

Potomac Torah Study Center
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NOTE: Devrei Torah presented weekly in Loving Memory of Rabbi Leonard S. Cahan z"l, Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation Har Shalom, who started me on my road to learning more than 50 years ago and was our family Rebbe and close friend until his untimely death.

Devrei Torah are now Available for Download (normally by noon on Fridays) at www.PotomacTorah.org. Thanks to Bill Landau for hosting the Devrei Torah archives.

May Hashem protect Israel and Jews everywhere. May Hashem's protection shine on all of Israel, the IDF, and Jews throughout the world. We celebrate the return of our living hostages and mourn those of our people who perished during the last two years. May a new era bring security and rebuilding for both Israel and all others who genuinely seek peace.

We always encounter Vayishlach during the depressing, cold days of early winter, normally a week before Hanukkah. The parsha opens with Yaakov seeking a meeting with his brother Esav, hoping that his brother will forgive him for his deception more than twenty years earlier – insisting on the birthright in exchange for a bowl of lentils (while the family is sitting shiva for their grandfather Avraham) and impersonating Esav so Yitzhak will give Yaakov the bracha of wealth meant for Esav.

After studying at Lavan's University of Deception for twenty plus years, Yitzhak appreciates how Esav must have felt being the victim of his brother's deceptive tricks. Yaakov understands that to obtain Esav's trust and to gain his own respect, that of Hashem, and that of his father, he must make amends. Yaakov must return the fruits of Yitzhak's blessing of wealth and show his brother that he respects Esav's position of political leader of the family. Yaakov's tremendous gift of animals (including both males and females of each species) and bowing seven times to Esav give this message.

Many of the commentaries below discuss the question of whether Esav's acceptance of Yitzhak's gifts is genuine or fake. Overall, I believe that Esav's response to Yaakov is genuine. Esav knows for twenty years where Yitzhak is (with their uncle), and he could have gone to seek revenge at any time. Esav and Yaakov meet in peace and remain in peace. Esav could find Yaakov easily at any time after the reunion, yet he never comes for revenge. Yaakov and Esav must live at some distance from each other, because both are extremely wealthy and need very large grazing areas to feed their huge flocks. The brothers come together in peace to bury their father. The animosity between Edom and Yisrael arises between later generations, not between Esav and Yitzhak.

Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander focuses on the haftorah, Ovadia's vision of the ultimate course of Yaakov's and Esav's descendants. The parsha concludes by presenting an extensive list of princes who come from Esav's large family. Ovadia's vision includes a long struggle between Esav and Yaakov, with Esav on top for many generations – but eventually Yaakov will prevail and there will be no more descendants of Esav.

We have seen two thousand years of struggles with and persecution from Esav/Edom. Fortunately, the Catholic Church changed its theology sixty years ago and no longer states that the Jews killed Jesus. Finally, relations between Jews and Christians have been improving, although in recent years, conditions in many European countries have become dangerous for Jews. (While much of the initiative for the violence has come from Muslims, Christian majority countries have not made life safe for Jews in many of these countries.)

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, z"l, focuses on the story of Dina's rape and forced marriage to the son of the prince of Shechem (ch. 34). Rabbi Sacks observes that no one in this story, not any of the people of Shechem and none of Yaakov's family, comes out well. The Torah reports the story without indicating who is right or wrong. Rabbi Sacks refers to Andrew Schmookler's parable of the tribes: whenever a group of tribes lives in close proximity, if any one tribe initiates violence, no matter how other tribes react, the result will always be violence. Even if every other tribe wants peace, the human tragedy is that violence is inevitable. In such a case, there is no right course of action – every option requires abandoning some moral principle(s).

Rabbi Sacks originally wrote this Dvar Torah eleven years ago in response to violence from Hamas. Violence against Israel from Arab countries dates back at least to 1929 and has continued without pause since then, increasing since Israel became a country in 1948. The parable of the tribes (see Rabbi Sacks' clear exposition) indicates that there is no way for Israel to avoid violence as long as any neighboring country initiates violence against our country.

Chabad presents a useful lesson. We Jews cannot improve relations with non-Jews by watering down our mitzvot. Non-Jews only respect us when we increase our mitzvot. Living as Torah Jews helps many non-Jews accept us and live with us in peace. The tragedy, however, as Rabbi Sacks explains, is that it only takes a single nation dealing with us with violence to turn our world into one of violence. The struggle of Jews, and for Israel, will continue for quite some time in the future. We must explain the dilemma to our children and grandchildren, because that is the future they face.

Shabbat Shalom; Hanukkah Samaich,

Hannah and Alan

Much of the inspiration for my weekly Dvar Torah message comes from the insights of Rabbi David Fohrman and his team of scholars at www.alephbeta.org. Please join me in supporting this wonderful organization, which has increased its scholarly work during and since the pandemic, despite many of its supporters having to cut back on their donations.

Please daven for a Refuah Shlema for Velvel David ben Sarah Rachel; Moshe Aaron ben Leah Beilah (badly wounded in battle in Gaza but slowly recovering), Daniel Yitzchak Meir HaLevy ben Ruth; Avram David ben Zeezl Esther, Avraham Dov ben Blimah; Ariah Ben Sarah, Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Reuven ben Basha Chaya Zlata Lana, Avraham ben Gavriela, Mordechai ben Chaya, David Moshe ben Raizel; Zvi ben Sara Chaya, Reuven ben Masha, Meir ben Sara, Oscar ben Simcha; Miriam Bat Leah; Yehudit Leah bas Hannah Feiga; Miriam bat Esha, Chana bat Sarah; Raizel bat Rut; Rena bat Ilsa, Riva Golda bat Leah, Sharon bat Sarah, Kayla bat Ester, and Malka bat Simcha, and all our fellow Jews in danger in and near Israel. Please contact me for any additions or subtractions. Thank you.

Haftarat Parshat Vayishlach: Confrontation and Redemption

By Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander *
President and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone

In a 1980 lecture on Parshat Vayishlach, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik explored the idea that just as each holiday's Torah reading has its own special motif, so, too, each parsha in the Torah has its own defining theme. For example, Parshat Lech Lecha focuses on the concept of conversion through the lens of Avraham. The stories of Parshat Vayishlach, on the other hand, teach us about the destiny of the Jew and his engagement with broader society (see the commentary of the Ramban on Bereshiet 33:15, who elaborates on this point). The Midrash states (Midrash Rabbah, Bereshiet 78:15) that Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi (Judah the Prince), before meeting with the Roman emperor, would read Parshat Vayishlach to draw guidance on how to navigate the encounter.

There are two instances of confrontation that appear in Parshat Vayishlach, both of which presage the destiny of the Jewish people, and symbolize the challenges posed by the nations of the world.

The first is Yaakov's fraught reunion with Esav, an adversary motivated by grievances he believes to be justified. Esav embodies those enemies of the Jewish people whose identities are known, articulated, and openly antagonistic.

The second confrontation is Yaakov's wrestling match with an unidentified adversary during his crossing of the Yabok river. When Yaakov asks his opponent for a name, the figure refuses to answer. This episode represents attacks the Jewish people face from unexpected quarters: enemies who provide no reasons, and no rules. Their violence is anonymous; their motivations unfathomable.

At the end of the parsha, we find a detailed biography of Esav's genealogy. Here we find that Esav founded an enduring nation and a powerful dynasty. The biological and spiritual heirs of Esav would continue to haunt Yaakov for thousands of years. Most often, Esav held the power and played the role of pursuer and oppressor. Like in the parsha, Yaakov always survives, but never emerges unscathed. Millions of Jews would be destroyed in Esav's long struggle with Yaakov throughout history, from ancient persecutions to the tragedies of modern times.

The haftara continues the saga of the two adversaries, envisioning a final battle in which Yaakov will ultimately prevail. This vision is presented in response to the challenges of the parsha. Ovadya, a book consisting of one chapter, is dedicated completely to the subject of Israel's clash with its enemies, particularly Edom. *"This is Ovadya's vision: So says the Lord God to Edom"*)v. 1(. *The opening verses attack Edom's illusion of strength and security: "The arrogance of your heart deceived you, you who dwell in the cliff 's niches, your lofty abode, saying in your heart, 'Who could bring me down to earth?"*)v. 3(

The haftara goes on to recognize the fact that Edom and the other foreign peoples – the community of nations – have committed crimes against Israel, for which they will be held to account: *"For the violence you wrought against your brother Yaakov shame will cover you"*)v. 10(.

Having established this, Ovadya responds to all of the challenges highlighted in Parshat Vayishlach – both the revealed and the anonymous attacks on the Jewish people – and assures us that eventually the tide of history will turn: *"For the day of the Lord draws near for all the nations. What you have done shall be done to you; what you have wrought will return upon your head"*)v. 15(. The reversal will be devastating: *"The House of Yaakov will be fire, the House of Yosef, flame; the House of Esav, straw. They will blaze among them and consume them, and there will be no survivors of the House of Esav, for the Lord has spoken"*)v. 18(.

In the vision of the haftara, Israel is no longer pursued, persecuted, and powerless. Instead, it will stand strong and proud, and have dominance over those who seek its destruction. With these words of comfort, the haftara describes a reality in which the injustices and struggles highlighted in the parsha will be overcome, once and for all.

* Ohr Torah Stone is a modern Orthodox group of 32 institutions and programs. Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin is the Founding Director, and Rabbi Dr. Brander is President and Rosh HaYeshiva. For more information or to support Ohr Torah Stone, contact ohrtorahstone@otsny.org or 212-935-8672. Donations to 49 West 45th Street #701, New York, NY 10036.

<https://ots.org.il/haftarat-parshat-vayetze-rabbi-brander-5786/>

Vayishlach: Our Stronger Than Iron Dome

By Rabbi Label Lam © 5768

And Yaakov sent angels in front of him to Eisav his brother to the land of Seir to the field of Edom. And he commanded them saying; "So you shall say to my master to Eisav; So says Yaakov your servant; "I have lived with Lavan and tarried till now and I have oxen and donkeys

and sheep and servants and maid servants and I am sending to my master to find grace in your eyes...")Breishis 32:3-5(

And Yaakov sent angels: Real angels!)Rashi(

I have lived with Lavan: I lived)garti(is the numerical value of Taryag-613; as if to say I have lived with Lavan and I have still kept 613 Mitzvos and I did not learn from his wicked ways!)Rashi(

How did Yaakov get actual angels to act on his behalf? How was this group of angels particularly useful in defending Yaakov from the brutality of Eisav's approaching army? What do we learn from the fact that Yaakov was able to direct authentic angels for his protection? Is this not only an indicator of Yaakov's lofty spiritual stature?

The Nefesh HaChaim writes;:

"Every Jewish person should not say in his heart, heaven forfend, 'what am I and what impact do my lowly deeds have in the world?' Rather, he should understand that every minute detail of his actions, and his speech, and his thoughts, each and every moment is not lost! How powerful are his actions and very great and lofty too, for everyone according to the root of his soul, to impact and effect in the highest of heights, and the purest of lights. In truth, a man who is wise and understands this clearly, his heart will tremble within him a great shuddering when he considers his actions that are not good and how far they reach to destroy and ruin with even a slight misstep..."

Everyone has power to release angels, extraordinarily productive and destructive too! The Sefas Emes says that these are the angels sent by Yaakov, and that according to the Zohar there are angels created from both the Yetzer Hora and the Yetzer Tov! He states that the angels generated from the Yetzer Hora can have more protective powers than those created from the Yetzer Tov! How does that work?

It is written in Pirke Avos)2:4(, *"Make His will your will in order that He will make your will his will!" How do you get what you want, so to speak? Do what HASHEM – your supernal Partner wants as if it is your will and He will look to fulfill your will!"* Fine! Now comes the second part which has direct relevance to our discussion: *"Nullify your will for His will so that He will nullify the will others the will of others for the sake of your will!"*

Fascinating! The first part is about *"positive Mitzvos"* – doing deeds! The second is talking about *"negative Mitzvos"* – refraining from doing! Doing brings the goodness we seek while *"holding back"* provides protection from frightening external foes! By resisting temptation, one creates a real super shield of protection for himself and others too.

The Sefas Emes emphasizes that these angels that Yaakov sent to Eisav were created during the time he resided by Lavan. It is no mistake that he signals to Eisav that he lived with Lavan and he fulfilled the Taryag – 613 Mitzvos, not only the 248 *"to do"* Mitzvos but the 365 *"don't do"* Mitzvos as well and that he remained unaffected by Lavan! This was not only Yaakov's silent strategy for his survival but it is in fact our most secret of weapons today and is our stronger than iron dome.

Good Shabbos!

<https://torah.org/torah-portion/dvartorah-5773-vayishlach/>

"And He Was Limping on his Thigh" – Paying the Cost of Integrity
By Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah © 2009, 2019

Parshat VaYishlach opens with Yaakov preparing to confront Esav on his return to the Land of Canaan. We, as the reader, are eager to find out not only whether Yaakov will emerge unscathed, but how Yaakov will achieve this goal. Will this encounter differ in character from his last one with Esav, twenty years ago? Has Yaakov's character changed? Will he be the same Yaakov who was willing to use deceit to achieve his goals, or has he somehow learned from his twenty years of hardship, having received his comeuppance and having himself been deceived by Lavan, first by the switching of the daughters and then by the switching of the wages? Has he learned these lessons, or is he the same Yaakov from twenty years past?

We already have a hint to the answer from the story of Yaakov's shepherding of the sheep. On the one hand, Yaakov played the system and worked the loopholes, positioning the striped posts in front of the sheep at the time of copulation so that striped and speckled sheep would be conceived. However, such behavior, while not totally yasher, was still not deceitful, and was still playing by the rules. While less than ideal, such behavior is often the only way a person can survive when he is unprotected and in an inhospitable and foreign land. Such hostile environments have often been the reality of Jews in galut. We as a people have had to learn to survive and adapt, and we have excelled in this ability, learning how to play the system while keeping to its rules, no matter how unjust they may be.

The key in these situations has always been to do what we need to in order to survive, but do so while keeping one's integrity. And Yaakov, in his watching of the sheep, in no way "played the system" – he was the model of integrity and hard, honest work: "*That which was torn of beasts I brought unto thee; I bore the loss of it; of my hand did you require it, whether stolen by day or stolen by night. Thus I was: in the day the drought consumed me, and the frost by night; and my sleep fled from my eyes.*" (Breishit 32:39- 40).

So this "playing the system" was a necessary, adaptive mode for galut, but it was not ideal. And Yaakov is alerted to this, I believe, in the dream of the angel which he relates to Rachel and Leah. In that dream, the angel informs Yaakov that it was only because of God's help – and not because of Yaakov's scheme – that the ewes bore speckled lambs. The scheming was not what led to success, it was God's watching over him that did so.

And now Yaakov comes to encounter Esav. A hard and powerful enemy, but one that he is meeting head-on and in the land of Canaan, not as a guest in another land. Will he be the Yaakov of twenty years ago, and engage in real deceit? Will he be the Yaakov of the house of Lavan, and try to secretly work the loopholes? Or will he confront the challenge directly?

The answer is not necessarily a foregone conclusion. Some people are never able to readjust to new situations and to abandon their old paradigms. As a case in point, we find that even today, some of our fellow Jews still approach the government, even the democratic government of the United States, as if they were living in the old oppressive regimes of Eastern Europe. When asked by certain yeshivot if they could deceive the United States government to get more funding for programs than they deserved, Rav Moshe Feinstein (HM 2:30) spends the majority of his response explaining that we live in a country that is not Tsarist Russia, and that in a country that protects its citizens, modes of deceit and trickery learned in previous generations, which were always problematic, are absolutely unethical and completely inconceivable.

Yaakov Aveinu, for his part, was able to learn these lessons on his own, and the path that he adopts is the straight and narrow one. While he prepares a gift, this is an act of appeasement, not of trickery. And he says so directly to Esav: "[It is] to find favor in the eyes of my master." When Esav tries to maintain a presence in Canaan, Yaakov politely but firmly begs off. There is no trickery – everyone knows the purpose of the gift, the meaning of Esav's accepting it (an accepting of Yaakov's apology) and the meaning of Yaakov's begging off of Esav's accompaniment and Esav's acquiescence to this (a waiving of Esav's rights to the land of Canaan). There is sophistication, intelligence and skill in this approach, but no trickery. And Yaakov has also not forgotten the angel's message. He knows that whatever he does, his success relies on God's help. Thus, before this momentous event he prays to God – the first time Yaakov talks directly to God – to beseech God for help and protection.

Yaakov has learned that to achieve his goals he need not use deceit, and he need not make use of loopholes. He can achieve his goals by confronting his challenges head-on, by using intelligence and skill, and by relying on God. This may

be a harder path, it may be a riskier path, but it is the correct path. And to fully realize it, he must confront his old self and reject the Yaakov of the past. And thus, on the night before the encounter – “And Yaakov was left alone.” He was left alone with himself. He had to look himself in the mirror and confront who he was and who he wanted to be. “And a man wrestled with him” – he had to struggle with his old self, and to reject who he was for who he could become. And when his old self saw that it could no longer define the new Yaakov, it engaged in its old trickery – “And he saw that he could not prevail against him” – when he – the man, the old Yaakov – saw that he could not achieve his ends through honest means, “he touched the curve of the thigh” – he used a dirty trick, touching the curve of the thigh, comparable to the curve of the heel, the ekev, the crooked path that is the old Yaakov. But the new Yaakov would not lower himself to this level. He refused to fight dirty, to give in to the old Yaakov, and he remained upright. And as such, he merited a new name: Yisrael. No longer Yaakov – the bent heel, but Yashar-El: Yashar, the straight one, El – who connects to God.

Yaakov became Yisrael, became the one who recognized that we must always remain straight and upright and rely on God, and that in this way – and not through self-reliance on trickery and deceit – will we achieve our goals. The path may be harder, we may have to sacrifice something as a result, we may come out limping a little in the end, but our integrity will be intact, and we will be better for it. That is why Bnei Yisrael – the descendants of Yisrael, not of Yaakov – will not eat the gid haneshesh that is on the thigh – that we reject the representation of the old Yaakov, and together with it give up some small degree of pleasure. This is a tiny sacrifice to make for being yashar and being with God, and for our merit to be the true descendants of Yisrael, worthy of being called Bnei Yisrael.

Shabbat shalom!

From my archives

Paired Perspectives on the Parashah: Esau’s Intentions — Hostility or Reconciliation?

By Rabbi Hayyim Angel *

When Jacob returns to the Land of Canaan after twenty years in exile, he receives alarming news: “*The messengers returned to Jacob, saying, ‘We came to your brother Esau, and moreover he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him’*” (Genesis 32:7).

Is Esau approaching as an adversary or as a loving brother? The text’s silence regarding Esau’s motives allows the drama to unfold in tension and ambiguity.

The number four hundred carries ominous associations. Sforno notes that David’s personal militia also numbered four hundred men (I Samuel 22:2; 25:13; 30:10, 17). The parallel suggests a trained band capable of war, deepening Jacob’s fear that his brother intends violence. Jacob reacts by dividing his camp, sending gifts, and preparing both for battle and for prayer.

Classical commentators diverge sharply in their reading of Esau’s intentions. Rashi (on 33:4) and Ramban (on 32:8) interpret the narrative as one of potential hostility averted. Esau had set out to attack, but Jacob’s humility, gifts, and deference helped transform his brother’s wrath. The meeting’s warmth at the chapter’s climax — “*Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him; and they wept*” — thus becomes the triumph of conciliation over animosity.

Rashbam, by contrast, reads the same verses with an entirely different tone. In his view (on 32:7), Esau never intended harm at all. Having established himself as a prosperous chieftain in Seir, Esau came with his four hundred men not as an army but as an honor guard. The Torah’s narrative of Jacob’s fear, Rashbam implies, arises not from Esau’s malice but from Jacob’s imagination.

Modern scholarship also underscores the textual ambiguity. Rabbi Yehudah Kiel (Da'at Mikra) observes that the phrase “he is coming to meet you” (ve-gam holekh likratekha) can signify either friendly greeting or hostile advance. When Aaron goes out “to meet” Moses (Exodus 4:14), the phrase marks joyful reunion; when Edom comes out “to meet” Israel with “much people and a strong hand” (Numbers 20:20), it signals aggression. Both instances of fraternal encounter — Moses and Aaron, Israel and Edom — echo through this story of brothers divided and restored.

Some interpreters seek a middle ground. Esau's earlier resolve to kill Jacob (Genesis 27:41) was conditioned on waiting until after their father Isaac's death. Since Isaac remains alive until the end of chapter 35, Esau may have suspended his vengeance, even if the old resentment still smoldered. Jacob, for his part, may not know this — or may not trust it, given that Rebekah had not relayed Esau's full statement.

Rabbi Yosef Bekhor Shor captures this uncertainty best: Jacob could not be sure of Esau's purpose, so he prudently prepared for both peace and war — a stance that often defines moral courage in moments of fear and uncertainty. His elaborate precautions, gifts, and prayers reflect not cowardice but realism.

In the end, the Torah never clarifies what Esau intended when he set out with his men. Had his anger long subsided, replaced by the equanimity of a man who had built his own life? Or did Jacob's humility and generosity soften a heart still hardened by memory? Scripture leaves the question open. The ambiguity itself may be the point: reconciliation in human relationships is often complex — sometimes leading to full repair, and at other times requiring a safer distance.

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<https://www.jewishideas.org/node/3390>

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We are Yisrael: Thoughts for Parashat Vayishlah

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

The Bible refers to our people using three names for our forefather: Yaakov, Yisrael, Yeshurun.

The name Yaakov was given to him at birth because he was clinging to the heel (ekev) of his older twin brother, Esav. This name characterized Yaakov in many challenges he faced. He did not confront things directly but acted cleverly, even deviously, to achieve his goals. He outsmarted Esav, Yitzhak, and Lavan through his wit, not through physical strength or courage.

The name Yisrael was given to him first by an angel and later by God. He earned this name because he “struggled with God and with men, and prevailed.” Yaakov was no longer dependent on victories won through subterfuge. He now proved that he was able to confront challenges directly and forcefully...and prevail.

