Simchat Torah Challenge

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Vayetzei

Set in Stone

At the beginning of Parshat Vayetzei, Jacob, having fled home to escape his brother's anger, stops for the night.

בראשית כח:י–יח	**Genesis 28:10–18**
(י) וַיֵּצֵא יַעֲקֹב מִבְּאֵר שָׁבַע וַיֵּלֶךְ חָרָנָה: (יא) וַיִּפְגַּע בַּמָּקוֹם וַיָּלֶן שָׁם כִּי־בָא הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ וַיִּקַּח מֵאַבְנֵי הַמָּקוֹם וַיָּשֶׂם מְרַאֲשֹׁתָיו וַיִּשְׁכַּב בַּמָּקוֹם הַהוּא: (יב) וַיַּחֲלֹם וְהִנֵּה סֻלָּם מֻצָּב אַרְצָה וְרֹאשׁוֹ מַגִּיעַ הַשָּׁמָיְמָה וְהִנֵּה מַלְאֲכֵי אֱלֹהִים עֹלִים וְיֹרְדִים בּוֹ: (יג) וְהִנֵּה יְהוָה נִצָּב עָלָיו וַיֹּאמַר אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם אָבִיךָ וֵאלֹהֵי יִצְחָק הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה שֹׁכֵב עָלֶיהָ לְךָ אֶתְּנֶנָּה וּלְזַרְעֶךָ: (יד) וְהָיָה זַרְעֲךָ כַּעֲפַר הָאָרֶץ וּפָרַצְתָּ יָמָּה וָקֵדְמָה וְצָפֹנָה וָנֶגְבָּה וְנִבְרְכוּ בְךָ כֹּל מִשְׁפְּחֹת הָאֲדָמָה וּבְזַרְעֶךָ: (טו) וְהִנֵּה אָנֹכִי עִמָּךְ וּשְׁמַרְתִּיךָ בְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר־תֵּלֵךְ וַהֲשִׁבֹתִיךָ אֶל־הָאֲדָמָה הַזֹּאת כִּי לֹא אֶעֱזָבְךָ עַד אֲשֶׁר אִם־עָשִׂיתִי אֶת אֲשֶׁר־דִּבַּרְתִּי לָךְ: (טז) וַיִּיקַץ יַעֲקֹב מִשְּׁנָתוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר אָכֵן יֵשׁ יְהוָה בַּמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה וְאָנֹכִי לֹא יָדָעְתִּי: (יז) וַיִּירָא וַיֹּאמֶר מַה־נּוֹרָא הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה אֵין זֶה כִּי אִם־בֵּית אֱלֹהִים וְזֶה שַׁעַר הַשָּׁמָיִם: (יח) וַיַּשְׁכֵּם יַעֲקֹב בַּבֹּקֶר וַיִּקַּח אֶת־הָאֶבֶן אֲשֶׁר־שָׂם מְרַאֲשֹׁתָיו וַיָּשֶׂם אֹתָהּ מַצֵּבָה וַיִּצֹק שֶׁמֶן עַל־רֹאשָׁהּ:	Jacob left Beer-sheba, and set out for Haran. He came upon a certain place and stopped there for the night, for the sun had set. He took of the stones of that place, and put them under his head, and lay down in that place to sleep. He dreamed, and behold a ladder was set up on the earth and the top of it reached toward heaven; and behold angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And behold the Lord stood over him, and said, I am the Lord, God of Abraham, your father, and God of Isaac. The land upon which you are lying, I will give to you and to your descendants. Your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth. You shall spread to the west, to the east, to the north and to the south. Through you shall be blessed all the families of the earth, and through your descendants. Behold, I am with you, and I will guard you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not forsake you until I have done that which I have spoken for you. Jacob awoke from his sleep, and said, "In truth, the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it." He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of Elohim, and this is the gate of heaven." Jacob rose early in the morning and took the stone that he had placed at his head; and he set it as a monument, and poured oil on its top.

