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The Vision of Protection

The Ramban describes how every detail of our forefather's lives was a signpost, indicating future events in the lives of their descendants. Yaakov's wanderings in exile, as he fled first from the wrath of Eisav, and later from the jealousy of Lavan, foretold the exiles that his children would suffer throughout the ages. Yet throughout the difficult epochs of exile that we have endured, Hashem has stretched His protective wings over us, rescuing us from our enemies time and time again, just as He rescued Yaakov Avinu, in fulfillment of His vow, *"I am with you; I will guard you wherever you go."*[1]

Rav Yaakov Emden writes:

> *When we contemplate our situation in the history of the world, we realize that we are a nation exiled, like scattered sheep. After all the thousands of years of hardship that have befallen us, there is no nation as oppressed as ours. Our enemies are numerous. With hatred and jealousy, they have raised their heads to uproot and destroy us. Even so, they have been unable to fulfill their plans. The most powerful of nations have risen against us and long ago fallen, their memory forgotten like a passing shadow, but we who cling to Hashem survive today. Despite all the torments of our exile, we have not forsaken even one letter of the written Torah, and the words of our Sages still stand strong. They have been impervious to the hand of time. What could the clever philosophers possibly say to explain this? That it is a coincidence?*
>
> *By my life, I swear that this is a greater miracle than those Hashem performed for our forefathers in Egypt, in the desert, and in Eretz Yisrael. The longer the Exile lasts, the more the miracle becomes obvious and God's might is revealed. Everything that we undergo today was already foreseen by the prophets, who bemoaned the terrible length of the Exile long before it began. From all their words, not one has fallen aside. He who would dispute this, his words are like smoke and the passing clouds.*[2]

The fortitude necessary to endure our exile was bequeathed to us by our forefathers, who suffered similar hardships throughout their lives. Avraham Avinu, the founder of our nation, also tasted the hardship of exile, when he fulfilled God's command, "*Go for yourself from your land.*" He was the first to assume the role of the wandering Jew, traveling from one land to another, not even knowing his destination, but trusting that God would ultimately bring him "*to the land that I will show you*."

However, Avraham's exile was very different from Yaakov's. Avraham experienced the hardship of wandering in foreign lands, but

Yaakov experienced a much more difficult exile, as he fled the unsheathed sword of a deadly adversary. To give him the encouragement he so desperately needed, Yaakov was granted a prophetic vision, in which God assured him of his survival in exile: an assurance that would stand for his descendants throughout the generations.

> *And he dreamt, and behold! A ladder was set earthward and its top reached heavenward; and behold! angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And behold! Hashem was standing over him, and He said, "I am Hashem, God of Avraham your father and God of Yitzchak; the ground upon which you are lying, to you will I give it and to your descendants. Your offspring shall be as the dust of the earth, and you shall spread out powerfully westward, eastward, northward, and southward; and all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you and by your offspring. Behold, I am with you; I will guard you wherever you go, and I will return you to this soil; for I will not forsake you until I will have done what I have spoken about you."*[3]

The Ramban interprets this vision as follows: God revealed to Yaakov through a prophetic dream, that everything that occurs here on earth is orchestrated through the angels by Divine decree. The angels that God sends to walk the earth can perform no act, from the trivial to the momentous, until they have first returned to stand before the Lord of the world, to deliver their report, and state whether the land rests peacefully or is plagued by sword and bloodshed. God then directs the angels to return to earth to fulfill His bidding.

God's appearance over the ladder represented His firm assurance that Yaakov's fate would not be entrusted to the hands of the angels. Yaakov was God's own portion, and God would always protect him personally, as it is written, "I shall be with you; I will guard you wherever you go." In this respect, Yaakov was greater than other *tzaddikim*, of whom it is written, "He will charge His angels for you, to protect you in all your ways."[4]

According to Rabbi Eliezer the Great, this vision paralleled Avraham's *Bris bein HaBesarim* (Covenant of the Parts). God showed Yaakov how the four empires would ascend to power, and ultimately crumble. The angels on the ladder were the guardian angels of the empires: Greece, Babylon, Media, and Rome, as described by Daniel.[5] God assured Yaakov that He would stand by Yaakov's side to protect him as he wandered among the nations, and rescue him from their hands.

God showed him each empire's ascent and its subsequent destruction. He showed him the guardian angel of Babylon ascending seventy rungs on the ladder, and then falling. He showed him the guardian angel of Media ascending 52 rungs and then falling. He showed him the guardian angel of Greece ascending one hundred and eighty rungs and then falling. He then showed him the angel of Edom ascending higher and higher, but it did not fall. Hashem then assured him, "But in the end, he shall fall into the abyss."[6] Hashem then said to Eisav, "If you raise [your nest] like an eagle, [or if you place your nest among the stars, I will bring you down
from there — the word of Hashem]."[7]

Yaakov's adversaries were the spiritual forebears of the empires that were destined to oppress his descendants. Each enemy threatened Yaakov with a particular form of danger, which paralleled the dangers that the Children of Israel were destined to endure in exile. Eisav threatened him with physical destruction, representing nations such as Nazi Germany, which waged an open war to destroy the Children of Israel, irrespective of our level of religious observance.

The suffering Yaakov endured under Lavan's hand was more insidious. Yaakov worked for him for 20 years, under conditions of hardship and depravation: *"This is how I was: By day, scorching heat consumed me, and frost by night; my sleep drifted from my eyes."*[8]

Yet throughout it all he remained the very model of honest labor, as the Rambam writes: Just as an employer is forbidden to cheat his employees, or withhold their pay; so too an employee is forbidden to cheat his employer by shirking his duties here and there, until finally the entire day is wasted in deceit. He must be punctual and diligent in his work hours, for which reason our Sages exempted him from the fourth blessing of *Birkas HaMazon*. He must serve his employer with all his strength, as Yaakov the *tzaddik* said, "it was with all my might that I served your father."[9] Hashem rewarded him in this world for his honest labor, as it is written, "And the man was very, very successful."[10,11]

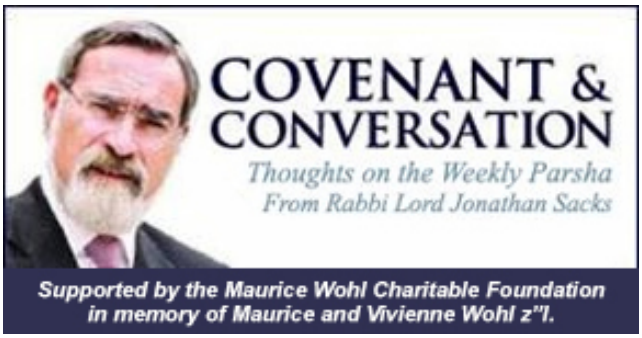
Lavan prospered by Yaakov's honest labor, but he never showed Yaakov the slightest bit of appreciation. Just the opposite, he constantly sought ways to cheat Yaakov, and deprive him of his basic rights. This foreshadowed the plight of the Children of Israel in lands such as Communist Russia, where their lives were spared, but their basic human rights were usurped. Jews played a role in the development of science, education, and trade in all the countries where we were exiled, yet we were often denied the opportunity to earn the most basic livelihood.

