

Beware of Idolatry, Poverty and Illness (Vayetze)

*Idolatry happens when we take good things and make them ultimate things. -
Timothy Keller*

Our forefather Jacob is on the run. He has been exiled from his birthplace in Israel, he is fearful of his brother's murderous intentions, and is heading to his uncle, Lavan, a notorious swindler. On his first night on the road Jacob has a prophetic dream and God addresses him, blesses him and reassures him. (Recap of Genesis 28).

In the morning, Jacob pronounces a solemn vow, which at first reading is strange (Genesis 28:20):

"If God will be with me, and protects me on this road that I travel, and gives me bread to eat and clothing to wear, and I will return in peace to my father's house and God will be for me to a God."

Rabbi Ovadia Sforno (1475-1549) seems to indicate that Jacob's vow is not so much conditional but is rather a more detailed request and affirmation of God's blessing to him. It should not be understood in a business sense that if God doesn't deliver than Jacob will not accept God. Rather Jacob is praying to God for the above-mentioned requests, as these are the minimal conditions for Jacob to be able to worship God properly.

Sforno breaks down Jacob's requests into three specific groupings that are critical for a person's success and states as follows, by quoting the Babylonian Talmud in Tractate Eruvin 41b:

*"These things deprive a man of his senses and of knowledge of his Creator...
foreigners, an evil spirit, and oppressive poverty."*

Sforno then links the request in Jacob's vow to these three areas:

"protects me" - from foreigners (idolaters)

"bread" - saves from oppressive poverty

"peace" - saves from illness that is related to an evil spirit

Jacob understood very well the precarious situation he was in, as well as the danger he was heading into. He translated God's blessings to him, into near-term specific requests in order that he could continue to fulfill the mission God had outlined for him.

Jacob needed divine assistance to protect him from the idolatrous influences of his day. He required God's hand to save him from poverty as well as from the illness of an evil spirit. With these blessings in hand, Jacob would have a solid foundation for embarking on his mission and giving birth to the people who would become the Children of Israel.

May Jacob's vow apply in full force to his modern-day progeny. May we be saved from foreign influences, poverty, illness and all evil. May we merit that "God will be for me to a God."

Shabbat Shalom,

Ben-Tzion

Dedication

To the opening of Israel's first wave energy project:

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