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A Bible Story, 1984.

#### A Bible Story Daniel Jeremy Silver December 2, 1984

I have never quite understood what the term revelation includes, but it certainly includes the impressive historic fact that for at least the last two thousand years Jews have read from the Torah following a fixed annual cycle and found in that portion insight relevant to their particular situation. Jewish life has unfolded its wisdom and developed its tradition through the careful, thorough investigation of Scripture. The emphasis here is on careful and thorough. A young student in my class at the university told me excitedly several weeks ago that she had just finished reading the Bible. I am always impressed by those who can complete a piece of work, but I had to confess to her that I had never read the Bible. I have studied the Bible. I've written books and articles about Biblical ideas and themes, but I've not read the Bible through. You can begin in Genesis and speed read to Chronicles, but you will not have gained much from this exercise. The Bible is to be pondered. Its texts are to be savored. I've spent several rewarding weeks or months investigating a simple story, and I'd like to investigate on such incidents with you this morning.

I'll begin by telling you of a man you probably never heard of. His name was Daniel Bomberg. He was not a Jew. Bomberg lived in Venice at the end of the 15th and well into the 16th centuries.

Venice in his day had a sizeable Jewish community, swollen recently by exiles who had been ordered out of Spain in 1492 and Portugal in 1498. Venice's non-Jewish community included a number of Renaissance scholars, men who were dedicated to the classics and who were eager to read these classics in their original languages. They wanted to go behind the Latin of the translations by churchmen to the original Greek of Homer, Plato and Aristotle and to get behind the Latin of the Jerome's Vulgate translation of the Bible to the Hebrew original.

The Bible Gutenberg printed in 1451, the first printed Bible was the Vulgate, a Latin translation, the translation used by the Roman Church. Some thirty years later, in 1488, Gerson Soncino published in Venice the first printed Hebrew

Bible. In 1516 our friend, Daniel Bomberg, printed the first rabbinic Bible, the text of Hebrew Bible with its interpretations as developed by the Jewish tradition. Bomberg's Bible includes, besides the Hebrew text, the Aramaic translation which we call the Targum and the great medieval Hebrew commentaries of Rashi, Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac of Troy, Radak, Rabbi David Kimhi and others. The extent of his accomplishment is still a matter of marvel. He had to find and fix correct xts for those commentaries and to cut and set the type and procf read the final product which ran to four volumes.

Why was a Catholic printer the first to accomplish this task? Jewish life in the late 15th and early 16th centuries was unsettled. Jews were periodically exiled and their property repeatedly expropriated. A press was an expensive investment in non-portable machinery which could be taken away at will. How did a Catholic printer accomplish all this? He hired Jewish scholars to determine the correct text, set type, proof read and edit. Printing was actually the first cooperative Jewish-non-Jewish enterprise. Bcmberg's rabbinic Bible was of such fine quality that it became the standard rabbinic text used almost our century.

Bumberg did intrude one new Jewish element into his work: the division of the text into chapters. The older manuscript writers of the rabbinic tradition simply wrote out the Hebrew line after line without indicating any division between chapters. There was no such thing as a book title in Torah scroll. The text simply runs on with the scribe occasionally leaving a space or two indicate that he believed that a particular paragraph ended here or an empty line or two to indicate the beginning of a new book. This was the way of most Middle Eastern scribes. They had no reason to divide scrolls by chapters. Standardization was not a passion. The Torah was known by heart. The scroll was only an aide memoire. Medieval Jews knew a division of Scripture by Pashiyot, essentially the divisions of text designed for synagogue reading at a particular time. These divisions were known but not noted in many manuscripts. They were

known by a name taken from a key word in the opening sentence. The Book of Genesis, the first <u>Parasha</u>, is called Bereshit. The Hebrew sentence begins: "bereshit para elohim: in the beginning God created. The portion that I read to you this morning is called <u>V'yatzei</u>. The opening sentence reads: <u>v'yaitzei</u> <u>Ya'akov mi-Beershevu</u>", and Jacob went out from Beresheba. When someone quoted from <u>Va'yeitzet</u>, everyone knew what texts he was referring to.

After Bomberg introduced this by chapters, it became the standard of all later Bible printing. It facilitated citation. Jewish and Christian scholars were able to understand each other. Sixty years later, in a second edition, Bomberg introduced the numbering of verses and that form, too, became standard.