By enduring these difficult tests, and remaining faithful to Hashem throughout them all, Yaakov instilled in our nation the strength and fortitude necessary to survive the various stages of our exile. In his merit, Hashem stands beside us at all times, to rescue us from our adversaries, in whatever guise they may appear.

"In every generation they rise against us to destroy us, but HaKadosh Baruch Hu rescues us from their hands."[12]

1. Bereishis 28:15.
2. Siddur Beis Yaakov: Sulam Beis Keil.
3. Bereishis 28:12-15.
4. Tehillim 91:11.
5. Daniel, Chapter 11.
6. Yeshayahu 14:15.
7. Ovadiah 1:4.
8. Bereishis 31:40.
9. Ibid. v. 6.
10. Bereishis 30:43.
11. Rambam, Hilchos Sechirus 13:6.
12. Pesach Haggadah.

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The Birth of the World's Oldest Hatred

"Go and learn what Laban the Aramean sought to do to our father Jacob. Pharaoh made his decree only about the males whereas Laban sought to destroy everything." This passage from the Haggadah on Pesach - evidently based on this week's parsha - is extraordinarily difficult to understand.

First, it is a commentary on the phrase in Deuteronomy, Arami oved avi. As the

overwhelming majority of commentators point out, the meaning of this phrase is "my father was a wandering Aramean", a reference either to Jacob, who escaped to Aram [=Syria, a reference to Haran where Laban lived], or to Abraham, who left Aram in response to God's call to travel to the land of Canaan. It does not mean "an Aramean [=Laban] tried to destroy my father." Some commentators read it this way, but almost certainly they only do so because of this passage in the Haggadah.

Second, nowhere in the parsha do we find that Laban actually tried to destroy Jacob. He deceived him, tried to exploit him, and chased after him when he fled. As he was about to catch up with Jacob, God appeared to him in a dream at night and said: 'Be very careful not to say anything, good or bad, to Jacob.' (Gen. 31:22). When Laban complains about the fact that Jacob was trying to escape, Jacob replies: "Twenty years now I have worked for you in your estate - fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for some of your flocks. You changed my wages ten times!" (31:41). All this suggests that Laban behaved outrageously to Jacob, treating him like an unpaid labourer, almost a slave, but not that he tried to "destroy" him - to kill him as Pharaoh tried to kill all male Israelite children.

Third, the Haggadah and the seder service of which it is the text, is about how the Egyptians enslaved and practised slow genocide against the Israelites and how God saved them from slavery and death. Why seek to diminish this whole narrative by saying that, actually, Pharaoh's decree was not that bad, Laban's was worse. This seems to make no sense, either in terms of the central theme of the Haggadah or in relation to the actual facts as recorded in the biblical text.

How then are we to understand it?

Perhaps the answer is this. Laban's behaviour is the paradigm of anti-Semites through the ages. It was not so much what Laban did that the Haggadah is referring to, but what his behaviour gave rise to, in century after century. How so?

Laban begins by seeming like a friend. He offers Jacob refuge when he is in flight from Esau who has vowed to kill him. Yet it turns out that his behaviour is less generous than self-interested and calculating. Jacob works for him for seven years for Rachel. Then on the wedding night Laban substitutes Leah for Rachel, so that to marry Rachel, Jacob has to work another seven years. When Joseph is born to Rachel, Jacob tries to leave. Laban protests. Jacob works another six years, and then realises that the situation is untenable. Laban's sons are accusing him of getting rich at Laban's expense. Jacob senses that Laban himself is becoming hostile. Rachel and Leah agree, saying, "he treats us like strangers! He has sold us and spent the money!" (31:14-15).

Jacob realises that there is nothing he can do or say that will persuade Laban to let him leave. He has no choice but to escape. Laban then pursues him, and were it not for God's warning the night before he catches up with him, there is little doubt that he would have forced Jacob to return and live out the rest of his life as his unpaid labourer. As he says to Jacob the next day: "The daughters are my daughters! The sons are my sons! The flocks are my flocks! All that you see is mine!" (31:43). It turns out that everything he had ostensibly given Jacob, in his own mind he had not given at all.

Laban treats Jacob as his property, his slave. He is a non-person. In his eyes Jacob has no rights, no independent existence. He has given Jacob his daughters in marriage but still claims that they and their children belong to him, not Jacob. He has given Jacob an agreement as to the animals that will be his as his wages, yet he still insists that "The flocks are my flocks."

What arouses his anger, his rage, is that Jacob maintains his dignity and independence. Faced

with an impossible existence as his father-in-law's slave, Jacob always finds a way of carrying on. Yes he has been cheated of his beloved Rachel, but he works so that he can marry her too. Yes he has been forced to work for nothing, but he uses his superior knowledge of animal husbandry to propose a deal which will allow him to build flocks of his own that will allow him to maintain what is now a large family. Jacob refuses to be defeated. Hemmed in on all sides, he finds a way out. That is Jacob's greatness. His methods are not those he would have chosen in other circumstances. He has to outwit an extremely cunning adversary. But Jacob refuses to be defeated, or crushed and demoralised. In a seemingly impossible situation Jacob retains his dignity, independence and freedom. Jacob is no man's slave.

