

The Jewish Mission

Why are Jews always chased away and invited back? What's the real purpose of our presence?

The Owner of Macy's

Good Shabbos!

Back in the early 1900s, there were two brothers in America named Isadore and Nathan Strauss. These guys were some of the wealthiest and most well-known people in the country. They founded the iconic Macy's department store and had a few other big businesses, too.

Besides their business success, they were really active in the community. They helped promote pasteurized milk because they believed it was safer and healthier, even subsidizing it so more people would buy it. They also gave generously to support the poor in the Holy Land.

In 1912, the Strauss brothers and their wives went on vacation in Europe. While they were there, Nathan suggested to Isadore, "Hey, since we're already over here, why don't we make a quick trip to the Holy Land?"

Now, Israel back then wasn't exactly a top vacation spot. It was struggling with disease, poverty, and food shortages. But the Strauss brothers really cared about their fellow Jews there, so they decided to visit, check out the organizations they were donating to, and see the country.

After about a week, Isadore was ready to leave. “How many camels, old ruins, and yeshivas can we see already?” he said to Nathan. He was eager to get back to the U.S.

But Nathan didn’t feel right about leaving. “You see how tough things are here? People need us! How can we just leave?” he told his brother. Isadore replied, “If you care so much, then just send more money!” Nathan agreed but insisted that the people in Israel needed more than just cash—they needed guidance and leadership, too.

So the brothers argued. Finally, Isadore decided to leave, telling Nathan, “Our place is in America.” He and his wife left for Europe, traveled a bit more, and then booked tickets on a ship heading from England back to the U.S. Isadore even bought tickets for Nathan and his wife, hoping they’d join them. He sent a telegram urging Nathan to come quickly—they had reserved spots on a ship leaving Southampton for New York.

But Nathan was still in Israel, visiting more places and donating money to start a new settlement by the sea. When he finally got to Europe, he’d missed the boat. And that wasn’t just any ship—it was the Titanic.

A few days later, Nathan found out what a tragedy he’d narrowly avoided.

From that point on, Nathan dedicated his life to helping others, especially those in Israel. He passed away in 1931, and the city of Netanya was named in his honor.

And this brings us to this week’s Torah portion.

Jacob's Escape

In this week's parsha, we read about another Jewish man's deep desire to return to the Holy Land: our forefather Yaakov (Jacob). Despite all the challenges he faced, Yaakov finally makes it back to the Holy Land.

The story starts with Yaakov leaving Beer Sheva and heading to Charan (modern-day Turkey) to marry Rachel. He works for her father, Lavan, for seven years, but in a twist, Lavan deceives him, and he ends up marrying Rachel's sister Leah. After an argument, Lavan finally agrees to let him marry Rachel, but only if Yaakov commits to another seven years of work.

Fourteen years go by. Yaakov now has 11 sons and a daughter, and he's ready to return to his father's home. He goes to Lavan and says, "Send me off so I can go to my land" (Bereishis 30:25). But Lavan doesn't want him to leave—he insists that his prosperity is thanks to Yaakov and persuades him to stay.

Another six years pass. Yaakov starts noticing a shift in the atmosphere. He overhears Lavan's sons grumbling that Yaakov's wealth really belongs to their father, accusing him of "taking everything" from Lavan. It's an accusation we've unfortunately seen throughout Jewish history—that any success a Jew has somehow "belongs" to others.

Lavan himself doesn't say anything outright, but Yaakov notices he's no longer as friendly. The same Lavan who once begged him to stay and credited him for his success now seems resentful. As the Torah says, "Yaakov saw that Lavan's attitude was not the same as it had been before." At this point, Yaakov

realizes that Charan is no longer safe for him or his family, and he decides it's time to return to the Holy Land.

Yaakov knows that Lavan won't let him leave easily, so he waits until Lavan leaves on a business trip. Then he gathers his family—his four wives, twelve children, and all his livestock—and makes a quiet, quick escape.

A few days later, Lavan finds out Yaakov has left. Furious, he chases after him and eventually catches up, demanding an explanation: “Why didn't you tell me? I would have sent you off with joy and music, with tambourines and harps!”

Isaac's Antisemitism

We see a similar story in last week's parsha with Yitzchak. Yitzchak settles in a place called Grar, where he digs wells, farms the land, and becomes very successful. As the Torah says, “The man prospered and continued to grow until he had become very great.” But immediately after, it adds, “and the Pelishtim envied him.” Avimelech, the king of the Pelishtim, isn't shy about telling him directly: “Go away from us, for you have become much stronger than we are.” So Yitzchak leaves and moves to Beer Sheva.

But later, Avimelech shows up with his entire entourage, including his top general, to visit Yitzchak. Yitzchak asks them, “Why are you here when you hate me and sent me away?” (Bereishis 26:27).

This story is all too familiar to us. Often, Jews are invited to a country to help improve the economy. People know that Jews

are skilled and resourceful, often excelling in business. But when they become too successful, envy sets in, and people start accusing them of gaining wealth “at the locals’ expense.” They’re eventually asked to leave, and, not long after, the economy starts to falter, prompting leaders to invite Jews back once again.

Take China, for example. Judaism isn’t recognized as a legal religion there. The government only officially acknowledges five religions—Buddhism, Hinduism, and a few others—but Judaism isn’t one of them. Technically, that means Jewish life isn’t supposed to be openly practiced, and Jewish rituals and mitzvos are restricted by law.

But the Chinese government is well aware that Jews contribute positively to their economy. They understand that having Jews visit benefits them, so they allow Chabad emissaries to set up shuls, kosher restaurants, mikvahs, and more. However, there’s a condition: these services are supposed to be for visitors, not for locals.

For now, things are relatively good for Jews in China. But imagine if, in a few years, thousands of Jews moved there. History would likely repeat itself, and the rest of the story would be pretty predictable.

Our True Purpose

So, why did Lavan chase after Yaakov? And why did Avimelech return to Yitzchak after forcing him to leave? The answer might lie in Avimelech’s words when he explained himself to Yitzchak: “We have surely seen that G-d was with you.”

After Yitzchak left, the Pelishtim realized they were missing something. They felt the absence of a spiritual presence—a moral figure who reminded them of something greater. When Yitzchak was around, they felt a little closer to G-d, a little more human, a bit less tied to materialism. This quality is what many throughout history have recognized in the Jew.

And this, my friend, is our mission.

We may live in Charan, in Grar, in America, or in China. But no matter where we are, our mission isn't just to contribute to local economies—it's to bring the message of G-d to the world. We are here to remind people that there is a Creator, to teach that all people, not just Jews, can pray to G-d, trust in Him, love Him, and honor Him. We're here to share the ideas of repentance and accountability, and, most importantly, to teach that there is "an Eye that Sees, an Ear that Hears, and that every deed is recorded."