

In the Beginning: First Times in the Bible

by Meir Shalev

Translated from the Hebrew by Stuart Schoffman

Introduction

The book of Genesis, true to its name, describes the beginnings of things. Though the Bible speaks in such terms only about the creation of the world, it also portrays the first love, the first death, the first laugh, the first dream, and tells too of the people who were chosen to do things first: to give birth, to hate, to deceive; to be the first musician, king, blacksmith, or spy.

These firsts are often surprising. The first death in the Bible, for example, is not of natural causes. The first crying is not of a newborn baby or of a bereaved parent or an unrequited lover. The first dream in the Bible is not dreamt by an important figure in the history of the Jews, but rather by an utterly marginal king of the Philistines. The first kiss is not a lovers' kiss but a son's test of his father, spurred by suspicion. And the first appearance in the Bible of the Hebrew word for "love" is not about the love of a man for a woman, or a woman for a man, or a mother for her son. The first love was a father's love.

This is a book of biblical firsts, each of which gives rise to further occurrences. In writing it I kept faithful to a self-imposed rule: each of these cases has to be explicitly designated. The first love and first hatred, for example, could not be derived from an interpretation of the stories. The words "love" and "hate" had to appear in the text.

This is my second book about the Bible. The first was called *Bible Now*, and again now as then, I neither wish nor pretend to furnish a substitute for reading the Bible itself. I urge readers to go back to the original and make new discoveries – about themselves as well.

The First Love

Once I happened to visit a fishing village in the Andaman Sea, west of the Malay Peninsula in the Indian Ocean. Unlike typical fishing villages, this one was not situated onshore, but floated in the sea. Its houses were built on rafts that were anchored side by side and connected with ropes and wooden walkways.

The village rocked tranquilly upon the waves, up and down, creating a strange sensation. In general, when you go from a boat to a dock, you feel at once the reassuring solidity of the shore, whereas here I went from one rocking to another.

The villagers were Muslims, Malay fishermen. I walked among their houses until I came upon a half-opened door beyond which sat a thin, wiry man. We exchanged glances and the man smiled and invited me in with a wave of his hand. We drank tea. On the wall were a photograph and a drawing. The photo was some sort of European landscape – green valleys, reddish brown cows, waterfalls, snow-covered mountains. The drawing was readily identifiable: a young lad lying upon an altar, an old man brandishing a knife over him, an angel hovering overhead, and in the background, the ram, its horns caught in the bush.

For a moment I thought I had stumbled upon one of the Ten Lost Tribes, and in my mind began to compose letters to the Chief Rabbinate and the Jewish Agency, urging that they be airlifted to Israel. But before throwing my arms around my long-lost brother, I asked him what was depicted in the drawing. The man pointed at the old man with the knife and pronounced, with an unfamiliar lilt: "Ibrahim." He then pointed to the lad and said: "Isma'il." I knew differently, yet said nothing. When I got back to Jerusalem, I checked and discovered that indeed, according to some interpreters of the Quran, it was Ishmael and not Isaac whom God had ordered Abraham to sacrifice. I report this with a degree of embarrassment. I should have known this all along.

Instead of the requisite amazement I felt sorrow. The Israeli-Arab conflict, I realized, isn't only about land or holy places. It's a dispute over something more difficult: love. Specifically, a father's love. And to make things even more complicated, this is not love that is expressed in the gift of a coat of many colors, or by a better blessing, but rather in the very worst act to be found in the book of Genesis – the binding of Isaac. It is written in the Bible: "Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love," and offer him as a burnt offering. It's a bit hard for the descendants of Ishmael to see the name Isaac attached to the words "your favorite son, whom you love."

Ishmael and Isaac themselves, by the way, were not rivals. Certainly not like Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers. The real rivalry in the family was between the two mothers, Sarah and her maidservant Hagar. The fact that two separate religions would someday spring from Ishmael and Isaac was as yet unknown. But when God said "your favored one, whom you love" about Isaac – Ishmael and his mother having been banished from Abraham's house – the emotional basis for the problem that afflicts us to this day was set in place.

But there's more: This "whom you love" is the first appearance of love in the Bible. Two points are of interest. First, that this is the love of a man for his son, not his wife.

That will come second, in the love of Isaac for Rebecca. Moreover, here we have a father's love, not a mother's. The first case of motherly love will be the third instance in the Bible – the love of Rebecca for her son Jacob. Then too, there is discrimination between brothers: Rebecca loves Jacob, Isaac loves Esau.

Two oddities: From a literary and societal point of view, and a legal standpoint as well, a mother's love is thought to be greater than a father's. As for love between man and wife, modern literature ranks it higher than the love of parents for their children, and indeed in the natural order of things it comes first – for without it, there'd be no children to love them in return. But the Bible favors the family, and in this case, the family that will become a nation. Thus Abraham's love for Isaac is put in first place. The love of a parent for a daughter, incidentally, is never mentioned in the Bible at all.

Adah and Zillah

Did Adam love Eve? Did Eve love Adam? Maybe so, but their relationship is not described by the word "love," which is too bad. A romantic reader would be happy to encounter the word "love" in this case in particular, for Adam and Eve were a unique couple, not merely owing to their pleasant life in the Garden of Eden, or their intimate proximity to God, but because they were the only couple in the whole world. They genuinely experienced, for quite a while, what only a few lucky couples feel on rare and fleeting occasions. Yet the Bible does not speak of any love that prevailed between the first man and the first woman. It mentions such things as shame, knowledge, labor, sadness, domination, and procreation. It informs the reader that Eve will desire Adam and he will rule over her – but says nary a word about their love. Maybe love is unnecessary when there's no other man or woman in the world.

And so, without love, Adam "knew" Eve and Eve gave birth to Cain. Cain knew his wife – her name is unknown – and she gave birth to Enoch. Enoch begot a son named Irad, and Irad begot Mehujael and Mehujael begot Methusael and Methusael begot Lamech. So it is written: begot, *yaledet* -- but here the text uses the latter verb form for and the woman gives birth – *yoledet* -- but here the text uses the latter verb form for men. (Maybe that's how it was, in the distant past.) In any event – there were men and women, and children were born, but love still went unmentioned.

Neither is it written that Lamech loved, but his wives, unlike the other women of those generations, did have names, and Lamech even sang them a song that he, I imagine, considered charming:

*Adah and Zillah, hear my voice.
O wives of Lamech, give ear to my speech,
I have slain a man for wounding me,
And a lad for bruising me.
If Cain is avenged sevenfold,
Then Lamech seventy-sevenfold.*

The words "sing" and "song" do not appear, but the rhythm and the Hebrew rhymes speak for themselves, and thus Lamech is the first person in the Bible to produce a bit

of creative writing. Alas, this was not a love poem, but an ode to belligerence. If Lamech loved anyone, it was himself.

According to Genesis 5, Lamech was the father of Noah, he of the flood and the ark, who also had a wife. The Bible says nothing about her, though I've no doubt that she adored Noah. As usual in the Bible, here too the man is the hero of the story. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his day; he spoke with God, built the ark. But it was Noah's wife, while he devoted himself to his new obsession, who handled the family's day-to-day affairs.

Nowhere is it written, but Noah's wife was a very loving woman, surely the most patient of all the patient women in the Bible. First she silently suffered the building of the ark, then the prolonged stay within it, a crowded and foul-smelling craft, filthy and noisy, with animals and birds inside and a raging flood outdoors, and not only hundreds of creatures but also one husband, three sons and three daughters-in-law. No escape, no privacy – if it were up to me, I'd name the ark for her, and the whole story too. Not Noah's Ark but Noah's Wife's Ark, as she too, just like her love, is never called by name.

The Bible does not describe the hard life inside the ark. But one may gauge the situation in light of the long recovery period thereafter. When the flood was over and the earth dried off and everybody emerged from the ark, God reminded Noah and his family of the responsibility of the human species to fructify and multiply. Yet it took two years for a son to be born to Shem, the son of Noah. It thus turns out that in the ark everyone practiced absolute abstinence, which continued for another year! It would appear that the crowded, claustrophobic conditions stimulated a yearning for monkish solitude, which took a good while to get over.

