

Vayetze

וַיֵּצֵא

“He went out”

Genesis 28:10 – 32:3

Torah Together



This *Torah* portion covers about 20 years in Jacob’s life, telling of his journey to Haran where he meets his uncle and finds a wife for himself. It also documents the births of his children and tells of his leaving Haran to return to his father’s house. Much about Jacob’s character can be learned in this portion.

1. Jacob leaves home - 28:10-22

a) When Jacob left Beer Sheva, where was he headed? What were the reasons for this destination? What were the two reasons he was leaving home? How do you think Jacob felt as he left on his journey?

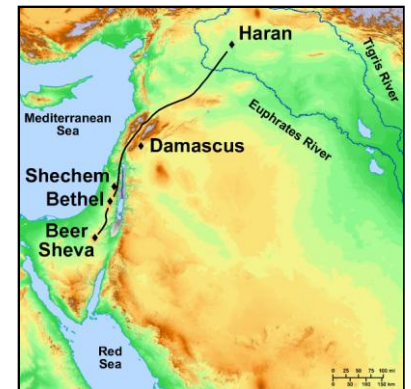
Jacob headed northeast to Haran where Rebekah’s family lived. His goal was to locate his mother’s family and to choose a wife from them. Also, Esau had threatened to kill Jacob because of his deception in gaining Isaac’s blessing and Jacob was fleeing from his brother’s anger. This was probably the first time that Jacob had left home by himself. It was to be a long trip to an unfamiliar destination and he was undoubtedly lonely and fearful.

b) Where did Jacob stop to spend the night on his journey? Describe the dream that Jacob had here. How would you interpret his dream?

Luz (meaning almond tree), a small town west of Ai, is between Jerusalem and Shechem. In his dream, a ladder extended from heaven to earth with angels ascending and descending. Several interpretations are possible: (1) God’s special blessing on Jacob and his descendants. (2) Mt. Sinai and giving of the Torah. (3) God’s special blessing on the land. In John 1:43-51, Yeshua relates the dream to his coming.

c) What did God say to Jacob that night? What was Jacob’s response?

God restated his promise to Abraham and reassured Jacob, who was in awe and fearful, that He would bring him back to this very spot. This was likely the first time he had “met with” God. It must have been very encouraging to have God confirm that Jacob was to be the recipient of God’s original promise to Abraham.



Scripture Link:

Genesis 12:6-8 tells the story of Abraham’s first meeting with God in the Promised Land at Bethel. It was very likely on this same spot where Jacob slept and had his dream. **Genesis 31:13** records that Jacob remembered this spot as the place where God met with him. Finally, in **Genesis 35:1-14**, we see that Jacob returns to this very spot, just as God had promised.

Jacob's Vow

Some may see the vow that Jacob makes to God in verses 20-22 as a bargain with God – “If you do this, I’ll do that.” But God had already promised to be with Jacob and to watch over him. So Jacob’s vow was done out of a heart of gratitude, an offering for the blessings of God that he believed he would receive on his journey.

The Stone covering the Well

It seems that the stone covering the well was so large that it took all of the shepherds together to move it from the mouth of the well. This would force all of the users of the well to be together to water their flocks. Can you see any implications in this?

Jacob's Arrival at Haran

As Jacob kisses Rachel and begins to weep, you get a feeling for the stress he was under during his journey. It must have been a difficult and frightening experience for him, but now he had arrived at his destination and God had indeed guided and protected him.

d) What does Beth-El mean? Do you know the location of Bethel? Why did Jacob set up a ‘mazzevah’ or sacred pillar at Bethel and anoint it with oil?

Beth-El or House of God, is described as 12 miles north of Jerusalem on the road to Shechem, where it crosses the road from Jericho to the Mediterranean Sea. Site of today’s Beitin, just west of Ai. He set up the ‘mazzevah’ to commemorate the event and to mark the location.

e) What vow did Jacob make to God that day? What was God’s part and what was Jacob’s part?

Jacob’s vow was not a “bargain with God”, it was more like an acknowledgement of God’s blessing. “God, if you indeed do what You’ve said You will do (keep me safe, etc), then You will be my God and I will tithe.” Note how this fits in with Jacob’s fearfulness and homesickness that night.