Laban is, in effect, the first anti-Semite. In age after age, Jews sought refuge from those, like Esau, who sought to kill them. The nations who gave them refuge seemed at first to be benefactors. But they demanded a price. They saw, in Jews, people who would make them rich. Wherever Jews went they brought prosperity to their hosts. Yet they refused to be mere chattels. They refused to be owned. They had their own identity and way of life; they insisted on the basic human right to be free. The host society then eventually turned against them. They claimed that Jews were exploiting them rather than what was in fact the case, that they were exploiting the Jews. And when Jews succeeded, they accused them of theft: "The flocks are my flocks! All that you see is mine!" They forgot that Jews had contributed massively to national prosperity. The fact that Jews had salvaged some self-respect, some independence, that they too had prospered, made them not just envious but angry. That was when it became dangerous to be a Jew.

Laban was the first to display this syndrome but not the last. It happened again in Egypt after the death of Joseph. It happened under the Greeks and Romans, the Christian and Muslim empires of the Middle Ages, the European nations of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and after the Russian Revolution.

In her fascinating book World on Fire, Amy Chua argues that ethnic hatred will always be directed by the host society against any conspicuously successful minority. All three conditions must be present. [1] The hated group must be a minority or people will fear to attack it. [2] It must be successful or people will not envy it, merely feel contempt for it. [3] It must be conspicuous or people will not notice it. Jews tended to fit all three. That is why they were hated.

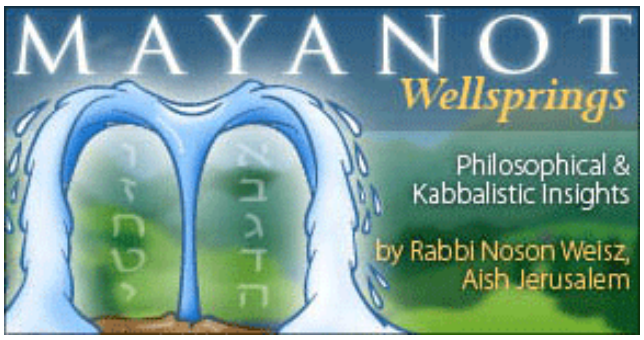
And it began with Jacob during his stay with Laban. He was a minority, outnumbered by Laban's family. He was successful, and it was conspicuous: you could see it by looking at his flocks.

What the sages are saying in the Haggadah now becomes clear. Pharaoh was a one-time enemy of the Jews, but Laban exists, in one form or another, in age after age. The syndrome still exists today. As Amy Chua notes, Israel in the context of the Middle East is a conspicuously successful minority. It is a small country, a minority; it is successful and it is conspicuously so. Somehow, in a tiny country with few natural resources, it has outshone its neighbours. The result is envy that becomes anger that becomes hate. Where did it begin? With Laban.

Put this way, we begin to see Jacob in a new light. Jacob stands for minorities and small nations everywhere. Jacob is the refusal to let large powers crush the few, the weak, the refugee. Jacob refuses to define himself as a slave, someone else's property. He maintains his inner dignity and freedom. He contributes to other people's prosperity but he defeats every attempt to be exploited. Jacob is the

voice that says: I too am human. I too have rights. I too am free.

If Laban is the eternal paradigm of hatred of conspicuously successful minorities, then Jacob is the eternal paradigm of the human capacity to survive the hatred of others. In this strange way Jacob becomes the voice of hope in the conversation of humankind, the living proof that hate never wins the final victory; freedom does.



Tunes of Glory

> *Jacob departed from Beer-Sheba and went toward Haran. (Genesis 28,10)*

Rashi comments: the departure of a *tzadik,* a righteous person, from a place leaves a void. As long as he lives in a city, he constitutes its glory, its splendor and its beauty; when he departs, its glory, splendor and beauty depart with him. The same applies to the verse *she left the place where she had been* (Ruth 1,7) that is written about Naomi and Ruth.

Rashi offers us the cross-reference to Ruth because he wants to explain how this departure of 'splendor and glory' manifests itself in the real world. There is no way to tell by looking at Jacob, but there is a passage of Talmud regarding Ruth that sheds much light on the concept.

True Consolation

> *Rabbi Shmuel bar Yehuda's daughter passed away. The Rabbis asked Ula to join them in paying him a consolation visit, but Ula refused. He said, "What do I have in common with the consolations of the Babylonians (Ula was an Israeli who moved to Babylon) which really amount to profanity? All their words of consolation when distilled amount to a single message: 'What can you do?', as though they would do something if they could." (Ula considered this profane since it implies, "We do not have the power to overrule God's edicts, but we would if we could.")*
>
> *Ula made his own separate visit, and this is what he said:*
>
> *God said to Moses; "You shall not distress Moab, and you shall not provoke war with them." (Deuteronomy 2:9) Why would it have occurred to Moses to wage war with Moab without God's permission? Moses reasoned thus: If regarding the Midionites, who only came to assist Moab [in the war Moab waged against Israel, described in Parshat Balak] the Torah commanded, Harass the Midionites and smite them; for they harassed you through their conspiracy that they conspired against you... (Numbers 25:17-18) surely the same policy should be applied against the Moabites who were the instigators of the war. But God told Moses, "I think differently! I still have a wonderful treasure to pull out of Moab, namely Ruth..." Now, if because of a single maiden God spared an entire nation, isn't it obvious that if your daughter were destined to produce someone good, God would have spared her? (Talmud, Baba Kama 38a)*

There are some obvious difficulties in this

apparently bizarre passage of Talmud, which are all relevant to a proper understanding of Jacob's life.

A Loss of Splendor

The first thing to emerge is the exact definition of 'the departed glory and splendor.' When Ruth and Naomi left Moab, God had no further need of the Moabite nation. Had there been a temporal power around desirous and capable of destroying Moab following their departure, the destruction of Moab would have duly resulted. God had no further interest in preserving the nation and it was no longer the focus of His attention and protection. Because there was no such power around at the time, and God Himself had no interest in proactively destroying Moab, the nation continued to endure.

The 'glory, splendor and the beauty' that depart with the *tzadik* refer to the luster the world has in God's eyes. When God takes a special interest in a particular location and focuses His attention on it, this grants it spiritual splendor and glory. Applying the principle of Ruth to Jacob's departure, as soon as Jacob departed from Beer-sheba, God lost interest in the place. Whatever happened in Beer-sheba subsequently would be the result of chance, not the orderings of Divine Providence that require the focus of God's attention. The glory and splendor bequeathed by Divine Providence was transferred to Haran when Jacob moved there.

