

[CS – Late Breaking Dvar Torah:
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Rav Frand

By Rabbi Yissocher Frand
Parshas Vayeitzei

Lavan's Super-fast Travel Was Part of the Divine Plan

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly portion: #1358 – I've Davened Maariv; Other Minyan Still Davening Mincha – Can I Answer Kedusha? Good Shabbos!

Yaakov suspects that he will have trouble if he lets his father-in-law know that he is about to leave. Therefore, Yaakov picks up his entire family and leaves without telling Lavan (Bereshis 31:21). On the third day, Lavan finds out that Yaakov has run away and chases after him, finally catching up with him on Har Hagilad. Rashi comments that although Yaakov was a six day's journey away from Lavan, Lavan caught up with him in a single day. In other words, in one day, Lavan travelled the distance that it took Yaakov and his family a week to travel. Rashi explains that Lavan accomplished this through the concept of "kefitzas haderech" (a Divine shortening of the way).

The Ohr Hachaim asks why Yaakov was not granted this miraculous attribute of "kefitzas haderech" to allow him to allude his pursuing father-in-law? According to Chazal, Eliezer had kefitzas haderech on the way to find a wife for Yitzchak. Likewise, Yaakov had kefitzas haderech on his way to Charan twenty years earlier. Why, now, when Yaakov could have really been helped by kefitzas haderech, was he not granted that mode of Divine transportation? On top of that, why is Lavan the Arami granted kefitzas haderech?

The Ohr Hachaim answers with a fundamental insight into how we understand hashgacha pratis (Divine providence) and how we understand history. Of course, the Ribono shel Olam knew exactly what He was doing, as He always does. The Ribono shel Olam, in fact, wanted Lavan to catch up with Yaakov. He wanted the interaction between Yaakov and Lavan to occur because this meeting laid the groundwork for the eventual salvation of Klal Yisrael.

Lavan catches up with Yaakov and protests to him: "Why did you steal my gods?" (Bereshis 31:30) Yaakov, not knowing that Rochel had taken these 'terafim' assured Lavan that his claim was a false one and to buttress his denial he said that anyone who stole those 'terafim' will die! Because of that, the Medrash says, Rochel died prematurely. The Ohr Hachaim says that the Divine plan was for this meeting and for this dialog between Yaakov and Lavan to occur. Why?

Yaakov's statement during this dialogue caused Rochel to die soon afterwards, causing her to be buried there "on the road to Efrat, which is Beis Lechem." (Bereshis 35:19). Why? All of this happened so that when Klal Yisrael would be going into Galus Bavel (the Babylonian exile), they would pass Rochel's gravesite in Beis Lechem and she would cry for her children and persuade the Ribono shel Olam to bring Klal Yisrael back from galus. (exile). As the moving Medrash at the beginning of Eicha says, all the giants of Jewish history came to the Ribono shel Olam and begged for the welfare of their exiled nation – Avraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov, Moshe – but none of them were answered. Only in Rochel's zechus (merit) – the zechus of saving her sister from embarrassment by sharing with her the secret identification code she arranged with Yaakov — did the Ribono shel Olam grant that the "Children will return to their borders" (Yirmiyahu 31:16). In the zechus of that self-sacrifice, the mercy of the Ribono shel Olam was aroused and He promised to eventually redeem his children from galus.

Rochel's burial at the very spot where Klal Yisrael was destined to pass on their way to Galus Bavel happened through Yaakov unwittingly cursing her when Lavan charged him with having stolen his gods. And the entire dialogue only happened because Lavan was granted kefitzas haderech to catch up with Yaakov, who did not have kefitzas haderech at that time. Therefore, something that at the time appeared as a tragedy

and an inexplicable application of Divine Logic, turned out to be an essential component of the future salvation of the Jewish nation.

There is an incredible teaching of the Rokeach (Elazar ben Shmuel Rokeach (1685-1742); Chief Rabbi of Amsterdam) in a sefer called Galyei Razah: Yaakov Avinu was supposed to live to be 180 years old, just like his father Yitzchak, however he only lived to age 147. Thirty-three years were somehow chopped off of Yaakov's intended lifespan.

The Rokeach says that Yaakov lost those 33 years because when he and Lavan made this "peace treaty," erecting a pile of stones, the two protagonists named the pile of stones differently. Yaakov called it "gal" and Lavan called it "yegar sahadusa" (Bereshis 31:47). Then when the next pasuk starts with "vihamitzpa," the Rokeach uniquely interprets that as Yaakov also naming it "mitzpa," which according to the Rokeach, is an Aramaic word. (Other meforshim disagree with both points.) The Rokeach says that this is the only Aramaic expression in all of Chumash. According to the Rokeach, there was some form of Divine irritation with Yaakov Avinu for causing Aramaic to sully the pure lashon hakodesh (holy tongue, i.e. – Hebrew) that appears throughout the Torah. The gematria of the proper Hebrew name "gal" that Yaakov originally used is 33. Therefore, Yaakov lost 33 years of his life, because of this incident with Lavan.

Consider what happened: Rochel died because of this incident with Lavan. Yaakov himself lost 33 years of his life because of this incident with Lavan. What a tragedy! The righteous suffer! The Ohr Hachaim Hakadosh is explaining that this is the way the Ribono shel Olam set the stage for Rochel to cry for her children and guarantee their return from galus.

That which at the time appeared to be a terrible tragedy, was the Ribono shel Olam manipulating the strings of history. This is the story of history. So many times, incidents occur throughout history that seem to be incredible tragedies. This does not only happen in history but also in individual people's lives.

I once heard from Rav Simcha Zissel Brodie, the Chevron Rosh HaYeshiva, who heard from Rav Mordechai Epstein that it is well known that the day of the Spanish Exile (when the Jews had to leave Spain in 1492) was the very day Columbus set sail for the "New World." At that time, Spain was at the height of their power. Imagine how the Jews felt that day:

Ferdinand and Izabella were the worst of the worst. They gave Spanish Jewry the choice of converting to Christianity or banishment from the country. As we know, as a result of the fact that Columbus set sail for America and opened up a "New World," eventually the United States of America emerged, which has been the refuge of Jews from throughout the world since the end of the 19th century. There are many in our audience for whom were there not America, their parents would have had no place to go. We are here because there was an America.

At the time, it seemed so unjust and so wrong and yet, it was also the Ribono shel Olam manipulating historical events to prepare for something that would happen three or four hundred years later. That is the story of Yaakov and Lavan. That is why Lavan had kefitzas haderech and Yaakov did not have kefitzas haderech. The Ribono shel Olam wanted this encounter to happen. As a result, Rochel died early. As a result, she had to be buried by Beis Lechem, and as a result when Klal Yisrael were marching into galus, Rochel cried for her children, and as a result, her children returned to their borders.

The ways of Hashem are far beyond our comprehension. "For My thoughts are not your thoughts and your ways are not My ways." (Yeshaya 55:8). At the end of all days – "Hashem will be the King over all the land; on that day Hashem will be One and His Name will be One." (Zecharia 14:9) Then we will all understand it. Until then, we must just have faith that Hakadosh Baruch Hu is always acting in our best interests and in the best interests of Klal Yisrael.

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Vayetzei

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The main character in this week's parsha, aside from our father Yaakov, is Lavan of Aram, who becomes the father-in-law of Yaakov and the grandfather of the twelve tribes of Israel. Lavan is portrayed as a devious, scheming and duplicitous person. He is narcissistic in the extreme, only interested in his own selfish wants, even sacrificing his daughters to fulfill his scheming goals.

In the famous statement of the rabbis, the Hagada of Pesach teaches us that Lavan was a greater and even more dangerous enemy of Jewish survival than was the Pharaoh that enslaved Israel in Egyptian bondage! Lavan is portrayed as wishing to uproot all Jewish existence for all time. Pharaoh threatened Jewish physical existence by drowning the Jewish male infants in the Nile. But even then the Jewish people could have survived and limped along through the female line of Israel (which is often even a stronger bond than the male line.) However Lavan intended to destroy Yaakov and his descendants spiritually. He tells Yaakov that the "sons of Yaakov are my sons and the daughters of Yaakov are my daughters and all that Yaakov possesses, physically and spiritually all belong to me." In Lavan's eyes the Jewish people and their faith and vision and goals are to be non-existent. Only Lavan is entitled to life and success. Everyone else, especially a conscience laden family such as that of Yaakov, is only entitled to become part of Lavan's world or they are to be eliminated.

The selfishness of Lavan knows no bounds. The rule of the rabbis that one is jealous of the success of all others except that one is never jealous of one's own children and students ironically finds its own exception in the case of Lavan, who remains jealous and inimical even of the success of his own children and grandchildren. It is interesting to note that after his role as it appears in this week's parsha, Lavan disappears from the biblical scene. In attempting to destroy Yaakov and the Jewish people, Lavan in essence destroys himself and is not granted any positive mention of eternity in the Torah. Such is always the fate of the attempted destroyers of Israel.

