

CHABAD

RESEARCH UNIT

הגה

שבת..... *for Friday night*..... קדש

Friday 27 November 2009 - 10 Kislev 5770
Sedra Vayetzei

SHEEP, CHILDREN OR LEOPARDS?

THE JEWISH PEOPLE ARE OFTEN DESCRIBED AS G-D'S CHILDREN. Sometimes too we find ourselves termed His 'flock': we are a flock of sheep, and G-d is our Shepherd¹. Yet again, the Code of Law² encourages us to be 'bold as a leopard' in our service of G-d. Are these terms just poetic imagery, or are they telling us something significant about ourselves?

The theme of sheep is dominant in the Sedra³, which also tells a story of struggle in an uncomfortable environment. The Sedra is called *Vayetze*, meaning 'and he went out'. Jacob leaves his home, where he was brought up and where he 'dwelt in tents', a phrase explained as meaning tents of spiritual study and endeavour⁴. He went to Haran, a name which in Hebrew suggests 'anger', and stayed there with his devious uncle Laban.

The main part of the Sedra describes Jacob's life in Haran: his marriages to Laban's two daughters, Rachel and Leah, the birth of his children, his struggle to make a living by being a shepherd. It is here that we come to the sheep. The Torah tells us in detail how Jacob cared for the sheep and how his flocks increased at a tremendous rate. Jacob became a wealthy man on account of his flocks of sheep.



In Memory of ARYEH (LOUIS) LITTMAN ה"ע, who passed away on 16 Kislev 5748 (1987). Dedicated by his Wife and Family 'ש in Loving Memory

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What do sheep signify for us? We think of them as very mild, meek creatures. They are obedient, following their shepherd in a docile, unprotesting way.

This provides an important element in our relationship with G-d: meekness, obedience, selflessness. As a member of G-d's 'flock' we have the ability to follow unquestioningly.

By contrast, to be one of G-d's *children* means a strong emphasis on our intellectual powers and our independence. A son or daughter of G-d is in a position of significance and authority, for whom the entire wealth of G-d's Torah is freely accessible. As children of G-d we explore, question and discover new ideas.

In the life of our ancestor Jacob, the qualities of intellectual exploration and discovery are seen while he was still at home, studying in the 'tents', in the inspiring company of his father Isaac, his grandfather Abraham, and earlier ancestors who were still alive, such as Shem and Eber.

It was when Jacob left home and entered the difficult atmosphere of Haran that we see him preoccupied with sheep. The implication is that the selfless nature of a sheep is particularly useful when conquering new territory and facing difficult challenges.

As G-d's obedient flock we are able to go through discomfort and deprivation in order to achieve real goals. Indeed, this is how we see Jacob in the Sedra. He is the shepherd of the flock, but he suffers the scorching heat of the day and the icy cold at night together with them⁵.

At the same time, the Lubavitcher Rebbe points out, we need the boldness of the leopard. To be a sheep, and even a son, are not quite enough. This third ingredient is also necessary. We need selfless obedience to the Torah, intellectual analysis, and also boundless *courage*. With these three qualities we can fulfil the purpose of our journey to 'Haran', our long exile, and gain the ultimate Redemption.

1. See Psalm 23; Yom Kippur Liturgy "For we are Your people.. we are Your flock"; Cant. Rab. 2: 34. 2. Beginning of Tur and Shulchan Aruch HaRav, quoting Ethics 5:20. 3. Genesis 28:10-32:3. 4. Gen.25:27 and Rashi. 5. See Gen.31:40. 6. *Likkutei Sichot* vol. 15 pp.252-58.

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SEDRA VAYETZEI

SPREADING OUT!

Gabriel bent down to put the last dab of paint on the fence and then straightened up to survey his handiwork. Mrs Dobbs would be pleased. She had been asking him to paint the fence for a while and he had just been waiting for a clear and warm day. Yitzi, the volunteer coordinator, would also be pleased. He always liked to hear that the volunteers were productive during their weekly visits. Gabriel left Mrs Dobbs house feeling happy that he had done a good deed, and made it home just in time to pray the Afternoon Prayer.

That evening, Gabriel joined his friend Uri for a learning session and some trampoline jumping. Every Sunday evening they would spend time studying for their Monday Torah quiz and then let loose on the trampoline! Gabriel looked forward to this all week.

After they had finished studying Sedra Vayetzei, the boys chased each other out to the trampoline. As they started jumping they burst out in a song they had learned about the Sedra: "Ufaratzah....You will spread out to the west, east, north and south..." This was G-d's promise to Jacob in his dream as he was on his way to Laban.

The boys had learned in school that the Jewish people inherited the ability to spread out and break all limitations, even positive ones. That meant, doing good things, even more than your normal habit.

The tune was lively and the boys tried to jump in the directions they sang about. They sang louder and louder and jumped higher and higher, breaking the limitations of gravity. "You know," Gabriel said as he slowed his jumping down a bit, "today I painted Mrs. Dobbs' fence."

"What a Mitzvah!" Uri called out breathlessly. "Don't you visit her every week?"

"Yes. And I also got to pray the Afternoon Prayer. And we also learned Torah together." Gabriel and Uri had slowed down and were just bobbing up and down gently now.

"But, I've been visiting Mrs Dobbs forever, and praying the Afternoon Prayer for a long while, and we only studied because we have a quiz... And, *where...*" Gabriel crouched down, "am I *breaking...*" he crouched down further, "*limitations!?*" Gabriel took a flying leap straight up in the air.

"I see what you mean!" Uri called out. "I cleaned my room, and watched my brother and studied with you, but *where...*" Uri crouched down, "am I *going...*" he crouched even further, "*beyond my limitations?!?*" Uri took a flying leap straight up in the air.

As the two friends bounced up and down, they began to shout out: *I'm going to... add more money to the charity box in the morning!...help my mother do the washing up!...say my prayers more slowly!...learn one law a day...!* Until eventually, they collapsed in an exhausted heap, laughing.

"Let's see if we remember to do any of that tomorrow," Uri said as his friend left for home.

"Well, let's try!" Gabriel answered. The two boys smiled and walked away in their different directions, humming *Ufaratztah, Ufaratztah....* *

* To hear and see this tune sung by children with the Lubavitcher Rebbe, visit <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cjWpwN-JhSc&feature=related> (not on Shabbat or a Festival!)

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