



The Journey to Maturation in the Covenant

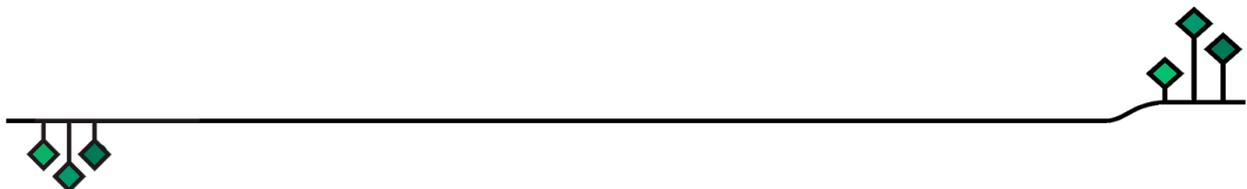
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Parashat VaYeitzei 5781

In our *parashah*, Jacob sets out on a journey to his uncle Laban’s house in Haran. Ostensibly, his trip is a flight to safety and finding a wife. It is actually a journey of growth from Jacob into Israel. His wandering is the first stage of his people’s path from local family or tribe to a pace setter on the world’s road to redemption.

On the way, Jacob has a dream vision of angels and receives a heartening message. God promises to fulfill the covenantal commitment by blessing him and bringing him home. Upon arising, Jacob promises that if God sustains him and enables him to return home safely that he will be faithful to the covenant. He pledges that whatever wealth he accumulates he will tithe to God (Genesis 28:12-22).

The Torah clearly tells us of this pledge to praise Jacob’s sense of gratitude, modelling for us giving back to God from whatever we possess. In so doing, the Torah reminds us that in the biblical first stage of the covenant between us and God, membership had a significant transactional dimension. God blesses, protects, and rewards those who uphold the covenant—“God blessed Abraham in all things” (Genesis 24:1). As Abraham’s servant stresses



to Laban, this includes “flocks and herds, silver and gold, manservants and maidservants, and camels and donkeys” (Genesis 24:35).

This reward and punishment psychology is not limited to Genesis: The Torah repeats often that the rewards go to all faithful members of the covenant. In Deuteronomy, Moses tells the people that they are “to keep the commandments... walk in God’s ways and revere God” (Deuteronomy 8:6). In return, God will bring them to “a good land, a land of water sources... of wheat and barley, vines, fig trees, pomegranates... olive oil, and honey... in which you will eat bread without scarceness...” (8:7-9). In parallel, there will be severe punishments if Israel betrays the covenant and does not listen to God (8:19-20), even catastrophic punishments (28:15ff.). In one of the most repeated passages of all, recited daily in the second paragraph of the Shema, the Torah says that “if you listen diligently to my commandments... I [God] will give you the rain of the land in its due season” (11:13). But if Israel betrays the covenant and serves other gods, then God will “shut up the heavens and there will be no rain...” (11:17).

Maimonides saw the meaning of this pattern of rewards and punishments: The people were not yet of mature religious consciousness. They were moved to join and keep the covenant faithfulness by external rewards and punishments. Maimonides compares that to when children first start learning Torah. They are given honey to lick and candies and treats to eat to make the words of Torah sweet to them. When they grow up they will not need such treats but will appreciate Torah learning for its own sake.¹

¹ Maimonides, Commentary on the Mishnah, Sanhedrin, Perek Helek.



We tend to glorify the earlier generations as more religious and devout,² but the Bible's portrait of the Israelites shows their immature behavior in the desert. When the Israelites lacked water, instead of digging for it, they sat around and blamed Moses (Exodus 15:22-26). When they lacked food, instead of foraging for it, they complained, blamed Moses, and said that they missed the “good old days” [of slavery!] in Egypt where they ate their fill (Exodus 16:2-4). Later, in the Land of Israel, the Bible shows them shifting back and forth between keeping the covenant and serving idolatrous cults, suggesting that the people of Israel were more like children and beginners in the process of religious development.

Although the Rabbis hold the Torah and the earlier generations at the highest level of sanctity and authority, they also saw the covenant as an educational tool, designed to connect to the Jews where they were and grow them to a higher level of religious living. I believe that the Rabbis affirmed that, in their time, God had further self-limited to call the Jews to a higher level of service. The people had more deeply internalized religious values. As a result, they were capable of taking on more authority in the covenant, as well as greater responsibility for realizing it in this world.³ This was possible because, after a millennium of living the covenant, the people of Israel had matured and could participate out of higher level of identification with the *brit*.

As part of this maturation, the Rabbis tried to move the Jews from observing for the sake of reward and punishment, to covenantal commitment for its own sake. The Rabbis approached this shift from two angles. One: they suggested that we cannot discern a pattern of reward for observing commandments. While acknowledging the tradition that individual good deeds

² See the article “[Yeridat Ha-dorot](#)” in Hebrew Wikipedia for extensive discussion and documentation. See also Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 102b.

³ See my forthcoming *The Triumph of Life*, ch. 8.



are rewarded—or at least, when a person has a surplus of good deeds over bad deeds that they are rewarded⁴—the Babylonian Talmud deconstructs the idea in favor of Rabbi Ya’akov, who simply states, “There is no reward for (doing) a *mitzvah* in this world” (Kiddushin 39b).⁵ Rabbi Ya’akov means that there is no discernible consistent pattern that those who fulfill the commandments do better in this life than those who do not observe them. Secondly, the Talmud teaches that “*Olam ke-minhago noheg*,” meaning “the world follows its [objective, natural] course” (Avodah Zarah 54b).⁶ Natural processes neither reward good behavior nor punish bad behavior.

