Excerpt (no.5) of *Genesis in Poetry*
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JACOB'S FLIGHT AND THE DREAM OF THE LADDER
(28:10 – 22)

Jacob left, heavy of heart,
Hardly convinced that this was the start
Of a destiny that God would chart,
And of which he'd be an active part.

After a full day's ride at a speedy pace,
He alighted at an eerie place,[1]
By whose aura he felt embraced—
And a powerful sense of holy space.

He felt that he was not alone,
But was being observed.
He prayed to God and prepared for sleep,[2]
Considerably unnerved.

He took twelve stones as a support[3]
For his heavy, distracted head.
He smoothed the ground
And then lay down
On his makeshift bed.

After a while he closed his eyes,
And soon began to dream
Of a ladder reaching to the skies,
And, caught in a moonbeam,
Angels gliding up and down—
A translucent celestial team.[4]

Above the ladder, in a haze, he saw…
Who else could it be?[5]
He was constrained to avert his gaze,
Instinctively.

''*Jacob, you have no cause to fear*
What you've just seen.
Offspring of Abraham, my friend,
And Isaac whom I esteem,
This place where you have had your dream,

In holiness is supreme.

‘‘*In time to come, on this site,*
My temple shall stand as a beacon of light.[6]
Nations shall acclaim your offspring’s worth,
And abundant they’ll be as the dust of the earth.
‘‘*Fear not for what the future may bring,*
For I determine everything.
To Canaan, one day, you’ll return,
And there your offspring shall sojourn.

As for the angels going up and down,
Your deeds have created for them a crown.
The first group[7] *watched over you till this day,*
The second descend now
To smooth your way.’’

Jacob awoke from his sleep,
Not knowing whether to laugh or weep:
I’ve never heard God’s voice before,
And here, lying on the floor,
I’m vouchsafed a wondrous revelation
That I’d become a great nation.
How did I deserve to locate
The house of God
And heaven’s gate?

Next morning, in the terrain,
There was no trace of where he’d lain.
And the twelve stones he’d arranged,
Into one large slab had now been changed![8]

He anchored it firmly into the soil,
And poured over it anointing oil,
Saying, “*Beth El* it shall now be called,
‘God’s house’ forever I’ve just installed.
And when I return to my land,
God shall receive tithes
From the toil of my hand.

* * *

APPROACHING LABAN’S HOME
(29:1 – 12)

Emboldened now and charged with elation,
He rode east with determination.
Arriving at the central well,

He asked the shepherds if they could tell
Him where he might locate a man
Called Laban —
They replied, ‘‘We can!’’

‘‘In fact,’’ said one, ‘‘here comes his daughter,
The gorgeous Rachel, to draw her water,
To quench the thirst of her father’s flock,
But she’ll have to wait till the dead-weight rock
That covers the well is lifted by us
Three shepherds together, without any fuss.
Then, when we’ve watered our own sheep,
The girls can approach—
While we take a peep!’’[9]

“Be off with you!” said Jacob,
“The sun’s still high in the sky.
So, the flocks have plenty more time to graze —
Their full quota,
You scoundrels deny!”[10]

Just as the shepherds, in anger, rose
To give Jacob a beating,
He whipped the rock off the top of the well—
And the lambs all started bleating.

The shepherds fell back in dismay
At the amazing strength on display.[11]
At the uplifted rock
They abandoned their flock —
And in panic ran away.

When Rachel approached,
Jacob knew at once
That this was the love of his life,
That she was the one who was heaven-sent
To be his partner and wife.

He gave her sheep to drink their fill
And then replaced the rock.
They talked and they embraced until
Their love became unlocked.
He planted kisses on her cheeks[12]
And wept tears of joy:[13]
“To find you I have travelled weeks –
There’s no need to be coy!
I am your cousin, after all,
Your aunt Rebekah’s boy!”

“Just beware,” said Rachel,

"For my father can't be trusted.
Take every promise that he makes
With several grains of mustard!"

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JACOB AT LABAN'S HOME
(29:13 – 30:13)

When Laban was told that Jacob had come,
The potential for gain made him run
To greet the young man with a warm embrace —
Though the smile was soon wiped off his face!