History is littered with the bones of those who came to eradicate Jews and Judaism from the world. Some used the devious tactics of Lavan (such as Napoleon and his sham Sanhedrin which was intended to "modernize" and assimilate the Jews of Europe and the attempt of the Marxists to create a Marxist Jew who no longer would be a Jew or a believer, among other such examples) while others used the more direct methods of Pharaoh to physically enslave, terrorize and eliminate the Jewish people.

All have failed in these nefarious endeavors. Lavan's selfishness is his own undoing. Much of the hatred directed towards the Jewish people and the State of Israel is still based on jealousy and selfishness. It dooms the hater to eventual extinction and disappearance. Thus the lesson of Lavan's eventual fate, of his being erased from the eternal book, is part of the great morality play which is the narrative of this week's parsha.

Shabat shalom.

Rabbi Berel Wein ZT"L

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Encountering God

Vayetse

It is one of the great visions of the Torah. Jacob, alone at night, fleeing from the wrath of Esau, lies down to rest, and sees not a nightmare of fear but an epiphany:

In time he [Yaakov] chanced upon a certain place [vayifga bamakom] and decided to spend the night there, because the sun had set. He took

some stones of the place and put them under his head, and in that place lay down to sleep. And he dreamed: He saw a ladder set upon the ground, whose top reached the heavens. On it, angels of God went up and came down. The Lord stood over him...

Gen. 28:11-13

Then Yaakov awoke from his sleep and said, "Truly, the Lord is in this place - and I did not know it!" He was afraid and said, "How full of awe is this place! This is none other than the House of God, and this the gate of the Heavens!"

Gen. 28:16-17

On the basis of this passage, the Sages said that "Jacob instituted the evening prayer." The inference is based on the word vayifga which can mean not only, "he came to, encountered, happened upon, chanced upon" but also "he prayed, entreated, pleaded" as in Jeremiah, "Do not pray for this people, nor raise up a cry for them, and do not plead with Me... [ve-al tifga bi]" (Jeremiah 7:16).

The Sages also understood the word bamakom, "the place" to mean "God" (the "place" of the universe). Thus Jacob completed the cycle of daily prayers. Abraham instituted shacharit, the morning prayer, Isaac initiated Mincha, the afternoon prayer, and Jacob was first to establish Arvit, also known as Maariv, the prayer of night-time.

This is a striking idea. Though each of the weekday prayers is identical in wording, each bears the character of one of the patriarchs. Abraham represents morning. He is the initiator, the one who introduced a new religious consciousness to the world. With him a day begins.

Isaac represents afternoon. There is nothing new about Isaac - no major transition from darkness to light or light to darkness. Many of the incidents in Isaac's life recapitulate those of his father. Famine forces him, as it did Abraham, to go to the land of the Philistines. He re-digs his father's wells.

Isaac's is the quiet heroism of continuity. He is a link in the chain of the covenant. He joins one generation to the next. He introduces nothing new into the life of faith, but his life has its own nobility. Isaac is steadfastness, loyalty, the determination to continue.

Jacob represents night. He is the man of fear and flight, the man who wrestles with God, with others and with himself. Jacob is one who knows the darkness of this world.

There is, however, a difficulty with the idea that Jacob introduced the evening prayer. In a famous episode in the Talmud, Rabbi Joshua takes the view that, unlike Shacharit or Mincha, the evening prayer is not obligatory (though, as the commentators note, it has become obligatory through the acceptance of generations of Jews). Why, if it was instituted by Jacob, was it not held to carry the same obligation as the prayers of Abraham and Isaac? Tradition offers three answers.

The first is that the view that Arvit is non-obligatory according to those who hold that our daily prayers are based not on the patriarchs but on the sacrifices that were offered in the Temple. There was a morning and afternoon offering but no evening sacrifice. The two views differ precisely on this, that for those who trace prayer to sacrifice, the evening prayer is voluntary, whereas for those who base it on the patriarchs, it is obligatory.

The second is that there is a law that those on a journey (and for three days thereafter) are exempt from prayer. In the days when journeys were hazardous - when travellers were in constant fear of attack by raiders - it was impossible to concentrate. Prayer requires concentration (kavanah). Therefore Jacob was exempt from prayer, and offered up his entreaty not as an obligation but as a voluntary act - and so it remained.

The third is that there is a tradition that, as Jacob was travelling, "the sun set suddenly" - not at its normal time. Jacob had intended to say the afternoon prayer, but found, to his surprise, that night had fallen. Arvit did not become an obligation, since Jacob had not meant to say an evening prayer at all.

There is, however, a more profound explanation. A different linguistic construction is used for each of the three occasions that the Sages saw as the basis of prayer. Abraham "rose early in the morning to the place where he had stood before God" (Gen. 19:27). Isaac "went out to meditate [lasuach] in the field towards evening" (Gen. 24:63). Jacob

“met, encountered, came across, chanced upon” God [vayifga bamakom]. These are different kinds of religious experience.

Abraham initiated the quest for God. He was a creative religious personality – the father of all those who set out on a journey of the spirit to an unknown destination, armed only with the trust that those who seek, find. Abraham sought God before God sought him.

Isaac’s prayer is described as a sichah (literally a conversation or dialogue). There are two parties to a dialogue – one who speaks, and one who listens and, having listened, responds. Isaac represents the religious experience as conversation between the word of God and the word of humankind.

Jacob’s prayer is very different. He does not initiate it. His thoughts are elsewhere – on Esau from whom he is escaping, and on Laban to whom he is travelling. Into this troubled mind comes a vision of God and the angels and a stairway connecting earth and heaven. He has done nothing to prepare for it. It is unexpected. Jacob literally “encounters” God as we can sometimes encounter a familiar face among a crowd of strangers. This is a meeting brought about by God, not man. That is why Jacob’s prayer could not be made the basis of a regular obligation. None of us knows when the presence of God will suddenly intrude into our lives.

There is an element of the religious life that is beyond conscious control. It comes out of nowhere, when we are least expecting it. If Abraham represents our journey towards God, and Isaac our dialogue with God, Jacob signifies God’s encounter with us – unplanned, unscheduled, unexpected; the vision, the voice, the call we can never know in advance but which leaves us transformed. As for Jacob, so for us. It feels as if we are waking from a sleep and realising, as if for the first time, that “God was in this place and I did not know it.” The place has not changed, but we have. Such an experience can never be made the subject of an obligation. It is not something we do. It is something that happens to us. Vayifga bamakom means that, thinking of other things, we find that we have walked into the presence of God.

Such experiences take place - literally or metaphorically - at night. They happen when we are alone, afraid, vulnerable, close to despair. It is then that, when we least expect it, we can find our lives flooded by the radiance of the Divine. Suddenly, with a certainty that is unmistakable, we know that we are not alone, that God is there and has been all along but that we were too preoccupied by our own concerns to notice Him. That is how Jacob found God – not by his own efforts, like Abraham; not through continuous dialogue, like Isaac; but in the midst of fear and isolation. Jacob, in flight, trips and falls – and finds he has fallen into the waiting arms of God. No one who has had this experience, ever forgets it. “Now I know that You were with me all the time, but I was looking elsewhere.”

That was Jacob’s prayer. There are times when we speak and times when we are spoken to. Prayer is not always predictable, a matter of fixed times and daily obligation. It is also an openness, a vulnerability. God can take us by surprise, waking us from our sleep, catching us as we fall.

Rabbi Eliezer Melamed

The Commandment of Writing a Torah Scroll

Revivim

The commandment upon every Jewish male is that he write for himself a Torah scroll * Fulfilling this commandment cannot be done using tithe money * Even one who inherited a Torah scroll from his fathers is commanded to write the Torah himself * Our Sages saw that in order to uphold the Torah among Israel it was necessary to permit writing down the Oral Torah * Today the practice is to fulfill the commandment of writing a Torah scroll in partnership * A woman too may study from the sacred Torah scroll

A Question About the Commandment of Writing a Torah Scroll

A question signed by a married couple: “Thank God, we find ourselves today in a good financial situation that allows us to invest for our future, as well as for our children. We are careful, as much as possible, to give a tithe of our money, and thank God, we see blessing in this. Now we find ourselves facing a dilemma regarding the commandment of writing a

Torah scroll, whose cost is about 200,000 shekels. On the one hand, it is a commandment, and therefore, one may not use tithe money to fulfill a commandment. On the other hand, there are quite a few conditions and opinions in the matter, among them that a person must have enough available money to obligate himself to fulfill the commandment (it seems to me that in this, we meet the condition). The question: Does this commandment obligate today as in the past, when writing a Torah scroll was intended for the sake of Torah study? Does helping children with housing take precedence over this? They are not in a problematic financial situation, but perhaps helping them precedes the commandment of writing a Torah scroll?”

Another question: “In owning a Torah scroll, is there perhaps the appearance of pride, and a status symbol for people able to invest in such a thing? We also thought that perhaps we would purchase a small Torah scroll (a “travel edition”) and keep it at home with the willingness to serve as a free-loan fund for groups traveling on vacation in Israel or abroad. For placing another scroll in a synagogue’s ark does not seem to us like the fulfillment of the commandment itself.”

