

Between Two Worlds: Black Friday, Coffee, 613, and the December
Dilemma
Parashat Vayetze
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Rabbi Ari Sunshine

Last year, around this time, Jen and I made a decision that for the first time in either of our lives, we would play the “Black Friday” game. Jen (who is the earlier riser in our family) got up earlier than people should ever get up to go shopping and went over to Target, Old Navy, and Sports Authority to try to pick up some advertised great deals on a number of things we wanted to get for our household and for Hanukkah gifts. On a certain level, the trip was successful, in that Jen got what we were looking for at very good prices. But, on another level, the trip was problematic. It involved getting up far too early in the morning and struggling through large crowds and long lines just to get the best deals possible. We decided that, on some level, it was good that we had tried this once, but that neither of us were interested in doing this again in the future. The money saved just wasn’t worth the trade-off of having to go through the sheer craziness of the experience.

Fast forward to last week. True to our decision after last year, we did not get involved in Black Friday shopping. But we, like many other people in the sanctuary today, did read the tragic story about the temporary Wal-Mart worker, Jdimytai Damour, who was trampled to death in a rush of thousands of early

morning shoppers as he was unlocking the doors of the Long Island, New York, store, at 5 AM. Video showed as many as a dozen people knocked to the floor in the stampede of people trying to get in. The police detective investigating the death said “this was utter chaos as these men tried to open the door”—the employee was “stepped on by hundreds of people” as other workers attempted to fight their way through the crowd. “Several minutes” passed before others were able to clear space around the man and attempt to render aid. Even after police arrived and were giving first aid, those police officers were also jostled and pushed. “Shoppers... were on a full-out run into the store”, said the detective.

Can we even begin to process how horrifying this incident was? A crowd of people trying to save some money on gifts for the holidays is so obsessed with, or POSSESSED BY, its quest that the people not only run over another person in front of them, but also cannot even recognize what they are doing enough to get out of the way to make room for help—even when the help is uniformed police officers! The most basic human value, shared by faith traditions all over the world, is the sanctity of human life. And yet that value was recklessly cast aside and ignored for the sake of saving money on material purchases. How can we live with such a skewed sense of priorities and values in our society?

Fittingly, today’s parasha, Vayetze, addresses this troubling issue. The parasha starts off with Jacob leaving his home in Canaan on the way to his uncle

Laban's home in Mesopotamia, a journey that begins with a dream by the side of the road. Jacob dreams of a ladder with angels climbing up and down, and in the dream God appears to him and promises him a multitude of descendants spreading out all over, and a family name that would be a blessing for all. God also promises Jacob protection wherever he goes and promises to bring him back safely to this special land of Canaan. Jacob wakes up and builds God an altar and names the place "Beth-El"—a house of God. This dream experience is a great tone-setter for Jacob's journey—he is inspired and confident with regard to his future as he makes his way to Laban's house.

However, Jacob's experience in Laban's house represents a starkly different reality. Laban deceives and takes advantage of his nephew, and so it takes more than twenty years there for Jacob to be married to the woman he loves the most, Rachel (along with her older sister Leah), and prosperous in terms of children as well as material success. He is exposed to Laban's materialistic society and values, and becomes fully a part of it, struggling through an economic tug-of-war with his difficult uncle and father-in-law to ensure his own family's financial stability. Having finally arrived at a seemingly satisfactory compensation arrangement, Jacob has a second dream, one quite different than his first one so many years earlier at Beth El. In this dream, Jacob sees all of the goats mating and giving birth to streaked, speckled, or spotted goats—the same goats that were

supposed to be Jacob's compensation for his years of hard work for Laban, goats that Jacob cleverly bred even after Laban removed the original such goats from the flock. So Jacob's dream actually is his reality—his dream vision inspires him to arrive at a successful sheep-breeding strategy that ends up allowing him to profit greatly despite Laban's attempts to deny him his due. But as the dream continues, Jacob encounters an angel who notes Jacob's financial success as a testament to the fact that God has seen all that Laban has been doing to him, and adds—“*Anochi ha-El Beit-El*”—I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and where you made a vow to Me. Now, arise and leave this land and return to your native land!”

