



The Ziegler School
of Rabbinic Studies

Walking with History

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דרכיה דרכי נעם

In Memory of Harold Held and Louise Held,
of blessed memory

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Published in partnership with the
United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism,
the Rabbinical Assembly,
the Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs
and the Women's League for Conservative Judaism.



UNIT 2: THE BIBLICAL PERIOD

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While as a modern, thoughtful reader of the Bible it is difficult to speak about the Bible as history, it is equally difficult to speak about the Bible without speaking of history. Although the parameters of the questions raised by this struggle may differ depending on the reader, the approach, and the text, the question as to how and when to read the Bible as history has persisted for many years. Approaches to historical method in studying Bible have ranged from the minimalist position (one does not read any of the Bible as historically accurate unless it is supported by extra-biblical evidence) to the maximalist position (one reads the Bible as historically accurate unless that reading is specifically countered by outside evidence) to everything in between. One way to think about this question is to consider that many modern readers of the Bible do not read the Creation and Garden of Eden stories as historically accurate. At the same time, many modern readers believe that a fair number of the Israelite kings mentioned in the Book of Kings were historical personages, as they are mentioned in extra-biblical ancient Near Eastern sources. The question can then be asked: Where, between Adam and Eve and the Kings, do we begin to read biblical characters as having been historical figures? Do we start with Abraham? Moses? David? The fact that in any group of serious readers one will find many different answers to this question accentuates the difficulty of reading the Bible from a historical point of view.

Despite this complicated and challenging state of affairs, it would be unfortunate to take the question of history out of our conversation about the Bible. After all, Jews see the Hebrew Bible as a sacred text which describes our heritage. It is written through a lens of history and it develops chronologically, describing events, timetables, genealogies, and natural phenomena that help historians to ascertain dates. Most importantly, God in the Bible acts on the historical stage, and shows Divine power by interacting with the historical issues and events of the day.

This theological approach is especially evident in texts surrounding the Babylonian Exile. These texts describe Israel's downfall and Babylonia's success as God's punishment (Jeremiah 21:1-10), and Cyrus, the King of Persia, the country that ultimately allowed the Israelites to return to Judah, as God's anointed one (Isaiah 45:1). The Babylonian Exile, which began in 586 BCE and continued through 537 BCE, was a time of great learning and challenge for the Jews. They needed to learn how to live outside of their land for the first time. They needed to create a new conception of God, since they now needed to worship God without a Temple and outside of Israel, against the backdrop of contemporary thought that held that gods were powerful primarily, or exclusively, in their own lands. Because of the need to deal with all of this change and upheaval, this became a time of growth and development for the Jewish People. While there are many questions and theories as to how the Torah came to be, many modern scholars understand the Torah as having been canonized, that is, brought together as a whole, and considered holy, during this time. Thus, the struggles and challenges of the Babylonian Exile made their way into the themes of the Torah.

The prophets were the first to struggle with this difficult situation of defeat and exile. They saved the Jewish People by stating that Judah was not falling to the Babylonians because of any weakness in or lack of Divine power. They explained that this state of affairs, that Judah was being conquered and that the Temple was destroyed, came about because of Israel's sins. Babylonia would never have been able to conquer by itself. Rather, Babylonia became God's tool of punishment. God used Babylonia to punish Israel for her sins.

This very important conclusion led to two essential corollaries. First, it made it clear that Israel's God was well, and strong, and able not only to control Israel, but also to control the whole world. It enabled the Israelites to envision God as a *miqdash me'at* or "small sanctuary" in Babylonia, thus allowing them to retain their ability



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to worship and to find sacredness in their lives while living without a Temple, and outside of Israel (Ezekiel 11:16). Second, it meant that if the Israelites repented, they could return to their land (Ezekiel 37:21-23). By defining the Israelites' difficult situation as God's choice, as God's punishment for the people's sins, the prophets set the stage for the possibility of living in exile while retaining a yearning for and connection to Israel as the homeland. The prophetic approach to history was to explain it theologically, and thus to create hope and a future for a people that was feeling hopeless and destroyed.