A: Fortunate are you that you merit discussing questions of a commandment. Indeed, as you wrote, the question is complex, and we will clarify it from its foundations. First, what is the commandment, and does it obligate today? But before all, I will preface, as you wrote, that fulfilling this commandment cannot be done using tithe money.

The Commandment of Writing a Torah Scroll

It is a commandment for every Jewish male to write for himself a Torah scroll, as it is said:

“And now, write for yourselves this song, and teach it to the Children of Israel; put it in their mouth, so that this song shall be for Me a witness against the Children of Israel” (Deuteronomy 31:19).

Many Torah scholars interpret that the “song” we were commanded to write is the ‘Song of Ha’azinu’, stated further on in the Torah. But since it is forbidden to write excerpts of the Torah, in order to write the ‘Song of Ha’azinu’, one must write the entire Torah (Rambam, Laws of Torah Scroll 7:1; Sefer Mitzvot Gadol, Rosh, Meiri, Beit Yosef, and more). And why was the commandment stated in this way? To teach us that the ‘Song of Ha’azinu’ expresses the entire Torah, the covenant God made with Israel, whose meaning is that the word of God is revealed to the world through the people of Israel, such that the history of Israel is the history of the revelation of God’s word in the world.

Indeed, the entire Torah is also called a “song,” because besides the things written in it plainly, there are hidden within it, great and immeasurably deep ideas. Thus, one can also explain that the commandment to write the song refers to the whole Torah, which is called a “song” (see the teachings of Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda, Talmud Torah, p. 294). Even one who inherited a Torah scroll from his fathers is commanded to write the Torah himself (Sanhedrin 21b), because through writing the Torah for himself, he merits to connect personally to the Torah, and through contemplating the Torah scroll that he wrote, he will be further strengthened in fulfilling the commandments written in it.

The Permission to Write the Oral Torah

Nevertheless, we must remember that originally it was permitted to write only the Written Torah, that is, the books of the Tanakh. And God commanded that every Jewish male write for himself the Torah in ink on parchment according to the laws of writing sacred texts, and the learned wrote also the Prophets and Writings, and in these books, they studied all the days of their lives. And writing down the Oral Torah was forbidden, in order that it remain alive in the hearts, and preserved in memory. But after the generations diminished, and the matters of the Oral Torah expanded and multiplied with many opinions, and the nation began to disperse into various exiles, the Sages of Israel saw that in order to maintain the Torah among Israel, it was necessary to permit writing down the Oral Torah. Thus, the Mishnah was written, and after it, the Jerusalem Talmud, the Babylonian Talmud, the Midrashim, commentaries, and halakhic rulings—until most study was conducted in books of the Oral Torah. Since they permitted writing the Oral Torah, they permitted also writing the Tanakh in simple script, not on parchment—initially by hand, and later in print.

The Dispute Among the Early Authorities

Because even the study of the Written Torah is conducted in books that are not a Torah scroll written in ink on parchment, and most study takes place in books of the Oral Torah, the question arose whether there remains a commandment to write a Torah scroll, when in practice, people do not usually study from it.

According to Rambam (Laws of Torah Scroll 7:1), even after study began to take place from other books, the commandment remained in force. That is, the essence of the commandment is to connect to the Torah as it was given at Sinai, and as our Sages said (Menachot 30a), that anyone who writes a Torah scroll “Scripture considers it as if he received it from Mount Sinai.”

According to the Rosh (Laws of Torah Scroll 1), the commandment to write a Torah scroll is so that Jews can study the Torah and fulfill its commandments. When all study was conducted in the sacred Torah scroll, naturally the scroll would wear out within one to three generations. And since the Torah commanded each person who is able to write a Torah scroll, all Jews had the possibility to study Torah. One who could write would merit to study from the scroll he wrote, and others studied from scrolls remaining from previous generations. But from the time writing the Oral Torah was permitted, the commandment is fulfilled by purchasing the books from which Torah is actually studied, and there is no commandment for a person to write a Torah scroll (Derisha YD 274:4; Shach 5).

Practical Halakha According to Both Opinions

In practice, the halakha follows both approaches, as ruled in the Shulchan Aruch (Yoreh De'ah 274:1–2). In section 1, it is ruled that it is a commandment for each person to write a Torah scroll according to its transmission from Sinai, and even one who hires a scribe to write for him fulfills the commandment. And in section 2, it is ruled that it is a commandment for every Jew to purchase for himself the foundational Torah books so he can study from them.

The Custom Today: Fulfilling the Commandment in Partnership

Today the common practice is to fulfill the commandment of writing a Torah scroll in partnership, in such a way that many people take part in funding the writing of the Torah scroll. After its completion, they dedicate it to the synagogue for Torah reading, with the stipulation that the scroll remain theirs, and thus they continue to fulfill the commandment with it, all their lives. Although there is a dispute about whether the commandment can be fulfilled in partnership—some poskim say it cannot be fulfilled in partnership (Beit Yehudah YD 23; Pele Yoetz “Sefer”; Ruach Chaim [Palagi] 274:6; Aruch HaShulchan 11). And some say it can be fulfilled in partnership (see Pitchei Teshuvah 274:1; Da'at Kedoshim 274:1; Shoel U-Meishiv I:266; Nefesh Chaya YD 75; Igrot Moshe YD I:163).

But since some hold that today there is no commandment at all to write a Torah scroll (Rosh, Derisha, Shach), one may rely on the authorities who allow fulfilling the commandment in partnership. And this is preferable, for otherwise the sacred scrolls would multiply, and since most would not be used, there is concern that they may be degraded for lack of a respectful place to keep them. Additionally, since this is a very expensive commandment, one who cannot afford it is not obligated (Rosh, Laws of Torah Scroll §1); and in Igrot Moshe (YD I:163), it is calculated that a person should not spend more than a tenth of his available money on this commandment.

A Wealthy Person Who Wishes to Fund the Writing of a Torah Scroll

Therefore, a wealthy person who can easily fund the writing of a Torah scroll, and knows of a synagogue that lacks a Torah scroll, has grounds to fulfill the commandment according to all opinions and fulfill it without partnership, and fund the writing of a Torah scroll for that synagogue. Likewise, a wealthy person who wants to have a Torah scroll in his home, in order to honor it and to read from it occasionally the weekly portion twice (shnayim mikra), has grounds to beautify the commandment according to all opinions, and hire a scribe to write a Torah scroll for him.

Answer – Guidance

Since you are able to fulfill the commandment without partnership, and you intend to designate for the Torah scroll a respectful place in your home, and to study from it from time to time the weekly portion, and in addition, to lend it for communal needs of Torah reading, you have the commandment to write it. And you need not fear pride. On the contrary, out of humility that everything is by the grace of God, it is fitting for a person to take pride in the commandments he fulfills.

Since you ask as a couple, I will add that although a woman is not obligated to write a Torah scroll, a woman who funds the writing of a Torah scroll fulfills a mitzvah. And since you are a couple, you are considered a single unit, and you both fulfill the commandment together. Regarding the question of what is preferable—helping children with their welfare needs, or writing a Torah scroll—this is your personal decision. For as I explained, the commandment can be fulfilled in partnership, and thus, as with many decisions—such as whether it is better to expand the home, or take a vacation, or donate to a mitzvah cause—this is a personal decision. For after you give a tithe of your money, and sometimes even a fifth, you are not obligated to add more giving.

Is It Preferable for a Person to Study from the Sacred Torah Scroll in His Home?

I will add that although some poskim hold that after printing Chumashim was permitted, it is preferable to study from printed books, and not to treat the sacred Torah scroll lightly by opening it for regular study. Moreover, the Torah scroll has no vowel points, and studying from it is more difficult (Perishah YD 274:8; Shach 5). However, on the other hand, it is implied from all who hold that every person is commanded to write for himself a Torah scroll, that there is a virtue in studying from the sacred Torah scroll. And it seems that from Torah scrolls dedicated to a synagogue, it is not proper for a private individual to study. But one who has a Torah scroll in his home—there is an advantage in studying from the scroll that belongs to him.

A woman too may study from the sacred Torah scroll, for there is no prohibition for women, even during their menstrual period, to touch the Torah scroll or to kiss it (Shulchan Aruch YD 282:9). Indeed, men and women alike, out of respect for the Torah scroll, must be careful not to touch the parchment with bare hands, but to roll it only using the wooden rollers. And if it is necessary to adjust the parchment, one wraps the hand with a cloth for that purpose (Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 147:1).

Parshat Vayetze: May We Bargain with God?

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“If God will be with me...from all that God gives me I shall tithe.” (Genesis 28:20–22)

Let’s make a deal. God, you restore my health and I’ll donate \$100,000 to the new wing of my local hospital. Or, let’s put it another way:

“If God will be with me, and guard me on this road that I am going, and give me bread to eat, and garments to wear, and restore me in peace to the house of my father, then the Lord will be for me as God, and this stone which I have made a monument will be a House of God, and from all that God gives me I shall tithe.” (Gen. 28:20–22)

Is Jacob’s conditional vow, in its standard format of an if clause followed by a then clause, the way to engage with the Almighty? Is it proper to say, If God will do such and such, then He will be my God? Is such an exchange an authentic expression of divine service, or is it an attempt at divine manipulation? And, if making a deal with God is not proper religious conduct, what are we to make of Jacob’s conditional vow?

