The "Fear of Isaac"--Thoughts for Parashat Vayetsei

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Vayetsei

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

This is the only Torah portion where God is referred to as Pahad Yitzhak, Fear of Isaac. Jacob uses this expression twice as he negotiates his separation from Laban, his father-in-law.

Commentators have suggested various interpretations of Pahad Yitzhak, often connecting it to the Akeida where Yitzhak literally faced death at the hands of his own father. God—who commanded the Akeida—would likely have been a source of fear to Isaac.

Yet, the question remains: why did Jacob only use this term in his dealings with Laban? He generally referred to the God of Abraham and Isaac without referring to God as Pahad Yitzhak.

Jacob's relationship with Laban had deteriorated so much that Jacob and family fled Laban without even saying goodbye. When Laban learned that Jacob's entourage had left, he pursued them and confronted Jacob. Why did you leave without even allowing me to kiss my children and grandchildren? Jacob replied: "I was afraid lest you should take your daughters from me by force" (31:31). Jacob complained to Laban: "These twenty years I have been in your household; I served you fourteen years for your two daughters and six years for your flock; and you have changed my wages ten times. If the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, had not been on my side you would have sent me away empty…" (31:41-42).

After a hostile exchange between Jacob and Laban, the two agreed to make a covenant so that neither would hurt the other in the future. Jacob confirmed the covenant in the name of the Fear of Isaac his father (31.53).

Jacob realized that Laban was a unique type of opponent. Laban was deceitful in the extreme. His word could never be trusted. Even a covenant with him was of dubious value, because Laban would not hesitate to violate it. How could Jacob be sure that Laban would leave him and his family alone in the

future?

Jacob concluded: Laban will understand only one thing: fear of harsh retribution if he would renege on this treaty. Jacob

invoked the Fear of Isaac, being sure to underscore the element of fear. He was making it clear to Laban that the Fear of Isaac was a mighty and fearsome God.

While Jacob's other adversaries in life posed threats to him, he at least knew what he was up against. He knew their strengths and intentions and could plan accordingly. But when it came to Laban, he was dealing with a slippery liar who thrived on deceit and deception. Unless Laban felt genuine fear, he would behave ruthlessly.

It is difficult to deal with enemies who are inveterate liars and cheaters, who claim your property as theirs, who have no compunction about committing acts of violence and terror. Such enemies need to be reminded that Pahad Yitzhak—the Fear of Isaac—is a fearsome God who will wreak vengeance on those who seek our harm.