It was not only the prophets, however, who worked with text to make sense of their times. The Torah's narrative literature also expresses these same struggles through themes that recur in the text. Tracing some of these themes in Genesis makes it possible to better comprehend the dire situation faced by the Israelites in the period just before and during the Babylonian Exile. These themes are especially evident in the narrative of Jacob. Jacob was probably our most important patriarch. Not only was he the father of sons who became the twelve tribes, but it was he who received the name "Israel" (Genesis 32:29). Three themes which permeate his life can help us see how the Israelites in exile defined themselves: the primacy of the younger son, deception, and disability.

Throughout the Torah, we see that while in theory the older son is meant to inherit, it is always the younger son who wins out. This theme is especially evident in the life of Jacob. The story of how he manages to buy his brother's birthright and to steal his blessing (Genesis 25:29-34, 27:1-40) fills a substantial part of the narrative of his life.

One way of understanding this interesting situation is that Israel always saw itself as a small nation, a nation one would think could not succeed against much larger foes. Yet the Israelites also considered themselves to be God's Chosen People, with a special covenantal relationship and a special blessing. In a time when they were living without a country and without a Temple, how could they maintain their self-image as God's chosen, special people? The answer that permeates the narrative literature is that things are not as they appear to be. The one who is expected to inherit may be stronger, but he often loses. It is the weaker younger son, the one who should not succeed, who wins out. These narratives reflect Israel's exilic situation, and were a major source of hope for the Israelites in their Babylonian Exile.

Deception is another prominent theme in Jacob's life. Not only does Jacob receive the most important covenantal blessing through deceiving his father, but his mother engineers the plan. The fact that the blessing occurred through deception in no way negates its efficacy (Genesis 27:1-40). Similarly, Jacob becomes wealthy through a deceptive arrangement involving the division of sheep between him and his uncle Laban (Genesis 30:25-43). In the biblical text, these deceptive actions are not seen as negative; they are not condemned. Rather, deception is seen as a legitimate means of accomplishing one's goals against stronger opponents. Here too, Jacob's story showed the exiled Israelites that there were tools available to the weak which were legitimate and could help them to accomplish their goals. While the exiles knew that they could not best their opponents in face-to-face confrontation, this theme of deception emphasized that there were alternative means available to them.

Finally, we see that Jacob ends up with a disability, having been injured in his struggle with an angel while on his way to meet his brother Esau (Genesis 32:22-33). This was a most important struggle, and Jacob came out of it with two new characteristics: he was given the name Israel, and he would now walk with a limp. It does not seem to be an accident that Jacob received both of these qualities simultaneously. Receiving the name of Israel was a mark of success and of overcoming challenges, yet it was accompanied by a limp. Once again, we



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see a parallel between the story of Jacob and that of the Israelites during the Babylonian Exile. Like Jacob, the Israelites suffered a metaphorical disability, the terrible disability of the loss of their Temple and their land, yet they overcame challenges and they succeeded where one would expect that they would not be able to succeed. They maintained their covenantal relationship with God, survived Exile and returned to regain their land.

This approach to reading Genesis as a biblical book which expresses important themes of the Babylonian Exile can also be used in analyzing the husband and wife pairs in Genesis. In each case, while the man is higher in social status, it is the woman who makes sure that the blessing is passed on to the right son. For example, Sarah insists that Ishmael be sent away, a request that is supported by God (Genesis 21:9-13). And Rebecca arranges for Jacob to deceive Isaac into blessing him as the older son, thus fulfilling the prophecy she received during her pregnancy (Genesis 25:19-24; 27:5-17). While many have tried to understand this theme of deception, perhaps it is best for us to think about Genesis as reflecting themes which were important to the Jews in exile. During the exilic time period, the metaphor of God and Israel as husband and wife was already prevalent (Jeremiah 2:1-2; Hosea 1-2). If we think of this metaphor in the context of the husbands and wives in our Genesis narrative, then perhaps the statement is being made that although the husband, God, is the stronger party with higher social status, it is up to the wife, Israel, to be active and assertive, and to make sure that the covenant passes on properly to the next generation. This was a powerful message for the exiles, telling them that while they could count on God's might and their status as God's chosen people, it was still up to them to be active and to make sure that things passed on properly to their descendants.

