are not mutually exclusive, but neither are they interchangeable. The political account asks students to understand sovereignty as an achievement that must continually be defended and renewed. The cultural account places demands on Diaspora institutions that celebrate Israel while tolerating weak Hebrew and limited knowledge of Israeli cultural life. The covenantal account asks what Jews owe one another across borders and what institutional forms can carry that obligation. A school may affirm all three, but it should specify their relative weight because each produces different curricular priorities and different measures of success. Without such specification, "Zionism" becomes a word under which incompatible aspirations coexist without scrutiny.

Two common approaches can distract from that work. The first is the advocacy trap: Zionist education becomes preparation to answer hostile claims, survive the campus seminar, or respond to an encampment. These skills are increasingly necessary, but they remain skills. A student can defend Israel effectively without understanding herself to be obligated by Jewish sovereignty or peoplehood. The second is the nuance trap: complexity becomes an alibi for withholding judgment. A student can articulate every perspective and never be asked what she believes or intends to do. Advocacy and nuance are often presented as opposites, yet both can remain entirely within education about Israel. Neither, by itself, requires the student to assume responsibility.

One further objection should be acknowledged before proceeding, because it determines whether anything proposed here is affordable. Curricular time is finite and already contested. Hours devoted to contemporary Israel are hours withdrawn from Gemara, Tanakh, halakhah, or general studies, and administrators are right to ask what justifies the exchange. If knowledge of Israeli society were valuable chiefly because it strengthens identity or produces capable advocates, the exchange would be difficult to defend. Identity and advocacy are genuine goods,

but neither obviously outranks the study of Torah, and a school asked to trade the one for the other should decline. The argument advanced later in this essay is different in kind. It holds that certain domains of Torah cannot be studied as living law without knowledge of the society in which they now operate, and that the choice is therefore not between Israel and Torah but between two conceptions of what the study of Torah includes.

3. Religious Zionism as Curricular Content

The need to distinguish knowledge from claim is especially acute in Religious Zionist education. Religious Zionism is not generic Zionism supplemented by the recitation of Hallel. It makes theological and halakhic claims. If schools identify themselves as Religious Zionist institutions, those claims should have curricular consequences.

An episode from R. Aharon Lichtenstein's first visit to Israel in 1962 illustrates the problem. Rav Yitzchak Hutner asked the young R. Lichtenstein what had struck him about the country. R. Lichtenstein described notable features of Israeli Torah life. Rav Hutner dismissed each answer as something that could also have existed in Eastern Europe. He then invoked the biblical and rabbinic language of a land sought by God and denied even to Moshe and Aharon. R. Lichtenstein left the encounter chastened: his observations had been intelligent and accurate, but his category had been inadequate. [7] Schools can produce similarly accomplished students - students who understand Israeli society yet have never been asked what Eretz Yisrael and Medinat Yisrael means as a religious category.

The strongest version of Religious Zionism treats Aliyah as its educational telos. That position should be presented seriously rather than evaded. But associated with that and at minimum, Religious Zionist education entails four propositions.

First, Jewish history is not religiously neutral. Schools may disagree about the redemptive status of the State and about the phrase *reishit tzemichat ge'ulateinu.* Nevertheless, a graduate who can interpret 1948 only as a fortuitous result of diplomacy has not encountered a distinctively Religious Zionist account of history. The proposition that restored sovereignty bears religious meaning is teachable, contestable, and assessable. It should not remain merely a mood.

Teaching this proposition does not require a school to announce that contemporary history can be read with prophetic certainty. Indeed, a serious curriculum should distinguish religious meaning from confident prediction. Students should encounter triumphalist and anti-triumphalist readings, the theological possibilities opened by renewed sovereignty, and the warnings against identifying a state or political program too quickly with redemption. What makes the curriculum

[7] Rav Lichtenstein, "Diaspora Religious Zionism." The dictum on Eretz Yisrael as the place denied to Moshe and Aharon is at Ketubot 112a.

Religious Zionist is not the elimination of disagreement but the refusal to treat Jewish return and sovereignty as religiously irrelevant.

Second, the Land is halakhically present. *Yishuv ha'aretz, shemittah, terumot u-ma'asrot,* and the *mitzvot ha-teluyot ba'aretz* should be taught as living law rather than as antiquarian material. A curriculum that devotes years to the laws of Shabbat but little sustained study to the laws of the Land communicates, regardless of its assemblies, which domains of halakhah it regards as real.

The curricular signal is especially powerful because the laws of the Land join text to contemporary practice. They require students to see agriculture, economics, rabbinic authority, and state policy as sites of Torah rather than as background to it. They also reveal the difference between admiring Israel and inhabiting categories generated by Jewish life in the Land. A celebratory calendar can communicate esteem; sustained halakhic study communicates reality.

Third, sovereignty itself carries religious significance. The authority of government, the use of military force, the treatment of minorities, the jurisdiction of religious courts, and the distribution of civic burdens are not merely political questions. Religious Zionism claims that the return of Jewish power creates new arenas of religious responsibility. For much of Diaspora history, Jewish law operated principally within communities whose members accepted its authority. Sovereignty changes the structure of the problem. A state can conscript, tax, imprison, regulate marriage and divorce, and exercise force over people who did not choose its religious or political commitments. Secular Jews, Arab citizens, immigrants whose Jewish status is contested, converts, and women subject to rabbinic jurisdiction all encounter Jewish power differently. This is the central novelty of Religious Zionism, yet it often receives less curricular attention than history or advocacy.

