
THE TANACH STUDY CENTER mail.tanach.org
In Memory of Rabbi Abraham Leibtag
Questions for Self Study - by Menachem Leibtag

PARSHAT VA'YETZE

PART I - QUESTIONS FOR THE 'SHABBOS TABLE'

LAVAN'S FAMILY

1. When Yaakov arrives in Charan, he meets Rachel as she is taking care of Lavan's sheep. As you review this story (i.e. read 29:1-11) attempt to answer the following questions (that relate to Lavan's family):

1. Why is Rachel taking care of the sheep by herself?
2. Why isn't Leah or anyone else 'helping out'?
3. Why are all the other shepherds male?
4. How old is Rachel at this time?

If (or when) you give up, see Ramban on 29:9, noting how he answers all of the above questions; and enjoy!

PRAYING OR COMPLAINING

2. Review 30:1-2, noting how Rachel demands that Yaakov give her a child. Compare this incident with the beginning of Parshat Toldot (see 25:21) where Yitzchak prays that Rivka will have a child. Relate as well to 30:22-24 (when Rachel finally does give birth).

In your opinion, what was the nature of Rachel's demand? Does it imply that she wanted Yaakov to 'pray for her'?

Why was Yaakov angered by this request? In your opinion, was Yaakov's anger (see 30:2) justified?

Similarly, was Rachel's request improper, or was it simply the manner by which she asked?

If the latter, how should she have asked?

Can you explain why God's Name in this narrative is specifically "shem ELOKIM"? [Relate to Breishit 17:1-9.]

As above, after you answer these questions, see Ramban on 30:1-2!

HA-"MAKOM" ASHER YIVCHAR HASHEM

3. Note the emphasis and repetition of the word "ha'Makom" in the beginning of Parshat Va'yetze, i.e. 28:11,16,17,19. [Note this same word in 13:14 and 22:4 as well. Does this refer to the same place?

Then, review Devarim chapter 12, noting the use of the word "ha'makom" in 12:5,11,14,18. Is this the same "makom" as above?

What is a common theme that links all of these parshiot?

Relate your answer to Chazal's opinion that the site of Yaakov's dream was the same site as the Akeyda on Har Ha'Moriah, and eventually the site of the Bet HaMikdash in Yerushalayim.

To support Chazal's opinion, see II Divrei Ha'yamim 3:1-2! See also Rashi 28:17, noting how the Midrash of R. Elazar that he quotes relates directly to this parallel.

4. When Yaakov first arrives in Charan he meets a group of shepherds by a well. Review 29:1-3, noting the minute detail in the Torah's description of these events. Recall as well the Torah's detail re: the wells that Yitzchak and Avraham had dug (see 26:13-23).

Can you explain the need for this detail, i.e. how it adds to our comprehension of the story that develops.

Then, see Ramban on 29:2-3 for a beautiful explanation, relating to the exegetic principle of "maase avot siman la'banim". See also Ramban on 26:20-22 for a more complete explanation of this approach.

DREAMING DOLLARS

5. Recall the vision that Yaakov saw (before leaving Eretz Yisrael)

of angels going up and down a ladder (see 28:12). Then, compare that vision to what Yaakov sees in his dream after working with Lavan's sheep for twenty years, as described in 31:10-13.

Can you identify both a parallel and a contrast? If so, can you find any significance in this contrast? (If you need help, ask any 'yeshiva bochur' who has gone into business....).

MOTHERS KNOW BEST

6. Review 29:31-30:25, noting **who** names each of Yaakov's children, and which of God's Names [Elokim or Havaya (or none)] is mentioned in the explanation of each son's name. Can you identify a clear pattern (or at least a partial one)?

If so, explain what that pattern is.

Can you suggest a reason why? In your answer, relate to Yaakov's answer to Rachel's demand in 30:1-2, as well as to Breishit 17:1-7.

A MATTER OF PERSPECTIVE

7. Review 31:36-42, noting how Yaakov bursts out at Lavan after being accused of stealing his "trafim". To the best of your recollection, has Yaakov ever spoken in this manner before? Attempt to explain what sparks this manner of response at this time.

Relate your answer to Yaakov's struggle with the "malach" in 32:24-32, and his subsequent name change to Yisrael, as well as the situation he now finds himself in.