While there is much to learn about history from the Bible, perhaps even more importantly for us, there is so much we can learn from how our ancestors used sacred literature to process and work through their own history. They used their understanding of their relationship to God and their heritage to make sense of their struggles and difficulties. Maybe the most important lesson we can learn from biblical history is that it is up to us to use that same method. It is essential that we, too, should feel that the place to deal with our communal struggles is through text, through understanding our relationship with God, and through our connection to our heritage.



UNIT 2: THE BIBLICAL PERIOD – TEXT 1

בראשית ג:א-יט

א והנחש הזה ערום מכל חית השדה אשר עשה יהוה אלהים, ויאמר אל האשה אף כי אמר אלהים לא תאכלו מכל עץ הגן. ב ותאמר האשה אל הנחש, מפרי עץ הגן נאכל. ג ומפרי העץ אשר בתוך הגן אמר אלהים לא תאכלו ממנו ולא תגעו בו, פן תמתו. ד ויאמר הנחש אל האשה, לא מות תמתו. ה כי ידע אלהים כי ביום אכלכם ממנו ונפקחו עיניכם, והייתם כאלהים ידעי טוב ורע. ו ותרא האשה כי טוב העץ למאכל וכי תאנה הוא לעינים ונחמד העץ להשפיל ותקח מפריו ותאכל, ותתן גם לאישה עמה ויאכל. ז ותפקחנה עיני שניהם וידעו כי עירמם הם, ויתפרו עלה תאנה ויעשו להם חגרת. ח וישמעו את קול יהוה אלהים מתהלך בגן לרוח היום, ויתחבא האדם ואשתו מפני יהוה אלהים בתוך עץ הגן. ט ויקרא יהוה אלהים אל האדם, ויאמר לו איכה. י ויאמר את קלך שמעתי בגן, ואיך אפי עירם אנכי ואחבא. יא ויאמר מי הגיד לך כי עירם אתה, המן העץ אשר צויתך לבלתי אכל ממנו אכלת. יב ויאמר האדם, האשה אשר נתתה עמדי היא נתנה לי מן העץ ואכל. יג ויאמר יהוה אלהים לאשה מה זאת עשית, ותאמר האשה הנחש השיאני ואכל. יד ויאמר יהוה אלהים אל הנחש כי עשית זאת ארור אתה מכל הבהמה ומכל חית השדה, על גחונך תלך ועפר תאכל כל ימי חייך. טו ואיבה אשית בינך ובין האשה ובין זרעך ובין זרעה, הוא ישופך ראש ואתה תשופנו עקב. טז אל האשה אמר הרבה ארבה עצבונך והרנדבעצב תלדי בנים, ואל אישך תשוקתך והוא ימשל בך. יז ולאדם אמר כי שמעת לקול אשתך ותאכל מן העץ אשר צויתך לאמר לא תאכל ממנו, ארוחה האדמה בעבורך בעצבון תאכלנה כל ימי חייך. יח וקוץ ודרדר תצמיח לך, ואכלת את עשב השדה. יט בזעת אפיך תאכל לחם עד שובך אל האדמה כי ממנה לקחת, כי עפר אתה ואל עפר תשוב.

GENESIS 3:1-19

1 Now the serpent was the shrewdest of all the wild animals which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman 'Did God say you shall not eat of any tree of the garden'? 2 And the woman said to the serpent "We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden 3 but of the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden God said 'You shall not eat of it or touch it lest you die'". 4 And the serpent said to the woman "You shall not die 5 for God knows that on the day you eat of it your eyes shall be opened and you shall be as gods, knowing good and evil". 6 And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and gave also to her husband with her, and he ate. 7 And the eyes of both of them were opened and they knew that they were naked, and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. 8 And they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the breeze of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God amongst the trees of the garden. 9 And the Lord God called to the man and said to him "Where are you"? 10 And he replied "I heard your voice in the garden and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid". 11 And he said: "Who told you that you were naked? Did you eat of the tree from which I commanded you not to eat"? 12 And the man said "The woman you gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree and I ate". 13 And the Lord God said to the



