



Vayetze

ARE JEWS SUPPOSED TO BE SHEEPISH?

Lessons from the Shepherding Habits of Our Forefathers. It's Not What You Think.

PARSHAH OVERVIEW

Vayetze

Jacob leaves his hometown of Be'er Sheba and journeys to Charan. On the way, he encounters "the place" and sleeps there, dreaming of a ladder connecting Heaven and earth, with angels climbing and descending on it; G-d appears and promises that the land upon which he lies will be given to his descendants. In the morning, Jacob raises the stone on which he laid his head as an altar and monument, pledging that it will be made the house of G-d.

In Charan, Jacob stays with and works for his uncle Laban, tending Laban's sheep. Laban agrees to give him his younger daughter, Rachel—whom Jacob loves—in marriage, in return for seven years' labor. But on the wedding night, Laban gives him his elder daughter, Leah, instead—a deception Jacob discovers only in the morning. Jacob marries Rachel, too, a week later, after agreeing to work another seven years for Laban.

Leah gives birth to six sons—Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun—and a daughter, Dinah, while Rachel remains barren. Rachel gives Jacob her handmaiden, Bilhah, as a wife to bear children in her stead, and two more sons, Dan and Naftali, are born. Leah does the same with her handmaiden, Zilpah, who gives birth to Gad and Asher. Finally, Rachel's prayers are answered and she gives birth to Joseph.

Jacob has now been in Charan for fourteen years, and wishes to return home. But Laban persuades him to remain, now offering him sheep in return for his labor. Jacob prospers despite Laban's repeated attempts to swindle him. After six years, Jacob leaves Charan in stealth, fearing that Laban will prevent him from leaving with the family and property for which he labored. Laban pursues Jacob, but is warned by G-d in a dream not to harm him. Laban and Jacob make a pact on Mount Gal-Ed, attested to by a pile of stones, and Jacob proceeds to the Holy Land, where he is met by angels.

QUESTION

Is the Jewish idea of humility compatible with the personal pride our culture promotes?



TEXT 1A

Genesis 30:25–26

כה. וַיְהִי כַּאֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה רַחֵל אֶת יוֹסֵף, וַיֹּאמֶר
יַעֲקֹב אֶל לָבָן שְׁלַחֲנִי וְאֶלְכָה אֶל מְקוֹמִי
וְלְאֶרְצִי:

כו. תִּנֶּה אֶת נְשָׁי וְאֶת יְלָדֵי אֲשֶׁר עֲבַדְתִּי אֹתְךָ
בְּהֵן וְאֶלְכָה, כִּי אַתָּה יָדַעְתָּ אֶת עֲבַדְתִּי אֲשֶׁר
עֲבַדְתִּיךָ:

25. And it came to pass, after Rachel had borne Joseph, that Jacob said to Laban, “Give me leave and I will return to my place, to my land.

26. “Give me my wives and my children, for whom I have served you, so that I may go; for you know well the services I have rendered you.”

TEXT 1B

Ibid. 30:27–28

כז. וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹו לָבָן, אִם נָא מָצָאתִי חֵן
בְּעֵינֶיךָ, נַחֲשֵׁתִי וַיְבָרְכֵנִי ה' בְּגִלְלָךְ:

כח. וַיֹּאמֶר, נִקְבֵה שְׂכָרְךָ עָלַי וְאֶתְנָה:

27. Laban said to him, “If I have found favor in your eyes [indulge me], for G-d has blessed me on your account.”

28. And he continued, “Name your wages due from me, and I will pay you.”

TEXT 1C

Ibid. 30:43

וַיִּפְרֹץ הָאִישׁ מְאֹד מְאֹד, וַיְהִי לוֹ צֹאן רַבּוֹת
וְשִׁפְחוֹת וְעֲבָדִים וְגַמְלִים וְחֹמְרִים:

The man [Jacob] grew exceedingly prosperous, and he owned large flocks of sheep, and numerous maidservants, menservants, camels, and donkeys.

TEXT 1D

Rashi, ad loc.