To help us address these questions, we need to consider a discussion in the Talmud where the Sages address a similar issue:

“If a person says, ‘I will give this sela [monetary gift] to charity so that my son may live,’ he is a complete tzaddik [righteous person].” (Pesachim 8a)

Apparently it would seem that ‘making deals with God’ is meritorious. However, according to Rabbenu Hananel, the proper textual reading

should be not tzaddik but rather tzedek (charity). This rendering would maintain that the individual who gives charity in such a manner can- not be regarded as a tzaddik, as a righteous person. Rather we can only regard the gift itself as tzedek, a gift of righteousness and charity. Rabbenu Hananel wants us to understand that such a conditional vow does not vitiate the gift, but does render the giver less praiseworthy.

Ba'alei HaTosafot also question the accepted reading of 'he is a complete tzaddik' (Pesachim, ad loc). After all, there is a theological principle set forth in Ethics of the Fathers [Chapter 1, Mishna 3] that teaches that a person should not be like a servant who serves his master in order to receive a reward, but rather ought to serve his master with no thought of reward. Hence, the Ba'alei Tosafot (as well as Rashi) explain the Talmudic teaching to refer to an instance in which the individual is not making his charity a conditional gift. After all, the Hebrew doesn't state 'on the condition my son lives,' but rather 'so that my son will live.' The father will give the charity in any case; he is merely expressing the prayer that the merit of the good deed will help towards his son's recuperation. Clearly, even if his son should die, God forbid, he would not take back the charitable contribution. Had he made his gift conditional on his son's recovery, he would not be considered righteous at all!

From the perspective of these commentaries, the Talmudic passage ultimately teaches us that every action brings with it varied and complex motivations and it is unnecessary to delve into all of the motivations of the person performing a good deed. However, as long as the sole motivation is not individual reward, we need not investigate any further.

From the above discussion, a vow to the Almighty that is conditional upon the attainment of an individual reward is meaningless. Certainly a vow which stipulates acceptance of God only if personal well- being is experienced can hardly be considered meritorious. Therefore, how can we justify Jacob's vow?

Rashi clarifies the conditions of the verse, thus mitigating our theological problem considerably:

"If God...will guard me in this path...and He will give me bread to eat and clothes to wear and will return me in peace to the house of my father, and the Lord will be for me as a God, then this stone which I have made a monument will be a House of God, and from all that God gives me I shall tithe." (Gen. 28:20–22)

Rashi explains that 'the Lord will be for me as a God' is part of the if clause, not the then clause. And the list of specifics in Jacob's if clause are not new demands that he is now bringing as a deal before God; it is rather a list of God's own previous promises. After all, God has already declared:

"I am with you, and will watch over you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land, for I will not leave you until I have fully kept this promise to you." (Gen. 28:15)

Jacob is saying that if God does everything He said He would, if God is acting as his God in accordance with the divine promises, then Jacob will return to Bet El, erect a Temple to God and tithe everything he owes to God. If he is prevented in some way from returning to Israel, he will obviously be unable to erect a monument in Bet El; and if he has no physical substance, there will be nothing to tithe. Hence, this is not a deal but a logical result of the situation at hand.

Nahmanides accepts Rashi's premise that Jacob is not striking a bargain with God but is rather expressing the natural results. However, in one important respect he disagrees with Rashi; he does regard the phrase 'the Lord shall be for me as a God' as part of the then clause: 'if You [God] will return me to the land of my fathers, then the Lord shall be for me as a God.' For Nahmanides it is clear that if Jacob were to remain outside Israel, he would ipso facto be exiled from his God. After all, the Talmud declares, 'Whoever lives outside the land of Israel, it is as though he has no God' (Ketubot 110b). For as long as Jacob will be forced to wander in the homeland of Laban, Diaspora to Jacob, he will have no God. Hence his statement, 'If you bring me back to Israel, then You will be for me as a God' is plain and straightforward. Jacob means exactly what he says; if he never returns to Israel, he will have no God!

How are we to understand this startling idea? Since the essence of the Torah is keeping the commandments, the Midrash further amplifies the Talmudic statement cited above by explaining that only in Israel does the performance of the commandments have real value. In fact, the only reason we keep the commandments in the Diaspora is so that they not be forgotten when we eventually return to the true home of the Jewish people and the true place for Torah observance – the land of Israel. According to Nahmanides, this applies to all of the commandments, and not only to the laws that are related to the land and its produce, such as tithes and the Sabbatical year. He argues that even the genuine observance of Shabbat can only take place in Israel (see Rashi on Deut. 11:18).

But isn't God everywhere? Why shouldn't a Jew in New York, Johannesburg, London or Paris be able to keep those commandments which are not dependent on the land of Israel – like the tithes and the Sabbatical year – just as well as a Jew in Efrat?

I believe that Jacob's dream of the ladder rooted on earth, whose top extends heavenwards, contains the key to a proper understanding of Nahmanides' position. Judaism posits a 'this-worldly' religion, that attempts to suffuse every aspect of earthly culture and endeavor with a touch of the divine and a taste of heaven. We are not to escape this world in our quest for the divine, but are enjoined to bring God down into this world. Jerusalem is not a city of God, but a city of humanity, and Jewish law extends far beyond the precincts of the Temple or the synagogue. The angels ascend the ladder in order to ultimately descend, and to bring with them a sanctity which can and must infuse the kitchen and the bedroom, the market-place and the wheat field, the prayer house and the sporting fields. And it is only in Israel that Judaism has the right and the challenge to influence every aspect of society; only Israel is, after all, a Jewish state. I believe this to be Nahmanides' position.

I'd like to suggest another interpretation of Jacob's vow. There are two major names of God in the Torah: Elokim, which reflects God's quality of truth and judgment, and the four-letter name of God (YHWH), which expresses God's attribute of love and compassion.

With this in mind, Jacob's vow to God means that under all circumstances he will serve God as Elokim. But, if the things God promised will come to pass and Jacob will be cared for by God in a personal and compassionate way, then a Lord of compassion will be revealed to him as his God.

Having given this interpretation, we must remember that the young Jacob learnt a great deal by the end of his life. I am reminded of a significant prayer attributed to Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav, when he was only a child: "Dear God, I do not ask You to make my life easy; I do ask You to make me strong."

Jacob experienced very little divine compassion in his life – he is hurt by the lack of a father's love and appreciation; he is forced to flee his homeland to escape a vengeful brother; he works for two decades for a scoundrel uncle; he loses a young beloved wife; and he is separated for twenty-two years from his favorite son, whom he thinks is dead. Although he manages to return to Israel, the end of his life is spent in exile. Nevertheless, an aged Jacob blesses his grandchildren:

"May the angel who has redeemed me from all evil bless these children." (Gen. 48:6)

The God of justice has indeed become his God of compassion and redemption – not because his life was made easy, but because he found the inner strength to confront, and overcome, all obstacles. That fortitude is ultimately the greatest gift we can ask of the Divine, and is the greatest expression of His compassion towards us.

Shabbat Shalom

[CS – Late-breaking dvar torah added:

from: Rabbi YY Jacobson rbbiyy@theyeshiva.net info@theyeshiva.net

date: Nov 27, 2025, 8:51 PM

Gratitude & Thanksgiving During Challenging Times

How Rachel Taught Her Child—and the World—the Secret to Happiness

By: Rabbi YY Jacobson

These are challenging times for our people, and for all good people. For Jews, one of the most powerful resources for millennia has been thanksgiving and gratitude. In our tradition, we express gratitude hundreds of times a day, at every step of the road. Before I eat an apple, after I come out of the bathroom, when I open my eyes in the morning, and when I am about to retire. How do we cultivate this life-changing gift during times of visceral pain and distress?

What's the Shame?

It is a perplexing response in this week's Torah portion, Vayeitzei. Rachel, who has been childless for many years, gives birth. In the words of the Torah:

"And she conceived and bore a son, and she said, "G-d has taken away my shame."

What type of shame was she referring to? What shame is there in infertility, which is not her fault? Sarah and Rebecca were also barren, but we never hear that they were ashamed. In the world of Torah, there is no room for shame for a condition you never caused. Pain, anguish, or jealousy are sentiments we can appreciate, but why shame?

Rashi presents the astounding and disturbing answer in the Midrash:

The Aggadah (Midrash Rabbah 73:5) explains it: As long as a woman has no child, she has no one to blame for her faults. As soon as she has a child, she blames him. "Who broke this dish? Your child!" "Who ate these figs? Your child!"

Rachel was previously ashamed because she had nobody to blame for any errors, oversights, or flaws. The food was burnt? Rachel must be a lousy cook. The keys to the car are lost? Rachel is irresponsible. Rachel is in a bad mood? She is impulsive and irrational. A plate breaks? She is a shlimazal. The couch is dirty? She is a lazy couch potato. The home is unkempt? Rachel just can't get it together.