THE BIBLICAL PERIOD – TEXT 1 (CONTINUED)

woman “What is this that you have done”! And the woman said “The serpent beguiled me and I ate”. 14 And the Lord God said to the serpent “Because you did this, you are cursed above all cattle and above every beast of the field; on your belly you will go, and you will eat dust all the days of your life. 15 And I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your seed and her seed; they shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise their heel”. 16 To the woman he said “I will greatly multiply the pain of your childbearing; in pain shall you bear children. Yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you”. 17 And to the man he said “Because you did as your wife said and ate of the tree about which I commanded you ‘You shalt not eat of it’, cursed is the ground because of you; by toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. 18 Thorns also and thistles shall it sprout for you, and you shall eat the grasses of the field. 19 By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return unto the ground, for from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you shall return”.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **What is the role of deception in this text? Consider every character.**
- **How do you read Eve’s actions in light of what Dr. Prouser says about Sarah and Rebecca as seen through exilic eyes?**
- **Does the theme of disability play a role in this text? Is it possible to read the punishment of the snake as a “disabling” act? If so, what is the significance?**
- **How can we relate the expulsion from the garden to the Babylonian Exile, including questions of punishment and God’s continued care?**



THE BIBLICAL PERIOD – TEXT 2

ישעיהו מ:א-יא

א נחמו נחמו עמי, יאמר אלהיכם. ב דברו על לב ירושלים וקראו אליה כי מלאה צבאה כי נרצה עונה, כי לקחה מיד יהוה כפלים בכל חטאתיה. ג קול קורא במדבר פנו דרך יהוה, ישרו בערבה מסלה לאלהינו. ד כל גיא ינשא וכל הר וגבעה ישפלו, והיה העקב למישור והרכסים לבקעה. ה ונגלה כבוד יהוה, וראו כל בשר יחדו כי פי יהוה דבר. ו קול אומר קרא ויאמר מה אקרא, כל הבשר חציר וכל חסדו כציץ השדה. ז יבש חציר נבל ציץ כי רוח יהוה נשבה בו, אכן חציר העם. ח יבש חציר נבל ציץ, ודבר אלהינו יקום לעולם. ט על הר גבה עלי לך מבשרת ציון הרימי בכת קולך מבשרת ירושלים, הרימי אל תיראי אמרי לערי יהודה הנה אלהיכם. י הנה אדני יהוה בחזק יבוא וזרעו משלה לו, הנה שכרו אתו ופעלתו לפניו. יא כרעה עדרו ירעה בזרעו יקבץ טלאים ובחיקו ישא, עלות ינהל.

ISAIAH 40:1-11

1 Comfort, oh comfort my people, says your God. 2 Speak comfortingly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her war service is over, that her iniquity is pardoned, for she has received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins. 3 A voice cries "Prepare in the wilderness the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 4 Every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain and hill made low, and the crooked shall be made straight and the rough places plain. 5 And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken". 6 A voice says "Proclaim"! And he asks "What shall I proclaim"? "All flesh is grass, and all its goodness like flowers of the field. 7 The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it, surely man is but grass. 8 The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God shall stand for ever". 9 You who brings good tidings to Zion go up into the high mountain, you who brings good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with strength, lift it up, have no fear; say to the cities of Judah "Behold your God"! 10 Behold, the Lord God will come with might, and his arm will rule for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. 11 He shall feed his flock like a shepherd, he shall gather the lambs in his arms and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- This text expresses comfort and support for the exiles and includes hopeful visions of return. What are the metaphors and images it uses to express these things?
- How does this message of comfort follow from the prophetic explanation of the destruction?
- How is God characterized in this text?