Indeed, even Laban was perceptive enough to recognize this. When Jacob told him he wanted to leave after the birth of Joseph, Laban's response was: "*If I have found favor in your eyes ? I have learned by divination that God has blessed me on account of you.*" (Genesis 30,27) Divine Providence, and along with it God's blessing, resided wherever Jacob was.

Jacob - the Reinstated Adam

In last year's essay on Vayetzei we learned that in the eyes of Jewish tradition, Jacob is the second edition of Adam. After Adam's fall, it was not till Jacob came along that any human managed to regain the splendor, glory and beauty of being the perfect '*tzelem Elokim*', image of God. The celebration of the reacquisition of this Divine image by a living human being was the central prophetic message delivered by Jacob's vision of the 'ladder.'

According to Rabbi Chaim of Voloz'hin (*Nefesh HaChaim*, Part 1) the fact that from henceforth Divine Providence would be attached to Jacob is the second message of this vision and is directly correlated to Jacob's achievement of having regained the perfection of being the *tzelem Elokim*.

To grasp the significance of the connection of the two ideas, and to fully understand the ramifications of *Hashgacha Pratis*, or Divine Providence, we have to have a better understanding of this idea that man was created in God's image. The *Nefesh HaChaim* makes the following points.

Being Cast in God's Image

- God has no image. The meaning of being cast in God's image does not imply any sort of physical resemblance. It is a reference to a similarity of powers. Man has something Godlike about him in terms of one of God's Attributes.
- The name of God that was chosen to describe this Godlike attribute of man is the name *Elokim*. God refers to Himself exclusively by this name in the first chapter of Genesis, the story of creation. The *Shulchan Aruch,* the Code of Jewish Law (*Orach Chaim* Ch.5) defines this name as meaning that God is the sole origin and controller of all the energy in the universe.

The *Nefesh HaChaim* uses the following analogy to help us to relate to this concept. When a person constructs a building, let us say out of wood, he doesn't create the wood at the time he erects the building. Nor is his power necessary to keep the building in existence once he has finished erecting it. In fact all the builder does is shape the materials and then arrange them in a certain sequence.

But when God created the Universe, there were no materials at hand out of which it could be fashioned. He built the universe out of his own Divine energy. Being constructed out of Divine energy means that the universe has no real inertia; it requires ceaseless input of Divine Energy to preserve it in a state of being. The continued existence of the universe is comparable to the situation of a stone held suspended in mid air. It takes a constant application of force to keep it from falling to earth, as the force of gravity needs to be countered. In the same way, as the universe is really made of nothing, it takes constant input of Divine Energy to keep it in a state of being. All this is implied by the name *Elokim*.

The Passing of God's Power to Man

- When God created man as a *tzelem Elokim*, he bequeathed this "*Elokim*" power to man.

The *Nefesh HaChaim* explains: God made a policy decision at creation; although it is His Divine power and energy that maintains the universe in a state of being, He would place man in charge of His power. The input of Divine Energy into creation would be placed under man's control. God would pour in the energy only at man's command, only in the quantity that man demands, and only into the places that man directs.

But this policy applies only to the man who justly merits the title of *tzelem Elokim*. As no such human being came along until Jacob turned up, no human being before him was awarded this power. In the absence of a *tzelem Elokim*, God merely kept creation going in the manner that He had decided to create it. It ran under what we would call natural law. Following the expulsion of Adam from the Garden of Eden, His focus was on purely global issues, as in the case of Noach and the Dispersal, until Abraham came along. He took no interest in guiding individual human lives.

God's Involvement With Individuals

But even God's involvement with Abraham and Isaac does not present a true portrait of Divine Providence.

When we compare/contrast the lives of Abraham and Isaac with the life of Jacob, we are struck by a remarkable phenomenon. Abraham and Isaac led truly awesome lives. They were miraculously wealthy, successful and victorious. Their involvement with other people was always from a position of superiority. They spent their lives spreading the message of Divine service without the need to struggle with the ordinary burdens of life.

In contrast, Jacob led a life of fear and drudgery. Nothing came easily to him. First he contended with Esau and had to flee, than he contended with Laban and also had to flee, then again with Esau on the way back. His only daughter was raped, his favorite son was sold into slavery, and he ended his life in exile. And yet, Jacob was the greatest of our forefathers.

Jacob Rescues Abraham

Abraham was only saved from the fiery furnace in the merit of Jacob. We can understand this through the following example. Someone was condemned to be burned by a ruler who was also an expert

astrologer. The ruler foresaw that the condemned prisoner was destined to give birth to a daughter who would become the king's bride. He thought to himself, "It is worth sparing him in the merit of the daughter he will have." Similarly when Nimrod condemned Abraham, God said "It's worth saving him in the merit of Jacob who will come out of him, as it is written, *Therefore thus said God to the house of Jacob who redeemed Abraham* (Isaiah 29,22). The Rabbis said; Abraham was only created in the merit of Jacob, as it is written, *For I have loved him, because he commands his children and his household after him that they keep the way of God doing charity and justice...*(Genesis 18,19) and there is no charity and justice except in Jacob, as it is written, *The justice and righteousness of Jacob you have made.* (Psalms 99,4) (Vayikra Raba,36,4)

How does this make sense? Jacob, the harbinger of blessing, the glory, splendor and the beauty of the *tzelem Elokim*, the person who channels Divine energy into the universe, God's focus, couldn't arrange a better life for himself?

Providence and the Purpose of Life

But what is life in this world for? Jewish tradition teaches that we live in order to perfect ourselves. If everything goes smoothly in our lives, and we never have to contend with sorrow or unhappiness, anxiety or drudgery, how will we be able to perfect our characters? In a productive life, as productivity must be understood in the light of Jewish tradition, we would expect to see a fair amount of travail.

The Jewish philosophy of life, especially as it applies to *tzadikim*, is expressed in the following Midrash, not coincidentally also concerning Jacob.

Jacob settled in the land of his father's sojournings, in the land of Canaan. (Genesis 37,1) Rashi comments: Jacob sought to dwell in tranquility, but the ordeal of Joseph sprung upon him. The righteous seek to dwell in tranquility, but God says, "The righteous don't consider that which is prepared for them in the World to Come sufficient for them that they also desire to sit in tranquility in this world?"

