Vayetzei - A Commentary on Jacob's First Encounter with Rachel and Laban
Rabbi Eliot Malomet November 21, 2026 11 Kislev 5787

Jacob has just met Rachel at the well in Haran. Then this:

וַיַּגֶּד יַעֲקֹב לְרָחֵל כִּי אֲחִי אָבִיהָ הוּא וְכִי בֶן רִבְקָה הוּא וַתָּרָץ וַתַּגֶּד לְאָבִיהָ. וַיְהִי כִּשְׁמֹעַ לָבָן אֶת שֵׁמַע יַעֲקֹב בֶּן אֲחֹתוֹ וַיָּרָץ לִקְרָאתוֹ וַיְחַבֵּק לוֹ וַיְנַשֵּׁק לוֹ וַיְבִיאֵהוּ אֶל בֵּיתוֹ וַיְסַפֵּר לְלָבָן אֵת כָּל הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה. וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ לָבָן אַךְ עַצְמִי וּבְשָׂרִי אָתָּה וַיֵּשֶׁב עִמּוֹ חֹדֶשׁ יָמִים. וַיֹּאמֶר לָבָן לְיַעֲקֹב הֲכִי אָחִי אַתָּה וַעֲבַדְתַּנִי חִנָּם הַגִּידָה לִי מַה מַּשְׂכֻּרְתֶּךָ. וּלְלָבָן שְׁתֵּי בָנוֹת שֵׁם הַגְּדֹלָה לֵאָה וְשֵׁם הַקְּטַנָּה רָחֵל. וְעֵינֵי לֵאָה רַכּוֹת וְרָחֵל הָיְתָה יְפַת תֹּאַר וִיפַת מַרְאֶה. וַיֶּאֱהַב יַעֲקֹב אֶת רָחֵל וַיֹּאמֶר אֶעֱבָדְךָ שֶׁבַע שָׁנִים בְּרָחֵל בִּתְּךָ הַקְּטַנָּה. וַיֹּאמֶר לָבָן טוֹב תִּתִּי אֹתָהּ לָךְ מִתִּתִּי אֹתָהּ לְאִישׁ אַחֵר שְׁבָה עִמָּדִי. (בר׳ כט:יב-יז)

And Jacob told Rachel that he was her father's brother and that he was Rebekah's son. She ran and told her father. Now it was, as soon as Laban heard the tidings concerning Jacob, his sister's son, that he ran to meet him, embraced him and kissed him, and brought him into his house. And he recounted all these events to Laban. Laban said to him: Without doubt you are my bone, my flesh! And he stayed with him a month's time. Laban said to Jacob: Because you are my brother, should you serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be? Now Laban had two daughters: the name of the elder was Leah, the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah's eyes were soft, but Rachel was beautiful of form and beautiful of appearance. And Jacob fell in love with Rachel. He said: I will serve you seven years for Rachel, your younger daughter. Laban said: Better I should give her to you than I give her to another man; stay with me. (Gen. 29:12-17)

Commmentary: **וַיַּגֶּד יַעֲקֹב לְרָחֵל כִּי אֲחִי אָבִיהָ הוּא וְכִי בֶן רִבְקָה הוּא**-***Jacob told Rachel that he her father's brother and that he was Rebekah's son.*** Why does he state this identity in two ways? Wouldn't one have been enough? ***By giving us two relationships the narrator creates texture in the story.*** Fast forward to Joseph. When Joseph reveals himself first he says, **אֲנִי יוֹסֵף הַעוֹד אָבִי**-***I am Joseph, is my father still alive?*** But they are too stunned to respond. Then he says, **אֲנִי יוֹסֵף אֲחִיכֶם אֲשֶׁר מְכַרְתֶּם אֹתִי מִצְרָיְמָה**-***I am Joseph your brother, whom you sold.*** The first piece of information comes as a shock. The second makes it sink in. ***Jacob's first revelation shocks Rachel. The second gets her to realize what is happening.***

וַתָּרָץ-***She ran.*** This is one of ten instances of running in Genesis. ***Running is a motif that runs through the story***.

וַתַּגֶּד לְאָבִיהָ-***and she told her father.*** What exactly did she tell her father? There are six explicit pieces of information:

1. A man lifted the stone off the well by himself.
2. He then watered her sheep.
3. He then kissed her.
4. He then cried.
5. He then identified himself as her father's brother.
6. He then identified himself as Rebekah's son.

However, he never explicitly states his name! The narrator conceals this crucial **7th piece of information!** But somehow, they know ***his name*** because the narrator informs us...