"When your grandpa's servant arrived here,
Many years ago,
He came laden with many gifts—
But you with a mere '*hello!*"[14]

"Forgive me, uncle that I don't impress,
For a fugitive am I.
Let me work on your estate,
Rather than just stand by."

A month passed, and Laban saw
That Jacob was there to stay.
"You can't work here for nothing, lad.
For sure, that's not our way!"

In Laban's mind a plan was hatched:
Elder daughter, Leah, was not yet matched.
Her face was sallow, her figure narrow,
Her eyes weak, she didn't much speak.
She always looked tired,
Was never admired.
No wonder no suitors
Had enquired!

"Jacob, good fellow, you need a wife,
And I know for whom you care.
So, for how long are you prepared to work? –
Let's agree a term that's fair."

"Indeed, I love her," Jacob replied,
"And Rachel loves me too.
Is seven years' work a fair bride's price? —
I think so.
Don't you?"

His love for her was so intense
That the years passed as a few days.
The nuptials arranged,
The townsfolk came,
To shout their *hurray*s!

Heavily veiled,
To the canopy
The bride was conveyed.
And when the last guest had gone,
The bridal bed was made.

In the deep darkness of the night
The couple were united.
But when the morning light shone in,
Jacob's hope was blighted.
For, lying there next to him,
Was not the one he adored,
But her homely sister, Leah,
Whom he'd hitherto ignored.[15]

He rushed straight to Laban's tent,
Beside himself with rage,
Denouncing him for the treachery
With which he'd been engaged.

"In the light of what you've done to me,
Could I go after Leah a-wooing,
Pretending passion for someone
Who conspired in my undoing?"

"Come, now, Jacob," Laban replied,
"I'm surprised that you don't know
That life has an inexorable rule
That we reap what we sow.
Did you not supplant your older brother,
And secure his birthright under cover?
But in *our* place,
We don't stoop so low[16]
As to leave the older one in limbo!

"But just to show my good intent,
Once this week's celebration is spent,[17]
I'll give you Rachel as you desired,
If for seven more years
You agree to be hired."

True to his word, the marriage took place,
And Laban allotted a suitable space,
On his estate, situated,

For the two families now being created.
He provided whatever the couples might need,
That, from all chores, they might be freed:
To Leah, Zilpah as her handmaid,
To Rachel, Bilhah, a help, top-grade.

The Lord wasn't pleased
That Leah was hated,
So, he blessed her with children—
Status elevated!
When Reuben, the firstborn,
Arrived in their life,
She felt she'd become
The number one wife.

Simeon, Levi, and Judah
Followed in quick succession.
Leah's nest now became
Jacob's proudest possession.

Rachel grew more bitter[18]
With each passing day,
Though Jacob tried to console her
In every way.

"Give me children!" she would cry,
"For without them, I'll surely die.
That such a gift you can supply
Is something you certainly cannot deny.
For, it's abundantly clear to me
That you and God speak,
Yet now, in my desperation,
You act incredibly meek!"

Jacob flew into a rage,
Though by nature, most mild:
"Do I stand in place of God
Who's withheld from you a child?"

Rachel paused for a while,
Then she had a thought:
"With my handmaid, Bilhah, as a wife
Would you be prepared to consort?
If you do,
The child produced
Would fulfil my maternal need,
And I would feel fulfilled, my love.
Of my burden I'd be freed."

Jacob lay with the maid,

And, in the course of time,
A son, Dan, was born to them,
Meaning, ‘God has “judged” my crime’ –
In speaking out and laying blame
On Jacob, a righteous man,
Who, mercifully, has now confirmed
His pleasure at my plan.

The second child the maid produced,
Was Naphtali, “my desperation,”
Recalling Rachel’s jealousy
At her sister’s propagation.

When Leah saw
She was bearing no more,
She gave Jacob Zilpah, her maid.
When Gad and Asher arrived,
Leah thrived
On the love Jacob newly displayed.

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REUBEN AND THE MANDRAKES
(30:14 – 24)

Reuben took an unfamiliar path
During the harvest’s aftermath.
He found some mandrakes on the ground —
A plant he’d never previously found.

