

The Chase

Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe
Courtesy of MeaningfulLife.com

And it was reported to Laban on the third day that Jacob had fled. And he took his kinsmen with him, and he chased after him a seven days' journey; and they overtook him at Mount Gilad....

And Jacob was angry and strove with Laban... And he said: "What is my crime and what is my sin, that you have so hotly pursued me? ...Twenty years I have been in your employ... In the day drought consumed me, and the frost at night; and my sleep departed from my eyes..."

And Laban said: "...Come, let us make a covenant, I and you." ... And they took stones and made a heap, and they ate there upon the heap... And Laban said to Jacob: "...This heap be witness, and this monument be witness, that I will not cross this heap to you, and you will not cross this heap and monument to me, for harm..." And they spent the night on the hill.

And Laban rose in the morning... and he returned to his place. And Jacob went on his way. (Genesis 31:4-32:2)

Why does a man who has spent his entire life in the "tents of study" in pursuit of wisdom and closeness to G-d, leave the spiritual oasis of Be'er Sheva, home of Abraham and Isaac, and go to Charan in Paddan-Aram, the world's capital of idolatry and deceit, to spend twenty years as a shepherd in the employ of Laban the Deceiver?

Each and every creation has at its heart a "spark of holiness"

He is hunting sparks.

Each and every creation, no matter how material and mundane, has at its heart a "spark of holiness." A spark that embodies G-d's desire that it exist and its function within G-d's overall purpose for creation. A spark that is the original instrument of its creation and which remains nestled within it to continually supply it with being and vitality. A spark of holiness that constitutes its "soul"—its spiritual content and design.

Entrenched in the physical reality, these holy sparks are virtual prisoners within their material encasements. The physical world, with its illusions of self-sufficiency and arbitrariness, suppresses all but the faintest glimmer of G-dliness and purposefulness.

The soul of man descends into the trappings and trials of physical life in order to reclaim these sparks. By assuming a physical body that will eat, wear clothes, inhabit a home, and otherwise make use of the objects and forces of the physical existence, the soul can redeem the sparks of holiness they incorporate. For when a person utilizes something, directly or indirectly, to serve the Creator, he penetrates its shell of mundanity, revealing and realizing its divine essence and purpose.

"The deeds of the fathers are signposts for the children."¹ The story of Jacob's journey to Charan, where he spent twenty years in the home and employ of the evil Laban, is the story of our own lives. The soul, too, leaves behind a spiritual and G-dly existence to preoccupy itself with material needs, to become a shepherd and entrepreneur in the Charans of the world.² The soul, too, must condescend to deal with the crassness, hostility and deceptions of an alien employer. It must struggle to extract the sparks of holiness from their mundane husks, to deliver the flocks of Laban into the domain of Jacob.

Unfinished Business

Among the "signposts" in Jacob's journey is the rather strange closing chapter in his dealings with Laban.

Jacob's mission in Charan seemed complete. As he tells Rachel and Leah, Laban's wealth has been "delivered"³ to him—the material resources of this alien land have been sublimated, their sparks of holiness redeemed through Jacob's exploitation of them for good and G-dly ends. Indeed, the Almighty has communicated to him it is time he came home. Rachel and Leah, too, sense that all opportunities in Charan have been utilized, that there no longer remains "a portion or inheritance for us in our father's house." So Jacob "rose up and set his sons and his wives on the camels. And he led away all his cattle, and all his goods which he had acquired, the possessions of his purchase, which he had acquired in Paddan-Aram, to go to... the land of Canaan."⁴

But Laban pursues Jacob, and they have a final confrontation on Mount Gilad. Reconciled, they break bread together and camp for the night. Then, each goes his own way, having sealed a mutual non-aggression pact, to be attested to by a pile of stones which marks their respective domains.⁵