A son of Shem was called Arpachshad. Arpachshad begot Shelah, and Shelah begot Eber, and Eber begot Peleg, and Peleg begot Reu, and Reu begot Serug, and Serug begot Nahor and Nahor begot Terah, and Terah begot Nahor and Haran and Abram, the Abram who would later be renamed Abraham and be known as "Our Father," and would take for a wife Sarai, who would be renamed Sarah and give birth to his son Isaac.

Sarai was a "beautiful woman," and since I am speaking of firsts, let me point out that she is the first beautiful woman in the Bible. Nevertheless, even though at last we have a man with such a beautiful wife, we are still without love. Generation upon generation has passed, and we have been fruitful and multiplied and gotten angry and killed, we have sinned and been punished, we built a city and a tower and an ark, we got drunk and cried, we banished and were banished, and laughed and made others laugh, and lied and feared, we planted vines and a tamarisk tree, and dug wells – but have still not found love. All these Hebrew verbs have appeared, but not yet this one – *alef, bet, heh*, which spells love.

And then – a surprise, a terrible surprise: "Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering."

The conventional wisdom has it that the story of the binding of Isaac – the *akeidah* in Hebrew – was meant to clarify that the God of Israel is opposed to human sacrifice, a

commonplace ritual back in those days, as documented in scripture. Meshah the king of Moab, for instance, sacrificed his first-born son to his god as he faced defeat by the army of Israel. But such horrors transpired in our midst as well. Of King Ahaz of Judah it is written, "He even consigned his son to the fire, in the abhorrent fashion of the nations," and the best-known, most traumatic case is that of the daughter of Jephthah. Her father, the judge Jephthah the Gileadite, vowed that if he were victorious in battle he would sacrifice whomever was first to greet him upon his return. His daughter came out dancing with her tambourine to welcome him home, and he kept his word. The rabbis of the Talmud made sure to explain that Jephthah had he been better versed in Torah law, could have extracted himself from his vow, but I shall not belabor the story. The reader may find it at the end of chapter 11 of the Book of Judges and discover that in certain respects, the story of Jephthah and his daughter is even worse than the story of Abraham and Isaac. As for the *akedah* itself, I don't think the story is intended to combat the practice of human sacrifice, but rather to demonstrate how the obedience of the Bible's most obedient believer may lead into the darkest of alleys.

Either way, in the same verse that God orders the sacrifice of Isaac, love shows up in the Bible for the first time. It makes a dim, almost imperceptible debut due to its proximity to the horrific *akedah*, but this is no reason to ignore it. Here it is, and apart from being the love of a father for a son, it is intriguing for another reason: It appears not in the words of the narrator, nor those of Abraham. It's not Abraham who tells Isaac that he loves him, nor does the author tell the reader that Abraham loves his son, but God is the one who says it to Abraham, as if informing not only us, but also the first lover himself.

In effect, God returns here to His hallowed habit from the days of Creation — assigning names. This may be helpful to all those who have wondered since time immemorial: "What is love?" In my humble opinion, it's an indulgence, since everybody knows what love is, especially when it fills the heart and also when it is absent. I would wager that Shakespeare, who coined the question "What is love?" could identify it coming and going, though even he had a hard time putting the answer into words.

Nice of God to have had this habit of giving names. Here's how He explains love to us, upon its very first appearance. God called light "day", and darkness he called "night," dry land was "earth" and the waters "the seas" and the heavens "sky", and this, He tells Abraham, what you are feeling for your son, is called "love." And now that I have given a name to your love, take your son whom you love and sacrifice him to Me as a burnt offering.

The Two Together

This is how the first love story in the Bible begins: "Early in the morning, Abraham saddled his ass and took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac, and split the wood for the burnt offering, and set out for the place of which God had told him."

The loving father is industrious and organized. His activity soothes him, eases his mind. He is first to appear, for he is the main character, and the only one who knows

where they are going and why. Next are mentioned one donkey and two young men, and these three know nothing beyond their own tasks — to carry and serve. After them appears Isaac, the story’s supporting actor, who also doesn’t know the truth, and finally the props of the play: first the firewood, mute and puzzling and intimidating, and later the fire and the butcher knife will make their entrance. At the end God will dispatch the ram and the angel, who in His opinion will solve the whole problem, but will in fact raise other difficulties that will not, in any way, be resolved.

And Sarah? Where is she? Has she understood what’s happening? Did she say goodbye to her son? Apparently not. Sarah has demonstrated in the past her ability to impose her will on Abraham, and also proven that she is capable of casting doubt upon God’s word. If she is silent, this indicates that she knows nothing. Abraham obviously made up some story, and even she, who forced him to banish his first-born son Ishmael into the desert, could never imagine such a monstrous possibility as this one — the sacrifice of their son as a burnt offering.

Three days they walked together, the loving father and the beloved son, without exchanging a single word. On the third day Abraham recognized the appointed place and told the servants to wait with the donkey, and “the boy and I will go up there, we will worship and will return to you.”

Here Abraham’s lie is twofold. He speaks of worshipping God and not of making a burnt offering, and he promises to return in the plural “we”, he and his son together. If he were to mention the sacrifice, the servants would ask now what Isaac will ask later: “Where is the sheep for the burnt offering?” If he were to say “I will return” in the singular and not plural, the servants would realize that something is about to happen to Isaac. Who knows? Maybe this is same thing he told Sarah: you sit here in the tent, and the boy and I will go worship God. We’ll go and come back to you, don’t worry, Sarah.

“And the two of them walked together.” The loving father and his son. At this point the two new participants, unrevealed in the first act, arrive onstage — the knife and the firestone, the designated implements that were hidden heretofore and now remove all doubt and confirm every fear.

“And the two of them walked together.” The loving father carried the tools: a knife to slaughter his son and fire to roast his flesh. The beloved son carried the raw materials: the wood and himself. Who knows, maybe Abraham produced the knife and flint in order to make clear to Isaac what was about to happen, and give him a chance to run for his life? Even if so, Isaac went along with him. Maybe he didn’t flee because he didn’t understand, or maybe he did understand and stayed anyway. But now, with the servants left behind, he dared to express what he had suspected deep inside all along.

“My father,” the beloved son addressed his loving father, as if trying to confirm that the man with the knife is actually his father and not some stranger who wants to kill him. “My father” — and this is the first word they have exchanged, after three days of walking.

"Here I am, my son," answered the loving father, as if trying to confirm that their family bond is intact.

"Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?"

He can't bring himself to mention the knife, but it is there too, in his father's hand.

"God will see to the sheep for the burnt offering, my son."

Thus answered Abraham, and the reader doesn't know how to parse these last words. Should the comma between "offering" and "my son" be read like a colon? Is it "God will provide the offering, my son," or "God will provide the offering: my son"? In other words, is "my son" an appellation of Isaac, or a definition of the sacrifice?

But apart from this, as readers will discern -- and Abraham and Isaac too, albeit many years later -- the words "my son" are the last that will ever be spoken between the two, not only in the here and now of the *akedah*, but from this moment on. They will continue to walk in silence to the appointed spot. The father will build an altar without saying a word to the son. He will tie him up without speaking, and he will wield the knife over him in the same absolute silence.

And Isaac too will not say a word or even cry out. Not as his father binds him with ropes and not when he brandishes a butcher knife over his neck. This defeatist passivity is astonishing. The text doesn't tell us how old he was; the word *na ar* or "lad" does not denote any specific age in biblical Hebrew. But it is clear that Isaac was not a small, weak child. He traveled on foot for three days and then climbed to the mountaintop with firewood on his back. For his part, Abraham was already well past his hundredth birthday.

According to the rabbis of the Talmud, Isaac at the time was thirty-seven years old. If he had wanted to, he could have run away from his father or fought him and easily saved his own life. But it appears that from the moment he realized what was happening, he was struck dumb with terror, and perhaps it was something deeper: that not just Abraham was on trial, his son Isaac was too. In any case, this story has not only protagonists but an author, who like other biblical authors has a purpose in mind, and from the outset this author only assigned Isaac one role, that of victim in the theatre of the *akedah*.

