

Shabbat Kodesh: A Weekly Reader from Kodesh Press

Parshat Vayitzei: December 3, 2022 | 9 Kislev 5783

BELIEVING IN OUR ABILITIES

Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman

One of the best predictors of success is the belief that our actions can bring about the desired results. This power of believing in our own abilities, referred to as “self-efficacy,” was first understood to be domain specific; meaning that we have different beliefs regarding the different types of ability in question. For example, I may have high self-efficacy for writing but low self-efficacy for calculus. Later researchers suggested that there can also be a general self-efficacy that is not domain specific. This means that I can have a general belief in my ability to accomplish tasks and overcome barriers, regardless of what type of task it may be.

As Yaakov makes his way to Charan he dreams of angels ascending and descending on a ladder that reaches the Heavens (Bereishit 28:12). Through this vision, he realizes that God was present in that place, of which he seemed previously unaware.

In his vision of God’s throne, Yechezkel (10:14) describes seeing four faces: a cherub, a lion, an eagle, and a human. The Gemara in *Chullin* (91b) elaborates on Yaakov’s dream and suggests that the angels were going up and down, looking at the picture of the human face by the throne and comparing it to Yaakov’s face. Seeing the resemblance, they became jealous of his presence on the throne and wanted to harm him, so God had to protect Yaakov.

In a brilliantly creative rereading of the pasuk, Rabbi Shimshon Ostropoli suggests that Yaakov’s word choice alludes to self-efficacy. He already knew the spiritual potential of “achein,” in Hebrew spelled *aleph – chof – nun*, representing the lion (*aryeh*), cherub, and eagle (*neshar*). Yet, until this dream, he was unaware of the spiritual potential of *anochi*, literally “myself,” spelled *aleph – nun – chof – yud*, representing, the three images from “achein” with the addition of the *yud* – for Yaakov.

This new-found self-efficacy was not domain specific. Yaakov’s new attitude pervaded all his interactions, as is clear from the very next episode regarding the shepherds by the well. In a powerful drasha (“The Stone on the Well – Boulder

or Pebble?”), Rabbi Norman Lamm contrasts the attitude of the shepherds with that of Yaakov. When Yaakov asked the shepherds why they do not water their herds, they respond that there is a giant stone covering the well and until more people come to help push it off: *lo nuchal* – they just can’t do it (Bereishit 29:8). They don’t believe in their ability, so they don’t even try. Yaakov, believing in his ability to accomplish, walks over to the stone and succeeds in removing it from the well. He believes in his ability to effect change, puts in the effort, and succeeds.

How many areas of life – spiritual or otherwise – do we write off as being too hard or not within our abilities? Perhaps if we learn this lesson from Yaakov, we can work on boosting our self-efficacy by realizing our potential, putting in the effort, and increasing our chances of success and accomplishment.

*Adapted from Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman,
Psyched for Torah*

A TWICE-TOLD TALE

Rabbi Ari D. Kahn

The story seems strangely familiar: A band of Jews on the run, desperately trying to escape, wanting nothing more than to return to their ancestral homeland and live in peace. The prototypical account appears in *Parashat Vayetzei*: Yaakov and his family quit Lavan’s house and start the journey home. Soon enough, Lavan gets word of what has happened and chases them down. Despite Yaakov’s three-day head start, Lavan

ONKELOS CORNER

Rabbi Jack Abramowitz

28:20. Yaakov made an **oath**, saying, “If the word of Hashem will assist me and protect me on this road that I’m traveling, if He gives me bread to eat and clothes to wear.

An oath rather than a vow (*neder*). A vow typically prohibits something to a person. Yaakov’s vow doesn’t, causing Onkelos to translate it as “oath.”

Adapted from The Complete Targum Onkelos

catches up with and confronts Yaakov on the seventh day. Words are exchanged, accusations fly. In the end, an understanding is reached and a covenant forged.

