

Parashah and Politics: How Torah Changed the World

Parashat Vayetzei, Genesis, Chapters 28-30

By Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

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The Sacred Stones of Israel, Yesteryear and Today

In one of the many resonant recent photos from Israel, we see a member of the IDF holding his newborn son. To the photo the soldier appended the following reflection:

Welcome, my little boy.

The world is a bit dark and scary, with monsters in every corner. But I promise you: Daddy will fix this. Daddy will kill all those who try to harm you and your brothers. Daddy will see to it that this will never happen again. And you? You will grow and flourish, you will fix that in which we we [mistakenly] messed up. We will meet again after the war, my little boy, along with Mommy and your brothers. *Abba ohev umitga'agei'a*, Dad loves and misses you.

This very same soldier would return from the front earlier than anticipated, and would soon give us another image in which he holds his son once more. And this photo, in a sublimely symbolic way, embodies the strength of Israel, and, in a certain sense, Jewish history itself.

This week's *parashah* of *Vayetzei* begins as Jacob flees his home and the wrath of Esau, and prepares to spend the night on the road. A seemingly prosaic detail is provided:

And he took from the stones of the place, and put them around his head. (Genesis 28:11)

This apparently unimportant element is actually essential. As my father pointed out to me, the theme of stones is be found throughout this reading, throughout the story of Jacob, reflecting a name by which he is known, an appellation that is biblical in origin: he is called at the end of Genesis even Yisrael, the "foundation stone of Israel." The stones thus remind us that it is in this week's reading that the very foundation of the house of Israel will be laid, Jacob's children will be born, and the stage set for the emergence of Israel as a nation.



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As he sleeps on his bed of stones Jacob beholds a very famous vision:

And he dreamt, and behold a ladder set on the ground, its top reaching the Heavens; and behold, angels of God were ascending and descending upon it. (Genesis 28:12)

What is the meaning of this dream? Many explanations have been offered, including that the angels symbolize the various kingdom that will rise and fall as Israel endures. But perhaps the angelic beings embody the dream itself. The prospects for a dream's successful fulfilment rise and fall. When Rembrandt created an image of this scene on behalf of his neighbor Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel, the artist—at the rabbi's behest—placed Jacob not at the foot of the ladder but at its very center:



Every great dreamer places the dream at the center of his or her life. All is oriented around it; yet no great dream succeeds immediately. There are advancements, but at times also terrible setbacks. The dream's prospects rise and fall, like the angels. Jacob, the dreamer in our reading, has dreams of becoming patriarch of a people, father of a nation. But few figures in Tanakh had challenges like his: years of exile, fleeing from his brother, suffering the apparent loss of his child, and ultimately finding himself in exile again in Egypt, only for his body to be returned to the Holy Land after his death. A visionary faces



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challenges before a vision comes into being. This point was made by Winston Churchill, in the only biblically themed essay he ever wrote:

Every prophet has to come from civilization, but every prophet has to go into the wilderness. He must have a strong impression of a complex society and all that it has to give, and then he must serve periods of isolation and meditation. This is the process by which psychic dynamite is made.

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Churchill composed this at a time when, as Gertrude Himmelfarb noted, he was himself in the political wilderness, when his prospects of achieving leadership were dim, and it seemed impossible that his own dreams would be fulfilled. For he did indeed have dreams. As the historian Andrew Roberts reports, when Churchill was sixteen and discussing his future with a friend, he said:

“I have an idea of where I will be. I have dreams about it.”

“Where is that?”

“Well, I can see vast changes coming over a now peaceful world; great upheavals, terrible struggles, wars such as one cannot imagine; and I tell you London will be in danger—London will be attacked and I shall be very prominent in the defense of London.”

“How can you talk like that? We are forever safe from invasion, since the days of Napoleon.”

“I see further ahead than you do. I see into the future. This country will be subjected somehow to a tremendous invasion, by what means I do not know, but I tell you I shall be in command of the defenses of London and I shall save London and England from disaster; . . . dreams of the future are blurred but the main objective is clear. I repeat—London will be in danger and in the high position I shall occupy, it will fall to me to save the Capital, to save the Empire.”

Churchill, then, had a remarkable dream of his own. But for much of his career, the notion that he would ever save Britain, that he would ever lead Britain, seemed nonsensical. And Churchill believed as well in the great dream of Theodor Herzl, the man who famously reflected that “If you will it, it is no dream.” As early as 1908 Churchill wrote:

I am in full sympathy with the historical aspirations of the Jews. . . . Jerusalem must be the ultimate goal. When it will be achieved it is vain to prophesy but that it will someday be achieved is one of the few certainties for the future.