THE BIBLICAL PERIOD – TEXT 3

ירמיהו כט:א, ה-יד

א וְאֵלֶּה דְבָרֵי הַסֵּפֶר אֲשֶׁר שָׁלַח יִרְמְיָה הַנְּבִיא מִירוּשָׁלַם, אֶל יֵתָר זִקְנֵי הַגּוֹלָה וְאֶל הַכֹּהֲנִים וְאֶל הַנְּבִיאִים וְאֶל כָּל הָעָם אֲשֶׁר הִגְלָה נְבוּכַדְנֶצַּר מִירוּשָׁלַם בְּבִלְהָ... ה בָּנוּ בָתִּים וְשָׁבוּ, וְנָטְעוּ גִּנּוֹת וְאָכְלוּ אֶת פְּרִיָן. ו קָחוּ נָשִׁים וְהוֹלִידוּ בָנִים וּבָנוֹת וּקְחוּ לְבָנֵיכֶם נָשִׁים וְאֶת בָּנוֹתֵיכֶם תָּנוּ לְאִנְשֵׁים וְתִלְדְּנָה בָנִים וּבָנוֹת, וּרְבוּ שָׁם וְאֵל תִּמְעָטוּ. ז וּדְרָשׁוּ אֶת שְׁלוֹם הָעִיר אֲשֶׁר הִגְלִיתִי אֶתְכֶם שָׁמָּה וְהִתְפַּלְלוּ בְּעֵדָה אֶל יְהוָה, כִּי בְשָׁלוֹמָה יִהְיֶה לָכֶם שְׁלוֹם. ח כִּי כֹה אָמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֵל יִשְׂרָאֵל לָכֶם נְבִיאֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבְּכֶם וְקִסְמֵיכֶם, וְאֵל תִּשְׁמְעוּ אֶל חֲלֻמֹתֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם מְחַלְמִים. ט כִּי בְשִׁקְרָהּ הֵם נְבִיאִים לָכֶם בְּשָׁמִי, לֹא שִׁלַּחְתִּים נְאֻם יְהוָה. י כִּי כֹה אָמַר יְהוָה כִּי לִפִּי מְלֹאֵת לְבַבְךָ לְבָבֶל שְׁבָעִים שָׁנָה אֶפְקֹד אֶתְכֶם, וְהִקְמַתִּי עֲלֵיכֶם אֶת דְּבָרֵי הַטּוֹב לְהַשִּׁיב אֶתְכֶם אֶל הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה. יא כִּי אֲנֹכִי יֹדְעֵתִי אֶת הַמַּחְשָׁבֹת אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי חָשַׁב עֲלֵיכֶם נְאֻם יְהוָה, מַחְשְׁבוֹת שְׁלוֹם וְלֹא לְרָעָה לְתֵת לָכֶם אַחֲרַיִת וְתִקְוָה. יב וּקְרָאתֶם אֹתִי וְהִלַּכְתֶּם וְהִתְפַּלַּלְתֶּם אֵלַי, וְשָׁמַעְתִּי אֲלֵיכֶם. יג וּבְקִשְׁתֶּם אֹתִי וּמְצֵאתֶם, כִּי תִדְרָשְׁנִי בְּכָל לְבַבְכֶם. יד וְנִמְצָאתִי לָכֶם נְאֻם יְהוָה, וְשָׁבַתִּי אֶת שְׁבוֹתֵיכֶם וּקְבַצְתִּי אֶתְכֶם מִכָּל הַגּוֹיִם וּמִכָּל הַמְּקוֹמוֹת אֲשֶׁר הִדַּחְתִּי אֶתְכֶם שָׁם נְאֻם יְהוָה, וְהִשְׁבַּתִּי אֶתְכֶם אֶל הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר הִגְלִיתִי אֶתְכֶם מִשָּׁם.

