



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

GENESIS > Vayitzei

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

December 10, 2016
Vayitzei

Chapter and Verse



Meaningful Sermons

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ABSTRACT

There is a secret weapon that we Jews possess. It is not our brains, though there's that too. It's not our survival instinct, though that can't be discounted. It's not our business acumen, though that can't be discredited. It's not our innate ethical code, our emphasis on family, education, and a higher calling. Those are all indeed secret, or not-so-secret, weapons. The secret weapon, however, of which we speak here, is something many of us are unaware of, and that is:

The Book of Psalms – known in Hebrew as *Sefer Tehillim*, which means “Book of Praises.”

Our mothers and grandmothers – and fathers and grandfathers as well – both in times of crisis and in good times, during the High Holidays and on regular days – would silently and solemnly read the Psalms continuously.

It is our secret weapon because its song and poetry remind us of our inherent oneness with G-d.

And the articulation of this concept began with our forefather, Jacob.

This heartfelt idea is demonstrated in a story about the Baal Shem Tov and his disciples. And in a story about an opera singer and an old Jew.

**CHAPTER AND VERSE:
THE SECRET POWER OF PSALMS**

1. The Lord is My Shepherd (Humor)

A Hebrew school teacher decided to have her young class memorize one of the most quoted chapters of the Book of Psalms: Number 23.

Little Sammy was excited about the task, but he just couldn't remember the Psalm.

On the day that the kids were scheduled to recite Psalm 23 in front of the congregation, Sammy was so nervous. When it was his turn, he stepped up to the microphone and said, "*The Lord is my shepherd...* and that's all I need to know."

2. The Secret Weapon of the Jews

There is a secret weapon that we Jews possess. It is not our brains, though there's that too. It's not our survival instinct, though that can't be discounted. It's not our business acumen, though that can't be discredited. It's not our innate ethical code, our emphasis on family, education, and a higher calling. Those are all indeed secret, or not-so-secret, weapons. The secret weapon, however, of which we speak here, is something many of us are unaware of, and that is:

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It is our secret weapon because its song and poetry remind us of our inherent oneness with the Shepherd.

And the articulation of this connection began with our forefather, Jacob, as we discover in this week's Torah reading.

3. Parshat Vayeitzei

Our Torah reading this week – *Parshat Vayetzei* – relates Jacob's famous dream of a ladder to heaven. Fleeing the wrath of his brother Esau, Jacob travels to the home of his mother's brother, Laban. On the way, he spends a most mazing night:

Jacob left Beer Sheba, and he went to Haran. And he arrived at the place and rested there because the sun had set, and he took some of the stones of the place and placed them around his head, and he lay down to sleep there.¹

Jacob arrived "at the place." What place was that? Rashi tells us that it was Mount Moriah, the future site of the Temple, G-d's home on earth.²

When he went to sleep in that place – on Mount Moriah, on the Temple Mount – Jacob had a dream:

And behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.³

Much has been written about Jacob's dream. But that's not what I want to talk about today. I want to spend the next few minutes focusing on Jacob's *sleep*, and what lessons it may teach us.

¹ Genesis 28:10-11.

² See Pesachim 88a. Chulin 91b.

³ Genesis 28:12.

4. Holy Insomnia

The Midrash⁴ cites a discussion between the Talmudic sages on what happened on Mount Moriah:

Rabbi Yehudah said that here Jacob lay down to sleep there, but during the previous fifteen years that he was hiding out in the house of Eber he did not sleep.

Rabbi Nechemiah said that he lay down to sleep there, but the following twenty years when he stayed in the house of Laban he did not sleep.

What did he do instead?

Rabbi Yehoshuah ben Levi said that he recited the fifteen Songs of Ascent from the Book of Psalms. What's the reasoning? [One of the psalms states:] *Let Israel declare now*,⁵ referring to Jacob by his other name, Israel.

