

VaYetze	And (Jacob) Went Out	The Battle of the Sisters
Torah:	Genesis 28:10-32:3	
Haftarah:	Hosea 12:13-14:10	
Brit Chadashah:	John 1:10-51	

This portion discusses four main topics: Jacob's angelic encounter, his trip to Charan, His marriages (and the battle of the sisters) and how he began to grow rich. The only time Isaac is mentioned again is when he passes, and his two sons bury him.

There is a whole theology of angels, called angelology and theologians make a lot of speculations, since the Bible does not go into great detail about these special messengers of G-d. We know that up to 1/3 of them are fallen angels in league with the enemy. The other 2/3 serve G-d and even watch over believers (Matt. 18:10 – guardian angels are biblical). They can appear as people (Gen. 18:2) or as fiery servants (Judg. 13:20).

In this morning's passage, Jacob has a dream where he sees angels ascending and descending on a ladder connected to Heaven. He sees YHVH at the top of the ladder and Jacob received the Abrahamic blessing. When he awakens, he sets up a rock pillar (monument) and pours oil over the top. He makes a pledge to YHVH, saying that if YHVH looks out for him and brings Jacob back in peace to his father's home, then YHVH shall be his G-d.

Jacob also promises to build a house for the L-rd (one of the earliest references to a building or a temple) where the presence of YHVH can reside. He also promises to give ten percent of his future increase to YHVH. This is still a valid requirement for us today and we need pledge ten percent of our increase to YHVH. It is not an option we can observe or ignore at our own discretion. The entire universe belongs to YHVH and as the servants He takes care of, we need to pledge our tithes to YHVH. The Queen Mother once said that duty is the rent you pay for living. Tithing is a big part of the rent believers need to pay for living and walking with YHVH. Not paying your tithe shows disrespect for YHVH and His Word.

There is a small-time gap and we are not told if Jacob had any adventures on his trip to the land of the sons of the East. He arrives at the community well when it is still full daylight and begins to ask if the people know Laban the son of Nachor. As he is talking, Rachel arrives with her father's flock. Jacob rolls the rock off the well and waters Rachel's flock. He identifies himself to Rachel and she rushes off to tell her father. Laban hugs Jacob and kisses him. He then spends one month with Laban and his family.

Laban asks Jacob what it would take for him to serve Laban (as a shepherd) and Jacob says he will serve Laban for seven years if he is given Rachel as his wife. The seven years passed quickly and when it came time for the wedding to occur, Laban sends Leah into Jacob's tent, instead of Rachel. It was customary at the time for the bride and groom to spend their first week together in a special tent, where they are expected to have relations at least once a day. In between times, there was feasting and dancing as the new couple were congratulated. In the morning, Jacob sees Leah lying beside him and he goes and confronts his father-in-law about his marriage trickery. He has consummated the marriage with Leah, but she is not the wife he wants.

Laban tells him to finish the matrimonial week with Leah and he can also marry Rachel and serve Laban for another seven years as the bride price. Leah's nurse (female servant) is called Zilpa, while Rachel's female servant is called Bilha. Over the next seven years, there is a battle royal between the sisters to see who can give their husband the most children. I have called it the battle of the sisters because each name they give to each child is both a challenge and an insult for the rival sisters.

Much has been said about the prophetic meaning of the names of the 12 (13) tribes, but it is just an amazing rivalry between the two sisters. Leah wins the first round and gives birth to Ruben (behold a son). She calls her next son Simeon because YHVH has heard her and given her a second son. She gives her third son the name of Levi, because now she says her husband will become attached to her. Her fourth son is given the name of Judah, which means to praise. She praises YHVH for giving her another son.

She then stops bearing children and it may mean that Jacob took a break from sleeping with her. It may also mean that Jacob had relations with her at times she was not fertile. A woman is usually fertile for around four days a month and having relations outside this period of fertility, usually does not involve conceiving a child.

After the birth of Judah and during the time of Leah's infertility, Rachel gets upset that she cannot give children to her husband and causes Jacob to take her maid, Bilha, as a wife. She would actually be a concubine and Rachel could claim any children born to her former nurse. Bilha give Jacob two more sons and Rachel selects names for them. She calls the first one, Dan, because YHVH has judged and given her justice. Next comes Naphtali because Rachel has wrestled with her sister and has prevailed.

