

## Of Angels, Pillars and Brothers

By Rav Chanoch Waxman

Parashat Vayetze ends pretty much as it began. The end of the parasha reports that upon parting from Lavan, Ya'akov encountered angels:

And Ya'akov went on his way, and angels of God met him (va-yifge'u bo malakhei E-lokim). And when Ya'akov saw them, he said, "This is God's camp;" and he called the name of that place (ha-makom) Machanaim. (32:2-3)

This meeting echoes Ya'akov's dream of "angels of God" at the opening of the parasha both linguistically and thematically. Both appearances of the angels of God occur at the beginning of a journey (28:10, 32:2). Both encounters occur at locations termed "the place" (ha-makom, 28:11, 32:3). Furthermore, both meetings are described by a verb based upon the stem peh-gimmel-ayin, meaning either to meet or to encounter. Finally, both visions end with Ya'akov's proclamation regarding the divine nature of the place and naming of the site (28:16-17, 19, 32:3).

This "angel encounter" parallel is not the only echo of the early parts of the parasha to be found at its end. Shortly before parting, Ya'akov and Lavan contract a covenant (31:44-54) to serve as a witness between them. Ya'akov promptly takes a stone and fashions a "matzeva," a pillar-shaped monument (31:44-45). As the story continues, a pile of stones is assembled and termed "gal-ed," meaning "pile of witness." While a certain amount of ambiguity exists in the text as to whether there are two stone monuments or one (31:48-52), most probably the ceremony involved a "matzeva," a single stone erected by Ya'akov, and a pile of stones heaped together by Lavan and his clan brothers. The two monuments represent the two sides. The story of the covenant with Lavan concludes with the verbal contract and oath sworn by both sides in the presence of the monument-witness (31:51-53).

All of this should remind us of the "matzeva," the stone pillar erected by Ya'akov upon awaking from his dream at the beginning of the parasha. In the dream, God promises to give "the land he sleeps on" to Ya'akov and his descendants. In addition, God issues a series of promises regarding a multitude of descendants, the blessing of all through these descendants, protection on the upcoming journey and safe return (28:13-15). In response, Ya'akov erects a pillar made from "the stone that he had put under his head" (28:18). But of course, Ya'akov had placed more than one stone under his head (28:11). We have here two of the primary symbols of the

covenant of Lavan. Like the story of the covenant with Lavan, the story of God's promise contains both the pillar of a single stone, Ya'akov's making of a matzeva, and the textual stone-stones ambiguity.

In addition, upon placing his pillar at the beginning of the parasha, Ya'akov takes a vow. In exchange for God's promise of protection and safe return, and on the condition that God will throw in food and clothing, Ya'akov promises to treat the matzeva as a "house of God" and give a tenth of his wealth to God (28:20-22). In sum, even without entering into a detailed parsing of Ya'akov's vow, it is obvious that Ya'akov attempts to convert God's unconditional promise of the blessings of Avraham into a two-sided verbal contract, a formal covenant witnessed by the matzeva he erects. At the end of the parasha, not just the encounter with angels resurfaces, but so do the pillar, the stone-stones ambiguity, the contract terms and a vow.

When taken together, the two parallels outlined above seem to form a chiasmic structure, a kind of reversing frame for the main body of Parashat Vayetze. According to this line of thinking, we can roughly sketch the architecture of the parasha as follows:

A (28:10-12) - the angel encounter on the way to Charan;

B (28:13-22) - the pillar covenant with God;

C (Parashat Vayetze) - Ya'akov in Charan in the house of Lavan;

B (31:44-54) - the pillar covenant with Lavan;

A (32:1-3) - the angel encounter upon leaving Charan.

As mentioned above, the "frame" of the parasha reverses itself. While on the way to Charan the angel encounter (A) precedes the pillar covenant (B), on the way back things are switched. The angel encounter (A) now follows the pillar covenant (B).

We might be inclined to dismiss these two parallels and their forming of a chiasmic frame for the parasha as no more than literary artistry. After all, Ya'akov does dream, does need his second set of angels for dealing with Eisav (Ramban 32:2) and probably has some sort of propensity for setting up pillars of stone. It may just happen to be that the Torah arranges the stories with a stylistic flair. In my opinion, this would be an error. This kind of paralleling and structuring should somehow connect essentially to the content and themes of Parashat Vayetze. But what constitutes the connection? How does the "frame" interact with the "picture?" To put this more pointedly:

How do the parallels and structure contribute to our understanding of Ya'akov and his time in the house of Lavan?