To look at the Torah by <u>Parasha</u> and <u>Posuk</u> (verse) is to begin to look at the Bible in a useful way. I want to investigate with you the first twelve verses of this week's <u>Parasha</u> as they are translated in the new Jewish Publication Society version:

Jacob left Bersheba and he set out for Haran. He came upon a certain place and stopped there for the night for the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of that place, he put it under his head and laid down in that place. He had a dream. A stairway was set on the ground and its top reached to the sky and angels of God were going up and going down on it. And the Lord was standing beside him and He said, I am the Lord, the God of your fathers, Abraham, and the God of Isaac. The ground on which you are lying I will give to you and to your offspring. Your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth. You shall' spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south and all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you and your descendants. Remember, I am with you, I will protect you wherever you will go and will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done that which I have promised you. Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, surely, the Lord is present in this place and I did not know it. Shaken, he said, how awesome is this place; this is none other than the abode of God and that is the gateway to Heaven.

Early in the morning Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He named that site Beth El, previously the name of the city had been Luze. Jacob then made a vow, saying, if God remained with me, if He protects me on this journey that I am making and gives me bread to eat and clothing to wear and if I return safe to my father's house the Lord shall be my God. And this stone which I have set up as a pillar shall be God's abode and all that you give me I will set aside a tithe for you.

A modern scholar who looks at this text recognizes immediately that it represents a familiar, West Asian literary type known as a shrine legend. Such stories were designed to show a particular location was a sacred place. Its sacredness grew out of the fact that a meeting of consequence between a leader and the God had taken place here. Where God had been, he or she could be expected again. Therefore, this was an auspicious place to offer prayer and sacrifice and be certain that one's devotion and needs were noted in the heavens.

Luz had been an ordinary town before becoming Beit El, the house of God, a sacred place. This story explains when Luz became house of God. This had transpired when the patriarched sensed in a dream the presence of God and heard God promise him protection on his journey and this land which He had already promised to Abraham.

This shrine legend is comparable to others popular in the ancient Middle East, but for all this, this story reflects the specialness of the Hebrew tradition. The usual shrine legend described a moment in which a god defeated some other god at this particular place. Usually the victorious god was said to have built here the first altar. In our shrine legend it is Jacob, not God, who built the altar and it is God who manifests Himself here, not to another god but to the patriarch. If we define myths as stories about the activities of the gods, there is no myth in the Bible. To be sure, God controls history,

that in the Bible people act as people do. The Biblical personages remain people with recognizable feelings, emotions and hopes and their feelings are an essential part of the story. The Bible can be read as a record of the activities of God and is as a study of the nature of God, but, and this is also part of the story, it is a record of how human beings react to specific and recognized situations. If the Bible were only sacred history, we would long since have lost interest. God is God and we are not God. It is the humanity of the Biblical literary tradition which has insured its immortality.

Jacob and Esau were twins. Esau was the elder. The two boys were opposites. Esau was a physical type, an outdoor man's man. Jacob preferred his mother's text. He was a child who delighted to play indoors and to be with adults. Esau is straightforward and fairly simple. Jacob is wiley. Under his mother's influence he defrauds Esau of the birthright which by Israelite law belongs to the elder. His brother is understandably angry. His scheme is successful, but he wins only to lose. He intends to give him a good thrashing. We meet the fleeing Jacob. He has literally run away. To be alone in the wilderness is always dangerous. There are wild animals and you are on your own. In the ancient world to be alone and without the support of your clan or family was to be in mortal danger. You were exposed. There was no one to defend you.

Our children sometime come to us and say, 'I want to travel. I'd like to move about the country or visit Europe.' If they have the time and we have the means we encourage them to do so, and neither of us think that they are necessarily endangering themselves. We take for granted the existence of organized societies and safety forces. In the ancient world the minute you left the protection of your clan you were fair game. No one traveled without a retinue of armed supporters. Have you ever wondered why the nomadic tribes who followed their herds from one pasture to another move as a tribal unit? Their world had no protection save their own strength. If the men were to leave the women and

children behind, these would have been massacred or taken as slaves by the time they returned. A person who left his family's protection was in mortal danger.

Jacob, on this dangerous and lonely journey, knew that he was exposed and he must have been riddled with anxiety. One is tempted to analogize the situation. A young person, to leave the protection of home and family, knowing that there is no alternative but recognizing that he is in a cold and cruel world. Freudian thinking affects all of us and we assume we understand Jacob's dream. Exposed and frightened, we tend to project out, conjure up, the support we need. God or an ideology or an amulet will protect us on the way. A Freudian, reading of this text, would describe Jacob's dream as his way of convincing himself that he was no longer. "Truly God is in this place and I knew it not."

Abraham Lincoln is said to have \_ erved that he found himself down on his kneews when he didn't know where else to go. Jacob went on his knees. He was flat on his back with his head on a stone, but no matter. He was seeking a sense of protection and he has this wonderfully reassuring dream in which he hears God say, "I will protect you, I will be with you wherever you go. I will bring you back to this land. You need not fear." In many ways the ultimate importance of any religious tradition is that it is portable, that we carry it with us so that when the inevitable moment comes and we must leave the womb of childhood and family, we are not alone. We carry with us the \_xperiences and teachings of our family world and these can and are reinforced whenever we enter a synagogue. Our religious conditioning is the most effective antidote to what the philosophers call existential loneliness, that feeling that life is spinning away from us and that we have nothing and no one to hold on to. In this sense our story refracts experiences which we can easily understand.