- **What do you think the symbolism of the ladder might be in Jacob's dream?**

- **After he wakes, Jacob realizes that the place where he spent the night was holy. Have you ever spent time somewhere and only later discovered its deeper significance? Did that discovery change how you understood your experience there?**

In this sheet we will focus on the verses immediately before and after Jacob's dream, particularly an odd contradiction picked up on by many traditional commentators. This passage from the Talmud, the textual record of generations of rabbinic debate compiled between the 3rd and 8th centuries, notes the contradiction and offers a potential explanation:

חולין צא: כְּתִיב "וַיִּקַּח מֵאַבְנֵי הַמָּקוֹם", וּכְתִיב אֶת הָאֶבֶן". אָמַר רַבִּי יִצְחָק: מְלַמֵּד שֶׁנִּתְקַבְּצוּ כָּל אוֹתָן אֲבָנִים לְמָקוֹם אֶחָד, וְכָל אַחַת וְאַחַת אוֹמֶרֶת: "עָלַי יָנִיחַ צַדִּיק זֶה רֹאשׁוֹ". תְּנָא: וְכוּלָּן נִבְלְעוּ בְּאֶחָד.	**Chullin 91b** It is written: "He took of the stones of that place, [and put them under his head, and lay down in that place to sleep. " (Genesis 28:11).] And it is written: [Jacob rose early in the morning] and took the stone [that he had placed at his head; and he set it as a monument, and poured oil on its top." (Genesis 28:18). The first verse indicates that Jacob took several stones, whereas the latter verse indicates that he took only one stone.] Rabbi Yitzḥak says: This teaches that all those stones gathered to one place and each one said: Let this righteous man place his head upon me. And it was taught: And all of them were absorbed into one large rock.

- **Do you think the rocks becoming one resolves their argument, punishes them for bickering, or something else? What leads you to that reading?**
- **What does the rabbinic attentiveness to such small textual details suggest about how they approached the Torah?**

Two more explanations for these contradictory verses can be found in Bereshit Rabbah. Composed around 400 CE, Bereshit Rabbah provides verse-by-verse, and often word-by-word, commentary on the entire book of Genesis.

בראשית רבה סח:יא וַיִּקַּח מֵאַבְנֵי הַמָּקוֹם (בראשית כח:יא)... רַבִּי יְהוּדָה אָמַר שְׁנֵים עָשְׂרֵה אֲבָנִים נָטַל, כְּדֵּי גָּזַר הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא שֶׁהוּא מַעֲמִיד שְׁנֵים עָשָׂר שְׁבָטִים, אָמַר אַבְרָהָם לֹא הֶעֱמִידָן, יִצְחָק לֹא הֶעֱמִידָן, אֲנִי אִם מִתְאַחוֹת הֵן שְׁנֵים עָשָׂר אֲבָנִים זוֹ לָזוֹ יוֹדֵעַ אֲנִי שֶׁאֲנִי מַעֲמִיד שְׁנֵים עָשָׂר שְׁבָטִים, כֵּיוָן שֶׁנִּתְאַחוּ שְׁנֵים עָשָׂר אֲבָנִים זוֹ לָזוֹ,	**Bereishit Rabbah 68:11** "He took of the stones of that place" (Genesis 28:11)... Rabbi Yehuda said: He took twelve stones. So, the Holy One blessed be He decreed that he would produce twelve tribes. He [Jacob] said: "Abraham did not produce them, Isaac did