Ah, but now, with the birth of Joseph, the shame is gone. The food burnt because the baby ran a fever, and she had to rush him to the doctor. The keys to the car lost? The baby got a hold of them and cast them in the dustbin. The plate broke? The baby dropped it. The couch is dirty? The baby decided to have his ice cream on the couch. The house is a mess? Of course, the baby is at fault.

So, if I am understanding this correctly, that is why Rachel who was childless for 7 years wanted a baby—not for the incredible experience of creating a life, not for the infinite joy of having a child, not for the happiness that comes with the singular mother-child relationship—all of this was not the motivating factor. Why did Rachel want a child? So that she has somebody to blame for getting the turkey and cranberry sauce all over the floor?!

Absurd or what? Our mother Rachel, barren and infertile, was yearning for a child—to the point of her telling Jacob: "If I don't have children, I am dead."—So that she would blame all her mistakes on her child?

What is more, this seems so dishonest. If Rachel did not really make errors like breaking dishes and eating up figs, she would have not been ashamed to begin with. If she did, and she was constantly getting embarrassed, what exactly was her comfort now? That when she breaks a china plate she will lie and say that her child did it?

What is even more disturbing is that she names her baby "Yosef," which means removed, to celebrate the fact that now her shame has been "removed" (asaf). You are giving your child whom you waited for so many years a name which represents your newfound ability now to blame him for your mistakes?!

How can we make sense of this perplexing Midrash?

Of course, we need to dig deeper to uncover the gems contained here. In essence, Rachel was teaching us one of the primary secrets to live a life of gratitude.

Rachel's Magic

In all our lives there is a gap between what we have, and what we want. No one gets everything. And even when we are given blessings, the "package" comes with "fine print" you may have not realized in the beginning. Human nature is to focus on that which we are missing, while forgetting that which we have. We take our blessings for granted and we obsess about the missing pieces.

Rachel knew about the human proclivity to focus on the negative instead of the positive, and that even after you experienced an extraordinary gift, after a while you take it for granted and begin kvetching about the imperfections. To counterbalance this human recipe for misery, she exclaimed, "G-d has removed my shame," to remind herself of the idea that she must attribute the things going wrong to her child. When your child breaks the dish or eats the figs, remember that the only reason you have this problem is because you were blessed with a child. When your child breaks something or eats up the fresh food you made for the guests, attribute the problem to your child, to the miracle and blessing of having a child.

You can say: Oy, my child MADE A MESS. Or you can say: Thank G-d, MY CHILD made a mess. Same words, but with a different emphasis. It is the Jewish custom that when a glass breaks, we shout: Mazal Tov! When the groom breaks the glass under the chuppah, we exclaim Mazal Tov! Why don't we say: Oy, 10 dollars down the drain? This is Rachel's gift: When the plate breaks, be grateful. It means you have a home; you own dishes. When your husband breaks something, say: Mazal Tov! Thank goodness, I married a human being, not an angel.

To live means to become aware of the miracle of the breath I am emitting at this moment. Every breath is a Divine gift. I am alive, wow. I am grateful. I do not own life; I did not create life; I am privileged to be a channel for life, for the infinite source of life, at this moment—wow. And I have a child sitting near me—wow, I can now be a channel for love and light.

Yes, life presents us with painful moments, and we can feel overwhelmed, scared, and sad. And at that very moment, I can talk to my mind and say: And now, I want to go into space of gratitude—of knowing that G-d creates me at this moment so I can be a channel for His infinite love, light, peace, and compassion, and to radiate that to all around me.

The Hunch of a Mother

With the hunch of a mother, Rachel decided to immortalize this message in the name of her child, Yosef, meaning "G-d removed my shame." This became the secret of Joseph's success.

Joseph endured enormous pain and suffering. His brothers despised him, they sold him into slavery, he was accused of promiscuity, and thrown into a dungeon for twelve years. And yet throughout his entire life, Joseph never lost his joy, grace, passion for life, love for people, ambition to succeed, and his ability to forgive. Joseph comes across as one of the most integrated, wholesome, cheerful, loveable persons in the entire Tanach. With a life story like his, we would expect him to be bitter, cynical, resentful, angry, stone-like, and harsh. "A rock feels no pain and an island never cries," yet Joseph weeps more than everyone in the Hebrew Bible.

How did he do this? This, perhaps, was his mother's gift. Though she died when he was nine years of age, she infused him with perspective on how to live: Every challenge can only exist because it has a blessing as its backdrop. I feel pain. But that means I am alive, and I have feelings. It also means that there is something new I must discover about myself and the world. I am hurt, but that means that I am sensitive, and I can be here for people. I disagree with my spouse, but that means that I am blessed to have a soul partner who cares for me, and that we have an opportunity to create a deeper relationship. My children challenge me? That means I have children whom I love, and I am given an opportunity to dig deeper and find the light beyond the darkness.

The Backdrop of Pain

When your husband comes home late from work, instead of thinking: He is so irresponsible and unreliable, you can choose to say: Thank G-d I have a husband, who loves me and cares for me, and he has a job he loves, and works hard. Sure, speak to him about coming home on time, but choose what you will focus on.

When your mother or father calls you for help, instead of saying to yourself: Oy, my entire life must revolve around her needs, say instead: Thank G-d I have parents.

When you come into the office, and you experience overload, with 90 emails to respond to, six different options for future growth, tell

yourself: Thank G-d I have a job, I have six different options, I have so much to do, I am busy and productive, and I am driven.

When your wife rebukes you for your mistakes, instead of thinking, Why do I need someone who criticizes me? Say to yourself: I am so grateful that I have a wife who cares about me deeply and allows me the gift of introspection. (Of course, you may want to share with her how she can communicate with you in a way that goes easier on your trauma, but choose what to focus on.)

When your kids or grandkids make a "balagan" in your home and turn the place upside down, don't zoom in exclusively on the mess; rather focus on the fact that you have children and grandchildren who are filled with good spirit.

When your car breaks down, and you must get it towed, instead of cursing your luck, say to yourself: I own a car. That puts me in the one percent bracket, superior to most humans on this planet.

An Appetite

Chassidim tell a story about the holy Reb Zusha of Anipoli. When he was a child, he often went hungry. But he was always thankful. Once, when he was really hungry, someone overheard him talking to G-d. This is what he said: G-d, I want to thank you so much for giving me an appetite!

Even the hunger he experienced as something that can exist only in the context of a blessing. G-d gave me an appetite.

Gratitude Even As I Don't Get It

I do not comprehend the reason and purpose of so much of what is going on in our world; it is much larger than our brains. The pain we are all feeling is visceral and profound; it is the pain of peoplehood, of being part of a singular organism challenged to its core. How can I show up best in such a situation? How can I remain anchored in hope, faith, and courage? How can I, and each of us, become a beacon of light, love, and strength?

Rachel teaches us, by choosing to live in a space of gratitude, because that allows us to remain anchored in the source of all life, love, and strength, not get washed away by the tides of anger, frustration, and madness. My heart swells with gratitude to the majestic people of Israel, to my people, my brothers and sisters who are so holy and good; toward the loved ones in my life who are Divine gifts; to my inner soul, which has so much light and love.

And, finally, gratitude for the privilege of being a conduit for Hashem's truth, love, and clarity.

(The idea behind this essay I heard from Rabbi Fishel Schachter shlita).

Gratefully dedicated by Menachem & Batya Abrams and family to all our Israeli soldiers & volunteer organizations]

The Significance of Tachanun

By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

Why is tachanun such an important part of davening?

According to the Zohar,[1] the level of kapparah (atonement) achieved through the sincere recital of tachanun cannot be accomplished any other way in this world. Talmudic sources teach that a tearfully recited tachanun can accomplish more than any other prayer.[2]

The Rambam writes that the most important aspect of tachanun is to make personal requests.[3] He states pointedly that there is no limit to the number of personal requests one may make.

Although the importance of tachanun is both underestimated and not duly appreciated by many, this should certainly not be the case. Tachanun is actually based on Moshe Rabbeinu's successful entreating of Hashem on Har Sinai to spare Klal Yisrael from punishment after their grievous sins:[4] Va'esnapal lifnei Hashem, "And I threw myself down in prayer before G-d." [5]

When do we recite tachanun?

After completing shemoneh esrei, which is recited standing, the supplicant continues the mitzvah of tefillah by reciting the tachanun in a manner reminiscent of prostration.[6] Thus, tachanun should be viewed and treated as a continuation of the shemoneh esrei.[7]

Total submission

In earlier days, tachanun was said with one's face pressed to the ground and one's body stretched out in total submission to Hashem.[8] In the time of the Gemara, people bowed without prostrating themselves totally, or by prostrating themselves while tilting a bit on their side.[9] This was done to avoid violating the prohibition against prostrating oneself on a stone surface, which is derived from the pasuk, "You may not place a stone (even maskis) for bowing upon it in your Land." [10] This prohibition is violated only by prostrating oneself on a stone with one's hands and legs completely stretched out.