“צאן רבות.” פרות ורבות משאר צאן.

“ושפחות ועבדים.” מוכר צאנו בדמים יקרים
ולוקח לו כל אלה.

“Large flocks.” They were fruitful and multiplied more than other animals.

“Maid servants and menservants.” He would sell his animals at a high price and purchase all of these.

QUESTION

Why were so many of the prominent Jewish leaders shepherds?

TEXT 2A

Genesis 32:6

וַיְהִי לִי שׁוֹר וַחֲמֹר צֹאן וְעֶבֶד וְשִׁפְחָה:

And I acquired oxen, donkeys, sheep, menservants, and maidservants.

TEXT 2B

Genesis 32:15–16

טו. עֲזִים מְאֹתַיִם וְתִשְׁעִים עֶשְׂרִים, רְחֵלִים
מְאֹתַיִם וְאַיִלִים עֶשְׂרִים:

טז. גְּמָלִים מִיִּנְיֹקוֹת וּבְנֵיהֶם שְׁלֹשִׁים, פָּרוֹת
אַרְבָּעִים וּפָרִים עֶשְׂרֵה, אֶתְנַת עֶשְׂרִים וְעִירֹם
עֶשְׂרֵה:

15. Two hundred she-goats and twenty he-goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams.

16. Thirty nursing camels with their young, forty cows and ten bulls, twenty she-donkeys and ten he-donkeys.

QUESTION

Why wasn't Jacob presenting his prized possession as the main gift to Esau?

TEXT 3A

*Midrash, Shir Hashirim
Rabah 2:16*

הוא לי לאב, ואני לו לבן.

הוא לי לאב, "כי אתה אבינו" (ישעיה סג,
טז), "כי הייתי לישראל לאב" (ירמיה לא, ט).
ואני לו לבן, "בני בכרי ישראל" (שמות ד,
כב), "בנים אתם לה" (דברים יד, א).

הוא לי לרועה, "רעה ישראל האזינה"
(תהלים פ, ב), ואני לו לצאן, "ואתן צאני
צאן מרעיתי" (יחזקאל לד, לא).

He is as a father to me, and I am as a son to Him.

He is as a father to me [as the passages attest], "For you are our father" (Isaiah 63:16), [and] "For I was a Father to Israel" (Jeremiah 31:9). And I am as a son to Him [as the passages attest], "My son, my firstborn, Israel" (Exodus 4:22), [and] "You are all sons of G-d" (Deuteronomy 14:1).

He is to me as a shepherd [as the passage attests], "Hear, O Shepherd of Israel" (Psalms 80:2). I am to Him as sheep [as the passage attests], "And you are my sheep, the sheep of my flock" (Ezekiel 34:31).

TEXT 3B

Yom Kippur Liturgy

אָנוּ בְּנֵיךָ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ . . . אָנוּ צֹאנֶךָ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ.
רוֹעֵנוּ.

We are Your sons, and You are our Father;
. . . we are Your sheep, and You are our
Shepherd.

Our relationship with G-d:



Child and parent



Sheep and shepherd

TEXT 4

The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, *Likutei Sichot*
15, p. 253

דאס וואס מ'רופט אן אידן בשם "בנים", ווייזט אז זיי זיינען א מציאות לגבי דעם "אב" (דעם אויבערשטן) . . . דער עצם תואר "בן" א באווייז, אז דאס איז כאילו ווי א צווייטע מציאות (ניט דער "אב"), און זיין מציאות וחביבות האט אן ערך ותפיסת מקום ביים אב . . .

אבער לגבי דעם אור אלוקי שלמעלה מהשתלשלות . . . איז ניט שייך צו זאגן אז ס'איז דא וועלכע ס'איז מציאות אויסער אים; און לגבי אים ווערן אידן (וחביבותם) פארגליכן צו צאן, וואס זייער מציאות (ווי אויך זייער חביבות) האט ניט קיין ערך לגבי דעם מהות פון רועה.