The name Yeshurun was applied to his people, the Israelites, in the book of Devarim and in Yeshayahu. Yeshurun derives from the word Yashar...upright. It has the opposite resonance of the name Yaakov, which is related to the word akov, crooked. Yeshurun, in a sense, is the “ideal” name, representing truthfulness, integrity, and commitment to principle.

Throughout Jewish history, we have had phases when the name Yaakov seemed most appropriate. For centuries of exile, we lived in Christian and Muslim lands where we were deprived of basic human rights. We lacked elementary abilities to

defend ourselves physically from far more powerful entities. We survived through our wit, our ability to fend off dangers by bending our heads to the prevailing powers.

In our messianic vision, the name Yeshurun will be most appropriate. We will be living in a calm, peaceful world dedicated to the ideals of the human spirit. God will be universally acknowledged by all humanity. Truthfulness will be valued by all and will prevail among all.

But it was the name Yisrael that has been our primary designation since biblical times. We are known as the children of Israel, the Israelites, the benei Yisrael. The modern Jewish State is aptly known as Israel, Medinat Yisrael. And Yisrael is a name that signifies ongoing struggle.

We live in an as yet unredeemed world. We face numerous challenges on so many fronts. We confront threats to our physical wellbeing by hateful enemies. We face spiritual battles with those who seek to undermine our religious foundations. We have no shortage of internal controversies pitting Jews against Jews.

We remind ourselves: we are Yisrael. We face struggles...but we prevail. We muster the physical strength to ward off enemy attacks; we draw on our spiritual strength to overcome ideological opponents.

We don't forget that we have the wit and wisdom of Yaakov. We don't abandon our vision of Yeshurun. But we are Yisrael.

We struggle. We face challenges directly and courageously. We strive to overcome internal and external dissension. We sometimes fail, we limp...but we do not surrender and lose hope. We are Yisrael. We struggle with God and with human beings...and we will prevail. AM YISRAEL HAI.

* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. and rabbi emeritus of the historic Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York City.

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Vayishlach – Money

by Rabbi Mordechai Rhine *

May this Dvar Torah be a Zechus Refuah Shileima for Cholei Yisroel

Man's relationship with money is a fascinating one. The more money we accumulate the more we think we can do. But it isn't until we part with the money that we have actually done anything with it.

In this week's Parsha, Yakov returned to his father's house and transferred his family and assets with him. The Torah tells us that after he had transferred everything of consequence, Yakov went back for some small containers that others would have discarded. The Talmud (Chullin 91) wonders why Yakov would go back for these seemingly insignificant containers. The Talmud explains that a righteous person treasures his belongings because he does not steal.

In other words, Yakov worked hard to earn his money honestly. He therefore did not subscribe to an attitude of “easy come – easy go.” As Rav Simcha Zissel Ziv explains, a righteous person might have to forgo numerous opportunities to make money because they aren’t 100% appropriate. When he finally gets to earn money that he feels justified in taking, he treasures it.

The Chasam Sofer (Chullin 91) adds a perspective regarding the relationship that a righteous person has with his money. He explains that not only does the righteous person work hard to earn money in a most appropriate way, but he hopes to be able to spend the money in a most appropriate way as well. Thus, Yakov viewed leaving small containers behind as something he was philosophically opposed to. Since the assets were earned honestly, with holiness and purity, they had a spark of holiness to them and should be parted with in a holy, intentional way — not merely because they were forgotten.

Remarkably, it is when Yakov displays this appreciation for his assets that Esav’s angel engages him to try to hurt him. This perspective of Yakov’s is very different than that of Esav’s. To Esav, the goal of assets is that he can do whatever he wants. The assets are his to service him. In contrast to Yakov, the assets were earned in holiness and are to be disbursed with conscious intent to serve Hashem. When Yakov and Esav meet, Yakov describes his wealth as being precise (*“I have exactly what I need to serve Hashem”*) whereas Esav describes his perception of wealth by saying that he has more than he needs. Because to Esav the wealth was to service him, and when Esav had reached the max of personal physical stimulation, he saw no higher calling for his wealth.

In our time we note that society has some confusion regarding earning money, saving money, and parting with assets. Regarding earning money, the lottery myth persists, where people think that if they win, they will be provided for and will be happy. This perspective is born from an ill-fitting perception of the relationship of man with money. Statistics do not support the notion that lottery winners will be happy because they have lots of money.

There is also confusion regarding saving money. Saving is good. Saving is important. But saving should have a purpose which guides us as to when to spend the saved money. Rav S. R. Hirsch explained that just as there can be Baal Tashchis, wasteful conduct with money by discarding a useful object carelessly, so saving without a sense of purpose can be Baal Tashchis if the money saved is never spent in a purposeful way. Keep in mind: The purpose of saving money is not because the person with the most saved assets in the end wins.

Regarding parting with assets, there is a myth that everything must be saved. There are people who view hoarding as an expression of piety. To discard anything would be a form of Baal Tashchis. The Talmud, however, teaches that Baal Tashchis is possible regarding one’s life or relationships. When hoarding causes a lowering of quality of life or damages relationships, the item(s) should be discarded as an act of service to our higher calling.

From a different angle, there are people who have been blessed with so much that they spend on excessive luxuries because, “Why not?” It is best for a person to be focused, as the Chasam Sofer describes, on earning money in holiness and then spending it in holiness.

Yakov’s returning for small containers may seem like a small act. But it is a great conversation starter regarding the spark of holiness that we all should strive to live by.

With best wishes for a wonderful Shabbos.

* Rabbi Mordechai Rhine is a certified mediator and coach with Rabbinic experience of more than 20 years. Based in Maryland, he provides services internationally via Zoom. He is the Director of TEACH613: Building Torah Communities, One family at a Time, and the founder of CARE Mediation, focused on Marriage/ Shalom Bayis and personal coaching. To reach Rabbi Rhine, his websites are www.care-mediation.com and www.teach613.org; his email is

RMRhine@gmail.com. For information or to join any Torah613 classes, or to help sponsor his Torah insights, contact Rabbi Rhine.

Vayishlach – Don't Forget the Masses

by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer *

We are very well aware of the importance of gratitude and appreciating the kindness that people show us. There is a Medrash in this week's parsha which teaches that appreciating the individual is not always enough. We must also appreciate the community within which the kindness was done.

The Torah tells us that after Yaakov parted ways with Eisav, he arrived whole and unharmed in Shechem and stayed there for a time. The Torah uses an unusual phrase when describing Yaakov's settling in Shechem saying, "*and he camped on the face of the city.*")Bereshis 33:18(In one explanation, the Medrash explains that the word "*and he camped*")בָּנָי(can also mean "*and he was gracious.*" The Torah is telling us that Yaakov was gracious to the city of Shechem and set up shops to sell merchandise to the city at a good price. The Medrash learns from here that one must provide goodness to a place which he has benefit from.

The Medrash continues and shares that Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his son Rabbi Elazer learned this lesson from Yaakov. When the Romans had decreed to kill them, they hid in a cave for thirteen years. During that time their bodies developed sores from malnutrition. After the decree was annulled, they went to Teveriah and bathed in the bathhouses at the hot springs there to cure themselves. Rabbi Elazar suggested to his father that should purify Teveriah in return for the great benefit they had received.)There were areas in Teveriah where people had been buried, but no one knew where the graves were. Kohanim and anyone else who wished to remain ritually pure would have to circumvent many areas of the city.(Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai agreed with his son, saying that they should do so, just as Yaakov had done good for Shechem. They then proceeded to locate all of the graves and move them to proper burial grounds.)Bereishis Rabbah 79:6(

We can learn powerful lessons in gratitude from both stories. Yaakov arrived in Shechem as a wealthy individual. The Torah tells us that he purchased the land where he was staying, and presumably he participated in the commerce of the city. Having such a wealthy household move into the neighborhood must certainly have benefitted the community. Yet, Yaakov felt that natural benefit wasn't enough. He wanted to give something actively to show his gratitude. He therefore, chose to take a loss and sell merchandise for low prices in the town. Although he had simply moved in and they did not specifically go out of their way for him, he had still benefitted from their town. He felt the need to actively express his gratitude.

From Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his son we can learn another lesson in gratitude. Unlike Yaakov, they were not moving into Teveriah. They were simply coming as customers to use the bathhouses at the hot springs of Teveriah. They presumably had paid for their use of the bathhouse. However, for them this was far more than a regular bath. They had sores all over their bodies and had been healed by the famed hot springs of Teveriah. Recognizing the extent of their personal benefit, they felt the need to express gratitude to the city for opening up their bathhouses to the public. They therefore invested themselves in locating and removing graves, not resting until the city was declared ritually pure, to show how much they appreciated Teveriah.

The Maharz"u adds another layer to the lessons from these stories. He explains that the phrase "*and he camped on the face of the city*" mean that Yaakov did not live in Shechem proper. Rather, he lived outside the border looking in at the city. He notes that Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his son also did not enter the city proper, but only went to the hot springs. In both cases, they still felt the need to show gratitude to the local town. When one benefits from an area, one must show gratitude to those who live nearby.

We first must take stock and appreciate the individual acts of kindness people have done to us. But we can't stop there. We must also remember the community which made that kindness possible.

* Co-founder of the Rhode Island Torah Network in Providence, RI. Until recently, Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, Bethesda, MD., and then associated with the Savannah Kollel.

Dinah Alert

By Rabbi Haim Ovadia *

The girl, tossing and turning in her bed, unable to fall asleep, hears her dad's footsteps as he enters the house. She knows he is tired after a long day at work, yet she calls out to him:

- Dad, can you read me a bedtime story?
- But honey, you are a big girl now, freshman year; I haven't told you a story in decades.
- I know, but still, I hear so many terrible things and I need some comfort, please!
- Ok, I understand. How about reading from the Parasha? Maybe you will learn how to face difficult situations if we examine how Jacob prepares for the encounter with his wicked older brother Esau, who wants to take revenge for being robbed of his blessing)Gen. 32:23(:

Jacob took his two wives, two maid-servants, and eleven children...

- Eleven, wait a second, Dad, didn't he have twelve? Who is missing?
- Let's see. Rashi says that Dinah was missing.
- Oh Dad, come on, don't tell me that just because she is a woman she is not counted. This discrimination is everywhere!
- No dear, that's not it. Let me show you what Rashi says:

And his eleven children – and where was Dinah? He hid her in a trunk and locked her so Esau will not lay his eyes on her.

- That's even worse, Dad. You would have never locked me in box, why, not even in my room, just so someone wouldn't see me, this is so wrong!
- You are right, honey. As a matter of fact, Rashi says that Jacob was punished for it.
- Jacob? Our patriarch? The one who upholds truth and never errs? Rashi really says he was punished? That's scary. What was his punishment?
- Let's continue reading, dear:

Because Jacob prevented his brother from meeting her, not seeing that she could have caused Esau to repent, he was punished and she fell in the hand of Shechem!

- I remember Shechem vaguely, Dad, remind me, what was the story?
- You know what? It's really late... How about we call it a night and continue tomorrow, maybe with a different Parasha?
- No! I want to know who Shechem is and what happened.
- Ok)sighs(. Shechem was the son of the city's governor, he saw Dinah and liked her so he kidnapped her, violated and tortured her, and then "fell in love with her")mockingly(and tried to convince her to marry him. There, I said it. Are you happy now?
- No. Of course I'm not. That's terrible. Why would men think that they have the right to treat women like that just because they are in a position of power? Wait, please tell me that no one blamed Dinah for what happened, saying that she was provocative or out in the streets or something, because then they would be blaming the victim. They didn't say that, right?
-)The father remains silent for a while, then sighs(I don't know what they said, or I knew and I forgot.
- Well, try to remember. It's really important to me!
-)reluctantly(Well, the Midrash does say that it was her fault:

While Dinah's father and brothers were sitting in the Beit HaMidrash, she went out to meet the local girls, and caused herself to be violated.
- Unbelievable, Dad, nothing has changed. My campus' police says the same thing to rape victims, and as a result they are afraid to report it.
- Yes, it is horrible.
- Were they really learning in Beit HaMidrash?
- No, the Torah states clearly that they were in the field at the time.
- Ugh! What happened next?
- Jacob's children tricked the citizens of Shechem into believing they would let their leader marry Dinah if they all circumcise, but then they attacked them and slayed all the men, captured all children and women, looted the city, and freed their sister. As a result Jacob was afraid that he would be attacked by the neighboring tribes but they all feared his children and he emerged unscathed.
-)Seething(Unscathed? Her dad's punishment for hiding her is that SHE is traumatized for life *and* blamed for being assaulted. Not only that, the result of this "punishment" is that a whole city is destroyed, and women and children are taken captives, yet he is unscathed? Where is Divine Justice?
-)The father, now carried away and a little agitated himself(But wait, that's not all. The rabbis said that Shechem became a place destined for disaster)Sanhedrin 102:1(: It was in Shechem that the brothers sold Joseph to slavery, it was in Shechem that Abimelech son of Gideon started a rebellion which led to the murder of his 70 brothers and to a bloody war afterwards, and it was in Shechem that the kingdom of David was split... all as a result of hiding Dinah from Esau)his

voice trails off, he sees that his daughter, her face twisted in anger, finally fell asleep; he turns off the light and tiptoes out of the room(.

Let us, the readers, also tiptoe out of the room and contemplate the Midrashic interpretation of Dinah's story, as mentioned by Rashi and retold here. Obviously the Midrash about the Rapunzelesque Dinah, locked in a box, was not meant to be taken literally, because the phrase about the eleven children is mentioned regarding the crossing of the Jabbok River. Jacob did not leave Dinah on the other side, so even though the reference to eleven children does indeed exclude Dinah, it is not because she is in a box but rather because she is a female. Had the number eleven been mentioned in the actual encounter between Jacob and Esau, the story of Dinah in the box might have been plausible, but now that it is mentioned at the crossing of the river it is unacceptable, so we must search for a message here.

The Midrash is using Jacob as a metaphor to parents who deny their children choices because they fear for them, but their attempts lead to disastrous consequences. Jacob is described as a father so protective that he limits his daughter's knowledge and worldview. He could have spoken to her and asked her to hide or disguise herself in a way which would not attract Esau's attention, or better yet, promise her that he and his children would fight for her. If Esau represents the lure of foreign culture, then the parents should provide their children with the means to deal with that culture and appreciate their own, instead of locking them away.

The overprotective parents want to shelter their kids forever. They lock them in a physical or conceptual trunk and take the keys with them, leaving no exit way. But this method is temporary: sooner or later, they will be exposed to the real world, they will break out, just like Dinah.

When children are not properly educated and prepared to deal with the adversities of life, a trail of blood, animosity, and divisiveness follows. The ensuing mayhem can be traced to the initial moment of concealing knowledge. That's what the rabbis meant when they pointed out that the city of Shechem became an epicenter for wars and dispute, splitting the brothers from Joseph, Abimelech from Gideon, and the House of David from the Kingdom of Israel.

Let me give three examples of the dangers of overprotectiveness: in the personal, global, and religious realm.

Personal: A couple of weeks ago I hid from my son news about a family tragedy which had happened in Israel. I had been waiting for the right moment, thinking he would weather it better if he heard it after a month or so had passed. He ended up hearing it from one of the teachers, thus suffering a greater shock than the one I was trying to spare him from.

Global: Some experts trace the terrible polio epidemic to extreme cleanliness practices in the Western world, which prevented children from exposure to agents of the disease at an early age. As a result, those children did not develop an immune system to protect them from the epidemic. By sheltering from them from the tiniest grain of dust, the parents unknowingly made their children susceptible to the full onslaught of the disease)See Naomi Rogers' book: *Dirt and Disease*(.

Finally, on the religious level, the message is to all Orthodox parents who want to censor what their kids read, hear, or know, a practice sometimes enforced by schools or tightknit communities. It is a cautionary tale to all overprotective parents, educators, and religious leaders: locking people away, or locking the world away from them, could lead to disastrous results. Some religious leaders believe that in order to protect the young generation from the influences of the evils of technology, science, and knowledge, they must shut them in a box. They should pay heed to the case of Yohanan Lowen, a Quebecois who is suing his ministry of education for failing to supervise the private Hassidic school system he attended, from which he graduated with mastery of Yiddish and Aramaic, but abysmal English, French, and math skills. He is one of thousands who are denied basic secular knowledge and language skills as a measure of protection, but who in turn become disillusioned by Judaism and alienated from their communities.

The world today is more enticing, interesting, interconnected, fast, and yes, more dangerous than ever. The only way to prepare ourselves, and our children, to face our changing world is to step out of the box and embrace what it has to offer. If we do so, not only will we survive it, we will prosper and excel, all the while enhancing our Judaism and eternal values. And as the Midrash hints, in the process we will inspire the whole world, making it a better, friendlier place for all mankind.

Shabbat Shalom.

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Many Devrei Torah from Rabbi Ovadia this year come from an unpublished draft of his forthcoming book on Tanach, which Rabbi Ovadia has generously shared with our readers. Rabbi Ovadia reserves all copyright protections for this material.

A Bissel of Torah from a Tiny Jewish Community

By Rabbi Natanel Kaszovitz

Auckland, New Zealand Hebrew Congregation *

This week we read about the long-awaited and in many ways intense - reunion between the twins, Yaakov and Eisav. Yaakov anxiously prepares himself for several possible scenarios. He prays to Hashem for protection, he sends a gift to Eisav in the hope of softening his heart, and he even prepares for battle, hoping it will not come to that. He divides his family into two camps so that if Eisav attacks, at least half may survive.

When they finally meet, Yaakov insists that Eisav accept the gift from him. Yaakov explains that it is from the blessing he "took" and that Hashem has since blessed him greatly. Although Eisav initially refuses, he ultimately agrees to accept it. When reading the verses closely, we notice that Eisav actually has more material wealth than Yaakov and from this difference we can learn something essential about the brothers' perspectives.

This week's Shabbat-table discussion question: What is the secret to true happiness and being satisfied with what you have? Hint: it's right there in the parsha (Bereshit 33:8-11).

Shabbat Shalom; B'Ahavat Yisrael.

]Editor's note: If you became Rabbi of the only synagogue in a small, isolated Jewish community, at what level would you direct your Shabbat message? [

Bridging the Generations: The Holocaust and Its Legacy: The Holocaust Centre of New Zealand is hosting the annual International Holocaust Remembrance Day commemoration on January 25, 2026, in Auckland. Created in 2005 by the United Nations, 27 January -the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau - is International Holocaust Remembrance Day, which honours and remembers the victims and survivors of the Holocaust. This year's commemoration is dedicated to strengthening the crucial link between the past and the future, empowering younger generations to carry the torch of remembrance and responsibility.

B'Nai Akiva: AHC has an active chapter of B'Nai Akiva and is looking for a venue for this year for its 20 active members.

* Rabbi Kaszovitz, an Israeli ordained at Ohr Torah Stone, previously served as Rabbi in Nairobi, Kenya. He became Rabbi of Auckland Hebrew Congregation in September 2025. Rabbi Moshe Rube, whose remarks I previously posted in this space, is in the process of starting a new Rabbinic position in Australia. Rabbi Rube is waiting for his visa to enter Australia, when he will be able to start his new position. I plan to use this space to include messages from Rabbi Kaszovitz and Rabbi Rube going forward.

Rav Kook Torah

VaYishlach: The Prohibition of Gid Ha-Nasheh

Jacob was limping, but he had survived the nighttime struggle at Penuel. Nervously awaiting a confrontation with his estranged brother Esau, Jacob was attacked by a mysterious opponent. As dawn broke, the stranger struck Jacob's thigh and dislocated it.

"Therefore the Israelites do not eat the displaced nerve)gid ha-nasheh(on the hip joint to this very day, because he touched Jacob's thigh on the displaced nerve.")Gen. 32:33(

What is the meaning of this prohibition? Do we refrain from eating the sciatic nerve only to commemorate a mysterious wrestling match that took place thousands of years ago?

A Vision of Violence

At first glance, the ban on *gid ha-nasheh* appears to be yet another limitation that the Torah places on eating meat. While the Torah permits the consumption of meat, it instituted a number of restrictions: which animals may be eaten, how they are to be slaughtered, how their blood should be handled, and so on. These regulations remind us that we may not deal with animals as we wish, without regard for their welfare. On the contrary, we have moral obligations and responsibilities toward animals.

The prohibition of *gid ha-nasheh*, however, is meant to project a broader ethical aspiration, beyond the issue of how we should treat animals.

According to tradition, the stranger who fought Jacob that night was the guardian angel of Esau. Jacob's opponent symbolized the lifestyle of the hunter, a man of violence and conquest, one whose prophetic blessing was that he would live by his sword. This nighttime struggle was not a private experience, a personal event in Jacob's life. It was a vision for all times. It epitomizes our constant battle against belligerent foes who claim the right to subjugate others by virtue of their physical strength and military prowess.

This struggle appeared to Jacob in its most unadorned fashion, without any pretense of gallantry and shining swords to mask its visceral violence and naked aggression. For the truth is that all wars, no matter how 'civilized,' are nothing more than the reduction of conflict to physical force, the attempt to dominate another through violence.

If there is one area in which the human race constantly innovates, it is the art of war. Methods and tools of combat constantly grow ever more sophisticated. We have progressed from primitive spears and swords to guns and canons, and onward to modern warfare with tanks, fighter jets, and nuclear arms. And yet, the essence of war remains unchanged: a brutal contest of power between two opponents, where victory is secured by felling one's adversary.

Protesting Aggression

By not eating the *gid ha-nasheh*, we demonstrate our revulsion at unprovoked aggression and violence. Just as Jacob fought Esau's angel that night, we also oppose the cynical belief in the doctrine that might makes right. We resist the worldview that sanctifies violence as a legitimate instrument of superiority.

While nationalism provides many benefits, in its extreme form it can descend into conquest and imperialism. As Rav Kook observed in *Olat Re'iyah*)vol. I, p. 234(:

"Nationalism is a lofty emotion in its natural, pristine state. But if it is not directed towards the highest goal — the aspiration of universal happiness and perfection — it will end up crossing the boundaries of morality."

We may need a strong army to defend ourselves, and we may need to slaughter animals to provide for our physical needs. But by refraining from eating the *gid ha-nasheh*, we demonstrate that our goal is not to subjugate others, whether man or beast. Even as we consume the meat of animals, we avoid the sciatic nerve that allows the body to stand upright. This is a moral sensitivity that should govern every human encounter, so that all may benefit from a Divine-spirited and harmonious existence.