Today, the accepted custom is that we do not prostrate ourselves, except on Yom Kippur (and some have the custom also on Rosh Hashanah), and, when doing so, we place cloth or paper beneath ourselves, to avoid any shaylah.[11] Similarly, we do not bow fully when reciting tachanun. The Ashkenazic custom is to recite tachanun sitting, while resting one's head on the arm as a reminiscence of bowing. This is called nefilas apayim or "falling tachanun." The custom among Sefardim is to sit while reciting tachanun, but not to place the head down. I will soon explain the halachic reasons for both practices.

Interrupting between shemoneh esrei and tachanun

Conversing between shemoneh esrei and tachanun weakens the effectiveness of the tachanun.[12] Therefore, the Shulchan Aruch rules that one should not converse between tefillah and tachanun. Some contend that only a lengthy conversation disturbs the efficacy of the tachanun, but not a short interruption,[13] whereas others rule that any interruption at all undermines the value of the tachanun.[14]

The Magen Avraham rules that one may recite tachanun in a place different from where one davened shemoneh esrei, and this is not considered an interruption.

Interrupting during tachanun

One should not interrupt during the recital of tachanun except to answer Borchu and the significant responses of Kedusha and Kaddish.[15]

May tachanun be said standing?

The early authorities dispute whether tachanun may be said standing, some contending that it is even preferable to recite tachanun by bowing in a standing position. Others contend that it is better to sit for tachanun; this completely avoids the problem of even maskis, since it is impossible to prostrate oneself completely from a sitting position.[16] The accepted custom is to recite tachanun while sitting.[17] The Shulchan Aruch rules that one should recite tachanun only in a sitting position.[18] Under extenuating circumstances, one may recite it while standing.[19]

What about the chazzan?

Tachanun is the only part of davening where the chazzan does not stand. Since the entire purpose of the tachanun is to recite a prayer while one is bowing, the chazzan also "falls tachanun."

What prayer is recited for tachanun?

Whereas Ashkenazim recite Chapter 6 of Tehillim while "falling tachanun," Sefardim recite Chapter 25 of Tehillim as tachanun, and recite it in a regular sitting position.

Why do Ashkenazim (including "nusach Sefard") "fall tachanun," whereas Sefardim (Edot Hamizrach) do not? And, why do Ashkenazim and Sefardim recite different chapters of Tehillim for tachanun?

In actuality, these differing practices are based on the same source. According to the Zohar, the sincere recital of Chapter 25 of Tehillim accomplishes a tremendous level of atonement, and repairs other spiritual shortcomings. However, reciting it insincerely and without proper intent can cause tremendous damage.[20] To avoid the harm that may be incurred should tachanun not be said properly, both Ashkenazim and Sefardim say tachanun differently from the procedure described by the Zohar. Ashkenazim recite Chapter 6 of Tehillim rather than Chapter 25,[21] while Sefardim recite Chapter 25 as stated in Zohar, but do not place their heads down in a bowing position. The Sefardic practice is never to do nefillas apayim when reciting tachanun, due to the eventuality that one may not have the proper kavanos.[22]

On which side do we lean?

The early authorities dispute whether it is preferable to lean on the left side or on the right side during tachanun. Some contend that it is better to lean on the left side, because in earlier times, wealthy people used to

lean on that side (compare the mitzvah of heseibah, reclining, at the Pesach Seder). By leaning on the left side, we demonstrate the subjugation of our “wealthier” side to Hashem.[23]

A second reason cited is that the Shechinah is opposite one’s right side. Therefore when leaning on the left side, one faces the Shechinah.[24] Others contend that one should always lean on the right side, and we should fall tachanun on the side of the Shechinah rather than facing it.[25]

The most common, but not exclusive, Ashkenazic practice is to lean on the left side when not wearing tefillin, and on the right side when wearing tefillin, so as not to lean on the tefillin.[26] A left-handed person should always recite tachanun while leaning on his left side.[27]

Why do we stand up in the middle of the pasuk “Va’anachnu lo neida”?

The first three words of this pasuk are recited sitting, and then, we stand up to complete the prayer. In addition, we say the first five words of this prayer aloud. Why do we follow these unusual practices?

This practice is observed in order to emphasize our having attempted to pray in several different positions. We davened shemoneh esrei while standing, tachanun while bowing, and other prayers while sitting. Finally, we exclaim, va’anachnu lo neida, “We do not know!” We have tried every method of prayer that we can think of, and we are unaware of any other possibilities.[28]

Tachanun recited with the community

Tachanun should, preferably, be said together with a minyan.[29] Therefore, someone in an Ashkenazi shul who finished Vehu Rachum before the tzibur should wait in order to begin tachanun together with them.[30] Similarly, if davening with a mincha minyan that did not recite the full repetition of shemoneh esrei (sometimes called heicha kedusha), one should wait to say tachanun together with a minyan. (Please note that I am not advocating that a minyan daven with a heicha kedusha. I am personally opposed to this practice, except for extenuating circumstances.)

Is it more important to say tachanun sitting or to recite it together with the minyan?

This question manifests itself in two cases.

(1) Someone is davening shemoneh esrei immediately behind me, making it halachically impossible for me to sit down for tachanun, since it is forbidden to sit down in front of someone who is davening shemoneh esrei.

(2) Someone who completed the shemoneh esrei is required to wait for a few seconds (the time it takes to walk four amos) in his place after backing up. Therefore, someone who has just finished the quiet shemoneh esrei when the tzibur is beginning to say tachanun needs to wait a few seconds before he can “fall tachanun.” What is the optimal means of reconciling this with the obligation to recite tachanun with the tzibur?

The poskim dispute which way is best to deal with this predicament. Some contend that one should begin tachanun immediately, while still standing,[31] whereas others contend that it is better to wait and recite tachanun while sitting.[32]

Incidentally, the chazzan may sit down immediately and begin tachanun without waiting for the regulation few seconds and walking back three steps. He should just leave the amud and sit down immediately for tachanun.[33]

Conclusion

It is essential to appreciate that tachanun is a time when one can include personal tefillos and sincerely beg Hashem for whatever we lack. May He speedily answer all our prayers for good!

[1] End of Bamidbar, quoted by Beis Yosef, Orach Chayim 131. [2] See Bava Metzia 59b. [3] Hilchos Tefillah 5:13. [4] Tur, Orach Chayim 131. [5] Devarim 9:18, 25. [6] See Rambam, Hilchos Tefillah 5:1, 13. [7] Levush, Orach Chayim 131:1. [8] Megillah 22b; Rambam, Hilchos Tefillah 5:13-14; Tur, Orach Chayim 131; see Bach. [9] Megillah 22b. [10] Vayikra 26:1. [11] See Shu’t Rivash #412 and commentaries on Tur 131. [12] Bava Metzia 59b, as explained by the Shibbolei Haleket #30 and the Beis Yosef, Orach Chayim 131; Levush, Orach Chayim 131. [13] Magen Avraham 131:1. [14] Aruch Hashulchan 131:3; Kaf

Hachayim 131:1-3, quoting Zohar and Ari. [15] Shaarei Teshuvah 131:1. [16] Shu’t Rivash #412. [17] Beis Yosef 131, quoting the mekubalim. [18] Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 131:2. [19] Mishnah Berurah 131:10. [20] Zohar, end of parshas Bamidbar, quoted by Beis Yosef. [21] Magen Avraham 131:5. [22] Ben Ish Chai, 1: Ki Sissa; Yalkut Yosef, Orach Chayim 131: 16. [23] Shibbolei Haleket #30, quoting Rav Hai Gaon. [24] Shibbolei Haleket, quoting his brother, R’ Binyamin. [25] Rakanati, quoted by Magen Avraham; Rema, quoting yesh omrim. [26] Darchei Moshe and Rema comments on Shulchan Aruch. [27] See Pri Megadim, Mishbetzos Zahav 131:2. [28] Shelah, quoted by Magen Avraham 131:4. [29] Rambam; Tur. [30] Be’er Heiteiv 134:1. [31] Mishnah Berurah 131:10. [32] Magen Avraham 131:5. [33] Mishnah Berurah 104:9.

An Invocation in an America First Moment: Standing for Faith and Principle

By Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

When I was invited to deliver an invocation at the America First Policy Institute (AFPI) Summit, I was honored, but I also hesitated. The timing, early Friday morning, was particularly challenging, and there were other considerations as well. After consulting with people I respect and trust, I came to see it as an important opportunity at a critical moment.

AFPI is a relatively new but rapidly growing conservative think tank that promotes a Trump-aligned “America First” agenda. It has limited Jewish involvement and, until now, had never hosted a rabbi to speak or offer an invocation. With several high-ranking members of the administration and prominent conservative leaders present, the invitation created a rare platform: to both express gratitude for those standing firmly with Israel and the Jewish people, and to candidly address the troubling trends and dangerous elements emerging in parts of the conservative world.

In this broader landscape, some institutions have taken divergent paths. Most notably, the Heritage Foundation has not, in recent times, been sufficiently clear or consistent in condemning antisemitism or its purveyors. By contrast, the Hudson Institute has been a steadfast ally of the Jewish community through its long-standing, principled pro-Israel positions. AFPI is currently on the pro-Israel side of that divide, but it is crucial to reinforce and encourage institutions like AFPI to follow the Hudson model rather than drifting toward the ambiguity we have seen from Heritage.

