

Genesis 35:1-7, 16-21, 27-29 (Robert Alter translation)

And God said to Jacob, “Rise, go up to Bethel and dwell there and make an altar there to the God Who appeared to you when you fled from Esau your brother.” And Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, “Put away the alien gods that are in your midst and cleanse yourselves and change your garments. And let us rise and go up to Bethel, and I shall make an altar there to the God Who answered me on the day of my distress and was with me on the way that I went.” And they gave Jacob all the alien gods that were in their hands and the rings that were in their ears, and Jacob buried them under the terebinth that is by Shechem. And they journeyed onward, and the terror of God was upon the towns around them, and they did not pursue the sons of Jacob. And Jacob came to Luz in the land of Canaan, that is, Bethel, he and all the people who were with him. And he built there an altar and he called the place El-Bethel, for there God was revealed to him when he fled from his brother.

And they journeyed onward from Bethel, and when they were still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel gave birth, and she labored hard in the birth. And it happened, when she was laboring hardest in the birth, that the midwife said to her, “Fear not, for this one, too, is a son for you.” And it happened, as her life ran out, for she was dying, that she called his name Ben-Oni, but his father called him Benjamin. And Rachel died and she was buried on the road to Ephrath, that is, Bethlehem. And Jacob set up a pillar on her grave, it is the pillar of Rachel’s grave to this day.

And Israel journeyed onward and pitched his tent on the far side of Migdal-Eder.

And Jacob came to Isaac his father in Mamre, at Kiriath-Arba, that is, Hebron, where Abraham, and Isaac, had sojourned. And Isaac’s days were a hundred and eighty years. And Isaac breathed his last, and died, and was gathered to his kin, old and sated with years, and Esau and Jacob his sons buried him.¹

¹ Alter Robert, *The Five Books of Moses*, n.d.

An Era Ends

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: *Genesis 35:1-7, 16-21, 27-29*

Rachel, whom Jacob loved from the moment he saw her, now many years later clinched her every muscle in the contractions of labor. This was to be her second child, to be born long after her first one, Joseph. It did not look to end well. But when inevitable heartbreak overshadows a moment in human life, often small things become an acceptable consolation. “Fear not, for this one, too, is a son for you,” says Rachel’s midwife. In this hour when Rachel knows that life is fleeing her, she is consoled that a new life, another son, will come forth from her. With her dying breath she names him Benoni.

The Hebrew language itself is pregnant with meaning—mystical and sacred. Today in Jerusalem you will find dumpsters for worn out sacred texts—the Torah, the Talmud and the Midrash. The worn out texts cannot just be thrown in recycling or the trash. They must be gathered up and properly buried. Many Jews consider the language itself to be sacred, so they place anything that has Hebrew characters in these containers for burial—newspapers, posters, grocery lists—anything. Every word, every letter, is more than meets the eye.

So, when Rachel named her newborn son, you can understand that the name was abundant with meaning, several levels of meaning, actually, that were meant to play with one another, developing both tension and fullness.

Benoni. She named him. Son of my sorrow is one meaning. And to be sure this is a moment of sorrow. Rachel is facing her own mortality. Jacob is about to lose his beloved. By the end of the chapter he will bury his father Isaac and for the last time lay his eyes on Esau his brother. Jacob will mostly now wander off the stage of this narrative, an old man at the end of his days. Benoni. Son of my sorrow, indeed.

Oddly, though, Benoni also means son of my vigor. Ironic words for a dying woman. But she seems to mean that even as her vitality departs, it is passed on to the next generation. Like Eliot’s Magi, we find death and birth intertwined. As one chapter, as one generation, as one era closes, another takes its first breath. Benoni. Son of my sorrow. Son of my vigor.

In a highly unusual move, Jacob also names the child, as if the two excruciating layers of life and death are not enough. He names the child Benjamin. Here, too, the meanings pile high. The first and most obvious meaning is “son of the right hand,” that is, as Robert Alter notes, “favored son, the one to whom is imparted special power or ‘dexterity.’” But the right hand also designates the south in biblical idiom, so the name could mean ‘dweller in the south.’” And to be sure, our narrative is about to turn from the land of Canaan and take up its sojourn southerly, into Egypt. To add more layers, some have proposed that Benjamin should be understood as son of my day, son of my time. That is, son of the end of my time, the son of old age.² So Jacob, too, names his son in a way that poignantly acknowledges the end of his time, both a leaving Canaan behind and his own death knell, but it also points forward to a continuation as the story swings south.

