Vayeitzei

[27:43Now, my son, listen to me. Flee at once to Haran, to my brother Laban.

Stay with him a while, until your brother’s fury subsides—…

27:46 Rebekah said to Isaac, “I am disgusted with my life because of the Hittite women. If Jacob marries a Hittite woman like these, from among the native women, what good will life be to me?”

28 :1 So Isaac sent for Jacob and blessed him. He instructed him, saying, “You shall not take a wife from among the Canaanite women.

2Up, go to Paddan-aram, to the house of Bethuel, your mother’s father, and take a wife there from among the daughters of Laban, your mother’s brother,

3May El Shaddai bless you, make you fertile and numerous, so that you become an assembly of peoples.

5 Then Isaac sent Jacob off, and he went to Paddan-aram, to Laban the son of Bethuel the Aramean, the brother of Rebekah, mother of Jacob and Esau.]

…

10Jacob left Beer-sheba, and set out for Haran.

11 He came upon a certain place and stopped there for the night, for the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of that place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place.

12He had a dream; a stairway was set on the ground and its top reached to the sky, and angels of God were going up and down on it.

13And the LORD was standing beside him and He said, “I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac: the ground on which you are lying I will assign to you and to your offspring.

I want to trace the role of the stone in this parshah. It points to the theme of closeness and distance, being too close, being too different. Esau marries foreign women he shouldn’t have, according to Rebecca, who says she is disgusted with life because of his Hittite wives; Jacob is told not to take a Canaanite wife, and in his case, as earlier when Abraham sent off his servant to obtain a wife for Isaac, his father also designated one who came from his people. Getting the right wife for Jacob meant one from his maternal uncle’s family—not his father’s brother, not Ishmael’s people, as Esau was to do. A bride from the family, as Avram had done in choosing Sarai.

The stone was a barrier between worlds that needed to be kept apart, but also that marked the place where they would meet. The first time we see it, it seems to appear almost offhandedly:

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The Chabad translation differs from Hebcal: “and he took some of the stones of the place and placed [them] at his head, and he lay down in that place.” After the dream, he takes the stone—a single stone, this time—as uses it to mark the place as holy:

16 Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, “Surely the LORD is present in this place, and I did not know it!”

17 Shaken, he said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of God, and that is the gateway to heaven.”

Early in the morning, Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on the top of it.

He named that site Bethel;

His head on the stone, he enters into the dream, the magic of transformation from this worldly to other worldly; this makon, this place, to the site of passage to the other. We have very few passages in the Tanakh that depart from ordinary accounts—what happened to whom, who were the descendants, who struggled for power or life or to have children, etc—to full blown metaphors or images that evoke the metaphysical and transcendental. A burning bush, but explained by the divine presence; the mystical appearance of three men, but then given as angels, or as a form taken by god’s presence, etc. Here the stairway from the place, makon, the ground, to the sky, like the rainbow with Noah, the bridge from the human to the divine. Not just a name, but a place which was reached by Jacob through the dream. After he wakes

he places it on a pillar as a marker, and anoints it like a site of holiness, bethel. Its name reaches across the gap, like the gap between stranger and family. A border, to which he must return after undergoing the mission, finding the bride, the mothers-to-be of the b’nai israel, who give birth there to all but one of his children. It marks the brit or covenant, which is spelled out and sealed with Jacob’s vow 22:“And this stone, which I have set up as a pillar, shall be God’s abode; and of all that You give me, I will set aside a tithe for You.”

The acquisition of his beloved spouse is marked again by a stone, this time a huge one that covers the well, the place, the makon, where the fateful meeting with Rachel is to take place. The stone is mentioned repeatedly:

29: 2 And he looked, and behold! a well in the field, and behold! three flocks of sheep lying beside it, because from that well they would water the flocks, and a huge rock was upon the mouth of the well.

3And all the flocks would gather there, and they would roll the rock off the mouth of the well and water the sheep, and [then] they would return the rock onto the mouth of the well, to its place….And they said, "[Things are going] well, and behold, his daughter Rachel is coming with the sheep."

7And he said, "The day is yet long; it is not the time to take in the livestock. Water the sheep and go, pasture."

8And they said, "We cannot [do that], until all the flocks are gathered together, and they will roll the rock off the mouth of the well, and we shall [then] water the sheep."

…10And it came to pass, when Jacob saw Rachel, the daughter of Laban, his mother's brother and the sheep of Laban, his mother's brother, that Jacob drew near and rolled the rock off the mouth of the well, and he watered the sheep of Laban, his mother's brother.

11And Jacob kissed Rachel, and he raised his voice and wept.

He wooed her with the watering of the sheep, by rolling off the huge rock. [מִן־הַבְּאֵ֣ר הַהִ֔ואוּ וְהָאֶ֥בֶן גְּדֹל].

The same word, stone, ha’even. first the pillar, to mark the place; now the enormous rock, to block the well, to provide the place where he will undergo the test to prove he is the one, and she chosen to fufill the covenant made at bethel. “He raised his voice, and wept.”

Oh these, fathers, these men: he will weep for his son, Joseph, his favorite son, as he himself caused his father pain, caused his brother to weep: “And Esau said to his father, “Have you but one blessing, Father? Bless me too, Father!” And Esau wept aloud. »

Will Abraham not have wept when he lost his son Ishmael, at the insistence of Sarah. Did Aaron dare weep when god killed his two sons. Joseph and his brothers wept when they found each other again in Egypt; Joseph, the lost one, wept so loudly the Egyptians could hear him and wonder.

The fathers become so close, too close for god’s comfort, to their sons, and have to learn the hard way that their covenant could be fulfilled not only by having the blessed son, but by losing him as well, by sacrificing him on the mountain, by finding a substitute, by enduring the loss, by having to choose god over boy-son. The hard stone that marked the place served both as the location for opening the way to the brit and closing the way to the heart and the tears. Too close to the beloved; to the chosen bride, to her son; too close to the love for her, for her child. Too close for god.

The interpretation of dreams comes from god, joseph modestly proclaims. Joseph reads his fate, to be beloved of his father, hated by all but one of his brothers, chosen, but not for tears of joy as much as the pain of separation, reuniting, and ultimately of being forced to chose, as his father and his father’s father and father’s father’s father had done, to choose the brit, marked by the knife, the blood, and ultimately the duty to remember god before self or family. We were chosen to come down to Egypt, where we would be reunited, but not to stay there forever. The tears flow, in our tradition, but I see now how important the stone is to this tradition; how jacob’s act of rolling off the stone, so that the sheep might be watered, so that he could embrace his bride and weep with joy, would not mark the end of the tears. We did not read of Abraham’s tears when he was forced to put Isaac to the knife, but what else could he have done but weep when he came down that mountain after the test. After all, he was human, and for us, he was the first of our ancestors. We his children remember the tears, are reminded to retell the story of the love and the tears every pesach to the children. In the story lies the meaning, as Joseph said, of what had happened and of what was to be told again.

Here's where the story of the stones ends:

51And Laban said to Jacob, "Behold this pile and behold this monument, which I have cast between me and you.

52This pile is a witness, and this monument is a witness, that I will not pass this pile [to go] to you and that you shall not pass this pile and this monument to [come to] me to [do] harm.

53May the God of Abraham and the god of Nahor judge between us, the god of their father."

And then they part, maybe without any tears this time, as Laban goes back and Jacob goes on.

32:1And Laban arose early in the morning and kissed his sons and daughters and blessed them, and Laban went and returned to his place.

2And Jacob went on his way, and angels of God met him.

Shabbat shalom