Moreover, the author carries to an extreme the usual method of biblical writers, who describe actions in detail but thoughts and feelings minimally. It has often been observed that the thoughts of Abraham and Isaac are not described here at all, and their talk is doled out in snippets.

I said earlier that the words "my son" would be the last ever to be uttered between the two. But this is not just for fear of confrontation, or because the father and son stopped speaking to one another, but because from that time on they simply never saw each other again. The Bible never states this outright, but it's possible to derive it from the text. When Isaac and Abraham took leave of the two servants, it is written: "And the two of them walked together." But after the *akedah* it says: "Abraham then returned to his servants." And where is Isaac? And what happened to "together?"

From now on, the word "together" will apply to Abraham's walking off with the servants: "And they departed together for Beersheba." From this we may conclude that Isaac did not return with his father, but left the place alone.

In the ensuing chapters it becomes clear that from the day of the *akedah* until Abraham's death, a period of many years, the two are not to be found "together" even once. It's possible to understand Isaac. After experiencing a father who hides the truth from you, ties you up on an altar, and waxes a steak knife over your neck, you might not want any more of that "togetherness." From this point on, Isaac avoided his father until the latter's death, at which time he buried him together with Ishmael, whom the same father had cast out into the desert. It is not made clear to the reader whether they came to pay their last respects or to make sure he was dead and buried.

Here one should note that the *akedah* drove a wedge not merely between father and son. We will no longer find Sarah at Abraham's side either. After the *akedah*, Abraham settled immediately in Beersheba, whereas she, at the start of the next chapter, perhaps upon hearing the news about her son, died in Kiryat Arba. The Bible tells us: "Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to bewail her." If so, it means he has not been with her. He came from Beersheba to Hebron, to bury her in the Cave of Machpelah.

In any event, the *akedah* and the resultant fissures in the family also have a broader (if less theatrical) significance, for they illustrate what may well befall other families similar to Abraham's: the families of revolutionaries, military commanders, intellectuals and other leaders, who are devoted with all their heart and might to a vision, an idea, to art, society, science, to radical reform. In this regard, the binding of Isaac is not just a theological parable but an example of what can happen to close family members of such notables. They are forced to pay the price for ideals that were imposed upon them, revolutions they did not choose.

But the *akedah* led to another disconnection too – between Abraham and his God. Earlier, the two spoke and met quite often. God told Abraham to "go forth" from Haran, promised him the Land on several occasions, revealed Himself to him amid the pieces of hacked-up animals, changed his name, and demanded that he circumcise himself; He had lunch at his tent, where for a second time He promised that a son called Isaac would be born to him, discussed with him the number of righteous men in Sodom, told him to obey Sarah and banish Ishmael and Hagar, and ordered him to sacrifice Isaac as a burnt offering.

All this came to an end. From the *akedah* onward there is no further mention of meetings or conversations between Abraham and his God. Abraham passed the test, but it would seem that the two now prefer not to see each other anymore, as though the *akedah* was a breaking point for both of them. God did not reveal himself or his word to Abraham again, nor did Abraham turn to Him and seek His presence. The death of his wife and estrangement of his son showed him how high a price his family had been forced to pay. And who knows, perhaps God too had second thoughts. Maybe He repented for what He had done, or maybe He was no longer interested in this sort of faith or believer.

And He Took Her as His Wife and He Loved Her

Time passed, but did not, as is commonly hoped and supposed, heal all wounds or lessen their pain. The mother has died, and the beloved son is forty years old and still alone, without a wife. The father knows how this came about, and also knows he won't be able to talk to him about it, or anything else, from the *akedah* onward.

Talking is impossible, but taking action is not. Abraham, whose relationships with his sons ended up with the expulsion of the first and the binding of the second, decided to do something more. Until now, in compliance with God's will and intent, he was the father of a people, of a multitude, "our father Abraham." Now, on his own initiative, he will be the father of Isaac alone. The damage has been done, but Abraham will be able to repair it, just a little.

At last, after long years of obedient acquiescence, Abraham did something of personal significance without getting instructions from his God or his wife. As opposed to the two horrors he perpetrated at their command, banishing Ishmael and binding Isaac, this deed was a good deed: Abraham sent his servant to Haran, to find and bring a wife for his son. A wife who will make his life easier, comfort him, fill his heart with love. The rift between the father and the son was so deep and absolute that Abraham couldn't send Isaac himself there, the way Rebecca would send Jacob in the next generation. He couldn't even tell him about it. The servant went on his mission unbeknownst to Isaac.

And so a small caravan arrived in Haran, Abraham's home town in the land of Aram: A few men, headed by Abraham's servant, and ten camels, laden with provisions and valuable gifts. The servant parked the caravan near the well outside of the city, let his weary camels kneel and rest, and asked God for a sign. He suggested to the Almighty that he will ask the maidens who draw water from the well for a drink. The one who replies, "Drink, and I will also water your camels," will be the one that God has intended for the son of the servant's master Abraham.

It should be noted that this servant was not necessarily Abraham's majordomo Eliezer, as is commonly held, but there is no doubt that he was a smart and serious person. The sign he thought up was not just any sign, but one that served both his immediate needs and his greater goal. A maiden who would say, "Drink, and I will also water your camels," would make a good wife for Isaac – generous, resourceful, strong, kind, self-confident. And indeed Rebecca the daughter of Bethuel, granddaughter of Abraham's brother Nahor, came to the well with her jug on her shoulder. The servant asked her for water. She said: "Drink, my lord," and gave him some, adding: "I will also draw water for your camels, until they finish drinking." Her words were not identical to those stipulated by the servant, but the words were less important than the readiness and good character that stood behind them.

Again and again she drew from the well and emptied the jug into the trough, until all the camels had drunk. This entailed a lot of heavy lifting. Ten camels drink a great deal of water after a long journey. Abraham's servant was thrilled. He gave her a nose-ring and bracelets made of gold, and she hurried home to tell her family about him. Her brother, Laban by name, the same Laban who will later cheat Jacob, was

very excited by the sight of the expensive gifts. He ran to the well and invited the visitor to his home, along with his camels and men.

The twenty-fourth chapter of Genesis is one of the most detailed narrative passages in the Bible. The most interesting thing about the writing is the way the author repeats the events – once in the third person, describing the journey of the servant to Haran and the encounter with Rebecca and her family, and again in the first person, as the servant tells the family the same story about himself.

I won't go into all the details, many of which are related with relish by the skilled and seasoned author, but it should be emphasized that the sign that the servant designated was indeed significant. Rebecca was revealed as a young lady not only generous and virtuous, but also independent and decisive. Her family members were well aware of this, and when the servant declared his wish to leave right away and take her with him, they replied in words seldom heard in the Bible: "Let us call the girl and ask for her reply."

"They called Rebecca and said to her: 'Will you go with this man?' And she said: 'I will go.'"

She and her maidservants mounted the camels and rode after the servant, who brought her straightaway to Isaac, who then dwelt in the Negev desert, near Be'er Lahai-Roi.

"Isaac went out walking in the field toward evening," as the author describes the scene. Isaac, it will be recalled, is forty and still a bachelor, a situation that even today arouses the attention of readers, friends, and family, and all the more so in the days of the Bible. His evening stroll testifies to his loneliness and solitude, to free personal time, fixed habits, comforting routines. All this will suddenly be undone by the appearance of Rebecca, and the Bible's description of their first meeting is so beautiful that I will quote it in full:

And Isaac went out walking in the field toward evening

And, looking up, he saw camels approaching.

Raising her eyes, Rebecca saw Isaac.

She alighted from her camel and said to the servant,

"Who is that man walking in the field toward us?"

And the servant said, "That is my master."

So she took her veil and covered herself.

The servant told Isaac all the things that he had done.

Isaac then brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah.

And he took Rebecca as his wife. Isaac loved her,

And thus found comfort after his mother's death.

"He loved her" in biblical Hebrew is expressed in a single word: *yave 'chaveha*, an elegant condensation of feeling, time, man, and woman. Here we finally arrive at the first love of a man for a woman in the Bible. Isaac's love for Rebecca.