This claim has profound curricular consequences and is frequently the least developed. Schools may discuss Israeli elections and current events while leaving students to interpret them exclusively through American political categories. A Religious Zionist curriculum should instead ask what sources within the tradition contribute to a theory of public authority, coercion, citizenship, war, and responsibility for the outsider. The sources will not yield a single policy platform. Their educational function is to establish that Jewish sovereignty makes demands on Torah learning and that political judgment is part of religious adulthood.

Fourth, the Jewish people is a covenantal body whose members bear obligations to one another. Rabbi Shalom Rosner has suggested the category *bein adam le'amo* - obligations between a person and the Jewish nation - alongside the familiar domains of *bein adam la-Makom, bein adam le-chaveiro, and bein adam le'atzmo*. [8] The

[8] Shalom Rosner, in "Diaspora Judaism at a Crossroads," symposium, *The Benjamin and Rose Berger Torah To-Go Series*, Pesach 5786 (Yeshiva University / RIETS, April 2026), 17. Rosner attributes the third category, *bein adam le'atzmo*, to the Gra "and others."

terminology may be debated, but the underlying claim is indispensable. Defending the Jewish people, serving its institutions, or relocating one's life to Israel has national significance that cannot be reduced to interpersonal benevolence.

This category also prevents Zionist obligation from collapsing into generalized benevolence. Visiting the sick, supporting a family in need, and volunteering in one's neighborhood are indispensable forms of *chesed*. National obligation adds a different scale and object: sustaining institutions, sharing burdens, participating in collective defense, cultivating Hebrew culture, and accepting responsibility for decisions made by the Jewish polity. A curriculum that teaches interpersonal ethics without national responsibility may form admirable Jews, but it has not yet explained what is distinctive about Religious Zionism.

The most common Diaspora translation of national obligation is financial. Federation campaigns, institutional appeals, emergency drives, and school fundraising offer students a concrete and immediate way to act, and the generosity that followed October 7 was extraordinary by any measure. Philanthropy should not be disparaged. It sustains institutions that could not otherwise operate, and a willingness to part with resources is a real index of commitment. It is worth noticing, however, why giving becomes the default. It is the only expression of obligation that requires no knowledge. A donor may support an institution whose language he does not speak, whose internal debates he cannot follow, and whose decisions he is not equipped to evaluate. Money is the single contribution that can be made without understanding anything.

That is what makes it insufficient as the terminus of a religious education. A relationship in which one party's entire contribution is financial is not covenantal but philanthropic, and *bein adam le'amo*, whatever else it entails, is not a category of donation. The risk is not that students will give too much. It is that giving will discharge the sense of obligation at the lowest informational cost, permitting a school to record an outcome while the formative work remains undone. The relevant test is therefore not the size of the campaign. It is whether a graduate can explain what the funds were for, what disagreement exists in Israel about whether they should be spent that way, and who holds the opposing position.

These propositions do not dictate a single curriculum. They do, however, establish a content threshold. A school cannot plausibly call its education Religious Zionist if students encounter the State chiefly through contemporary politics, the Land chiefly through celebration, and Jewish peoplehood chiefly through sentiment.

The four propositions are analytically distinct but educationally interdependent. A theological reading of history without study of the Land's halakhot can become an atmosphere of providential confidence detached from disciplined practice. Halakhic study without attention to sovereignty can reduce Religious Zionism to commandments made newly practicable by geography. A theory of state power without covenantal peoplehood can become a political

philosophy with little account of why Jews outside Israel are implicated in it. Covenantal solidarity without the other three can collapse into generalized concern for fellow Jews, intense but indistinguishable from forms of peoplehood that make no claim about land or state.

Curricular integration is therefore essential. The history course that teaches 1948, the Gemara class that studies Ketubot, the halakhah curriculum that treats *shemittah*, the Hebrew program, and the civics unit on Israeli institutions should not function as unrelated domains. Students need opportunities to see how historical interpretation, legal obligation, language, peoplehood, and public power inform one another. Integration does not require a single interdisciplinary course or the elimination of disciplinary expertise. It requires a shared set of questions that recur across the curriculum and culminate in work through which students construct a defensible position.

One such question might ask what changes religiously when Jewish collective life moves from minority community to sovereign state. A student could encounter that question historically through the founding of the State, textually through sources on kingship and communal authority, halakhically through laws dependent on the Land, ethically through the treatment of minorities, and personally through deliberation about citizenship and residence. The repeated question gives coherence to material that schools already teach, while changing its purpose from coverage to formation.

This formulation also sets an important limit. Religious Zionist education should not be evaluated by the intensity of its ceremonies alone. Ritual can embody ideas and sustain memory, but it cannot substitute for conceptual content. Nor should intellectual content be evaluated only by a student's ability to reproduce the school's preferred answer. The more appropriate outcome is disciplined judgment: a graduate who understands why the questions arise from within Religious Zionism, can reason with its sources, can identify the costs of competing positions, and recognizes that a refusal to decide may itself carry consequences.