An old man, a passer-by,
Watching him examine his find,
Said, “that plant’s not for the likes of you.
It’s of a special kind.”

“What do you mean,” demanded the lad,
“By ‘a special kind’? —
If you don’t explain to me in full,
You’ll get a piece of my mind!”

“As you will!” replied the man,[19]
“But be prepared to blush:
To embrace a woman who eats this plant,
There’s not a man won’t rush.
He’ll find no way that he might cool
The ardor of his loins.[20]
And she’s sure to conceive
When with her he carnally joins.”

To Leah, his mum,

Reuben brought his find.
But when Rachel entered,
Leah read her mind.
“Be content to enjoy
All our husband’s passion.
Don’t think now you’ll get
This extra ration!”

“Then sell me your mandrakes,”
Rachel implored,
‘‘For an extra night
With our man, most adored.”

The deal was struck,
The mandrakes exchanged –
And Leah joined Jacob
As arranged.[21]

Issachar was conceived thereby,
Then Zevulun, rather shy.
Finally, Dinah, a beautiful girl,
Viewed by Leah as her precious pearl.

Just when Rachel had given up hope,
God banished her gloom.
In answer to her fervent prayers
He opened her womb.
The child, Joseph, was manifestly blessed
With double the beauty of the rest.

NOTES

JACOB’S FLIGHT AND THE DREAM OF THE LADDER

1. *He alighted at an eerie place:* See Gen. 28:11. The Hebrew, *vayyifga ba-makom* (literally, ‘‘He alighted on a place’’), may also be translated (albeit in later, rabbinic Hebrew) as, ‘‘And he entreated the Omnipresent.’’ Allowing itself such literary license, rabbinic tradition ascribed to Jacob the introduction of the recitation of the evening service.

2. *He prayed to God and prepared for sleep:* See previous note. Later Judaism instituted a further prayer (*Keri’at Shema al ha-mittah*) to be recited just before closing one’s eyes for sleep each night.

3. *He took twelve stones as a support:* We have incorporated here a rabbinic tradition, recorded in the name of R. Judah, that he placed twelve stones under his head, corresponding

to the twelve tribes of which he was destined to become the primogenitor.
Another view, that of R. Nehemiah, is that he took only three stones, expressive of his wish that, just as God had bestowed His spirit upon his father, Isaac, and grandfather, Abraham, so would he do for him. Yet a further recorded view is that he took just two stones. This is based upon the phrase, ''And he took of *the stones* of the place.'' Since we are not told how many stones there were, this view assumed that the minimum of plural was implied (See Mid. *Ber. Rabb.* 68 (13). Onkelos, the officially authorized Aramaic translation (Targum) of the Bible in Talmudic times, does not provide any number, whereas the other well-established Aramaic translation, (Pseudo-) Jonathan, states that he took four stones. All this adds up to the conclusion that we will never know how many stones he really took!

4. *A translucent celestial team:* See Gen. 28:12-15.

5. *Who else could it be?* See v.13.

6. *My Temple shall stand as a beacon of light:* See the reference to ''the house of God'' and ''the gate of heaven'' in v.17.

7. *The first…The second:* Rabbinic tradition explains the mission of the ascending group of angels as that of having protected Jacob from the time he left his father's home until this moment when he was about to leave the borders of the Holy Land. That group thereupon 'ascended' back to heaven on the completion of their mission. The mission of the next group, of descending angels, was to protect him for as long as he remained outside the land of Israel.

8. *Into one large slab had now been changed:* This is inferred from the fact that Gen. 28:8 states that, on awakening from his dream, 'he took *the stone* which he had placed under his head.'

APPROACHING LABAN'S HOME

9. *While we take a peep:* The vulnerability of shepherdesses to sexual harassment is well attested, especially in this situation wherein they were unable to lift the dead-weight stone cover of the well without the help of several male shepherds. The fact that the latter, after feeding their own flocks, replaced that cover, while knowing full-well that Rachel and her fellow-shepherdesses would shortly arrive, explains Jacob's hostility towards them.

