

**Pardes from Jerusalem - Weekly Parsha Podcast –
Parshat VaYeitzei**

Yaakov's Oath – The paradox between two disparate aspirations: Are we here for ourselves or to be in service to something greater than ourselves?

This session addresses the spiritual practice of holding paradox and cultivating “these and these are both the words of the living God – אלו ואלו דברי א-להים חיים” (Talmud, Eruvin 13b). This sharing is based on the Lubavitcher Rebbe's, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson's, teaching in *Likkutei Sichot*, Vol.25, adapted by Rabbi Yanki Tauber.

The Rebbe asks the everlasting theological, philosophical and spiritual question that has intrigued, bothered and compelled humankind to answer throughout all of history: Why are we here? All possible answers to this question fall into two general categories: a) For ourselves, e.g., to enjoy life, realize our potential, achieve transcendence; b) To be in service to something greater than ourselves, e.g., society, history, God.

What makes this question so difficult to address is that we sense both “a” and “b” to be true. **On the one hand**, we are strongly driven to better ourselves, to “get the most” out of every experience and opportunity. We also sense that this is not necessarily a shallow selfishness but something very deep and true in our souls --- something implanted in us by our Creator as intrinsic to our identity and purpose. **On the other hand**, we may be equally aware that we are part of something greater than ourselves --- that if our existence has meaning, it is only because it serves a reality beyond its own finite and subjective being.

Indeed, we find both ideas expressed in our tradition. **On the one hand**, the Torah repeatedly stresses that God's program for life is for the good of humankind, both materially and spiritually (Deuteronomy 11: 13-21 – 2nd portion of the *Shema* and Leviticus 26: 3-13). The Midrash in *Bereishit Rabba* 44:1 and the Talmud, *Makot* 23b, teach that “the *mitzvot* were given only to refine humanity.” Elsewhere, the Talmud, in *Sanhedrin* 37a, even goes so far as to state: “Every person is obligated to say ‘The world was created for my sake.’” Thus the Baal HaTanya, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, describes in *Likkutei Torah* the saga of the soul as a “descent for the purpose of ascent” – the soul's entry into the physical state entails a curtailment of its spiritual faculties and sensitivities, but the purpose of this is that she be elevated by the challenges and achievements of earthly life.

On the other hand, the highest praise that the Torah has for Moshe Rabeinu, whom the Rambam states in his "*Thirteen Fundamental Principles*", is the father of all prophets, is that he was simply a "servant of God." (Deuteronomy 34:5). Our sages repeatedly exhort us to strive for altruism in our lives, so that everything we do is permeated with the recognition that "I was not created but to serve my Creator," as taught in the Talmud, *Kiddushin* 82b, *Pirkei Avot* 1:3 and in the Rambam's Mishnah Torah, *Hilchot Teshuva*, chapter 10.

To understand the interplay, the intersectionality and interconnectedness between these two apparently contradictory beliefs and the respective places they hold in the purpose of our lives, we must first examine a juncture in the life of Yaakov Avinu.

The Ramban, Nachmanides (Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, 1270), writes on Genesis 12:6 that "everything that happened to the Patriarchs is a signpost for their children. These events all come to instruct the future: when something happens to one of the *Avot* one understands from it what is decreed to occur to his descendants." More than role models or sources of inspiration, the lives of our forefathers and foremothers are all-inclusive blueprints that map every fork and turn in the road of our lives, addressing every dilemma and paradox that may confront us.

The *Ohr HaChaim*, Rav Chaim ben Moshe ibn Attar, Moroccan Biblical commentator, d. 1743 in Jerusalem, teaches that Yaakov's journey to Charan is the story of every soul's descent to earth. The soul leaves the ideal spiritual state behind – an existence steeped in divine awareness and knowledge – to struggle in the employ of a "Lavan" in a "Charan" environment. For the material state is a wicked deceiver, accentuating the corporeal and obscuring the Godly, confusing a person's priorities and perpetually threatening the virtue of the spiritual. But every soul is empowered, as a child of Yaakov, to make this a "descent for the purpose of ascent": to emerge from the "Charan" of material earth with its integrity intact. Indeed, not only are the spiritual powers galvanized by the challenge, it also gains "wealth," having learned to transform the forces and resources of the physical world to further its spiritual ends. Most significantly, in its spiritual state the soul is perfect but childless; only when it dwells in a physical being can it fulfill the divine *mitzvot*, which are the soul's progeny and its link to the infinite and the eternal. The *Midrash Tanchuma*, *Noach* 2 teaches that "A person's progeny are his good deeds.