2. Jacob at the Well - 29:1-14

a) Jacob arrived at a well near Haran (in Paddan-Aram). What was the purpose of the stone covering the well? What does this imply about the people that used this well?

Certainly the stone protected the water source from contamination and from “unauthorized” usage. But the stone was also a device to assure that no one could get more than their fair share of the water - all had to be present before the stone could be removed. It implies a less than trusting relationship between shepherds. (There are several stories in the Bible about wells & women. How many can you recall?)

b) Jacob inquired about Laban’s family and met Rachel. Why do you think that Jacob “kissed her and wept aloud” (verse 11)?

It had been a difficult and frightening trip for Jacob, alone in unfamiliar territory, and he was obviously greatly relieved to be in the company of “family.” Rachel ran to tell her father, Laban, the news of his arrival.

c) What do you think Laban thought when he heard about Jacob from Rachel? Do you think there is any hidden meaning in his statement, “You are my own flesh and blood”?

Remember that Laban was Jacob’s uncle, his mother’s brother. Laban probably thought to himself, “Here’s my chance to have another son, and someone who’ll work for me.” (We know from the story of Abraham acquiring Rebekah as a wife for Isaac (Genesis 24) that Laban was somewhat conniving and self-serving.)

3. Jacob Works for a Dowry - 29:15-31

a) After a month, Laban offered to pay Jacob for his work. What does this say about the kind of worker Jacob was? What was Jacob's "price"? Do you think Laban was surprised by the proposal?

Jacob must have been a hard worker or Laban wouldn't have offered to keep him on. Jacob offered to work for seven years for Rachel's hand in marriage. Laban probably knew that Jacob loved Rachel and expected the offer.

b) What were the differences between Rachel & Leah? What do you think is meant by "weak eyes"? How did the seven years seem to pass for Jacob? Why?

Weak eyes could mean poor eyesight or just that Rachel was more beautiful than Leah. Jacob loved Rachel so much that "seven years passed as a few days."

c) When Jacob awakened and found he had married the wrong woman, how do you think he felt? Do you think Leah & Rachel were "in on" the deception? How do you think they felt about it? What did Jacob do? What was Laban's excuse for the deception?

Jacob must have been infuriated when he discovered the deception. (Similar to how Isaac felt?) It's difficult to imagine how the entire affair could have been pulled off, but it seems likely that Rachel was in on it, else she could have warned Jacob. She may have been compelled to go along by her father. When Jacob confronted Laban, he said that it was not the custom for the younger sister to marry before the older one. He then offered both daughters for another seven years of work. Jacob had little choice but to go along with it.

" . . . And Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah."

Genesis 29:30

d) Besides two wives, what else did Jacob end up with? Based on verses 30 & 31, do you think Jacob was at fault for his treatment of Leah?

Each wife brought along their handmaid (Leah brought Zilpah and Rachel brought Bilhah). It seems that God blessed Leah because Jacob didn't love her.

Jacob's Dowry

Jacob had no dowry with which to obtain a bride. (See **Jacob's Dowry** in the previous lesson.) Laban recognized that Jacob was a hard worker and he had probably noticed that Jacob was in love with Rachel. It was a good business decision to accept seven years of Jacob's labor for Rachel's hand in marriage.

Leah's Weak Eyes

It's not clear exactly what this phrase means. Some think that Leah may have been nearsighted. Others believe that the word might be better translated as "delicate" or "lovely." In any case, Rachel was seen as the more attractive of the two sisters as she is described as "lovely in form and beautiful."

A Wedding & Deception

In ancient near-eastern weddings, the bride remained fully concealed in clothing during the ceremony and awaited her new husband in a dimly lit marriage chamber. In the meantime, the men in the wedding party celebrated for several hours with plenty of food and drink. It is conceivable that Jacob could have been in such a state that he wasn't aware that Leah had taken Rachel's place.

Domestic Tranquility

It seems clear from the narrative that there was considerable tension between Jacob's wives. Do you think that God intends for a man to have multiple wives or does He perhaps just tolerate the practice? **Deuteronomy 21:15-17** states God's instructions for how the husband of more than one wife should behave. Did Jacob follow these instructions?