Let us return to our point of departure, the angel-encounter parallel. In point of fact, the two stories might be said to differ in more ways than they resemble each other. While in both cases Ya'akov "encounters" angels, the quality of the meetings, or the prophetic state in which they take place, varies greatly. At the beginning of the parasha, the angels appear as part of a dream: Ya'akov dreams of angels of God ascending and descending a ladder that bridges the gap between heaven and earth (28:12). The angels are part of a strange and fantastic vision accompanied by the divine promise Ya'akov has so yearned to hear. In contrast, the angels of God at the end of the parasha appear to Ya'akov in a waking state, normally considered a much higher level of prophecy. Upon taking his leave from Lavan, in mid-journey and apparently mid-day, Ya'akov is met by the angels. The angels are a concrete reality, rather than a dreamlike vision.

In addition, we can also note a difference in the initiation verbs of the two encounters. In the dream story, the initiation is described by the phrase "vayifga ba-makom" (28:11). While this can be translated as, "And he encountered the place," a more colloquial interpretation would note the overtones of accident and happenstance implicit in the text. Something along the lines of, "And he happened upon the place," would be in order. Almost by accident, Ya'akov stumbles upon a holy place and dreams of angels. He seeks, but in a haphazard and accidental fashion. In contrast, the angel encounter at Machanaim is initiated not by Ya'akov, but by the angels, the divine side of things. The text utilizes the phrase, "Vayifge'u bo malakhei E-lokim," "And angels of God met him" (32:2). The angels initiate the meeting. Furthermore, the initiation and the meeting are deliberate and purposeful, devoid of any accidental quality. Ya'akov is sought out.

Moreover, the encounters seem not only different in quality and initiation but also in their duration. In the first encounter, the dream vision, Ya'akov awakens. The vision evaporates and the dream dissolves, leaving Ya'akov with no more than memory of God's promises. However, in the second encounter, the concrete meeting, the angels do not just fade away. As Ibn Ezra points out (32:2), the name Machanaim means two camps, denoting the parallel camps of Ya'akov and his family on the one hand and the divine angels on the other. Just as Ya'akov is encamped as part of his journey, so too the divine angels are encamped, engaged, at least briefly, in a parallel journey.

The beginning of parashat Vayishlach may strengthen this point. Almost immediately after being met by the angels of God (malakhei E-lokim) in 32:2, Ya'akov sends messengers (malakhim) to his brother Eisav in the land of Seir (32:4). Quite possibly, these malakhim-messengers should be identified as stemming from the camp of malakhim-angels accompanying Ya'akov (Ramban 32:2, Rashi 32:4). If so, the second encounter, the concrete meeting, persists even longer.

To put all of this together, the story at the end of the parasha, the meeting at Machanaim, depicts a concrete meeting in time and space initiated by the divine. Ya'akov and the angels camp and perhaps journey together. He is someone worthy of angelic greeting and accompaniment. The story at the beginning of the parasha presents an altogether different picture. Ya'akov is not greeted by angels, accompanied by angels, nor granted a concrete vision by God. Instead, the story of Beit El is a dream, the ephemeral vision of a running man. It is an almost accidental and brief glimpse of a promised future, a story in which Ya'akov stumbles upon prophecy and destiny. In sum, it is a story of potential, portraying Ya'akov in the process of becoming, not yet worthy of concrete visions and persistent divine accompaniment.

If so, perhaps part of the point of the frame of the parasha, the bracketing of the parasha with the two angel-encounter stories, is to telegraph the change in Ya'akov. The Ya'akov who emerges from Charan is not the same Ya'akov who had fled to Charan.

This reading of the frame gets us a little closer to the picture. Somehow, the years in Charan have changed Ya'akov. But in what way has he changed? How does he differ from the Ya'akov of twenty years past? Why is he now deserving of concrete vision and angelic accompaniment?

### III

Let us take a look at the covenant contracted between Lavan and Ya'akov. Normally, a covenant comprises a relatively friendly affair, a formal confirmation of good relations. For example, in the covenant between Avraham and Avimelech (21:22-33), Avimelech requests "kindness" from Avraham and his descendents in return for the kindness he has shown to Avraham (21:23). The covenant scene closes with the statement that "they made a covenant" (21:32) and the fact that Avraham remained in the land of the Philistines "many days" (21:34).