I am grateful to share that the remarks were warmly received. There were several spontaneous rounds of applause, particularly when speaking about unwavering support for Israel. Afterward, many attendees came over specifically to express their strong solidarity with Israel and the Jewish people, and to affirm how deeply the message resonated with them.

I am sharing the text of my remarks below not only for your interest, but also as a resource, a set of talking points and themes you can draw upon and adapt for your own settings, whether addressing a crowd or having one-on-one conversations where these issues arise.

Invocation at the America First Policy Institute

Mar-a-Lago | November 21, 2025

Ladies and gentlemen, honored leaders and dear friends,

We gather today to thank God for the gift of this great nation and to offer our prayers for America: for safety, unity, and for moral clarity and courage.

I stand before you this morning as an Orthodox rabbi, as an unapologetic Jew, and as a grateful and proud American.

If we speak of “America First,” we must also speak of how America first came to be. This country was born from an extraordinary faith, deeply informed by the language and ideas of the Jewish Bible.

When our Founders wrote in the Declaration of Independence that all men are “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights,” they were echoing the first chapter of Genesis, that every human being is created b’tzelem Elokim, in the image of God.

When they appealed to “the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God,” they were affirming that there is a moral law higher than any king, any parliament, or any polling data.

When they concluded, “with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence,” they spoke in the language of our prophets, a people placing its destiny in the hands of Heaven.

So if we say “America First,” it must mean America first in fidelity to these founding biblical principles: First in honoring the Creator who endows our rights. First in defending the dignity of every person and their right to practice their faith. First in preserving the moral order that makes liberty possible.

“America First” must not only mean prioritizing American interests; it must mean America first in standing true to the principles, values, and ideals that made her exceptional in the first place.

We now approach 250 years of American history. For nearly a quarter of a millennium, this nation has been a beacon of light and hope to the world. It has understood that being the world’s superpower means wielding not only might, but also moral influence.

This morning, we offer our deepest gratitude and our prayers for the next 250 years. That America remains strong, free, and secure. That her children grow up in homes of stability, in communities of faith and responsibility. That her leaders be guided by wisdom, humility, and courage.

As Jews, we are profoundly conscious of the blessing this country has been. In all of Jewish history, no diaspora land has given us more freedom, more safety, and more opportunity than the United States of America, and for that we are deeply grateful.

I stand here as a rabbi but also as an ordinary Jew to say, “I love America,” not as a slogan or a platitude, but as a heartfelt expression of religious obligation, a fulfillment of hakaras hatov, of gratitude: recognizing the goodness we have received and feeling the responsibility to respond with loyalty and service.

Yet I must also take this moment to speak personally and honestly. We are living in a time when, from the extremes of both the left and the right, a climate is being created in which many Jews feel less safe.

There are moments, even in this blessed country, when I step onto certain streets wearing this yarmulka on my head, and for the first time in my life, I hesitate. I feel the stares. I hear the rhetoric. I read the threats. And I find myself unimaginably asking: Are they questioning my loyalty? Do they see me as fully American?

There are voices on the left who demonize Israel and then look suspiciously at anyone who loves and supports it, as if that love somehow disqualifies us from full belonging in American life. There are voices on the right who speak of “real Americans” and “patriots” in a way that can leave Jews and other minorities wondering whether we are truly included in that vision.

To all those voices, I say this, respectfully but firmly: my loyalty to this country is not conditional, not partial, not divided. It is expressed in prayer for its leaders, in gratitude for its freedoms, in service to its communities, and in the raising of children who sing its anthem and uphold its ideals.

And at the very same time and in no way a contradiction, I am a proud, unapologetic Jew and a steadfast supporter of Israel. To love Israel is not to betray America. To stand with Jerusalem is not to stand against Washington.

In truth, to love Israel is to be deeply faithful to America’s own values, because America is founded on values that come from Jerusalem: On belief in one God. On the sanctity of human life. On the rule of just law over mere power. On the conviction that nations are accountable to a higher moral standard.

The Bible that inspired the Declaration of Independence is the same Bible that first gave birth to the people and land of Israel. So when America stands with Israel, America is standing with the very wellspring of its own moral vocabulary.

Let me be clear: to platform purveyors of hate, to provide a podium to promote antisemitism, may be one’s first amendment legal right, but it is not “America First.” In fact, it is not American at all. It is an offense

against the very values that America ought to be first in defending. Those spreading vile lies against Israel and the Jewish people on college campuses, outside of Synagogues and even in the halls of Congress do so not only because they hate the Jew. In truth, they hate America, they are not proud Americans, and they are not loyal to how America first came to be or how it must remain first in upholding its values.

We must speak with moral clarity. We must act with courage. And we must continue to express gratitude. We thank God Almighty that on July 13, as a bullet was fired at him, President Trump suddenly turned his head. Turning his head saved his life, and the president has continued to turn his head since then: turning to listen, turning to hear the call of the moment, turning to act. President Trump and his Administration have shown unprecedented loyalty and friendship to Israel and the Jewish people, a steadfast support that we don’t take for granted and for which we will never stop saying thank you.

I close with a brief prayer.

“The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not lack.” Let us never lack in knowing the Lord is our Shepherd.

Master of the Universe, Bless the United States of America as she approaches her 250th year. May she return again and again to the truths written in the Bible and echoed in its founding Declaration—that our rights come from You, and that our greatness lies in fidelity to Your moral law. Bless our leaders, that they may have wisdom to discern right from wrong, courage to choose what is sometimes the harder path. Bless the alliance between America and Israel, two nations that look to Jerusalem not only as a city on a map, but as a source of enduring values. Bless this land so all may continue to walk proudly including those with our yarmulkas visible, our faith intact, and our love for America unwavering.

Our Father in Heaven: Give strength, wisdom and courage to President Trump and his distinguished administration to guide our country towards unity, security, and success. Guard the courageous members of the United States military and the Israeli Defense Forces as they guard us and protect freedom and democracy around the world.

Dear God - We ask that you grant peace and prosperity to the United States, to the State of Israel and to the entire world, and let us respond, Amen.

Rav Kook Torah

VaYitzei: The Prayers of the Avot

According to the Talmud (Berachot 26b), the Avot (forefathers) instituted the three daily prayers:

Abraham — Shacharit, the morning prayer.

Isaac — Minchah, the afternoon prayer.

Jacob — Ma’ariv, the evening prayer.

Is there an inner connection between these prayers and their founders?

Rav Kook wrote that each of these three prayers has its own special nature. This nature is a function of both the character of that time of day, and the pervading spirit of the righteous tzaddik who would pray at that time.

The Morning Stand

Abraham, the first Jew, established the first prayer of the day. He would pray at daybreak, standing before God:

“Abraham rose early in the morning, [returning] to the place where he had stood before God.” (Gen. 19:27)

Why does the Torah call attention to the fact that Abraham would stand as he prayed? This position indicates that the function of this morning prayer is to make a spiritual stand. We need inner fortitude to maintain the ethical level that we have struggled to attain. The constant pressures and conflicts of day-to-day life can chip away at our spiritual foundation. To counter these negative influences, the medium of prayer can help us, by etching holy thoughts and sublime images deeply into the heart. Such a prayer at the start of the day helps protect us from the pitfalls of worldly temptations throughout the day.

This function of prayer — securing a solid ethical foothold in the soul — is reflected in the name Amidah (the “standing prayer”). It is particularly appropriate that Abraham, who successfully withstood ten

trials and tenaciously overcame all who fought against his path of truth, established the “standing prayer” of the morning.

Flowering of the Soul in the Afternoon

The second prayer, initiated by Isaac, is recited in the afternoon. This is the hour when the temporal activities of the day are finished, and we are able to clear our minds from the distractions of the world. The soul is free to express its true essence, unleashing innate feelings of holiness, pure love and awe of God.

The Torah characterizes Isaac’s afternoon prayer as *sichah* (meditation): “Isaac went out to meditate in the field towards evening” (Gen. 24:64). The word *sichah* also refers to plants and bushes (*sichim*), for it expresses the spontaneous flowering of life force. This is a fitting metaphor for the afternoon prayer, when the soul is able to naturally grow and flourish.

Why was it Isaac who established this prayer? Isaac exemplified the attribute of Justice (*midat ha-din*), so he founded the soul’s natural prayer of the afternoon. The exacting measure of law is applied to situations where one has deviated from the normal and accepted path.

Spontaneous Evening Revelation

And what distinguishes Ma’ariv, the evening prayer?

Leaving his parents’ home, Jacob stopped for the night in Beth-El. There he dreamed of ascending and descending angels and divine promises. Jacob awoke the following morning awestruck; he had not been aware of holiness of his encampment.

“He chanced upon the place and stayed overnight, for it became suddenly night.” (Gen. 28:11)

The “chance meeting” — a spiritual experience beyond the level to which the soul is accustomed — that is the special quality of the evening prayer. The night is a time of quiet solitude. It is a time especially receptive to extraordinary elevations of the soul, including prophecy and levels close to it.