)*Sapphire from the Land of Israel*. Adapted from *Oztrot HaRe'iyah* vol. II, p. 507(

https://ravkooktorah.org/VAYISHLACH_68.htm

Vayishlach – The Parable of the Tribes (5775, 5782)

By Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l, Former UK Chief Rabbi*

From beginning to end, Genesis chapter 34 tells a terrifying story. Dina, Jacob's daughter – the only Jewish daughter mentioned in the entire patriarchal narrative – leaves the safety of home to go out to "look at the daughters of the land.")Gen. 34:1(She is raped and abducted by a local prince, son of the king of the town known as Shechem.

Jacob learns of this fact but does nothing until his sons return. Dina's brothers Shimon and Levi immediately realise that they must act to rescue her. It is an almost impossible assignment. The hostage-taker is no ordinary individual. As the son of the king, he cannot be confronted directly. The king is unlikely to order his son to release her. The other townspeople, if challenged, will come to the prince's defence. It is Shimon and Levi against the town, two against many. Even were all of Jacob's sons to be enlisted, they would still be outnumbered.

Shimon and Levi therefore decide on a ruse. They agree to let Dina marry the prince, but they make one condition. All the male members of the town must all be circumcised. The men of Shechem, seeing long-term advantages to an alliance with this neighbouring tribe, agree. The men of the town are weakened by the operation, and their pain is most acute on the third day. That day, Shimon and Levi enter the town and kill the entire male population. They rescue Dina and bring her home. The other brothers then plunder the town.

Jacob is horrified by their actions. "You have made me odious to the people of the land," he says.)Gen. 34:30(What then were we supposed to do, ask the two brothers? "*Should we have left our sister to be treated like a prostitute?*" With that rhetorical question, the episode ends and the narrative moves elsewhere. But Jacob's horror at the action of his sons does not end there. He returns to it on his deathbed, and in effect curses them:

"Simeon and Levi are brothers — their swords are weapons of violence. Let me not enter their council, let me not join their assembly, for they have killed men in their anger and hamstrung

oxen as they pleased. Cursed be their anger, so fierce, and their fury, so cruel! I will scatter them in Jacob and disperse them in Israel.” Gen. 49:5-7

The story of Dina is an extraordinary passage. It seems to lack any kind of moral message. No one comes out of it well. Shechem, the prince, would seem to be the chief villain. It was he who abducted and raped Dina in the first place. Hamor, his father, fails to reprimand him or order Dina’s release. Shimon and Levi are guilty of a horrendous act of violence. The other brothers engage in looting the town.]1[Jacob seems passive throughout. He neither acts nor instructs his sons on how to act. Even Dina herself seems at best to have been guilty of carelessness in going out into what was clearly a dangerous neighbourhood – recall that both Abraham and Isaac, her grandfather and great grandfather, had feared for their own lives because of the lawlessness of the times.]2[

Who was in the right and who in the wrong are left conspicuously undecided in the text. Jacob condemns his sons, but his sons reject the criticism.

This debate continued and was taken up by two of the greatest Rabbis in the Middle Ages. Maimonides takes the side of Shimon and Levi. They were justified in what they did, he says. The other members of the town saw what Shechem had done, knew that he was guilty of a crime, and yet they neither brought him to court nor rescued the girl. They were therefore accomplices in his guilt. What Shechem had done was a capital crime, and by sheltering him the townspeople were implicated.]3[This is, incidentally, a fascinating ruling since it suggests that for Maimonides the rule that “*all Israel are responsible for one another*” (Shavuot 39a) is not restricted to Israel. It applies to all societies. As Isaac Arama was to write in the fifteenth century, any crime known about and allowed to continue ceases to be an offence of individuals only and becomes a sin of the community as a whole.]4[

Nahmanides disagrees in his commentary to Gen. 34:13(. The principle of collective responsibility does not, in his view, apply to non-Jewish societies. The Noahide covenant requires every society to set up courts of law, but it does not imply that a failure to prosecute a wrongdoer involves all members of the society in a capital crime.

The debate continues today among Bible scholars. Two in particular subject the story to close literary analysis: Meir Sternberg in his *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*]5[and Rabbi Elchanan Samet in his studies on the parsha.]6[They too arrive at conflicting conclusions. Sternberg argues that the text is critical of Jacob for both his inaction and his criticism of his sons for acting. Samet sees the chief culprits as Shechem and Hamor.

Both point out, however, the remarkable fact that **the text deliberately deepens the moral ambiguity by refusing to portray even the apparent villains in an unduly negative light**. Consider the chief wrongdoer, the young prince Shechem. The text tells us that “his heart was drawn to Dina, daughter of Jacob; he loved the young woman and spoke tenderly to her. And Shechem said to his father Hamor, ‘Get me this girl as my wife.’” (Gen. 34:3-4) Compare this with the description of Amnon, son of King David, who rapes his half-sister Tamar. That story too is a tale of bloody revenge. But the text says about Amnon that after raping Tamar, he “*hated her with intense hatred. In fact, he hated her more than he had loved her. Amnon said to her, ‘Get up and get out!’*” (2 Samuel 13:15) Shechem is not like that at all. He falls in love with Dina and wants to marry her. The king and the people of the town readily accede to the Shimon and Levi’s request that they become circumcised.]emphasis added[

Not only does the text not demonise the people of Shechem, it **also does not paint any of Jacob’s family in a positive light**. It uses the same word – “*deceit*” (34:13) – of Shimon and Levi that it has used previously about Jacob taking Esau’s blessing, and Laban substituting Leah for Rachel. Its description of all the character – from the gadabout Dina to her excessively violent rescuers, to the plundering other brothers and the passive Jacob – the text seems written deliberately to alienate our sympathies.]emphasis added[

The overall effect is a **story with no irredeemable villains and no stainless heroes**. Why then is it told at all? Stories do not appear in the Torah merely because they happened. The Torah is not a history book. It is silent on some of the most important periods of time. We know nothing, for example, about Abraham's childhood, or about thirty-eight of the forty years spent by the Israelites in the wilderness. Torah means "teaching," "instruction," "guidance." What teaching does the Torah want us to draw from this narrative out of which no one emerges well?]emphasis added[

There is an important thought-experiment devised by Andrew Schmookler, known as **the parable of the tribes.**]7[Imagine a group of tribes living close to one another. All choose the way of peace except one that is willing to use violence to achieve its ends. What happens to the peace-seeking tribes? One is defeated and destroyed. A second is conquered and subjugated. A third flees to some remote and inaccessible place. If the fourth seeks to defend itself, it too will have to have recourse to violence. **"The irony is that successful defence against a power-maximising aggressor requires a society to become more like the society that threatens it. Power can be stopped only by power."**]8[]emphasis added[

There are, in other words, four possible outcomes:]1[destruction,]2[subjugation,]3[withdrawal, and]4[imitation. *"In every one of these outcomes the ways of power are spread throughout the system. This is the parable of the tribes."*]9[Recall that all but one of the tribes seeks peace and has no desire to exercise power over its neighbours. Nonetheless, **if you introduce a single violent tribe into the region, violence will eventually prevail, however the other tribes choose to respond. That is the tragedy of the human condition.**]emphasis added[

As I was writing this essay in the summer of 2014, Israel was engaged in a bitter struggle with Hamas in Gaza in which many people died. The State of Israel had no more desire to be engaged in this kind of warfare than did our ancestor Jacob. Throughout the campaign I found myself recalling the words earlier in our parsha about Jacob's feelings prior to his meeting with Esau: *"Jacob was very afraid and distressed"*)Gen. 32:8(, about which the Sages said, *"Afraid, lest he be killed, distressed lest he be forced to kill."*]10[What the episode of Dina tells us is not that Jacob, or Shimon and Levi, were right, but rather that **there can be situations in which there is no right course of action; where whatever you do is wrong; where every option will involve the abandonment of some moral principle.**]emphasis added[

That is Schmookler's point, that *"power is like a contaminant, a disease, which once introduced will gradually but inexorably become universal in the system of competing societies."*]11[**Shechem's single act of violence against Dina forced two of Jacob's sons into violent reprisal, and in the end everyone was either contaminated or dead. It is indicative of the moral depth of the Torah that it does not hide this terrible truth from us by depicting one side as guilty, the other as innocent.**]emphasis added[

Violence defiles us all. It did then. It does now.

FOOTNOTES:

]1[An action that is disapproved of biblically: see Deut. 13:13-19, 1 Samuel 15:13-26, Esther 9:10, 9:15-16.

]2[The Midrash is critical of Dina: see *Midrash Aggadah*)Buber(to Gen. 34:1. *Midrash Sechel Tov* is even critical of her mother Leah for permitting her to go out to Shechem.

]3[Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Melachim* 9:14.

]4[Arama, *Akeidat Yitzchak, Bereishit, Vayera*, Gate 20, s.v. UVeMidrash.

]5[Sternberg, Meir. *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985. 444-81.

]6[Elhanan Samet, Iyunim be-Parshat ha-Shavuah, third series, *Israel: Yediot Aharonot*, 2012, 149-171.

]7[Andrew Bard Schmookler, *The Parable of the Tribes: The Problem of Power in Social Evolution*. Berkeley: U of California, 1984.

]8[Ibid., 21.

]9[Ibid., 22.

]10[Quoted by Rashi ad loc.

]11[Schmookler, ibid., 22.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE: Questions to Ponder

]1[Do you see any innocent parties in this story?

]2[Do you think Judaism is a religion of pacifism? What proofs can you bring to support your answer?

]3[What would you say are the underlying values we can learn from the story?

<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vayishlach/parable-of-tribes/> Note: because Likutei Torah and the Internet Parsha Sheet, both attached by E-mail, normally include the two most recent Devrei Torah by Rabbi Sacks, I have selected an earlier Devar.

Did Esau Really Forgive Jacob?

By Mordechai Rubin* © Chabad

After Jacob received the coveted blessings intended for Esau, he was compelled to flee to his mother's family in Haran to escape Esau's wrath. After spending 20 years in Haran, God appeared to Jacob and instructed him to return home, promising, "*I will be with you.*"¹ Notwithstanding God's promise of protection, Jacob took a number of precautions to prepare for his encounter with Esau and his 400 men: he sent messengers and gifts to placate Esau, he prayed, and he actively prepared for war.

But when the brothers finally met, instead of attacking Jacob, Esau rushed forward, embraced him, and kissed him. Was this a sudden change of heart? Did Esau experience a moment of repentance? Below, we will explore how the biblical commentators interpret this episode.

1. Esau Was Placated by Jacob Prostrating Himself – Rashi

Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki 1040 – 1105) understands that when Jacob prostrated himself before Esau, he evoked Esau's mercy. This appears to be based on the Midrash which states that "*He did not cease to bow down until the attribute of justice was turned to mercy.*"² Rabbi David Kimhi (1160 – 1235), known by the acronym Radak, expands on this and explicitly states that at that moment, Esau forgave Jacob entirely.³ Gersonides (Levi ben Gershon, 1288 – 1344) commonly known as Ralbag, adds that when Esau saw that Jacob seemed remorseful, as evidenced by him prostrating himself, they embraced and kissed like the long-lost brothers they were.⁴

2. Esau Forgave Jacob Before They Even Met – Rashbam & Chizkuni

Rashi's grandson, Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir (1085 – 1158), known as Rashbam, interprets these verses in a surprising manner. Although most commentaries understand the report that Jacob received that Esau was approaching accompanied by 400 men as a threat of war, Rashbam understands these 400 men as a guard of honor for Jacob. According to Rashbam, Esau harbored no ill feelings toward Jacob during this episode, even though that is evidently not how Jacob read the situation, as he clearly feared for his life after receiving the report. Still, according to this understanding, Esau's intentions were good.

As proof, Rashbam cites similar verbiage in Exodus where the verse describes Moses' return to Egypt. After being forced to flee Egypt — for having killed an Egyptian who was harming a Jew — Moses eventually settled in Midian where he married and raised his family. While tending to the flocks of his father-in-law Yitro, God revealed Himself to Moses in the famous episode of the burning bush. During this exchange with God, in which Moses expressed his reluctance to serve as the Divine ambassador, God described Aaron's reception of Moses upon his return. There, the verse uses the exact same language as in our verse in Genesis: *"He is coming forth toward you, and when he sees you, he will rejoice in his heart."*⁵ This phrase unmistakably conveys a joyful and heartfelt reception.⁶

This view is echoed by Rabbi Hezekiah ben Manoach (1250 - 1310) known by the title of his commentary Chizkuni.⁷

3. It Was a Fleeting Moment of Compassion – Sifrei

When Jacob and Esau finally met, Esau embraced and kissed Jacob. In the Torah scroll, small dots appear over the Hebrew word for "and he kissed him" (וְיִקְרַבֵּהוּ). In interpreting these dots, the Midrash Rashi cites reads as follows:

Some interpret the dots to mean that[he did not kiss him wholeheartedly. Rabbi Simeon ben Yochai said: It is a well-known tradition that Esau hated Jacob, but his compassion was moved at that time and he kissed him wholeheartedly.⁸

This second explanation seems to imply that while the kiss may have been genuine, it was not a true reconciliation. At the end of the day, Esau's hatred for Jacob endured.⁹

4. God Orchestrated a Change of Heart – Malbim

In a similar vein, Rabbi Meir Leibush (1809 – 1879), more commonly known as the Malbim, notes on the words, "And Esau ran toward him," that, "God changed his hate to love." This means that Esau himself did not forgive Jacob or even harbor any positive feelings for him. God, however, had promised Jacob that he would protect him. He therefore intervened to change Esau's intentions.¹⁰

5. He Attempted to Bite Jacob – Midrash Rabbah

This approach, cited by various commentators, reconstrues Esau's kiss as an attempt to bite Jacob's neck. God performed a miracle and turned his neck into a solid block of marble. In this reading, the dots allude to the fact that this was not a typical kiss. Some note that Rashi does not cite this explanation as it does not align with the simple reading of the text.¹¹

6. The Angels Jacob Sent Affected a Change in Esau – The Rebbe

In the Rebbe's reading, the angels Jacob sent¹² were able to affect positive change in Esau. Esau's ability to interact with these angels meant that even though he was not fully transformed, he was still able to reach a point of reconciliation. This interaction set the groundwork for the kiss that would take place when they met. This coming together of Jacob and Esau

was an important breakthrough. It showed that even in this physical world of falsehood, Esau, who represents the “other side,” bows to Jacob — the side of holiness.¹³

7. Esau Had the Ability to Bring Ultimate Redemption – Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi

In this kabbalistic reading, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi explains that Jacob recognized Esau’s unique strengths and understood that achieving the world’s ultimate destiny required combining those qualities with his own. Jacob was sure that he had successfully redeemed the sparks of holiness necessary to herald in the Ultimate Redemption. This profound spiritual achievement affected their reconciliation, culminating in the kiss that Esau bestowed upon Jacob. Ultimately, however, Esau was not ready. He was still very much entrenched in the physicality of this world — as represented by the 400 men that accompanied him.¹⁴

FOOTNOTES:

1. Genesis 31:3
2. *Midrash Rabbah* ibid.
3. Radak Ibid.
4. Ralbag Ibid.
5. Exodus 4:14.
6. Genesis 32:7.
7. Genesis 32:7.
8. Sifrei, Numbers 69:2.
9. For a lengthy analysis of this Midrash cited by Rashi, see *Likkutei Sichot*, vol 20, p 144.
10. Malbim Genesis 33:2.
11. *Maskil le-David* 33:4.
12. Rashi Genesis 22:4.
13. *Torat Menachem* 5742, vol 1, p 457.
14. See *Sichot Kodesh* 5737, Shabbat Parshat Vayishlach, section 6, and Torah Or, *Parshat Vayishlach*, p 24b.

* Content editor and staff writer at Chabad.org.

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/6690553/jewish/Did-Esau-Really-Forgive-Jacob.htm#footnoteRef2a6690553

Vayishlach: Subduing and Refining the World

by Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky *

When Jacob and Esau met, Esau kissed Jacob – at first not wholeheartedly, but then with sincere, albeit fleeting, wholeheartedness.)Gen. 33:4(

Jacob not only survived his meeting with Esau but transformed him. Whereas Esau had previously wanted to kill Jacob, he now ran toward him to hug and kiss him. This (albeit temporary) reconciliation between Jacob and Esau was a monumental spiritual event, which laid the foundation upon which the work of permanently transforming the materiality that Esau represented could take place over the course of history.

Esau's two successive sentiments while kissing Jacob correspond to the two successive methods by which we refine the animating soul and the world in general. The first stage, in which Esau goes through the motions of kissing Jacob but his heart is not in it, alludes to how at first, the crudeness of the material world remains but we subdue it, forcing it to behave in a G-dly way. In the second stage, in which Esau kisses Jacob wholeheartedly, alludes to how we then transform the materiality of nature, refining it to the point that nature itself becomes holy.

* — from *Daily Wisdom #3*

* An insight by **the Lubavitcher Rebbe** on parashat Vayishlach from our *Daily Wisdom #3* by Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky.

Gut Shabbos,

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Covenant and Conversation

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l

The Jewish Journey

Why is Jacob the father of our people, the hero of our faith? We are “the congregation of Jacob”, “the children of Israel.” Yet it was Abraham who began the Jewish journey, Isaac who was willing to be sacrificed, Joseph who saved his family in the years of famine, Moses who led the people out of Egypt and gave it its laws. It was Joshua who took the people into the Promised land, David who became its greatest king, Solomon who built the Temple, and the prophets through the ages who became the voice of God.

The account of Jacob in the Torah seems to fall short of these other lives, at least if we read the text literally. He has tense relationships with his brother Esau, his wives Rachel and Leah, his father-in-law Laban, and with his three eldest children, Reuben, Simon and Levi. There are times when he seems full of fear, others when he acts – or at least seems to act – with less than total honesty. In reply to Pharaoh, he says of himself, “The days of my life have been few and hard” (Gen. 47:9). This is less than we might expect from a hero of faith.

That is why so much of the image we have of Jacob is filtered through the lens of Midrash – the Oral Tradition preserved by the Sages. In this tradition, Jacob is all good, Esau all bad. It had to be this way – so argued Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Chajes in his essay on the nature of Midrashic interpretation – because otherwise we would find it hard to draw from the biblical text a clear sense of right and wrong, good and bad.^[1] The Torah is an exceptionally subtle book, and subtle books tend to be misunderstood. So the Oral Tradition made it simpler: black and white instead of shades of grey.

Yet perhaps, even without Midrash, we can find an answer – and the best way of so doing is to think of the idea of a journey.

Judaism is about faith as a journey. It begins with the journey of Abraham and Sarah, leaving behind their “land, birthplace, and father’s house” and travelling to an unknown destination, “the land I will show you.”

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The Jewish people is defined by another journey in a different age: the journey of Moses and the Israelites from Egypt across the desert to the Promised Land. That journey becomes a litany in Parshat Masei: “They left X and they camped in Y. They left Y and they camped in Z.” To be a Jew is to move, to travel, and only rarely, if ever, to settle down. Moses warns the people of the danger of settling down and taking the status quo for granted, even in Israel itself: “When you have children and grandchildren, and have been established in the land for a long time, you might become decadent.” Deut. 4:25

Hence the rules that Israel must always remember its past, never forget its years of slavery in Egypt, never forget on Succot that our ancestors once lived in temporary dwellings, never forget that it does not own the land – it belongs to God – and we are merely there as God’s gerim ve-toshavim, “strangers and sojourners” (Lev. 25:23).

Why so? Because to be a Jew means not to be fully at home in the world. To be a Jew means to live within the tension between heaven and earth, creation and revelation, the world that is and the world we are called on to make; between exile and home, and between the universality of the human condition and the particularity of Jewish identity. Jews don’t stand still except when standing before God. The universe, from galaxies to subatomic particles, is in constant motion, and so is the Jewish soul.

We are, we believe, an unstable combination of dust of the earth and breath of God, and this calls on us constantly to make decisions, choices, that will make us grow to be as big as our ideals, or, if we choose wrongly, make us shrivel into small, petulant creatures obsessed by trivia. Life as a journey means striving each day to be greater than we were the day before, individually and collectively.

If the concept of a journey is a central metaphor of Jewish life, what in this regard is the difference between Abraham, Isaac and Jacob?

Abraham’s life is framed by two journeys both of which use the phrase Lech lecha, “undertake a journey”, once in Genesis 12 when he was told to leave his land and father’s house, the

other in Genesis 22:2 at the Binding of Isaac, when he was told, “Take your son, the only one you love – Isaac – and go [lech lecha] to the region of Moriah.”

What is so moving about Abraham is that he goes, immediately and without question, despite the fact that both journeys are heart-wrenching in human terms. In the first he must leave his father. In the second he must let go of his son. He has to say goodbye to the past and risk saying farewell to the future. Abraham is pure faith. He loves God and trusts Him absolutely. Not everyone can achieve that kind of faith. It is almost superhuman.

Isaac is the opposite. It is as if Abraham, knowing the emotional sacrifices he has had to make, knowing too the trauma Isaac must have felt at the Binding, seeks to protect his son as far as lies within his power. He makes sure that Isaac does not leave the Holy Land (see Genesis 24:6 – that is why Abraham does not let him travel to find a wife). Isaac’s one journey (to the land of the Philistines, in Genesis 26) is limited and local. Isaac’s life is a brief respite from the nomadic existence Abraham and Jacob both experience.

Jacob is different again. What makes him unique is that he has his most intense encounters with God – they are the most dramatic in the whole book of Genesis – in the midst of the journey, alone, at night, far from home, fleeing from one danger to the next, from Esau to Laban on the outward journey, from Laban to Esau on his homecoming.

In the midst of the first he has the blazing epiphany of the ladder stretching from earth to heaven, with angels ascending and descending, moving him to say on waking, “God is truly in this place, but I did not know it . . . This must be God’s house and this the gate to heaven” (Gen. 28:16-17). None of the other patriarchs, not even Moses, has a vision quite like this.

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On the second, in our Parsha, he has the haunting, enigmatic wrestling match with the man/angel/God, which leaves him limping but permanently transformed – the only person in the Torah to receive from God an entirely new name, Israel, which may mean, “one who has wrestled with God and man” or “one who has become a prince [sar] before God”.