4. Why Contemporary Israel Belongs in the Study of Torah

The preceding argument assumes that students are obligated not only to care about Israel but also to understand it, including its internal debates. That assumption requires justification. The familiar rationales are insufficient: Israeli society should not be studied merely because it is interesting, because familiarity strengthens Jewish identity, or because graduates will confront hostile claims on campus. Each treats Israel as instrumental to another objective, and none establishes why its study should compete for hours otherwise devoted to Torah.

The stronger justification is that Jewish sovereignty reactivated domains of Torah that had remained largely theoretical for much of Jewish

history. Living law cannot be understood apart from the circumstances in which it operates. For nearly two millennia, Jewish communities lacked the jurisdiction necessary to apply substantial areas of the tradition: the laws of kingship and war, courts and public authority, taxation and expenditure, the *ger toshav*, the commandments dependent on the Land, and Shabbat in a public domain administered by Jews. These are not peripheral subjects; they occupy a significant place in Rambam's code. The establishment of a Jewish state restored the conditions under which they generate practical questions. The extensive modern halakhic literature on government, military ethics, medicine, technology, and economic policy is therefore not commentary on Israeli current events. It is Torah applied under conditions that Jewish sovereignty has made possible.

Once this is recognized, knowledge of contemporary Israel ceases to be background information and becomes something closer to case law. One cannot study warfare as living halakhah without understanding what an army does, which decisions its commanders confront, and what Israeli poskim are debating. One cannot study the obligations of a Jewish polity toward resident non-Jews without knowing who Israel's non-Jewish citizens are and how the state governs them. The relationship is familiar from every other area of serious learning: *sugyot* in Bava Kamma require some knowledge of oxen and pits; *sugyot* in Bava Metzia require some knowledge of employment and credit. Such knowledge is not a diversion from Torah study but a condition of understanding it.

An instructive asymmetry reveals the curricular problem. Schools would rightly regard it as an educational failure if graduates believed that Judaism had nothing to say about commercial honesty or an employer's treatment of workers. Yet it is rarely treated as a comparable failure when graduates have no idea what Torah demands of a Jewish army, a Jewish court, or a Jewish majority governing a minority. Both omissions reflect the same constriction of Torah. The second may be more consequential because these questions, largely theoretical for centuries, now possess practical urgency.

This is also why Israel's internal debates matter, not merely its institutional facts. Halakhic and theological questions become fully intelligible when they are contested by people who must live with the consequences. Israeli disputes over conscription and yeshiva students, judicial authority, conversion and the jurisdiction of the rabbinate, the public character of Shabbat, the conduct of war, and the treatment of asylum seekers represent the tradition reasoning about itself under conditions of power. Diaspora communities provide few equivalent occasions because voluntary institutions rarely make decisions binding those who reject their authority. Students who never encounter these debates may reasonably conclude that halakhah governs private observance but has little claim upon public life. Excluding the debates does not protect students from politics; it transmits a smaller Torah. The objection concerning curricular time can therefore be answered directly. The proposal is integrative rather than additive. It does not ordinarily require a new course. It requires

material schools already teach—the Gemara in Ketubot, the laws of the Land, the history of 1948, and Hebrew—to be taught with attention to the circumstances in which Torah now operates. A school that cannot accommodate this should understand the choice it is making. It is not merely declining to add another subject; it is assigning some domains of Torah less educational importance than others. That judgment may be defensible, but it should be stated and justified rather than produced inadvertently by the accumulated pressures of the timetable.

What is ultimately at stake is not political literacy but the scope of the Judaism a school transmits. Rabbi Sacks observed that Israel is the only setting in which Jews live Judaism in something other than an edited edition. The same is true of Jewish education. A student taught only the portions of Torah practicable within a voluntary minority community has received an abridged tradition, generally without being told that it is abridged. Such a student may become knowledgeable and observant while remaining unaware that Judaism possesses a jurisprudence of public power, a political tradition, and unresolved arguments about coercion, force, citizenship, and the ordering of society.

That absence is a religious deprivation, not merely a civic one—and Jewish schools are now able to remedy it. R. Lichtenstein's account of *derishat Tziyon* is instructive precisely because it defines Zionism as seeking rather than sentiment. One cannot seek what one has not troubled to understand.

Conclusion

North American Jewish educators have built a substantial apparatus for teaching about Israel. Many students know the history, hold complexity, can answer a hostile claim, and love the place. Those are genuine achievements, and nothing argued here should be read as disparagement of the people who built them.

The limitation lies elsewhere. The field has not adequately specified what it is educating toward, and it has assumed that knowledge and attachment will mature into obligation without deliberate work. Sometimes they do. More often, crisis supplies the missing catalyst. Rav Abba bar Kahana's contrast between prophetic exhortation and the signet ring remains a standing rebuke to educators: an education that depends on catastrophe to complete its work is not yet complete.

Religious Zionism supplies the resources for a more demanding account, provided its claims are treated as curricular content rather than institutional atmosphere. That Jewish history is not religiously neutral, that the Land is halakhically present, that sovereignty generates religious responsibility, and that the Jewish people constitutes a covenantal body are propositions: teachable, contestable, and assessable. Taken seriously, they also establish that contemporary Israel is not a subject competing with Torah for scarce hours but a condition without which

substantial portions of Torah cannot be studied as living law.