If the story seems familiar, perhaps it is because it the Yaakov-Lavan story is the concise version of the great Exodus. Yet although so many elements of the two stories are similar, there are enough differences to make us overlook the similarities. In the Exodus story, there is no reconciliation, no understanding, no covenant. The hated Egyptians drown in the sea, in Divine retribution for the Jewish babies who suffered a similar plight.

Yet in terms of their structure, the two stories are strikingly similar. Both describe the escape, the almost-supernatural accrual of wealth, and the three-day chase culminating in confrontation on the seventh day. Both the story of Yaakov's escape from Lavan and the story of the Jews' escape from Egypt involve more than physical exodus. Both stories are about leaving an alien culture and heading home. In both stories, the "hosts," the "other" side, who have benefited financially from the presence of the "stranger" in their midst, have strong reservations regarding the separation. Neither Lavan nor Pharaoh is willing to lose the benefits of having the Jews at their service.

But the Torah is not a book of history; it is a book of theology. The stories—especially those concerning our forefathers—are spiritual blueprints that affect all of Jewish history. The Exodus from Egypt unfolded as it did because of Yaakov's flight from the house of Lavan, and these two redemptions create the spiritual energy that will power the final redemption. Such is the secret of Jewish history: Time is cyclical, not linear. For this reason, studying the past gives us insight into the present and the future.

Had the Torah imparted only one of the two exodus stories, we would, of necessity, had only one possible ending for Jewish history. The Vilna Gaon explains that the Exodus from Egypt was itself based on the exodus from the house of Lavan. The conclusions of the two stories are starkly different, and herein lies the challenge of history: The existence of that earlier exodus with its own conclusion creates an alternative—an alternative that was available to Pharaoh, as it was available to others who hosted the Jewish People throughout history.

The Vilna Gaon teaches us that the Torah tells the same story twice; there are two possible endings to the story. Must history end with lifeless bodies floating on the sea? While this

final scene of vengeance and retribution may appeal to the baser elements of human nature, is this the *denouement* we must necessarily anticipate? Or does the story end with mutual respect, reconciliation and covenant? Which ending do we pray for to witness—"speedily and in our own times"?

*Adapted from Rabbi Ari D. Kahn,
A River Flowed from Eden*

CONSEQUENCES OF DECEPTION

Rabbi Hayyim Angel

God repeatedly makes promises to protect Jacob, yet Jacob remains terrified. Right after Jacob's lofty vision of the angels on the ladder and God's assurance of protection, Jacob wakes up and says, "If God remains with me, if He protects me on this journey that I am making, and gives me bread to eat and clothing to wear, and if I return safe to my father's house—the Lord shall be my God" (Genesis 28:20–21).

Years later, despite additional divine assurances for his return to Israel, Jacob is terror-stricken upon learning that Esau is approaching. The Talmud asks: Given God's promises of protection, why was Jacob afraid? It answers: He worried that his sins may have undermined God's promises (*Berakhot* 4a). For the rest of his life, Jacob suffered from his deception of Isaac.

Professors Nehama Leibowitz and David Berger trace biblical and rabbinic criticisms of the deception, and its impact on Jacob: (1) Lavan deceived him with Leah. (2) Lavan deceived him with wages. (3) Jacob's sons deceived him during their sale of Joseph. (4) Joseph pretended not to recognize his brothers, leading to further anguish for Jacob and his sons. On the psychological plane, Jacob could not even trust in God's promises. He had lost his self-confidence as a result of his past, and the deception haunted him for the rest of his life. He was unable to fully trust anyone, not even God.

When he returned to the Promised Land, Jacob finally had to confront his past. Esau came to greet him after more than 20 years of separation. God forced him to confront the deception directly by sending an angel. After Jacob defeated the angel, God changed his name from Jacob (crookedness, *'k-b*) to Israel (straightness, *y-sh-r*). This name change signaled the beginning of a healing process through which Jacob could face his past forthrightly, and build a more honorable future for himself and his nation.

*Adapted from Rabbi Hayyim Angel,
A Synagogue Companion*