What is fascinating is that Jacob's meetings with angels are described by the same verb – *וַיַּגַּד* - 'p-g-'a, (Gen. 28:11, and Gen. 32:2) which means “a chance encounter”, as if they took Jacob by surprise, which they clearly they did. Jacob's most spiritual moments are ones he did not plan. He was thinking of other things, about what he was leaving behind and what lay ahead of him. He was, as it were, “surprised by God.”

Jacob is someone with whom we can identify. Not everyone can aspire to the loving faith and total trust of an Abraham, or to the seclusion of an Isaac. But Jacob is someone we understand. We can feel his fear, understand his pain at the tensions in his family, and sympathise with his deep longing for a life of quietude and peace (the Sages say about the opening words of next week's Parsha that “Jacob longed to live at peace, but was immediately thrust into the troubles of Joseph”).

The point is not just that Jacob is the most human of the patriarchs but rather that at the depths of his despair he is lifted to the greatest heights of spirituality. He is the man who encounters angels. He is the person surprised by God. He is the one who, at the very moments he feels most alone, discovers that he is not alone, that God is with him, that he is accompanied by angels.

Jacob's message defines Jewish existence. It is our destiny to travel. We are the restless people. Rare and brief have been our interludes of peace. But in the dark of night we have found ourselves lifted by a force of faith we did not know we had, surrounded by angels we did not know were there. If we walk in the way of Jacob, we too may find ourselves surprised by God.

[1] The Maharatz Chajes explains this traditionally 'black and white' view of Jacob and Esau in the *Mavo ha-Aggadot* printed at the beginning of *Eyn Yaakov*.

Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

“And Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him, and they wept.” (Genesis 33:4)

Years ago, a college classmate provocatively announced that he planned to name his first son “after the most maligned figure in the entire Torah: Esau.”

Let's consider Esau's defense. After we are introduced to Esau as Isaac's favorite son since ‘the hunt was in his [Isaac's] mouth’ (Genesis 30:28), we are immediately taken to the fateful scene where Jacob is cooking lentil soup when Esau came home exhausted from the hunt. The hungry hunter asks for some food, but Jacob will only agree to give his brother food in exchange for the birthright. Who is taking advantage of whom? Is not a cunning Jacob taking advantage of an innocent Esau?

Then there is the more troubling question of the stolen blessing. Even without going into the details of how Jacob pretends to be someone he's not, Esau emerges as an honest figure deserving of our sympathy. After all, Esau's desire to personally carry out his father's will meant that he needed a long time to prepare the meat himself. Indeed, it was Esau's diligence in tending to his father that allowed enough time to pass to make it possible for his younger brother to get to Isaac's tent first. Surely, Rebecca must have realized the profound nature of Esau's commitment to his father, for she masterminded Jacob's plan.

On his return from the field, Esau realizes that Jacob has already received the blessing originally meant for him. His response cannot fail to touch the reader; poignantly, Esau begs of his father, ‘Have you but one blessing, my father? Bless me, even me also, O my father.’ And Esau lifted up his voice and wept” (Genesis 27:38).

But it is the beginning of Vayishlach that clinches our pro-Esau case. Jacob finally returns to his ancestral home after an absence of twenty years. Understandably, Jacob is terrified of his brother's potential reaction, and so in preparation, Jacob sends messengers ahead with exact instructions as to how to address Esau. Informed of the impending approach of Esau's army of four hundred men, he divides his household into two camps, so that he's prepared for the worst. But what actually happens defies Jacob's expectations: Esau is overjoyed and thrilled to see him. The past is the past. ‘And Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him, and they wept’ (Genesis 33:4).

The defense rests. Thus described, Esau hardly seems worthy of the official censure of Jewish history as the personification of the anti-Jew. In fact, my college friend had good reason to name his son after Esau.

So, why are our Sages so critical of him? I would suggest our analysis so far overlooks something central in Esau's character. Yes, there are positive characteristics of Esau to be found in many Jews across the Diaspora. Many are aggressive, self-made people who weep

Likutei Divrei Torah

when they meet a long-lost Jewish brother from Ethiopia or Russia. They have respect for their parents and grandparents, tending to their physical needs and even reciting – or hiring someone to recite – the traditional mourner's Kaddish for a full year after their death.

Financial support and solidarity missions to the State of Israel, combined with their vocal commitment to Jewry and Israel, reflect a highly developed sense of Abrahamic (Jewish) identity, just like Esau seems to have. Esau feels Abrahamic identity with every fiber of his being.

But when it comes to commitment to Abrahamic (Jewish) continuity, a willingness to secure a Jewish future, many of our Jewish siblings are found to be wanting – just like Esau. Undoubtedly, one of the most important factors in keeping us ‘a people apart’ and preventing total Jewish assimilation into the majority culture, has been our unique laws of kashrut. Refusing to break bread with our non-Jewish work colleagues and neighbors has imposed a certain social distance that has been crucial for maintaining our identity. But Esau is willing to give up his birthright for a bowl of lentil soup. Hasn't the road to modern Jewry's assimilation been paved with the T-bone steaks and the lobsters that tease the tongues lacking the self-discipline to say no to a tasty dish? Like Esau, the overwhelming majority of Diaspora Jewry has sold its birthright for a cheeseburger.

Esau's name means fully-made, complete. He exists in the present tense. He has no commitment to past or future. He wants the freedom of the hunt and the ability to follow the scent wherever it takes him. He is emotional about his identity, but he is not willing to make sacrifices for its continuity. Primarily, it is on the surface, as an external cloak that is only skin-deep. That's why it doesn't take more than a skin-covering for Jacob to enter his father's tent and take on the character of Esau. Indeed, Esau is even called Edom, red, after the external color of the lentil soup. Esau has no depth; he is Mr. Superficial!

And what's true for a bowl of soup is true for his choice of wives. Esau marries Hittite women. And that causes his parents to feel a ‘bitterness of spirit’ (Genesis 27:35). No wonder! The decision of many modern Jews to ‘marry out’ has reached an American average of 62%! The ‘bitterness of spirit’ continues to be felt in many families throughout the Diaspora. Even those who marry out and continue to profess a strong Jewish identity cannot commit to Jewish continuity. Perhaps Esau even mouthed the argument I've heard from those I've tried to dissuade from marrying out. ‘But she has a Jewish name! She even looks Jewish! ’He may have said, ‘Her name is Yehudit [literally meaning a Jewess;

from Judah]; she has a wonderful fragrance [Basmat means perfume] '(Genesis 26:34). But once again, Esau only looks at externals!

The Person in the Parsha

Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

He Remembers the Kindnesses of the Fathers

This phrase occurs in the very first blessing of the Amidah, the eighteen blessings commonly referred to as Shemoneh Esreh, the centerpiece of the prayer service recited in the synagogue at least three times every day. The blessing praises the Patriarchs, Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, and calls upon the Almighty to take account of their benevolent deeds and to bring us the redemption that we seek as the descendants of the men whose entire lives were models of exemplary loving-kindness.

The blessing is based upon the concept of *zechut avot*, "the merit of the fathers." Children benefit from the good deeds of their parents, and it is legitimate to beseech the Almighty to take note, as it were, of the *mitzvot* and *maasim tovim* of one's parents, of their adherence to His commandments and their performance of good deeds.

Calling upon *zechut avot* is especially warranted when one is in an *et tzarah*, extremely dire straits. It is then that one feels utterly helpless and dares not seek divine intervention based on his or her own good deeds. Praying for the merit of the good deeds of our ancestors is then justified and helps assure rescue and salvation.

We find an example of a prayer relying upon *zechut avot* in this week's Torah portion, *Vayishlach* (Genesis 32:3-36:43). The person in the parsha who offers this prayer is Yaakov himself, who depends upon the merits of his father and grandfather, Yitzchak and Avraham. It is a powerful prayer, motivated by Yaakov's confrontation with his brother Esav, who, years earlier, threatened to murder him, and who now has his opportunity to execute his dastardly plan. Here are Yaakov's words, and note how the prayer conveys Yaakov's desperation:

...God of my father Avraham and God of my father Yitzchak, LORD, You who said to me, "Go back to the land where you were born and I will deal well with you." I am unworthy of all the kindnesses and the faithfulness that You have bestowed upon Your servant... Rescue me, I pray, from my brother's hand, from the hand of Esav. I am afraid that he will come and kill us all, mothers and children alike. (Genesis 32:9-11)

Yaakov's intent is apparent. He is petitioning the Almighty to defend him against his murderous brother. In doing so, he hopes that

the fact that he is a son and a grandson of Yitzchak and Avraham will stand him in good stead. He seems confident that the merits of his ancestors will accrue to his cause, and he will survive, and perhaps even overcome, Esav.

It is here that I have the privilege of sharing with you a question posed by a Chassidic master of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. His name was Rabbi Avraham Bornstein, and he was the rabbi of a town called Sochachov, Poland. He authored several works, including one called *Avnei Nezer*, a collection of his halachic responsa which also contains much of his ideology and personal anecdotes. He is generally referred to as "the" *Avnei Nezer* or as the *Sochachover Rebbe*.

He is troubled by Yaakov's prayer, the one referenced above. After all, Yaakov seems sure that he has Avraham and Yitzchak on his side, whereas Esav is denied that access to his ancestors even through his prayers. But, as the *Sochachover Rebbe* insists, is Esav not also a son of Avraham and Yitzchak? Is he not entitled to call upon the *zechut avot* of his father and grandfather? Does he not enjoy the exact same ancestral rewards of which Yaakov is so certain?

As is often the custom of rabbinic commentators, the Rebbe prefaces his answer with another question. "Why," he asks, "was Yaakov so frightened by his encounter with Esav? Did Yaakov not have the Almighty's own promise that He would keep Yaakov safe?"

To that, the Rebbe responds in a most interesting fashion. He suggests that Yaakov feared Esav because of Esav's two great merits. For one thing, Esav dwelled in *Eretz Yisrael*, in the Land of Israel. Just residing in the Holy Land is in and of itself a *mitzvah*. Yaakov had been absent from *Eretz Yisrael* for quite a few years and had just returned there at that point.

Secondly, Esav had cared for his father Yitzchak in a manner far more impressive than did Yaakov. Esav thus had the additional merit of *kibud av*, of honoring one's father, one of the Ten Commandments and a very special *mitzvah* indeed.

The Rebbe continues his line of thought by pointing out that the holy Land of Israel does not tolerate residents who commit idolatry, adultery, and cause bloodshed. Perhaps Esav, who committed all three cardinal sins, was denied the merit of dwelling in *Eretz Yisrael*. The Torah itself emphasizes that the Holy Land "spits out" its evil inhabitants.

Likutei Divrei Torah

The Rebbe resolves this difficulty by magnifying the *mitzvah* of *kibud av*. Honoring one's father who himself resides in the Land of Israel, as Yitzchak did, allows even sinners of the worst kind to remain in the Holy Land and not be dispelled therefrom.

Why, then, did Yaakov not consider Esav to be entitled to *zechut avot*? It is here that the Rebbe resorts to an answer he heard from his father-in law, who was the famous "Kotzker," Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk. The Kotzker provides us with a basic definition of the limits of *zechut avot*. "Zechut avot only applies to those who follow the path of their ancestors." Despite dwelling in *Eretz Yisrael*, and despite all the respect he showed his father, Esav most decidedly did not follow Yitzchak's path of righteousness and piety. He could not access his father's and grandfather's merits because he failed to emulate their ways of life.

Yaakov did model himself after his father and grandfather to the best of his ability. That entitled him to call upon the God of Yitzchak and the God of Avraham in his prayers.

This is a lesson for us all, especially at the current juncture of our history. We must strive to emulate our Patriarchs and Matriarchs and thereby qualify to vie for their *zechut avot v'imahot*.

I conclude with the poetic translation of one of the blessings subsequent to the morning recitation of the *Shema*. It was composed by the late, and sorely lamented, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks:

"His words live and persist,
"faithful and desirable
"for ever and all time.
"So they were for our ancestors,
"as they are for us,
"and as they will be for our children
"and all our generations
"and for all future generations
"of the seed of Israel, Your servants."

Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

The Key to Yaakov's Gratitude is Hayarden HaZEH

Yaakov thanked Hashem for his "rags to riches" success over the past twenty years of his life by saying, "I have been diminished by all the kindnesses and by all the truth that You have done for Your servant; for with my staff I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps" (Bereshis 32:11) One word in Yaakov's statement seems rather strange.

Yaakov notes that he crossed Hayarden hazeh (this Jordan River). Whenever the word *zeh* is used in Chumash, it connotes that the speaker is pointing at the object in question, for example, *zeh K-eli v'avneihu* (This is my G-d

and I will glorify Him). Unless we assume that Yaakov was standing on the banks of the Yarden now and was pointing at "this Yarden," why does the pasuk over here use the word *zeh*?

The answer to this question is the following: The key for a person to be *makir tova* (recognize when a favor has been done for him) is remembering the situation before he merited this favor. A person should never take what he has for granted and think "this is what I have now and this is the way it has always been." It behooves us to try to think back and remember "what it once was like."

A person may have been suffering terribly. He went to the doctor and had a successful operation. Now he is a new person. In the beginning, he is appreciative of the doctor – the surgeon who saved him from all his pain and suffering, significantly improving his quality of life. But with the passage of time, a person may forget how it was before the operation.

Consider knee replacement surgery. When people get older, it often becomes necessary to have their knees replaced. Knees can become arthritic and can get to a point where the person cannot walk. It is simply too painful to walk. Today, Baruch Hashem, people can have knee replacement surgery, where surgeons can put in an artificial knee and the person can go from not being able to walk to even playing tennis again. After the operation, a person feels: "Ah! Gevaldik!" But one, two, or three years later, he may take for granted his ability to walk normally again. The key to maintaining a sense of gratitude is to remember "I was not able to walk and now I can even play tennis." That is how a person is *makir tova*.

Yaakov Avinu could say "for with my staff I crossed this Jordan River" even when he was not standing next to the Yarden because he always remembered "what I was like before." "I was a fugitive. My brother wanted to kill me. I literally had nothing to my name. I came to Rochel empty handed. All I had was my walking stick!" That image was permanently imbued in Yaakov's memory, so much so, that it was as if he was standing by the Yarden, as he was about to leave Eretz Yisrael. Yaakov replayed that scene over and over, such that he could always feel "Katonti m'kol hachasdim..." (I am unworthy of all the kindness...)

Why Did the Brothers Wait Until Parshas Vayeshev to Become Jealous of Yosef?

The pasuk says, "Yaakov raised his eyes and saw, and behold, Eisav was coming, and with him, four hundred men – so he divided the children among Leah, Rachel, and the two

handmaids. He put the handmaids and their children first, and Leah and her children later, and Rachel and Yosef last." (Bereshis 33:1-2). Eisav is approaching Yaakov. Yaakov splits the camps. He positions the handmaidens and their sons first, followed by Leah and her children, followed in the rear by Rochel and Yosef. It would seem that the most expendable members of his entourage were placed first and the most cherished were placed in the back.

The Vilna Maggid asks the following question: Next week's parsha contains the famous story of Yaakov showing favoritism towards Yosef by giving him a *kesones passim*. This led to Yosef's brothers becoming jealous of him, and it ultimately led to the entire Galus Mitzrayim (Egyptian Exile). The Gemara learns out from this incident that a father should never show favoritism towards any of his children. The Vilna Maggid asked, why were the brothers jealous when Yosef received his *kesones passim* but they were apparently not jealous when he was placed last in the family configuration to best protect him from Eisav and his approaching army? No one said, "Hey, what am I – chopped liver?" "What am I – cannon fodder?" We don't see them objecting to this here. This would appear to be a much bigger deal. A person can live just fine without a *kesones passim*. However, the configuration when they met Eisav was potentially a matter of life and death!

The Vilna Maggid gives three answers to this question. For my purposes today, I am only going to mention one of these answers: The brothers understood that since Rochel, the prime wife of Yaakov, only had one child, it was necessary to afford maximum protection to an "only son." Similarly, in the Israeli Army today, an "only son" is not placed in a combat unit. This is a long-practiced and well-understood plan of action. The brothers were not going to protest Yaakov's urge to protect an "only son."

However, the situation "next week" in Parshas Vayeshev is a different story. There was no excuse for Yaakov to single out Yosef and dress him in a special garment that he felt that only this son and not his other sons deserved to wear. This is the answer of the Vilna Maggid. I saw that the sefer *Me'Orei Ohr* raises the same question and offers a different answer. He says as follows: Yaakov Avinu had just come back from Lavan, where he had his eleven children. He knew that the environment in the house of Lavan was spiritually toxic. Yaakov did everything in his power to make sure that his children would not be influenced by Lavan's home. That was his goal in life – to create the "Shivtei K-ah" (Tribes of the Almighty) – and he would do everything under

Likutei Divrei Torah

the sun to inoculate them not to be influenced by their grandfather, Lavan.

Now Yaakov meets Eisav with his four hundred men. Yaakov does not know what is going to happen. He does not know whether Eisav is going to insist that they stay together. Yaakov realized that his children were all facing potential danger because he was going from a toxic environment to another environment that was also hostile to them. He feared that the twenty years he invested in creating the "Shivtei K-ah" and protecting them may all go down the drain.

At this point, the other shvatim were already older children. However, Yosef was still a little child, perhaps four or five years old. Most of Yaakov's sons were already teenagers, who already knew how to take care of themselves. Yosef was a little kid. "What is going to be with my poor little Yossele? Yossele doesn't know any better. He is a kindergarten baby." That is why Yaakov put Yosef last – to protect him. He was not being protected from being killed. Regarding the physical danger, Yaakov relied on his promise from Hashem that "I will be with You wherever you go." (Bereshis 25:21). However, regarding "ruchniyus" (spirituality), Hashem does not make any promises. "All is in the hands of Heaven – except for fear of Heaven" (Berachos 33b). Ruchniyus is up to us. Yaakov felt that he needed to protect his little Yosef from the spiritual dangers that contact with Eisav and his army might present. As a little child, Yosef was most vulnerable to being spiritually contaminated by outside influences. Therefore, the other shevatim had no problem with their youngest brother being placed at the back of the camp.

Dvar Torah: Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

What Will Our Monuments Look Like?

We are familiar with the concept of a *Matzevah*, a stone slab which sadly covers a grave. But intriguingly and significantly in Parshat Vayishlach, we're told about Rachel's tragic passing during childbirth.

We're told that Jacob, her husband, built a *Matzevah*, a monument over her grave. The Torah describes it as "Hi matzevet kevurat-Rachel," which means "This is the *Matzevah*, the monument over the burial place of Rachel."

But why use the word "kevurat" (burial place)?

Why not simply say, "This is the monument over Rachel"?

Let me explain why.

The Talmud tells us, "Ein osin nefashot latzadikim, divreihem hen hen zichronan" –

"We don't need a grand monument for those who have passed away, because their words and deeds are their legacy."

The reason for this is that a person's legacy is not confined to a physical marker. It can't be encapsulated in mere stone. Instead, a person's impact continues far beyond the material world. Just as you can engrave letters into stone, and those letters remain for a long time, so too when a good person influences others, those lessons become internalised and passed on.

In this way, a person's legacy endures through the generations.

This is precisely what happened with Rachel. The Torah describes the Matzevah as being over her burial place, not just because it marks where she is buried, but to emphasise that Rachel's legacy endures. Her memory and her lessons continue to inspire us, even beyond her death.

The purpose of the memorial is not simply to say, "This is where she is buried," but to remind us that Rachel lives on in the world. We continue to learn from her life and her example.

So, what will our monuments look like?

Sir Christopher Wren, during his lifetime, wrote the words for his own epitaph. His message reflects the teaching we find in this week's Parsha.

It reads: "If you seek his monument, just look around."

Ohr Torah Stone Dvar Torah

Prayer and Preparation

Shlomit Solberg

It is truly inspiring to see how the Torah, gifted to us so many generations ago, continues to resonate with relevance and profound meaning in our lives. A brief reflection on this week's portion reveals the abundance of wisdom we can draw from the Torah and the conduct of our forefathers—wisdom that strengthens and guides us even in contemporary times.

We cannot overlook the ongoing war and the complex social challenges we have been enduring for over a year. Let us therefore turn to the portion, seeking practical lessons to help us navigate through this demanding period.

The first aspect I wish to examine is Yaakov's preparation for his meeting with Esav. Yaakov fervently turns to prayer, entreating the Almighty for Divine protection: "And Yaakov said, 'O God of my father Avraham and God of my father Yitzchak... Save me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the

hand of Esav'" (Bereshit 32:10-12). Yet, while Yaakov places great faith in prayer, he does not rely solely on heavenly mercy. He recognizes the necessity of taking action, planning strategically, and preparing thoroughly for this crucial encounter.

To this end, Yaakov divides his camp into two groups and organizes a gift offering for Esav. These thoughtful preparations reveal a carefully crafted strategy, demonstrating his intent to approach the meeting with both readiness and composure. Yaakov exemplifies a harmonious balance of deep faith in the Almighty and diligent human effort. He understands that while prayer and trust in God are indispensable, human initiative and responsibility are equally vital. By taking proactive steps, he seeks to protect his family and ensure he is as prepared as possible for the confrontation.

This portion also offers a powerful lesson on addressing internal divisions within Am Yisrael. At times, the disagreements among us can appear insurmountable, yet at their core, we share a collective yearning for good.

I am referring, of course, to the meeting between Yaakov and Esav. Their long-standing rift is well-known, yet Yaakov approaches Esav with sensitivity and a genuine desire for reconciliation. He begins by bowing before Esav—a clear gesture of peace and goodwill. This act opens the door for Esav to embrace Yaakov, and in that moment, both brothers recognize their shared longing for good.

While their differences and divides do not vanish, there is mutual acceptance. Today, it may feel as though the divides within Israeli society are so deep that we speak entirely different languages. Yet, often, all it takes is sitting down, engaging in honest dialogue, and recognizing that from every perspective, we all seek what is good. Admittedly, the paths to achieving that good may differ, and each of us holds distinct views on the way forward. But the shared understanding that everyone's ultimate wish is for good can serve as a powerful unifying force.