Human Suffering and Providence

Suffering, travail and misfortune are not an indication of the lack of *Hashgacha,* Divine Providence. It is facing the wrong kinds of travail and misfortune that results from God's lack of focus. In order to be able to perfect ourselves we do not only need problems to overcome, we require the right sort of problems to overcome. They should neither be too easy or too difficult to surmount, and they should be the sorts of problems that fit the shape of our characters, and fit them exactly when they appear. This is the true meaning of *Hashgacha Pratis,* Divine Providence.

Jacob had a difficult life but he had the exactly correct sort of difficult life for him. He lost a wife but never a child. He didn't suffer from illness or old age; he didn't have any retarded children and so on. God made sure to inflict him with exactly the sort of difficulties and tests that he needed to achieve perfection as a *tzelem Elokim*. God focused on Jacob the individual, and adjusted the events of the world around his spiritual requirements down to the minutest jot and title.

Man Controls the Elokim Power

This is the true significance of being in charge of God's "*Elokim*" power. God does indeed channel His energy into the world at man's direction, but not according to man's desire or whim. The energy is directed so that the world

changes in the way the *tzelem Elokim* requires to get the maximum out of his worldly existence. Man is deemed to be the one in charge because the Divine Energy is always fine tuned according to man's changing needs, rather than on the basis of God's policy decisions.

Ula's message of consolation only seems bizarre at first glance. What Ula was saying to the bereaved father was that as long as his daughter needed to be in the world to accomplish what she was created for, she was invulnerable to death and sheltered from the sorts of harm that would prevent her from attaining her assigned goals. The focus of God's attention was upon her and the world automatically adjusted itself around her needs. As she had fallen victim to some misfortune that could only have struck in the absence of Divine Protection, she had obviously completed the task she had been assigned in life.

Having finished what she had to do, Divine Providence no longer arranged the world about her, and she thus became vulnerable to the natural pitfalls that are an integral part of the world of nature. One of these killed her. Death is a natural phenomenon that can strike at random when the focus of Providence is absent. This focus can be removed when God is satisfied that a person has achieved what he or she was supposed to achieve and attained his or her place in the World to Come.

Splendor in Human Terms

Does the Torah give us any indication of the 'splendor, glory and beauty' that God perceived in Jacob?

The very next verse tells the tale! *He encountered the place and spent the night there because the sun had set; he took from the stones of the place which he arranged around his head, and lay down in that place.* This verse encapsulates Jacob's character and ambition.

- *Lay down in that place* - but for the fourteen years previous to this night that Jacob spent learning in the Yeshiva of Shem and Ever he did not lay his head down to sleep.

Jewish tradition teaches that Jacob was sixty-three when he left to Haran [see Rashi (Genesis 28,9] and seventy-seven when he arrived. The fourteen missing years were spent in Yeshiva. When he was sent to Haran to find his mate by Isaac, Jacob felt unfinished and unready spiritually to successfully confront Laban and the exile. He invested fourteen years of such incredible intensity in forging his bond to God through the vehicle of Torah study that he literally never even went to bed.

- *he encountered the place* - tradition teaches that Jacob had already arrived in Haran prior to this encounter which took place back in Israel on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Having arrived [miraculously in a single day according to tradition, indicating how strongly providence favored the journey] he realized that he had failed to stop on his way to pray in Jerusalem. The bond forged through Torah study in never enough. The world also stands on the pillar of prayer. Jacob felt the absence of this prayer bond so keenly, that he turned right around and undertook the several-week journey back to Jerusalem [in those days] to fill in this void in his soul.

Providence Is a Two Way Street

There was a reason God focused His attention on Jacob. His focus was a response to the intensity of the focus of Jacob's attention on God. And this is why our superficial view of Jacob's life gives us a totally false picture of its

quality.

In actuality, Jacob had a wonderful life full of the most intense joy imaginable. A person's happiness and suffering can only be measured through the window of his own soul. Anyone who is capable of voluntarily giving up sleep for fourteen years and is willing to take on a journey of several weeks to pray does not have much interest in the physical comforts of life. There is never any sadness or drudgery in his existence because he is always enveloped in the Joy of experiencing God's presence.

Jacob attained his ambition fully and led a very rewarding life. He achieved and retained the intense relationship with God that he was after, and he kept it for a lifetime. His gift to us is the reconstituted *tzelem Elokim* and the *Hashgacha Pratis,* Divine Providence that is its companion. It is through the power of Jacob that man controls the universe.



Yaakov's Ladder

Escape From Be'ersheva[1]

The Parsha begins with Yaakov on the run, ordered by his parents, but propelled by fear of his vengeful, bloodthirsty brother. Yaakov's departure is actually recounted at the end of the previous chapter, in Parshat Toldot:

> *And Yitzchak sent Yaakov away, and he went to Padan-Aram, to Lavan, son of Betuel the Aramaean, brother of Rivkah, mother of Yaakov and Esau. (Bereishit 28:5)*

Now in Parshat Vayetze, the Torah returns to this topic in much greater detail:

> *And Yaakov went out from Be'er-Sheva, and went toward Haran, and he touched at a [certain] place, and lodged there, because the sun had set, and he took of the stones of that place, and put them for his pillows, and lay down in that place to sleep.(Bereishit 28:10-11)*

As for as his present location, all we are told initially is that he is somewhere between Be'er-Sheva and Haran. The language[2] implies that it is fate, not planning, which leads him to this particular place. Yaakov sleeps and dreams and sees a vision of a ladder with its feet on the ground that stretches up to the heavens.

> *And he dreamed, and behold, a ladder set up on the earth, (and its head) and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it.(Bereishit 28:12)*

The description is reminiscent of the Tower of Babel which also had its foundation on the ground and reached toward the heavens.[3] Ironically, it was at that tower that Avraham was thrown into a furnace. Saved by a miracle, he began his journey - away from Ur Kasdim, to the Land of Israel. Now his grandson Yaakov is heading back toward Avraham's homeland because **his** life is in danger in the Promised Land.

Yaakov sees angels ascending and descending, rather than what we may have expected: angels should first be described as coming down from Heaven and then going back up. This vision leads to an even more

profound revelation: he sees God above him (or above the ladder):

> *And, behold, God stood above him (or above it), and said, 'I am the Lord, the God of Avraham your father, and the God of Yitzchak. The land on which you lie, to you will I give it, and to your descendents.(Bereishit 28:5)*

We still do not know his precise location, yet he is assured that this is holy land, and that it will one day be his. All that we do know is that he has left Be'er Sheva. Where he lies is still not known.