Obviously, there was still some unfinished business between them, some lingering sparks still languishing in Laban's camp. In the words of Rabbi DovBer of Mezeritch: "Jacob had left behind Torah letters (a kabbalistic term for the "sparks of holiness" imbedded in creation⁶) which he had not yet extracted from Laban. This is why Laban pursued him—to give him the letters which remained with him. An entire chapter was added to the Torah by these letters."⁷

To Pursue and to be Pursued

In other words, there are two types of "sparks" that we redeem in the course of our lives. The first type are those which we consciously pursue, having recognized the potential for sanctity and goodness in an object or event within our life's trajectory. Indeed, we human beings pride ourselves on the measure of control we have learned to exercise over our lives: we plan our education, decide whom to marry, choose a community, chart a career and save for retirement. We're constantly manipulating our environment, cultivating opportunities and maneuvering ourselves into the right place and time to properly take advantage of them.

But every so often, we are confronted with something that is neither of our making nor in our control. Something that seemed so readily in our grasp remains incomprehensibly elusive; something we've done everything in

**...opportunities
representing potentials
so lofty that they cannot**

our power to avoid invades our lives. These are "sparks" of the second sort: opportunities which we would never have realized on our own, since they represent potentials so lofty that they cannot be identified and consciously developed by our humanly finite perception and faculties. So our redemption of these sparks can only come about unwittingly, when, by divine providence, our involvement with them is forced upon our by circumstances beyond his control.

**be identified by our
humanly finite faculties**

Thus our lives are divided into "Charan" periods and "Mount Gilad" events. The bulk of our efforts are conscious and focused: goals are defined, opportunities recognized, endeavors planned and achieved. But then there are the situations we never desired, the encounters which pursue us even as we flee from them. These may aggravate and exasperate us; like Jacob on Mount Gilead we cry, "What more do you want of me? Are my decades scorching days and freezing nights not enough?" But we must never dismiss these encounters and fail to extract the kernel of good that certainly lies buried within them. Indeed, they contain the most elusive, and most rewarding, achievements of our lives.⁸

FOOTNOTES

1. Nachmanides' commentary on [Genesis 12:6](#).
2. See Or HaChaim commentary on [Genesis 28:14](#).
3. Thus the verb *hatzalah*, which means "save," "redeem" and "deliver," is used by the Torah to describe Jacob's success in exacting a profit from Laban's flocks ([Genesis 31:9](#) and 16). The same word is used in connection with the "great riches" with which the Jews left Egypt, "leaving it as a silo emptied of its grain, as a pond emptied of its fish"—a reference to the "sparks of holiness" whose redemption was the purpose of their descent into Egyptian exile ([Exodus 12:36](#); see [Genesis 15:14](#) and Talmud, Berachot 9a-b).
4. Genesis 31, verses 9, 3, 14 and 17-18 respectively.
5. We find a similar phenomenon in the prohibition of a Jew to live in Egypt ([Deuteronomy 17:16](#)): having been utterly "emptied" of its sparks, there is no longer anything to be accomplished through one's involvement with the material resources in that corner of the world.
6. The sparks of holiness are referred to in the teachings of Kabbalah and Chassidism as "letters", since it is the "letters" of the divine speech (e.g. "And G-d said: 'Let there be light!' And there was light") which create and sustain each created entity and constitute its soul and essence (see Tanya, part II, ch. 1).
7. Quoted by Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch in Ohr HaTorah, vol. V, p. 869a.
8. Based on a talk by the Rebbe, Tishrei 27, 5712 (October 27, 1951); Likkutei Sichot, vol. XV, pp. 260-264.

Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe

Originally published in *Week in Review*.

Republished with the permission of MeaningfulLife.com. If you wish to republish this article in a periodical, book, or website, please email permissions@meaningfullife.com.

Artwork by David Brook. David lives in Sydney, Australia, and has been selling his art since he was in high school. He is currently painting and doing web illustrations.

© Copyright, all rights reserved. If you enjoyed this article, we encourage you to distribute it further, provided that you comply with Chabad.org's copyright policy.