JEREMIAH 29: 1, 5-14

1 Now these are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the residue of the elders of the exile community, and to the priests and to the prophets, and to all the people whom Nebuchadnezzar had exiled from Jerusalem to Babylon....5 Build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat their fruit. 6 Take wives and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters; and multiply there and do not decrease. 7 And seek the peace of the city to which I have exiled you and pray to the Lord for it, for in its peace you shall have peace. 8 For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Let not the prophets and diviners among you deceive you, and pay no attention to the dreams they dream. 9 For they prophesy falsely to you in my name; I did not send them, declares the Lord. 10 For thus says the Lord: When Babylon's 70 years are full, I will remember you, and perform my good word toward you to return you to this place. 11 For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. 12 Then you shall call upon me and go and pray to me, and I will pay attention to you. 13 You shall seek me and find me when you will seek me with all your heart. 14 And I will be found for you says the Lord, and I will restore you from your captivity and gather you from all the nations and from all the places to which I have banished you declares the Lord; and I will bring you back to the place from which I have exiled you.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **Jeremiah's prophecy is addressed to the people in exile in Babylonia. What should they do, which leaders must they follow, and what feelings should they express?**
- **Look at verses 5-7. What is the significance of each thing Jeremiah tells the exiles to do?**
- **The Babylonian exiles here are learning for the first time how to be Diaspora Jews. Discuss how this letter from Jeremiah helps them in this process.**
- **Which parts of Jeremiah's letter resonate with you in your situation today?**



בראשית כח:י-כב

י וַיֵּצֵא יַעֲקֹב מִבְּעַר שְׂבַע וַיֵּלֶךְ חֲרָנָה. יא וַיִּפְגַּע בַּמָּקוֹם וַיֵּלֶן שָׁם כִּי-בָא הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ וַיִּקַּח מֵאֲבְנֵי הַמָּקוֹם וַיִּשָּׁם מְרֹאשֵׁתָיו, וַיִּשְׁכַּב בַּמָּקוֹם הַהוּא. יב וַיַּחֲלֹם וַהֲנִה סֹלֶם מֵצֵב אֲרָצָה וְרָאשׁוּ מִגִּיעַ הַשָּׁמַיְמָה, וַהֲנִה מַלְאָכֵי אֱלֹהִים עֹלִים וְיֹרְדִים בּוֹ. יג וַהֲנִה יְהוָה נֹצֵב עָלָיו וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אֲבִיךָ וְאֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק, הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה שֹׁכֵב עָלֶיהָ לְךָ אֶתְנַנֶּה וְלִזְרַעְךָ. יד וַהֲיֵה זֶרְעֶךָ כְּעַפְרַת הָאָרֶץ וּפְרָצְתָּ יָמָה וְקִדְמָה וְצַפְנָה וְנִגְבָּה, וְנִבְרָכוּ בְךָ כָּל-מִשְׁפַּחַת הָאֲדָמָה וּבְזַרְעֶךָ. טו וַהֲנִה אֲנֹכִי עִמָּךְ וְשָׁמַרְתִּיךָ בְּכָל אֲשֶׁר-תֵּלֵךְ וְהִשְׁבַּתִּיךָ אֶל-הָאֲדָמָה הַזֹּאת, כִּי לֹא אֶעֱזָבְךָ עַד אֲשֶׁר אִם-עָשִׂיתִי אֵת אֲשֶׁר-דִּבַּרְתִּי לְךָ. טז וַיִּיקַח יַעֲקֹב מִשְׁנָתוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר אֲכֹן יֵשׁ יְהוָה בַּמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה, וְאֲנֹכִי לֹא יָדַעְתִּי. יז וַיִּירָא וַיֹּאמֶר מִה-נֹרָא הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה, אֵין זֶה כִּי אִם-בֵּית אֱלֹהִים וְזֶה שַׁעַר הַשָּׁמַיִם. יח וַיִּשְׁכַּם יַעֲקֹב בְּבֹקֶר וַיִּקַּח אֶת-הָאֲבֹן אֲשֶׁר-שָׁם וַיִּשָּׁם אֹתָהּ מִצְבָּה, וַיִּצַק שָׁמֹן עַל-רֹאשָׁהּ. יט וַיִּקְרָא אֶת-שֵׁם-הַמָּקוֹם הַהוּא בֵּית-אֵל.... כ וַיִּזְדַּר יַעֲקֹב נָדָר לֵאמֹר, אִם-יְהִיָּה אֱלֹהִים עִמָּדִי וְשָׁמַרְנִי בַדֶּרֶךְ הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי הוֹלֵךְ וְנָתַן-לִי לֶחֶם לֶאֱכֹל, וּבְגָד לְלַבֵּשׁ כֹּא וְשַׁבְּתִי בְשָׁלוֹם אֶל-בֵּית אָבִי, וַהֲיֵה יְהוָה לִי לֵאלֹהִים. כב וְהָאֲבֹן הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר-שָׁמַתִּי מִצְבָּה יְהִיָּה בֵּית אֱלֹהִים, וְכָל אֲשֶׁר תִּתֶּן-לִי עֲשֹׂר אֶעֱשֶׂרְנוּ לְךָ.

