

The Extended Commentary of the Baal HaTurim (R. Yaakov ben HaRosh) to Genesis  
28:20-22

אם יהיה אל-הים עמדי –  
שישמור לי הבטחתו שהבטחתני, שלא יגרום החטא, שהצדיקים אינם מאמינים בעצמם.  
וי"מ:  
משום שלא היה אלא חלום, אמר: אם יהיה החלום אמת ויתקיים בי החלום.  
וי"מ:  
לשון שבועה: 'כן יהיה השם עמדי ושמרני בדרך, כן כאשר אשוב בשלום לבית אבי שיהיה השם לי לאל-הים.  
והרמב"ן פירש:  
שיש מלת 'אם' שאינה תנאי, כמו "אם יהיה היובל לבני ישראל", שפירושו 'כשיהיה היובל', וכמו "אשר אם  
עשיתי",  
שבדבר העתיד נופל בו לשון 'אם', פירושו 'כשיבא הזמן שיהיה התנאי קיים אז יתקיים המעשה'.

*Im* G-d will be with me –

that He will observe with respect to me His promise that He promised me, that sin will not be the cause (of His not fulfilling that pledge). (Yaakov said this) because the righteous do not have faith in themselves.

And some interpret:

Because (Yaakov's experience of G-d's promise) was only a dream, he said: If the dream will be true, and the dream will be fulfilled with regard to me, (then etc.)

And some interpret:

this is the language of oaths: Truly will Hashem be with me and guard me on the way, and as truly, when I return in peace to my father's house, Hashem will be for me G-d.

And Ramban interpreted:

That there are uses of *im* that do not imply conditions, as "if the Jubilee year happens for the Children of Israel", meaning "when there will be the Jubilee year", and as "until when I have done",

For the word *im* can apply to something that will be in the future, in which case its interpretation is "when the time comes that the condition is fulfilled, then the action will be fulfilled as well".

The Extended Commentary of the Tur to Chumash was introduced to me by Dr. Moshe Bernstein years ago as the best way to be *maavir sedra* (review the weekly Torah portion), as he gives you concise summaries of traditional interpretations, and in particular of Ramban. The numerological teasers he put at the outset of each parshah have been more popular, under the name Baal HaTurim, than the commentary itself, and I'm happy to help it become better known, and along the way briefly explore how much creativity may be involved in apparent summarizing.

On the assumption that Yaakov is in fact making a deal here with Hashem, Nechamah Leibowitz z"l has a fine treatment of the question of where Yaakov's conditions end and his commitments begin. Interpretations 2-4 above of course seek to avoid having Yaakov make any "deal" with G-d by either understanding "im" as something other than "if", or else having Yaakov doubting his own perception rather than G-d's Word. What I'll focus on this week, however, is the small phrase with which Tur ends his first interpretation: "for the righteous do not have faith in themselves".

The acknowledgement that Yaakov is saying "if" here about the immediately preceding Divine promise is from Rashi, and Ramban adds that Yaakov was concerned lest he sin and void the promise. Tur presumably borrows the phrase "for the righteous do not have faith in themselves) from Ramban to Genesis 15:2, who explains Avraham's disbelief in G-d's promise of Yitzchak this way, and then cites Yaakov's fear when confronting Esav (Genesis 32:8) after the vision of the Promise as similarly motivated (Talmud Berakhot 4a said that Yaakov was afraid lest he sin). It is worth noting, however, that Ramban specifically says that the righteous worry that they will sin accidentally, not deliberately. I suggest that according to Ramban they worry about their judgment, not about their spiritual stability.

However, Ramban's likely source, Mishnah Avot's statement "do not believe in yourself until the day of your death", is connected to narratives in the Talmuds and midrashim that suggest otherwise.

Berakhot 29a presents it with regard to the great Yochanan the High Priest, who became a Sadducee after 80 years of distinguished service, and other sources make it clear that this was a triumph of his evil inclination.

Tanchuma Miktetz cites the story of a man who denied this statement and thus contradicted his teachers. His punishment was that a demoness appeared and successfully tempted him on Yom Kippur despite claiming to be married and niddah. (After he suffers from the memory for many years, she reappears to him to tell him that she had not after all been human.) This is a genre story (compare Talmud Shabbat 12b regarding the prohibition of reading by candlelight on Shabbat lest one tilt the candle, and the story of Beruriah as brought by Rashi) about the importance of accepting rabbinic statements about human nature, (although as with the Beruriah story, it seems to emphasize the importance of accepting the statement as true rather than the truth of the statement; perhaps the man was justified in believing that his righteousness was reliable under ordinary, fair circumstances), but for our purposes all that matters is that once again the issue is deliberate rather than accidental sin.

Reconstructing Tur's interpretation: The Talmud claims that Yaakov's fear when approaching Esav, despite G-d's promise, was lest he sin and void the promise. Ramban understands Rashi here as using that to justify Yaakov saying "if" about a Divine promise, and Tur connects this to Ramban's comment to 15:2. What emerges is that

Yaakov's "if...then" statement reflects nothing about him that is not generic to the righteous. It is important to note that Rashi makes no effort to say this, and even Ramban's explanation of Rashi here leaves open the possibility that Yaakov's spiritual insecurity was unusual – it is Tur who connects the dots in a way that makes this unavoidably generic. Tur also leaves out Ramban's interesting limitation of the insecurity to accidental sin.

I suggest as an alternative that we pay attention to the differences between the Divine promise in 28:15 and the condition Yaakov sets in 28:20-21. Specifically, G-d promises "I will guard you wherever you go and return you to this land", whereas Yaakov says "If G-d will be with me and guard me on the path I am going *and give me bread to eat and clothing to wear*, and I return *in peace to my father's house*".

It seems to me that Yaakov is not merely saying "if" about the promise; rather, he is setting as a condition that the promise be fulfilled in very particular ways; he is trying to disambiguate the promise. Predictably, the attempt fails in its purpose – G-d accepts Yaakov's deal and provides Yaakov with bread and clothing, but not without making him work very hard in a trying environment, and returns him in peace to his father's house, but only after making him confront Esav in potential battle (after wresting the angel), and only in time to bury his father.

In this reading, we get a very individual portrait of Yaakov as someone who tries and fails to control the terms of his relationship with the Divine. The unique greatness of Yaakov may then be his ability to maintain his relationship with G-d despite that failure, whereas Avraham and Yitzchak had never considered trying.

Shabbat Shalom

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