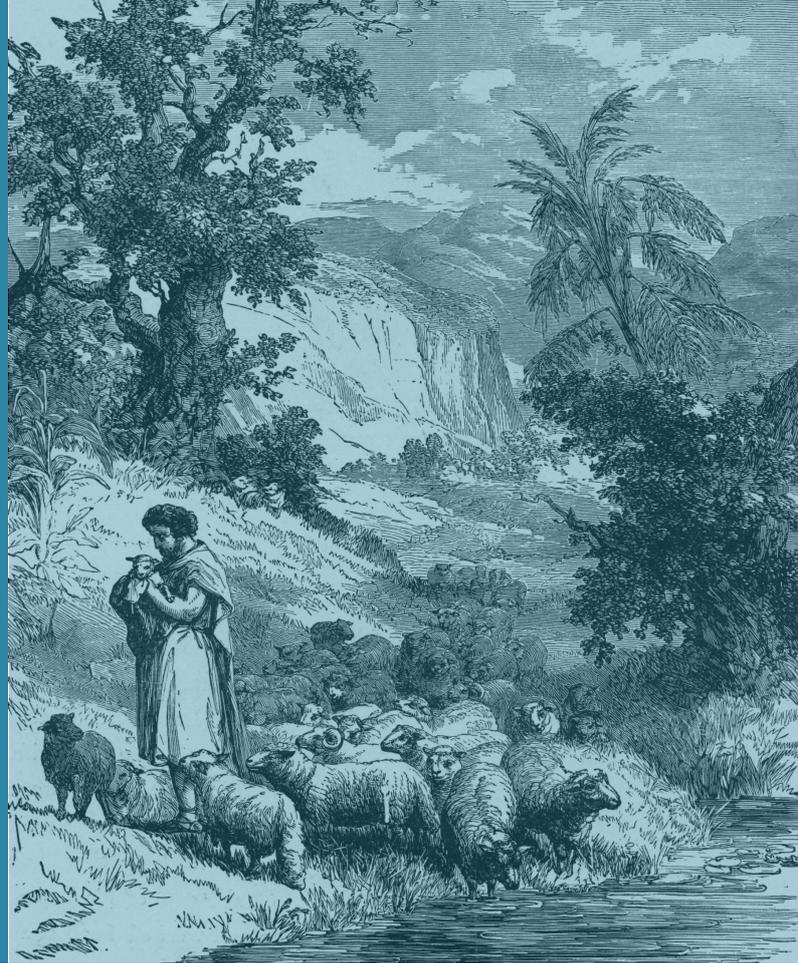


# Jacob, a Dweller in Tents

*Torah Portion November 18, 2017*



## Parashat Toldot

This Shabbat we will read and study the weekly Torah portion, "Parashat Toldot." The Torah portions from Genesis are rich in information and details. There is much to learn from these portions, especially from this week's.

Today I want to focus on Jacob's work ethic as well as a common question that arises in Jewish tradition, was he considered a yeshiva student?

This question causes us to ask ourselves the following, how much quality-time are we spending with God and what is our top priority - God or the world? Indeed, this is a thought-provoking portion that makes us reflect on our own relationship with the Almighty.

## A Dweller in Tents

Let's go back to the question of whether or not Jacob was a yeshiva student in his youth.

*Jacob and his brother Esau grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter- a man of the open country, while Jacob was content staying at home among the tents. - Genesis 25:27 [NIV]*

Many interpretations have been written in an attempt to understand the phrase, "to stay at home among the tents." A popular view on the matter claims that this phrase means, "sitting and learning Torah." Let's look at how the Jewish sages depict this:

***BUT JACOB WAS A PERFECT MAN DWELLING IN TENTS. "Dwelling in a tent" is not written in the passage, but rather "dwelling in tents." Jacob would go out from the academy (bet midrash) of Shem and enter the academy of Eber. He would go from the academy of Eber to the academy of Abraham. - Midrash Tanchuma Buber, Vayishlach 9:1***

Many consider "sitting in tents" to mean that our father Jacob was a wise yeshiva student. Hence the justification, for many in the orthodox community today, for excessive learning and prayer. This can come sometimes at the expense of manual labor, household income, and participation in the burden of national military service. This problem does not exist only in Judaism. In Christianity we are familiar with the concept of monks, nuns, and monasteries who follow suit in this ideology.

As believers, this issue is not foreign to us either. The ideal, as most of us see it (whether consciously or subconsciously), is to invest in faith, learning, and prayer. The ideal is that God takes first place in our lives.

Surprisingly, the Bible and New Testament focus primarily on how we treat our neighbors and whether or not we are doing so properly. Yes, God should be first and foremost; our duty is to worship and believe in one God - the God of Abraham and Jacob. But the kind of work that pleases God comes mainly in the form of how we treat others. In other words, we believe in God and want to serve Him, but how do we go about doing so? We can accomplish this by serving our neighbors out of our faith and love for God.