Look for a moment at the dream itself. In his Jacob sees a great ladder reaching to the heavens. He sees angels climbing up and climbing down upon it. He calls its top "the gate of heaven." Behind this dream we recognize the image of the great Babylonian Temple towers, the ziggurats, great step towers

topped by a temple which, not incidentally, was often called Sha'ar Shamayin, the Gate of Heaven. Asians offered their sacrifices in these pyramid top temples where they felt close to God, but the dream is not simply a vision of Babylonian Temple architecture with priests bustling up and down the steps cut in the pyramid front.

The rabbis used this story to explain Judaism's unique view of the mystical experience. In many another tradition religious ecstasy is described as the soul leaving the body and ascending to heaven where it becomes one with God. In such tradition there is usually a heavy emphasis on monasticism and denial and freeing the soul from the prison of the flesh. The religious experience is designed to help to leave the body and ascend to God. In our tradition, using this particular text as a symbol of what the religious experience is really involved with, the rabbis insisted that the body and the soul are one and that the religious experience represented hopes and our prayers reaching up to God, but not actual part of our being. Jacob does not climb the ladder. He remains earthbound. Judaism encourages religious experience, a special awareness of the beauty of the universe or of the presence of God, but discourages people from believing that they could become one with God. God cannot manifest himself in man. Man cannot become one with God. Our work is e and the way of encouraging religious experience does not lie in denial or a life of prayer apart from family and community but in carrying out one's ethical and spiritual duties within the context of the everyday.

There's another interesting lesson here. Most people who look at religious folk assume that because they are religious they have no doubts, that they know with unshakable certainty that God is, that God rewards, that God protects, that our prayers are answered. Look again at our text. Jacob is anxious and worried. God appears and tells him, 'don't worry, I am with you, I will protect you, I will return here with you.' What better assurance could anyone want? Jacob

awakens from his dream and he acts like a confident, reassured man. he dedicates this place to God. He changes its name to Beth El. He builds an altar and anoints it and he offers a vow to God. The man of confident certainty - but if we look closely at his vow it's an iffy oath. "If you will be with me; If you will guard me; If you will bring me back," then I give to this shrine a tithe of all that I own. God has spoken to Jacob and Jacob is still not completely convinced.

If faith did not involve a leap beyond experience, common sense would make communicants out of all of us. People would naturally do that which is clearly to their advantage. If it is to their advantage to pray for security or happiness, pray they will. If religious devotion is manifestly useful as a commitment, these seats would be filled week in, week out. But religious commitment always transcends. There is no way of knowing when God cares or prayers are answered. Indeed, our experiences inevitably raise questions about the religious affirmations. If God cares, why is there so much hurt and pain in life? One of the great things about oru Bible is that it admits doubt. The basic Biblical affirmation is that if you are willing and obedient, if you do what is right, things will go right with you. The Bible contains the covenant and Book of Job. Righteousness should be rewarded, but here is a righteous man who is afflicted. The Bible contains affirmation and doubts which experiences raise. Any and every religious life contains affirmation and experience. Jacob has heard God. He is not quite sure. Religion's commitment cannot deny reality. We speak prayers and many times the prayers are not answered. Human beings are created in the image of God and yet often act like animals.

A religious person affirms, he affirms life's possibility, but he does not deny his experiences and so we always experience the kind of tension we see in Jacob's life. I believe, yet. . . No one, no saint, no religious figure is immune to doubt or even to moments of denial. No one's faith is utterly and always constant. What can be constant is the willingness to come back again,

again and again to the religious experience, to the religious institution, to the traditions, and expose one's self again to them, to its vision and affirmations.

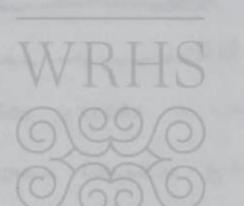
The rabbis delighted to explore the image of the ladder in Jacob's dream with the angels descending and ascending. They found here a statement of the vicissitudes of life. At times we ascend, at times things go well for us and times are good. Inevitably, these are followed by times of bad luck, illness, loss, financial reversal. Never take success and health for granted and never believe that there is no hope. The angels ascend and descend. What is now will not be tomorrow, and what will be tomorrow will not take place in the next day.

