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DREAMING OF PUNS, SHEEPISHLY

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*"She . . . sheep!" the boy stuttered loudly.
"No need to shout", his mom replied. "I can bear ewe perfectly".*

Genesis 29:10-11 contains the best pun in the Torah.

וישק את צאן לבן אחי אמו וישק יעקב לרחל

Yaakov waters (שק=VaYiSHaK) the flock of Lavan his mother's brother, and then he kisses (וישק=VaYaSHK) Rachel, whose name means "ewe". Or for comic effect – was it the other way around? Now you might think a young man in love would easily distinguish a she from a sheep, but Yaakov seems to confuse them from the very beginning. Their relationship began, after all, when Yaakov saw

*Rachel daughter of Lavan his mother's brother,
and the sheep of Lavan his mother's brother.*

Nor is Yaakov really to blame for the confusion. His interlocutors had told him

Behold! Rachel his daughter, coming with the sheep!

and the narrator chimed in

Rachel, come with the sheep

What is the purpose of this constant blurring?

To answer this question, we need to back up a few verses, to where Yaakov notices flocks of sheep before Rachel makes her appearance,

*Yaakov lifted his legs. He went toward the land of the People of
the East*

He saw

Behold! A well in the field

*Behold! Three flocks of sheep there, pasturing near it
because from that well the flocks would drink
the rock was large on the mouth of the well.*

All the flocks would gather there

They would roll the rock off the mouth of the well

They would water the sheep

*They would return the rock onto the mouth of the well
to its place*

In Bereshit Rabbah, R. Chama bar Chanina offers six different symbolic understandings of this scene. The three flocks of sheep represent the three forefathers, the three classes of Jews (priests, Levites, and Israelites), the three festivals, Moses Aaron and Miriam, the three rabbinic courts on the Temple Mount, the three judges of a standard rabbinic court, and/or the Persian, Medean, and Hellenistic empires. The stone represents the Torah, the Evil Inclination, and many things beyond and between. And so on and so forth.

What motivates this interpretational efflorescence? I suggest that R. Chama bar Chanina noticed first of all the use of **וישא** (=he lifted) and **והנה** (=behold), which are often markers of prophetic visions. Next he noticed the presence of an **אבן** (=stone), which recalls the **אבן** in the immediately preceding episode, which Yaakov first placed under his head and then erected as a monolith. By this point R. Chama was convinced that our scene is a continuation of that vision rather than a narration of subsequent events.

With that understanding, we can take a fresh look at the opening of Yaakov's dialogue with the shepherds.

Yaakov said to them: My brothers, wherefrom are you?

This may be intended as a friendly greeting, but it comes across as aggressive, and a little off kilter – the stranger in town is asking the locals where they come from, as if he were the host and they the transients. Indeed, Yaakov is soon ordering them about:

He said:

Hold – the day is still large;

it is not time for the gathering of the herd.

Water the sheep and go graze!

This all seems socially implausible.

Let us now pay attention to the implicit irony. Yaakov is fleeing from his brother's murderous hatred – and he greets strangers as brothers! His best hope seems to be Lavan – because Lavan is his mother's brother! Lavan greets him effusively and hospitably, describing him as **ובשרי עצמי** = *my bone and my flesh*. This is *spousal* language taken from Adam's reaction to his first sight of Eve, **עצם מעצמי ובשר מבשרי** = *bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh*. The first rough spot in the relationship, however, comes when he addresses Yaakov as **אחי עתה** = *you are my brother*. So perhaps Yaakov should not be so eager to see all men as his brothers.

But if this too is part of a dream, we can understand why Yaakov would be looking for the loving fraternal relationship he never had, and even more than that, for a relationship more reliable than brotherhood.

The problem with this reading is that Yaakov really does spend many years in Lavan's house, and he really does end up married to Rachel – so where does the dream end and reality begin?

Two possible approaches emerge from a dispute between Rambam and Ramban. Rambam holds that angels only appear in dreams – therefore, for example, the destruction of Sodom *as told* in Torah is a dream. Nachmanides objects vociferously on ideological grounds – “These words are forbidden to hear, all the more so to believe” – but also has powerful arguments: Yaakov genuinely limps the morning after wrestling with the angel, and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is physically evident to anyone who visits the environs where they once flourished.

We can respond for Maimonides in two ways:

- a. The Torah's report of the destruction of Sodom is Avraham's dream, but that dream was a religious personality's experience of a physical event. The Torah is comfortable leaving us to infer that the physical event happened.
- b. Dreams can have consequences in the real world, psychosomatically or otherwise.

Each response works reasonably well in our context.

But I prefer a third approach. Nachmanides reinterpreted the Rabbinic phrase **מעשה אבות סימן לבנים** = *the deeds of the ancestors foreshadow those of the descendants* to mean that the Forefathers lived fully symbolic lives – **everything** they did would be reenacted in history by Bnei Yisroel. The question is how often they were conscious of this dimension of their lives.

My suggestion is that in the aftermath of his overpowering ladder vision, Yaakov remained conscious of that dimension. But – in this case what he saw was not (only) his descendant's future, but his own.

Most commentators assume that Yaakov's single-handed removal of the stone is a superhuman feat. It seems clear that this stone was placed on the well precisely because it could not be removed by any one man, probably because water was scarce, and that Yaakov's action breached a reasonable community protocol. Is it possible that the three flocks represent Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah, and Yaakov's removal of the rock for the fourth flock, Rachel's, symbolizes his favoritism for Rachel? Perhaps Yaakov realizes immediately that his love for Rachel is potentially tragic, for it distorts his sense of the morally and politically appropriate, and we can understand why he cries immediately after kissing her.

Nechama Leibowitz z"l used to enjoy saying that yeshiva students often knew twenty explanations as to why Yaakov was permitted to kiss Rachel when not married to her, but did not know the verse in the Torah which says "don't lie". I suggest that all twenty are incorrect; Yaakov was not permitted to kiss Rachel, but did anyway, and this symbolized the extent to which love was a problematic motive for action in his life. Deborah Klapper has noted that one should perhaps see much of Yaakov's life as an attempt to learn lessons from his parents' mishandling of the blessing and birthright, just as Yitzchak's relationship to his children responded to the exile of Yishmael and the Akkeidah. But children rarely learn the right lessons from their parents' mistakes. (*Originally published 2014.*)

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