The angel's message appears confusing—if Jacob has now, finally, achieved success in this foreign land, why is it the time to leave and return home? And yet, the angel illustrates an important contrast between Jacob's first dream and this second one and says, in so many words, to Jacob —“twenty years ago, Jacob, you were focused on angels, holiness, the birth and perpetuation of a people, and your relationship with God; now, you are dreaming about how to get more sheep and goats. Do you even remember your dream at Beth El? Since you are being changed by the values of Laban's world, it is time to go back to where you belong.”

Rabbi Pinchas Peli, z”l, finds this interpretation compelling and finds additional support for it a few verses before the relating of the dream, when the text teaches us, “*Vayar Ya’akov et p’nei Lavan v’hinei eineinu imo kit’mol shilshom*”—and Jacob noticed that Laban’s face did not appear to him as it did before. Most commentators explain this statement as saying Laban was jealous of Jacob or angry with him. But Rabbi Peli reads it in completely the opposite fashion. Until now, Jacob had looked at Laban’s obsession with selfish materialism and seen values that were strange and different to him. Now, however, Laban’s face, and Laban’s approach to life was not so troubling or distasteful anymore, because it was starting to become Jacob’s way of life, too. Could Jacob even remember his original dream?

When we feel like we are losing our unique sense of who we are, it is time to take a step back and return to our roots. Along those lines, it was quite a fitting coincidence that, earlier this week, when I was thinking about the Black Friday tragedy and in the midst of brainstorming how to address it this Shabbat in my remarks, that I happened to go into Panera. There I ordered a chai tea latte and a bagel with cream cheese, which happened to cost me exactly \$6.13. I was doing what lots of other people do all the time (ok, granted, most other people get coffee drinks rather than chai tea, but the symbolism is still there), buying an expensive breakfast drink, a habit that, if carried out to the extreme of a daily practice, would

potentially waste a fair amount of money over the course of a year or many years. And symbolically that drink and its bagel companion cost me \$6.13, like the 613 commandments in our tradition. If that's not a good reminder that some of that \$6.13 could have been better put towards tzedakah, then I'm not sure what is. ☺

Now, I am certainly not saying that we should never buy expensive breakfast drinks nor try to find good deals when we are shopping. Nor am I saying the only solution, though it is a viable option for some, is to move to Israel. What I am saying is that as Jews in a non-Jewish world, we are constantly challenged to balance the preservation of our traditions with the norms of society around us, some of which are NOT in keeping with our own values and obligations. This time of year in particular we may feel additional pressure to get caught up in the rampant materialism and free-spending that has become a major problem in our society.

How do we respond to this challenge? We can start off in these next few weeks by—sorry kids—☹ not feeling obligated to spend large sums of money on gifts for each night of Hanukkah, since, in fact, that custom is really a relatively recent development born out of Jews living in American society! Instead, we can use some of that money we might have spent and give it to a worthwhile charitable cause for tzedakah. We can thus attempt to keep the focus of our celebration of Hanukkah on the miracle of the little light that wouldn't go out, of Jewish survival

against overwhelming odds, against the Greeks in the 2nd century BCE and throughout history. And after we make it through these next few weeks, we can, and should, continue to ask ourselves—what are the values that are important to us? Which of them do we find in our society and which are a unique part of our Jewish identity and tradition? And, when they come into conflict, as we know they will, will we continue to reaffirm our commitment to Torah, Shabbat, Tzedakah, Tefillah, and holidays in the face of that conflict? Will we keep making time to better understand and live out our identity through study and prayer, celebration of sacred times and relationships, and acts of lovingkindness? Hanukkah is about the perpetuation of the eternal flame of our people and our traditions. Living in a foreign land, we are charged to remember the context of holiness and blessing of Jacob's first dream in Beth El. What will each of us do to keep that original Jewish dream alive?