Selective Breeding

Based on what we know today, the breeding practices followed by Jacob would not necessarily produce the offspring described in this story. However, Jacob was honest and worked hard. So, as He had promised, God blessed Jacob and his flocks grew abundantly. Note that Laban was also blessed through Jacob's success.

4. Jacob Builds a Family - 29:32 - 30:24

a) Briefly review the chronology of events that leads to the birth of Jacob's 12 children. What significance do you find in the meanings of any of the children's names?

See the chart at the end of this chapter.

b) **Genesis 30:14-16** describes an incident involving mandrakes. Find out what you can about these plants and why they were important. ***Mandragora officinara grows all over Israel, a low plant with no stalk, broad leaves, violet flowers & yellow fruit. It is thought to aid in conception. Also see Song of Songs 7:13.***

c) Notice the verbal exchange between Leah and Rachel. What does this imply about the relationships between each woman and Jacob? How does it make you feel about Leah?

It seems that Leah spent her entire life longing to be loved by Jacob. She kept hoping that bearing him sons would make him love her but he always loved Rachel more. Rachel spent most of her life wishing to bear a child.

d) About how long did it take for Jacob to have his 12 children? ***Assuming that Reuben came along soon after their marriage, we know that Jacob worked for 7 more years to pay for Rachel. In Genesis 31:38, when Jacob was fleeing from Laban, he stated that he had worked for Laban 20 years. This would imply that he worked for him about 14 years after his wedding. Thus it took between 7 and 14 years to have these children.***

5. Jacob Tries Animal Husbandry - 30:25-43

a) After the birth of Joseph, Jacob asked Laban to let him go back home. Why do you think Jacob wanted to leave? What was Laban's response? What do you think were his motivations?

Jacob may have wanted to leave for several reasons: He may have missed his parents; he probably wanted to get out on his own; he may have been tired of working for Laban. Laban said that he learned that God was blessing him through Jacob and offered to pay whatever he asked. As usual, Laban was motivated by riches.

b) Jacob named his price. What was it? ***Jacob asked to have as his share only the spotted or speckled sheep & goats, leaving the better ones for Laban.***

c) Verses 35-36 relate Laban's actions after his agreement with Jacob. What do you think his intent was with these actions?

The day after the agreement, Laban took the spotted & speckled animals, gave them to his sons, and had them move them a 3-day journey from Jacob. The intent was obviously to cheat Jacob.

d) What did Jacob do and what was the result?

Jacob practiced selective breeding, placing striped branches in front of the animals. Through God's intervention, the animals produced spotted & speckled offspring, which Jacob kept for himself. Jacob prospered. (verse 43)

6. Jacob Leaves Laban - 31:1 - 21

a) Describe the events that lead Jacob to begin preparation to return to Canaan. Can you draw any applications to your own life from these events?

First, the relationship between Jacob and Laban had begun to deteriorate as Laban began to believe that Jacob's wealth had come from him. Also, God had told Jacob to return home. He had a dream in which God reminded him of his vow at Beth-el and instructed him to leave.

b) Why do you think Jacob met Rachel and Leah in the fields to discuss this matter with them? What was he seeking from them? What was their response?

Jacob may have met with them in the fields so that they could speak privately. Jacob was seeking their support in leaving Laban. They agreed, gladly choosing to go with Jacob over staying with their father and family.

c) Where was Laban when Jacob chose to leave? Do you think he did this on purpose? What crime did Rachel commit before they left? Why do you think she did this?

Laban had gone to shear his sheep (was out of town) giving Jacob time to pack up and get a head start. Rachel stole her father, Laban's, household gods or idols. She may have wanted them for herself but likely she was just trying to hurt her father.

In-law Problems

The relationship between Jacob and his father-in-law was clearly deteriorating. From Laban's perspective, Jacob had arrived on his doorstep some years earlier with nothing. Now he had amassed wives, children, and large flocks and herds. None of this would have been possible without Laban's help. On the other hand, Jacob had worked hard for everything he had and God had blessed him and Laban both. Laban didn't want to lose the prosperity that he had gained through Jacob and was willing to go to great lengths to prevent this from happening. Jacob, however, had always intended to go back home and God had told him that the time had come. He dreaded the inevitable confrontation with Laban, and waited until he was out of town before quickly packing up his family, flocks and herds and sneaking away. Does this seem consistent with Jacob's character up to this point in his life?

