

Date: 6 Kislev 5786 (November 26, 2025)

Torah Portion: Vayetze

Topic: The Torah of Exile

As it is written (Gen. 28:10): “*Ya’akov departed from Beer-sheba and went toward Haran.*” The Midrash calculates Ya’akov’s age at the time of his marriage. He was sixty-three years old when he received the blessings from his father, Yitzchak. He subsequently spent fourteen years secluded in the academy of Eber and another seven years working in Laban’s house for Rachel. Thus, he married for the first time at the age of eighty-four.

Shem, the son of Noach, and Eber, Shem’s great-grandson, founded a yeshivah for the study of Torah. Originally, this academy was named after both Shem and Eber. However, Shem died in the year 2158, when Ya’akov was fifty years old. Consequently, only Eber remained alive, and Ya’akov studied in his yeshivah for fourteen years before embarking on his journey to Haran. He arrived in Haran at the age of seventy-seven.

The Gemara (Megillah 17a) teaches that because Ya’akov failed to fulfill the mitzvah of honoring his parents during the twenty-two years he spent in Laban’s household, he was punished by being separated from his son Yosef for the same duration. However, the Gemara also teaches that Ya’akov was not punished for the fourteen years he spent in the yeshivah of Eber. Clearly, his time there was so critical for his spiritual development that it took precedence over his obligation to honor his parents.

How are we to understand this? That same Gemara relates that Ya’akov was sixty-three years old when he left his parents’ home. During his earlier years, he had studied Torah with his grandfather Abraham and his father Yitzchak. Why, then, was it so essential for him to delay fulfilling his parents’ instructions in order to study for an additional fourteen years in the yeshivah of Eber? This seems comparable to a son who, after being asked by his father to purchase a particular item, decides to stop at a yeshivah to study beforehand. Surely such a son would be neglecting his filial duty. Great as the mitzvah of Torah study is, halakhic principle dictates that it must be set aside in favor of any mitzvah that cannot be fulfilled by others.

Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky explains that one must appreciate the unique nature of the Torah taught at the yeshivah of Eber. At home, Ya’akov studied Torah in a holy but sheltered environment. He was surrounded by righteous individuals—his grandfather Abraham, his father Yitzchak, their disciples, and his mother Rivka. However, he was now about to enter Haran, into the house of Laban, where he would be surrounded by deceitful and corrupt people. He needed to learn a different kind of Torah: one that would prepare him to live among the morally depraved while preserving his own spiritual integrity. Such Torah could only be found in the yeshivot of Shem and Eber.

Shem had lived through the Generation of the Flood, a period marked by extreme moral degradation. Eber had experienced the Generation of the Dispersion, in which people attempted to build a tower to rebel against God. Despite these corrupting influences, Shem and Eber remained righteous. Only they—and not Yitzchak—could teach Ya’akov the spiritual tools necessary to remain upright in a morally corrupt environment.

Ya’akov’s time in the yeshivah of Eber was therefore an essential part of fulfilling his parents’ directive, for they surely did not wish for him to become spiritually corrupted in Haran. By first absorbing the teachings of Eber, he was better equipped to carry out their instructions as they were intended. This is analogous to a father asking his son to obtain a proper lulav and etrog, and the son first reviewing the relevant halakhot in yeshivah. In such a case, the study itself becomes part of fulfilling the father’s request. Similarly, without the spiritual preparation provided by the yeshivah of Shem and Eber, Ya’akov would not have been able to fulfill his parents’ command in its truest sense.

This idea is reinforced by the Midrash, which states that everything Ya’akov learned from Shem and Eber, he transmitted to Yosef. Why does the Midrash emphasize the Torah of Shem and Eber, rather than that which Ya’akov learned from his father and grandfather? Moreover, did Ya’akov not transmit Torah to all his sons? The answer is that he certainly taught the Torah of the Patriarchs to all his children. However, according to a tradition passed down from Abraham, Ya’akov knew that the nation of Israel was destined to live as aliens in a foreign land. He understood the need to prepare his children for that exile. Since Yosef would be the first to enter that corrupt land, he alone would need the spiritual resilience to withstand its trials. Moreover, Yosef would bear the responsibility of preparing the way for his brothers and their families to follow.

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For this reason, Ya'akov passed on to Yosef the unique "Torah of exile" he had learned from Shem and Eber. The other brothers, unaware of their father's intentions, were jealous of Yosef, not understanding why he received more of their father's attention. In truth, the Torah of the Patriarchs sufficed for them. But for Yosef, the Torah of exile was indispensable. It was this Torah—transmitted from Shem and Eber to Ya'akov, and from Ya'akov to Yosef—that sustained him in Egypt, just as it had sustained Ya'akov in Haran.

Shalom.