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Churchill understood the essence of the Jewish dream, but he also understood, as Jacob's dream and life story indicate, that there would be challenges before its achievement. It is this truth that will be the theme of Jacob's life.

Awaking from his dream, Jacob marks the sanctity of the site in a notable way:

And Jacob took the stone that he had placed under his head, and set it up as a pillar and poured oil upon it. (Genesis 28:18)

This stone, Jacob announces, was to be foundation stone of a house of God. But it surely also represents the man himself, the foundation stone of Israel, the patriarch of the twelve tribes. The Hebrew word for stones, *avanim*, is linked to both the words for sons and daughters, *banim* and *banot*, as well as to the Hebrew infinitive of "to build," *livnot*. Children are the sacred stones in the House of God that is the people Israel, the people that Jacob brings into being. We must bear this in mind as we make our way through the *parashah*, where we will meet Jacob's children and better understand why, in the Jewish worldview, children are so cherished.

Arriving at his mother's hometown, Jacob comes to the local well, and again the theme of stones enters the scene:

... and there was a large stone on the mouth of the well. And all the shepherds would gather and roll the stone from the mouth of the well, and give water to the sheep, and then the stone would be replaced on the mouth of the well. (Genesis 29:2-3)

Jacob asks why the stone has not yet been removed, and the shepherds plead weakness:

We cannot, until all the flocks are rounded up, then the stone is rolled off the mouth of the well. (Genesis 29:8)

Suddenly, Jacob's eyes alight on the arriving Rachel, his cousin, who will be the great love of his life, and he is seized with alacrity:

And it was that Jacob saw Rachel, daughter of his uncle Laban, as well as the sheep of Laban his uncle, that Jacob went near and rolled the stone off the mouth of the well ... (Genesis 29:10)

The sudden strength of this heretofore mild-mannered man, the way in which he seizes the stone, reflect, no doubt, the hope and belief that it would be this woman, Rachel, that would join him as the foundation stone of his family.

But of course, as the dream itself hinted, no dream is fulfilled smoothly; it has its ups and downs. After working for his conniving father-in-law Laban for seven years, Jacob is tricked into marrying Rachel's elder sister Leah, and is given Rachel as a wife a week later. Thus is set up the truly painful dynamic of two sisters, two wives, one of whom is loved but desperately desires children, and the other of whom is blessed with children but longs for her husband's affection.



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It is through the lovelorn Leah that the House of Israel begins to come into being. Yet as we read of her children, and the names bestowed upon them, we realize that Leah's mind is entirely on her spouse, not her offspring. The first child is named Reuben, whose meaning is literally a plaintive plea to Jacob: *re'u, ben*, "see, I have given you a son!" The name of the next son, Shimon, reflects the fact that God has heard the pain of an ignored wife, and the name of the third, Levi, expresses the hope that *yilaveh ishi*, "my husband will escort me." It is only with the fourth child that the name strikes a different theme, one appropriate for this week: thanksgiving.

And she conceived again and bore a son, and declared, "This time I will give thanks to God." And she named him Judah. (Genesis 29:35)

Leah, as Leon Kass notes, finally expresses gratitude for the gift that a child embodies, naming him Yehuda, Judah, literally, "thank God." It can thus be said that the very term "Judaism" begins with the recognition of children as a profound gift; and it is worth nothing that for Jewish law, circumcision in the evening is invalid. Only during the day, only after the appearance of the dawn's early light on the horizon, is a circumcision acceptable.

The point is deeply significant. Despite so many dark periods in our history, Jews see in the life of a Jewish child the dawn of a new day. Through centuries of suffering, even in the worst of times, when there was very little laughter, our ancestors saw in a new link between past and posterity the ultimate ray of hope on the horizon, and drew therefrom the courage to continue the covenant.

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Meanwhile, the much-loved Rachel is desperate for children herself, and her pleas are finally answered by the Almighty:

And she named his name Joseph, saying, may God add another son for me. (Genesis 30:24)

Yosef, Joseph, literally means "may He increase." This is why the Puritan leader and father of Cotton Mather was named Increase Mather, reflecting the Hebraism of the American age.