² Alter Robert, *The Five Books of Moses*, n.d.

It is a remarkable transition point that we are at. From the instant that Abram was called for from his father's house and commanded to sojourn in Canaan, our characters have trod and re-trod pathways from the old homeland of Haran and among the cities of Canaan. [slide 1] Abram came from Haran. He sent his servant back there to fetch a wife for Isaac, and returned with Rebekah. And then Rebekah sent her son Jacob there to find his wife, a journey from which he has just returned. And look at the cities on this map. [slide 2] Shechem, Bethel, Ai, Mamre, Hebron, to name but a few are places the characters in our story have lived and returned to time and again. In the very beginning Abram passed through Shechem. It was at Bethel that God first spoke to him and promised the old man that this land would one day be his offspring's. Abram named the place Bethel, house of God, and built an altar there and pitched his tent between Bethel and Ai. Jacob came unknowingly to this same place as he fled Esau's fury. God came to Jacob there, and God promised Jacob that he would bring him back to this land. Jacob set up a pillar, anointed it with oil, and he named this place, unawares, the same thing his father had, Bethel, house of God, for there Jacob said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." And now on his return trip it happens all over again. "And there he built an altar and called the place El-bethel, because it was there that God had revealed himself to him when he fled from his brother."

And so it is with nearly every city on this map. Each generation has played its part on this stage—living, loving and dying in a land that would not yet quite be theirs—coming again and again to almost familiar places as though they were tethered there. T. S. Eliot writes of something like this in his poem, "Little Gidding."

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started

The Patriarchs and Matriarchs of Genesis keep arriving where they've been before. But the lines of Eliot's poem that I quoted are but the first three lines, and Eliot wrote the poem in quartets. The fourth line, then, makes all the difference:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

In this story that Genesis weaves, for all the comings and goings of the characters, they keep coming to the old places anew. It is, perhaps, both the bane and blessing of the human condition. Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob, Leah and Rachel learn and re-learn the same lessons, to the point that God can hardly bear it. But when they encounter the holy, on Mt. Moriah where Abraham held the knife over Isaac, or at Bethel, where they discovered and rediscovered that they were standing in the house of God, these generations bowed in awe and devotion, seeing the place again, for the first time.

And this time as we revisit Bethel and Mamre and Hebron, we prepare to turn the story over to the next and last generation, the children of Jacob. But we are at a pivot point, an ending of sorts. Jacob and Leah will be the last generation to be buried in the cave at the field that Abraham purchased in Hebron. We are at a pivot point. We prepare to leave these environs. The ties to Canaan will stay in place a moment longer, but Egypt will soon take center stage. Joseph, perhaps the least flawed of all in these early generations will command our attention next. We will meet new characters, Pharaoh and Potiphar and more. We'll trade the Bedouin life and the rough cities of Canaan for Egypt's royal court.

But one day, many years and generations hence, the story will return to this land. And the Israelites who come out of Egypt into the Promised Land will carry with them a vivid connection to the land they will have left so long before, both figuratively and literally. They will carry these stories we have been reading, to be sure. But there's more.

Joseph, as we will see, died in Egypt. He was the only Israelite on record to have been embalmed in the Egyptian way. And Joseph extracted a deathbed promise that when the chosen people finally returned to the Promised Land, they would carry his bones with them and bury them there. Generations later Moses complied with Joseph's wishes and carried Joseph's bones with him out of Egypt. And those who came after Moses died continued to transport them. Wherever they went they carried Joseph's bones that they might be properly buried according to Joseph's wishes.

Finally, after years and years of wanderings and battles, they buried Joseph in the Promised Land. Can you guess where they buried him? The bones of Joseph, which the Israelites had brought up from Egypt, were buried at Shechem, in the portion of ground that Jacob had bought from the children of Hamor, the father of Shechem, for one hundred pieces of money. (Joshua 24:32)

Shechem. The city, where Abram first came, where Jacob bought the land and built the well, where Jesus would speak with the Samaritan woman. There they buried Joseph.

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
Amen.