Yaakov awakens. He now knows that he is on holy ground, and he seems surprised and overwhelmed. Not only is the land holy, this place is the "House of God" and the entrance to Heaven:

> *16. And Yaakov awoke from his sleep, and he said, surely God is in this place; and I did not know. 17. And he was afraid, and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is no other but the House of God, and this is the gate of Heaven.'(Bereishit 28:16-17)*

This is the first reference in the Torah to a House of God. At this point it exists only in the supernatural sphere, and Yaakov sees it in a vision. But one day a Tabernacle will be built to travel with the Israelites in the desert, and when the Jews finally return to their homeland the Tabernacle will metamorphose into a physical Temple - the Beit Hamikdash. It all begins with Yaakov's dream and his perception of this place as the gate of Heaven. The reader, however, still does not know where Yaakov is.

> *And Yaakov rose up early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put for his pillows, and set it up for a pillar, and poured oil upon its top. And he called the name of that place Beit El; but the name of that city was called Luz at the first. And Yaakov vowed a vow,[4] saying, If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and a garment to wear,and I come back to my father's house in peace; then shall the Lord be my God. And this stone, which I have set for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that you shall give me I will surely give the tenth to you.(Bereishit 28:18-22)*

Yaakov calls the place where he has had this vision *Beit El,* literally, the House of God, connecting the entrance to Heaven seen in his vision to the House of God he vows to build as a gateway to Heaven.

Jerusalem

Rashi draws an image of the ladder on an angle, stretching across all of the Land of Israel, with the base in Be'er Sheva, the top in Beit El, and the middle directly above what would one day be known as Jerusalem.[5] Thus, Rashi solves the question of the exact location of this episode. He[6] identifies Beit El with *Har HaMoriah*, connecting the other Patriarchs to this same place of prayer. Despite the fact that Avraham lived in Be'er Sheva and Yitzchak lived in Be'er L'Hai Ro'i, our tradition teaches us that this spot was a place of prayer for both Avraham and Yitzchak, and the site of the *Akeida*. At the end of his commentary to this verse, Rashi cites a passage from the Talmud which compares the prayers of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, basing itself on a verse in the book of Micha regarding the Messianic Age:

> *But in the last days it shall come to pass, that the mountain of the House of God shall be established in the top of the mountains, and it shall be exalted*

> *above the hills; and people shall flow to it. And many nations shall come, and say, 'Come, and let us go up to the mountain of God, and to the House of the God of Yaakov; and He will teach us of His ways, and we will walk in His paths; for Torah shall go forth from Zion, and the word of God from Jerusalem. (Micha Chapter 4:1-2)*

The Talmud explains why it is Yaakov whose name is associated with the House of God, above the other Patriarchs:

> *R. Eleazar also said, 'What is meant by the verse," And many people shall go and say: 'Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, To the house of the God of Yaakov'- the God of Yaakov, but not the God of Avraham and Yitzchak? Not like Avraham, in connection with whom 'mountain' is written, as it is said, 'As it is said to this day, 'In the mountain where the Lord is seen.' Nor like Yitzchak, in connection with whom 'field' is written, as it is said, 'And Yitzchak went out to meditate in the field at eventide.' But like Yaakov, who called it (or called Him) 'home', as it is said, 'And he called the name of that place Beit El ['The House of God'].*

The verse quoted, of course, is from our own parsha, when Yaakov sees the gateway to Heaven and senses the need for a House of God. All three Patriarchs are associated with *Har HaMoriah*, but Yaakov, more than the other Patriarchs, is associated with the *Beit Hamikdash*. The Zohar[7] understands that the first Temple is associated with Avraham, the second with Yitzchak, but the third and final Temple, which will be established in the End of Days and will be everlasting, is related to Yaakov.[8] In the words of the Shem MiShmuel, this third Temple will have as its foundation the first two Temples, and will be the culmination of both previous Temples, just as Yaakov was the spiritual culmination and combination of the first two Patriarchs.[9]

Sinai

The Midrash goes in another direction altogether, associating the ladder of Yaakov's vision with Sinai. If taken literally, this would pose a further geographic challenge, but the thematic parallel should not be overlooked: Both Yaakov's ladder and Mount Sinai are conduits to Heaven, methods of approaching Heaven, of bringing information down from Heaven. Perhaps most importantly, both are revelations.

> *The Rabbis related it to Sinai. AND HE DREAMED, AND BEHOLD A LADDER symbolizes Sinai; SET UPON THE EARTH. as it says, And they stood at the base of the mount (Ex. 19:17); AND THE TOP OF IT REACHED TO HEAVEN-And the mountain burned with fire unto the heart of heaven (Deut. 4:11).4 AND BEHOLD THE ANGELS OF GOD alludes to Moshe and Aharon. ASCENDING: And Moshe went up to God (Ex. 19:3); AND DESCENDING-And Moshe went down from the mount (ib. 14). AND, BEHOLD, THE LORD STOOD ABOVE HIM-And the Lord came down upon Mount Sinai (ib. 20). (Bereishit Rabbah 68:12)*

The Midrash[10] goes one step further with this association and reveals that "*Sinai*" and "*sulam*" (ladder) have the same numerical value (130).[11] This connection is clarified by a teaching of the Ramban,[12] who states that the Revelation at Sinai was a singular, "one-time" experience which would be transferred to the Tabernacle and eventually to the Beit Hamikdash. With that in mind, the connection between the ladder and Sinai becomes more clear.

There is a connection between Yaakov and Sinai. We recall that the 'House of Yaakov' was specifically addressed at Mount Sinai:

> *And Moshe went up to God, and God called to him from the mountain, saying, 'Thus shall you say to the House of Yaakov, and tell the People of Israel.'*

One more connection should be noted: The voice of Yaakov may be seen as a type of ladder as well, when used to study Torah, bringing the words of God down to earth, and when raised in prayer, bringing man's praise and supplication up to Heaven. The commentaries point out that the word "*kol*" (voice) has the same numerical value as "*sulam*" (ladder): 130.[13]

Marriage

The word house or *bayit* also connotes marriage, or a domestic arrangement. Rav Zadok Hakohen, cognizant of Yaakov's mission to seek a wife in Charan, sees part of the essence of Yaakov linked with this other kind of house as well. The Talmud[14] states that the word *bayit* can be used as a synonym for a wife. Rav Zadok[15] explains that a home is a place of stability, and a place to build an honest and holy relationship. He contrasts Yaakov's home life with that of Eliphaz, son of Esav, who had an illicit relationship with a woman named Timna; the offspring of this relationship was a child named Amalek.