I will conclude with a final reflection—one that is poignant yet brimming with hope. The tragic death of Rachel in this portion represents profound sorrow and loss. Yet Rachel was buried on the road, and this was no coincidence. She remains there to accompany Am Yisrael throughout our exiles and tribulations, praying for us in our darkest moments. It is in her merit that the Almighty extends His promise in the book of Yirmeyahu:

Likutei Divrei Torah

"Thus says the Lord: Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for there is reward for your labor, says the Lord, and they shall return from the land of the enemy" (Yirmeyahu 31:15).

With heartfelt prayers for the safe return of all hostages and soldiers, and for the complete recovery of the wounded.

Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

Rabbi Aryeh Lebowitz

The Tripple Battle of Tzitzis

One of the most challenging and enigmatic episodes in Sefer Bereishis is the battle between Yaakov and saro shel Esav. While we believe, with the possible exception of Sefer Iyov, that all of the narratives in Tanach are actual events that occurred, some rishonim believe that this battle was not a real event, in the physical sense, and is purely symbolic. We don't even understand how it is possible to fight a malach, let alone to defeat one.

We know that ma'asch avos siman labonim, and therefore there is clearly significant symbolism for future generations in whatever happened in this episode. To understand what that symbolism is, there are at least three questions we must ask. First, in what way does this battle symbolize the eternal battle between the descendants of Yaakov and our adversaries? Second, why does this battle only occur when, "vayivaser Yaakov l'vado", when Yaakov is alone? And third, what is the meaning of, "vayiga b'kaf yerech Yaakov", i.e. where is the vulnerability that can expose us to harm?

Rav Yosef Nechemya Kornitzer, quoting the Chasam Sofer in the name of the Shelah Hakadosh, says that the word טר"י is an acronym for טהרא, קדש, רוח- the ocean, the firmament and the throne" and, "vayiga b'kaf yerech Yaakov" means that saro shel Esav was able to do his damage in the kuf of the word טר, namely the throne. However, the Chasam Sofer did not explain at all what this means. Rav Yosef Nechmya develops the idea as follows:

The three items alluded to in the word טר, i.e. the ocean, the firmament and the throne, appear when the Gemara (Menachos 43) discusses the value and meaning of techeiles: "R' Meir says, 'what makes techeiles unique among all colors? It reminds us of the ocean, which in turn reminds us of the firmament which in turn reminds us of the kisei hakavod'. The obvious question on this Gemara is why do we need the intermediary steps? Why not just say that the techeiles reminds us of the kisei hakavod? After all, the goal of always seeing the kisei hakavod, of "shivisi Hashem l'negdi tamid" is what the Rema identifies at the beginning of Shulchan Aruch as the best

formula to successfully observe Torah and mitzvos.

Rav Yosef Nechemya suggests that Chazal took their cue from the parsha of tzitzis which seems to contain three extra themes and phrases when describing what we will remember when we see our tzitzis. It doesn't simply say, "הַלְקִיכְם וְאַתֶּם אֶתְּנוּ וְזַרְהַתֶּם כִּי אַנְּיִךְ", rather it includes "לְמַעַן, וְלֹא תָהַוו אָחָר לְבָכְבָמָה" and "אַלְקִיכְם אֲשֶׁר הַצְּצִצִּת 'אַנְּיִךְ הָוֶה וְהַיִתְּמַמְּשָׁה... חַכְמָה... אַתֶּם מְאַרְצָנָצִים". The seemingly unnecessary components of this parsha add to the series of items that seeing the techeiles is meant to remind us of, and these components are meant to caution us against threats to our avodas Hashem.

First, we must always remember "ואהבת לרעך כמוך", which Hillel told a ger (Shabbos 31) is the foundation of the entire Torah. Proper fulfillment of this mitzvah involves viewing whatever Hashem has blessed us with as opportunities to share with others. My money has no value if it can't enrich the lives of others. My wisdom has no value if I can't use it to teach others. The mishna (Avos 1) gives three pieces of advice which flow one from another: "הו מותנים בדין ה' והעמידו תלמידים הרבה, והעמידו סיג' לחרה ועשה סיג' לחרה". Judges must take other people's money very seriously and not flippantly issue a verdict (הו מותנים בדין) and must share their wealth with others (העמידו תלמידים הרבה), and only then will they have succeeded in making a סיג' לחרה. When one understands that he is responsible to share his gifts with others, he will be able to protect his Torah learning. For this message, we look at the Yam, which receives an abundance of water but never overflows because its water is shared and flows out for others to use. Chazal saw this message in "לא תהוו אחריו ללבכם ואחריו עיניכם" – don't look to indulge, instead look to share.

Second, we need to distance ourselves from improper influences. Particularly, after having internalized the first message of אהבת הבריות we must be very careful that we can distinguish between those who will positively affect us and those who will do the opposite. Chazal understand "ובבדיל אתכם מן העמים ליהוו לוי" to indicate that as long as we are מובדל מכם – associated with Hashem. Chazal tell us to look at the קדרון to learn this lesson, as its purpose is described in בראות being ליהוו בין המים ליהוו תחנותים; we all need a personal מומחה to separate the בני עלייה from the תחנותים. That is why the פרשת הצעית reminds us *וְהַיִתְמַמְּשָׁה...* Our love of others cannot be permitted to affect our קדשנה.

Finally, a powerful force in determining our outlook is "consensus". We tend to believe that if the masses believe or value something, they must be correct. The mashal is "kol ha-maon ke-kol

שְׁנִי". However, a ben aliyah who knows the truth must be able to withstand the general consensus and fight for what is correct. This is the ma'aloh of Avraham Avinu who was persecuted terribly for his beliefs, to the point of being thrown into a fire. In fact, Hashem Himself demonstrated this middah when He saved us from the attacking Egyptians against the protests of all of the angels who argued that we were no better than the Egyptians. This is the third reminder of the techeiles – that of the kisei hakavod. It is not just a kisei, but a kisei hakavod because He doesn't require the kavod of others, as His throne is inherently kavod. The passuk in parsha of tzitzis tells us to remember "אשר הוֹצָאֵת אֶתְכֶם מִצְרָיִם" – Hashem only took us out of Mitzrayim because He knew to ignore the protests of the angels.

The symbolism of Yaakov being alone is not an indication of his vulnerability, but of his strength. Because he had the strength to be alone and still remain true to his beliefs, he is able to withstand the challenge of Esav. Chazal (Chullin 91) allude to these messages when they say "וַיַּאֲבַק אִישׁ עָמוֹ מַלְמֵד שְׁעַלְתָּה אֶבֶךְ עַד כְּסָא הַכְּבוּד".

At the very end of the battle, which will ultimately be a winning battle for the Jewish people, "וַיַּעֲגֹג בְּכָרְךָ יְעַקְּבָךְ" – there will be vulnerability in the "כָּרְךָ", the sense of kisei, the sense of Jewish pride, of valuing what is truly valuable even if the world doesn't see its value. We will see Judaism associated with social liberalism because that is the consensus of the world. But as we approach Chanukah, we remember that association with the kisei means that we celebrate "רְבָבָם בִּדְמַעַשִּׁים" – we ignore the masses who may impose foreign values, and we instead stand up and say, "אָלֵי מֵי לְהָ" as those whose dedication is purely to Hashem.

Mizrachi Dvar Torah

Rav Doron Perez

Confronting Our Demons

Ya'akov sends messengers to Eisav that he is coming back – but why does he do this? Does he really want this confrontation? Ya'akov reveals then that he is afraid and pained – but he was the one who initiated the confrontation, so why is he so scared?

Ya'akov has had enough of running away. All his life he has been running away, and he finally understood that you can't run away from your problems, you have to own the consequences of your actions. He understands that he needs to confront his demons.

He then has a confrontation with a strange 'ish – 'who fights him the entire night – who we are told is Eisav's spiritual force. He has to confront Eisav in his heart, and only then do we have his transformation. The angel changes

Likutei Divrei Torah

his name to Yisrael – meaning the one who confronts their demons and overcomes them.

Yes, when you confront your enemies and demons you sometimes get injured, as Ya'akov did – that is the price of confrontation, but the price of deception and avoidance is even worse. Therefore, he limped for the rest of his life, and we as Jews are limping to an extent since then. May Hashem bless us to be able to confront those we need to confront, without injury and with blessing.

May we always make an impact wherever we are, always leaving every place much better for us having been there.

Torah.Org Dvar Torah

by Rabbi Label Lam

A Brotherly Embrace

And he (Yaakov) went ahead of them and prostrated himself to the ground seven times, until he came close to his brother. And Esav ran toward him and embraced him, and he fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. (Breishis 33:3-4)

Yaakov just dodged a big bullet. He somehow managed to defuse a giant and potentially destructive conflict. In the end, Esav, his mortal enemy, hugged him and kissed him. How in the world did that happen? Maybe it was that he was prepared for war, or that he prayed, or that he sent gifts preemptively, or maybe the combination of all three. Perhaps it was all decided in the surrealistic wrestling match that preceded the confrontation. It's not unusual that wars are won in advance. It could be there is another critical factor to notice here. The Chizkuni, in his commentaries on tractate Kiddushin, spells out a few fascinating Gematrias that are not only cute and interesting hints, but they help tell and explain the depth of the story.

Abaye heard that Rav Acha bar Ya'akov was coming. There was a certain demon in the study hall of Abaye, which was so powerful that when two people would enter, they would be harmed, even during the day. Abaye said to the people of the town: Do not give Rav Acha bar Ya'akov lodging [ushpiza] so that he will be forced to spend the night in the study hall. Since Rav Acha bar Ya'akov is a righteous man, perhaps a miracle will occur on his behalf and he will kill the demon. Rav Aha found no place to spend the night, and he entered and spent the night in that study hall of the Sages. The demon appeared to him like a serpent with seven heads. Rav Acha bar Ya'akov began to pray, and with every bow that he bowed one of the demon's heads fell off, until it eventually died. The next day Rav Acha said to the townspeople: If a miracle had not occurred, you would have placed me in danger.

There is plenty to chew on here and discuss but what is fascinating and relevant to us is how he vanquished this seven-headed beast. Somehow, just by bowing in prayer, the demon was beheaded. So too, by Yaakov, as he approached Essav, he bowed seven times until he reached him, until he came close to his brother. There is a parallel here.

The Chizkuni points out that the name Yitzchok is the numerical value 208, which is 8 times 26, the numerical value of the Name of HASHEM. The numerical value of Yaakov, 182, is 7 times the Name of HASHEM, 26.

Now, Essav is 1 time the Name of HASHEM plus seven times the word for spiritual contamination, TAME', which is 50. 50 times 7 plus 26. It seems there really was an essential goodness and depth in Essav but it was covered up by 7 layers of materialism. Seven is always representative of this world which is made and completed in seven days. Now what would it take to reach that holy point, that common brotherly core!? Yaakov bows seven times, and each bow removed an outer layer, until he approached not only the man, the legend, the personality Essav, but until he reached "his brother". That was the magic moment when Essav, who would rather have stabbed him, hugged and kissed him.

There are incredible spiritual dynamics and psychological implications at play here. Yaakov's and Rav Acha's bowing were not just a symbolic- gestures. It was an act of self-nullification to the Ultimate Source of all being, HASHEM. At some point, it was as if they hardly existed, like a candle in the enormity of the sun.

We have all seen the unfortunate result of a dog or a deer that did not make it across a highway. Sometimes, we espy a deer perched on the edge of a busy thruway and we know what the ugly conclusion will be. Yet, a paper bag or a balloon on the highway dances gracefully and artfully dodges all trucks and busses and cars with ease. What's going on!? The balloon is light and the bag is empty. Place a pebble in the bag and see what happens. It will be shredded instantly. Yaakov emptied his ego out entirely.

I did this exercise last night. I called upon one student to stand next to me. I put up my hand and he put his hand against mine instinctively. As I pushed, he pushed back harder. Then I put my hand up and he put his hand against mine. I gently dropped my hand to my side. So did he. As I did not strive with him, he did not push back against me. As I disarm, so does he. The natural, default response then is, remarkably, a brotherly embrace.

Rabbi Dr. Norman J. Lamm's Derashot Ledorot

Sincerely Yours

Hypocrisy is rightly a despised trait, and the word "hypocrite" a harsh and contemptuous epithet reserved for vile people. It is all the more unfortunate, therefore, that the popular condemnation of insincerity is not always matched by a correspondingly universal abstention from this vice in the affairs of man in society. Every day many thousands of letters are written in which the writers employ varied devices ranging from subtle deviousness to outright deceit, and compound their crime by signing the letters, "I am, sincerely yours...."

What is a hypocrite? According to the dictionary definition it is one who pretends to be something other than what he really is (usually one who pretends to be better than he really is) or to feel what he does not really feel. Hypocrisy is feigning, acting a part, pretending. Perhaps a better word is the Hebrew tzeviut – literally: coloring, dyeing. Hypocrisy, then, is giving an impression which does not correspond with the facts. It is the incommensurateness of the inner fact and the outer appearance.

Our prophets stormed against hypocrisy. Our rabbis thundered against it. The Talmud quotes King Yannai advising his wife, Queen Salome, "Do not be afraid either of the Pharisees or of those who are not Pharisees; fear only those hypocrites who act like Pharisees, who behave like Zimri (an ignoble person), and who expect to be rewarded like Pinchas (the saintly priest of Israel)" (Sota 22b).

In that case, we are presented with a problem by the sidra. We read, in very few lines, that Reuben sinned with Bilha, the concubine of his father Jacob. If the Bible said so, it is the truth. Yet the Talmud (Megilla 25b) advises us that the story of Reuben should be read but not translated. It was once the custom that the Torah would be read as we read it, and then one person would be assigned to translate it publicly into Aramaic, the vernacular at that time. However, an exception was made of this story of Reuben, and when one rabbi insisted that it be read in the Hebrew but left untranslated, he was congratulated by his colleagues. But is this not insincere, even hypocritical? Is not the suppression of the truth hypocrisy, and is not every instance of hypocrisy deplorable?

The answer is no, it is not hypocrisy or insincerity, although it suppresses the broadcast of a true event. And, if one should insist that this is hypocrisy, then with full respect to all our honorable prejudices, certain forms of such insincerity are not malicious but wholesome and healthy. Not in all ways must one's appearances be thoroughly equivalent

Likutei Divrei Torah

and correspond to his inner thoughts. To speak a conscious untruth aiming at personal gain or creating a favorable image and false impression is a foul act. But to refrain from telling all I know and consider to be true, either because I am unsure how that truth will be interpreted, or out of respect for the sensitivity and feelings of others – that is an act of civility, not insincerity.

Thus, in the affair of Reuben there were many mitigating factors, and varying interpretations are possible, as indeed many of them appear in the Talmud. A direct translation into the vernacular is, therefore, misleading and the cause of much misunderstanding. Furthermore, it is bad enough that the Torah preserves a sacred record of Reuben's misdeed, and there is no need to add salt to the wounds of a cherished forebear even if he is no longer in the world of the living.

It is a sin to lie; it is no mitzva to tell all I know, even if it is the truth. There is a law in the Shulchan Arukh that if a man has, heaven forbid, lost a close relative for whom he must mourn, but he is unaware of his loss, then one ought not to apprise him of it within thirty days of the death, for then he would be obligated to observe all of the shiva. One may not give a false answer upon interrogation, but one ought not to volunteer this kind of information, and if he does he is considered a kesil, a fool. A fool, indeed! Hypocrisy is not avoided and insincerity not served by mindless chattering and compulsive loquaciousness!

Too much cruelty has been practiced under the guise of honesty, too much frightful foolishness excused as frankness, too many assaults on the feelings of others carried out under the pretense of sincerity. Is it hypocrisy for a teacher to refrain from telling a slow student that he is unintelligent? Is it commendable sincerity to tell every homely person, "You are plain-looking and unattractive"? No, it is not. In fact, Hillel taught that one must even tell an unattractive bride that she is beautiful and charming!

The truth should be spoken, not blurted out. If you hear a performer or entertainer or artist, and have adverse criticism – even if it is constructive – then Jewish ethics and derekh eretz advise you: wait for a propitious time before offering your comments, do not offend the innermost feelings of another human being. If you apprehend a friend in embarrassing circumstances, performing an evil deed, it is a mitzvah to reproach him. You are not free to withhold your comment. But the rebuke must be administered gently, considerately, delicately. The Torah commands us, "You shall reproach your friend" (Leviticus 19:17). And the rabbis add, "Even a hundred times" (Bava Metzia 31a). On this, one of the great

lights of the Musar movement commented: this means that the single rebuke must be broken into a hundred pieces and offered in tiny doses, lest the person you seek to correct should become the victim of painful insult.

Furthermore, there is a decent, beneficial, and honorable kind of hypocrisy which is not insincere, and without which society might well collapse. There are certain conventional fictions that are apparently untrue, but that suggest a kind of truth far beyond the reach of normal comprehension. Jewish law, for instance, aims at producing perfect individuals and a holy society, yet it knows full well, as King Solomon taught, that no person in the world is perfectly righteous and blameless.

Halakha grants each person a *chezkat kashrut*, a presumption of innocence and virtue; yet it knows full well that, as the Bible teaches, "Man's innate disposition is toward evil" (Genesis 8:21). Is this hypocrisy? If it is, then we should all be in favor of hypocrisy! For without it, all law and religion must progressively be reduced and diminished to the lowest level of common practice. This spells the death of all ideals. A child who errs and stumbles, yet who is trusted by a parent and feels that the parent's opinion of him is higher than his poor reality, is inspired by this discrepancy to fulfill the higher image. Likewise the Jew and his halakha: he is imperfect and faulted, yet because he is granted the *chezkat kashrut* and told that he incorporates the image of God, and is expected to live up to it, he will strive to do just that, lest he suffer inner embarrassment and shame.

This week the Supreme Court has been deliberating on the problems of censorship and pornography. This brings to mind a fascinating article by George P. Elliot I read in a national magazine, in which a principle similar to the one we have been discussing was put forth. The author believes that the law should banish pornography, but not enforce this regulation. He asks: is it not, however, hypocrisy to outlaw pornography if we know well that it will be sold surreptitiously? He answers: "The law should rest content with a decent hypocrisy," and ban obscene literature in the marketplace even if it knows that it will be sold under the counter, where the law will not and cannot bother with it. Law is the way that society approves and disapproves of certain acts. "A certain amount of official hypocrisy is one of the operative principles of a good society." Unenforced laws express society's goals, ideals, and visions. Law is meant not only to punish, but also to educate to higher standards. "Civilization behaves as though men are decent in full knowledge that they are not."

Judaism cannot take exception to this doctrine. When, at the beginning of the Emancipation,

non-Orthodox Jews did adopt an opposite point of view, they began to prune the laws and cut down the halakha to fit current, prevalent practice. As a result, they discovered – as we well know in our days – that when you do this Judaism begins to crumble and Jews begin to vanish. If Jewish laws are abandoned because they are not universally observed, Judaism becomes nothing but a sanctimonious self-approval for spiritual failures, a vacuous "hekhsher" for not-so-kosher Jews.

That is why we ought not to be impressed or depressed at the cries of hypocrisy often hurled at Orthodox synagogues that disapprove of travel on the Sabbath, though many of its members violate that standard. We rightly insist upon full and meticulous observance of *kashrut*, though some members in the privacy of their homes or when away from home do not live up to this ideal. If a standard is set, the congregation must live under the impression that the ideal is a reality; and all who fail to conform must suffer the pangs of guilt. If that is a fiction, it is a splendid and sublime fiction, on the way to becoming a luminous truth.

We live in an *alma diperuda*, an imperfect and fragmented world. For truth to be triumphant, it must proceed cautiously. We must give no quarter to falsehood, but we must remember that truth must often disguise itself in a thousand different garments – until that blessed day, the "day of the Lord," when man and society will be redeemed; when truth will be revealed courageously and fully; when this world will become transformed into an *olam ha'emet*, a world of truth; when God's unity will be expressed in living the whole truth and nothing but the truth; and when men will confront their own selves in truth, and be truly devoted to each other, so that each man will be able to address his brother and say, in full and genuine honesty, "I am, sincerely, yours!"

Excerpted from Rabbi Norman Lamm's 'Derashot Ledorot: A Commentary for the Ages – Genesis' co-published by OU Press, Maggid Books, and Yeshiva University Press; Edited by Stuart W. Halpern

Weekly Internet Parsha Sheet
VAYISHLACH 5786

[CS – late-breaking dvar torah:

from: **OU Kosher** <noreply@ounetwork.org>

subject: **Halacha Yomis - V'sain Tal Umatar**

TOPIC: **V'SAIN TAL UMATAR**

QUESTION: Thursday evening, December 4th, 2025, we begin reciting V'sain Tal Umatar in the Shmoneh Esrei of Maariv. What happens if one forgot to say V'sain Tal Umatar and what is the halacha if one is uncertain?

ANSWER: If a person said “v’sain beracha” instead of “v’sain tal umatar livracha”, and he realized his error after ending Shmoneh Esrei, the entire Shmoneh Esrei must be repeated.

If the error was caught while in the middle of Shmoneh Esrei, corrective action may be taken by inserting the phrase of v’sain tal umatar livrocha in the beracha of Shema Koleinu, before the words of “Ki ata shomeiya”. If the beracha of Shema Koleinu was already completed, but he did not yet begin the beracha of Retzei, Shulchan Aruch (117:5) writes that the phrase v’sain tal umatar livracha should be inserted between the two berachos. However if he already began the beracha of Retzei, the individual must return to the beginning of the beracha of Bareich Aleinu and use the proper phrase of v’sain tal umatar.

What if a person does not remember if he said v’sain bracha or v’sain tal umatar? Since he has no recollection, we assume the bracha was recited without thought, out of habit, in the manner that he was accustomed to saying it. Halacha assumes that habits of davening are established with thirty days of repetition. As such, thirty days after December 4th, when in doubt, Shmoneh Esrei need not be repeated. It can be assumed that v’sain tal umatar was said out habit and second nature. Before thirty days, it can be assumed that the wrong phrase (v’sain bracha) was used, and Shmoneh Esrei must be repeated.

