SUMMARY OF PARASHAT VAYETZE

Jacob leaves Beersheba and sets out for Haran, in Syria. He is fleeing from his brother Esav, who has threatened to kill him, and he also hopes to find a wife in his mother's hometown. Shortly after beginning his long journey, when he reaches Bet El, Jacob has a beautiful dream: angels ascending and descending a ladder. God promises Jacob His blessing and protection and assures him that he and his descendants will inherit the Land of Israel.

After several days, Jacob arrives in Haran and makes his way to the local well. There he meets a young woman who turns out to be his first cousin, Rachel, and he falls in love with her. Rachel takes him home, where he is welcomed by his uncle Laban. They soon reach an agreement: Jacob will work for Laban for seven years, and in return, Laban will allow him to marry his daughter Rachel. But when the wedding day arrives, Laban gives him his daughter Leah instead of Rachel, and Jacob only discovers the deception the following morning.

How could Jacob have failed to recognize Leah? There are several explanations. The simplest are:

1. Rachel and Leah were sisters and may have looked and sounded very much alike.

2. In ancient times, women wore thick veils, similar to the burkas worn by women in Afghanistan.

3. Everything took place in the darkness of the night.

4. Jacob had absolutely no reason to suspect a deception.

Many commentators explain that Jacob now becomes the victim of an "identity theft" similar to the one he himself had carried out when he disguised himself as his brother Esav to receive the blessing of his blind father, Isaac. The similarities

between these two episodes can hardly be a coincidence.

Jacob must work another seven years to marry Rachel as well.

Before the giving of the Torah, there was no prohibition against marrying two sisters. Leah, Bilhah, and Zilpah bear Jacob several children. Rachel is unable to conceive for many years, but eventually gives birth to a son, Yosef. Jacob now has eleven sons: Reuben, Shimon, Levi, Yehuda, Yissachar, Zebulun, Dan, Naftali, Gad, Asher, and Yosef, as well as a daughter, Dinah. The birth of his twelfth son, Benjamin, is not mentioned until next week's Parashah. Each of his sons will become the founder of one of the tribes of Israel.

There is a very important difference between the sons of Yishmael and the sons of Jacob. We read recently that Yishmael also had twelve sons, but each of them established a separate nation (shneim asar nesi'im le'umotam). Jacob, by contrast, succeeded in bringing his twelve sons together as twelve tribes belonging to one people.

After many years of working for Laban, Jacob expresses his desire to return to the land of his ancestors, Eretz Israel. Laban persuades him to stay longer and offers to pay him with a portion of the flock so that Jacob can begin building wealth of his own. Over the following years, Jacob's flock grows miraculously, and our patriarch decides to return to his homeland without asking Laban's permission. He gathers his family and tells them that God appeared to him in a dream and announced that it was time to leave.

Jacob and his family practically flee without Laban's knowledge. When Laban finds out, he sets off in pursuit of them with hostile intentions. God appears to Laban and warns him not to harm Jacob. Laban confronts Jacob, accusing him of taking away his daughters and grandchildren. Eventually, they reconcile and make a peace agreement at Gal'ed. Jacob continues his journey toward the land of Canaan and arrives at

Machanayim. His next challenge will be to face his brother Esav, who twenty years earlier had resolved to kill him.