Leah also gave her servant to Jacob and two more sons were born: Gad (happiness) and Asher (happy). Then Leah gives two more sons to Jacob: Issachar (salary or reward) and Zebulun (dwelling place). She then conceives a daughter, Dinah, because she feels that YHVH has judged her. She and the other ladies may have conceived other daughters, but it was only when they conceived sons that they could hope to win Jacob's favour.

Rachel finally gives birth to a son and names him Joseph (YHVH adds). After Joseph is born, Jacob asks Laban to let him return home. He has to serve some more years and as he does, he uses a technique to bring the vigorous ewes into heat, so his flock gets bigger and stronger while Laban's fills up with weaker sheep.

He convinces his wives it is time to leave and is not aware that Rachel has stolen her father's holy figurines (Theraphim). Laban catches up with them after they have travelled seven days and Laban is warned to let Jacob go in peace. He is willing, but he wants his figurines back and searches Jacob's tent for them. Rachel sits on them and says she cannot get up because she is having her monthlies. They part company with a pledge at Mitzpah, where they promise not to harm each other and Jacob holds a ritual feast for Laban and his entourage.

Laban embraces his daughters and his grandchildren and goes back home. As Jacob is travelling home, he has a second angelic encounter at a place he calls Mahanaim (two camps). He recognizes that the hand of YHVH has always been with him, even during his trials and when he was robbed. Do you realize that YHVH's hand is always with you?

Sermon: When Your Walls Come a Tumbling Down: Lamentations 3:19-24

My title initially makes us think of Joshua and the walls of Jericho, but this morning I would like to talk to you about how to respond when your own walls come tumbling down. When we look at the life of Jeremiah, the author of Lamentations, we see how things went from bad to worse for him and never really got any better.

He was an Aaronite (priest), and his prophetic ministry covered the reign of the last three kings of Judah. He went from experiencing great joy during the reign of the most righteous king of Judah, Josiah. In the early part of his reign, Josiah removed all the pagan idols that previous king of Judah had set up. He then repairs the temple and finds a scroll of the Torah which describes how to observe Passover. From the time of the prophet Samuel until the reign of Josiah, Passover had not been celebrated as well and as thoroughly as it was during Josiah's reign.

Two things. The passage does not say how Passover was celebrated during the times of the Judges, nor during the times of the Kings of Israel and Judah. The first Passover celebrated in the Holy Land was on the plain near the city of Jericho. After Joshua it may be that the people held various negligent versions of Passover. It could also mean that no Passover was celebrated after the time of Samuel. The Feast of Unleavened Bread was supposed to be one of the three pilgrimage festivals.

It could be that some people gathered in Jerusalem for Passover, but the passage indicates that it was not a national celebration where the entire nation gathered around the temple. Josiah wanted to celebrate the Festival of Passover, which is really three festivals in one (Passover Seder, Unleavened Bread, and the Festival of First Fruits). When ever the festival of Passover is mentioned, the other two are assumed to always be part of the equation.

Josiah wanted to do things both thoroughly and properly. Food was given to the people and to the Levites and the people sacrificed well into the night (2 Chron. 35:14). The temple singers participated in a worship service where the songs of Asaph and David were sung (2 Chron. 35:5). Everything which was supposed to happen was included in the weeklong celebrations.

It occurred during the 18th year of Josiah's reign, just before he was killed in a conflict with Pharaoh Necho, while the Egyptians tried unsuccessfully to come to the aid of the Assyrians and shared in their defeat. Josiah's reforms had not been given much time to be soaked in by the people and things began to decline until the deportation to Babylon and the survivors flight into Egypt.

In memory of the sad death of such a good king, they established the custom of singing mournful songs, right up until they went into Babylon. We are not told when this singing occurred because the fasts which commemorate the destruction of the temple were not around yet. Whenever it occurred, the people would read through the Lamentations of Jeremiah. Our version of Lamentations is written in Babylonian acrostic, we are told about the form of the commemoration before our people were taken captive to Babylon. However, this occurred it was later incorporated into Tisha B'Av, when the entire Book of the Lamentations is read. When things collapse around us, our spirituality needs to remain intact. Even though Jeremiah died in captivity in Egypt, his spirituality remained intact and even vibrant. When we find ourselves in a similar situation our spirituality also needs to remain intact.