The Mishna Berura (114:38) qualifies this last halacha and says that if the person intended to say “v’sain tal umatar” in Shmoneh Esrei, and later in the day he cannot remember what he said, he need not repeat Shmoneh Esrei. This is because it can be assumed that he recited the bracha properly, since that was his intention. The fact that he cannot remember is inconsequential because people do not typically remember such details after a significant amount of time has elapsed. Rav Shlomo Zalman Auervach, z”tl (Shmiras Shabbos Kehilchoso 57:17) notes that each person’s memory span is different. For someone whose memory is poor, the last halacha would apply even if one cannot remember soon after reciting Shmoneh Esrei.

QUESTION: Thursday evening, December 4, 2025 (which is the sixtieth day after the halachic calculation of the autumnal equinox), Klal Yisrael in the diaspora will begin reciting V'sain Tal Umatar, a prayer for rain, in the Shemona Esrai of Maariv. In Israel, the Jewish community began saying V'sain Tal Umatar about a month earlier on the seventh day of Cheshvอน. Why is there a difference between Israel and the diaspora? The Talmud (Taanis 10a) explains that Israel is a mountainous region which needs much rain, and therefore V'sain Tal Umatar is recited in the early fall. On the other hand, Bavel (Babylonia) is a low-lying country, and rain was not needed until late fall. The Talmud concludes that the diaspora follows the same schedule as Bavel. Can you explain why we in the U.S. follow the minhag of Bavel when our weather patterns are completely different, and we are in need of rain even in early autumn.

ANSWER: Rashi (ibid) explains that the diaspora begins reciting V'sain Tal Umatar in late autumn because they follow the customs of Bavel. Apparently, Rashi's position is that the Talmudic scholars of old instituted that the diaspora should follow Babylonian tradition because Bavel had the largest Jewish community at that time, and that ruling remains permanently binding even though the location of the Jewish community has changed.

Rabbeinu Asher, the 13th century posek who composed the definitive halachic work known as the Rosh, writes (Taanis 1:4) that he does not understand why the diaspora should follow minhag-Bavel, when our

climate and the need for rain is completely different than Bavel. Furthermore, the Rosh reports that when he was in Provance, he observed that they recited V'sain Tal Umatar in the month of Cheshvอน (as was done in Israel), and he concludes, "It is very correct in my eyes". Rabbeinu Asher lived in Germany and was a close disciple of the Maharam Mi'Rutenberg. The Maharam was unjustly imprisoned and died in jail after seven years. After the death of the Maharam, Rabbeinu Asher feared for his own life. He fled Germany and settled in the Provance region of France. It was then that he observed the minhag quoted above. Subsequently, Rabbeinu Asher travelled to Toledo Spain, and there he was invited to serve as the head of the Jewish community. In his responsa (4:10), the Rosh described a scene that took place in his synagogue on Pesach, in 1312. There were drought conditions for the past few months, and the Rosh decided that now was the time to change the custom in Spain and continue to say Mashiv horuach (the prayer for rain) during Pesach and V'sain Tal Umatar in Cheshvอน. This created an uproar in the synagogue because it was contrary to the minhag, and the Rosh backed down from promoting this position, so as not to divide the community.

Rav Yosef Kairo writes in the Bais Yosef (Orach Chaim 117) that since the position of the Rosh was not accepted as normative practice, the basic halacha remains that V'sain Tal Umatar is not recited in the diaspora until the sixtieth day after the autumnal equinox. However, some have the custom during the summer months to add V'sain Tal Umatar in the beracha of Shomei Tefilah. In this way, if the halacha follows the Rosh or if the halacha follows Rav Kairo, either way the Shmoneh Esrai would be acceptable. This was the custom of Rav Soloveitchik zt"l as well. Rabbi Genack asked Rav Soloveitchik how can one recite V'sain Tal Umatar in the summer unless he also recites mashiv ha'ruach or at least morid ha'tal. Rav Soloveitchik answered in a way that implied that he recites morid ha'tal as well.

If one inserted V'sain Tal Umatar in Birchas hashananim before December 4th, and he lives in a country that needs rain in the summer, Shemoneh Esrai is not repeated since according to the Rosh he davened correctly. Still, it is preferable to repeat Shemoneh Esrai as a voluntary tefila (tefilas nedavah) and say V'sain Beracha instead (Shulchan Aruch OC 117:2). The Mishnah Berurah (117:13) adds that the areas where we live require rain during the fall, and they have the status discussed above. The Aruch Hashulchan (117:7) writes that due to our lack of concentration, we avoid davening tefilas nidava. Piskei Teshuvos (117:4) also cites many later poskim who follow this ruling.

QUESTION: In a previous halacha, we mentioned the opinion of the Rosh that those who live in countries that require rain even in the summer months should recite V'sain Tal Umatar in the summer as well. Although the Rosh admitted that his opinion was not accepted, and Shulchan Aruch does not follow this ruling, there are individuals who want to be strict to accommodate both opinions. Is there a way to do this?

ANSWER: Rabbi Genack relates that the practice of Rav Soloveitchik zt"l was to recite v'sain Tal umatar during the summer months in the beracha of shema koleinu. This was the practice of Rav Chaim Soloveitchik zt"l as well. In the beracha of Shema Koleinu one may add a private request. Even if one is not required to daven for rain, one may do so at this point as a private request. On the other hand, if one is required to recite V'sain Tal Umatar in the summer, as per the opinion of the Rosh, then one fulfills their obligation by inserting v'sain tal umatar in shema koleinu. In this way, one fulfills their obligation according to all opinions. However, this practice still needs further clarification, since the Gemara Taanis (4b) compares one who davens for rain (v'sain tal umatar) but does not praise Hashem for the rain (by reciting mashiv ha'ruach u'morid ha'geshem) to putting smoke in one's eyes and vinegar on their teeth. Since one may not recite mashiv ha'ruach u'morid ha'geshem in the summer months, it would seem that it is inappropriate to daven for rain. However, Rabbi Genack explained

that for those who recite "morid ha'tal" in the summer, this would not be an issue. The halacha is that if one recited "morid ha'tal" instead of "mashiv ha'ruach u'morid ha'geshem" it is acceptable bidi'oved. Therefore, by reciting morid ha'tal in the beracha of gevuros, and v'sain tal umatar in Shema koleinu one can fulfill all the opinions.

from: Ira Zlotowitz <Iraz@klalgovoah.org>

date: Dec 4, 2025, 8:25 PM

subject: Tidbits • Parashas Vayishlach 5786

Parashas Vayishlach • December 6th • 16 Kislev 5786

On Thursday night, December 4th at Maariv, we began saying V'sain Tal U'matar in Bareich Aleinu (those in Eretz Yisrael began last month on 7 Cheshvan). If one forgets V'sain Tal U'matar in Bareich Aleinu, he can make it up by saying it in Shema Koleinu. If one remembers his omission only after passing Shema Koleinu, he must go back to the berachah of Bareich Aleinu. If one has already finished Shemoneh Esrei, he must repeat Shemoneh Esrei. If one is unsure what he said, until thirty days have passed (Shabbos Parashas Vayechi, January 3rd, 2026), we assume that he did not say V'sain Tal U'matar. However, one who repeats the phrase "V'es Kol... V'sein Tal U'matar" 90 times (ideally 101 times) is thereafter - in case of doubt - halachically presumed to have said it properly and thus would need not repeat.]

Vayishlach

by Rabbi Berel Wein

In this week's parsha, our father Yaakov, fresh from his successful escape from Lavan, prepares to encounter his brother and sworn enemy, Eisav. He sends malachim to deal with Eisav before he meets with him face to face. The word malachim signifies two different meanings. One is that it means agents, messengers, human beings who were sent on a particular mission to do Yaakov's bidding. The other meaning is that the word malachim signifies angels, supernatural messengers of God who were sent to Yaakov to help him in his fateful encounter with his brother.

Rashi cites both possible interpretations in his commentary. When Rashi does so, he is teaching us that both interpretations are correct at differing levels of understanding the verse involved. The message here is that the encounter with Eisav, to be successful from Yaakov's vantage point and situation, must have both human and supernatural help.

Eisav is a formidable foe, physically, militarily, culturally and intellectually speaking. He cannot be ignored nor wished away. He has accompanied us from the time of Yaakov till this very day. At times he threatens our very existence and at times he appears to have a more benevolent attitude towards us. Yet, he is always there, hovering over and around us, and he has never relinquished any of his demands upon us to either convert, assimilate or just plain disappear. While it is Yishmael that currently occupies the bulk of our attention, it would be foolish of us to ignore the continuing presence of Eisav in our world and affairs.

Yaakov's strategy is to employ both possibilities of malachim in his defense. He prepares himself for soothing Eisav by gifts and wealth, pointing out to Eisav that it is beneficial to him to have Yaakov around and being productive. He also strengthens himself spiritually in prayer and in appealing to God to deliver him from Eisav. And finally, as a last resort he is prepared to fight Eisav with his own weapons, the sword and war.

Two of these strategies - gifts to Eisav and war against Eisav - require human endeavor, talent and sacrifice. They are the representative of the interpretation of malachim as being human agents and messengers. The third strategy, prayer and reliance upon heavenly intervention to thwart Eisav's evil designs, follows the idea that Yaakov's malachim were heavenly, supernatural creatures. In the long history of our encounter with Eisav we have always relied upon both interpretations of malachim. Neither interpretation by itself will suffice to defeat Eisav. Without human endeavor and sacrifice, heavenly aid is often denied or diminished.

According to the labor is the reward. But it is foolish to believe that a small and beleaguered people can by itself weather all storms and defeat Eisav's intentions solely by its own efforts.

Without the Lord to help, we attempt in vain to build our national home. Thus, the double meaning of malachim in this week's parsha has great relevance to our situation.

Shabat shalom.

Rabbi Berel Wein ZT"ל

Rabbi Eliezer Melamed

Travel Notes from the United States: Dreaming of Aliyah!

Revivim

With only the ability to speak Hebrew, I traveled to the United States * The purpose of the trip was to teach Torah, meet our Jewish brethren, learn about their strengths and the challenges they face * The classes and meetings were mainly with communities and schools belonging to what is known as the "Modern Orthodox" public * I met a Zionist community for whom the Land of Israel is very dear * Many people are seriously considering Aliyah * In all communities, Psalms were recited at the end of prayers for the success of IDF soldiers * The synagogue rabbis work to strengthen community cohesion and to maintain each member's connection to the community and to Judaism * I found myself needing to describe the goodness of the Land, since the media naturally focuses on problems and tensions

A week ago, I returned from a twelve-day tour of the Jewish communities in the New York and New Jersey area. The purpose of the trip was to teach Torah and meet our Jewish brethren, to learn about their strengths, and the challenges they face. In practice, I delivered dozens of classes to rabbis, communities, and students in yeshivot and schools. Usually, at the end of each lesson, I answered questions on halakha and emunah (faith).

At first, I did not think I would go to the United States, but after I traveled abroad for the first time about eight months ago—to serve as a rabbi at a conference of rabbis and emissaries in Paris—people argued that it was important to visit the Jewish communities in America as well. I argued that I did not know English; they replied that indeed this was a serious problem, and yet, there would still be great benefit, since many study the "Peninei Halakha" books, and meeting them would strengthen their connection to Torah, and to the Land of Israel.

Incidentally, when I was a student in the middle school of the Yeshiva High School adjacent to Merkaz HaRav, the righteous Rebbeztzin Mendelcorn was our English teacher. But at the time I wanted to study Mishnah. She tried to persuade me to attend English class, but even then, I knew I wanted to devote my life to Torah, and did not want to "waste time" on English. When she argued that millions of Jews speak only English, I replied that instead of my learning English, they should learn Hebrew. From then on, I stopped studying English. About twelve years later, I gave a lecture for women at the Yeshurun synagogue in Jerusalem. After the class, Rebbeztzin Mendelcorn approached me, and asked: "Do you remember that you didn't want to learn English, and what I told you?" I replied: "Of course I remember." She continued: "And what do you think now?" I answered: "Now I regret that I don't know English." She was very happy to hear my honest answer and called her friends so they could hear it too. So, retrospectively, I became one of her beloved students. And thus—with only Hebrew—I traveled to the United States.

Modern Orthodox

The classes and meetings were mainly with communities and schools of the "Modern Orthodox" public, all of whom are Zionist, as well as with Zionist Sephardic communities. Indeed, I met a Zionist community for whom the Land of Israel is very dear, and the past two years—in which we have fought our enemies on all sides—have greatly strengthened their identification with the State of Israel and their desire to make Aliyah, and participate in building the country, and safeguarding its security.

In all communities, Psalms were recited at the end of prayer for the success of IDF soldiers. In our community in Har Bracha, we stopped

saying these Psalms more than a month ago, at the start of the cease-fire since, from that time, the tension and concern for the many residents on the front lines decreased greatly. It is fitting to reserve special prayers for a time when the war is in full force, and concern is high. When I told one of the rabbis that we no longer recite these Psalms, he explained that since they are far away, they must be even more careful not to appear indifferent to what is happening in Israel. I replied with a smile that this is similar to the “Second Day of Yom Tov in the Diaspora.”

In the courtyard of the Bnai Yeshurun synagogue in Teaneck, small lanterns had been placed—one for each hostage, including those still not brought to burial. On Motzei Shabbat, after Maariv, they went outside and recited Psalms, and a child removed two lanterns corresponding to the two bodies recovered that Shabbat. Tears came to my eyes from the intensity of their solidarity.

In almost all meetings with rabbis or communities, time was devoted to questions and answers, and some of the questions related to Israel’s security situation and internal social tensions, including how the Haredim could be enlisted into the army. In general, I found myself needing to describe the goodness of the Land, since the media naturally focuses on problems and tensions, and does not work to describe the great brotherhood that prevails in Israeli society, as expressed in joint military service. Nor do they frequently report on the rapid economic and scientific development of the State of Israel.

Incidentally, external appearance as classified in Israel does not match norms abroad. At one meeting two young men, about twenty-five, participated. They looked like members of the Lithuanian-Haredi community in Israel, yet from their question—why the Haredi community evades army service and opposes core curriculum studies—it was clear that they supported the National-Religious path. Indeed, it turned out they study science at prestigious universities, and plan to make Aliyah after finishing their studies.

Growing Desire for Aliyah

Joining us on the trip was Dr. Raphael Kayim, a physician who made Aliyah from New York about thirty years ago, at around age forty-four. Many times, he translated my words into English. In the past he would say, ironically, that if you want to end a conversation with American Jews, start talking about Aliyah—but today, for many, raising the topic does not end the conversation. Many people are seriously considering Aliyah. In the past, Aliyah did not stand at the center of the agenda; now it is at the top. Investment in education is bearing fruit. For years, along with the emissaries who come from Israel, rabbis have been educating for love of the Land and the value of Aliyah, and gradually, more and more Jews want to move to Israel.

Many already have a close relative who has made Aliyah. For example, before boarding the plane back to Israel, a Jew approached me and told me he had attended one of the classes, and that he too was flying to visit Israel to meet his father who made Aliyah a few years ago, and to meet his son and daughter-in-law, who made Aliyah a few months ago. The principal of one of the schools told me that his children have already made Aliyah, and that he too plans to follow soon. This is the situation of many rabbis and educators—so much so that at times, they must be strengthened to continue their sacred mission in the Diaspora. A mission that yields rare, wonderful fruit, for the contribution of American olim to building the Land is tremendous.

For a few days, we stayed in central Manhattan with a family whose son made Aliyah for a year of study in a Hesder yeshiva, and decided to continue into combat service. A few months ago, they attended his swearing-in ceremony at the Western Wall, and his photograph with his comrades in formation stands in their living room. Every day they pray for his safety, and the safety of all soldiers. Incredible! Instead of studying medicine at one of the most prestigious universities in the United States as he had planned, he decided to enlist, and then study medicine in Israel. Incidentally, his sister, who spent a year in Israel, is now a student at Columbia University and serves as president of the Hillel Jewish organization, and on a hostile campus, she worked on behalf of Jewish students, and against antisemitism.

“Peninei Halakha”

One evening we arrived at a class and meeting with about ten families who plan to make Aliyah together this coming summer, along with several families considering joining them. This meeting was joyful and encouraging for me, as they told me that about seven years ago one of the community activists began encouraging study of the “Peninei Halakha” books, and as a result, a process of strengthening observance began. For example, several women began covering their hair, and after studying the “Peninei Halakha” volume “The Nation and the Land,” the decision to make Aliyah crystallized. Likewise, a Jew who lives in Manhattan and has an additional home in Florida told me that a young woman from a Haredi background who had left religion had agreed, as a favor, to live in his Florida home while they were in New York. While living there, she saw the “Peninei Halakha” books and began reading the volume on prayer, and since then, she has begun to pray, and is gradually returning to observance. This man often gives the “Peninei Halakha” series as a Bar/Bat Mitzvah gift.

Community Rabbis

The rabbis of the synagogues have a particularly important role in the United States. They are the backbone of the community, and besides their concern for prayers and Torah classes, they work to strengthen communal cohesion and maintain each member’s connection to the community, and to Judaism. And they succeed. Comparing the situation of Modern Orthodox communities thirty years ago to today, one finds that many more Jews attend synagogue for prayers and classes, far more parents send their children to spend a year studying Torah in Israel, and many of those children are also encouraged to make Aliyah. In the past two years, this strengthening has intensified further. We hope that thanks to olim from the United States, this rabbinic heritage will also become more widespread in the Land of Israel. On another occasion I will try to elaborate on what can be learned from the community rabbis in the U.S.

The Straight Path

Despite the great challenges facing the Modern Orthodox public, it seems that this community represents more than any other the true path of Torah in the United States, since it is connected to all the mitzvot of the Torah, without rejecting any value or commandment. Torah study and the observance of its commandments hold great value, as do the sanctity of the nation and the Land, and work and science also have great worth. Alienation from all of this—even if done for the sake of Heaven to preserve tradition—contains a major deficiency, and does not allow movement toward complete repentance and redemption.

In a meeting with rabbis, this topic arose when they said that at times it is difficult to explain to young people seeking to strengthen observance that the proper path is to do so while continuing to embrace the full spectrum of Torah’s values and commandments, and not by following the Haredi path that rejects some of them. One rabbi wrote that educational material on this topic is lacking. That night, I thought about it at length, and decided that after finishing the book I am currently writing (on sacred objects—Torah scrolls, tzitzit, tefillin, synagogues, mezuzot), I will devote time to clarifying the mitzvah of Torah study and, within that, the value of Torah’s completeness in all its parts, and the values of life and its needs.

Is One Obligated to Make Aliyah?

Several times, after the conversation and Q&A session ended, one of the youths approached and asked whether one is obligated to make Aliyah if one’s parents oppose it. I did not want to answer this question; instead, I preferred to refer them to a rabbi who knows them—provided he is a Zionist. For although the principle is that when parents instruct their child to act against the Torah, the Torah must be obeyed—as explained in the Shulchan Aruch (Yoreh De’ah 240:15), and as I wrote in “Peninei Halakha” (Ha’am Veha’aretz 3:8)—I cannot, in practice, give a ruling based solely on this principle, because I do not know the young person or his parents. For example, he may need their emotional and financial support, and if he goes against their wishes and makes Aliyah, he may not succeed in adjusting, and might eventually have to leave Israel. In that case, my answer would not help him fulfill the mitzvah and would only cause him and his parents’ pain and suffering. However, if he consults with a rabbi who knows him, that rabbi will know how to guide

him in a way that, while honoring his parents, he can grow closer and closer to the Land, until he will likely merit to make Aliyah successfully. That is, assuming the rabbi is faithful to Torah and all its commandments—that is, he is a Zionist.

[CS – Late-breaking dvar torah
from: TorahWeb <torahweb@torahweb.org>

date: Dec 4, 2025, 10:05 PM

subject: **Rabbi Zvi Sobolofsky** - Biological Descendants and Spiritual Legacy

Rabbi Zvi Sobolofsky

Biological Descendants and Spiritual Legacy

The Torah dedicates forty-three pesukim at the end of פرشת וישלה to a topic that appears to be insignificant. An elaborate list of the descendants of Esav, the family of Se'ir and the children of Edom are introduced with the phrase “אלה תולדות עש”. An identical wording concerning the descendants of Yishmael appears in the end of פرشת הי שרה, “וְאֵלֶּה תֹּולְדֹת יִשְׁמָעֵאל”, and we then read the listing of the sons of Yishmael. Once again it is perplexing that the Torah even mentions individuals who are not significant. Similarly, in both lists of descendants we are told almost nothing about any of them. The Torah, which is usually succinct, devotes many pesukim to descendants of individuals who will not carry on the legacy of Avraham. What are we to derive from the two lists of toldos, both of Yishmael and of Esav?

A similarity exists in the context of the descendants of Esav and Yishmael. Immediately following these toldos, we read about another set of toldos. We see concludes with the toldos of Yishmael and begins with פرشת הי שרה. פرشת וישלה begins with “אלה תולדות יצחק”. Furthermore, פرشת וישלה ends with “אלה תולדות יעקב”. Apparently, the Torah is contrasting the genealogies of Yitzchak and Yishmael, and subsequently those of Yaakov and Esav. What is the meaning of this contrast?

Earlier in the Torah we read of another set of toldos, i.e. “אלה תולדות נח”. The meaning of the word toldos in that context is ambiguous. Rather than immediately listing the physical descendants of Noach, the Torah highlights that Noach was an “איש צדיק”. Rashi presents two interpretations as to why the Torah interjects that Noach was a tzaddik before telling us who his toldos were. According to one approach, the phrase “איש צדיק” is not a description of his toldos but rather it is modifying Noach himself. When a righteous person is mentioned, his righteousness should be highlighted, as is taught by the phrase “בר צדיק איש צדיק”. Alternatively, Rashi suggests that the description of “איש צדיק” is actually referencing the toldos of Noach; the primary toldos of a person are one's righteous deeds. Rashi is teaching us that there are two ways to evaluate a person's toldos. There are a person's biological descendants and there are one's spiritual accomplishments which constitute one's legacy and are also a form of toldos.

