

December 3, 2012

VA-YETZE (He Went Out)

Ya'acov left Beersheva, which is way in the south of Israel, and was headed for Haran, which is way in the north. One night when he stopped to sleep, he had a dream about angels ascending and descending a ladder. When he got up, he moved on toward Haran. When he was almost there, he made some inquiries about his Uncle Laban. Then Rachel appeared and Ya'acov knew right away that she was the one for him.

So he agreed to work for Laban for 7 years if he would be allowed to marry his Rachel. Well, we all know how that turned out. So after spending the bridal week with Leah, Ya'acov agreed to work another 7 years in order to marry the woman he really loved. It's a good thing that Laban had only 2 daughters.

The story goes on about how so-and-so had a child and he was named whatever because of what it meant to the mother. So after having worked 14 years for the girls, Laban persuaded Ya'acov to stick around a little longer and take care of the flocks. Well, after another 6 years, Ya'acov decided it was time to move on down the road. Laban wasn't too pleased when he found out Ya'acov had gone and taken his family and possessions with him. When Laban caught up with him, he accused Ya'acov of taking things that did not belong to him. And that's when Ya'acov went off like a Roman candle.

The question I have is, "what kept Ya'acov going?" 20 years is a long time to spend out in the fields working for someone who is always changing the rules. I believe that the answer lies in the Hebrew word *lulei*, even though it sounds like the name of some French composer. In response to Laban's claims that Ya'acov's success was owed to him, Ya'acov insisted that it was *lulei*. So what is *lulei*? It is generally translated as "were it not." In the JPS Bible, it is translated as, "Had not the God of my fathers. . .been with me, you would have sent me away empty handed." Some commentators take this to mean that if it had not been for the good deeds and role model of his parents and grandparents, Ya'acov would have lacked the clear sense of right and wrong and the inner strength to take the proper path. The goodness of his ancestors gave him his sense of purpose, his vision of what could be, and the ability to work toward that distant goal.

On the other hand, perhaps Ya'acov's actions were motivated for the sake of the sanctity of God's name. Ya'acov knew that his behavior would either reflect credit on the God of Israel or make the God of his fathers seem hypocritical and foolish. How he behaved would affect God's reputation among the people who knew Ya'acov. Acting in a way that reflects positively on God may have motivated our patriarch to live up to his ideals, and to walk in God's ways even during times of sorrow, want, and fear.

*Lulei*. Were it not for. What is your motivation? What is your strength? What is it that keeps you going?

Focus: What keeps us going