

# Echoes of Eden

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## Parashat Vayetze: A Twice-Told Tale

The story seems strangely familiar: A band of Jews on the run, desperately trying to escape, wanting nothing more than to return to their ancestral homeland and live in peace. How many times throughout history has this story been repeated? The first time, the prototypical account, appears in this week's Torah reading: Yaakov and his family quit Lavan's house and start the journey home. Soon enough, Lavan gets word of what has happened and chases them down. Despite Yaakov's three-day head start, Lavan catches up with and confronts Yaakov on the seventh day. Words are exchanged, accusations fly. In the end, an understanding is reached and a covenant forged.

If the story seems familiar, perhaps it is because it was repeated many years later in the next book of the Torah. The Yaakov-Lavan story is the concise version of the great Exodus, yet although so many elements of the two stories are similar, there are enough differences to make us overlook the similarities. The most pronounced difference speaks to our tendency to think in terms of results rather than in terms of processes: In the Exodus story, there is no reconciliation, no understanding, no covenant. The hated Egyptians drown in the sea, in Divine retribution for the Jewish babies who suffered a similar plight.

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Yet in terms of their structure, the two stories are strikingly similar. Both describe the escape, the almost-supernatural accrual of wealth, and the three-day chase culminating in confrontation on the seventh day. In fact, one of the great thinkers in Jewish history, Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilna, the famed Vilna Gaon, believed that these two accounts are actually the same story. And yet, how far does this teaching attempt to take us? Was the Vilna Gaon referring to the stories' structure alone, or to the underlying message? Clearly, the Genius of

Vilna could not have been referring to the conclusion of the story – or was he?

Looking beyond the superficial similarities of the two stories, we find that both the story of Yaakov's escape from Lavan and the story of the Jews' escape from Egypt are stories of more than physical exodus. Both stories are about leaving an alien culture and heading home. In both stories, the 'hosts', the "other" side, who have benefited financially from the presence of the "stranger" in their midst, have strong reservations regarding the separation. Neither Lavan nor Paroh is willing to lose the benefits of having the Jews at their service.

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But the Torah is not a book of history; it is a book of theology. The stories – especially those concerning our forefathers, are spiritual blueprints that affect all of Jewish history. The exodus from Egypt unfolded as it did because of Yaakov's flight from the house of Lavan, and these two redemptions create the spiritual energy that will power the final redemption. Such is the secret of Jewish history: Time is cyclical, not linear.

Throughout our history, events repeat themselves as the spiritual blueprint is expressed in different generations. This is why studying the past gives us insight into the present and the future.

In the case of redemption, we see before us two versions, two prototypes for the final script. Had the Torah imparted only one of the two exodus stories, we would, of necessity, had only one possible ending for Jewish history. If, for example, we had the Exodus from Egypt as the sole prototype, the final redemption will, of necessity, have the same ending: The Jews will be saved at the expense of their enemies. This is the incredible insight of the Vilna Gaon: The Exodus from Egypt was itself based on the exodus from the house of Lavan. So many of the details are identical that we can see how that earlier exodus created the energy for the subsequent exodus. Yet the conclusions are starkly different, and herein lies the challenge of history: The existence of that earlier exodus with its own conclusion creates an alternative –an alternative

that was available to Paroh, as it was available to others who 'hosted' the Jewish People throughout history. So many times, this alternative has been rejected; so many times, Paroh and others of his ilk created a zero-sum game, leaving the scenario in which Yaakov and Lavan made peace an unrealized potential. This conclusion, this alternative ending, is still available. This spiritual dynamic is at least as valid, if not more so, than the other, harder route that has been chosen too many times by too many of our enemies.

The Vilna Gaon teaches us that the Torah tells the same story twice; there are two possible endings to the story. We have no trouble identifying with the theme of being pursued by an enemy or a potential adversary who has not treated us with the respect we deserve. The part of the story in which the Jews are saved is familiar to us; as in the past, we will be redeemed. The question is, what happens to the "other"? Must history end with lifeless bodies floating on the sea? While this final scene of vengeance and retribution may appeal to the baser elements of human nature, is this the *denouement* we must necessarily anticipate? Or does the story end with mutual respect, reconciliation and covenant? One story, twice told, with two possible final scenes: Which ending do we really want? Which one do we pray for? Which one do we hope to witness – "speedily and in our own times"?

For a more in-depth analysis see: <http://www.arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2013/11/audio-and-essays-parashat-vayetze.html>