By presenting the toldos of Yitzchak and Yishmael and then Yaakov and Esav next to one another, the Torah is juxtaposing these two elements. Yishmael has twelve physical descendants. The promise that he will be a father of a “גָּדוֹלָה גְּדוֹלָה”, a large nation, is fulfilled. Yet, these twelve descendants do not reach spiritual greatness. The Torah deliberately lists them quickly without elaborating upon any spiritual greatness because there was nothing to mention. They were physical toldos but never became spiritual ones. The toldos of Yitzchak follow, and here the Torah elaborates upon the spiritual legacy of Yitzchak. He is known as the blessed one of Hashem. It is he who follows in the path of Avraham and transmits that legacy to Yaakov. Although he had only two biological toldos, his righteous actions are his eternal toldos. Similarly, the great multitudes who are the descendants of Esav are nothing more than a list of names. There are no ma'asim tovim to relate about any of them. In contrast, the descendants of Yaakov will be known as “הָעִמִּים מְלָאָמִת מִכָּל הָעִמִּים”, the smallest nation measured by demographics. Yet, it is Yaakov and his children's spiritual story that become the rest of the Torah. It is these contrasts that highlight the toldos of Klal Yisroel for eternity.

This dual definition of toldos relates to each of us in our dual roles in transmitting the mesorah. The words “וְשָׁנַתְמָ בְּנֵיךְ” is translated literally as obligating us to teach Torah to our biological children. In addition, Chazal teach us that “בְּנֵיךְ” also refers to our talmidim. We can all influence others in various aspects of spiritual growth. During our lifetime we encounter many opportunities to influence spiritual toldos. Our ma'asim tovim, and especially those that inspire others, are our true toldos. May we always look to our Avos as role models as we write the story of both our physical toldos and the legacy of our spiritual toldos.

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Fear or Distress?

Vayishlach

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Jacob and Esau are about to meet again after a separation of twenty-two years. It is a fraught encounter. Once, Esau had sworn to kill Jacob in revenge for what he saw as the theft of his blessing. Will he do so now – or has time healed the wound? Jacob sends messengers to let his brother know he is coming. They return, saying that Esau is coming to meet Jacob with a force of four hundred men. We then read:

Jacob was acutely afraid and distressed.

Bereishit 32:8

The question is obvious. Jacob is in the grip of strong emotions. But why the tautology, the duplication of verbs? What is the difference between being afraid and being distressed? To this a Midrash gives a profound answer:

Rabbi Judah bar Ilai said: Are not fear and distress identical? The meaning, however, is that “he was afraid” that he might be killed. “He was distressed” that he might kill. For Jacob thought: If he prevails against me, will he not kill me; while if I prevail against him, will I not kill him? That is the meaning of “he was afraid” – lest he should be killed; “and distressed” – lest he should kill.

The difference between being afraid and distressed, according to the Midrash, is that the first is a physical anxiety; the second a moral one. It is one thing to fear one's own death, quite another to contemplate being the cause of someone else's. However, a further question now arises. Surely self-defence is permitted in Jewish law? If Esau were to try to kill Jacob, Jacob would be justified in fighting back, if necessary at the cost of Esau's life. Why then should this possibility raise moral qualms? This is the issue addressed by Rabbi Shabbetai Bass, author of the commentary on Rashi, Siftei Chachamim:

One might argue that Jacob should surely not be distressed about the possibility of killing Esau, for there is an explicit rule: “If someone comes to kill you, forestall it by killing him.” Nonetheless, Jacob did have qualms, fearing that in the course of the fight he might kill some of Esau's men, who were not themselves intent on killing Jacob but merely on fighting Jacob's men. And even though Esau's men were pursuing Jacob's men, and every person has the right to save the life of the pursued at the cost of the life of the pursuer, nonetheless there is a condition: “If the pursued could have been saved by maiming a limb of the pursuer, but instead the rescuer killed the pursuer, the rescuer is liable to capital punishment on that account.” Hence Jacob feared that, in the confusion of battle, he might kill some of Esau's men when he might have restrained them by merely inflicting injury on them.

The principle at stake, according to the Siftei Chachamim, is the minimum use of force. Jacob was distressed at the possibility that in the heat of conflict he might kill some of the combatants when injury alone might have been all that was necessary to defend the lives of those – including himself – who were under attack.

There is, however, a second possibility, namely that the Midrash means what it says, no more, no less: that Jacob was distressed at the possibility of being forced to kill even if that were entirely justified.

At stake is the concept of a moral dilemma. A dilemma is not simply a conflict. There are many moral conflicts. May we perform an abortion to save the life of the mother? Should we obey a parent when he or she asks us to do something forbidden in Jewish law? May we break Shabbat to extend the life of a terminally ill patient? These questions have answers. There is a right course of action and a wrong one. Two duties conflict and we have meta-halachic principles to tell us which takes priority. There are some systems in which all moral conflicts are of this kind. There is always a decision procedure and thus a determinate answer to the question, "What shall I do?"

A dilemma, however, is a situation in which there is no right answer. I ought not to do A (allow myself to be killed); I ought not to do B (kill someone else); but I must do one or the other. To put it more precisely, there may be situations in which doing the right thing is not the end of the matter. The conflict may be inherently tragic. The fact that one principle (self-defence) overrides another (the prohibition against killing) does not mean that, faced with such a choice, I am without qualms. Sometimes being moral means that I experience distress at having to make such a choice. Doing the right thing may mean that I do not feel remorse or guilt, but I still feel regret or grief that I had to do what I did.

A moral system which leaves room for the existence of dilemmas is one that does not attempt to eliminate the complexities of the moral life. In a conflict between two rights or two wrongs, there may be a proper way to act (the lesser of two evils, or the greater of two goods), but this does not cancel out all emotional pain. A righteous individual may sometimes be one who is capable of distress even when they know they have acted rightly. What the Midrash is telling us is that Judaism recognises the existence of dilemmas. Despite the intricacy of Jewish law and its meta-halachic principles for deciding which of two duties takes priority, we may still be faced with situations in which there is an ineliminable cause for distress. It was Jacob's greatness that he was capable of moral anxiety even at the prospect of doing something entirely justified, namely defending his life at the cost of his brother's.

That characteristic – distress at violence and potential bloodshed even when undertaken in self-defence – has stayed with the Jewish people ever since. One of the most remarkable phenomena in modern history was the reaction of Israeli soldiers after the Six Day War in 1967. In the weeks preceding the war, few Jews anywhere in the world were unaware that Israel and its people faced terrifying danger. Troops – Egyptian, Syrian, Jordanian – were massing on all its borders. Israel was surrounded by enemies who had sworn to drive its people into the sea. In the event, it won one of the most stunning military victories of all time. The sense of relief was overwhelming, as was the exhilaration at the re-unification of Jerusalem and the fact that Jews could now pray (as they had been unable to do for nineteen years) at the Western Wall. Even the most secular Israelis admitted to feeling intense religious emotion at what they knew was an historic triumph.

Yet, in the months after the war, as conversations took place throughout Israel, it became clear that the mood among those who had taken part in the war was anything but triumphal. It was sombre, reflective, even anguished. That year, the Hebrew University in Jerusalem gave an honorary doctorate to Yitzhak Rabin, Chief of Staff during the war. During his speech of acceptance, he said:

"We find more and more a strange phenomenon among our fighters. Their joy is incomplete, and more than a small portion of sorrow and shock prevails in their festivities, and there are those who abstain from celebration. The warriors in the front lines saw with their own eyes not only the glory of victory but the price of victory: their comrades who fell beside them bleeding, and I know that even the terrible price which our enemies paid touched the hearts of many of our men. It may be that the Jewish people has never learned or accustomed itself to feel the triumph of conquest and victory, and therefore we receive it with mixed feelings."

A people capable of feeling distress, even in victory, is one that knows the tragic complexity of the moral life. Sometimes it is not enough to make the right choice. One must also fight to create a world in which such choices do not arise because we have sought and found non-violent ways of resolving conflict.

Chief Rabbi Mirvis

Vayishlach The Greatest of All Gifts

The very best gift that a person can give is a Mincha. But hold on, isn't Mincha the afternoon service that we pray every day? In what way is it a present? And how does it become the best of all presents?

In Parshat Vayishlach we are told how Jacob desperately wanted to appease his twin brother Esau, and so he sent him a gift of many hundreds of animals, part of the wealth he had accumulated, having worked for Laban for 22 years.

And the Torah describes this as "mincha hei shlucha", he sent this mincha to his brother. Onkelos, the authoritative Aramaic translation of the Torah, explains that the word mincha is 'tikruvta', which means a sacrifice.

Tikruvta also comes from the root 'karov', which means to be close. It is a sacrifice that you make, and through which you become closer to another person. Jacob wanted to show Esau that he cared about him and therefore he invested money, effort, energy, care, and love into the present he was giving. That is what makes the mincha so special. And you know that a mincha does not have to cost a lot of money. For example, God forbid, if somebody is sitting shiva and people bring a meal for the family to eat, that is a mincha - they're showing their love and their care.

Or when you bake a cake for somebody on their birthday, that feeling of closeness becomes really intense because one invests so much love and effort into the mincha that is given. And one of the greatest of all minchas is actually, the ring that the groom gives to a bride under the chuppah.

In order to show that he loves and cares for her, he needs to have bought that ring, as a token of his affection for her. He places it on the forefinger of her right hand, declares that with this ring they become husband and wife, and it is called Kiddushin.

It is a moment of a sacred bond between them. That is how they become husband and wife. And here we see another element of tikruvta. Not only are the groom and bride being bonded together but Almighty God becomes part of a three-way, sacred relationship. Hashem exists in places where people are there to give to others.

And now we can understand why in the Gemara, Masechet Brachot, our sages tell us that Elijah the prophet was answered through the mincha offering in the afternoon. Because when it comes to the mincha prayer, we have to make a special effort. Shacharit is first thing in the morning, Ma'ariv late at night, but especially during the winter months you have to make a special effort to invest in finding that time to pray the mincha service and that is why it is elevated above the others.

So therefore, if you want to come closer to others and closer to Hashem, why not give a mincha?

Shabbat Shalom

Rav Kook Torah

VaYishlach: The Prohibition of Gid HaNasheh

Jacob was limping, but he had survived the nighttime struggle at Penuel. Nervously awaiting a confrontation with his estranged brother Esau, Jacob was attacked by a mysterious opponent. As dawn broke, the stranger struck Jacob's thigh and dislocated it.

"Therefore the Israelites do not eat the displaced nerve (gid ha-nasheh) on the hip joint to this very day, because he touched Jacob's thigh on the displaced nerve." (Gen. 32:33)

What is the meaning of this prohibition? Do we refrain from eating the sciatic nerve only to commemorate a mysterious wrestling match that took place thousands of years ago?

A Vision of Violence

At first glance, the ban on gid ha-nasheh appears to be yet another limitation that the Torah places on eating meat. While the Torah permits the consumption of meat, it instituted a number of restrictions: which animals may be eaten, how they are to be slaughtered, how their blood should be handled, and so on. These regulations remind us that we may not deal with animals as we wish, without regard for their welfare. On the contrary, we have moral obligations and responsibilities toward animals.

The prohibition of gid ha-nasheh, however, is meant to project a broader ethical aspiration, beyond the issue of how we should treat animals.

According to tradition, the stranger who fought Jacob that night was the guardian angel of Esau. Jacob's opponent symbolized the lifestyle of the hunter, a man of violence and conquest, one whose prophetic blessing was that he would live by his sword. This nighttime struggle was not a private experience, a personal event in Jacob's life. It was a vision for all times. It epitomizes our constant battle against belligerent foes who claim the right to subjugate others by virtue of their physical strength and military prowess.

This struggle appeared to Jacob in its most unadorned fashion, without any pretense of gallantry and shining swords to mask its visceral violence and naked aggression. For the truth is that all wars, no matter how 'civilized,' are nothing more than the reduction of conflict to physical force, the attempt to dominate another through violence.

If there is one area in which the human race constantly innovates, it is the art of war. Methods and tools of combat constantly grow ever more sophisticated. We have progressed from primitive spears and swords to guns and canons, and onward to modern warfare with tanks, fighter jets, and nuclear arms. And yet, the essence of war remains unchanged: a brutal contest of power between two opponents, where victory is secured by felling one's adversary.

Protesting Aggression

By not eating the gid ha-nasheh, we demonstrate our revulsion at unprovoked aggression and violence. Just as Jacob fought Esau's angel that night, we also oppose the cynical belief in the doctrine that might makes right. We resist the worldview that sanctifies violence as a legitimate instrument of superiority.

While nationalism provides many benefits, in its extreme form it can descend into conquest and imperialism. As Rav Kook observed in *Olat Re'iyah* (vol. I, p. 234):

"Nationalism is a lofty emotion in its natural, pristine state. But if it is not directed towards the highest goal — the aspiration of universal happiness and perfection — it will end up crossing the boundaries of morality."

We may need a strong army to defend ourselves, and we may need to slaughter animals to provide for our physical needs. But by refraining from eating the gid ha-nasheh, we demonstrate that our goal is not to subjugate others, whether man or beast. Even as we consume the meat of animals, we avoid the sciatic nerve that allows the body to stand upright. This is a moral sensitivity that should govern every human encounter, so that all may benefit from a Divine-spirited and harmonious existence.

[CS – late-breaking dvar torah:

from: **Rabbi YY Jacobson** <rabbiyy@theyeshiva.net>
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date: Dec 4, 2025, 4:31 PM

subject: **"I have become small:" Are We the Chosen People? - Essay by Rabbi YY**

Why the Obsession with Israel?

I do not see a way of rationally explaining the obsessive hatred of Israel and Jews without the faith that Jews are G-d's chosen people to make the world a place of goodness and kindness.

The obsession with Jews, a people that does not even constitute a quarter of a percent of humanity, has been going on for almost 4000 years. It makes no sense. 500,000 people were murdered in Syria, including tens of thousands of children, and I did not hear of one demonstration. Israel went to war trying to protect its children from being slaughtered,

fighting an enemy that wants its own children to die so Israel can be demonized, and yet the Jews are condemned.

Traumatized self-hating Jews and anti-Semites even had the chutzpah to call Gaza a Jewish "concentration camp," when Israel expelled every last Jew from Gaza in 2005. Had the Gaza population not voted in Hamas in 2006 and chosen to spend all its resources on murdering Jews, Gaza could have been the Singapore of the Middle East. They blame Israel for having checkpoints, which only exist because, without them, there would be terrorist attacks daily. They want an airport in Gaza, so that planes can murder tens of thousands of Jews daily?

The obsession with Israel makes no sense unless you can appreciate the truth that we are G-d's people. We were chosen to serve as a light onto the nations, a Divine flame lit on the cosmic way, hence we trigger the world in unimaginable ways.

But this is not easy for Jews to accept, even though the world knows it. Virtually every other nation has perceived itself as chosen or otherwise divinely special. For example, China means "Middle Kingdom" in Chinese, meaning that China is at the center of the world; and Japan considers itself the land where the sun originates ("Land of the Rising Sun"). The British thought they were chosen, and the Muslims and Christians, of course, see themselves as chosen. And they would love hearing it. But when you tell a Jew you are chosen, he says: "Me? Never. I am just a human being."

Of course, Jewish chosen-ness cannot be racist because Jews are not a race; there are Jews of every race. What is more, any person of any race, ethnicity, or nationality can become a member of the Jewish people and thereby be as chosen as Abraham, Moses, Jeremiah, Maimonides, or the chief rabbi of Israel.

Can reason alone explain how a hodgepodge of ex-slaves was able to change history — to introduce the moral Creator we know as G-d, to devise ethical monotheism; to write the world's most influential book, the Bible; to be the only civilization to deny the cyclical worldview and give humanity belief in a linear (i.e., purposeful) history; to provide morality-driven prophets; and so much more — without G-d playing the decisive role in this people's history?

But we are still uncomfortable. Why did it have to be this way? Who needs this idea that one people is chosen? It seems unenlightened. To suggest that as Jews we are somehow closer to G-d than all other nations smacks of arrogance, elitism, and prejudice.

It's because we don't understand what "chosen" means.

The Rebbe's 1798 Letter

This story takes us back some two centuries ago. In 1798, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi (1745-1812), founder of Chabad, known as the Alter Rebbe, was arrested and charged with treason, on the basis of petitions to the Czar by opponents of Chassidism. It was a devastating moment in Jewish history. He could have been given capital punishment, heaven forbid, and that would have been the end not only of Chabad but of much of the Chassidic movement, as he was its chief defender, intellectual advocate, and most influential figure.

After 53 days of imprisonment, he was exonerated of all charges and freed. The event—celebrated to this day on the 19th day of Kislev—marked the decisive victory of the Chassidic movement and the onset of a new, expanded phase in the exploration and dissemination of the infinite spiritual depth of Judaism, embodied in Chassidism.

Upon his release, Rabbi Schneur Zalman dispatched a short but powerful letter to all his followers. It is one of the most extraordinary letters one can read. (It is published in *Tanya*, *Igeres Hakodesh*, chapter 2). The Rebbe suffered so much as a result of his opponents; they persecuted him and his followers even before the arrest; then came the arrest and his terrifying trial. Yet in this letter, he warns his disciples against any display of haughtiness as a result of their victory. He instructs them not to denigrate, tease, and show disdain to those who craved their downfall.

The letter opens with the verse stated by Jacob in Genesis: "I have become small by all the kindnesses and by all the truth that You have done Your servant." (This verse appears in the beginning of the Torah section of *Vayishlach* (Genesis 32:4-36:43), which was the Torah

reading for the Shabbat preceding the day of Rabbi Schneur Zalman's release, Tuesday, 19 Kislev, 5759-1798). The Alter Rebbe is perturbed by the obvious question. Why was Jacob humbled by all the kindness he was shown? Why did it not bolster his pride? If G-d gave this all to me, I probably deserve it!

תניא אגדת הקדוש סימן ב: פ"י שבעל חסד והס שקדוש ב"ה עושה לאדם צרך לה'ו שפל רוח במאן, כי חסド דרשו ימינה. וימינו תחבקנו. שהיא בח' קרבת אליהם ממש בירור שאות מלפניהם. וכל הקורב אל ה' בתר שאות והגבלה למלילה מעלה, צרך לחיות יותר שפל רוח למתה כמ"ש מוחוק ה' נרא לה. ווכווע דבואר קמי' וויאא לא אשבי. וא"כ כל שהוא קמי' יותר הוא אין ואפס וו בח' מײַן שבקדושה וחסן לאברהם שאמרacci עפר ואפר. וו היא ג"כ מדרחו של יעקב... משא"כ בזולע"ז הא יישמעאל חסן דקליפה. כל שהחסן גדול הוא הולך וגדיל בגביה וgstות הרוח ורוחב לבו.

The Alter Rebbe conveys a profound idea.

Who Chose You?

In the Jewish understanding, chosenness leads not to arrogance, but rather to humility. If it were some human king who chose us to be his special people, then your assumption would be correct — we would become elitists. When a mortal power shows favoritism towards a subject, that subject will become more arrogant as a result. The closer you are to the king, the more significant you are, and the higher respect you feel you deserve.

But we were chosen by G-d. And the closer you are to G-d, the more you sense your insignificance. While being buddy-buddy with a human leader inflates your ego, a relationship with G-d bursts your selfish bubble. Because G-d is an infinite being, and all delusions of petty self-importance fall away when you stand before infinity. Being close with G-d demands introspection and self-improvement, not smugness.

In Judaism, G-d is the core of reality—the entire reality of existence. We are all part of reality, we are all in reality; we are all part of G-d, in G-d, in reality. There is an organic oneness that unites all of existence, all of humanity, all of the cosmos—and that organic unity is what we call G-d. “Hashem Echad,” G-d is one, does not only mean there is one G-d and not twenty gods; it means that G-d is synonymous with oneness. The word G-d is another way of saying that “there is only one.” There is oneness that pervades all of existence. We are all reflections of One reality; One core. We are all manifestations—diverse expressions—of a singular reality.

To be conscious of G-d means to never allow your ego to wrap you in its superficial imagination. “Ego” stands for Easing G-d Out. When I do not realize my true greatness and value, as a reflection of G-d’s infinite oneness, I must resort to my ego to feel good about myself and to put you down. Becoming G-d conscious means that at every moment I need not protect my ego, as I become completely comfortable with my true reality, as an expression of Divine light. The more G-d conscious I am, the smaller I become and the greater I become: On one level, I become nothing, as there is nothing but the organic oneness, the absolute infinity of G-d, which pervades all. At the same time, I become the greatest, as my life becomes a full and seamless expression of the higher, unifying, integrating, eternal consciousness of the eternal core of all reality.

Being close to G-d summons you to respect others more, not less. The more G-d conscious, the more loving and charitable you become, as you are aware that G-d’s light pervades every person and every creature. When in the name of chosenness a person becomes bigoted, disrespectful, elitist, and arrogant, they have missed the boat. When you become aware of G-d choosing you, it eliminates the judgmentalism we resort to to protect our egos and feel better about ourselves and our place in the world. Your success never equals my failure. I reflect one aspect of G-d, as you reflect another one.

This is the idea of the Chosen People — a nation of individuals who have been given the opportunity to sense G-d’s closeness, hear His truth, and relay His message to the world. All agree that it was the Jews who introduced the world to monotheism and a system of ethics and morals that has shaped the modern view of life and its purpose. And it is the survival of Judaism to this day that attests to the eternal value of this system.

Anyone from any ethnic background can convert to Judaism and become chosen. Jewish chosenness is not a gene, it is a state of the soul. Anyone

wishing to take it upon themselves is welcome -- as long as they are ready to have their bubble burst. Anyone can join this group of “chosen people” as long as they are ready to experience themselves as nothing... And that is a Jew.

And that is why so many people loathe the Jewish people.

We have been chosen to teach each and every person alive that each of them has been chosen—to serve G-d and become an ambassador of love, light, and goodness to His world.

What Did Chosen-ness Do To Us?

When I look at our people, I ask myself one question: Has our belief that we are the chosen people turned us into murderous people who feel they have the right to abuse, persecute, target, and annihilate other cultures and peoples who are different? Or has it made us feel responsible to share, give, contribute, and help others? Has the idea of Chosen People turned us into people who are never introspective, or perhaps into the most self-critical and introspective nation on earth? (Often, the worst critics of Israel are Jews!)

