

JACOB GETS A BLESSING—REALLY GETS IT
or
FROM ROCKS TO RICHES
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Our parashah this week, Vayetzei, finds our ancestor Jacob on the road and fleeing for his life. When the time comes for him to set up camp, the Torah describes no details of a tent; nor a change of clothing after his many hours on a dusty, sandy road; nor feeding animals used for transportation and carrying baggage. We learn nothing of any food he brought with him for the journey—poor kid! What Jewish family sends a child off without a sandwich or nosh? It's not like Jacob comes from a poor family. The Isaac/Rebecca household is well-to-do, yet the Torah speaks loudly through its silence about his lack of provisions and then screams at us when describing his having to use rocks for a pillow. Jacob leaves home without a shekel in his pocket. Rabbi Haninah of the Midrash claims that his parents sent him "gadud," that is "stripped" of all material goods, this in order to quickly get him out of town unburdened by baggage, or make him a useless target for highway robbers. There was nothing to steal.

It must have been an emotional parting. Jacob's brother was ready to kill him and his parents were bidding their baby farewell—who knew for how long? And as for Jacob himself, he was not the travelling type. He was naive (in Hebrew: ish tam) and a homebody (in Hebrew: yoshev ohalim). For Jacob to set out on the road, alone, with few if any provisions, must have been terrifying.

But this was only the beginning of the story. By the end, the Torah describes Jacob as "exceedingly prosperous," a man with a large family, two wives, twelve children, and an owner of "large flocks, maidservants and menservants, camels and asses" (Genesis 30:43). Twenty years away from the comforts of home and dealing with a cut-throat businessman, his father-in-law Lavan, stripped Jacob of his naivete. He was no longer a youngster who knew nothing beyond the tarp of his parents' tents. He had learned the unpleasant ways of the real world. Given all he had experienced and endured by the duplicitous

activities of his father-in-law, running from his brother's wrath must have paled by comparison. He was ready to return home, stronger, bolder, laden with the riches he could barely dream of some twenty years prior when he left home.

How different Jewish history would have been had Jacob decided to stay home and not take the risk. True, his brother was murderously angry, and he would have that to deal with, but as the saying goes—the devil you know is better than the devil you don't. Or is it?

The blessing Isaac gave Jacob should have assured the boy riches without exertion, dedication, or grit. But the blessings that land in our laps unearned by any personal effort are not real blessings. They might be nice, welcomed, something to talk about at socials or family gatherings, but real blessings are the ones we've earned by our own hard work, by taking calculated risks, and by maintaining our faith in God, or in other words, by carrying a blessing in our hearts.

Isaac and Rebecca did little Jacob a great favor. They sent him away from home with nothing, that is, nothing but a blessing. The blessing his father gave him is the one we should give all of our children, that they, as we all, are never alone. Even when we have nothing, not even a pillow upon which to lay our heads, we still have more than most if we have God in our hearts. God is always with us, but it matters only if we have the insight to acknowledge it. By acknowledging it, we will have the courage to take those risks that will land us in a far better place, than remaining in the familiar surroundings that get us nowhere. That is the blessing of Jacob, Jacob's children, our children, and a gift the Jewish people has given to the world.