It is Judah and Joseph that will emerge as the two most important tribes, the two most significant stones, in the polity of biblical Israel. And we may suggest that the two names highlight themes in Jewish life reflected in Israeli society today. Judah's name embodies gratitude for every child, and this is a theme I summarize in my review of the book *The Genius of Israel* by Saul Singer and Dan Senor.

The authors emphasize the way in which Israeli society cherishes children. This, in turn, impacts the culture of the workplace, as employers are incredibly understanding of the parental responsibility of



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their employees. Offices in Israel, the authors show, are marked by a policy of “tolerating toddlers”; they take note of the hilarious moment in which comedian Conan O’Brien, visiting the site where Waze was developed, sees a child playing on the floor, and accuses the tech innovators of engaging in child labor. Whereas the usual conception of a “work-life balance” assumes that these two realms “are in perpetual conflict,” in Israel the relationship between work and life is more of marriage, one merging with the other. This, in turn, allows Israelis to see each other as one larger family; it is often noted that only on flights to Tel Aviv would a passenger hand a baby to a complete stranger before going to the bathroom, and only on such a flight would the child be joyfully received.

This is the theme of “Judah,” of thanksgiving to God for every child. But there is also, in Israel, an interest in Yosef, in increase, in constant hope for more blessings. Thus Singer and Senor write:

In perhaps the greatest sign of confidence in the future, Israelis have by far more children than any other wealthy democracy. It is an iron law of demography that as countries become more economically productive, they become less reproductive. There are no exceptions. Every other wealthy democracy is well below the replacement fertility rate of 2.1—the [OECD](#) [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development] average is [1.6 children](#) per woman.

But Israel has been at about 3.0 for the last 25 years. And it is not just because of the ultra-Orthodox. Having three children is about the norm in secular Tel Aviv, and having four is not uncommon. One television report even claimed that “four is the new three.” (Compare this to Japan, the world’s oldest country, where [more adult diapers](#) than baby diapers are sold each year.)

This Israeli cherishing of children, for the authors, is one of the Judaic aspects of Israeli society that allows it to be, according to polling—in the midst of constant battles and to the astonishment of so many outside it—one of the happiest countries on earth.

Thus the births and names of these two tribes of Israel, Judah and Joseph, “gratitude” and “increase,” taken together, remind us of the blessing of children and the Jewish longing for more blessings. Each son and daughter is seen as a sacred stone in the house of Israel. Thus was a culture created that valued above all the bond between generations, sustaining a people as the prospects of its dreams rose and fell, only to rise again.

As the family of Jacob almost fully comes into being, the weekly reading documents in detail the patriarch’s struggles with Laban, father of his wives. At their final parting, returning to the Holy Land, Jacob sets up a geographical boundary between himself and Laban, one whose makeup is noteworthy:

And Jacob took a stone and raised it as a pillar. And Jacob said to his brethren, gather stones; and they gathered stones, and made it into a mound. (Genesis 31:45–46)

It is the stones that will forever mark the boundary between Jacob and his pagan father-in-law, reflecting how it is the Israel that is coming into being that will be marked, apart, by how it cherishes progeny above power and prosperity, and how it utilizes its power and prosperity to preserve its progeny, and the transmission of its way of life.



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This, of course, is the message that this IDF soldier sought to send to his son, reflecting the love of children that marks Israeli resiliency. Soon after, the very same soldier would post a picture that was even more moving than the previous one. He had, apparently, been wounded in the field, and lay in a hospital bed, his injuries utterly apparent in photo. Yet while he must have been in terrible pain, he appears elated, for atop him lies his baby boy. To this image the soldier appended another reflection:

Hello my little boy,
Daddy returned from the war earlier than expected.
His body is broken but his heart is filled with pride and love.
As I promised you, Daddy and his heroic colleagues fought
like lions, and, on your behalf, turned the world into one
slightly more secure. You and Mommy and your brothers
will be my medicine.
Daddy is here, all will now be ok.
Am Yisrael chai.

To see the baby on top of his father is to see one sacred stone atop of another, part of a people founded by the foundation stone of Jacob, who fled his home so many millennia ago, a patriarch that founded a family that cherished children, and created a people that would endure forever.



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May the merit of our study together bring a swift victory to the Jewish people.



Additional Resources

Meir Soloveichik's Review of The Genius of Israel, "One Family, One Nation," Washington Free Beacon, October 31, 2023. [Click here to read.](#)

Dan Senor and Saul Singer on the Sources of Israeli Resilience, "Israel's Blueprint for a Revival of the West," *The Free Press*, November 7, 2023 [Click here to read.](#)

