



13 Kislev 5784 | November 25, 2023

## **Vayeitzei: A Ladder to Mount Sinai** **Sarah Kaufman, Class of 2025**

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How should we relate to God? So far in the book of Bereishit, we've seen many kinds of relationships: Noach's quiet obedience, the builders of Migdal Bavel's contemptuous brazenness, and Avraham's righteous love and fear of God.

Now, we see Yaakov. Unlike Yitzchak, who closely followed in his father's footsteps, Yaakov forges a new kind of covenantal relationship. In *parshat Vayetzei*, we see his divine revelations through dreams, including the famous *sulam*, commonly translated as a ladder. After the vision of the angels going up and down the *sulam*, God reiterates the covenantal promise and reassures Yaakov that He will protect him:

Remember, I am with you: I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." (Bereishit 28:15)

In response, Yaakov thanks God and renames the site Beit El in appreciation for such a divine revelation. But Yaakov also does something more remarkable. He responds to God and makes his own vow:

Jacob then made a vow, saying, "If God remains with me, protecting me on this journey that I am making, and giving me bread to eat and clothing to wear, and I return safe to my father's house—YKVK shall be my God. And this stone, which I have set up as a pillar, shall be God's abode; and of all that You give me, I will set aside a tithe for You." (Bereishit 28:20-22)

Many commentators are troubled by this vow. Could Yaakov really make his loyalty to God conditional? Rashi on this verse cites Bereishit Rabbah and explains that the vow is dependent on Yaakov's actions, not God's: So long as Yaakov doesn't sin, God will uphold the promise. Ramban elects for a simpler answer and says the word "*im*" (in the phrase "If [*im*] God remains with me" above), typically translated as "if," can also mean "when," so Yaakov's vow isn't conditional after all.

While these are fair interpretations to avoid a difficult implication, they go against the *pshat* of Yaakov's vow. The modern Israeli writer Meir Shalev in his book *Beginnings* instead focuses on the *pshat* and makes a radical claim:

Jacob's very first word—"if"—announces to God that here is a new type of believer. First of all, the word casts respectful doubt, suggesting the possibility that God's promise might not be fulfilled. Second, since "if" is conditional, it offers a deal: If the Lord keeps His word, He will be Jacob's God. And if he doesn't? The answer is unspoken, but it hangs in the air, clear and logical: He will not be my God. Maybe He will be someone else's, but he won't be mine. I'll find myself some other gods.<sup>1</sup>

Despite our discomfort with this less-than-traditional view, it can help us understand and sympathize with Yaakov's perspective. Here is a man fleeing his murderous brother, forced to an unknown land where he'll eventually labor for fourteen years for the woman he loves. Yaakov did not have an easy life. Despite the divine revelation he receives, Yaakov is still scared and alone. His skepticism is understandable.

Shalev relates God's promise, and Yaakov's audacity, to the *Aseret Hadibrot*, the Ten Commandments:

The impression made by Jacob's words was so powerful that five hundred years later, when the Torah was handed down on Mount Sinai, God began the Ten Commandments thus: "I the Lord am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage," and only then continued, "You shall have no other gods beside me." In other words, He first established that He had met the conditions, kept his promise, and only then demanded that He be the sole God of Israel... He spoke to [*B'nei Yisrael*] this way so that they would not be able to tell him 'if,' so that they would not set conditions as their ancestor Jacob had done." (Shalev, p. 33-34)

*Mah inyan Yaakov etzel Har Sinai?* What does the story of Yaakov's vow have to do with Har Sinai?

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<sup>1</sup> Meir Shalev, *Beginnings* (Harmony: 2011), pp. 33-34.



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Yaakov's interaction with God is certainly more relatable. How often do we make promises to God, that if God does something for us then we'll daven more regularly or give more *tzedakah*? We frequently try to bargain with God. But Har Sinai is the ideal. Many commentators, such as the Ramban, see the first of the *Aseret Hadibrot* as a commandment. One must "know and believe God exists" (Ramban on Shemot 20:2). We seek to achieve this level of certainty and *emunah*. But the Torah is well aware that that's not always how it feels day to day, and we see this with Yaakov. Despite hearing God's reassurance and promise from God Himself, Yaakov still had doubts and imposed conditions on his vow. He needed more from God because he was scared and scarred.

Yaakov's model of relationship with God can resonate with us when we're feeling scared, when we want more assurance of God's presence and protection. Sometimes God's will can be inscrutable. At other times, it can be crystal clear, but hard. What shall we do? In dark moments, we can turn to Yaakov's model of audacity, with the hope that we will reach the level of certainty at Har Sinai.

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