וַיְהִי כִּשְׁמֹעַ לָבָן אֶת שֵׁמַע יַעֲקֹב בֶּן אֲחֹתוֹ-***when Laban heard the tidings of Jacob, his sister's son. A listener will hear the pun:*** **שֵׁם-שֵׁמַע**. When Laban hears **שֵׁמַע יַעֲקֹב**-***the tidings of Jacob***, that is, the things that just happened at the well, he also hears **שֵׁם יַעֲקֹב**-***the name Jacob***. **Question:** Would Laban have already known the names of Rebekah's sons? **Answer:** Very likely. Abraham is told the names of Nachor's family.[1] And Rebekah and Isaac were aware that Laban had daughters.[2] Why wouldn't news have gone the other way? Hearing that this man was his nephew Jacob, perhaps Laban got excited not only because Jacob was family, but because the last time there was a visitor (Abraham's servant) from the Canaan branch of the family, that visitor came loaded with gifts and jewelry! Therefore... **וַיָּרָץ לִקְרָאתוֹ**-***he (Laban) runs to greet him,*** the same way he ran out on that previous visit to greet the servant (Gen. 24:30). Only this time there was no jewelry and no caravan of camels waiting by the well. This time, Laban sees nothing. ***Gurnischt***.

וַיְחַבֵּק לוֹ וַיְנַשֵּׁק לוֹ-***And he hugged him and he kissed him.*** Let's not dismiss this detail. When you hug someone you cannot see the face of the other person. ***But we in the audience can imagine the expressions on both of their faces. Jacob is relieved. Laban is disappointed.*** So much so that Rashi states (comically) that this is what happened: ***When he saw that he had nothing with him, he thought, "Perhaps he has brought gold coins, and they are hidden on his body!" Laban's hug of Jacob is a pretext to frisk him!***[3]



[1]After the Akedah, Abraham learns that his brother Nachor has become the father of quite a large clan (Gen. 22:20).

[2]***...and take yourself a wife from there, from the daughters of Lavan, your mother's brother*** Gen. 28:2.

[3]For biblical trivia lovers: there are only three ***hugging and kissing instances*** in the entire Torah and they all involve Jacob. The one here with Jacob and Lavan is the first; the Jacob and Esau reunion is second (Gen. 33:4); and Jacob's blessing of Ephraim and Menashe (Gen. 48:10), is the third, except in that instance, ***Jacob kisses them before he hugs them.*** What's in a hug? What's in a kiss? Well, consider this: in the book of Samuel after Absalom's rebellion, Joab (David's general), greets Amasa (David's turncoat nephew who was part of the rebellion), and like a scene out of the Godfather, as Joab is coming close to kiss Amasa, he grabs Amasa's beard with his right hand, pulls him close ***as if he is going to hug him***, kisses

וַיְבִיאֵהוּ אֶל בֵּיתוֹ-*he (Laban) brought him (Jacob) into his home.* Compare this with the Isaac and Rebekah story. וַיְבִאֶהָ יִצְחָק הָאֹהֱלָה שָׂרָה אִמּוֹ-*Isaac brought her (Rebekah) into his mother Sarah's tent* (Gen. 24:67).

Rebekah enters a fragile structure with a fragile, grieving son	**Jacob enters a sturdy structure with a stalwart, wily father.**
Rebekah creates a new equilibrium in the unstable realm of Sarah's tent.	**Laban dominates and doubles down in his very own stable realm.**

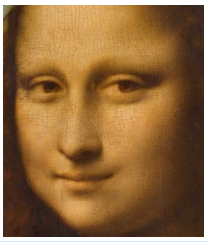
וַיְסַפֵּר לְלָבָן אֵת כָּל הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה-*And he (Jacob) tells Laban all these things.* Once again, compare this with the Isaac and Rebekah story.

Jacob tells Laban *all these things*.	**The servant tells Isaac *everything he did* (24:66).**
Did he tell him why he ended up in Haran? That he deceived his brother and was running for his life?	**The servant tells Isaac how he succeeded in finding him a wife. With God's help.**

וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ לָבָן אַךְ עַצְמִי וּבְשָׂרִי אָתָּה-*Laban said to him, Indeed, you are my bone, my flesh.* What does Laban mean with this nice little poetic flourish?[4] ***Sure, we are related. But I can see now that we are also very similar characters!***[5]

וַיֹּאמֶר לָבָן לְיַעֲקֹב הֲכִי אָחִי אַתָּה וַעֲבַדְתַּנִי חִנָּם הַגִּידָה לִּי מַה מַּשְׂכֻּרְתֶּךָ-*Laban said to Jacob: Because you are my brother, should you serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?* We can see that Laban knows how to turn a phrase. **הֲכִי אָחִי** is a nice rhyme but a careful listener hears the echo of Esau's despair when he discovers that he has been duped, הֲכִי קָרָא שְׁמוֹ יַעֲקֹב-*thus they called him Jacob...*(Gen. 27:36). We are being set up for a great deception.