Then, review 31:43-44, noting how Lavan doesn't appear to be impressed by Yaakov's harsh words. Can you explain why?

Relate to Yaakov's statement in 32:11 ("ki b'makli avarti et ha'yarden...") comparing how 'poor' he was when he left Eretz Canaan and how wealthy he is upon his return. To whom does Lavan relate this 'net growth'?

GUARDIAN ANGELS

8. Note that the entire Parsha this week covers only one 'parshia', i.e. a "parshia ptucha" starts at the beginning of Va'yetze and continues until the very end of the Parsha. Verify this point by using a Tanach Koren or similar.

Attempt to suggest a reason why, while relating your answer to the "malachim" who are found in both the beginning and at the end of the Sedra (28:10-12 /32:1-2).

Relate as well to Rashi on 28:21 and 32:2.

Then, see Ramban on 32:2. Why does he disagree with Rashi? Can you explain how Ramban's interpretation relates to "kabbalah"?

PART II - QUESTIONS FOR PREPARATION

For shiur on Yaakov's Dream

1. Review 28:10-22, and while studying these psukim, attempt to divide them into several paragraphs. As you identify each paragraph, try to give a short title that accurately summarizes its main topic.

As you review your titles and conclusions, be sure that you fully understand the logic behind the flow of topic from one paragraph to the next. [It would also be helpful to attempt to turn your titles into a short outline.]

After you've completed this 'homework', try to answer the following questions:

2. As you should have noticed, Yaakov's dream (as described in 28:12-15) contains both a vision and a 'message' from God. Note as well that is the first time in Chumash that God speaks to Yaakov. Why do you think that God decides to appear to him specifically at this time in his life? [Relate to 28:1-5!]

In your opinion, what is God's primary message in this "hitgalut" [revelation] to Yaakov? Attempt to explain the significance of each of these four psukim.

3. In what manner is God's promise to Yaakov (in 28:13-15) similar to God's earlier promises to Yitzchak (see 26:1-5) and to Avraham Avinu (see 12:1-8, 13:14-17, 15:18, 17:7-8 etc.)? In what manner is this "hitgalut" different?

PART III - PARSHANUT

YAAKOV's NEDER

1. Carefully review once again 28:13-22, especially the part dealing with Yaakov's "neder" [vow] in verses 18-22.

Note that Yaakov's "neder" contains two parts:

- 1) IF Hashem will....
- 2) THEN I will...

Read 28:20-22 carefully, and decide where the 'IF' clause ends, and where the 'THEN' clause begins! Be sure that you can identify at least two possibilities.

What philosophical problem is raised by Yaakov's statement: "v'haya Hashem li Elokim" (in 28:21)?

Is this phrase part of the 'condition' ("IF" clause) or part of the 'promise' ("THEN" clause)?

What is problematic about each possibility?

2. Compare God's promise to Yaakov in 28:15 to the 'conditions' that Yaakov sets in 28:20-21. Does this comparison shed any light on the above question?

Study Rashi on 28:20-21, noting he relates to this.

According to Rashi, is the phrase "v'haya Hashem li Elokim" a condition or a promise?

Why does Rashi mention God's promise to Avraham Avinu in 17:7-8 (i.e. in "brit milah" / note the phrase "l'hiyot lachem Elokim twice in those psukim)?

Re: Rashi's interpretation that Yaakov prays that there shouldn't be a "psul b'zari" - what does this phrase mean (i.e. what is it referring to)? Did such a problem happen with any of the other forefathers, i.e. was there ever a case when ALL of the children were not chosen?

Relate this to Rashi's understanding of this pasuk, noting once again how and why it should relate to brit milah!

3. Next, see Ramban, noting how he argues with Rashi, claiming that this phrase is part of the 'promise' and not the 'condition'.

Can you explain why he argues with Rashi's conclusion?

According to Ramban, how does this 'promise' of "v'haya Hashem li Elokim" relate to the rest of Yaakov's vow in 28:22?

Note as well that Ramban offers a second explanation, which he considers as "sod". Note, that according to this interpretation, the phrase "v'haya Hashem li Elokim" is neither a condition nor promise, rather 'a statement of fact' - a consequence of the first half of that pasuk ("v'shavi b'shalom et beit Avi").