Let's look at our passage and learn build and maintain a spirituality which will not crumble or sink into the sands brought on by the storms of our lives (Matt. 7:24-27).

“When I consider my distress and my misery and the bitterness and poison it is filling up with. And when my soul remembers and is cast down in the midst of me, this is what I want to pass through my heart and let them give me hope. The goodnesses of YHVH are not exhausted and His compassions have not run out. They are renewed every morning. How great is your is your faithfulness (YHVH). YHVH is my portion, says my soul, which is why I want to hope in Him. . . Why should a living man complain? Let each one complain about his own sins. (Lamentations 3:19-24 and 3:39)”

It is not wrong or carnal to grieve when bad things happen to us. Our faith does not require us just to grin and bear it or believe that bad things are actually good things in disguise. But we want to get our reaction to them out of our system and not be stuck in perpetual grievance that degrades into permanent anger and bitterness.

Jeremiah was not happy to watch his people slide into criminal idolatry and then break their solemn oath not to rebel against Babylon. He saw the L-RD's hand in all of this in at least two aspects. First people will reap what they have sown and if we are stuck on the sinking boat with them, YHVH will insure our survival. Even the greatest horror and terror we could ever experience, does not diminish the power and wonder of His great goodness and compassion.

Jeremiah ministered to the people as a prophet and warned them what would happen if they turned their back on G-d and on the promises they had made. He was not listened by most of the people he reached out to, but that did not stop him from continuing to reach out. There was not really a problem with his communication skills, there was a big problem with the people's reception skills.

Jeremiah stood as a monument of iron and of brass (Jer. 1:18) and his spiritual equilibrium was disturbed or troubled by the misbehaviour of the people he lived amongst. Because some of them listened, they retained a copy of his prophecies which was passed on to be included in the Bible which was handed down to us. He did not let them shut him down, but he did not run after them and plead with them or even scream at them. He said what YHVH wanted him to say, clearly and firmly. Prophets do not shriek like the false priestesses or Delhi in Greece, who even drooled and rolled around on the ground for added effect.

He kept on saying what he had to say and when his world totally fell apart, he expressed his sorrow and even his initial bitterness. We are not told how long he remained angry with the situation before he turned it over to YHVH, but he did not wallow in his anger and bitterness or let it fill his life with all the negativity that too many people seem to get stuck in. As he expressed it, he kept on going until it had emptied out of his system and left enough room for his life to fill up with the compassions and goodnesses of YHVH.

Filling up with this positive spiritual approach did not make his life suddenly get any better as the crowds drifted away and sunshine returned. He was chained and all the negative circumstances of his life, lost any power to negatively impact his heart and soul. He gained the strength to go on and did not allow his troubles to crush him or cause him to want to quit or find a safe place to hide until things began to look up. He kept on being conscious of the goodnesses and the compassions of YHVH. He kept his focus on the world to come.

I am a convinced Zionist and I believe in the spiritual destiny of my Jewish people. Many of them are stuck in the darkness of false traditions and false teachings which make up most of rabbinic Judaism, but that is not where they are going to say. I was recently told that more and more Jews are praying at the Western Wall because they know that Messiah's kingdom is close. There is an appreciable increase in their spiritual expectation and the only place they can find the spiritual satisfaction they are craving is in the Messiah.

They may have to spend time peeling off and shedding all the spiritual junk which Rabbinic Judaism continues to harbour, but I am not growing impatient with them or with the traumatic events that are increasingly causing great sadness in our world. I want to learn good spiritual anger control. I do not just want to pretend that bad things are not happening, and I do not want to focus on the good things in my life and around the world to the exclusion of all the pain and horror which is on the rise globally.

We are living in a world which produces more than enough food to feed everybody on the planet, yet we are still letting people go hungry and even starve to death at an alarming and accelerating event. We have enough medicine to treat all the people on our planet who are struggling with infectious diseases of all kinds. We are finding new and better ways to treat cancer and even the various debilitating mental health conditions that were previously just neglected and ignored. There are more than enough resources on our planet to give every member of the human race a high quality of life.

