

## **SHABBAT VAYETZE**

**Service Leader: Michael Main**

**Cantorial Soloist: Fran Chalin**

**12 Kislev 5761 -- December 8, 2000**

### **Introduction**

Two women are vying for the love and affection of one man. One woman is older and plain, and the younger woman is known as beautiful. They are sisters. Their father hears of a potential suitor for his younger daughter, but he insists that the suitor marry his older daughter instead. And because this is an exotic story taking place in an exotic locale, we can include the practice of polygamy in our tale, and so the father can finally allow our suitor to marry his younger daughter as well. Treachery, trickery, love, sadness; all are part of this exciting love story. It is a 1930's black-and-white B-movie, right? Or perhaps a Harlequin romance novel? It is neither. What we have is the makings of a very dramatic parashah, the very parashah that we will be discussing tonight. Tune in for the exiting Torah portion entitled VAYETZE.

### **Drash**

I introduced tonight's Torah portion with the soap opera that is actually to be found throughout all of its pages. And we have our cast of characters. They include Jacob, who is our young suitor; Leah, who is his older and plainer wife; Rachel, who is his younger, and apparently, more beautiful wife; and his evil, plotting father-in-law, Laban. Jacob has come searching for a wife, or wives as the case turned out to be, because his mother, Rebekah, did not want him cohabiting with the local Canaanite women. She has sent him to her brother, who turns out to be Laban, and Jacob falls in love with his younger cousin, Rachel. But we jump ahead in our story.

First, what do we know about Jacob? Jacob was a Patriarch; the father, ultimately, of twelve sons and one daughter, and from these sons came the twelve tribes of Israel. The Torah chooses to go into Jacob's entire story in great narrative detail. We see a Patriarch whose beginnings were not noble or generous, a Patriarch who was willing to resort to guile and trickery, and then become a victim of that same guile and trickery himself. We watch a man slowly grow into his role as Patriarch of a nation.

Jacob and his mother, Rebekah, got for Jacob his father's blessing, but they got it through a trick. They got the blessing that was meant for Jacob's brother, Esau. Jacob and Esau were twins, but Esau came into the world first, and so he was the older son, and a father's blessing went to the eldest. For Jacob to get the blessing, he had to dress in his brother's clothing and cover his neck and his arms with sheepskin, so that when he approached his blind father, Isaac, he would smell like Esau and feel as hairy as Esau.

It was in this way that Jacob was assured of getting what he wanted. When Esau discovered this, he was furious, and Jacob had to run from the wrath of a brother wronged. Jacob did not leave his home only because he was of marriageable age!

But now begins the adventures of our current Torah portion. Jacob stops for his first night away from home and has a dream; it is a dream of a stairway extending to heaven with angels ascending and descending on it, and God is standing before him and informing him: "I will give to you and to your offspring the ground on which you are lying, and your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth." Jacob awakens and humbly admits that there is something that he was not aware of. "Surely Adonai is present in this place, and I did not know it."

Ultimately, Jacob comes to Laban and works for Laban, and after a month, Jacob is finally asked what he wants as wages. Jacob answers that he wants to marry Rachel and will work for seven years to get her hand. Laban agrees; "Better I give her to you than that I should give her to an outsider." So Jacob labors, and the time finally comes for him to be paid, and a great feast is given. And that night, it is Leah, the older daughter, whom Laban sends in to cohabit with Jacob to consummate the marriage.

"What have you done to me? I was in your service for Rachel! Why did you lie to me?" asks Jacob in the words of Genesis. The answer is given: "It is not the practice in our place to marry off the younger before the older. Wait until the bridal week is over, and I will give you the other one too provided you work another seven years for me." Are you getting the picture of the type of man that Laban is?

Midrash says that Jacob also had an angry confrontation with Leah. He angrily asks her how she could have been party to such a trick. She answers simply that she had learned her trickery from him. After all, hadn't he fooled his father to get the blessing meant for his brother, Esau. So she had fooled him and got the blessing meant for her sister, Rachel. Ultimately, Jacob agrees to stay for Rachel, because, as it is written: "Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah, and so he served another seven years."