[Those of you who live in chutz l'aretz may find this Ramban rather disturbing!]

4. Next, see Rashbam [that He will help me in everything that I may do], Chizkuni [He will be a judge and avenger ("dayan v'nokeym")] and Rasag [He will be a "mashgiach" for me].

In what manner do all three of these interpretations share a similar approach? What similarity is shared by all three of these explanations? According to each of these "pirushim", is the phrase a condition or a promise?

How does Chizkuni understand the word "Elokim" in this pasuk? Relate all of these interpretations to the fact that God's Name appears twice in this phrase!

5. See Ibn Ezra.

Note as well how he relates to meaning of God's Name in this pasuk. Why does he put the emphasis on Hashem's Name, and how does this relate to the "hitgalut" itself in 28:12-14?

6. Finally, see Radak. He states specifically that we are dealing with a PROMISE, as Ramban does. In what manner, however, is his explanation different than Ramban's?

7. In your opinion, why do we find so many different approaches in explaining this pasuk?

b'hatzlacha,
menachem

4. Next, review Yaakov's reaction to this "hitgalut" in 28:16-22, noting how his reaction is quite different than the reactions of Avraham & Yitzchak (after God had appeared to them). Can you explain why? [In your answer, relate to Yaakov's current predicament.]

5. As you review 28:16-17, note how Yaakov makes several statements that all relate to certain things that he has now realized (because of this "hitgalut").

Attempt to explain how each of these 'realizations' relates to God's revelation in 28:12-15.

Among Yaakov's conclusions is his statement: "ein zeh ki im bet Elokim" [this is none other than God's house]. Did you understand this statement as a 'conclusion', a 'prediction', or a 'statement of intent'? [What is this "bet Elokim" that Yaakov refers to?]

Relate your answer to the psukim that follow!

6. In 28:18-19, Yaakov takes several actions. Can you explain the reason for each of them? In what manner do they relate to what he just stated in 28:16-17? In what manner do they relate to 28:20-22?

As you study 28:20-22, notice that Yaakov makes a "neder" (vow). Be sure that you understand how Yaakov's actions in 28:18-19 relate directly to his 'promise' in 28:22!

In your opinion, which realization prompted Yaakov to make this "neder"?

7. Review 28:20-21, noting how this includes a set of 'conditions' that Yaakov makes. Be sure that you understand how these 'conditions' relate to God's special promise in 28:15!

In your opinion, do these 'conditions' reflect his doubt that God may not fulfill His promise in 28:13-15? If not, can you offer any other explanation for these conditions?

How did you translate the opening word "im" (in 28:20)? Can this word have more than one meaning in Hebrew? If so, what else may it imply, based in this context?

8. Review 28:20-22 once again, noting how Yaakov's "neder" is conditional, i.e. a condition followed by a promise [IF.../THEN...].

Attempt to determine where the 'IF clause' ends and the 'THEN clause' begins. [If you are studying to become a lawyer, this will be good practice for you.]

Based on your understanding of the 'THEN clause' attempt to determine what in essence Yaakov promises to do upon his return to this site?

How does this promise relate to his 'realization' in 28:16-17? Similarly, how does his 'IF clause' relate to God's promise in 28:15. [Note how Rashi on 28:20 relates precisely to this parallel! If you have time, continue this question in the Parshanut section below.]

9. When Yaakov finally returns to Eretz Canaan (in Parshat Va'yishlach), does he ever fulfill this neder? If so, when? If not, can you explain why he doesn't? In your answer, relate to both 31:9-13 and 35:9-16!

Do Yaakov's offspring ever fulfill this "neder"? [In your answer, relate to Devarim 12:1-14.]

10. When does Yaakov FIRST decide that it is time to 'return home'? Relate to 30:22-26. [See also 30:1-2 and 28:20-21.]

In your opinion, what prompts this decision?

Why doesn't Yaakov actually return home at that time? Is there a logical reason why he wants to first raise his own sheep? [Relate to 30:28-35.]

Based on the 'deal' that he concludes with Lavan, when should Yaakov finally return home? When does he actually return home? Relate to 30:22-31:4, and also to 31:10-13.

What finally does prompt Yaakov to return?

Relate to 31:1-3 in relation to 30:43!

[Could you consider this "maase avot siman la'banim!!"]