What this essay has not addressed is what kind of claim those propositions make upon a particular student, what they imply about where a graduate should live, and by what evidence a school might determine whether it has taught them. Those questions are the subject of the second essay in this series. The domain that Jewish sovereignty itself created - the exercise of public power, the obligations owed to those subject to it, and the formation that occurs outside any syllabus - is the subject of the third.

What can be established here is prior to all of it. Religious Zionism is a claim rather than a subject. A school that teaches it as a subject may graduate students who know a great deal about Israel and have never been asked what Israel asks of them. A school that teaches it as a claim must be able to say what the claim is, and that is a task no external framework can perform on its behalf.

Jacob, Pursuer of Truth

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There is no one more intricately linked to the identity of the Jewish people than our biblical patriarch, Jacob. It is his name that is imprinted on God's chosen nation- B'nai *Israel*- just as it is his name that is etched into the land (Eretz *Israel*) given to the Jewish people as an eternal inheritance.

However, upon close inspection of Jacob's character, one wonders whether such an association for the Jewish people is especially complementary. For, in contrast to our patriarchs Abraham and Isaac, who each demonstrate impeccable moral conduct and an unwavering faith in God, Jacob's behavior, on both fronts, appears suspect.

Deception and Fraud

The first two episodes in the Torah involving Jacob reveal him to be a shrewd and cunning figure. First, Jacob tricks his famished older brother, Esau, into selling him his birthright for a bowl of lentils. A couple of chapters later, Jacob is at it again, this time deceiving his father by disguising himself as his older brother in order to procure the blessing of the first-born. Both Isaac and Esau call out Jacob's duplicitous actions, with Isaac acknowledging, "Your brother came with deceit and took your blessing[1]" (27:35), while Esau bitterly notes the aptness of Jacob's name- "This is why his name is called Yaakov, for he has deceived me (*va-ya'akveni*) these two times." (27:36)

In fact, divine retribution appears to be at play

[1] Translations are my own, except where noted.

later in the narrative when Jacob is deceived by Laban, who tricks him into marrying Laban's older daughter, Leah, in place of the younger, Rachel, for whom Jacob had worked seven years. After Jacob realizes he has been duped and accuses Laban of deception, Laban responds with a veiled reference to Jacob's earlier craftiness in usurping the blessing, stating, "Such is not done in *our* place, to give the younger before the older" (29:25-26).[2]

Considering Jacob's less than upstanding behavior, it seems curious that our sages attribute to him the quality of *emet*- truth (*Makkot* 24a).

However, Jacob's ethical shortcomings are not limited to his guile and craftiness. Even when not resorting to trickery, Jacob's interests and motivations in his dealings with others often appear self-serving. For example, after completing his initial seven years of work for Rachel, as Rabbi Yitchak Arama observes (*Akeydat Yitzchak* 25:1), Jacob appears to use coarse language in requesting his reward from Laban- "Give me my wife, for my time is fulfilled, that I may consort with her" (29:21).

After eventually succeeding in acquiring Rachel as a wife, Jacob appears to all but abandon his first wife, Leah. Described in the Torah as the "hated" wife, it is specifically due to Jacob's lack of affection towards her that God has compassion on her and blesses her with children, while Rachel remains barren for many years (29:31).

The devastation Leah feels as a result of her rejection by Jacob is reflected in her selection of names for her first three children; Reuben- "for God has seen my affliction;" Shimon- "because God has heard that I am hated;" Levi- "so this time my husband will become attached to me" (29:32-34).

And yet, even in his relationship with his favored wife, Jacob, at times, demonstrates impatience and a lack of empathy. This is particularly evident as Rachel, feeling anguished due to her barrenness, complains to Jacob and asks him to give her a child, to which he angrily replies, "Can I take the place of God Who has denied you fruit of the womb?!" (30:2)[3]

The Midrash is critical of Jacob's harsh rhetoric:

> The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Jacob, 'Is this the way to answer a woman who is oppressed by her barrenness? By your life! Your children are destined to stand before her son Joseph.' (*Genesis Rabbah* 71:7; translation taken from sefaria.org.il).

Jacob's self-interest is once again on display during his reunification with Esau, where Jacob's appeasement of his brother appears both disingenuous and self-serving. First, Jacob

[2] See Radak (Genesis 29:26), who sees in Laban's words a direct reference to Jacob's stealing of the blessing from Esau. Nehama Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bereshit* (World Zionist Organization, 1980), 266, also asserts that Laban's deceit of Jacob is payback for Jacob's craftiness in obtaining the blessing.

[3] Translation taken from JPS Tanakh.

carefully orchestrates a detailed procession of gifts to be presented before Esau (32:14-17), all in order to "gain favor in my lord's eyes" (see 33:8). Then, as he approaches his brother, Jacob prostrates himself no less than seven times in a seemingly excessive display of flattery towards Esau. It appears that Jacob's actions are motivated more by self-preservation than any genuine feelings of remorse for his earlier transgressions, or of sincere affection towards his brother.

Indeed, after practically forcing Esau to accept his gift and his mission to garner forgiveness is achieved, Jacob is quite eager to conclude their rendezvous and part ways (33:8-17).