אבער לאידך גיסא, איז דאס גופא א באווייז אויפן גודל העילוי פון אידן, אז אויך אין דער דרגא פון אלקות וואו ס'איז ניטא קיין נתינת מקום אויף דער מציאות פון נבראים . . . אויך "דארטן" איז דא די חביבות צו אידן.

נאר די חביבות זייערע איז ניט מצד זייער "מציאות", נאר פארקערט - מצד זייער עוצם הביטול צום אויבערשטן.

Calling Jews "children" demonstrates that they are independent of the "Father" (G-d). . . . The very word "child" connotes a separate being (who is not the parent) that is valued and loved by the parent. . . .

However, with respect to G-d, Who transcends all of creation, . . . nothing exists outside of Him. Relative to G-d, Jews (and G-d's love for them) are like sheep, who (despite all their attractive features) have no comparative value to the shepherd.

On the other hand, [portraying the Jew as a sheep] presents the Jew in a sublime light. Although nothing in all of existence has comparative value to G-d, . . . the Jew is, nevertheless, beloved by G-d.

Except that [on this level] we are not beloved for who we are. We are beloved for our complete surrender to G-d.



The sheep's
surrender to its
shepherd represents
our surrender to G-d.

TEXT 5

Rabbi Dovber of Lubavitch,
Torat Chayim, Vayetze, p.
172b

יש בצאן מבחינת הביטול והכנעה בתכלית יותר מכל הבהמות. דהגם שהשור מוכן לעול, הוא מנגח. וכן פרה ועגל, יש פרה סוררת. וגם בגדיים ועזים ותיישים, הן מנגחים בקרניהם כו'. אך הצאן, טבעם רך מאד ונכנע לכל. כמו בגוזזים צאן, שהצאן מניח את עצמה לגוזזה בלי שום מרד, כמו שכתוב: "כרחל לפני גוזזיה נאלמה" (ישעיה נג, ז), ולא תפתח פיה בצעקה כלל.

Sheep are more utterly submissive than any other animal. Though an ox is primed for the yoke, it also gores. There is also the occasional wayward cow and calf. Goats also gore with their horns, etc. Sheep, however, are soft in nature and submissive to all. For example, when the shearer approaches, the sheep allows itself to be shorn without a shred of resistance, as it is written, "Silent like a sheep before its shearers" (Isaiah 53:7). It never opens its mouth in protest.

ANSWER

Many of the prominent Jewish leaders were shepherds to train for their future positions.

This was done by learning from the nullification of sheep, and implementing it in their own connection to G-d.

TEXT 6

The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, *Likutei Sichot*
13, p. 33

אין פירוש עניו כמו שהעולם סוברים
שפירושו הוא לשון שפלות, כי שפלות הוא
מה שהוא יודע ומכיר ערכו ושפלותו שהוא
שפל אנשים כו', והיינו, מי שהוא באמת
מושלל ממעלות (או שישנן בו, אלא שאינן
ידועות לו).

אולם העניו באמת הוא . . . איש המעלות
והוא יודע ומכיר את ערכו - וביחד עם זה
אינו מתגאה בהן כלל וכלל ואינו מחזיק
טובה לעצמו, והטעם הוא . . . לפי שיודע
הוא שהכוחות והחושים הנעלים שלו כולם
ניתנו לו מהקדוש ברוך הוא.

Many people equate humility with inferiority. This is not so. Inferiority means to know ourselves and to recognize our inferior value compared to others: meaning that we are truly devoid of value, or if we have value, it is unknown to us. [This is not humility, it is inferiority.]

Authentic humility means to be a person of strengths. Such people know and recognize their value and are not at all haughty about it. They don't even give themselves credit for their strengths because they know that all their exalted strengths and abilities are endowed by G-d.

True *bitul* means recognizing your strengths and realizing that they are G-d-given.



TEXT 7A

Rabbi Shneur Zalman of
Liadi, *Torah Or*, p. 23c

”צאן” מלשון ”צאי”, כלומר דבר היוצא.

The Hebrew word *tzon*, sheep, is related to the word, *tze*—be someone who goes out.