Not the Practice in Our Place

The signature line of that first encounter is very touching: "Isaac was comforted after his mother's death." The verse describes, only after Sarah is gone, the deep bond that existed between mother and son. It also shows that things are never simple and one-sided in any family. In the view of many readers -- including mine, I must admit -- Sarah is often seen as a bad woman, and now and then as a real witch. She abused Hagar and forced Abraham to banish her and Ishmael. Yet she was a good and loving mother to Isaac. It could be that her insistence on banishing Ishmael, which in Abraham's opinion and that of many readers was an evil demand, was perceived by Isaac as a good move by his mother on his behalf. She, as opposed to Abraham, would not have obeyed God's command to sacrifice him as a burnt offering, and the *akedah* doubtless proved that he could trust and love only her. Her death was another big blow after the trial on Mount Moriah.

"Isaac then brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he took Rebecca as his wife. Isaac loved her, and found comfort after his mother's death." It turns out, then, that Isaac preserved the tent of his dead mother, and we may assume that her possessions and household goods were still in it. He thus created a portable shrine for his mother, which traveled with him wherever he wandered. One can imagine him sitting in it alone at times, to commune with her memory, maybe even living there to maintain a feeling of her enduring presence.

Bringing Rebecca into the tent is a symbolic presentation to his mother of his chosen beloved, even if the former is dead, and a request for her approval. But there is something more: Isaac is saying to Rebecca that his mother, whom she alas had never known, remains an important figure in his life even though she is gone. He is telling her, too, that he expects that she will take his mother's place.

Along with the story of Rebecca and Isaac comes a general statement of biblical principles regarding love. The order of Isaac's actions -- bringing Rebecca into Sarah's tent, taking her as his wife, and loving her -- is the proper sequence, per this point of view. Isaac was given a woman chosen by God and identified by His sign, he took her to his mother's tent, he married her, and only then did he fall in love with her.

This brings to mind the totally different sequence of events in the case of Jacob and Rachel, in the next generation: Jacob met Rachel at the well, he kissed her even before introducing himself as a kinsman, and loved her even before she became his wife; seven years of unfulfilled love passed until their wedding day, and so enormous was his longing that he rudely said to her father: "Give me my wife, for my time is fulfilled, that I may consort with her." This disruption of protocol did not go unnoticed. God enabled Laban to trick Jacob and give him Leah in Rachel's stead.

It is usually remarked, and rightly so, that Jacob was punished because he had previously tricked his father Isaac. Indeed, it's easy to see the resemblance between the two incidents. Jacob pretended to be his brother, and Leah pretended to be her sister. Jacob did so at his mother's initiative; Leah at her father's. And the two deceptions occurred under cover of darkness -- the blindness of Isaac, the night of the wedding. But Jacob's comeuppance was twofold. Not just the forced marriage to

Leah, whom he didn't love, but also her fertility as opposed to Rachel's barrenness: "The Lord saw that Leah was unloved and he opened her womb; but Rachel was barren."

All this was intended to clarify for Jacob the proper sequence of events and the priorities of the Bible: In first place come family and procreation, and love only afterwards. For us contemporary readers, egocentric romantics for whom the happiness of the individual is paramount, this seems awful. But by the standards of those days – so things must be.

The morning that Jacob awoke and opened his eyes and saw, "there was Leah," shocks the reader to this day. It's easy to understand his anger and humiliation, and maybe even to identify with the hatred he later felt for Leah. But the Bible, through the voice of Laban, seeks to explain to Jacob that there are official rules, even in love.

"It is not the practice in our place!" he made clear to Jacob, "to marry off the younger before the older." But directed at Jacob, the words "it is not the practice" point to other principles, beyond the marital customs of Haran. Here again is an expression of the biblical view of love: the womb trumps the heart. The family comes before the married couple. This is why "multiply and bear fruit" is the first command issued by God to man, and why a parent's love is the first one in the Bible, and only later comes the love of a man for a woman.

The Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai stressed another important point in this story – that Rachel and Leah, who in the Bible are two discrete personalities representing two ways of life, are likely to be bound up together in every woman. He wrote:

*Every woman making love is Rachel and Leah trading off
body and soul between them, seasons and dresses, kohl and perfumes,
the tastes of day flavored with the spices of night,
night stirrings with day sounds, thighs and breasts, to become one body.
Rachel and Leah. Racheleah. It's as if Jacob were in bed with two women,
one stormy and fiery, knowing she will die soon in childbirth,
the other placid and soft and heavy, down the generations
till me.*

(From "The Language of Love and Tea with Roasted Almonds", in *Open Closed Open: Poems*, translated by Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld, New York, 2000)

And indeed, reading further in the biblical story, especially later on when the unloved Leah gives birth and the beloved Rachel is barren, the thought arises that not merely in the story at hand, featuring the two sisters, does the man discover in the morning that "there was Leah." From the Bible's point of view, every man, on every wedding night, goes to bed with Rachel, the beloved for whom he lusted for seven years, and wakes up the morning after with Leah, whose role it is to bear children and raise a family. Not romantic. Not pleasant. But such is love, according to the Bible.

I do not mean to be pejorative. In the biblical view, this metamorphosis is necessary. As I said before, the Bible, especially the book of Genesis, does not glorify the love that initiates a relationship, but rather the love that develops between two people after the wedding and grows together with the family. In this regard one may recall the

grim fate of two other biblical couples whose relationships commenced with love: Amnon's love for Tamar, which led to rape and hatred on his part, and Samson's for Delilah, which brought his ruin and death.

Writes the author of Ecclesiastes: "Enjoy happiness with a woman you love." But Ecclesiastes is an uncharacteristic voice from a variety of standpoints, not the biblical norm. God instructed Adam and Noah to multiply and bear children, not to work on their relationships, and promised Abraham many descendants, not a loving life with Sarah. The same lesson may be derived from Rebecca's love for her son Jacob. She deceived the husband who loved her, for the benefit of her beloved boy.

The Bible tells us: "Isaac loved Esau because he had a taste for game; but Rebecca loves Jacob." This account indicates several things. First, that the Bible is more frank and honest than its readers. It admits of the possibility that the love of parents for their children may be similar in intensity but not identical in nature. Second, that Isaac's love for Esau was conditional. He loved Esau because he provided him with tasty meat. But Rebecca favored Jacob with a love dependent on nothing at all, certainly not upon good food.

Moreover, the verse uses different verb forms for Isaac and Rebecca. Of him it is written *vaye 'hav*, suggesting a discrete event in a narrative, like "he went" or "he said" or "he ate". But Rebecca's love for Jacob is related in the present tense — *ohavel* — reflecting a permanent, ongoing condition, as if speaking about the way of the world. The sun rises in the morning, the moon is full or new, rivers run to the sea, and Rebecca loves Jacob. And indeed, in time of need, this love of the mother for her favored son will grow stronger than her love for her husband or her other son.

As for Esau — it may be that his father's preference for him is connected with the old grudge that Isaac bore against his own father, and is a way of expressing it. Isaac promoted the son who differed in appearance and occupation from Abraham, and from himself: The hairy, red-complexioned son, an anomaly in the family of the patriarchs, a hunter in the fields, a vocation reminiscent of Esau's uncle Ishmael. In addition, one should not underestimate the aromatic allure of freshly killed game, perfectly cooked.

Anyone who expected the *akedah* to turn Isaac into a vegetarian was mistaken. According to Genesis 27, the scent of meat influenced him powerfully, owing in part to his fondness for Esau's cooking, perhaps also because the blindness that afflicted him in old age had sharpened his other senses. There's no doubt that it wasn't just Rebecca's scheming, but also Isaac's gluttony, that tipped the scale on that fateful day against the son he loved more. Despite his suspicions, and despite Jacob's clearly identifiable voice, his lust for the food addled his brain, permitting Rebecca and Jacob to trick him and damage Esau.

The episode recalls what happened two chapters earlier, when Esau sold his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of lentil soup. It thus becomes clear that Isaac handed down to Esau an unbridled passion for food and an inability to delay gratification, whereas Rebecca gave Jacob a talent for scheming and deceit. Maybe this too is a reason why Rebecca loved Jacob and Isaac loved Esau. Both loved the son who resembled them.