Even as a parent, Jacob pours all his love and affection onto the one son who gives him the most pleasure while, once again, seeming oblivious to the hurt such favoritism was causing his other sons. And while Joseph's own behavior certainly contributes to his brothers' disdain for him, the text states explicitly that it was Jacob's special love for Joseph that initially inflamed that hatred (see 37:4).

In his old-age as well, Jacob's self-concern is apparent. During the seven-year drought, he sends his sons down to Egypt to procure food. Upon their return, they inform him that Shimon has been taken hostage and the only way to win his release is to return with their youngest brother, Benjamin. Jacob's immediate response is not one of concern about Shimon or even of what will be with Benjamin but, rather, one of self-pity:

> It is always me that you bereave! Joseph is no more and Shimon is no more, and now you would take away Benjamin. These things always happen to me! (42:36)[4]

Later, after instructing his sons to travel down to Egypt to purchase grain and being reminded by Judah that they were warned not to return without their youngest brother, Jacob laments, "Why did you serve me so ill by telling the man that you had another brother?" (43:6)[5]

This self-pity is once again exhibited when he is introduced to Pharaoh upon his arrival in Egypt. Responding to Pharaoh's question about his age, Jacob states, "Few and bad have been the years of my life" (47:9). Jacob's victim mentality is critiqued in the Midrash, which states that his lack of appreciation for all the good he had received from God resulted in his lifespan being shortened (*Torah Shleimah* 23, cited in Hizkuni 47:8).

Remarkably, Jacob's self-regard is evident even in his relationship with God. After awakening from his dream of the ladder, in which God promises to shield and protect him during his journey to Haran, Jacob makes the following oath:

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

> If God will be with me, and 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 safe to my father's house-then YHWH shall be my God. (28:20-21).[6]

Stunningly, Jacob's pledge of fealty to God is conditioned on God first following through on His vow to guard and protect him. This is hardly an expression of faith and trust in God (see *Akeydat Yitzchak*, 25:1). Sure enough, as Jacob prepares for his reunion with Esau, he is overcome with fear and calls out to God to remind Him of His promise to ensure his safe return to Canaan.[7]

Contrast Jacob's unsteady faith in God with the unwavering faith of both Abraham and Isaac whom, following similar promises issued by God, immediately proceed to build an altar to God as an act of thanksgiving (see 14:14-18; 26:24-25). And yet, even after God fulfills His word and returns Jacob home safely, Jacob appears to all but forget God's kindness and has to be reminded by God to uphold his end of the bargain and construct an altar as an expression of gratitude to his protector (35:1).[8]

With so many glaring deficiencies apparent in Jacob's character, we are left to ponder the great esteem in which he is held by the Jewish tradition.

Reformation and Atonement

Let us begin by addressing the question of Jacob's duplicitous behavior. Here, it is essential to distinguish between Jacob's conduct *prior* to his departure from Canaan and that following his relocation to Haran. For, while Jacob's antics of deceit and chicanery in the early episodes of his life are evident, we discover a radical transformation in his actions beginning with his arrival in Haran.

The first point of significance is the fact that Jacob spends 20 years of his life serving Laban while refusing any monetary compensation. And yet, despite receiving no remuneration, both Jacob's work ethic and integrity are impeccable. Note his emphasis, upon requesting his release from Laban, that he had served Laban loyally and honestly and that Laban had profited immensely from Jacob's service, a fact that Laban openly acknowledges (30:25-27).

After Laban pleads with Jacob to stay and work for him longer while offering to pay whatever wages he demands, Jacob reiterates that he has served

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[6] Ibid. This interpretation follows the view of Ramban. Rashi, on the other hand, reads Jacob's statement about YHWH becoming his God as part of the list of conditions stated just prior; in other words, 'If God protects, nourishes me, returns me home safely, *and* if He becomes a God to me…'

[7] See Malbim (on Genesis 32:8-9), who argues that Jacob's fear of Esau is a reflection of his lack of trust in God Who had already assured Jacob of His protection.

[8] See *Akeydat Yitzchak* (25:1).

Laban faithfully and in fact put Laban's needs ahead of his own all those years (30:29-30).

Finally, as Laban continues to press, offering again to compensate Jacob generously to remain with him, Jacob reluctantly acquiesces but, nevertheless, remains adamant against accepting payment for his services. Instead, he suggests an arrangement that squarely puts himself at a disadvantage. He will return and herd Laban's flock while asking as compensation only those sheep and goats with unusual markings on their coats. The purpose in setting these unusual conditions is to make it abundantly clear that he has conducted himself with full transparency and honesty in tending Laban's herd. He states:

> In 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 there by theft. (30:33)[9]

Clearly, throughout his stay with Laban, first and foremost on Jacob's mind is his moral integrity and honesty.

It is only after perceiving Laban's hostility and suspicion towards him- despite having served Laban honorably- that Jacob (with God's encouragement) determines to secretly depart for Canaan. Nevertheless, Jacob's attentiveness to his integrity is, once again, front and center as he first consults with his wives on the matter, stating, "As you know, I have served your father with all my might," while Laban "cheated me, changing my wages time and time again (31:6-7).[10]

It is in consideration of Jacob's last point to his wives that makes his honesty that much more remarkable. For, despite his father-in-law's constant scheming and treachery, Jacob never allows himself to resort to similar tactics.