TEXT 7B

The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, *Likutei Sichot*
15, p. 254

דוקא די עבודה ברענגט ארויס דעם אמת'ן
ביטול פון א אידן צום אויבערשטען — די
יציאה . . . פון זיין מציאות. ווארום דאס איז
אן עבודה וואס א איד טוט זי ניט צוליב זיך,
צוליב זיין שלימות און עליה . . . נאר בלויז
כדי צו אויספירען דעם אויבערשטענ'ס
כוונה, לעשות לו יתברך דירה בתחתונים.

Only this way of serving G-d—stepping out of our comfort zone—expresses a Jew's true surrender to G-d. This way of serving G-d is not materially self-serving or even spiritually self-serving. It is purely to fulfill G-d's purpose, which is to turn our world into a habitat for G-d.



We must leave
the comfort zone
to use our talents
the way G-d
intended.

TEXT 8A

Mishnah, Avot 5:20

יְהוּדָה בֶּן תֵּימָא אָמַר: הָוֵי עֵז כְּנֹמֵר וְקַל
כְּנֹשֶׁר, וְרַץ כְּצִבִי וְגִבּוֹר כְּאַרִי, לַעֲשׂוֹת רְצוֹן
אָבִיךָ שְׁבַשְׁמַיִם

Yehudah ben Teima says, “Be brazen like a leopard, light like an eagle, swift like a deer, and mighty like a lion to do the will of your Father in Heaven.”

TEXT 8B

Rabbi Shneur Zalman of
Liadi, *Shulchan Aruch*
HaRav, Orach Chayim 1:1

עז כנמר הוא שלא להתבייש מפני בני אדם
המלעיגים.

וגבור כארי, עיקר הגבורה הוא בלב, להתגבר
על יצרו לנצחו כגבור המתגבר על שונאו
לנצחו ולהפילו לארץ. וכן צריך כל אדם
בבוקר להתגבר על יצרו כארי, לקום משינתו
קודם אור הבוקר לעבודת בוראו, כדי שיהא
הוא מעורר השחר.

“Brazen like a leopard” is to stand firm
before those who mock us.

“Mighty like a lion”: Might is primarily in
the heart, to overcome our sinful
inclinations as a warrior overpowers the
enemy to defeat him and to throw him to
the ground. Similarly, we must wake up
each morning like a lion ready to
overpower our sinful inclinations, to wake
up before the light of dawn to serve G-d
so that we awaken the morning [rather
than the morning awakening us].

TEXT 9

The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, *Likutei Sichot*
22, p. 161