And Abraham Took Another Wife

Let us return to Abraham. Even now, after his plan had been realized, and Isaac married Rebecca and was consoled over his mother's death, the father and son did not live together. The split between them had not healed. One may assume that Isaac knew that Abraham had orchestrated his marriage to Rebecca. The slave had told him "all the things that he had done", and obviously servants do not pick up and travel to far-off lands and bring women from there for the sons of their masters on their own account. Still, the connection between Isaac and his father was not restored.

To Abraham's credit it may be said that he chose a good and proper way to help his son. He had also obviously hoped to draw him closer. But even if he was disappointed, he didn't express it. He also did the right thing by not insisting that Isaac pay him back with a renewal of relations or expressions of gratitude. It was enough to know that he had benefited him, and the reader soon realizes that he benefited himself as well.

Indeed, immediately after Isaac took Rebecca for a wife and loved her, Abraham took himself a wife as well, a much younger woman named Keturah. And even as his son and daughter-in-law waited twenty years for their first pregnancy, the old man speedily sired many sons by his new wife.

Do not take this lightly. When he was a hundred years old, Abraham doubted his ability to beget Isaac. Now, at the age of more than a hundred and forty, and minus the visitations of angels and tidings or promises from God, he fathered six sons by Keturah, one after the next: "She bore him Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah."

The old father's marriage, so closely following that of his son, and his astonishing fertility, so much greater than the latter's, and the cute rhyming names of the little boys that trip merrily off the reader's tongue, represent a joyful flowering. Indeed, there is little doubt that Abraham has changed for the better. The *akedah* distanced him from his son but released him from the demanding omnipresence of his God and his wife, the two figures who ran his life with a heavy hand and made him commit such dreadful deeds as banishing his first-born son and offering the other as a sacrifice.

Now, with God silent and Sarah dead, and Isaac comforted by his love for Rebecca, Abraham finally found time for himself. He became a highly active and productive senior citizen. Apart from Keturah, he had concubines who also bore him children. The Bible emphasizes, of course, that Isaac was and remained the favorite son, to whom Abraham bequeathed all that he owned, and that Abraham sent away the sons of the concubines to the land of the East, lest they compete with the son of Sarah. But this is not what's important. The big story is Abraham's metamorphosis at such a ripe old age. He finally shed his role of father of a nation and a faith, quit being a symbol and turned into a private person. Again he undergoes a great transformation, which is more personal and happier and lovelier than the national and religious metamorphoses that preceded it, than the trek from country to country, the change of name and the circumcision.

Indeed, not only Abraham but his traumatized organ ceased serving as a symbol, and returned to its normal, pleasant function. It was no longer obligated to fly the flag of the covenant and supply the seed for the whole Jewish people. Now it becomes simply the happy flourishing organ of a man freed from his demanding God and difficult wife. And instead of a tied-up son and a deported one, who would fight from time immemorial until this very day over his love, Abraham sires ordinary kids, and instead of being the “father of a multitude of nations” he is the master of many concubines and father of a flock of children.

Abraham dies in ripe old age. “Old and contended,” as the Bible has it, and the reader senses that at last he is satisfied, relaxed, even blissful. Ishmael, the son he expelled from his home on his wife’s orders, and Isaac, the son he bound on the altar at his Lord’s command, buried him together. I said earlier that maybe they showed up to make sure he was dead, but now it seems clear to me that Abraham’s fine old age has a healthy effect on the reader too, and on the way he or she understands the story. Now I sense the forgiveness for the father on the part of the sons, maybe even remorse that they didn’t reconnect with him while he was alive.

The two buried Abraham alongside Sarah, nemesis of one of them and mother of the other, in the Cave of Machpelah, which many centuries later would also become a locus of discord. But it’s doubtful that Abraham knew this, and even if he did, it’s doubtful he would have cared. He lived well during his last good years, with his new wife and concubines and children. Now, after his death, he again finds himself alongside Sarah, who barely recognizes him, so good does he look.

The First Dream

When you hear “dream”, and especially “the first dream,” you tend to think immediately of the dream of the ladder and the angels that the patriarch Jacob dreamed at Beit-El, and about his son Joseph, whose entire path was paved with dreams. Unfortunately, the Bible’s first dreamer was not one of our forefathers but rather a certain Philistine, whose name was Abimelech, king of Gerar. The subject of Abimelech’s dream – and I am not sure this will please or console the reader – was our mother Sarah, wife of Abraham.

Our mother Sarah, as I have already reported, was a very beautiful woman, and our father Abraham had the strange and perverse habit of introducing her as his sister and handing her over to foreign kings for their sexual pleasure, lest they harm him because of her. He first did this with the pharaoh in Egypt, then with Abimelech in Gerar. By the way, according to the book of Genesis, Sarah was ninety at the time, but maybe Abimelech preferred mature women, or else was himself two hundred years old, an age not uncommon among the main players in Genesis, and liked to rob the cradle. Either way, Abimelech took her unto him, and that very night dreamed the first dream in the Bible.

“You are to die because of the woman you have taken,” said God to him in his dream, “for she is a married woman.”

So far as I know, this is the first time the expression “to die for” appears in the Hebrew language, but here its meaning is different from its usage today. Not “crazy about” or “blown away by” or some other romantic hyperbole, but dead because of her, plain and simple, punished for the sin of taking a married woman.

Indeed the Philistine king is terrified. “Will You slay even righteous people?” he asked God, and pleaded innocent: “He himself said to me, ‘She is my sister!’ And she also said, ‘He is my brother.’ When I did this, my heart was blameless and my hands were clean.”

Abimelech returned Sarah to her legal husband and was spared punishment, and one more thing should be noted – there had been no consummation, as my grandmother used to say about such situations. In other words, Abimelech didn’t get around to enacting his designs upon Sarah, which was a good thing, since the next chapter opens with the announcement of her pregnancy. That’s all we need, for Isaac to be rumored as the bastard son of some uncircumcised Philistine, aspersions to be cast upon his status as son of our father Abraham, not to mention the implications for the Middle East of today.

To return to our subject, it so happened that this Abimelech, and not such luminaries as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, or Joseph, gets credit for Bible’s first dream. Notwithstanding the angst that this might cause a Jewish reader, there is a solid and simple definition here of the purpose of dreams: the voicing of divine news. Not all biblical dreams were as clear and straightforward, nor did God appear in them all. Yet the dream in the Bible is not a complicated psychological vehicle, but rather a simple, practical tool by whose means God has His say. Just as two generations later

Joseph, "that dream-master" in his brothers' words, will say of the dream of the king of Egypt: "God has told Pharaoh what He is about to do."

He Lay Down in that Place and Had a Dream

The first dream of the Hebrews was the one I mentioned above, the dream of Jacob in Beit-El in Genesis 28. During his flight from the angry Esau, on his first night away from his mother's tent, far from her supportive proximity, Jacob slept in a field. "Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. He had a dream: a ladder was set on the ground and its top reached to the sky, and angels of God were going up and down on it."

The description "its top reached to the sky" recalls the words "its top in the sky," used earlier in Genesis to describe the Tower of Babel. As elsewhere, the biblical author created a similarity between the two stories in for the purpose of showing the differences between them:

The Tower of Babel was built in reality, the ladder was in a dream.

The Tower of Babel was built before the human race had been divided into nations, whereas the ladder is a Jewish project.

The Tower of Babel was erected by many well-organized people, unified in thought and speaking a single language, and the dream is a unique dream of one individual.

The Tower of Babel was a declaration of war against God, but Jacob's ladder symbolizes the connection with Him.

But the dream amounted to more than just a ladder and angels. God appeared in it too, and stood beside Jacob. Since this was their first meeting, He began by introducing Himself: "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac," and then repeated the promise he had made to them too: "the ground on which you are lying I will give to you and to your offspring."

The content of the promise is similar, but its wording offers a lovely and moving innovation. In promising the land to Abraham, God said: "Raise your eyes and look out from where you are, to the north and south, to the east and west, for I give all the land that you see to you and your offspring forever." By contrast, God defined the land he promised Jacob in the dream as "the ground on which you are lying." The seeing eye takes in a wider landscape than the lying body, but it lacks the intimacy of contact with the ground. Thus the bond between Abraham and the land is the cool and fleeting look of the eye, a distant and abstract connection, typical of the sense of sight. But Jacob has full and close contact with the land, one body touching another, man and earth, *Adam* and *adama*.