After learning of Jacob's clandestine departure, Laban sets foot after him and, upon catching up to him, accuses Jacob of deceit and thievery (31:27, 30). Perhaps, in part, due to his sensitivity to the nature of the charges and the fact that he did in fact depart in a secretive fashion, Jacob is initially restrained in his response to Laban's allegations. However, to Laban's charge of theft, he (having no knowledge that Rachel had stolen Laban's idols) is passionate and firm in declaring his innocence, going so far as to declare, "With whomever you find your gods, he shall not live" (31:32). When Laban's accusations of thievery are (prematurely) proven false, Jacob explodes with pent-up fury:

> Your ewes and she-goats never miscarried, nor did I feast on rams from your flock! That which was torn by my beasts I never brought to you; I myself made good the

[9] JPS Tanakh translation.

[10] Ibid.

> loss… Of the twenty years 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 time again! (31:38-41)[11]

Having gone the extra mile to conduct himself with utmost transparency and loyalty while in the service of the fraudulent Laban, Jacob simply cannot bear such accusations of deceit and guile. And the fact that Laban does not contest his claims once again confirms Jacob's integrity in the matter.

Later in the narrative, after Jacob's sons, Shimon and Levi, employ "deceit" (34:13) in avenging the rape of their sister, Jacob's newfound passion for honesty once again comes to the forefront. Scolding Shimon and Levi for their scheme, Jacob remarks, "You have dirtied me, making me foul among the inhabitants of the land…" (34:30)[12]

And Jacob never forgets Shimon and Levi's craftiness. Even on his deathbed, as he blesses each of his sons, he once again condemns their actions from many years prior (49:5-7).

Thus, while there is no denying the fact that Jacob employs craftiness in his early years, he appears to do everything in his power to atone for those transgressions later in life.

In fact, according to Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Jacob's reuniting with Esau in chapter 33 is essentially the story of Jacob's atonement for his stealing of the first-born blessing. Rabbi Sacks beautifully highlights the fact that, in presenting a gift to Esau, Jacob states, "Please take my *blessing* which was brought to you…" (33:11). The "blessing," argues Rabbi Sacks, is *the* blessing (see 27:28) that Jacob deceitfully stole from his older brother (Jonathan Sacks, *Essays on Ethics* (Maggid Books & Orthodox Union, 2016), 22).

In Pursuit of the Transcendent and the Substantive

Let us now turn our attention to the question of Jacob's egocentrism and selfishness. Once again, without disputing the fact that Jacob is at times motivated by self-serving interests, it is important to recognize that in all of his pursuits, regardless of his motivations, there is a relentless passion on his behalf for the substantive and enduring things in life.

Consider the birthright and the blessing of the first-born. As Ramban (25:34) points out, the birthright did not involve any material benefit. Its significance was mostly symbolic and any practical function it had would only take effect following the death of Isaac. Abarbanel argues, specifically, that the birthright inheritance was the land of Israel promised through the Abrahamic covenant

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[11] Ibid.

[12] Sforno (Genesis 34:30) attributes Jacob's anger to the fact that the inhabitants of the land will accuse him of breaking their trust. In fact, Hamor and Shechem had assured the people of the city that Jacob and his children were honorable people and could be trusted to keep their side of the bargain and give over Dinah to Shechem as a wife once the Shechemites circumcised themselves (34:21).

(Isaac Abarbanel, *Perush Abarbanel al Hatorah,* Bereishit (Tel-Aviv: Hapoel Hamizrahi, 1984), 299). Esau demonstrates through his behavior that all but the immediate physical pleasures in life were not worth waiting for in his eyes. And clearly, based on his choice to settle in Edom, the land promised to his father and grandfather held no special significance for him.

For Jacob, however, the birthright was particularly meaningful because of its symbolism and its enduring qualities. Similarly, his deep attachment to the land of Israel is evident from his demand of Joseph to make an oath promising to return Jacob to Canaan for burial following his death (47:28-31). As such, Jacob was clearly the more appropriate recipient of the birthright.

So too, the first-born blessing was not of great importance to Esau due to its less-than imminent application.[13] And although it is quite apparent from the text that Esau is anguished at having the blessing taken from him, as R. Arama posits (*Akeydat Yitzchak*, 25:1), it is not the loss of the first-born blessing that so angered Esau; it was the manner in which it was taken from him; through cunning and deceit. The truth is that Esau would have been happy with *any* blessing from his father whom he adored. This is evident from his plea to Isaac for another blessing despite the fact that the first-born blessing had already been allocated (27:38).[14]

Indeed, when Jacob wants to restore the blessing into Esau's possession, Esau seems to genuinely have no interest in recovering it- "I have plenty. My brother, let what you have remain yours" (33:9).[15] Esau sees no value in the blessing because, for him, there is no greater blessing than the worldly material wealth that he has already accrued.

That yearning for the substantive is, once again, evident with Jacob's courtship of Rachel. While his passionate kiss of Rachel strikes us as a scene out of a romance novel, the tears that flow from Jacob's eyes reveal a far deeper affection; that of a man who has just discovered his spiritual soul mate.[16] As such, his curt remarks to Laban about consorting with his wife are more likely representative of his genuine desire to build a family and a future with Rachel rather than an expression of any sort of lustful urges.