Likewise, the covenant between Yitzchak and Avimelech is also about the formal establishment of good relations. While Yitzchak is at first suspicious of Avimelech's attitude, accusing Avimelech of hating him (26:27), he is apparently won over by Avimelech's desire for "only good" in their relations and his desire to send him away "in peace" (26:27). The story concludes with each man swearing to "his brother" (26:31) and the new brothers parting "in peace" (26:31). In sum, treaties are about mutual kindness, good relations and peace.

Not so the "treaty" between Lavan and Ya'akov, our second pillar covenant. An atmosphere of hostility permeates the entire story (31:44-54). The treaty originates in mistrust and separation. Lavan originally requests a "witness," a guarantee, that Ya'akov will not afflict his daughters or take additional wives when hidden from Lavan's supervision (31:44,50). Furthermore, throughout the conversation, numerous references are made to the physical separation of the parties. Apparently, neither side will cross the dividing line formed by the pile of stones and the hill it rests upon (31:49,52, Rashi 31:52). Moreover, in line with the disengagement theme, Ya'akov and Lavan cannot even

agree on what to call the monuments or by what God to swear. Where as Lavan calls the monument "Yegar Sahaduta," Ya'akov calls it "Galed" (31:47). When Lavan swears by the "God of Avraham, Nachor and their fathers," Ya'akov pointedly swears by "Pahad Yitzchak" (31:53). Finally, throughout the story there is no mention of "kindness," good relations, peace or brotherhood between Ya'akov and Lavan. While the text refers to Ya'akov's and Lavan's mutual clansmen as the "brothers" of Ya'akov (31:46, 54), neither Ya'akov nor the text ever term Ya'akov and Lavan brothers. They are irrevocably disengaged one from another. This is a story of separation.

The roots of this cold peace between Lavan and Ya'akov lie buried in the history of the previous twenty years, a history that includes Lavan's ongoing trickery and Ya'akov's ever-burgeoning wealth. In fact, just before the contracting of the treaty of separation, the Torah brings these themes to the fore.

After Ya'akov consults with his wives, packs his bags and leaves Charan (31:1-18), Lavan gives chase, catches the fleeing Ya'akov, accuses him of theft and ransacks his camp (31:19-36). At this point, and immediately preceding the covenant of separation, a crucial dialogue ensues. Ya'akov begins by rebuking Lavan for pursuing him and accusing him of theft.

And [Ya'akov] ... said to Lavan, What is my transgression? What is my sin that you have hotly pursued me? Although you have searched all my stuff what have you found of your house's goods...? (31:36-37)

He continues on to deliver his take on the last twenty years. These were years in which Ya'akov worked hard, animated by loyalty and honesty. They were years in which Lavan rewarded honesty with trickery and hard work with miserliness.

Twenty years I have been with you; your sheep and goats

have not miscarried and your rams I have not consumed. The torn I didn't bring to you and I bore the loss, from my hand you demanded it, whether stolen by day or stolen by night. So it was for me: during the day drought consumed me, and frost at night, sleep departed from my eyes. So I have been twenty years in your house; I served you fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for your cattle: and you have changed my wages ten times. (31:38-40)

Ya'akov concludes with a flourish and a final accusation.

Were it not for the God of my father, the God of Avraham and Pachad Yitzchak who was with me, surely you would have sent me away empty. (31:41)

All he has, he owes to God and His providence. How else could he have survived Lavan's deal-making and slave-like working conditions? How else could he have thrived despite Lavan's trickery, abuse, cheapness and dishonesty? It is all due to the grace of God.

Lavan is neither swayed nor impressed. He is neither interested in history nor in responding to the substance of Ya'akov's claims. Rather he simply states his position.

These daughters are my daughters, and these children are my children, and these cattle are my cattle, and all that you see is mine... (31:43)

No wonder that the "covenant" which follows (31:44-54) is animated by distrust and disagreement. It is a treaty between enemies and opposites.

#### IV

Ya'akov has not always played the role of enemy and opposite to Lavan. Earlier on, upon arriving at the well and meeting Rachel, Ya'akov defines himself as "the brother of her father" (29:12). The entire plot of the well story revolves around Ya'akov seeking out Lavan, "the brother of his mother" (21:10). In fact, the stem for brother or sibling, aleph-chet, appears seven times (29:4,10,12,1,15) in the overall textual unit (29:1-17). When Ya'akov cries (29:11), he cries tears of relief. He has finally found his and his mother's brother, the end of his flight and a refuge from his biological brother Esav.