Rabbi Shmuel ben Nachman said that he recited the entire Book of Psalms. What's the reasoning? [One of the psalms states:] *You are holy; You await the praises of Israel*.⁶

Jacob recited Psalms to overcome the difficulties he encountered in Laban's house. Living and working in Laban's devious, idolatrous environment was a deep exile for Jacob, and it impacted him heavily.⁷ Understanding that, the Midrash asks what he did to maintain his fortitude, faith and connection with G-d. And it answers: He recited Psalms.

What can this mean? Especially since most of the Psalms are attributed to King David who lived hundreds of years after Jacob passed away.

⁴ Genesis Rabbah 68:14.

⁵ Psalms 124:1.

⁶ Psalms 22:4.

⁷ See Likkutei Sichot, vol. 20, p. 124.

First of all, *Eitz Yosef*, a commentary to the Midrash, explains: “When it says that Jacob recited Psalms, it means to say that he recited all the concepts of praise, founded upon the eternal praise of G-d and His kindness. Therefore the Psalms are collectively called, *Tehilot Yisrael*, “the Praises of Israel.” So though King David would later formally compose the Psalms, their ideas and sentiments were already expressed by Jacob.

Second of all, Jacob had a higher goal in mind, as we discover when we delve into the Psalms he recited – the Songs of Ascent in particular.

5. Quest for Peace

A verse in one of the fifteen Songs of Ascent reads: *I am for peace, but when I speak, they are for war.*⁸

The great 11th century Torah commentator, Rashi, explains the verse as follows: I am for peace with them, but when I speak of peace, they come to wage war with me. Who are the “they” that the psalm is referring to here? [It obviously cannot be referring to Laban himself, for he is one person, singular, not “them,” plural.]

The greatest aspiration of Jews is *shalom*, peace. Indeed, the Torah demands that Jews never intentionally place themselves in a state of war or danger.⁹ For whatever reason, however, there are many challenges in this world, many battles and wars that we Jews have to fight, many dangers that we must overcome. These are the “they” – called in Chassidic teachings the “domain of the many”¹⁰ – the many obstacles that stand between our promise and the act of fulfilling it.

How do we respond to such challenges? The same way Jacob responded to the challenges he faced while exiled in Laban’s home: by reciting the *Sefer Tehillim*, the “Book of Praises” – more specifically, praises through songs, and not just any songs, but the Songs of Ascent – that is – psalms 120 through 134.

⁸ Psalms 120:7.

⁹ See Berachot 60b.

¹⁰ Tanya, end Ch. 33.

6. The Power of Tehillim

The power of *Tehillim* has many dimensions. It certainly has mystical strength. But its power can also be explained in very practical and psychological terms, relevant to our lives today.

Some people face challenges by fighting them, by being bogged down by them, by questioning them.

The Jew responds to challenges with transcending the challenge. We respond to difficulty with singing a song, a song of ascent, with elevating our souls. Imagine the tremendous effect that has on our psyches and beings!

This is the power of *Tehillim*, Psalms. The energy of *tehilla* – the pure praise of G-d, expressing our deeply-felt faith. This is the very song of life. As the great Chassidic Master, the Tzemach Tzedek, said:

If you only knew the power of verses of *Tehillim* and their effect in the highest heavens, you would recite them constantly. Know that the chapters of *Tehillim* shatter all barriers, they ascend higher and still higher with no interference; they prostrate themselves in supplication before the Master of the Universe, and they effect and accomplish with kindness and compassion.¹¹

Many are the stories to illustrate this point. For example:

7. A Baal Shem Tov Story (Optional)

The Baal Shem Tov displayed a remarkable affection for simple pious folk. This was widely known and was a major force in teaching the Jewish scholars and rabbis at the time of the preciousness of each soul.

¹¹ Hayom Yom, Shevat 24 (free translation by Yitschak Meir Kagan, Kehot Publishing Society).

