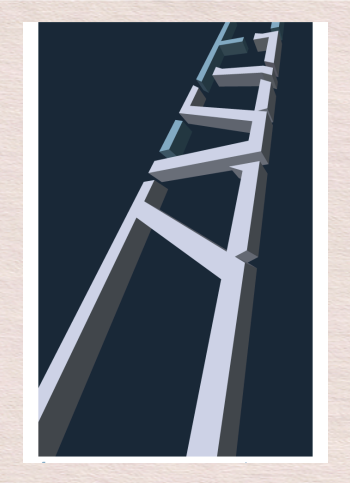
Vayetzei: Bereshit (Genesis)

What's it all about?



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Fleeing his brother Esau, Jacob leaves for Charan, but on the way falls asleep by the side of the road and **dreams of a ladder** connecting heaven and earth with angels climbing up and down. **God appears and promises Jacob he'll inherit the land** upon which he's sleeping, and when he wakes up, Jacob dedicates the stone he'd used as a pillow as an altar to HaShem.

In Charan, Jacobs lives with and works for Laban, his cunning uncle, and falls in love with Laban's younger daughter, Rachel. He agrees to work for Laban for seven years in return for Rachel's hand in marriage, but on his wedding night, Jacob discovers that he was tricked and led to marry Laban's older daughter, Leah, instead. A week later, and after agreeing to work an additional seven years in Laban's service, he marries Rachel as well.

Leah gives birth to six sons and a daughter, but **Rachel remains barren**. Her handmaid, Bilhaha, bears Jacob two more sons, as does Leah's handmaid, Zilpah. **Finally, Rachel's prayers are answered and she gives birth to a baby boy, Joseph.**

After 14 years, Jacob, now prosperous, decides to reject Laban's entreaties and leave Charan. He does so stealthily, knowing that Laban might try to keep him from going, but **God reveals Himself to Laban in a dream and warns him not to harm Jacob**. Laban and Jacob make a pact by erecting a pile of stones, and **Jacob enters the Holy Land** and is greeted by angels.

> "Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, 'God is truly present in this place, yet I was not aware of it.'"

Take a deeper dive

This week's parsha gives us one of the Bible's greatest—and most unsung—heroines, the inimitable matriarch, Leah.

As far as heroines go, Leah's back story isn't exactly a fairytale. She's not the one Jacob wants to marry— her father tricks her groom into saying "I Do." **Her name itself means "she who is tired and weary," and while her sister is described as beautiful, all we know about Leah is that her "eyes were tender,"** which, the great commentator Rashi explains, simply means that she was accustomed to crying a lot.

But this woman of constant sorrow, the parsha proceeds to tell us, is the one that gave birth to most of us, the matriarch responsible for six of the twelve sons who would go on to lead the twelve tribes of Israel. **And as soon as she did, she engaged in that holiest of tasks: naming the children.**

There are great stories behind why each of our ancestors got his name, but the most fascinating of all, maybe, concerns Judah, the one because of whom we're all called, well, Jews. His name—Yehuda, in Hebrew—comes from the verb le'hodot, which means both to give thanks—Leah is grateful to God for the gift of a fourth son—and to confess.

And this, the rabbis explain, is precisely Judah's essence. Here's the great Rav Abraham Isaac Kook with a beautiful explanation of this principle: "The first joyful cheer with which we greet the world every morning when we wake up and find a new world stuffed to the brim with goodness, that joyful cheer elevates the light of our inner mind and drives us to understand the true nature of the world…Grateful, a person gives thanks for the truth, and commits to the depth of true spiritual reckoning, and testifies to all that is true and that exists and that is light, all of which emanates from the fountain of goodness, from divine grace that gives life to all beings and things."

In other words, to be a Jew is to be grateful, not in some silly aw-shucks way but with a sort of gratitude that begins with giving thanks but very soon leads to deeper insights about the true nature of creation and all life on earth. **Gratitude is how we unlock the mysteries of the universe.**

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