Pick up Genesis chapter 28. In a Torah scroll you will find much of interest. This story and the rest of this week's <u>parash</u>, for instance, are written in the Torah, written without a break in the text. There is no space between sentences, paragraphs or chapters. This <u>parasha</u> begins with Jacob fleeing from Esau. In it we follow Jacob's stay with his uncle in Haran where he falls in love with Rachel, works for her for seven years and is married to Leah. His father-in-law tricks him because he cannot allow his younger daughter to marry before the older. Jacob then works an additional seven years for the woman of his dreams. During these fourteen years of responsibility and difficult living, when he is tricked as he tricked another, he learns a good bit about responsibility and maturity. The <u>parasha</u> ends as Jacob prepares to return to his home in the Holy Land. It begins with exile and ends with return. The rabbis used the symmetry of this <u>parasha</u> as a statement of their Zionism. This people may leave the land but they will return and until they return their lives are not complete.

They add that even when Jacob was away from the land God was with him.

In the encient world the high god of a people held power only within their land. Beyond their land another god held sway. When you went from one terri-

tory for another you began to worship the gods of the other places. Our story makes it clear the God is the God whose power reaches to all parts of the earth. God tells Jacob: "I will be with you, I will protect you wherever you go." God's protection is with Israel in Israel and in the diaspora. And so, here in a simple story, which I'm sure my student at the university read in three and a half seconds, are lessons which I have hardly begun to lay before you, lessons which teach of faith and the nature of God, the reassurance of faith, of the vicissitudes of life and of the meaning of the covenant.



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Sunday December 2, 1984

## Those who passed away this week

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## YOUR TEMPLE CALENDAR — Clip and Save

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SUN	MON	TUES	WED	THURS	FRI	SAT
SERVICE 10:30 a.m. The Temple Branch Rabbi Daniel Jeremy Silver will speak on RELIGION AND POLITICS IN ISRAEL No Religious School	26	TWA Activities 10:00 a.m Branch  Fellowship & Study Group Rabbi David Sandmel 10:30 a.m Branch	28	29	Service - 5:30 p.m. The Temple Chapel	Shabbat Service 9:00 a.m.  Bat Mitzvah STACEY JOHNSON 11:00 a.m. The Temple Chapel  QUINT TEMPLE The Main Temple
SERVICE 10:30 a.m. The Temple Branch Rabbi Daniel Jeremy Silver will speak on A BIBLE STORY  Mavo Program for Bar/Bat Candidates 12:30 - 4:00 p.m. Branch	3	Special Tuesday TWA Activities 10:00 a.m Branch  Fellowship & Study Group Rabbi David Sandmel 10:30 a.m Branch  TYA Board Meeting 8:00 p.m.	HS N	RICAN (WISH C H V E S	Service - 5:30 p.m. The Temple Chapel FIRST FRIDAY Douglas A. Fraser 8:15 p.m Branch	Shabbat Service 9:00 a.m.
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SERVICE 10:30 a.m. The Temple Branch Rabbi Daniel Jeremy Silver will speak  TYA Chaunkah Luncheon 12:30 - Branch	17	TWA Activities 10:00 a.m Branch  Fellowship & Study Group Rabbi David Sandmel 10:30 a.m.	TMC Board Meeting 8:00 p.m Branch	20	Service - 5:30 p.m. The Temple Chapel THIRD FRIDAY 7:45 p.m Branch	Shabbat Service 9t00 a.m.  Bat Mitzvah LAURA STERNHEIMER 11:00 a.m. The Temple Chapel
		First Candle of Chanukah	Second Candle of Chanukah	Third Candle of Chanukah	Fourth Candle of Chanukah	Fifth Candle of Chanukah

Friday Evening Service - 5:30 - 6:10 — The Temple Chapel Sabbath Service - 9:00 a.m. — The Branch

A BIBLE STORY

will sbeak on

DANIEL JEREMY SILVER

December 2, 1984 10:30 a.m. The Temple Branch MELIGION AND POLITICS
IN ISRAEL

DANIEL JEREMY SILVER

November 25, 1984 10:30 a.m. The Temple Branch

SUNDAY MORNING SERVICES

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# WRHS

# FIRST FRIDAY

## OUR 12 TH ANNIVERSARY YEAR

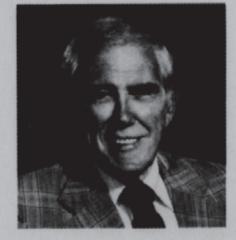
8:15 P.M.— THE TEMPLE BRANCH. ELLEN BONNIE MANDEL AUDITORIUM.

Kiddush and Candle Lighting.

December 7, 1984

DOUGLAS A. FRASER Labor and Management: Can They Cooperate?

\* Douglas Fraser, a former president of The United Auto Workers is a Vicepresident of the AFL-CIO and a noted labor leader.



- \* As a member of various national and international trade commissions and corporate Boards of directors, Douglas Fraser has broken new ground in union-management relations.
- \* There will be time for questions. The evening will conclude with an Oneg Shabbat. Reservations may be made by calling The Temple Branch, 831-3233.