

# BREAD IS FOR EATING

*by Rabbi Naftali Reich*

Could there be any better guarantee for success than a promise directly from Hashem? Undoubtedly not. If you are fortunate enough to get such a promise, you can "take it straight to the bank" - and you don't have to wait for it to clear! But strangely enough, that is not what happens in this week's parshah.

After he leaves his father's house, Jacob has his celebrated dream in which he has a prophetic vision of a ladder reaching up to the sky. Hashem appears to him and tells him, "Behold, I am with you, and I shall protect you wherever you go, and I shall return you to this land." The promise is explicit. And yet, when Jacob awakes he asks Hashem to provide him with "bread to eat and clothes to wear" and that he return to his "father's house in peace."

Why did Jacob find it necessary to make these requests after Hashem had just promised to protect him and return him in safety? Doesn't Hashem's protection include the basic necessities of life, such as food and clothing? Furthermore, what did Jacob mean by "bread to eat" and "clothes to wear"? For what other purpose could the food and clothes have been used?

To answer these questions, we must first consider the overwhelming concerns that occupied Jacob's mind at this critical time in his life. Jacob was leaving his father's house because his life was threatened by Esau. At the same time, however, he was exposing himself to a different kind of threat. His father's house was a secluded island of spirituality, far removed from the bustle and temptations of the secular world. In this environment, Jacob had flourished and grown to be a worthy successor to Abraham and Isaac.

But now he was going to the house of Laban, where he would come into close contact with deceit, temptation and greed. How would he be affected? Would he be able to maintain the high level of personal excellence he had achieved in the cocoon of his father's house? Would he become caught up in the pursuit of riches? Would he exchange the accumulation of wisdom for the accumulation of wealth?

This is what Jacob feared, and this was behind his request to Hashem. He prayed that in his encounter with materialism he should never lose sight of the true purpose of the material world. Bread is for eating, and clothes are for wearing. They are not to be valued for themselves and accumulated and hoarded until they become the very purpose of life. Jacob prayed that he would remain focused on the true values of life. He prayed that he would return to his father's house "at

peace" with himself, protected physically but also complete spiritually. He prayed that the Jacob who returned would not be a different Jacob from the one who had left.

A wealthy man from a distant land once came to visit a venerated sage. The sage's house was a simple, dilapidated hut. The interior was even shoddier. The sage was sitting at a table made of rough-hewn logs. None of the chairs matched each other, and the tablecloth was threadbare.

The sage greeted him kindly and pointed to a chair. "Please sit down."

The wealthy visitor gingerly tested the chair and sat down. He seemed surprised that it did not collapse under his weight.

"I don't understand," he said. "How can a great and famous person like you have furniture like this? Why don't you have real furniture?"

The sage smiled. "Tell me, my good friend, do you have good furniture?"

"Of course, I do. It's actually quite elegant - and solid like a rock."

"I see. And where is this furniture? Do you have it with you?"

"With me? You must be joking! Don't you know that I'm traveling? You don't take furniture along when you're only passing through!"

"You certainly don't," said the sage. "Well, you see, I am also only passing through. I'm going to be here in this world for a limited time only. Just like you, I don't need furniture when I'm passing through."

We are all passing through this world, on our way to a far better place. Like our forefather Jacob, we should not allow ourselves to be taken in by the illusions of materialism. We should always remember that "bread is for eating and clothes are for wearing," If we are fortunate enough to be blessed with affluence, we should not view the accumulation of wealth as an end in itself. Rather, we should use the freedom and expansiveness that wealth provides as a means to achieve continuous personal growth. In this way, we can enjoy material satisfaction in this world while we accumulate spiritual wealth for the continuation of our journey toward eternal life. Text Copyright © 2006 by Rabbi Naftali Reich and [Torah.org](http://Torah.org).

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