10. *Their full quota you scoundrels deny:* See *Rashi* on v.7.

11. *At the amazing strength on display:* See v.10. 'This act Jacob performed single-handedly, experiencing a sudden surge of strength at the sight of Rachel, and in the knowledge that he was meeting with his own kith and kin at last' (Sarna, *op. cit*., 202).

12. *He planted kisses on her cheeks:* While such a gesture might seem a trifle audacious, bearing in mind that he had only just encountered her, yet the Midrash justifies his conduct in the light of the fact they were cousins. It states, 'All kissing is frivolity except in three situations: A kiss conferred by one initiating another into a position of greatness, a kiss bestowed at a reunion after a lengthy absence, and a kiss bestowed on a relative' (Mid. *Ber. Rabb.* 70 (11).

13. *And wept tears of joy:* While we have interpreted his tears as expressive of joy at his new-found love, the sages prefer to view them otherwise, either as an expression of sadness and embarrassment that, when the servant of his grandfather, Abraham, had visited this family home, to secure Rebekah as a wife for Isaac, he had come with ten camels laden with gifts, whereas he, Jacob, was arriving there empty-handed and as a fugitive. A Midrashic exposition has it that his tears were the result of a prophetic revelation that they would not be buried together in the Cave of Machpelah (See *Ber. Rabb*. 70 (12)).

JACOB AT LABAN'S HOME

14. *But you with a mere 'hello!'* This is inferred from the phrase, 'And he (Laban) ran to meet him' (Gen. 29:13). When Abraham's servant had first arrived, all those years before, Laban also 'ran to meet him' Gen. 24:29), in justified expectation of rich gifts. This time, however, his rush to greet the newly-arrived family member from Canaan ended in frustration (See *Rashi* on Gen.29:13).

15. *Whom he'd hitherto ignored:* It strikes one as highly implausible that Jacob would not have recognized immediately that the woman in his bed was not his adored Rachel. The rabbis had a tradition that, knowing her brother Laban's cunning, and suspecting his intention to palm off the homely Leah ahead of Rachel, the latter contrived an ingenious and selfless ruse to prevent her sister being humiliated when she entered the unlit bridal chamber. Rachel disclosed to Leah, therefore, some secret signs and gestures that she had previously agreed with Jacob so that he would know that it was her, and not another, being escorted to his bed in the dark (See Tal. *Meg*. 13b).

16. *But in our place we don't stoop so low:* See Gen. 29:26. The emphasis, "in our place," is intended to indicate to Jacob that while, *in his place,* it was clearly acceptable to supplant an older brother— as he, Jacob, had done— yet in Laban's place they had a higher ethical conscience, and would never ride rough-shod over an older child, such as by allowing the younger one to marry first.

17. *Once this week's celebration is spent:* A Talmudic tradition ascribes the prohibition of 'merging one religious celebration with another' to Laban's decision not to allow the wedding of Jacob to Rachel to take place until the seven days of celebration for his nuptials with Leah were completed (See *Ber. Rabb*. 70 (18)). We have here a hint of the ancient Near-Eastern tradition of extending the celebration of a wedding for seven days, from which our *Sheva Berachot* is derived.

18. *Rachel grew more bitter:* See Gen. 30:1-2.

RACHEL AND THE MANDRAKES

19. "*As you will*," *replied the man:* This motif, of a passer-by disclosing the aphrodisiacal property of the mandrake to Reuben, is a figment of my imagination, introduced in order to explain how the young Reuben could possibly have known about intimate marital matters, and particularly regarding the aphrodisiacal properties of the mandrake.

20. *The ardor of his loins:* The Hebrew term for 'mandrake' is *duda'im,* which is a variant

of the word *dodim, meaning* '(potion of) lovers'.

21. *As arranged:* The Talmud attributes the fact that Rachel was not destined to lie for all eternity next to Jacob in the Cave of Machpelah to the fact that she was prepared so readily to surrender up a night with him in return for the mandrakes. She treated her physical and spiritual intimacy with him with scant respect by bartering it in an unseemly way, purely for the enhanced sexual gratification offered by the mandrake. (See Tal. *Nid.* 31b).