Some readers may be troubled, I suspect, by the small dimensions of "the ground on which you are lying." Let me calm them with the news that the rabbis of antiquity were also bothered by the problem, which they solved in a satisfying fashion. On that night, they explained, God folded up the whole Land of Israel under Jacob's body, and

the next morning unfolded it and spread it out anew. The explanation is nice, but misses the real significance of the situation as described in the text. The issue here is not the boundaries of the land, because in any case one can't define them either by eye or by lying down. What this is about is the quality of the connection with the land. This is a land with which Jacob will have a physical connection, a loving bond.

Two other promises of the land come to mind, which greatly resemble one another. One is the promise God made to Joshua, the son of Nun, on the eve of his entering the Land of Israel: "Every spot on which your foot treads I give to you." The other is the vow Moses made to Caleb, the son of Jephunneh: "The land on which your foot trod shall be a portion for you." Let me note parenthetically that not only are these two promises alike, but so are the two heroes who received them. Joshua and Caleb were the two spies who were not afraid of the inhabitants of the land, and advocated taking it by force. Forty years later, Joshua led the nation in conquering and settling the land, and Caleb himself conquered his tribe's portion.

And so, unlike the far-seeing eyes of Abraham and the marching feet of Joshua and Caleb, unlike the promises of sweeping vistas or crushing conquests, the promise of the land to Jacob is the promise of contact, of full sensual connection, between a man and his land. To put it more broadly, the God who promised the land to Abraham and Joshua is the God of the first chapter of Genesis, who abstractly spoke His world and its creatures into existence and commanded man to conquer it and control them. But the God of Jacob's dream is the God of Genesis 2, who created man from earth — *adama* — with His own hands, and gave him its name, *Adam*.

If God Remains With Me

Now God returned and sounded the familiar refrain of "Your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth," and pledged to Jacob that a vast nation would spring from his loins. Considering His prior speeches to Abraham and Isaac, it's reasonable to assume that if we're up to Him, the dream would end here. But Jacob luckily remembered that this was his dream, and so God was compelled to turn from the grand national destiny of the Jewish People in the distant future to the immediate and distressing personal problem of the dreamer — his long and frightening journey from his mother's tent in Canaan to his kinfolk in faraway Haran.

"I am with you," He reassured him. "I will protect you wherever you go and bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

The words are surprising and moving. Even Abraham didn't get a personal assurance like this on the eve of his journey in the opposite direction. And let's not forget that Abraham set out on his way by divine command, while Jacob's journey was his mother's idea.

Jacob woke up. "Surely the Lord is present in this place," he said, "and I did not know it." He was fearful — "How awesome is this place!" — and he realized: "This is none other than the abode of God, and that is the gateway to heaven." He lay there till morning, maybe fell back asleep, and when he got up he poured oil on the stone he

had used as a pillow and changed the name of the place from “Luz” to “Beit-El,” which means, “House of God.”

Then Jacob made a vow, a vow much more important than God’s words in the dream, because God hadn’t said anything basically new nor deviated from what He had said in the past, whereas Jacob’s vow redefined the relationship between God and man. Out of the faith and awe, the joy and trembling, that permeated the dream and his awakening, burst his voice, a new bold voice the likes of which not only the reader, but also God, had not heard before.

“If God remains with me,” he said, “if He protects me on this journey that I am making, and gives me bread to eat, and clothing to wear, and if I return safe to my father’s house, the Lord shall be my God.”

At first glance, this is just a listing of technical details connected with the trip, but let us not be mistaken. 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 not mine. I’ll find myself some other gods.

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 had remembered and taken to heart the conversation with Jacob, the ancient patriarch of the Children of Israel who now stood at the foot of the mountain. He spoke to them this way so that they would not be able to tell Him “if”, would not be able to set conditions as Jacob had done.

Bread to Eat and Clothing to Wear

But Jacob didn’t leave it at that. He also took the language of the offer God made him in the dream, examined it closely, and like a good lawyer handed it back with comments and corrections. The reader will appreciate his meticulous intelligence.

First let us return to God’s original offer to Jacob: “I am with you, “I will protect you wherever you go and bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”

And now Jacob’s response to God: “If God remains with me, if He protects me on this journey that I am making, and gives me bread to eat, and clothing to wear, and if I return safe to my father’s house, the Lord shall be my God.”

The differences are Jacob’s emendations, and they are interesting and instructive.

God offered: "I will protect you wherever you go."

Jacob's improved version: "If He protects me on this journey that I am making."

That is, I'm not interested in general promises, I want protection on this specific trip, from here to Haran and back.

God said only "I will protect you," to which Jacob added the clause: "And gives me bread to eat, and clothing to wear." In other words, it is not enough just to ensure my survival, God also has to provide a standard of living and quality of life.

God promised: "I will bring you back to this land."

Jacob's correction: "If I return safe to my father's house."

He added the word "safe" – *h'shalom* in the Hebrew – to make plain that he would not be content simply with returning but was insisting on coming back in good shape. And just as he had earlier specified "this journey," he altered the broad wording "back to this land" to "my father's house." Meaning that he wanted more than to return anywhere inside the borders of the country, he wanted to come back to the family he had been compelled to leave. In essence, he is saying that his father's house, his family, are more important to him than the land God had just promised him.

There's more: "To this land" might also be interpreted as a return to the same place he is at the moment. But since Jacob has just named the place "Beit-El", House of God, he may mean this: I don't want to return to your house, I want to return to my house.

God's offer, and Jacob's improvements thereon, indicate the conflict of interests between them. God has a master plan and sees the big picture. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are merely stepping stones on the path He has designed, no more than rungs on His ladder. But in contrast to Abraham, Jacob was unwilling to take on this job as offered. He made clear to God something that should have been made clear to Him long before: that not only God, but also the specific person standing before Him has demands that must be taken into consideration. Even if that person had been picked for an important national and historic role, he has personal needs in the here and now, pressing problems of his own. "Wherever you go" reflects God's encompassing field of vision. "This journey that I am making" is the specific reality Jacob must deal with now, including such minutiae as clothing and food, which don't concern God at all.

And more important still: As I said, the opening "if" set a clear condition before God and established that if He didn't fill it, He would have to find Himself another believer. Underlying this condition is the concept that God needs Jacob just as Jacob needs God. And from now on, God knows that Jacob knows this too.

This is also the meaning of the angels that Jacob saw in his dream. They go up and down the ladder and thus become a symbol of a symmetrical, two-way connection. They travel between Jacob and God in both directions and represent the give and take of both sides. True, the top of the ladder is up and the bottom down, but the movement of the angels establishes a kind of equality between the two.

To God's credit it should be noted that though He may have been surprised, He did not react harshly to Jacob's brazen words. So far as I can tell, after the initial shock there was even a rush of affection for what He had heard. Until now, He had believers who were foolish and childish, like Adam and Eve, resentful and murderous like Cain, righteous and obedient like Noah and Abraham, insolent like the builders of the Tower of Babel, wicked sinners like the generation of the Flood and the residents of Sodom – and suddenly comes this skeptical and demanding believer, a different mental type entirely, almost impudent, but so bold and original and interesting.

Meanwhile, Jacob has added another line: "And this stone, which I have set up as a pillar, shall be God's abode." Meaning, in this place I will build a sanctuary.

It could be that the author put these words in Jacob's mouth because he himself lived in a later period, a time of well-established organized religion, and needed to deliver an opinion about the income of the priestly caste. But I hope too that he wanted to give Jacob another bold wink at the heavens. When he promises God he will build Him a house, Jacob again point to the similarity between them. The difference between us is not that great, he tells Him, we both have material needs. And just as we've taken care of my clothing and food, let's also guarantee Your house and sacrifices.