On his way to Charan, Yaakov camped for the night on Mount Moriah where he had this famous dream in which he saw angels ascending and descending a ladder reaching from earth to heaven. Upon waking, in Genesis 28:18, we read, “Yaakov took the stone (on which he slept) and raised it as a monument.” He then made an oath, which the Torah relates as follows:

Genesis 28:20 – “... If God will be with me, and safeguard me on this road that I am traveling, and He will provide me with bread to eat and clothes to wear;

Genesis 28:21 – and I will return in peace to my father’s house, and God will be my God;

Genesis 28:22 – then this stone, which I have erected as a monument, shall be a house of God...”

The syntactical construction of Yaakov’s oath raises an important question in our relationship with the Divine. The oath consists of two parts: **a)** the conditions for its fulfillment (“if God will be with me,” “provide me bread to eat and clothes to wear,” etc.) and **b)** Yaakov’s fulfillment of the oath once the conditions are met (“then this stone...shall be a house of God...”). **What is not clear though is where the former ends and the latter begins.** Verse 20 is obviously part of the conditions --- things that God will do for Yaakov to enable him to fulfill his vow. The same applies to the first part of verse 21---“and I will return in peace to my father’s house.” Verse 22 speaks of what Yaakov will do for God, the fulfillment of his oath. **But what about the second part of verse 21, “and God will be my God”?** Is this part of the conditions for the vow’s fulfillment or is it part of the vow itself? In other words, does the second part of verse 21 mean “**and** God...” or “**then** God?” This question expresses the heart of the matter. Is experiencing the transcendental nature of the Lord in an immanent way as “my God” a condition for the vow’s fulfillment or as part of the vow itself?

In fact, two of the greatest biblical commentators and thinkers, Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, d. 1105) and Nachmanides, the Ramban (Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, d. 1270), debate this very point. According to Rashi, the first two verses are the conditions of Yaakov’s vow, while the third verse is its fulfillment: in order for Yaakov to make the stone a “house of God,” he requires to experience the Divine as “his God.” The Ramban however sees the words as “**then** God will be my God” --- as part of the promise itself, not as a condition --- meaning that if God will provide Yaakov with protection, food, clothes and a peaceful return, then he in fact will make God his God and the stone will be the abode for the Divine presence.

What is the deeper significance of these two interpretations? And why would the Torah recount Yaakov's oath in a way that allows for variant readings?

In the *Midrash Tanchuma, Parshat Nasso* our sages describe the purpose of creation as "God's desire for a dwelling in the lowly realms." God desired that there be a realm that is "lowly" --- a reality inhospitable to spirituality and Godliness ---and that this alien place be made into a "dwelling" for the Divine, an environment receptive and yielding to God's goodness and truth.

The Baal HaTanya explains in chapter 36 in Tanya, that this "lowly realm" is our physical world, "of which none is lower in the sense that it obscures the light of God...to the extent that it contains forces which actually oppose God with the claim that 'I am the ultimate.'" The physical world is actually the greatest concealment of the divine truth. A spiritual entity (e.g. an idea or feeling) exists to express something; a physical entity merely exists. The spiritual conveys that there is something greater than myself, which I want to be a part of, to be in service to. The physical proclaims "I am", contesting the truth that God is the ultimate and exclusive reality. But when a human being utilizes the resources and forces of the physical world to be in service to God, that individual sanctifies the material, so that it too is in service to God, becoming transformed into an instrument of Godliness, rather than obscuring the Divine presence.

This is the meaning of Yaakov's oath to make "this stone...a house of God." Yaakov is pledging himself to humankind's calling in life: to fulfill the divine purpose for creation by making the material world a "dwelling for God." Yaakov is promising to make "the stone" --- the brute substantiality of the physical world --- into a Divine abode.

To achieve this, Yaakov requires several things from God. He is not displaying arrogance by issuing an ultimatum. To the contrary --- his conditions are exactly that: those realities that will enable his soul to subsist in a physical body and achieve its aim of making the world a home for God.

The Rebbe then asks: where does personal fulfillment figure in this construct, if at all?