This, in turn, sheds new light on Jacob's neglect of Leah. Jacob saw Rachel as his true soul-mate, and it was this awareness that precipitated his disregard for Leah. This in no way excuses Jacob's behavior. However, it does show that his actions

[13] Sforno (Genesis 27:29) explains that the blessing was for the inheritance of future kingdoms.

[14] According to Malbim, Esau's statement "Bless me too, father" expresses his desire for an independent blessing, not related to the one given to Jacob. He wasn't interested in the spiritual blessing that Jacob receives but, rather, a worldly blessing of material wealth (Genesis 27:34).

[15] According to Rashi, Esau's statement, here, is a confirmation of Jacob's right to the blessing.

[16] See Abarbanel (*Perush Abarbanel al HaTorah, Bereishit,* 320) and R' Hirsch (Genesis 29:11), who each state that Jacob's kiss was not of a lustful or sexual nature.

are motivated by truth and not merely greed and selfishness. In his eyes, he was meant to be with

Rachel and therefore, as far as he was concerned, his relationship with Leah would take secondary importance. Contrast Jacob's enduring love for one woman to Esau's marriage to multiple women in order to satisfy his base physical lusts.

Recognizing that he and Rachel were destined for union, Jacob anticipated the special role their future offspring would have in transmitting forward the Abrahamic covenant.

So too, Jacob's special love for Joseph was not of a superficial nature. Rather, Jacob intuited that Joseph had prophetic wisdom as well as unique leadership qualities.[17] Note that, while scolding

Joseph for the self-glorifying message in his dreams, Jacob, nevertheless, does not dismiss those dreams as mere folly; rather, he "kept the matter in mind" (37:11). As Rashi comments, Jacob anticipated the coming to fruition of those dreams at some point in the future.

Sure enough, Joseph's dreams prove revelatory. He is elevated to the second most powerful position in the mighty Egyptian empire and, just as his dreams foretold, his family does bow down before him. Most importantly, throughout his rise to stardom he never forgets the fact that God is behind all of these events and that he merely serves as a receptacle in executing the divine plan.

And so, once again, we find that Jacob's seemingly self-regarding actions are, in fact, rooted in truth and virtue. Again, Jacob's noble motives do not necessarily translate into correct actions. For example, while Jacob correctly perceived the crucial role that Rachel and her children would play in securing the covenantal blessing, he failed to recognize the significant contributions Leah's offspring would make. In fact, it would be Leah's son, Judah, who would emerge as the leader among Jacob's children with Joseph playing a more utilitarian role in assisting Judah's evolution into the leader he would eventually become.

Indeed, the tribe of Judah would ultimately transcend Joseph in rank; while Joseph lives out his days in Egypt and never receives a tribal blessing (*that* goes to his children Ephraim and Menashe), it is the tribe of Judah that leads the conquest of the land of Israel in Joshua's time. Similarly, it is the tribe of Judah that goes on to produce Israel's most esteemed king (David), and it is the tribe of Judah that endures the long exile that follows the destruction of the Temple and the dissolution of the Israelite monarchy. In this sense, Judah has a much more enduring legacy than that of Joseph. Nevertheless, Jacob's special affection

[17] The text states that Jacob loved Joseph because Joseph was his "*ben zekunim*." Onkelos translates *zekunim* as "wise," meaning that Jacob's affection for Joseph was due to Joseph's great wisdom. Indeed, the Talmud (*Kiddushin* 32b) states that "*zaken*" is an acronym for "*zeh koneh hokhmah*"- "this (one) who acquires wisdom."

for Joseph cannot be attributed to trivial interests.

Perhaps, Jacob's zeal for the sublime is no more pronounced than in the episode in which he wrestles with the mysterious man/angel (32:25-30). Jacob's stubborn insistence on receiving a blessing from the angel demonstrates his passion for the transcendent and the spiritual. His demand to know the angel's name reflects his deep yearning for knowledge of God. Nevertheless, even in seeking out his Creator, Jacob is combative and unrelenting.

Jacob's obsession with life's deepest spiritual truths is reflected in the text's characterization of him as "*ish tam, yoshev ohalim*"- "a pure man, a dweller of tents" (25:27). Indeed, R. Hirsch characterizes Jacob as of a single-minded nature; that his interests and pursuits were directed towards contemplating the deeper questions in life. For Jacob the philosopher, all the answers he could possibly seek could be discovered within the four walls of the home. He had no regard for life's fleeting pleasures to be explored in the outside physical world (S. R. Hirsch, *The Pentateuch*, vol. 1, (New York: Judaica Press, 1971), 426-427).

It is in this regard that Jacob is the *ish emet throughout* his life.

A Solitary Figure

Jacob's desires for the essential and substantive things in life reveals another aspect to his selfish tendencies. The truth is that Jacob simply does not trust these matters in the hands of others. He doesn't trust Esau with the birthright, or his father in disseminating the blessings. He is also not confident that Joseph will ensure that Jacob's bones are returned to Israel for their final resting place without imposing an oath upon him. He doesn't even have complete faith that God will carry out His oath to protect Jacob and return him home intact as he prepares for his reunion with Esau.[18] Despite God's promise to protect him, Jacob is extremely fearful of Esau and is meticulous in preparing for all possible scenarios in anticipation of their reunion, thus demonstrating less than perfect faith in God's promises.