As pointed out above, the Torah never defines Ya'akov and Lavan as "brothers" during the treaty story. In pointed contrast to their mutual clansmen who are termed the brothers of Ya'akov (31:46,54), Lavan is just Lavan, not the brother of Ya'akov, not the brother of his mother nor his clan-brother. This contrast with the well-scene, the story of Ya'akov seeking his brother, is further highlighted by the fact that in the larger textual unit containing the treaty, the story of the chase, confrontation and treaty (31:19-54), the stem for brother, aleph-chet, appears seven times (31:23, 25, 32, 37, 46, 54) - the same seven times as in the well scene. But once again, in contrast to the well story, it never appears in reference to Ya'akov and Lavan.

In summary, the treaty story, i.e. the second pillar covenant of parashat Vayetze and its larger context of the chase and confrontation (31:19-54), constitutes a de-brothering story. It forms the opposite of Ya'akov's search for Lavan in the first half of the parasha. Rather than seeking his brother Lavan, he now flees and separates from his non-brother Lavan. The man who treated him so is not his brother.

#### V

Let us try to move from the level of attitude to the level of character. Commenting on Ya'akov's original statement to Rachel in which he claims to be the brother of Lavan, Rashi (29:12) cites a midrash which interprets Ya'akov's statement in

a striking fashion. As if to tell Rachel that all will turn out all right, Ya'akov claims to be the equal of Lavan in trickery (rama'ut). While this may be a bit of an exaggeration, the early Ya'akov does contain quite a bit of the character of Lavan. He too knows how to negotiate a good deal. It is Ya'akov the wily businessman who pulls off the purchase of the birthright, the land and the blessings for a bowl of soup (25:29-34). Leaving no loop open, he even extracts a formal oath from his "dying" brother (25:32-33). Likewise, Ya'akov the wily businessman is not deterred by a measure of trickery and deceit in pursuit of what he deems his right. He is willing to masquerade as his brother and lie to his father in order to protect his purchase (27:15-24). The only concern he expresses is that of being caught (27:11-12).

Finally, and most strikingly, the early Ya'akov acts the wily businessman even in his relation to God. As pointed out previously, Ya'akov's behavior in the aftermath of his dream, the very contracting of the first pillar covenant, seems rather strange. To review, God appears to Ya'akov to deliver a unilateral promise. He promises all of the standard components of the blessings of Avraham: land, descendants, etc. (28:13-14). In addition, given the unique circumstance of Ya'akov's fleeing from the land, he promises to "be with him" and to return him to the land. Upon awakening, Ya'akov erects a pillar, recasts God's promise as a deal, adds conditions for both sides, and seals it all with a vow (28:18-22). Undoubtedly there is something praiseworthy about the promise to return to the place of God and to tithe, to give a portion to God (28:22). Nevertheless, at the same time, Ya'akov has effectively turned the blessings of Avraham into a business deal including monetary components and obligations. The transformation by Ya'akov of God's gift into the first pillar covenant, a two-sided conditioned and formal deal, reflects the wily businessman inside, the element of Lavan within him.

The contrast with the later Ya'akov could not be greater. Let us take a look at the next time the Torah portrays Ya'akov as speaking to God, his prayer on the night before confronting Eisav. In the core of his prayer, Ya'akov beseeches God:

I am unworthy of the least of Your mercies, and of the truths that You have done with Your servant; for with my stick alone I last passed over this Jordan and now I have become two camps. Save me please from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Eisav, for I fear him, lest he come and smite us, mother and children. (32:11-12)

Here there is no deal-making, no offers of mutuality, no wiles, and no reliance upon one's own wits. Nothing is attributed to Ya'akov's skills, his intelligence or his abilities. Rather, all stems from God's mercy and justice, mercy and justice that Ya'akov realizes he fails to deserve. Here Ya'akov displays the character of a penitent, a true seeker of God, who recognizes his utter dependence upon God. This character constitutes the opposite of the wily businessman, who relies upon his own wits, his tricks and his deal-making to achieve his ends.

But from what does the transformation in Ya'akov stem? When does he change? Where does the turn in his personality occur? I believe we already know the answer.

Let us return briefly to the dialogue preceding the second pillar covenant, the separation treaty of Ya'akov and Lavan. As pointed out previously, Ya'akov finishes his tirade with a passionate flourish.