The Megaleh Amukot[16] explains that when Yaakov describes the place of his epiphany as "awesome" ("How awesome is this place!", Bereishit 28:17), it is the spiritual attributes that he senses. Specifically, he sees that this place can help heal a rift created long ago, when Adam and Eve sinned. In the wake of the expulsion that followed, a strain was created in their relationship. According to the Talmud they separated for one hundred and thirty years. When Shet is born the Torah states:

> *And Adam lived a hundred and thirty years, and fathered a son in his own likeness, after his image; and called his name Shet; (Bereishit 5:3)*

The implication is that prior to this child he had children NOT in his image!

> *R. Yirmiya b. Eleazar further stated: In all those years during which Adam was under the ban he begot ghosts and male demons and female demons, for it is said in Scripture: And Adam lived a hundred and thirty years and begot a son in his own likeness, after his own image, from which it follows that until that time he did not beget after his own image. (Talmud Bavli Eruvin 18b)*

Eviction from Eden had a price. For 130 years Adam and Eve were estranged from one another. Once again, the number 130 is significant, here referring to the lack of "*bayit*", stable home life.

Paradise Lost

Adam and Eve should have had the perfect relationship. God made the *shiduch*, and they were, literally, soul-mates. But the expulsion from Eden put sufficient pressure on the relationship that instead of a stable home they had a dysfunctional relationship. The rabbis claim that for 130 years Adam and Eve were estranged from one another. The Talmud speaks of demons and Liliths created during this time, the result of nocturnal emissions. In kabbalistic language this constitutes a weakness of the *sefira* of *Yesod*, which is related to sexual self-control and fidelity. Yosef, who displays the ability to contain himself despite the seductive overtures of Potifar's wife, is most closely identified with the kabbalistic sphere of *Yesod*. According to

midrashic and kabbalistic writings, both Adam and Eve[17] failed in this particular area during these 130 years. They lacked fidelity; they lacked stability; they lacked a home.

Now wandering, Yaakov needs stability. He needs a home. He needs a wife. Yaakov understands that this is true on a macro level as well: The Jewish People, his descendents, will also need stability; they will also need a home. But as we have seen, this mystical, connecting thread of 130 goes beyond Yaakov both on the individual level and the House of Yaakov on the national level. Yes - the ladder of his vision is a personal vision, with national ramifications. Yes, the voice of Yaakov is a medium through which Heaven and Earth may be brought closer. Yes - the Revelation at Sinai is the ultimate connection between the Jewish People and their Father in Heaven. But this thematic thread of 130 brings us all the way back to Adam and Eve, asking us to consider the ramifications of Yaakov's epiphany on an even larger scale. What, then, is the connection between Yaakov and Adam?

The Talmud states:

> *R. Kahana's beauty is a reflection of R. Abbahu's; R. Abbahu's is a reflection of our Father Yaakov's; our Father Yaakov's was a reflection of Adam's; (Talmud Bavli Bava Metzia 84a)*

Yaakov had the same pure, holy countenance as Adam before he ate from the tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.[18] In fact, when Yaakov stands on that holy ground and sees the ladder, what does he ask for? Bread to eat and clothing to wear (28:20), both elements effected by the sin in the Garden of Eden. Man's obligation to work and man's need to cover his nakedness originate from this sin. Ironically, the two interactions recorded between Yaakov and Esav also revolve around food and clothing.

Yaakov is connected to the Tree of[19] Life. Yaakov is associated with the Tents (of Torah), with Sinai, with the ladder of his vision and with the voice in search of the Word of God. All of these point to the Tree of Life, another name for Torah. Esav is connected with the other tree - the tree of death. The personification of evil in the Garden was the serpent. His punishment for causing man to be expelled from his home, for causing instability in the intimate relationship between Adam and Eve, is described in the Torah as follows:

> *And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he (man) shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his **heel**. (Bereishit 3:15)*

It starts with enmity between Eve and the serpent, and ends with a heel - the source of the name Yaakov! Who is this serpent that he should have such an adversary? The mystical sources identify the serpent with various nefarious characters, but one in particular stands out: *Sama'el,* the protecting angel of Esav. Variously associated with Esav,[20] with the Angel of Death or with the Serpent, this demonic angel[21] has an advantage over Yaakov: Samel has a numerical value of 131.[22]

When Yaakov goes in to see his father, bringing him food, he is wearing the clothing of Esav. This clothing is traced back to Nimrod - and all the way back to Adam. It may actually have been the skin of the Serpent. Now Yaakov has merged with the Serpent and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. He has entered a world of confusion.

Yaakov is a man of the tents. He desires stability, clarity, Torah; he seeks life. The ironic vicissitudes of his life have taken Yaakov from the tents (*Etz HaChayim*) to his father's tent, dressed up as Esav (*Etz Hada'at Tov v'Ra*), and then back out to the road. Under the open sky he seeks stability. He wants a home. He wants

happiness. He is an *ish tam* - and he wants an uncomplicated relationship.

Esav = Anarchy

When it is Esav's turn to marry, he takes two wives at once,[23] inviting disharmony, creating anarchy. Esav's son Eliphaz avoids marriage altogether and fathers an illegitimate child, Amalek. The irony of Yaakov's life is that despite his search for stability - he is forced to wander. Despite wanting to marry the one woman that he loves, he is forced into another marriage. Despite wanting simplicity, he receives complexity. His enemy is as old as Creation: *Sama'el,* the angel who desires man's confusion and ultimate destruction. But Yaakov is connected to the Tree of Life, thus, in the words of the Sages, "*Yaakov Avinu lo met*" - Yaakov will never die.[24] The secret to his life, his eternal strength, is this: Marriage and happiness, holiness and stability, a house for himself and a House for God. As we have seen, the ladder of his vision stretched across all of the Land of Israel, linking Sinai with the Temple.