Can the "dwelling of God in the lowly realms" be constructed mechanically, by workers faithful to their employer but devoid of all understanding and appreciation of what they are doing? Can the human being be in service to God without experiencing God as a personal and intimate presence in one's life?

Ultimately, the answer is no. God desires that we be in relationship with the Divine “with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might.” (Deuteronomy 6:5). That our life’s work should not be a robotic implementation of commandments that are vague, mysterious, and understood by few, but rather a labor of love that stimulates our minds, excites our hearts and fulfills our every faculty.

Is this another condition or is it part of the mission itself? Rashi, who comes to explain the literal meaning of the verse, views the issue in its quintessential simplicity. Why was man created? To serve the Creator. Everything else is a condition, a means to an end. If it is required that a person experience fulfillment in life by being in relationship with the Divine, then God provides him/her with such capacity, just as God provides the person with all the other necessary tools to fulfill one’s mission. But this is secondary to the person’s ultimate purpose in life, which is to make the world a home for God.

The Ramban however reads the Torah through the lens of the mystic --- with an eye to the experiential and anthropomorphic dimension of reality. From this perspective, a person’s experience of the Divine is not just a tool, but the very purpose of life! Indeed, in section II, 42b, the Zohar describes the purpose of creation “in order that God be known” by His/Her creations.

As with all variant interpretations of Torah, “these and these are both the words of the living God.” (Talmud Eruvin 13b). The soul’s elevation to a deeper relationship with God through its sanctification of physical life is **both a condition for and a component part of the purpose of creation.**

For the egotistical, self-oriented nature of a person is also part of “this stone” --- part of the obtuse physicality that is the lowest tier of God’s creation. It, too, must be developed into a “house of God,” into an environment hospitable to the divine truth. This if our service of God were to be something we merely submitted to, there could be no true “dwelling in the lowly realm.” It would mean that the physical reality has not really been transformed, but that an extrinsic state, alien to its nature, has been imposed upon it. A true “dwelling in the lowly realm” is a product of the very “lowly realm” itself --- a product of the physical human being, appreciated by one’s own physical mind, desired by one’s own physical heart and motivated by one’s own physical self. Each one of us therefore possesses the capacity to be transformed within our own selves into a “house of God.”

The Rebbe concludes by teaching that therefore an integral part of God's dwelling is a human self for whom "God is **my** God" --- for whom a life in the service of the Almighty, being in relationship with the Divine is in fact deeply satisfying and ultimate in self-realization.

I would like to suggest that, ultimately, we are being called to remain open to both Rashi's and the Ramban's points of view, cultivating the practice of holding paradox in a true "these and these are both the words of the living God – אלו ואלו דברי א-להים חיים."

I suspect that at times, in the spirit of Rashi's understanding, we need to first encounter the Divine in a personal, immanent and visceral way before we can begin engaging in making a home for God in the lowly realm. At times this is essential: that some type of sensing God's presence internally, within, moves us and inspires us to engage in and embrace the mission of transforming "the stone" into a "house of God."

Yet, at other times, in the spirit of the Ramban, we trust and simply embrace the mission to make a home for God in the lowly realm by transforming our physical selves and environment into a spiritual reality, thereby in fact encountering the Divine presence within us as we convert "the stone" into a "house of God."

In conclusion, I would like to suggest adopting the practice of becoming more aware of how each of you goes about expressing your Jewishness, through Talmud Torah, observance of mitzvot and prayer or private contemplation. Pay attention to how much in the course of any given day you are sensing the presence of God as the springboard and inspiration for your Torah learning, observance and prayer practice. Pay attention to how much by first engaging in these practices you actually begin to sense a closeness within and around you with the Divine as a result. Observe as well if you are in fact experiencing as your purpose in life a sense of self-fulfillment, realization of potentials and enjoyment. Or perhaps you feel the experience of being in service to that which is greater than yourself as your purpose in life.

Perhaps both??? I would like to further suggest that the experience of this remarkable intersectionality of these four divergent themes serves, for some, as quite a deep and profound religious experience of encountering the Divine. I invite all of you to dwell in the paradox and, with compassion, hold space to encounter the fluidity and variety of the endless shades of gray that reside between the absolute "either black or white." May we all merit to transform "this stone" into a "house of God."