Jacob's self-reliance may be attributed, at least in part, to his experiences during his formative years. In contrast to Isaac, who had everything provided for him by his adoring parents and who never had to compete for his parents' attention (his brother, Ishmael, was banished from the home when Isaac was still a young child),[19] Jacob was in constant rivalry with his twin brother, even having to compete with him for his parents' affections. As

[18] Calling out to God in fear of his brother, Jacob reminds God of His promise to protect and sustain him (see 32:13).

[19] See Gavriel Lakser ,"Isaac, the Eternal Optimist," *The Lehrhaus,* (December 3, 2020), located at https://thelehrhaus.com/scholarship/isaac-the-eternal-optimist/.

such, Jacob learned from a young age to look out for his own interests, to never depend on others, and to always trust his own instincts and judgments.

This might help explain the absence of God in Jacob's life until he is about to depart for Haran. For, it was only then, perhaps for the first time in his life, that Jacob found himself in a predicament beyond his control; he was about to embark on a dangerous journey to unfamiliar territory and without many resources at his disposal. It is only at this moment of uncertainty and need that God first appears to Jacob in a dream to let him know that He will be with him and protect him on this journey.

In fact, based on his reaction upon awakening from his dream, it appears that Jacob had no awareness of God's worldly presence until that moment:

> And Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "In truth, God is in this place and I did not know it!" (28:16)

Indeed, both R. Arama (*Akeydat Yitzchak,* 25:1)) and R. Hirsch (*The Pentateuch*, 462) argue that the concept of a personal God was first introduced to Jacob through this dream. R. Arama states that, while Jacob unquestionably believed in God, he did not have an awareness of *hashgahah peratit*, of God's personal providence. The angels ascending and descending the ladder, thus, represent that direct bond between the divine and the earthly, a connection that Jacob had not perceived until that moment.

Once again, Jacob's passions and desires are for the most meaningful things in life. His interests are never indulgent or trivial; his concerns are for the future of his progeny, for transmitting forward the covenantal blessing, and for knowledge of life's deepest spiritual truths. And it is specifically due to the weightiness of these matters that Jacob is so territorial and competitive in his quest to achieve those objectives.

To be sure, Jacob does come to recognize his ultimate dependence on God and the fact that it is God who sustains and protects him during his years away from home (see 30:30, 31:5, 31:9, 31:42, 32:11, 33:11). However, it seems that it is simply in Jacob's DNA to remain solitary, and to proceed on his journey of spiritual discovery with the least amount of assistance and interference as possible. Yes, Jacob is the *ish emet*, but he is also the *ish boded* (solitary man).

Jacob's fierce independence in his search for truth is expressed in the name assigned to him by the angel of God with whom he wrestles: *Israel*. Meaning "to struggle with God," *Israel* testifies to Jacob's unrelenting drive for acquiring life's deepest and most enduring truths on his own terms and without interference.

And remarkably, Jacob's desire for autonomy is accommodated by God. One indication of God's acquiescence to Jacob's desire for independence is when, during his dream at Beit El, God tells

Jacob that He will not abandon him *until* He fulfills His promise to return him home safely (28:15). The implications are that, upon securing Jacob's return to Canaan, God *will* depart from him. Indeed, God's appearance to Jacob at Beit El upon the latter's return to Canaan is the last communication God has with Jacob aside from one obscure episode of night visions (46:2-4).

In truth, *most* of God's communication with Jacob during his life is of an indirect nature, through the medium of dreams. This, in contrast to Abraham and Isaac, whose experience of God's communication appears in the text to most often be while fully lucid. But, once again, God's relative remoteness from Jacob is in accordance with Jacob's wishes and is tolerated by God, perhaps, due to the fact that Jacob's stubborn independence is geared entirely in the pursuit of matters of sanctity and holiness.

Conclusion

In the world of myths and fairy tales, our heroes take on an aura of purity and perfection, thereby, providing man an escape from the very real world so rife with cruelty and suffering. The Torah, in contrast, presents us with the real experiences of truly remarkable but fallible individuals through whom we can learn practical lessons on self-improvement, and how to lead a good, if imperfect, life.

For the modern Jew, Jacob is, perhaps, the most relatable of the biblical patriarchs. Indeed, the nation of Israel shares many attributes with its namesake. Like Jacob, the Jewish people have always been passionate about the essential and enduring things in life. While the great empires throughout history were primarily concerned with promoting their own glory and indulging their appetite for physical pleasure, the Jew's interests have always transcended the material and the here and now. We have produced some of the world's greatest contributors in the fields of science and medicine, education and philosophy, as well as leading the way in pursuing the cause of justice and lending a voice to the weak and the oppressed.

But, also like Jacob, the Jews have struggled in their relationship with God, often preferring to toil independently and without God's partnership while in pursuit of those holy endeavors. It is in this sense that we are a people that dwells apart, not only from the nations of the world (Numbers 23:9), but from He who uplifted us and designated us as 'Chosen.' We teach the nations the sanctity of life and, in doing so, provide a dwelling place for God on earth. And yet, ironically, we are often unwilling to share common space with our Creator as we promote His message to the world. It is in this sense that there is a no more suitable progenitor to the Jewish people than our patriarch, Jacob.

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