

TORAH SPARKS

SAY THAT YOU ARE MY SISTER

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Dvar Parashah

Jacob doesn't know it yet, but by the time he reaches Haran he has walked straight into the oldest fear in his family. Genesis keeps circling the same bruise, returning to it again and again: what happens to an Israelite in a foreign land. Sarah in Egypt, Sarah again in Gerar, Rivka under Abimelech's gaze, the danger always arrives the same way. A border crossed, a husband afraid, a woman mis-seen, misidentified, renamed to make the family survive. And through it all, the women say nothing. Sarah is silent. Rivka is silent. The men speak for them, around them, instead of them.

Jacob should know this pattern by heart. He was born into it. But in Vayeitzei, the pattern rushes up to meet him in a form no one taught him to expect. He arrives in Paddan Aram hoping for safety, for family, for a home. After all, it was Abraham's home, it was his mother's home. And he goes into the house with his uncle, Laban. Jacob enters as a guest, maybe even as kin. But it is not his home. And the foreign house does what foreign houses always do in this family: it begins to bend the truth.

Laban sees Jacob too. Not his face. His value. His hands. His labor. Seven years contracted for Rachel, a business arrangement cinched by beauty. And then the night of the wedding, the room dark, the bride silent. Morning light, and the shock that rings through the whole parashah: וַיִּהְיֶה-הוּא לְרָחֵל. And behold, it is Leah.

Laban isn't just a trickster here; he's the nightmare convergence of every role Genesis has taught us to fear. He is Pharaoh and Abimelech in a family man's clothing, the foreign king who takes what isn't his simply because he can. He is also the patriarch, the father who decides which daughter goes where, who controls their bodies and their futures with the ease of someone shuffling livestock. And he is the inverse-Abraham, the one who doesn't ask a woman to pretend to be a sister but forces the sister-wife swap himself, in the dark, without warning, without consent. Laban collapses the whole ancestral pattern into a single figure, the abuser from outside and the betrayer from inside, making Haran feel less like refuge and more like the heart of the danger Jacob thought he'd fled.

And Rachel and Leah? They know what has happened to them. The great crime that Laban has committed in their eyes is not the switch of the wedding night. It is, as they [say](#), that he has made them "strangers" in their own land.

The economics press harder here than anywhere else. Fourteen years for the right woman. Hired labor for intimacy. Children born into a competition structured by contracts and wages. Rachel trades mandrakes for Jacob's presence. Leah buys a night with her own husband. Even the births feel transactional, named out of bargains and grievances. Human love flattened into the logic of foreign households: work, daughters, livestock, profit. Everything quantifiable. Everything for sale.

And the gaze runs through it all, unsettling and relentless. Jacob sees Rachel and loves her. Laban sees Jacob and calculates him. Jacob only sees Leah when it's too late. God sees that Leah is unloved. Rachel sees she has no children and burns. The wrong kind of seeing activates every crisis in this family. The wrong gaze unravels them.

Vayeitzei sits directly in the middle of Genesis's long chain of threatened bodies. Before it was Sarah in Pharaoh's palace, Sarah in Abimelech's. After it will come Dinah, the sister, taken, seen and seized, having not been safely married off to kin. Then comes Tamar, the woman who inverts the pattern, tricking the Israelite about her identity, in order to claim a marriage to a brother. The last iteration is Joseph, nearly taken by the Wife of Potiphar, a foreign woman, as he loses his identity. But it is here, in Haran, that the pattern first cracks open: the trick springs back on the trickster. The danger that once targeted the women of the family now lands squarely on the patriarch.

Beneath it all, the covenant trembles. Every generation, the promise comes close to unraveling in someone else's household. If Sarah had remained in Pharaoh's palace, no Isaac. If Rivka had been held in Gerar, no Jacob. If Rachel had never reached Jacob's bed, no Twelve Tribes. Vayeitzei holds the future of Israel in the same fragile tension: can the promise survive another mis-seen woman, another foreign house, another night where the truth is hidden?