And indeed, in the very next verse he says: "And of all that You give me, I will set aside a tithe for You." This too is a condition: If I get from You, I'll give to You priests. Since a tithe means ten percent, Jacob makes clear to God: the amount I give to the priests depends on how much You give me. One can sense the smile on his lips, as if to say: Let's not be disingenuous. Let's not hide behind that fanning out "to the west and to the east," and those descendants as numerous "as sands on the seashore," and the other lofty language and grandiose promises. We both know that religion is not just faith and prophecy, not just a promised land and chosen people and prophetic ethical diatribes. It's also a sanctuary, priests and altars, sacrifices and tithes. It's Chief Rabbis, religious dealmakers and politicians and *kashrut* inspectors, and they all have to make a living.

Let me say parenthetically that Jacob's calculation of tithes also reflects something else, regarding his areas of personal interest. The first words Jacob uttered in the Bible, at the end of Genesis 25, were "First sell me your birthright," directed to Esau. His last words, at the end of Chapter 49, spoken on his deathbed to his sons, were: "The field and the cave in it, bought from the Hittites." Jacob in his lifetime knew love and desire, bereavement and longing, loss and pain, fear and the overcoming of fear. But the Bible preferred to emphasize the business side of his life, beginning with a sale and ending with a purchase. And so, as a maker of deals and contracts -- not as a righteous fool or obedient yes-man, but the way he stood facing Esau and will stand facing Laban and the figure he will wrestle at the Jabbok crossing -- Jacob, in his dream, also stands up to God.

Far Be It From You

Jacob was not the only believer to bargain with God, nor the first. Before him came Abraham, who in Genesis 18 argued and bargained with Him over the number of righteous people for whose sake Sodom would be spared. There is an apparent similarity here between two patriarchs, grandfather and grandson, but what really draws our attention is the difference between them, as reflected in the difference between the two conversations.

It will be recalled that “three men” paid a visit to Abraham to deliver the news that his son Isaac would be born to him. Two of the guests were the angels who went from there to Sodom, in order to destroy it. The third was God, who stayed with Abraham for another brief discussion. It began in a promising and surprising fashion. Abraham asked God boldly, almost insolently: “Will you sweep away the innocent along with the guilty? What if there should be fifty innocent within the city, will You then wipe out the place and not forgive it for the sake of the innocent fifty who are in it? Far be it from You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?”

The length of Abraham’s speech, its rhythm and tone, testify to his great agitation. This was not his first meeting with God, but usually God spoke and he listened. Now he had come by a unique opportunity. God was a guest in his tent and ate lunch with him, and he could engage Him in a real conversation. His main motive, in my opinion, was his concern for the fate of his nephew Lot, who lived in Sodom. But this is plainly also an essential discussion of reward and punishment, even an opportunity to criticize God’s decision and try to change it.

Abraham’s emotions, however, caused him to confuse various notions and claims. His opening argument was “Will you sweep away the innocent along with the guilty?” which resembles the question of Abimelech, king of Gerar: “Will You slay even righteous people?” In other words, he did not object to the slaying of the wicked of Sodom, but was concerned only for the innocent residents. But then he had a new idea: Would God forgive the whole city on account of fifty righteous people who might be there? Then he set that aside, and went back to the first argument: “Far be it from You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty.”

“If I find within the city of Sodom fifty innocent ones, I will forgive the whole place for their sake,” said God. In other words, He chose to ignore the subject of collective punishment, and preferred to spar with Abraham not on a matter of principle but instead about the number of innocent people for whose sake the city would be spared.

Abraham fell into the trap. He started to bargain with God like a haggler in the market: “Here I venture to speak to my Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. What if the fifty innocent should lack five? Will you destroy the whole city for want of the five?”

“I will not destroy if I find forty-five there,” said God.

“What if forty should be found there?” said Abraham.

"I will not do it, for the sake of the forty," said God.

"Let not my Lord be angry if I go on," Abraham pressed his luck, "What if thirty should be found there?" One can almost hear him adding, "I can't afford a penny more," but God displayed patience even now: "I will not do it if I find thirty there."

"I venture again to speak to my Lord," said Abraham: "What if twenty should be found there?"

"I will not destroy for the sake of the twenty," said God, wondering if Abraham will ever get to the heart of the matter.

"Let my Lord not be angry if I speak but this last time," asked Abraham again, "What if ten should be found there?"

"I will not destroy for the sake of the ten," said God, and got up and left. As it is written: "I will not destroy for the sake of the ten. When the Lord had finished speaking to Abraham, He departed."

God shows His impatience. He is saying: Get to the point. You've taken up too much of my time haggling over trivia and foolishness. But His leaving is also an act of disappointment. God expected that Abraham would speak the truth, that he was worried over the fate of Lot, and not hide behind a theological discussion. But even if he were interested in a theological conversation he should have conducted it properly and taken advantage of the rare opportunity for a genuine investigation of ideas.

Two issues are embodied within Abraham's bargaining with God: One is collective punishment, punishing the righteous together with the wicked, which Abraham broached but didn't pursue. The second is the value of the righteous individual, which Abraham tried to address, but with the stratagem of a merchant.

God's impatient departure may be taken to mean that there is no difference between forty righteous men or twenty, thirty or ten. Yet there is a difference between many righteous people and one. Hence the enduring Hebrew expression: "One righteous man in Sodom," a good person among scoundrels. But Abraham didn't go into that subject, and when God saw that he was trying to lower the price without dealing with the truly important issue. He was fed up: "When the Lord had finished speaking to Abraham, He departed."

By the way, Abraham's questions had been answered in the past. Had he read the story of the Flood, several chapters and generations before him, he would have realized that God saves the one righteous man, but does not forgive the evil ones for his sake. Back then, He saved Noah, the one righteous man of his day, and wiped out all the sinners. So will He do now too, in Sodom: His angels will save the one righteous man, namely Lot, and destroy the whole town and all its sinful inhabitants. In short, this whole standoff was superfluous from the outset, and Abraham missed a chance to have a serious discussion with his God.

Now, back to Jacob. From a first reading of the dream of the ladder, it would seem that he, unlike his grandfather, didn't even attempt a discussion of principles, but preferred to bargain over technical details and his personal needs for the journey to Haran. But despite the fact that Jacob dealt merely with his needs of the moment and Abraham, ostensibly, with larger ethical questions — it turns out that Jacob was the deeper and more thoughtful of the two. Not only did he establish that the relationship between God and man are two-way and symmetrical, that God needs His believers just as they need Him, but went farther still. He made it clear to God that man needs Him to protect him on his journey and provide him food and clothing, whereas God depends on His believers for His very existence.

Thus God came to understand that decrees such as “Go forth from your native land” and tests of faith like the *akedah*, which worked fine with the obedient Abraham, would be unacceptable to Jacob. God would test him too, but differently. Jacob would not be called upon to perform one hideous deed, but rather to endure ongoing trials. The first of these would be the journey to Haran, a challenge Jacob would meet handily. He started out scared and worried, and finished strong and bold, as evidenced by his rolling of the heavy stone from the mouth of the well and kissing Rachel at their very first meeting. The second test would be the long wait for his beloved, and here too he would succeed. The third trial would be her prolonged barrenness, which Jacob would not handle well, but he would learn a lesson about himself and his love. The fourth trial would be the false bereavement he was made to suffer, when he believed that his son Joseph was dead. Not only had his other sons lied to him and concealed the truth from him, even God had not appeared to him in a dream or otherwise revealed to him that Joseph was still alive.

But Jacob withstood yet another test, as described in Genesis 32. This was the nocturnal struggle at the ford of the Jabbok river, one of the most cryptic and fascinating episodes in all the stories of the patriarchs.

What is Your Name?

On the eve of his encounter with Esau, twenty years after he fled from his wrath, Jacob again requested assistance from his God. Previously he had been a lad who left his mother's tent, frightened and empty-handed — “with my staff alone I crossed this Jordan,” he recalled twenty years thereafter — and now he returned as the head of a large family, accompanied by a great many livestock.

But in both instances his heart is filled with dread. Back then, from the hardships and perils of the road, and now, the meeting with his brother. Then, he asked that God attach a safe return home to the deal they made, of which he now reminds Him: “Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of Esau; else, I fear, he may come and strike me down, mothers and children alike. Yet You have said, ‘I will deal bountifully with you and make your offspring as the sands of the sea, which are too numerous to count.’”

