

Date: 5 Kislev 5786 (November 25, 2025)

Torah Portion: Vayetze

Topic: The Four Sins

As it is written (Gen. 28:20–21): “If YHWH will be with me, will guard me on this way that I am going, will give me bread to eat and clothes to wear, and if I return in peace to my father’s house, then YHWH will be an Elohim to me.” In this vow, Ya’akov invokes Divine assistance across several domains. The Sages understood his request as a plea for protection from various sins, though they differed in interpreting how each sin is alluded to in his words.

R. Abahu said: “If YHWH will be with me, will guard me on this way (בַּדֶּרֶךְ, *ba-derekh*) that I am going”—this refers to protection from the sin of slander. The Midrash does not imply that someone of Ya’akov’s spiritual stature would commit overt slander. Rather, he feared stumbling into a more subtle form of the transgression known as *avak lashon hara* (lit., “the dust of slander”). The Gemara (Bava Batra 165a) asserts that all are susceptible to this sin, as it is written (Jer. 9:2): “They draw (וַיִּדְרֹכּוּ, *va-yadrekhu*) their tongues, [but] their bow is falsehood.”

“[Who] will give me bread to eat”—this alludes to protection from the sin of illicit relations. There was no real concern that Ya’akov would engage in actual prohibited illicit relationship. Rather, this request pertains to behaviors that, while not overtly sinful, are associated with forbidden relationships—such as inappropriate gazing, immodest social interaction, and other potentially compromising conduct. As it is stated (Gen. 39:6): “He left all that he had in Yosef’s custody, and with him present he concerned himself with nothing except for the bread he ate”—a phrase understood by the Sages as a euphemism for cohabitation, specifically with Potiphar’s wife. Similarly, Ya’akov’s request for “bread to eat” is interpreted as a reference to marriage, which, in its sanctified form, protects against promiscuity and moral transgression. “And I return in peace to my father’s house”—this refers to protection from the sin of murder. The phrase “in peace” implies innocence of bloodshed. *Matnos Kehunah* amends the text to include an explanatory note that “peace” appears in Scripture as the opposite of violence, citing Psalms 120:7: “I am peace; but when I speak, they are for war.” Again, Ya’akov was not concerned with literal murder, but with behaviors the Sages regarded as equivalent to it—such as public humiliation, which causes one’s face to pale, metaphorically “shedding blood.”

“And YHWH will be an Elohim to me”—this is interpreted as a request for protection from idolatry. The phrasing “YHWH [alone] will be an Elohim to me” excludes the possibility of allegiance to other deities. Ya’akov’s concern was not actual idol worship but rather activities that resemble or lead toward it. An example cited by the Sages (Bava Batra 10a) is the act of averting one’s eyes from giving charity, which is considered tantamount to idolatry due to its rejection of Divine values.

The sins from which Ya’akov sought protection—slander, illicit relations, murder, and idolatry—are not a random assortment. They are regarded as among the most grievous transgressions in the Torah. The latter three—murder, illicit relations, and idolatry—constitute the well-known category of cardinal sins for which one must sacrifice one’s life rather than transgress (Sanhedrin 74a). The severity of slander is equated with these three in Arachin 15b. As noted, Ya’akov was not likely to commit these sins in their most severe form. Rather, as he prepared for exile, he feared the spiritual vulnerabilities that might arise, rendering him susceptible to lesser but related transgressions.

Ya’akov’s fears were later validated by events within his household. The Midrash relates that all four transgressions eventually manifested in some form among his family. The verse “Discard the alien Hashems that are in your midst” (Gen. 35:2) implies that idolatry had infiltrated his camp. Immorality appeared in the abduction and violation of Dinah by Shechem (Gen. 34). This act was followed by an episode of bloodshed—namely, the massacre of the city’s inhabitants by Ya’akov’s sons. Finally, Ya’akov became the recipient of slander when he was informed that Lavan’s sons had spoken ill of him.

Vayikra Rabbah attributes Ya’akov’s association with these sins to his delay in fulfilling his vow to bring an offering at the location where he made it. By postponing the erection of an altar and the offering of sacrifices, he brought various misfortunes upon himself: the death of his wife Rachel, the abduction of Dinah, threats from Esau, and the injury he sustained in his struggle with the angel. The Midrash thus suggests a causal relationship between the delay in fulfilling a vow and exposure to these specific sins. It was for this reason, perhaps, that Ya’akov expressed such anxiety about these particular transgressions. Unfortunately, despite his awareness and concern, his failure to act promptly had serious

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consequences. He did not fulfill his vow until 22 years later, upon his return from Lavan's house, at which point the Midrash records Hashem's rebuke: "*You have forgotten your vow.*"

Eitz Yosef, commenting on *Vayikra Rabbah*, notes that Hashem does not punish individuals by causing them to sin. Rather, sin results from the withdrawal of Divine protection, which is ordinarily afforded to the righteous. When such protection is removed—due to prior transgressions such as failing to fulfill a vow—one becomes more vulnerable to spiritual failure.

Shalom.