Even with the greatly increased weapons production globally, we see our world putting checks and balances in place so that the horror of the two world wars is never repeated. There are still situations which could escalate and explode into massive military conflicts and even into nuclear confrontations. But so much progress has been made that if we could persuade people not to use violence and hatred to achieve their goals our world could become a safe place for everybody. This is not a likely possibility, but it is still a possibility.

I grew up at the height of the Cold War and my neighbourhood was actually equipped with a very loud nuclear attack air raid siren and we were all drilled in evacuation procedures if Calgary actually experienced a nuclear attack. As I went through school, we were told that a worldwide nuclear holocaust was imminent and that we would run out of our fuel resources long before the year 2000. Both side of the Cold War were increasing their stockpiles of nuclear weapons at an alarming rate.

Once things calmed down a bit, I found out that the intercontinental nuclear bombers had actually been launched around twenty times and a conflict was averted each time with only seconds to spare. I wasn't really scared then, and I am not really scared now. Before I came to faith, I knew that if there was nothing I could do to stop an all out nuclear war, then I just had to get on with my life and hope for the best. When I came to faith, I learned to trust in the prophetic purposes of YHVH And on the coming Kingdom of our Messiah, which would come at its appointed time.

Jeremiah lived through the horrors of the fall of Jerusalem and the brutality of the Babylonian captivity. Hundreds and thousands of Jewish people perished, and the survivors initially lived in dire straights, either as captives in a foreign land or as impoverished survivors among the ruins of Israel and Judah.

It must not have seemed very possible that the Jewish people had much of a future to look forward to and there was the danger that they would just melt away and disappear, like so many other broken peoples who only lived as remnants and could never hope to regain their past glory. Jeremiah knew that there was no hope for him or the Jewish people in their current distress, unless they turned their eyes on YHVH and watched Him deliver them and restore them to the land they had been chased out of.

Even for us when our walls come a tumbling down, YHVH is still our portion, and we should always hope in Him. His purposes will always be fulfilled, even if He has to undertake drastic measures with an increasingly dark world. It is funny, that our world is both becoming a better place and a worse place at the same time. Most people have swallowed the lie of evolution hook line and sinker and the murder of babies in the womb may have suffered a temporary setback in the US, but it is still on the rise globally. The gay agenda is swiftly changing the way our society looks at the sexually broken and Hallmark has actually come up with a gay Christmas movie. The portrayal of gay couples as normal has even found its way into most mainline advertising and people can now be taken to court if they speak put against homosexuality.

Gender violence and the breakdown of more and more marriages, joins hands with an alarming rise in homelessness. Even all kinds of mental illness are also on the rise as people are traumatized and become emotionally and mentally destabilized. There are still people who are doing their best to sound positive and even offer various solutions for the many crises we face in our modern world. But I do not see any real political will to make the necessary changes that would improve our lives globally and now anything that happens around the globe is having a growing impact around the world.

Pollution has been scaled back in many parts of the world, but in places like India and China it is as bad as it was at the height of the Industrial Revolution. Activists are still greatly outnumbered by those greedy people who will do anything to make a buck. Entertainment is escalating and most people live so much in social media that the noise of the pain and anguish of those who suffer is drowned out and ignored.

I am not predicting that the walls of our world are suddenly going to come tumbling down any time soon. But if our focus is on our supposed progress and the potential for the new politically correct agenda to resolve the problems of our world, we will be sorely disappointed. The British Prime Minister only delayed world war by making compromises with one of the most evil men who has ever lived. Making compromises is not the same as dealing with problems and resolving conflicts.

Our faith may not make much progress towards healing our world, but that does not mean that we should ever stop being salt and light. Keeping our focus on the goodnesses and the compassions of G-d is a proactive response which will lift our focus out of the mess we may experience when the walls of our world come tumbling down. He never abandoned Jeremiah, even as he was being held captive in Egypt. He never made it home to the Holy Land and no one knows where he is buried.

He knew that the end of his world was not the end of the whole world. He knew that if he was put into the grave he would rise again when the kingdom comes. We need to let this same assurance be the anchor of our souls in the storms of life. Shabbat Shalom and Shavua Tov.