

Jacob's Journey to Bethel

35: 1-8

DIG: What memories or feelings would Jacob associate with Bethel (see 28:10-22)? What finally made Jacob realize that he needed to be a spiritual leader to his family?

REFLECT: Idolatry is substituting what is created for the Creator, and quite frankly idolatry dominates our culture. Is there anything that you need to bury and leave behind to worship God? Do you need to get back to your Bethel to be renewed? Where has God met you in times of stress? How is your fellowship with God? What message do you need to hear from Him right now?

Jacob (Hebrew: Ya'akov) had allowed **twenty years (31:38)** to pass since his return from Haran, without making good on the vow he had made at **Bethel** when fleeing from Esau (28:20). Then God said to Jacob, "Go up to Bethel and settle there until you fulfill your vow." **The rabbis teach that because Jacob had delayed going up to Bethel, he was punished by what had happened to Dinah.** Bethel was about fifteen miles south of Shechem, but its elevation was a thousand feet higher. It is referenced much like **Jerusalem** in the B'rit Chadashah. Because its elevation is two thousand five hundred feet above sea level, no matter the direction of your approach, the Bible always says: **go up to Jerusalem**, and **Bethel** is twelve miles north of **Jerusalem**.

Although **Bethel** was a very special place for **Jacob**, he had evidently never returned there after coming back from Haran. And what makes it even stranger is that **Bethel** is located almost directly between Shechem and Hebron where Isaac lived. We know that **Jacob** visited his father, so it almost seems that he had deliberately avoided **Bethel**. It could be that he knew he had not kept the promise he had made to **God** at **Bethel** about **twenty years** before (28:10-22). So once he got there, he was to **build an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you were fleeing from your brother Esau (35:1)**. This is the fourth divine revelation that **God** had given to **Jacob**. **God** wanted **Jacob** to **settle there because the goal was fellowship. And fellowship with God should be our number one goal also.**

However, without even realizing it, **Jacob's** family had been spiritually devastated by living for ten years in the Canaanite city of Shechem. *Above all this was true of his children, who were especially vulnerable during their teenage years. So it is with our children today. Even if we bring them to church or temple every week, the life of worldliness during six days is far too powerful for anything that happens during the seventh day to counteract it.* Then to make things worse, Dinah was raped, the men of Shechem were slaughtered and the town looted. This had brought more **foreign gods** into his household. If **God** was going to bless them again, if they were going to have a fresh start, then **the foreign gods** must go.

So Jacob did what he should have done long ago. He regained the spiritual leadership of his household and said to all who were with him from the slaughter of Shechem: **Get rid of the foreign gods you have with you and purify yourselves and change your clothes (35:2)**. This was considered necessary in preparing to meet ADONAI. The purifying included getting rid of the foreign gods that Rachel had stolen from her father Laban. Jacob's love for her had led him to tolerate what he knew was wrong. Washing and changing their clothes symbolized the pure worship of God. Then Ya'akov said: **Come, let us go up to Bethel, where I will build an altar to God, who answered me in the day of my distress over both Esau and Laban, and who has been with me wherever I have gone (35:3)**. Because they realized that they were in serious danger of attack from other Canaanite cities, they were afraid, and surrendered to Jacob's commands. *Likewise, we must surrender to God before He can bless us. There are some things that we must bury and leave behind because they cannot possibly be devoted to the service of God.*

The change in Jacob was dramatic. In the previous chapter he was weak and spiritually impotent. But now even his savage sons, who had once lost respect for him and went their own way, now follow him and accept his position without question. Even they could not help being impressed with the fact that their father was back on the right path with God.

So they gave Jacob all the foreign gods they had and the rings in their ears, which were used for magical purposes (Hosea 2:13), and Jacob buried them under the oak at Shechem (35:4). This may have been the same great oak under which his grandfather Abraham had pitched his tent when he arrived at Shechem (12:6). Later, under the Torah, the Israelites were instructed to destroy such objects (Deuteronomy 7:5 and 25). Notice they didn't sell their foreign gods to feed the poor. They got rid of them. Scripture seems to indicate that you can't reroute the things of Satan and use them for the service of God. You need to get rid of them (Acts 19:19). We need to remember that anything that hinders us on our spiritual journey is useless, no matter how valuable it appears to the world (Hebrews 12:1).⁵³³ Then after purifying themselves, they set out.

All his life Jacob has had to contend with his own fears: the fear of God (28:17), the fear of Laban (31:31), and the fear of Esav (32:7 and 11). Nobody had been in fear of him. Angry, yes; fearful, no. But as Ya'akov traveled from Shechem to Bethel, all that changed. The terror of God fell upon the towns all around them so that no one pursued them (35:5). What prevented them from being pursued was not the terror of Jacob's sons, but the supernatural terror of God. In some way, God prevented them from coming after Ya'akov and his family for revenge. Ya'akov and all the people with him arrived safely at Luz (that is, Bethel) in the land of Canaan (35:6). It is significant that Luz is mentioned here because it means *separation*, while Bethel, its new name, means *the House of God*. Jacob was gaining a new chance to be separate from the world, and in leaving Shechem he was entering God's house.

Having safely arrived, **Jacob built an altar, and he renamed the place El Bethel, meaning *the God of the House of God*, because it was there that God revealed himself to him when he was fleeing from his brother Esau (35:7).** Here in the Hebrew text we have another implication of the plurality in the Godhead in **Genesis**. The Hebrew word for **Elohim** is a plural noun. When the word **Elohim** is used of pagan gods, then the adjective or verb that goes with it is also in the plural. But when **Elohim** is used of the one true **God**, then the adjective or verb is normally in the singular. However, there are exceptions. Sometimes the plurality of **the Godhead** is revealed because the adjective or verb as it relates to **Elohim** is also in the plural, and here is a good example because in Hebrew the word **revealed** is plural. The plural verb is used with the plural noun. Therefore, literally it means, *the Gods they revealed themselves to him*. This clearly points to a plurality in **the Godhead**. **The rabbis, who did not believe in the plurality of the Godhead, rationalized this verse by saying that the word God in this verse refers to angels.**

At that time a very precious link to the past was broken, **Deborah, Rebekah's nurse (24:59), died and was buried under the oak below Bethel.** She would have been about one hundred and eighty years old at that time. Her family loved her so the oak under which she was buried was renamed **Allon Bacuth**, meaning *the oak of weeping (35:8)*. **Jacob** had known **Deborah** all his life. She had come with **Rebekah** from Mesopotamia when **Rebekah** had left to marry **Isaac (24:59)**, and no doubt had cared for **Jacob** from the time he was born. She had not, of course, accompanied him when he fled from Esau to Haran, but she, as well as **Rebekah** must have grieved to see him go. We don't know when she rejoined **Ya'akov**, but it was probably on the occasion of one of his visits to Isaac while living at Shechem. In fact, her presence in **Jacob's** household is the reason we know that he did visit his father during those years.

In addition, the fact that she was now with **Ya'akov** was proof that **Rebekah herself** had died. She never saw her son again after sending him off to her brother **Laban**. When **Jacob** returned to Hebron and found that his mother had died, and **Deborah** really wasn't needed any longer in his father's home, he probably urged her to come and live with his own family. She might have served as some sort of "senior advisor" to his other servants, as well as "grandmother" to his own children. It must have grieved her greatly to see the things that took place at Shechem. In addition to that burden, the arduous trip up to **Bethel** was too much for her and she died.⁵³⁴