The parashah presents very poignantly Leah's struggle as she tries to deal with her status as a less-favored wife. And it is Leah, and not Rachel, who first bears children. She has one son and names him Reuben because it means: "Now my husband will love me." She has another son and names him Simeon because it means: "This is because Adonai heard that I was unloved." She has still another son and names him Levi because it means: "This time my husband will become attached to me." And a fourth son is named Judah because it means: "This time I will praise Adonai."

A modern Israeli poet, Shirley Kaufman, originally from Seattle, and writing in English, has tried to grapple with what Leah must have felt in this situation. She has written a poem entitled "Leah" that is introduced by the line in Genesis: "Leah had tender eyes, but Rachel was beautiful." She writes in the voice of Leah:

I do what I have to  
like an obedient daughter

or a dog. Not for your fingers  
in my flesh.

I watch you  
every day as you watch her;  
Since I'm the ugly one,  
the one pushed into your bed  
at night when you can't  
see the difference.

I've got another  
son inside me, and still  
you watch her. She doesn't  
sag as I do after each birth  
until you fill me again.

Why can't you look at me  
in daylight or take  
my hand and press it  
against your mouth?  
I'm not a stone; a shell  
your foot rolls over  
in the sand, the life  
gone out of it.

Maybe I am.  
Your sons have sucked me  
empty and dull.

Leah, so unhappy because she is unloved; but then there is Rachel -- a woman in a society that defined her role by the sons she gave to her husband. She is also unhappy because she has not given Jacob any children. So she does what Sarah did before her; she gives Jacob her handmaid to sleep with, and any children will, by extension, be hers. It works, because there are two sons by this handmaid.

As the story continues, there are seven more children added to this happy family. Leah has two more sons and a daughter, and Leah also gives Jacob her handmaid, and there are two more sons there. And finally, Rachel does give Jacob a son, and it is Joseph. And years later, Rachel would have a second son, Benjamin, and then she -- Jacob's favorite -- would die in childbirth far from home by the side of the road.

And so we witness the development of Jacob; through pain and joy, through happiness and sorrow. The life of a Patriarch takes form.

What can we draw from this parashah filled with the passion, the love, the yearning of a lifetime? I want to focus on the single statement Jacob uttered upon awakening from his dream, as he embarked on the adventures that would begin to mold his personality: "Surely Adonai is present in this place, and I did not know it."

He begins his search for God; and we, committed as we are to BCC, and in the midst of our families and in the midst of our community, show by our very being here that we, too, are looking for Adonai; or said another way, looking to express our sense of Jewishness. Why? Once in an issue of Moment Magazine I found an article that contained the statements of nine people who attempted to answer that very question.

For one of them, Samuel Heilman, as perhaps for many of us, being Jewish allowed him to share in the great chain of being that began somewhere in the primordial past with Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Rebekah, and with Jacob, Leah and Rachel, and would then pass onward through a most remarkable series of developments in human civilization. Being Jewish gave him, he wrote, as it perhaps gives many of us, a sense that there is more to existence than the span of a single lifetime, and a chance to learn about our chain of history. It gives us opportunities -- as we listen to services, and for some of us as we lead services and as we write sermons -- to integrate into our very consciousness the stories that make up the fabric of the whole collective life of the Jewish people. Jacob is my father, Leah and Rachel are your mothers, and the promises made to them are the promises made to all of us.

And what better place for us to talk about these people and these promises than at BCC. For in gathering together in community, gathering to talk about these people and these promises, we can say, not as Jacob said, that "Adonai is present in this place, and we do not know it," but that for us, at BCC, reminded as we are, week after week, again and again, regardless of which space we are in [this Shabbat service was held at Westside Jewish Community Center because BCC was getting its floors refinished], "Surely, Adonai is present in this place, and all of us, together, we DO know it."

. . . . AMEN.