Unlike the other two prayers, the evening prayer is not obligatory. But this does not reflect a lack of importance; on the contrary, the essence of the evening prayer is an exceptionally uplifting experience. Precisely because of its sublime nature, this prayer must not be encumbered by any aspect of rote obligation. It needs to flow spontaneously from the heart. The voluntary nature of the evening prayer is a continuation of Jacob’s unexpected spiritual revelation that night in Beth-El.

Chief Rabbi Mirvis

Vayeitzei

To be Jewish is to be Grateful

The essence of our Judaism is gratitude. Parshat Vayeitzei describes how after the births of her first three children Leah felt particularly despondent and this was reflected in the names she gave them. But, when she gave birth to her fourth child she declared, “*ha’paam odeh et Hashem*”, “this time I will give thanks to Hashem” and therefore she called his name Yehuda, from the word ‘*todah*’ which means thankful.

Fascinatingly, Yehuda was the only tribe to survive and remain intact and to this day we are descendants of Yehuda and therefore we are called Yehudim or Jews. So, to be grateful is an essential part of our Jewish character. And this is reflected in many ways, for example, in our shul services, of course, we stand when the ark is open and we stand as well for the most important prayers.

But in addition, we stand for thanksgiving prayers such as Mizmor L’toda, psalm 100, which we say every weekday morning, or via Vayavarech David, also in the morning service, which includes sentiments attitude and also, Mizmor Shir Le’yom Ha’sabbat, the psalm for the Sabbath day within which we say, “*tov le’hodot, l’Hashem*”, “it is good to be grateful to the Lord” and we stand for Hallel and so on. There is a further way in which this is expressed.

We have in Judaism a very strong concept of *shlichut*, that is, representation. “*Shlucho shel adam kemoto*”, my representative is my extended arm, and in a halakhic context can actually represent me as if I am doing what he or she is doing. However, there is no concept of *shlichut*, of representation, of an ambassador’s role, when it comes to

gratitude. If I feel grateful to somebody, I should pick up the phone, I should write the letter and not rely on somebody else to convey my appreciation.

And this is why in the repetition of the Amidah, the Chazan recites all the blessings and we respond Amen, with one exception. And that is Modim. When it comes to the thanksgiving blessing, we all must recite it. No wonder, therefore, that the very first words that we utter every morning are ‘*modeh ani le’fenacha*’, we give thanks to Hashem for enabling us to live on yet another day. From the very moment that Judah was born, we as Jews feel eternally grateful to those who brought us into this world, to those who have blessed us and more than anything, to Hakadosh Baruch Hu, to Almighty God, who continues to bless us always.

Shabbat Shalom.

Parshas Vayeitzei

Rabbi Yochanan Zweig

(Not) Together Forever

And it was when Yaakov saw Rochel [...] Then Yaakov kissed Rochel and he raised his voice and wept (29:10-11).

Yaakov Avinu, having traveled quite a distance to meet his future wife, reacts in a very unusual manner upon first seeing Rochel: He begins to cry in a very loud voice. Rashi, noting that this seems rather odd, explains that Yaakov cried because he saw through the Divine spirit that Rochel would not be buried alongside him (29:11).

But why would Yaakov be preoccupied by the idea of not being buried together on the day he first meets his wife? It would seem that Yaakov Avinu had far more pressing issues to overcome in the immediate future: he was destitute, had a devious Uncle Lavan, a brother who had proclaimed his intent to kill him, etc. So why was Yaakov worrying about their separate burial locations – events far removed in the future – at this time?

Perhaps even more perplexing: Rashi, in Parshas Vayechi (48:7), relates how Yaakov explains to his son Yosef that he should not be upset with him for not burying his mother Rochel in Beis Lechem because he buried her there at the direction of the Divine word of Hashem: “So that she should be of aid to her children when the Nebuzadran would exile them; (as they are leaving Eretz Yisroel) they would pass by her grave and Rochel would emerge from her grave and cry and seek Divine mercy for them[...].”

Thus, it was necessary for Rochel to be buried by the side of the road in order to come out and daven as her descendants passed by her grave. But if this is the reason she needed to be buried there then why did Yaakov cry – Rochel was obviously never intended to be buried next to him in Chevron anyway! Furthermore, Rashi, on the words “He shall not live” (31:32), explains that Yaakov inadvertently cursed Rochel and this is what caused her to be buried by the side of the road. But this seems to be a direct contradiction to the reason that Yaakov gave his son Yosef!

The answer to these questions lies in the fundamental understanding that the Jewish view of marriage is one of an eternal union. As explained in earlier editions of INSIGHTS, the primary method of how a woman becomes betrothed to a man is learned from the story of how Abraham acquired a burial plot for his deceased wife Sarah. He wasn’t buying one plot, he was buying plots for both of them. In fact, the Torah calls the city Kiryat Arba because of the four couples who are buried there (Rashi on 23:1). It isn’t eight individuals; it’s four merged couples. This is the Jewish view of what a marriage is supposed to be.

Yaakov was devastated when he saw through Ruach Hakodesh that he wouldn’t be buried together with his soulmate Rachel because this indicated that their union wouldn’t be perfect. A defect in their union would be very painful and obviously have repercussions throughout the marriage.

We find a fascinating concept by Yaakov Avinu. Rashi, in Parshas Vayechi (49:33), quotes the Gemara (Taanis 5b) that Yaakov never really died. In fact, according to the Midrash (BereishisRabbah 92:2), Yaakov was actually standing there when Bnei Yisroel left Egypt. Even though the Torah explicitly says that he was embalmed and buried in

Chevron, apparently, he wasn't physically bound by his death. In all likelihood, if Yaakov and Rochel would have had a perfect merged identity, it seems very possible that Rochel could have had the same quality of not being really dead. In other words, she could have been buried in Chevron and still gone out to the side of the road to pray for her children when they needed her.

This is why Yaakov Avinu was sobbing loudly when he first met Rochel. He understood from the outset that they would not share that eternal bond. Their brief marriage, which ended upon the sudden death of Rochel, also ended their connection and the potential for an eternal relationship. This is why Yaakov was exceedingly distraught when they first met.

A Fate Worse Than Death

[...] and he [Yaakov] cried (29:10).

Rashi relates that Yaakov was saddened by the fact that he came searching for a wife empty handed in contrast to Eliezer who, when he went to find a wife for Yitzchak, came bearing many gifts. This was because Elifaz, the son of Eisav, pursued him on the orders of his father to kill Yaakov. But Elifaz, who was "raised on the lap of Yitzchak," did not want to kill Yaakov. As Elifaz was conflicted, he asked Yaakov, "What should I do about my father's command?" Yaakov responded, "Take all my possessions, I will be impoverished and a poor person is considered as if he is dead." Obviously, Elifaz couldn't return to his father and outright lie by saying that he killed Yaakov because the truth would come to light eventually. This being so, even if technically he didn't violate his father's command, how could this scheme possibly satisfy Eisav?

There is a well-known maxim in Judaism; "He who publicly shames his neighbor is as though he shed his blood" (Baba Metzia 58b). The Gemara continues, "all who descend into Gehenna eventually leave. Except for one who publicly shames his neighbor."

This is quite remarkable. The ultimate punishment for embarrassing someone is worse than the punishment received for killing him! How is

this possible? Rabbeinu Yonah in his famous work explains that the pain of shame is even worse than death itself (Shaarei Teshuva 3:139).

The reason is quite obvious. When one kills someone the pain caused, while severe, is temporal. In contrast, when one suffers a deep humiliation the pain is replayed in their mind constantly and endured for a lifetime. This, in effect, causes a much greater emotional trauma to the victim than the pain of non-existence and therefore merits a much greater punishment.

This fact is demonstrated as Yaakov was so pained by the fact that he was penniless and had nothing to offer as a gift to his future wife that he cried. Clearly, Elifaz felt that Eisav would be satisfied with the continuous humiliation of Yaakov.

Family Matters

And Yaakov said to his brethren "gather stones" (Bereishis 31:46).

Rashi (ad loc) comments, "this refers to his sons who were as brothers to him, standing by him in his troubles and wars." Rashi's explanation seems a little difficult to understand; if the Torah meant to say his sons why are they referred to as "his brothers"?

Rashi is highlighting how Yaakov interacted with his children. Often parents treat their adolescent children as employees they can order around – and that's on a good day. On a bad day, they tend to treat them as indentured servants ("take out the garbage!" or "get me a beer!" etc.). Rashi is telling us that Yaakov Avinu treated his adolescent children as one would treat siblings: in other words, as equals. This is what spurred them to stand by him during his troubles and throughout wars. It's no wonder then that Yaakov's legacy was considered complete (see Rashi 35:22) and all of his children were righteous. This also explains Rashi's comment in Parshas Vayechi (49:24) on the words "even Yisroel" – foundation of Israel. There Rashi says that the word "even" is a contraction of the words "av" and "bonim" – "father and sons." In other words, the foundation of the Jewish people is built on the strength of the relationship between Yaakov and his children; that of a healthy relationship between a father and his sons.

לע"נ

יוחנן בן יקותיאל יודא ע"ה

שרה משה בת ר' יעקב אליעזר ע"ה

ביילא בת (אריה) לייב ע"ה

אנא מלכה בת ישראל