In Matthew 22 Yeshua was asked, "What is the greatest commandment?" Yeshua could have simply said, "Love the Lord your God," and finish with

that. However, Yeshua did not stop there. There's more: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

This commandment is not just about our personal relationship with God, even more so it's about our relationship with our neighbors. Yeshua taught us that even the commandments of the Torah are annulled when there's a person in distress. An example of this is found in Matthew 12, when Yeshua healed someone on the Sabbath. It exemplifies how our focus can not just be in one direction - upwards, towards God, but rather must be dispersed upwards and towards our environment. Our life challenge is to find the right balance, between the "vertical" and the "horizontal."

## Jacob: Scholar or Shepherd?

Let's go back to Jacob's story. Are there other ways to understand the phrase, "to stay at home among the tents"? Yes, in fact a similar verse is found in an earlier chapter,

*Adah gave birth to Jabel; he was the father of those who live in tents and raise livestock. – Genesis 4:20 [NIV]*

A "dweller in tents" is also known as a shepherd. Assuming that Jacob learned from his forefathers, what exactly did he study? What was Jacob's main occupation during the first years of his life? Was he mainly studying the Torah and seeking God? Or was he mainly engaged in manual labor?

The answer is revealed to us in the course of events and we must look at Jacob's actions as they appear in the following passages. How did he behave, as someone who was used to manual labor or as a scholar?

As soon as he arrived in Harran, Jacob encountered local shepherds with flocks of sheep lying near a well. Jacob immediately spoke to the shepherds,

*“Look,” he said, “the sun is still high; it is not time for the flocks to be gathered. Water the sheep and take them back to pasture.” – Genesis 29:7 [NIV]*

"What are you doing here? Why are you wasting time? Go shepherd the flock." Jacob is revealed as a person with a high work ethic who preaches morality, even to strangers.

Jacob is not satisfied with mere words, he is also a man of action, as seen in the following verse:

*When Jacob saw Rachel, daughter of his uncle Laban, and Laban's sheep, he went over and rolled the stone away from the mouth of the well and watered his uncle's sheep. – Genesis 29:10 [NIV]*

Jacob is depicted as having above-average physical strength as well as being skilled in watering flocks. The shepherds justified their idleness as waiting for all the shepherds to come, so they could roll the stone away from the mouth of the well together.

After the encounter with Rachel and the rest of his relatives, it is written,

*Then Laban said to him, "You are my own flesh and blood." After Jacob had stayed with him for a whole month... – Genesis 29:14 [NIV]*

What did Jacob do for the first month he was in Laban's home? Did Jacob sit and study Torah? Did Jacob seek the answer to all of his questions: What does God want from me? Why am I in Harran? Why did I get into this trouble? What is my life's purpose? The next verse answers this clearly,

*Laban said to him, "Just because you are a relative of mine, should you work for me for nothing? Tell me what your wages should be." – Genesis 29:15 [NIV]*

The answer is that Jacob did not rest for a moment. Instead he diligently shepherded Laban's flocks. Laban sees Jacob's work and offers him a job. Why did he decide to do this? He witnessed Jacob's work ethic and he wanted him for himself, before his competitors would offer Jacob a job and take away his hard worker.

Jacob remained and faithfully worked for Laban for 20 years. During those years, Laban cheated Jacob on several occasions. Jacob labored in exchange for his marriage to Rachel, and instead of Rachel he received her sister Leah. Even more so, he had to work seven more years in order to finally receive Rachel as his bride. After that, Jacob continued to work for another

six years.

Jacob shepherded Laban's flock with diligence and persistence; he was faithful to his work even under difficult conditions. We read about this in the challenging dialogue that Jacob had with Laban.

*“I have been with you for twenty years now. Your sheep and goats have not miscarried, nor have I eaten rams from your flocks. I did not bring you animals torn by wild beasts; I bore the loss myself. And you demanded payment from me for whatever was stolen by day or night. This was my situation: The heat consumed me in the daytime and the cold at night, and sleep fled from my eyes.” – Genesis 31:38–40 [NIV]*

Jacob pointed out to Laban just as the Torah points out to us, that God protected and preserved Jacob throughout all those years due to his incredible work ethic:

*“...But God has seen my hardship and the toil of my hands, and last night he rebuked you.” – Genesis 31:42b [NIV]*

## In Conclusion

The Jewish sages learned an important lesson that I think we should learn and apply in our own lives:

*From this episode we learn that the merit acquired from labor may be helpful even when the influence of one's ancestors is not. – Midrash Tanchuma, Vayetzei 13:1*

The essence of this quote is that a person should not say, "I can eat, drink, and be merry, and not bother myself with work and I will still receive mercy from heaven."

It is the opposite, a person must work with both his hands, and afterwards God will send him his blessings.

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