Stolen Household Idols

Why would Rachel want to steal her father's household idols? While she was clearly aware of the God her husband worshiped, she may not have completely forsaken the false gods that she had grown up with and considered them a source of power. Also, she may have harbored some resentment towards her father and saw this as a way to repay him for his mistreatment of her. In either case, this act was unwise at best and may even have been deadly.

Laban confronts Jacob

The confrontation between Laban and Jacob allows each to vent their anger over the way they were treated by the other. In the end, having aired their grievances, Laban and Jacob agree to go their separate ways, each promising not to pass this point to harm the other. *Mizpah*, meaning "watchtower," seems an appropriate name since they are each asking their god to "watch between us." Note that as they swear this covenant to each other they are not necessarily swearing to the same god (verses 51-53).

7. Laban Pursues Jacob - 31:22 - 32:3

a) When did Laban discover that Jacob and his family had fled? What did he do? Where did he catch up with them? What important event happened to Laban on his way?

It was three days later when Laban discovered that they had gone. He gathered his relatives and went after him. They caught up with them in the hill country of Gilead, northeast of the Dead Sea in modern Jordan. On the way, God appeared to Laban in a dream telling him not to say anything against Jacob.

b) Describe the action when Laban overtook Jacob and his family. Do you think Laban had justification for his anger? What do you think angered Laban most?

When Laban overtook Jacob, he was justifiably angry. He accused Jacob of sneaking out on him without saying good-bye and taking his daughters and grandchildren with him. He also accused him of stealing his idols.

c) What was Jacob's response to Laban's anger? What was his response to Laban's accusation of theft?

Jacob explained why he was afraid and swore that if anyone in his camp had stolen Laban's idols, that person would die. (As future events unfold, we will see that the person who had stolen Laban's idols did indeed die.) Jacob was incensed at Laban's anger.

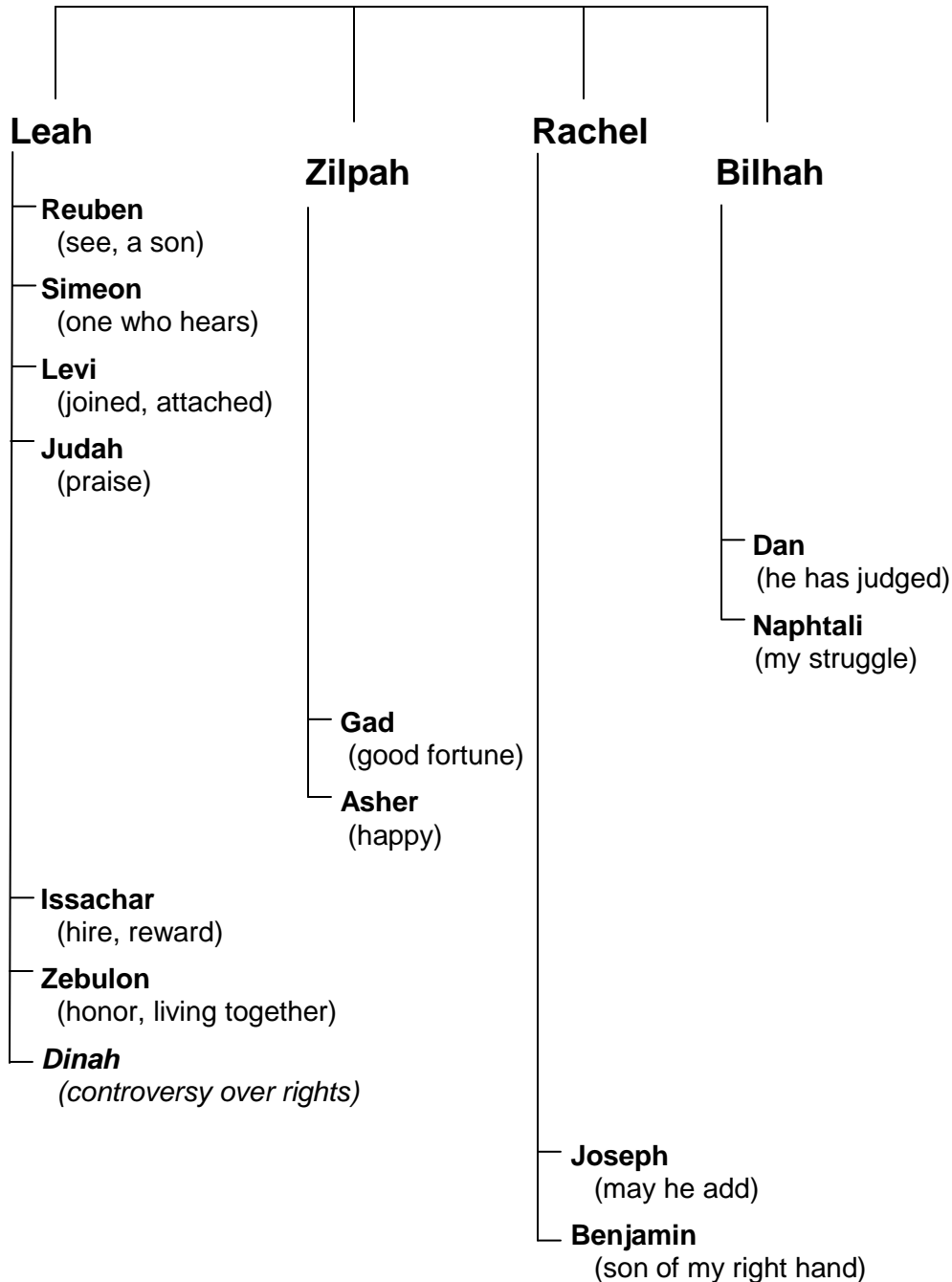
d) After searching Jacob's camp, did Laban find what he was looking for? Why or why not? Analyze the situation that followed and Jacob's words to Laban.