Were it not for the God of my father, the God of Avraham and Pachad Yitzchak who was with me, surely you would have sent me away empty. (31:41)

Here we have the later Ya'akov. Ya'akov easily could have attributed his success to his hard work; after all, he has worked fourteen years for his wives and children. He could have attributed his wealth to his clever negotiating with Lavan and utilization of sophisticated breeding techniques, his usage of striped and spotted sticks to produce speckled and spotted sheep (30:27-43). Instead of celebrating his own skill, Ya'akov attributes all to the help and mercy of God.

Ya'akov sees Lavan for who he truly is. He sees the trickiness, the theft, the lack of gratitude, the manipulations and the possessiveness of Lavan. He sees what it means not to act as a brother, what it is to manipulate and exploit in order to further one's own material interests. He sees what the character of the wily businessman is all about. In response, he acknowledges his own impotence to combat the external Lavan and recognizes that all comes from God. By doing so, Ya'akov separates not just from the external Lavan, but also from the internal Lavan, the wily businessman within. By recognizing the repulsiveness of Lavan and Lavaness, and by depending on God, Ya'akov in effect gives up part of his own character.

In sum, the story marks an important stage in separating from the character of Lavan and establishing the final character of Ya'akov. Quite possibly, the change in Ya'akov, the separation from the Lavan within, constitutes an ongoing and gradual process. Alternatively, the process may be revolutionary, occurring quickly in moments of crisis. Either way, our story, the separation treaty with Lavan, the second pillar covenant and its larger context of chase and confrontation, constitutes a crucial moment.

The story constitutes a de-brothering story, a separation of Ya'akov from Lavan, not just on the level of attitude but also on the level of character.

V

To close the circle, let us return to where we began, the chiasmic framing of the parasha. Let us briefly review the structure of the parasha.

A (28:10-12) - the angel encounter on the way to Charan;

B (28:13-22) - the pillar covenant with God;

C (Parashat Vayetze) - Ya'akov in Charan in the house of Lavan;

B (31:44-54) - the pillar covenant with Lavan;

A (32:1-3) - the angel encounter upon leaving Charan.

Earlier, I argued that the outer ring of the frame, the angel encounter parallel, serves to telegraph that Ya'akov has changed, that by the end of the parasha he is worthy of concrete visions and angelic accompaniment. This left us wondering as to the nature of this change. Our analysis above of the second pillar covenant as part of a larger context of chase, confrontation and separation (31:19-54), as a de-brothering story, as a separation from Lavan and Lavaness, should help complete the picture. The purpose of the inner ring of the frame is to signal the precise nature of the ongoing change in Ya'akov. In the first pillar covenant, the early Ya'akov, the brother of Lavan, acts the role of the wily businessman even vis-a-vis God. He goes from Beit El to seek his brother Lavan (29:1-17), his brother in the deepest sense of the term. The second pillar covenant turns out to be the opposite of the first. Here we have the later Ya'akov, who truly acknowledges dependence upon God, who separates from Lavan on the external and internal levels.

If so, the chiasmic frame of the parasha constitutes far more than just literary artistry. Rather, it signals contrast, change and closure. The second half of the frame closes not just the parasha and Ya'akov's time in the house of Lavan, but also a chapter in the character of Ya'akov. He is no longer the brother of Lavan, the wily deal-maker of his early days. One brother behind him, he heads off to deal with Eisav, his other brother. Lavan and Lavaness behind him, he is well on his way to becoming Yisrael.

[Note: I am indebted to my teacher Rav Aharon Lichtentsein for the interpretation of the angel encounter parallel presented in this shiur (Part II of the shiur). All further developments of this interpretation are my own responsibility.]

#### For Further Study:

1. Reread 28:20-22. See the respective comments of Rashi and Ramban. Is it possible to accept Ramban's interpretation in light of the shiur above? Alternatively, does Ramban's interpretation necessarily contradict any of the central theses of the shiur?
2. See the conversation between Ya'akov and his wives in 31:4-16. How should we interpret Ya'akov's claims about his newfound wealth and his dream? Is this the "early Ya'akov" or the "late Ya'akov"?
3. The shiur above assumes a chiasmic frame for parashat Vayetze. Might it be possible to note such a structure for the entire parasha? Try adding the following groupings: 29:1-12, 29:13-30:13, 30:14-23, 30:24-27, 30:28-30, 30:31-43, 31:1-16, 31:17-42. Where does the reversal begin?
4. Reread 31:20-25. See [Shemot 14:5-9](#). What do you think of this parallel? Can you think of others? See 30:43 and 31:18. What light does this shed on Ya'akov's time in the house of Lavan?

Visit our website: <http://etzion.org.il/en>