This story of wives in foreign households in Genesis becomes the metaphor for our nation. Israel as God's wife, beloved and desired, endangered by foreign powers, mis-seen by surrounding nations, her safety never guaranteed in someone else's land. The same dangers Sarah and Rivka faced become the dangers of exile; the same misrecognitions that shattered Jacob's household become the misrecognitions that threaten the covenant itself. Will we assimilate into Egypt, into Babylon, into Rome? And the hope Genesis carries is that once Israel is planted in her own land, the danger will end. That the wife of God will no longer be passed between foreign hands. That the beloved will be held, not bargained for. That the gaze resting upon her will finally be the gaze of love, not appetite.

The Song of Songs dreams that dream fully: אחותי רעיתי. Sister and wife. In the traditional reading of the text, this is Israel, bride of God. Kin and beloved. It imagines the world Genesis longs for but cannot quite reach, a world where we are home and we are safe.

EVERY CLOUD HAS A SILVER LONGING

Jonathan Lipnick

Language of the Parashah

The story of Jacob's emergence as the *pater familias* of the house of Israel which covers chapters 25-32 of Genesis reaches its dramatic climax in the final verses of parashat Vayetze. After enduring years of abuse at the hands of his uncle Laban, Jacob flees Haran with his wives and children only to be overtaken by Laban 400 miles away in the hills of Gilead. God explicitly prevents Laban from harming Jacob. However, Laban berates his nephew in an impassioned speech, the high-point of which is the following verse:

וַעֲתֵרָה הָלַךְ הָלַכְתָּ כִּי-נִכְסְפָתָה לְבֵית אָבִיךָ לָמָּה גָנַבְתָּ אֶת-אֱלֹהֵי:

Very well, you had to leave because you were homesick for your father's house;
but why did you steal my gods?" (Genesis 31:30)

The "gods" that Laban is referring to are the household idols (*terafim*) which Rachel had stolen on her way out the door (Gen. 31:19). There is much to be said about the matter of these idols, however, I would like to focus on the interesting language in the first half of the verse. Note that this verse contains two examples of "doubled" verbs: הָלַךְ הָלַכְתָּ ("you left") and נִכְסְפָתָה נִכְסַפְתָּ ("you longed"). Both are infinitive absolutes combined with a conjugated verb, a unique feature of biblical Hebrew used for emphasis, to strengthen the force of the action. In English this is normally conveyed by means of an adverb ("surely" or "indeed"). But in his translation of the Torah, Everett Fox (somewhat absurdly) has replicated these doubled verbs in English:

"Well now, you had to go, yes, go, since you longed, longed for your father's house—
why did you steal my gods?"

Let us zoom in on the phrase which Fox translates "longed, longed": נִכְסַפְתָּ נִכְסְפָתָה *niḥsaf niḥsafta*. This verb only appears six times in the entire Hebrew Bible. It comes from the Semitic root כסף KSF, which apparently means "to be pale, ashamed" (based on its meaning in Arabic and Aramaic). The only place in the Bible where it actually has this original meaning is Zephaniah 2:1: "Gather together, gather yourselves together, you nation with *no shame* (אַל תִּכְסַּף *lo niḥsaf*). In the other five instances, *niḥsaf* takes on the metaphorical meaning of "to yearn shamefully." Although the verbal form is exceedingly rare in Hebrew, the noun that is

derived from it is very common: כֶּסֶף *kesef* meaning “silver” (and by extension, “money”) on account of its “pale” color.