Laban did not find the idols because Rachel was sitting on them and said that since she was in her period, she could not rise. After the failed search, Jacob became angry and poured out his heart to Laban.

e) After both had expressed their anger and frustration, what did the two men do? Describe the process that they went through to seal their agreement.

They agreed to a truce and made a covenant. A boundary stone and a witness marker was set up. (Verse 49, the famous Mizpah is really a peace treaty.) The covenant was sealed with an animal sacrifice. Laban left the next day.

Jacob's Family Tree



Jacob's Family

This diagram lists Jacob's wives and concubines showing their respective children along with the meaning of their names. The births are in order as you read down the page. Dinah (whose name is in italics) is the only daughter mentioned in the list of Jacob's children.

Digging deeper

1. Analyze Laban's deception of Jacob. Compare it with Jacob's deception of Isaac.

Laban carefully planned and arranged the deception on Jacob's wedding night whereas Jacob was basically following his mother's plan when he deceived Isaac. However, in both cases, it is clear that the deceivers had a full understanding of what they were doing and that it was wrong. Both deceptions involved one person impersonating another. From God's point of view, the deception that Jacob received at Laban's hands was an appropriate consequence of Jacob's deception of Isaac.

2. Analyze life from Leah's point of view. Do you think Jacob could have behaved in a more honorable fashion?

One's heart goes out to Leah. She was probably forced to go along with the deception Laban planned. She was probably jealous of Rachel's good fortune in obtaining a fine husband. Once the deed was done and Jacob had both sisters as wives, all Leah wanted was to be loved by Jacob in the same way that he loved Rachel. God blessed her with a fertile womb and she kept hoping that Jacob would love her because she gave him so many sons, but it was not to be. Rachel, on the other hand, who had Jacob's love could not conceive for a number of years. According to Deuteronomy 21:15-17, Jacob did not act in a righteous manner toward his wives.

3. Analyze Jacob's character based on what we know about him so far. Was he a very admirable person?

Jacob does not seem to be a very admirable person so far in his life. The only real positive thing you can say about him is that he wanted God's blessing with all his heart. He was even willing to bend a few rules to get it. Not only was he deceptive, he also avoided conflict. Rather than face Laban and deal with the issues they faced, Jacob chose to flee when Laban was out of town. Jacob was also a fearful man.

For further study, see

Haftarah : Hosea 12:13-14:10

Brit Hadashah : John 1:43-51