However, some of his great disciples did not fully understand the Baal Shem Tov's approach. True, the Baal Shem Tov frequently sent them to simple Jews to learn from them traits like sincerity, trust in G-d, love of Israel and the like, still they could not fully appreciate his great regard for ordinary people, and certainly could not quite emulate his profound love for them.

It was the practice that guests were invited to eat the first and third meals of the Shabbat at the Baal Shem Tov's table, but the second meal was reserved only for the disciples, the Sacred Fellowship, when guests were not admitted.

One summer, between 1753 and 1755 – when the Sacred Fellowship included brilliant and renowned men like the Maggid of Mezeritch and the Rov of Polna – an incident occurred that thoroughly shook up the disciples.

A large number of guests came that Shabbat, including many seemingly undistinguished people like farmers, artisans, cobblers, tailors, vintners, gardeners, stockmen and small merchants. At the Friday evening meal, the Baal Shem Tov showed extraordinary affection for these people. He poured the remains of his *Kiddush* wine into the cup of one; to another he gave his own cup; he gave pieces of the loaves of his bread to several; to others he gave meat and fish from his portion. He showed other gestures of friendship and regard for these guests, leaving his disciples perplexed.

The guests knew that they could not attend the second Shabbat meal which was reserved for the inner group of disciples, so after their own repast, they assembled in the Baal Shem Tov's synagogue and started reciting *Tehillim*.

When the Baal Shem Tov sat at the table for the second meal, he arranged the disciples in a deliberate order, characteristic of the meticulous system governing everything he did. He delivered a complicated Torah discourse which was followed by song. The disciples were very pleased, filled with a sense of gratitude and happiness for G-d's favor to them in granting them the privilege of being among the disciples of the holy Baal Shem Tov. It occurred to several of them how this second meal was so delightful, without the crowd of "simpletons"

who have no idea what the Master is saying. Why, they thought, does he display such special affection for these people?

These thoughts still flitted through their minds when the Baal Shem Tov's expression changed. He became serious, fell silent and after a long while began to speak: "Our sages observe that where the penitent (*baal teshuva*) stands even perfect saints (*tzaddik*) cannot."¹² He went on to explain that there are two paths in the service of G-d: the path of the saint and the path of the penitent. The service of simple people is similar to that of the penitent, for the simple person's humility mirrors the penitent's remorse and resolve.

When the Baal Shem Tov concluded, they resumed singing. Those disciples who had been questioning the Master's open affection for simple people, realized that he was aware of their thoughts. His exposition of the qualities of the simple folk, equating them with the superiority of the penitent over the saint, was obviously addressed to them.

Then he told them to close their eyes and place the right hand on the shoulder of the neighbor, so that all the disciples sitting around the table would be joined. Finally, he placed his right hand on the shoulder of the disciple to his right, and his left on the disciple sitting there, so that the circle was closed.

Suddenly the disciples heard songs, melodies, interlaced with moving pleas, touching the very soul. One voice sang, "O, Master of the world," and launched into a verse of *Tehillim*, "*The sayings of G-d are pure...*"¹³ Another sang: "Ay, Master of the World," followed by another verse, "*Test me G-d, prove me, purify my heart.*"¹⁴ A third introduced his verse with a spontaneous cry in Yiddish: "*Tatte! Be gracious to me; I trust in You and I shelter in the shadow of Your wings.*"¹⁵ A fourth voice: "*Ay gevalt sweet Father in heaven, Let G-d arise; His foes will scatter; His enemies will flee.*"¹⁶ Another voice was anguished. "Precious Father, A bird has a home;

¹² Berochos 34b.

¹³ Psalms 12:7.

¹⁴ Psalms 26:2.

¹⁵ Psalms 57:2.

¹⁶ Psalms 68:2.

a swallow a nest."¹⁷ Still another pleaded, "Beloved Father, *Bring us back, G-d who helps, erase your anger against us.*"¹⁸

Hearing these words of *Tehillim* the disciples began to tremble. Their eyes were still shut, but tears coursed down their cheeks. Their hearts melted by what they heard. Each of the disciples fervently wished that he could serve G-d in this heart-felt and holy manner.