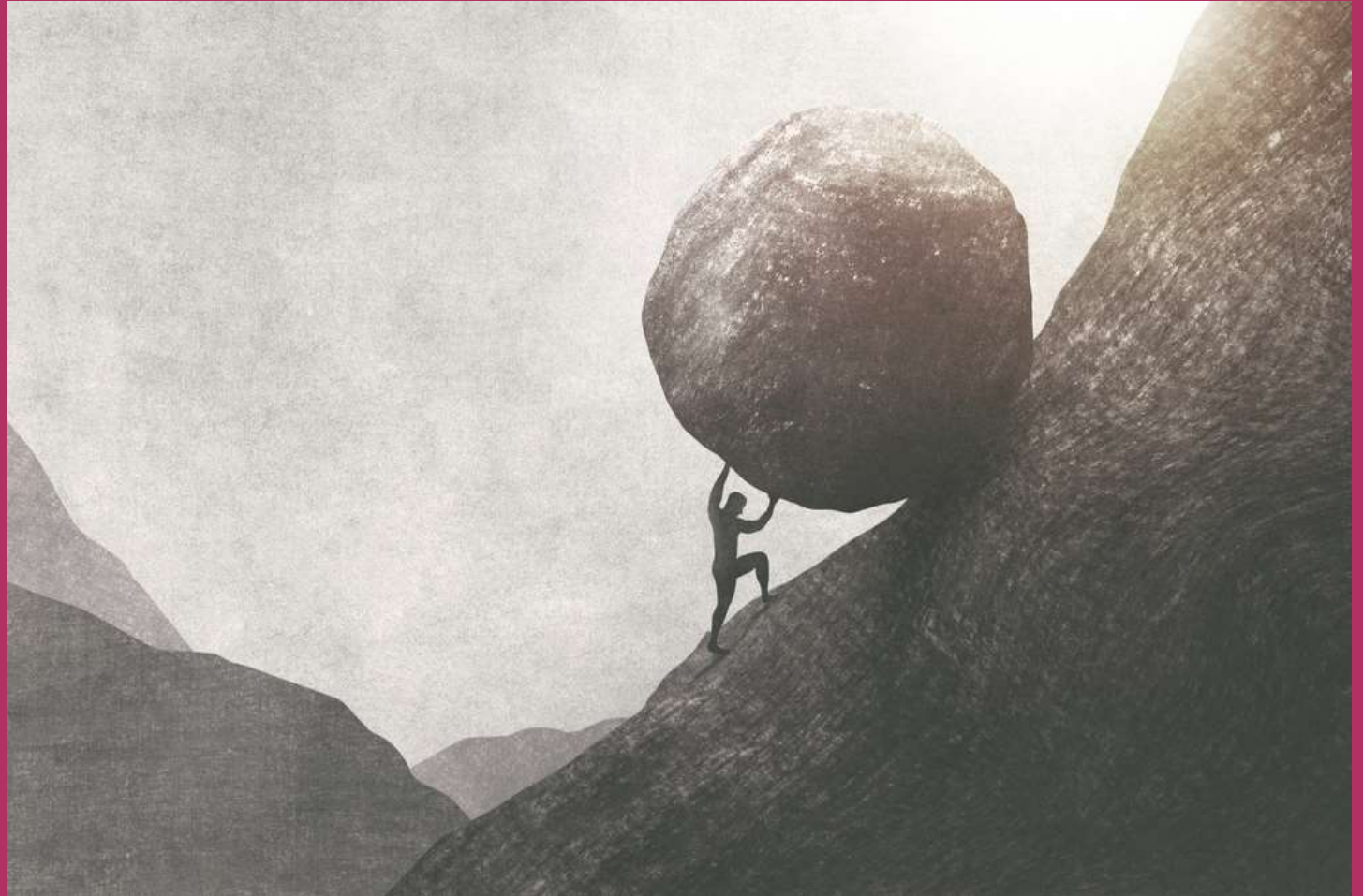
ווען מען האָלט ביים אמת'ן ביטול צו
אלקות, איז עס ניט קיין סתירה צו תוקף
והגבהה. ווייל ס'איז ניט א תוקף והגבהה פון
זיין מציאות, נאר דער תוקף והגבהה פון
אלקות.

ועל דרך מאמר חכמינו זכרונם לברכה בנוגע
צו אַן עבד – "עבד מלך מלך". וואס דאס
שאפט ניט דעם געפיל פון ישות וגאווה ביים
עבד, ווייל דאס איז ניט זיין חשיבות וגדלות,
נאר דעם מלך'ס.

Authentic surrender to G-d is not in
conflict with firmness and assertiveness.
This is because it is not your firmness and
assertiveness. It is G-d's.

This is similar to the saying of our sages,
"The servant of a king is a king" (Sifrei 1:7).
[Attaining the status of king] doesn't
trigger feelings of self-importance and
pride in the servant because he realizes
that this status is due to the king's
significance and greatness, not his own.

G-d-given
strengths have
infinite potential
by definition.



TEXT 10

Genesis 28:10

וַיֵּצֵא יַעֲקֹב מִבְּעַר שֶׁבַע, וַיֵּלֶךְ חָרָנָה:

And Jacob left Be'er Sheba and went to Charan.



Jacob left his comfort zone to create a holy environment in Laban's home.