יָדַע שֶׁהוּא מַעֲמִיד שְׁנֵים עָשָׂר שְׁבָטִים. רַבִּי נְחֶמְיָה אָמַר נָטַל שָׁלֹשׁ אֲבָנִים, אָמַר, אַבְרָהָם יִחֵד הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא שְׁמוֹ עָלָיו, יִצְחָק יִחֵד הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא שְׁמוֹ עָלָיו, וַאֲנִי אִם מִתְאַחוֹת הֵן שָׁלֹשׁ אֲבָנִים זוֹ לָזוֹ, יוֹדֵעַ אֲנִי שֶׁהַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא מְיַחֵד שְׁמוֹ עָלַי, וְכֵיוָן שֶׁנִּתְאַחוּ, יָדַע שֶׁהַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא מְיַחֵד שְׁמוֹ עָלָיו.	not produce them, I, if these twelve stones join with one another, I know that I will produce twelve tribes." When the twelve stones joined together one to another, he knew that he would produce twelve tribes. Rabbi Nechemya said: He took three stones. He said: "Abraham, the Holy One blessed be He designated His name upon him; Isaac, the Holy One blessed be He designated His name upon him; I, if these three stones join with one another, I know that He will designate His name upon me." When the three stones joined with one another, he knew that the Holy One blessed be He would designate His name upon him.

- **In both explanations, Jacob compares himself to Abraham and Isaac. What is different about what he hopes the stones will reveal?**
- **Jacob is presented here as seeking reassurance about his future. If you could have one question about your own future answered, what would it be, and why?**

Jumping forward in time around a thousand years, the medieval French commentator Chizkuni offers a twist on Rabbi Yehuda's explanation.

חזקוני כח:יא וַיִּקַּח מֵאַבְנֵי הַמָּקוֹם. מֵאַבְנֵי הַמִּזְבֵּחַ שֶׁיִּצְחָק אָבִיו נֶעֱקַד עָלָיו, וּפֵרֵשׁ רַשְׁ"י שֶׁכֻּלָּן נַעֲשׂוּ אַחַת, וְנִמְצָא בָּאַגָּדָה רֶמֶז לוֹ בָּהֶן שֶׁתְּהֵא מִטָּתוֹ שְׁלֵמָה	**Chizkuni, Genesis 28:11** **He took of the stones of that place.** According to tradition these stones had been part of the altar on which his father Isaac had been bound on the occasion of the binding of Isaac. According to Rashi, during the night these stones fused so that when he awoke there was only one stone. We have a tradition also that the meaning of this phenomenon was that Yaakov's children as opposed to those of his father and grandfather, would all remain true to their father's religious outlook.

- **Unlike the previous source, Chizkuni does not describe Jacob as asking God for a sign. How does that change the way you understand the significance of what happens?**

- **This source recognizes that transmitting family values to the next generation is not always successful. What do you think makes some values endure while others do not?**

Not all rabbinic commentators read the verses as contradicting one another. Ibn Ezra was a 12th century Spanish rabbi whose commentary on the Torah reflects his knowledge as a Hebrew grammarian and philologist. He writes:

אבן עזרא, בראשית כח:יא **מאבני המקום.** טעמו אחת מאבני המקום	**Ibn Ezra, Genesis 28:11** **Of the stones of that place**. Its meaning is: one of the stones of the place.

- **How does the Ibn Ezra's method of resolving this contradiction differ from those we have seen in the previous sources?**
- **Are you usually more drawn to simple explanations or to explanations that are more complex but feel more meaningful? Does it depend on the situation?**

Further Questions for Discussion

1. After reading through these various explanations for the two contradictory verses, is there one in particular that resonates with you? What do you like about it?
2. The sources on this sheet used stones to symbolize a variety of concepts. Before you learned these sources, what associations did you have with stones? Has anything you saw here shifted those associations?
3. After learning these sources, what is one idea that will stick with you, and what is one question that you are left with?

Suggestions for Further Study

If you are interested in seeing further sources on Vayetzei, visit the Simchat Torah Challenge Vayetzei page, which includes additional resources for continued learning. You can also find materials on Sefaria's Vayetzei topic page, which houses a wide variety of sources. You may also be interested in looking at Sefaria's topic pages on Jacob, Jacob's Dream, the Twelve Tribes, and the Patriarchs.

Another moment in this week's portion worth exploring further is verse 16, where Jacob says "In truth, the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it." Many commentators respond to this verse, offering explanations on what it means for God to be in a particular place, what exactly it was that Jacob did not know, and more. If you are interested in reading some of these explanations, you can find them here.

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