The Baal Shem Tov removed his hands, breaking the circle, and the group no longer heard the *Tehillim*.

"When I heard the songs of *Tehillim*," the Maggid later told the Alter Rebbe, "my soul just spilled forth. I felt such a longing, such that I had never yet been privileged to feel. My shirt was soaked with the perspiration and tears of repentance coming from the inwardness and depths of the heart."

At the conclusion of the meal, the Baal Shem Tov told them, "The songs you heard before were the songs of the simple Jews saying *Tehillim* with sincerity, from the recesses of the heart and with complete faith.

Now, my pupils, think carefully on this. The body is not truth. Only the soul is truth, but even the soul is only part of the essence, and so it is called the 'edge of truth' (*sfas emes*). Yet, we are able to recognize truth and are affected deeply by truth. Consider then how G-d who is perfect truth regards the *Tehillim* of these simple people."¹⁹

8. Opera Singer (Story)

A great opera singer, who was known for his renditions from the classics, often ended his performance with a dramatic chant of Psalm 23. As the tenor began – "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want" – the crowd would listen attentively and then rise with thunderous applause, in appreciation of the singer's moving rendition.

¹⁷ Psalms 84:4.

¹⁸ Psalms 85:5.

¹⁹ Adapted from: <http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=15690&st=&pgnum=12>.

One night, right after the great tenor offered his customary recital of Psalm 23 and following the ovation, an old Yid in the audience spoke up. “Sir, would you mind, if I too could recite Psalm 23?”

The tenor was surprised by this unusual request. However, he invited the frail old man to come onto the stage to recite the psalm; curious to see what would happen.

Softly, the old man began his prayer, reciting the psalm as only a Jew can do. When he was finished, there was no applause. There was no standing ovation. All that could be heard was the sound of weeping. The audience had been so moved by his recitation that every eye was filled with tears.

Amazed by what had happened, the world-renowned tenor asked, “I don’t understand. I have been performing Psalm 23 for years. I have a lifetime of experience and training – but I have never been able to move an audience as you have tonight. I receive a thundering ovation. But never tears. Tell me, what is your secret?”

The tiny old man looked at the towering tenor and humbly replied in a thick Yiddish accent: “Vell my good sir, vayl you may know de psalm – I know de Shepherd.”

9. Psalms Daily (Practical Advice)

There is an age-old tradition to regularly read the Book of Psalms. As I mentioned earlier, going back for generations, our grandparents and their grandparents, continuously recited Psalms.

This was their secret song, expressing their innermost connection to the source of all life. To G-d Almighty.

It may be one of our best kept secrets for survival.

And this tradition goes back... to Jacob in our chapter.

Perhaps it’s time to reclaim this secret. Not perhaps, but certainly.

The Psalms have been divided into different segments for reading: daily, weekly, monthly, with special psalms recited for healing, for yahrzeits and so forth. There is also a custom to recite daily one's personal Psalm, the Psalm number corresponding to one's birthday plus one. For example, when someone turns 35 years old, they begin reciting Psalm 36, 50 years old, Psalm 51.

So here's a practical suggestion:

As we read about Jacob's recital of Psalms and how it helped him face his challenges and build his great family – it seems fitting that we, his children, should begin reciting *Tehillim* on a daily basis (if we don't do so already). There are a few ways to do so:

1. Say the daily portion every morning or each night (about five chapters each day) so that you complete the entire book of 150 psalms in a month's time.
2. If you cannot do the above, at least recite the chapter that corresponds to your present year of age.
3. When someone is unwell, recite Psalm 20.
4. When going into an important meeting, or something that brings you angst, recite Psalm 23.

As with our forefather Jacob, may the pure psalms we recite inspire us to sing the Songs of Ascent that will elevate all our challenges into one of Promised Land and the Final Redemption. Amen!

Shabbat Shalom!