

## Follow the Spirit

This week's parsha, *Vayeitze*, begins, 'Jacob went out from *Be'er Sheva* and he went toward Charan.' (Gen 28:10) Let us recall, what made Jacob leave? Esav wants to kill his brother Jacob for stealing the blessing of the firstborn from their father, Isaac. His parents urge him to go to Charan in order to hide in safety, while he waits for Esav's rage to subside. Jacob's mother, Rebecca, implores her son to run to Lavan, with the passionate plea: If Esav should kill Jacob, she will be deprived of both sons in one day. (ibid 27:45)

Circumstances exert their will over Jacob: his parents' plea; his brother's blood lust. Jacob does not go out from Israel, he is chased out; he scurries from his home. And depending on whose reading you favor, Jacob leaves with nothing. [Perhaps he has nothing because the family is impoverished (Ibn Ezra) or, for the sake of secrecy, he leaves modestly (Ramban).]

However, between leaving Israel and arriving in Charan, Jacob undergoes a transformation. Weary from the rigors of the journey, Jacob sleeps and dreams. He dreams of the ladder that is fixed upon earth and reaches to the Heavens with angels rising and descending the ladder and God waiting at the top of the ladder. And Jacob wakes with a start and announces: 'God is in this place and I did not know it.' (ibid 28:16) That God-experience changes Jacob. The verse following the episode of the dream uses strange language to describe Jacob's departure from that place: Jacob lifted his legs and he went toward the land of the people in the East.(ibid 29:1)

Most commentators look at this as an expression of joy. He was, as the saying goes, light on his feet. Jacob felt the reassurance of God's loving attention and support and he was not dragging but, in a sense, floating. Rabbi Shimshon Refael Hirsch takes the expression a step further. He contrasts the two departures – the first from his family and the second from the dream – to highlight the immensity of Jacob's transformation.

He is a new man. Jacob's prophetic dream reverses the animating force of Jacob's life. In the first departure, Jacob's brother, his parents, his circumstance force him from his home and his life. He is a spectator, a bystander to the story of his life. After the dream, Jacob picks up his own feet and he moves; he carries himself. Jacob orchestrates the direction of his life. Rabbi Hirsch interprets this to mean that now Jacob no longer follows toward where the body is pushed; his spirit carries his body and points it in the direction it is meant to go. (See RSRH, ibid 29:1)

This is must be the mantra for our time – and for all times. We must follow the spirit. We allow the spirit, the neshama, to be swallowed by life, by other people, by circumstances. And, yes, we will accidentally arrive in places where we can do good and where we will be proud of ourselves. But the intentional, spirit-driven

life finds good and God wherever s/he resides. The spirit-driven life calls for the Jewish people to love each other unconditionally three days after her husband and the father of her children is murdered. The spirit is calling each of us. Let's follow her lead.

Shabbat Shalom Umevorach and Happy Thanksgiving  
Rabbi Menashe East