GENESIS 28:10-22

10 And Jacob left Be'er-sheva, and went toward Haran. 11 And he came upon a certain place and stopped there all night because the sun had set; and he took one of the stones of that place, and put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep. 12 And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven, and behold angels of God were going up and down on it. 13 And behold, the Lord stood beside him and said "I am the Lord God of Abraham your father, and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie, I give it to you and to your offspring. 14 And your seed shall be as the dust of the earth and you shall spread out to the west and to the east, and to the north and to the south. All the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you and your descendants. 15 And behold, I am with you and will protect you wherever you go and will return you to this land, for I will not leave you until I have done what I spoke to you". 16 And Jacob woke from his sleep and said "Surely the Lord is in this place and I didn't know it". 17 And he was afraid and said "How awesome is this place! This is no other than the house of God and this is the gate of heaven". 18 And Jacob rose up early in the morning and took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. 19 And he named that place Bet-el.... 20 And Jacob vowed a vow saying "If God remains with me and protects me in this way that I go and gives me bread to eat and clothing to wear 21 so that I come back to my father's house in peace, then shall the Lord shall be my God, 22 and this stone which I have set up for a pillar shall be God's house, and of all that you give me I will set aside a tithe for you".

STUDY QUESTIONS

- If we read Jacob's story in the context of the Babylonian Exile, which elements in God's speech and in Jacob's response stand out?
- What is the relationship between God and a specific place? What does it mean that God was there and Jacob didn't realize it?
- Remove the punctuation from verse 16. How does your understanding change if you read the phrase as: "The Lord is in this place and so was I, and I didn't know it"?



THE BIBLICAL PERIOD – TEXT 5

YITZHAK LAMDAN (1899–1954), “ISRAEL”¹

And he said: No longer Jacob shall your name be called but Israel for you have contended with Gods and men and you have prevailed. (Genesis 32:28-29)

And so night after night, God, you come to me,
Not to favor me do you come, but my strength to try.
And as I prevail against you until morning – again I am alone,
A poor strange wayfarer, limping upon my thigh.

“You have contended with Gods and with men and you have prevailed” –
Is this all the blessing you apportioned me, mysterious one?
Woe is me, I know, against all of you I have prevailed, over everything,
But over one I could not, over myself alone –

Your blessings weigh heavily upon me, I cannot carry them,
Limping and alone over all the highways I go,
Vanquish me once, oh You, and let me rest at morn
The rest that all the vanquished know!

Again it is night. I am alone. Again God descends.
“Israel”! – Here I am, God, here I am!
Oh, why do you come down each night to wrestle with me,
And as dawn rises you forsake me limping again? –

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **This poem reflects a modern sensibility. How does it work as an interpretation of the biblical story of Jacob?**
- **What is the significance of the “limping” in the poem, and how does that relate to the significance of Jacob’s limping in the biblical narrative?**
- **How does the poet’s characterization of God and Israel relate to the prophetic view of God, Israel, and exile?**

¹ *Modern Hebrew Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology*. Edited and translated by Ruth Finer Mintz. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968, p.136.





Published in partnership with the
United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism,
the Rabbinical Assembly,
the Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs
and the Women's League for Conservative Judaism.



ZIEGLER SCHOOL OF
RABBINIC STUDIES
AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

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