TEXT 11

The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, *Likutei Sichot*
15, p. 257

מיט זאגן "ויהי לי שור וחמור צאן ועבד
ושפחה" האט יעקב געוואלט דערמאנען די
זכיות און כוחות נעלים וואס וועלן אים
ביישטיין, און דערמיט אפשרעקן עשו'ן פון
צו טאן וואס עשו האט געוואלט טאן.

און דעריבער האט ער ניט מקדים געווען
דעם פרט פון צאן, וואס ווייסט אויף טבע
הביטול והשפלות וההכנעה - ווייל כדי צו
אפשרעקן עשו'ן, דארף ער (עשו) בעיקר און
צום אלעם ערשטן דערהערן דעם תוקף פון
יעקב.

ער דארף טאקע וויסן אז ביי יעקב איז דא
צאן, דאס הייסט ענין הביטול, ובמילא איז
זיין תוקף ניט קיין אייגענער, נאר ס'איז א
תוקף דקדושה - אבער מיט וואס שרעקט
מען אים אפ - מיט תוקף.

By saying, "I acquired oxen, donkeys,
sheep, menservants, and maidservants"
[Genesis 22:6], Jacob wanted to remind
Esau of the lofty merits and strengths that
would sustain him. By this, he would
intimidate Esau and keep him from doing
what he wanted to do.

He did not begin with sheep—which are a
symbol of surrender, lowliness, and
submission—because to be intimidated,
Esau would first and primarily need to
hear about Jacob's strengths.

It was, indeed, important that Esau know
that Jacob had sheep—submission. This
would tell him that Jacob's strengths were
not his own; they were G-d's strengths.
But how do we intimidate Esau? Only with
strength.

ANSWER

By presenting his oxen and donkeys first, Jacob was denoting that he would not be intimidated by Esau.

It was also important, however, for Esau to know that Jacob's strengths all rooted from sheep—his authentic submission to G-d.

TEXT 12A

The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, *Ibid.*

די איינפאכע הוראה פון כל הנתבאר לעיל
(בדורנו זה) איז: עס מוז זיין דער סדר עבודה
פון "ויצא" — ארויסגיין און ליכטיק מאכן
די וועלט. מען דארף און מען מוז פריער
האבן די הכנה פון לימוד התורה . . . מוז
מען ארויסגיין אין "ארץ" און פארנעמען זיך
מיט באלייכטן די וועלט.

The simple lesson in all of this: We must go out of our comfort zone and brighten up the world. Indeed, we must first study Torah to prepare ourselves, . . . but [then] we must go out into the world and make the world a brighter place.

TEXT 12B

The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, *Ibid.*

ובפרט בדורנו זה, וואס אט די התעסקות -
צו אויפזוכן אידן וואס בלאנדזשען אין חושך
הגלות, און זיי אוועקשטעלן בקרן אורה פון
נר מצוה ותורה אור - באשטייט. . . דעם
ענין פון הצלת נפשות ממש!

[This work is] exceedingly [critical] in our generation, when many Jews are wandering about in the spiritual darkness of our Exile. We must find them and lead them to the arena of light, “the candle of mitzvah and the Torah of light” (Proverbs 6:23). This is [not just a matter of extending assistance but] a matter of saving lives.

Call to action: go out and light up the world!



ANSWER

The Jewish idea of humility is not only compatible with personal pride, it complements it.

Unchecked pride leads to haughtiness. Realizing that our strengths and talents are G-d-given creates healthy pride.

KEY POINTS

1. The dominant trait of the Jew's relationship with G-d is utter surrender and supreme humility.
2. Ironically, Jewish humility means to be self-assertive and to utilize our strengths with confidence.
3. However, it also means to recognize that our strengths are G-d-given. When we are assertive, it is not our own assertiveness, it is G-d's. When we are determined, it is our G-d-given determination.
4. This ensures that we don't take credit for our strengths and don't grow arrogant. It also ensures that we use our strengths for causes and in ways that G-d wants us to use them.
5. This kind of humility is a perfect complement to the independence and self-assertion that marks our contemporary times. It marries our fearless independence with humble surrender to G-d.