If the phrase *nihsaf nihsafta* sounds oddly familiar to you, that is probably because it is quoted in the famous piyyut *Yedid Nefesh*, traditionally sung before *Kabbalat Shabbat* and at *Seudah Shelishit*. Attributed to the kabbalistic sage R. Elazar Azikri who lived in Safed in the 16th century, this poem expresses Israel’s deep yearning for the love of God:

וְתִיק יְהִימוּ נָא רַחֲמֶיךָ. וְחוּסָה נָא עַל בֶּן אוֹהֲבֶךָ.
כִּי זֶה כְּמֵה נִכְסוּף וְנִכְסַפְתִּי לְרֹאוֹת בְּתַפְאֲרַת עֲזֶךָ.
אָנָּה אֱלֹהִי מִחֲמַד לְבִי. חוּשָׁה נָא וְאַל תִּתְעַלֵּם:

Ancient One—let Your mercy be aroused, and please have pity upon Your beloved son.
For it is long that I **have yearned** to behold soon the glory of Your strength.
These my heart has desired, please have pity and do not conceal Yourself.

Another place where this rare verb can be found is in the opening verse of the 18th century piyyut *Yah Ehsaf*. Attributed to the Karliner Rebbe, R. Aharon Perlov (1736-1772), this is one of the only piyyutim that has emerged from the Hassidic tradition:

יְהִי אֶכְסֹף נְעִים שַׁבָּת
הַמְתַּאֲמֶת וּמִתְאַחֶדֶת בְּסִגְלַתְךָ
Oh Lord, how I **long** for the bliss of Shabbat
Which is fit for and unified with your chosen [people].

As stated above, the verb *nihsaf* is very rare in the Hebrew Bible. The only other place where this form of the verb appears is in Psalm 84:

נִכְסַפָּה וְגַם-כָּלְתָהּ | נַפְשִׁי לְחִצְרוֹת יְהוָה לִבִּי וּבִשְׂרִי יִרְנְנוּ אֶל-אֱלֹהֵי:
I **long**, I yearn for the courts of the Lord;
my body and soul shout for joy to the living God. (Ps. 84:3)

If this verse seems familiar to you, that is because it too is quoted in another liturgical poem sung on Shabbat. Here are the opening words of the Shabbat piyyut *Tzamah Nafshi*, written by the 12th century Spanish scholar Abraham ibn Ezra:

צָמָא נַפְשִׁי לְאֱלֹהִים לְאֵל חַי, לִבִּי וּבִשְׂרִי יִרְנְנוּ אֶל-אֱלֹהֵי חַי.

My soul hungers for God, for the living God.
My body and soul shout for joy to the living God.

What is going on here? Why is such a rare Hebrew verb so frequently found in liturgical poetry connected to Shabbat? According to the kabbalistic tradition, Shabbat is personified as a bride, who is united with her lover - either God or the people of Israel - each week. To express the burning desire associated with this erotic union, kabbalistic authors required a vocabulary of Hebrew words that relate to lust, passion and yearning. The obscure biblical word *nihsaf* fit the bill perfectly.

Back to our parashah. If *nihsaf* is such a rare word in the Bible, what compelled Laban to use it in his diatribe against Jacob? This is part of Laban's rhetoric to build a case for the restoration of what he truly cares about: not of his daughters and grandchildren, but his household idols. In his magisterial commentary on Genesis, Nahum M. Sarna writes:

For devastating psychological effect, Laban cynically reinforces his feigned magnanimity with a beguiling show of empathy. Having thus emotionally disarmed his opponent by lulling him into a false sense of relief, he then proceeds to deliver the coup de grace in the form of the most serious charge of all: theft of his gods. (218)

The key to this “feigned magnanimity” is the use of the emotionally charged verb *nihsaf*. Jacob must have been surprised when he heard it given its rarity. However, given the controversial terms under which Jacob had absconded from his home twenty years earlier, Jacob would have been struck with the astuteness of Laban's claim that he “longed *shamefully* for [his] father's house.” Although Laban's carefully crafted speech did not actually result in the restoration of his idols, he was apparently able to appeal to Jacob's emotions enough to draw him into the peace treaty that concludes this week's parashah.