וּלְלָבָן שְׁתֵּי בָנוֹת שֵׁם הַגְּדֹלָה לֵאָה וְשֵׁם הַקְּטַנָּה רָחֵל. וְעֵינֵי לֵאָה רַכּוֹת וְרָחֵל הָיְתָה יְפַת תֹּאַר וִיפַת מַרְאֶה-*Laban had two daughters. The name of the older was Leah and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah's eyes were soft. But Rachel was beautiful of form and beautiful of appearance.* Jacob is enthralled by Rachel's beauty. He must have known that she was the younger of the two sisters. And having experienced his own conflict with a birthright, how could he not have known that his request to marry the younger sister would fly in the face of convention? To this day, all families want to marry off their children in the order of their birth! He sees Rachel but he overlooks Leah. He erases her to the point that on his wedding night he cannot distinguish her from Rachel. Our narrator describes her as having eyes



that are רַכּוֹת - translated variously as ***tender, soft, gentle, delicate***. Perhaps in this moment she is the literary equivalent of the mysterious Mona Lisa.[6] Ironically, the woman Jacob would have wanted to erase from his bed, ends up giving birth to half the tribes of Israel.

וַיֶּאֱהַב יַעֲקֹב אֶת רָחֵל וַיֹּאמֶר אֶעֱבָדְךָ שֶׁבַע שָׁנִים בְּרָחֵל בִּתְּךָ הַקְּטַנָּה. וַיֹּאמֶר לָבָן טוֹב תִּתִּי אֹתָהּ לָךְ מִתִּתִּי אֹתָהּ לְאִישׁ אַחֵר שְׁבָה עִמָּדִי-*Jacob loved Rachel; so he answered, "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel." Laban said, "Better that I give her to you than that I should give her to an outsider. Stay with me."* Laban's reply deserves close attention. Try to say it ten times in Hebrew! It's a tongue twister![7] But more importantly it is ***a piece of consummate ambiguity***.[8] On the one hand, Laban gives a tepid nod to his future son-in-law. But on the other hand, knowing how smitten Jacob is with Rachel, he figures out how to exploit Jacob's weak-kneed lovesickness to his own advantage. If Laban had reacted effusively (like all future fathers-in-law would have!) he would have honored Jacob. But by shrugging off the proposal Laban keeps Jacob where he wants him: vulnerable, dependent, always being unsure if he is winning Laban's favor. **Shabbat Shalom!**

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him, and then stabs him with a knife in his left hand, (2 Sam. 20:9-10). ***Some hugs are loving and some hugs are lethal***. In the first two hugs, there is a palpable tension and suspicion between Jacob and Lavan and Jacob and Esau. We in the audience sense that these moments could quickly escalate to violence. Their momentary hug hovers between love and lethality. When the hug ends the tension subsides and they kiss. In the case of Jacob and his grandsons, ***he kisses them first then hugs them.*** What could that mean? Two interpretations: a) he kisses them out of love and then hugs them to signal that they are now equal to the rest of his sons; b) *he kisses them, Rachel's grandsons, to tie the bow on that story since it all began with a kiss; he hugs his young grandsons to challenge their emerging Egyptian identities and draw them back into the identity of the House of Israel.*

[4] More biblical trivia: Where else does this expression occur? In the story of the creation of Eve. וַיֹּאמֶר הָאָדָם זֹאת הַפַּעַם עֶצֶם-*Adam said, This time! Bone from my bones and flesh from my flesh!* (Gen. 2:23).

[5] Suspicion and deception are themes that run through this story from the beginning. For example, why is it that when Jacob first appears at the well early in the day, that the well is sealed with a big stone? It is because all the shepherds have to be present with their flocks when the well is unsealed. Why? To make sure nobody takes more than their share. Everybody is watching everybody else.

[6] There is a specific technique called ***sfumato*** that Leonardo da Vinci uses to create the sense of mystery in the Mona Lisa. It is "a painting technique for softening the transition between colors, mimicking an area beyond what the human eye is focusing on, or the out-of-focus plane." Perhaps we ought to imagine Leah as someone who would have appeared that way in a painting, or photographed through a diffusion filter, and appearing in soft focus.

[7] Not only that, but it has plenty of poetics of its own. The alliteration - *tov-titi-ota...mi-titi-otah* has few parallels in Tanakh. But listen to the unique beats of the verse: ***TÒV*** *ti****TÌ*** *o****TÀH*** ***LÀKH*** *// miti****TÌ*** *o****TÀH*** *le'****ÌSH*** *a****HÈR***. 4 beats followed by 4 beats. That is the same rhythm Jacob intones when he accosts Laban for cheating him: ***MÀH ZÒT*** *a****SÌ****ta* ***LÌ*** *// ha****LÒ*** *bera****HÈL*** *a****VÀ****deti i****MÀKH****.(What did you do to me? I worked for you to marry Rachel!)* (Gen. 29:25).

[8] Nahum Sarna, JPS Commentary on Genesis.