

Shabbat shalom. Parshah Vayetze, “and he left,” Jacob leaves his father-in-law’s home in Beersheva and journeys to Haran. On the way, he stops to rest, to sleep. He dreams of a ladder on which angels of G-d have been going up and descending, AND from above, G-d promises Jacob that he will care for him. He will see that Jacob and his descendents triumph over stronger adversaries. Perhaps the two angels, one ascending the ladder and one going down signifies that ha-Shem is present during Jacob’s good deeds on the one hand and his questionable behavior on the other. G-d is with him in either case, as is G-d, with us.

We all know the story and the dream has taken on significance in many arenas. It has prompted an old Civil War era spiritual, and an adaptation by leaders and the public during the civil rights era of the 1960’s. Even now, we sing of climbing Jacob’s ladder as we battle racial and religious segregation and acts of violence.

Important as it is, Jacob’s dream is just one of Vayetze’s themes. There is Jacob’s infatuation with Rachel when he first encountered her tending to her father’s livestock; there is the meeting with his uncle Laban and his asking for Rachel’s hand in marriage. One could be struck by the bargaining that Laban makes with Jacob, asking for seven years of labor, and his marrying off his older daughter, Leah, before he will consent to

Jacob's marrying Rachel. One could make notice of the rivalry between Leah and Rachel for the love of Jacob after the weddings. Yes, once again sibling rivalry is a theme in a Torah portion.

One could comment on both Rachel and Leah offering up their handmaids, Zilpah and Bilhah to couple with Jacob. This is a practice that we would abhor today. Yes, there is much to study.

Later on in the parshah Jacob prepares to leave his father-in-law's compound, Laban again exercises the upper hand by demanding that he work for another seven years to repay him for the bounty he has accumulated. Once again, Laban is negotiating to Jacob's disadvantage.

I could go on. There is so much in this parshah that is worthy of study. However, what struck me as distinct and worth an investigation is the naming of Jacob's children. It seems to me that our mothers gave considerable thought to the naming of their sons. The twelve tribes of Israel will be called after their names.

Leah had six sons. The first born, named Rueben, for Jacob's "might", then Judah, for "strength", Simeon, whose name has the same root as Shma, to "hear", and Levi, "attached." Jacob later refers to them as a pair of warriors. Then there is Issachar,

strong boned and an “award,” and Zebulun, who will “rise up,” and later will dwell at the seashore.

Rachel names Bilhah’s sons Dan “judge,” and Naphtali “contest,” (perhaps to signify her rivalry with her sister). Leah names Zilpah’s sons Gad, to mean “luck” and Asher, “happy.”

Later on Rachel conceives and bears her own son, Joseph, “increase,” perhaps to signify her previous anguish and the joy she finally achieved by this birth, which allowed her to increase the size of Jacob’s family.

(Later on Rachel gives birth to another son. She wanted to call him ben-Oni, after the pain she suffered in childbirth, but Jacob names him Benjamin, “child of joy.” Yet, she died from the consequence of childbirth, in the next parshah.)

There is one more child mentioned in Vayetze, Leah’s daughter Dina. No explanations are given for the naming of Dina.

Though like Dan, her name too contains the root daled yud nun, “judge,” there is no comment on the name in our portion. Is this because she is female?

(Tell Yiddish joke)

All this led me to thinking about how our parents chose our names, indeed, how we choose our children’s names. There is no Halacha involved, only the parameters of Minhag, custom. It is common for Ashkenazi Jews to name their children after a

deceased relative or close friend. Sephardim on the other hand often chose a living relative, often a grandparent to name their child.

The Jewish baby is given not one but two names: a secular name to be used in the wider world, and a Hebrew name for the religious community. This is a practice that began before the destruction of the second temple. Historically, naming practices changed with the empire in power, and with fashion. Greek and Latin names were once common, as are Anglo-sized names today. Of course, today there is competition with Hebrew names too.

Much has been written about the history of Jewish people's last names. In the last month or so there were op-ed pieces in the J, our local Jewish community newspaper, about the recording of European LAST names during the great migration from Eastern and Central Europe during late 19th and early 20th century.

There hasn't been much written on first names. However, a source was found: Benzion Kaganoff's ***A Dictionary of Jewish Names and Their History***, first published in 1977. The book surveys the giving of first names from Biblical times to the present (1977), and says much of the return to Hebrew names after the settlement of modern Israel. I recommend it. I would also suggest that one of our historians or sociologists lead us in

a discussion of first names, the topic that leapt out to me from parshah Vayetze. Shabbat shalom.