True Joy

Our Rabbi's tell us that the Covenant at Sinai is a marriage.[25] So, too, the Revelation at Sinai is described as a healing event.[26] Sinai is also where foundations of stability are laid. Sinai is where happiness is rediscovered. The voice (*kol*) at Sinai is joyful celebration of a marriage, a union of the Jewish People and God. Rabbi Nachman of Breslov taught that the way to defeat the Evil Inclination is with authentic happiness.[27] The *sulam* and the *kol* are the same: both uplift us when we are down. When the Jewish People were faced with destruction, Yirmiyahu prophesized against despair:

> *Thus says the Lord; Again there shall be heard in this place, which you say shall be desolate without man and without beast, in the cities of Judah, and in the streets of Jerusalem that are desolate, without man, and without inhabitant, and without beast. The voice of joy, and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom, and the voice of the bride, the voice of those who shall say, Praise the God of Hosts; for God is good; for His mercy endures for ever; the Sacrifice of Praise shall be brought in the House of God, "For I will cause to return the captivity of the land, as at the first," says the Lord. (Yirmiyahu 33:10-11)*

Those words are echoed at every Jewish wedding, and they have redemptive powers: they can bring joy and help rebuild the Temple:

> *R. Helbo further said in the name of R. Huna: Whoever enjoys the wedding meal of a bridegroom and does not help him to rejoice transgresses against 'the five voices' mentioned in the verse: The voice of joy and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voice of them that say, Give thanks to the Lord of Hosts. And if he does gladden (the bridegroom), what is his reward? R. Joshua b. Levi said: He is privileged to acquire [the knowledge of] the Torah which was given with five voices. For it is said: And it came to pass on the third day, when it was morning, that there was thunder and lightning and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of a horn . . . and when the voice of the horn waxed louder . . . Moshe spoke and God answered him by a voice. ... R. Abbahu says: It is as if he had sacrificed a thanksgiving offering. For it is said: Even of them that bring offerings of thanksgiving into the House of God. R. Nahman b. Yitzchak says: It is as if he*

> *had restored one of the ruins of Jerusalem. For it is said: For I will cause the captivity of the land to return as at the first, says the Lord. (Talmud Bavli Brachot 6b)*

The voice is a voice of joy, of marriage, of Torah, and of bringing an offering in the Temple of Jerusalem. Those who participate in the joy are seen as having rebuilt one of the ruins of Jerusalem, for all of these ideas are inextricably linked, made of the same voice of joy. This is what Yaakov perceived, lying on the ground someplace between Be'ersheba and Charan. Despite the fact that he now knew that he was in a holy place - perhaps the holiest place on Earth - and that this place would belong to him and his descendents, he nonetheless continued his journey to find his bride, while at the same time dedicating himself to building the House of God that he saw in his dream.

An Angelic Dance

Rabbi Nachman offers another perspective on the merger of Sinai and the ladder (*sulam*). He explains that the angels who are seen "going up and coming down" were, in fact, dancing. The kinetic movement of the dance is the movement of an angel whose feet no longer touch the ground, reaching toward heaven. Every wedding is like Sinai, every wedding should connect us with Heaven as if we had a ladder.[28] If we are to defeat the Evil Inclination, the melancholy of self - doubt, we must open our eyes and watch the angels going up and coming down. If we do more than just watch, and actually, physically join in the dance and song, we will find ourselves a little closer to heaven.

A version of this essay with Hebrew sources and footnotes can be found at http://arikahn.blogspot.com/.

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1. This shiur was originally given on the occasion of the *shloshim* of Rabbi Salim Dweck of blessed memory. It is presented here with a number of changes.
2. The word *vayifgah* sounds happenstance. So, to, "for the sun had set" implies that it set unexpectedly.
3. See Bereishit 11:4: "And they said, Come, let us build us a city and a tower, whose **top may reach to heaven;** and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth."
4. It is possible that the word vow, "*neder*" in Hebrew is etomologically related to *dira* - "dwelling place": A vow holy is holy because it turns something mundane into a place for God to dwell. See Rabenu Bachya Bamidbar 30:3.
5. Rashi's comments are on the words "this is none other than a House of God" 28:17. Apparently Rashi associates "House of God" with the ultimate House of God - the Temple in Jerusalem.
6. This comment by Rashi does not appear in all printed texts.
7. See Midrash Ne'elam Parshat Acharei Mot, and see .Rav Zadok Kometz Mincha part 2 section 61.
8. See Avodat Yisrael (the Maggid from Kuznitz) Parshat Vayetzei, who makes this point as well.
9. Shem Mishmuel Parshat Maatot 5675.
10. Bereishit Rabbah 68:12.
11. *Sulam* is spelled in the Torah defectively - without a *vav*, rather *samach* (60) *lamed* (30) *mem* (40). *Sinai* is *samach* (60) *yud* (10) *nun* (50) *yud* (10).
12. See Commentary of Ramban to the Torah, Shmot 40:34.
13. A number of commentaries also take note that *kol* - as in the voice of Yaakov, which has been connected to Yaakov's learning of Torah - is also equal 130 and is also written defectively in the Torah. It is more common for *kol* to be written with a *vav* - and then the value is 136 (the same as *sulam* when written with a *vav*). In the verse which speaks of the voice of Yaakov it is written both ways! See Bereishit 27:22: See Baal Haturim Bereshit 28:12, Sefer Hakana (Avigdor Ben Yitzchak Karo).
14. Tamud Bavli Yoma 2a.
15. Resisay Layla section 42.
16. See Megaleh Amukot, Parshat Vayera.
17. The sources view Eve's relationship with the serpent as having sexual overtones.
18. See Arizal sefer Haliquitim Vayeshev.
19. See Shla Hakodesh parshat Chayei Sara.
20. The Megaleh Amukot Vetchanan aspect 47, identifies the serpent with Esav.
21. The Zohar (Bereshit 170a) reveals that this is the identity of the "man" who wrestled with Yaakov.
22. See Megaleh Amukot Vetchanan aspect 191.
23. See Bereshit 26:34,35: "And Esau was forty years old when he married Judith the daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and Bashemath the daughter of Elon the Hittite. And they made life bitter for Isaac and for Rebekah."
24. Tamud Bavli Ta'anit 5b.
25. Tamud Bavli Ta'anit 26b.

26. See Midrash Rabbah - Shmot 2:4 - this is why so many hospitals are named "Mount Sinai" - because of the healing power of the place.
27. Likutei Halachot, Brachot Hodaah, Halacha 6.
28. Sichot Maharan section 86.