In Pirkei Avot, the classic book of rabbinic ethics and wisdom,⁷ the Rabbis try to educate to this higher religious motivation. “Antigonus of Socho... would say: Do not be like servants who serve the Master for the sake of receiving a payment. Rather be like servants who serve the Master [selflessly] not for the sake of payment” (Mishnah Avot 1:3).

The Rabbis offered the “consolation prize” that there would be reward for all *mitzvot* in the world to come—to which one might say that moving the reward to another realm and a distant date, in itself “discounts” the centrality and effect of the rewards. Yet Rabbi Ya’akov tops even this religious reset by asserting “One hour of repentance and good deeds [= mortal

⁴ See Mishnah Kiddushin 1:10.

⁵ The Gemara softens the blow by suggesting that in the next world, there will be a reward for each *mitzvah* performed. See below.

⁶ See also my previous essay “Covenant: Parashat Noah” for further exploration of this theme, available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/covenant>.

⁷ See *Sage Advice: Pirkei Avot*, with my translation and commentary (Koren Publishers, Jerusalem 2016), pp. xv-xxxvi, especially p. xxviii.



existence] is better than all the [soul/spirit only] life of the World to Come” (Mishnah Avot 4:17).⁸

If divine reward and punishment is not to be the driving force of covenantal living, then what can motivate the people to such a life? The Rabbis’ answer is: People will commit out of knowledge and understanding of the Torah and its commandments, out of internalizing the vision and values of the covenant, and out of love of God. The Rabbis established the *mitzvah* of Talmud Torah as the central religious activity. Daily Torah study leads to understanding of the rationale for commandments and to appreciation for the values. The stories and role models in the tradition further influence people and lead them to deep commitments. The Rabbis also generated countless rituals and blessings that gave content and meaning to daily life and implanted loyalty to the covenant.

The Rabbis also developed the concept of *Torah lishma*—studying and observing Torah for its own sake (neither for human nor divine rewards) as the superior form of religious living. At one point the Talmud warns that “one who studies Torah not for its own sake turns his Torah into poison...” (Makkot 7a).⁹ I would suggest that this learning and internalization process explains the superior faithfulness shown by the Jews in exile during the Rabbinic period. In the face of great persecution, suffering, and exclusion, Jewry clung to God and Torah at the highest level. This steadfast loyalty was shown more than in the biblical period where external reward and punishments were the driving force.

⁸ He somewhat offsets the impact by saying “But one hour of tranquil bliss in the World to Come is better than all the physical life [and pleasures] in this world.”

⁹ The Talmud softens this sharp critique by telling people they can start at the level of Torah not for its own sake—and if they work at it, they will move up and achieve the higher level of Torah for its own sake. See also Pesahim 50b and Nazir 23b.



This brings us to the paradox of covenantal religious commitment in the modern and postmodern period. There is a general impression that religion has declined and the quality of commitment has been eroded. Many point to the cause, that modern civilization offers so many rewards and pleasures in this life as to take away the power of the promised reward in the afterlife. Furthermore, as science and medicine have developed greater capacities, statistical analyses have whittled away at claims of special religious miracles. I believe that the drop off in formal religious affiliation reflects the people who kept the faith out of external rewards and punishments switching to alternate systems that “pay off.” However, many that come to religion today are acting at a higher level, a more idealistic motivation.

Nine decades ago, Dietrich Bonhoeffer¹⁰ pointed out that a great religious upgrading was taking place. As human capacity solved more and more problems, then the understanding of God shifted. In the past, people typically turned to God out of helplessness. God was invoked in order to solve the unsolvable or to account for the unknowable. Bonhoeffer predicted that humans will stop turning to God who is “the God of the gaps” [in our understanding], the God that is the divinity that we seek out of our incapacity. Instead we will turn to God out of our capacity and out of seeking partnership.¹¹ This paves the way for Judasim’s higher aspirations: turning to God out of love of God, out of drawing upon and being sustained by the Divine Presence in every aspect of daily life. The numbers of the formally religious may be

¹⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German Protestant theologian who joined the anti-Nazi underground. After an unsuccessful attempt to assassinate Hitler, he and his associates were arrested. Later, he was executed. In his final months, he came to a new understanding of Judaism (i.e. that it was not a superceded religion but a vital one) and of the powerful witness of the Hebrew prophets and their insistence on social justice and on relating to God by concern and care for fellow humans. He predicted that an empowered humanity would turn to God out of its capacity and desire for relationship instead of the traditional seeking God because we could not help ourselves. He predicted the emergence of a more “hidden” religious community turning to God not for reward or to explain the unknown but walking and working with God selflessly.

¹¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, edited by Eberhard Bethge, (New York, Macmillan, 1968), especially pp. 139-209.



down, but the quality of believers and of pure relationship and the numbers of those who act out of love of the covenantal method of *tikkun olam* and of universal human dignity and relationship is increasing. I attribute this upgrade to the long-term positive educational effect of covenantal living on the human psyche.

Rabbis and religious educators need to have the courage to offer more demanding religious living alternatives. Heightened knowledge of God, a deeper human solidarity in community and an enriched embrace of life through covenantal behaviors is the ideal religious model for our time. At some point, the drop off of the reward seekers and punishment fearers will stabilize. Then the dynamic core of committed, loving covenantal partners will become the magnet around which the practitioners of the ideal Torah of *hesed* (love and kindness) will gather. Then a Jewish community, formed out of choice and inspiring values, will lead the way forward. This will be the continuation and culmination of the journey to life and unity with God through which Jacob matured and became Israel. This is the growth to maturity which his descendants pursue to this day.