But Jacob, the serial worrier of the Bible, did not rely solely on God's help. He made sure to send Esau gifts, flocks of sheep, camels, and cattle. He told the servants who drove his herds exactly what to say in order to win his brother's favor. And the

evening before their encounter. when he got to the river Jabbok, he moved all his livestock and “his two wives, his two maidservants, and his eleven children” to the other side, under cover of darkness. The crossing was dangerous in the dark, but he chanced the perils of the night so as not to be openly vulnerable in mid-stream to Esau and his men.

And then, once they were all safe and sound on the other side of the river, we find one of the most mysterious and wondrous sentences in all the Bible: “Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn.”

Many have puzzled over the meaning of this struggle, and the identity of the opponent. According to the beginning of the story, it was “a man,” but at the end it is written, “you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed,” suggesting some sort of godlike figure. This brings to mind the visitors who came to Abraham’s tent prior to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. There, the text speaks first of “three men,” but it then becomes clear these were two angels plus God Himself.

Some commentators explain that the “man” at the Jabbok was none other than Esau. Some claim he was the “Prince of Esau,” that is, the heavenly angel assigned to him. And there are those who say that Jacob wrestled with his own inner being. I am inclined, as usual, to stick to the plain meaning of the text, and assume that this was an angel of God. I think so first of all because we are reading the Bible and not *War and Peace*, and it’s natural to meet angels in the pages of the Bible, especially in a story about Jacob, who has already met them in his various dreams. In his first dream, he saw them going up and down the ladder, and in another dream he met an angel who identified himself as God, blessed his flocks with fertility, and instructed him to return home. After Jacob left Laban, who chased after him, two angels of God appeared to him at a place he named Mahanaim, and here he has successfully wrestled “with beings divine and human” at the crossing of the Jabbok.

The mysterious adversary, who could not defeat Jacob or even get free of his grip, asked of him: “Let me go, for dawn is breaking.”

Jacob did not comply. Although he had been wounded in the struggle, he made demands and imposed conditions, just as he had done with Esau over the birthright and the lentil soup, and with God in the dream of the angels and the ladder.

“He answered, ‘I will not let you go, unless you bless me.’”

“Said the other, ‘What is your name?’”

“He replied, ‘Jacob.’”

“Said he, ‘Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed.’”

“Jacob asked, ‘Pray tell me your name.’”

“But he said, ‘Why do you ask my name? And he blessed him there.’”

Though not defined as such, the wrestling at the Jabbok is also a reverie of sorts, with some typical characteristics of dreams. It happens at night, and to one person who is alone. It includes an encounter and conversation with God or a godlike creature, and as in Jacob's earlier dreams, there is also important news having to do with his fears on the eve of a great and dangerous test: the journey to Haran, his escape from Laban, and now, his meeting with his brother Esau. And indeed, the symmetry in the dream of the ladder may again be found here. The forces are equal. The angel and the man wrestle and neither can subdue the other, and each asks the other the same exact question: What is your name? Incidentally, Jacob's question -- "tell me your name" -- and his adversary's answer, "why do you ask my name?" support the assumption that this is an angel of God, because both lines also appear in the encounter between Samson's parents and the angel who foretold his birth, in the book of Judges. Manoah, the father of Samson, asked the angel, "What is your name?" and the angel replied: "Why do you ask my name, for it is unknowable." But the ultimate proof of the wrestler's identity is the name that Jacob gave to the site of the struggle after it was over: Peniel – the face of God – "for I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved." In other words, in his view as well, Jacob had wrestled with a divine being and not a mortal, and this, in the end, is what's important – because this knowledge had caused him no faintness of heart or body.

Your Name Shall No Longer Be Jacob

No less significant than Jacob's confrontation with the angel of God are the blessing he received and the changing of his name. I daresay that the replacement of the name Jacob with "Israel" is greater and more meaningful than the change of Abram to Abraham. The latter has national importance alone, because Abram was just a name, and Abraham was "the father of a multitude of nations." But changing Jacob's name also has personal significance, well beyond the Bible's official explanation.

This explanation appears in the words of the angel: "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed." That is, the name "Israel" derives from the same root as the Hebrew words *sar* and *serarah*, which connote power and authority. Thus "Israel" is a man who has overpowered his adversary. Yet if this were the only explanation, the angel would not have asked Jacob for his former name. Because he asked, and was given the answer, there is certainly significance to the name Jacob, and to its fundamental difference from the new name, Israel.

The name of Jacob, *Ya'akov*, is twice explained in the Bible. First of all, it has to do with his unusual birth, with his hand "holding on to the heel of Esau," his *akev*. The second interpretation, more relevant to our discussion, involves a different vocalization of the same Hebrew root: *akov*, which means crooked. The double entendre is expressed by Esau, when he becomes aware of the sly impersonation by which Jacob stole his blessing from their father Isaac: "Was he, then, named Jacob that he might twice supplant me?" – *ya' akveni*, in the biblical Hebrew. Which is to say, he is not named Jacob for nothing – he cheated me, tricked me twice.

From a linguistic point of view, there may be a connection between the two meanings. The verb *la'akov* originally meant to be “on the heels” of someone, to track them like a hunter, with harmful intent. Only later did *akov* come to mean “crooked” in a broader sense: topologically, as in the famous phrase from the prophet Isaiah, “And the crooked shall be made straight,” and also morally. Of the Israelite King Jehu it is written that he “acted with guile”, *okva*. The image reappears in the warning of the prophet Jeremiah: “Everyone take heed to his neighbor, and do not trust any brother, for every brother will utterly supplant” – *akov ya'akov* – “and every neighbor will walk with slanderers.” Indeed, Jacob gained his father’s blessing by trickery, with the same crookedness that his name implies.

Now, as he seizes the angel and refuses to let him go, Jacob demands: “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.” He could have asked for wealth and happiness, health and wisdom. He could have sought a solution to his immediate problem, protection against his brother. But he asked for a blessing, and, uncharacteristically, did not specify its content -- which indicates that the content of the blessing is less important than its context and its very existence. Because Jacob knew that he had obtained his father’s blessing by deceit, he now seeks a blessing that he has earned honestly.

And indeed, the angel didn’t bless him, in conventional fashion, with fecundity and land and power and other familiar promises, but instead changed his name: “Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel.” The official interpretation, as I’ve already noted, was “for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed.” But one must also keep in mind that just as the name *Ya'akov* contains the language of deceit, the name *Yisrael* in Hebrew includes the same letters as *yashar*, which means “straight” or “honest.” Jacob will never again be considered a trickster. He came by this blessing honestly, on his merits. This is all the more significant as it comes on the eve of his meeting with Esau, the brother he deceived.

By the way, the name change from Jacob to Israel reoccurs a few chapters later, in Genesis 35, verse 9, with no explanation attached. But with the passage of time something interesting emerges. After Abram becomes Abraham, we never come upon his former name. After Sarai’s name was altered to Sarah, she stayed only Sarah. But Israel was still called Jacob many times after the switch. Even by God, and sometimes within the same sentence, as at the beginning of Genesis 46: “God called to Israel in a vision by night, ‘Jacob, Jacob . . .’”

It seems that despite the divine decision to change his name, Jacob was not finished with his old one. Perhaps it was because, unlike Abram and Sarai, the name Jacob was a definition of character and personality, and these didn’t change along with the name. But the land is called “the Land of Israel” and not the “Land of Jacob” – and the Jewish people are the “Children of Israel.” Here the Bible opts for the newer, cleaner name, which God, not his parents, gave to Jacob.

It’s also worth noting that the Land of Israel, the land that Jacob lay upon and dreamed his dream, is not called the “Land of Abraham” or the “Land of Isaac,” although it was promised to them too, even before it was promised to Jacob. Nor are the Children of Israel customarily called the “Children of Abraham” or “Children of Isaac.” From a technical standpoint, this is because the descendants of Ishmael are also entitled to be called “Children of Abraham,” and the descendants of Esau the

“Children of Isaac.” so if the Jews want an exclusive name, they have no choice but to use “Children of Israel.” But what this also shows is that Jacob wasn’t just a Father, one of the three patriarchs, with all the attendant pomp and fanfare; but also a father, *Abba*, plain and simple. A father whose good traits and bad ones we may find in ourselves, down to this very day.