The true test of chosenness is how humble you are. Most Jews today have passed this test with flying colors. Their humility is so deep, it doesn't allow them to accept that they are chosen. While most other religious groups are quite comfortable claiming that they are the best, we Jews will do anything to say that we are nothing special. Now that's what we call a Chosen People!

Katonti!

This, explained Rabbi Schneur Zalman, was the hallmark of Jacob. To the self-absorbed person, a kindness from G-d is proof of his own significance and worth. To the spiritually mature person, however, a kindness from G-d is, first and foremost, an act of divine love: G-d is drawing the person closer to Him. And the closer one comes to G-d, the more one realizes one’s own insignificance in the face of the divine infinity.

This is what it means to think as a Jew. When you were blessed with a gift, when you were showered with a blessing—the first instinct of the Jew is: Katonti! I am humbled.

This, the Alter Rebbe taught, must be the response of his followers to the grace they have seen: to become far more humble, authentic, and Divine. To suspend their egos and become channels for Divine oneness. When we realize we have been chosen, we cultivate a healthy confidence that comes not from ego but from humility. It is about respecting our role as Divine ambassadors for goodness and truth. Then we never duck to the pressure of those who want us to compromise our eternal mission to eliminate evil and cultivate goodness.

(My thanks to Rabbi Aron Moss for his article on the topic.)

Drasha

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Parshas Vayishlach

Animal House

Hutz ‘n’ plutz. That was a fictitious name my mother would give to a place where everything was bliss and very simple. It was the home of Chaim Yankel or whoever the mythical Jewish character of a given fable lived. But believe it or not, there was a place called Huts ‘n’ plutz. Of course, the ‘n’ plutz suffix was not added, nor was the place actually called Huts in the English language. It did however take the name in Hebrew. And it was called Sukkos. And a Sukkos are huts.

After Yaakov departed peacefully from his brother, he dwelled in a place for 18 months. When he arrived he built a quasi-infrastructure — homes for his kin and sukkos, huts, for his great herd. Then he named the city. He did not call it for the homes he built, rather for the myriad structures that he built for the animals — Sukkos, Huts.

Many commentaries are puzzled as to why Yaakov chose a name representing the temporal, animal structures as opposed to calling the city Houses or Batim, referring to the permanent dwellings he erected for his kin. After all, is it not more appropriate to name a village after the human abodes as opposed to the animal ones? Some answer that naming the city Sukkos was a symbolic expression of the paradox of all worldly permanence. Yaakov was saying that every abode, from

glorious mansions to marble edifices, is only temporal. They are all Sukkos. Thus he named the town Sukkos.

My grandfather, Rav Yaakov Kamenetzky, of blessed memory, once offered a very practical approach. After Yaakov constructed homes for both his children and livestock, the dominant feature of the landscape was myriad huts scattered across the countryside. Gazing at the amazingly transformed dessert, he appropriately named the town after the scene. He called it Huts.

But why tell us that? Who cares? Perhaps both questions can be answered as one.

In the northern part of Israel, Yeshiva K'far Chasidim had established itself as a prominent center of Torah scholarship. Students flocked to the Yeshiva to gain from the spiritual nourishment that the Mashgiach, Dean of Ethics, Reb Elya Lopian offered. But the Yeshiva attracted more than students seeking spiritual nourishment.

The basement in which the, pasta, flour and other dry goods were stored also attracted those seeking nourishment. It had become infested with rodents! The students decided on a simple solution to their problem of diminishing food supply and the health hazard.

They scoured the rubbish piles of the city and brought a stray cat back to the campus. Every day it would play in the yard and each evening they would bring back to the basement where it would earn its keep, receiving room and board simultaneously. Within a few weeks there was not a rodent to be found. But the cat remained. The boys lapsed in their commitment to its welfare and even forgot to feed it.

One evening it scratched on the screen door of the aged Mashgiach HaGaon Reb Elya Lopian's home. He was puzzled. Not informed about the extermination stratagem of the student body, he wondered where the cat came from. One of the younger students explained the problems of the mice and their ingenious solution. With that, the boy explained the presence of the cat that had made its way to the sage's home.

"Are there still mice?" asked Reb Elya. "No," exclaimed the student, "there hasn't been a rodent in days!" Then he smiled while looking down at the cat and added, "thanks to this fellow." "And since there are no mice, what has he been eating?" The boy just shrugged. He simply did not know. "Ahh," sighed the sage. "You have been lax in your responsibility and gratitude. I will show you how to feed a cat." With that, Reb Elya, a man in his eighties, went into his kitchen, poured milk into a saucer and placed it down for the hungry feline.

At that moment a young student named Kavinsky captured the moment on film. The picture of the white-bearded Torah giant bending down and feeding a cat remains one of the most popular pictures among thousands of youngsters in America and Israel.

It has become Reb Elya's proud testament that even G-d's simplest creatures must be cared for, even by a sage in Israel.

Rabbi Chaim Yosef David Azulai, a Sefardic sage who lived in the latter part of the 18th century, better known as the Chida, offers a brilliant and revolutionary explanation to the peculiar name Sukkos.

(I purchased this set of the Chida's writings after being encouraged by a reader, Boruch Meir (Bobby) Ohrbach, and I am grateful for the wealth of knowledge I have since attained. Thank you!)

The Chida explains that Yaakov Avinu did something unprecedented for that era. Realizing that he would be spending a year and a half in unsheltered terrain, he built a sanctuary of protection for animals!

Others would have left them in the cold, caring selfishly for only their own welfare and that of their kin. Yaakov was proud of building huts for the animals and he expressed that pride in naming the entire city, not after the act that any husband and father would do for his family. He did not enshrine the town after his labor of love that would be personally enjoyed by members of his family.

He did not call the village Levittown or Jacobsville. He called it after the labor of love sweated for his temporal flock. He gave a name to tell the world that he not only cared for his flesh and blood. He named the town in honor of what he had done for the beings who had no one else to depend upon. He declared the compassion one must accord to the simplest beings, even a cat.

Dedicated by the Schulman family in memory of Milton Schulman of blessed memory

PARABOLIC REFLECTIONS

In Parshas Noach's Drasha I wrote, "Recently, a billion dollar project to Mars was destroyed because the language of the metric system was spoken in one factory and feet and inches were spoken in the other."

I received this brief letter from Harvey Schabes, a NASA engineer.

"Just a brief note from your friendly NASA Engineer: I am almost positive that the Mars project was in the low hundreds of millions and not billions. But what's a few million between friends."

Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Vayishlach

Why Didn't Yaakov's Zechus Save His Daughter from Tragedy?

The incident with Dena in Parshas Vayishlach is very difficult to understand on many levels. "Now Dena – the daughter of Leah, whom she had borne to Yaakov – went out to look over the daughters of the land. Shechem, son of Chamor the Chivi, the prince of the region, saw her; he took her, lay with her, and violated her." (Bereshis 34:1-2) Of course, this was a terrible disgrace. Dena's brothers were outraged: "Shall our sister be treated like a zonah?" (Bereshis 34:31) Therefore, Shimon and Levi hatched their plot to have all the men of Shechem circumcised and then, when they were weakened from the operation, Shimon and Levi came in and killed out the entire city. This itself leaves room for a lot of discussion, and is something we have discussed over the years.

This year, I would like to share another topic, namely how did such a thing happen to the daughter of Yaakov Avinu? How was it that the zechus of Yaakov Avinu did not save his daughter from this terrible fate? There is a Medrash which addresses this. The Medrash points to a fault in Yaakov Avinu.

(Whenever Chazal point out a fault in the holy patriarchs, they are talking about the most nuanced of "aveiros" (sins). We cannot even call them "aveiros." At most, we can call them "shortcomings." We cannot project our foibles and weaknesses on Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. That would be a tragic mistake, because they are not regular people. They are the "Avos Hakedoshim" and we can't ascribe to them the base aveiros that we commit. That having been said, Chazal do point out slight imperfections in the deeds of the Avos and this Medrash is one such instance.)

The Medrash quotes the pasuk in Mishlei "Don't boast about tomorrow because you don't know what tomorrow will bring" (Mishlei 27:1), and applies it to Yaakov Avinu. In the previous parsha (Vayetzei) when Yaakov made a deal with Lavan regarding the division of the sheep, he boasted: "...my righteousness will testify that none of the sheep of Lavan will be found in my flock" (Bereshis 30:33). Supposedly, this was a very valid thing for Yaakov to say. Yaakov's righteousness, and specifically the way he dealt with Lavan all these years, was certainly beyond reproach! The Rambam cites Yaakov's work ethic towards Lavan as the paradigm of how an employee must serve his employer. Therefore, Yaakov could legitimately say "my righteousness will testify for me."

Nonetheless, regarding this comment, the Medrash says "Don't boast about tomorrow because you don't know what tomorrow will bring." The Medrash chastises Yaakov: "Don't be so confident of your righteousness; 'tomorrow' your daughter is going to go out and be violated." The simple reading of the Medrash is that the Medrash is making a play on words between the expression "v'ansa bi tzeedkasi" (and my righteousness will testify for me) and the word "va'yane-ha" (and he violated her). That is how the Medrash knows there is some kind of connection here.

Obviously, the Medrash is saying that Yaakov said something wrong here to Lavan. What could be wrong with what he said? The answer is (again this is only "the finest of finest of imperfections") that Yaakov Avinu was relying on his own accomplishments here. A person can never ever rely on his own accomplishments. A person must realize that every single day is a gift, and every single day he needs siyata d'shmaya

(Divine assistance). What happened yesterday is absolutely no guarantee for what will happen tomorrow.

When a person is so confident about the future that he can say “let my righteousness testify on my behalf for the future” that is saying that there is a level of self-confidence (bitachon-atzmi), trusting in myself rather than in the Ribono shel Olam. A person never knows. No matter what has happened in the past, a person cannot assume “I am set!” For a person never knows what tomorrow will bring.

As confident as Yaakov was about his integrity in monetary matters, he was equally confident about the chinuch (education) that he gave to his sons and daughters. “I don’t need to worry about my children because as much as I put into my work, I put into my children. I raised only righteous children! – The Shvta Kah!” (Twelve Tribes of the L-rd). However, this can even happen to your own daughter! Such things can happen if we have too much self-reliance!

The Punishment of Miriam Bas Bilgah

At the end of Maseches Succah, the Talmud relates an incident that occurred in the time of the Second Beis Hamikdash involving a certain “Miriam daughter of Bilga” from a family of Kohanim. Miriam abandoned her religion and married a Greek officer. When the Greeks entered the Beis Hamikdash (at the time of the Chanukah story) she kicked the mizbayach (altar) with her sandal and cried out “Wolf! Wolf! How long will you continue to consume the property of Israel and not come to their aid in their time of need?” The Gemara relates that when the chachomim heard about this incident, they fined the entire mishmar of Bilga, penalizing her family’s ability to partake in the future avodah in the Beis Hamikdash.

The Gemara asks why the whole family was fined for the misdeeds of one apostate daughter in the family. The Gemara famously answers that this retribution was appropriate because “the way a child talks in the street is based on conversation she heard at home. The expression of the children comes either from their father or their mother.” Miriam’s attitude – that the offerings upon the mizbayach were just a waste of Jewish money – did not originate with her. It came from her parents. Therefore, it was appropriate to fine the entire mishmar.

I once heard an interesting observation in the name of the Satmar Rebbe, zt”l. This Miriam intermarried. She became an apostate. For that, her family was not fined. But for cursing the mizbayach and calling the korbanos a waste of money – for that the chachomim threw the book at the family! The Rebbe explained that children sometimes go off the derech. It is not necessarily the parents’ fault. She might leave her religion. She might intermarry. These events cannot necessarily be blamed on her parents. But the way she talks – that came from somewhere. She got those attitudes from her home. These are things she picked up as a child from the way she heard her parents speak.

This is a lesson of the tremendous impact of parents’ influence on their children. Everything that takes place within the four walls of our homes gets stuck to the ears of our children. We may not think that they are paying attention but everything that we say and the attitude that we have are all picked up and remain. For this, we have great responsibility.

On the other hand, it is a two-way street. This phenomenon works for bad and it works for good.

There is a famous Rashi in the beginning of Parshas Behaalooscha. When Aharon Hakohen saw that neither he nor Shevet Levi participated in the dedication of the Mishkan (along with the other Princes listed at the end of Parshas Nasso), he became depressed. Chazal say that Aharon was told “Your portion is greater than their portion – for you will light the candles (of the Menorah).” The Ramban famously says that this does not refer to the lighting of the Menorah in the Beis HaMikdash but rather to the lighting of the Chanuka menorah throughout the generations until this very day, in commemoration of the heroics of the Maccabee Kohanim (who were descendants of Aharon).

The question is asked: Why is this a consolation prize? Aharon complained that he did not “contribute” as did the nessiyim (princes) who contributed personal offerings each day of the dedication of the Mishkan. This doesn’t answer the question. Where did Aharon have the opportunity to “contribute”?

The answer is: Why did Aharon Hakohen have great grandchildren who were moser nefesh for the mitzvah of lighting the menorah? From where did that come? It came from Aharon’s enthusiasm and passion for the lighting of the menorah. His inspiration to faithfully perform this mitzvah day after day is what carried on to his great grandchildren (the Maccabees) so that they too were moser nefesh to fight the wars of Hashem and clean up the Beis HaMikdash in order to light the menorah. That was Aharon’s contribution. The Ribono shel Olam told Aharon, “Your contribution is even greater than that of the nessiyim because your contribution will last throughout the generations. Therefore, you did contribute.” With that, the Ribono shel Olam appeased Aharon Hakohen.

The Sound of a Beer Bottle: A Twenty-Year Journey, One Day at a Time

By Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

Twenty years ago, a woman I knew came to me with a heavy heart. She was married to a man who had become an alcoholic. This wasn’t social drinking nor was it “a little too much at kiddush or at a simcha.” It was a pattern that was slowly hollowing out his life and his home. She was clear on what had to happen, but she lacked the courage and confidence to confront him. She asked me if I would.

As a young rabbi, I was inexperienced in this area (and most others) but I knew one thing: confrontation can humiliate or it can heal. It can push a person further into denial, or it can become the beginning of their redemption. I agreed to speak with this husband, not because I had guarantees about how it would go, but because looking away and staying silent was no longer an option.

I called him and asked if I could stop by. I didn’t spell out why, I just asked if we could catch up. I will never forget that evening: the fear I felt pulling up to his house, the tefillah I whispered asking Hashem to give me the right words. When I arrived, we sat outside. In his typical generous hospitality, he opened two beers, one for himself and one for me. On the surface, it was the picture of two people, friends shmoozing on a nice Florida evening. We spoke about work, family, life. It felt casual, unforced.

But the whole time, beneath the surface, I knew I wasn’t there just to catch up. I wasn’t there to judge him, label him, or attack him. I was there to share a truth that his wife, some close friends, and I all saw clearly, and that he, on some level, likely already knew but had not allowed himself to fully face. At a certain point, I gently steered the conversation where it needed to go.

“Look, I didn’t come here only to hang out. I came because your wife, some close friends, and I are very concerned. We see the role alcohol plays in your life, and it isn’t healthy; it has gotten out of control. This isn’t easy for me to say, but it’s harder to watch you continue this way and say nothing.” When you bring something like this up, you brace yourself for the response: “You’re overreacting. Everyone drinks. This is my business, not yours. Mind your own business. Stay out of my personal life.” You expect anger, denial, defensiveness.

This man didn’t do any of that. He didn’t blow up or storm off. Instead, he looked at me. Really looked at me. He gave me a long, strong, searching stare that made time feel like it had slowed down. It wasn’t a hateful look, and it wasn’t even particularly angry. It was the look of a man suddenly faced with a mirror he could no longer avoid. In that moment, it felt as if he was asking himself, “Is this really what people see when they look at me? Is he serious? Am I an alcoholic? Have I lost control?”

Then, without fanfare, without any dramatic declaration, he put his beer down and the sound of the glass made a clank. He did not take another sip. We continued to talk. From the outside, nothing dramatic had changed. There was no emotional explosion, no tearful promise, no big speech. But in that simple act of placing the beer down and not picking it back up, a line had been drawn. A decision had been made.

That beer was the last drink he ever took. From that day forward, he threw himself into recovery. He did not try to do it alone. He joined a recovery program. He went to meetings. He got a sponsor. He surrounded himself with people who understood his struggle and were committed to helping him heal and rebuild his life. And here is what is so remarkable: he told me that not only has he not touched alcohol since that day, but he has not even felt tempted to drink. Not once.

Twenty years ago, he put down that bottle and hasn’t picked up alcohol since, but that is far from the only change in his life. Twenty years of sobriety has meant twenty years of showing up differently for his family, for himself, for his career, and for Hashem. From the outside, it looks like he made one decision and held to it for two decades. But that is not how it really works. Recovery is not accomplished in twenty-year chunks. It can only ever be lived one day at a time. When someone faces a destructive habit, whether alcohol, drugs, uncontrolled anger, dishonesty, impatience, or anything else, and realizes something must

change, they often hear or tell themselves, "You can never do this again for the rest of your life. You have to stop forever." The natural reaction is panic. "The rest of my life? Never again? That's impossible. I'm guaranteed to fail." The phrase "for the rest of your life" feels so big, so heavy, that it nearly paralyzes the person before they even take their first step.

We simply are not designed to live for "forever." We are only capable of living today. But if instead you say, "Don't drink today," something shifts. Today is manageable. Today is concrete. Today feels attainable. Whatever we need to eliminate or work on, as soon as we move it into the realm of "forever," it feels hopeless. But when we bring it down to one more day, to today, it becomes possible.

That is the secret of recovery: one day at a time. Not, "I will never drink again," but, "Today, I will not drink. Today, I will stay sober." And tomorrow, with Hashem's help, we will say it again.

You wake up in the morning and you don't stay sober for twenty years; you stay sober for this morning, for this afternoon, for this evening. You do that enough times, and before you know it, those individual days have added up into something enormous. One day you turn around and realize that one more day and one more day and one more day without became twenty years.

When Yaakov Avinu agrees to work for Lavan for seven long, challenging years in order to marry Rochel, the Torah tells us something very surprising: "Vaya'avod Yaakov b'Rochel sheva shanim, vayihyu b'einav k'yamim achadim b'ahavaso osah." Yaakov worked for Rochel for seven years, and they seemed to him but a few days, k'yamim achadim, because of his love for her.

At first glance, this is difficult to understand. When we long for something, when we are waiting for someone we love, time usually moves slowly. Every day feels like an eternity. When a chassan and kallah are waiting for their wedding, when someone is waiting for a refuah, when a person is waiting for vacation to start, it rarely feels like a "few days." If anything, it feels like forever. So how could the Torah say that seven hard years passed for Yaakov "like a few days"?

Rabbi Dr. Abraham J. Twerski z'l, who was a world-renowned expert, thinker, and writer on addiction and recovery, suggests a beautiful insight. He points out that the word "achadim" shares a root with the word "echad," one. Yaakov did not live those seven years as one overwhelming, crushing block of time. He lived them as yamim echadim, one day at a time. Each day was a single unit of avodah: one day of working, one day of being one step closer, one day of commitment, one day of holding on to his love for Rochel and his trust in Hashem. Seven years is daunting. "Today" is not. When one lives in the present day, focused on what today demands, seven years can indeed pass "like a few days."

When my friend quietly put his beer down that day, I don't believe he was consciously committing to perfection for the rest of his life or picturing celebrating his twentieth anniversary of sobriety. He was taking the next right step. He was agreeing to face the truth, to seek help, to walk into that first meeting, to say no to the immediate urge. He was choosing to live that day differently. Hashem took that one courageous "today" and, one day at a time, turned it into twenty years.

He and I met recently to sit and talk once again and to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of that fateful conversation. He shared with me, "When I put the bottle of beer down, something happened. Something humanly unexplainable. A profound change happened instantly. The only attribute could be Hashem.

He was the catalyst that began this journey." In recovery, step three is to submit to a higher power and trust in God for help. Twenty years ago, my friend discovered a real and raw relationship with Hashem, a genuine and ongoing conversation with the Almighty.

As I marveled at his fortitude and accomplishment, I thought to myself: every one of us has something we need to work on, a temper that flares too quickly, a tongue that speaks too freely, a laziness that holds us back, a jealousy that corrodes our happiness, a private behavior we are ashamed of. When we tell ourselves, "I must never do this again for the rest of my life," we set ourselves up to feel crushed and defeated. We mean well, but we are thinking in terms that only Hashem can handle.

What if, instead, we thought and spoke to ourselves the way Torah and recovery both teach us to: "Today, I will be careful with my speech. Today, I will work on being more patient. Today, I will not open that site, that bottle, that door. Today, I will show up as the husband, wife, parent, friend, Jew I know I can be." The next day, we take a deep breath, trust in Hashem and say it again. Forever is not in our hands. Today is.

If you are like the woman in this story, watching someone you love slipping into something destructive, the feeling of helplessness can be overwhelming. You look at their future, and at yours, and "the rest of our lives" feels unbearably heavy. But you are not responsible to fix the rest of their life in one action, and you are not expected to know exactly what the next twenty years will bring.

You can take one step. She took one step by reaching out and asking for help. I took one step by agreeing to have a hard conversation. He took one step by putting down that beer and walking into recovery. Each of those steps was a yom echad, a single day's act of courage. Hashem can multiply that.

And if, in this story, you recognize yourself not in the wife but in the husband, if you sense that your drinking, or some other behavior, your private life, has become something you no longer fully control, then please hear this clearly: you do not need to promise perfection and you do not need to swear that you will never struggle again.

You need to be honest today. Today, admit that this has gotten out of control. Today, share it with someone you trust.

Today, make one phone call, walk into one meeting, send one message asking for help. Today, ask Hashem for the strength not for the next twenty years, but for the next twenty-four hours.

The yetzer hara, the voice of self-sabotage, loves the language of "forever." It whispers, "You'll never keep this up. You'll fail eventually. Why even start if you can't be perfect?" Torah and genuine recovery answer with the language of echad: not forever, but one. One step. One day. One honest conversation. One sincere teffillah. One refusal to pick up the next drink.

Twenty years ago, a wife's fear, a husband's hidden readiness, and one difficult but loving conversation converged on a porch. I can still hear the sound of him putting down that beer. That small, almost unremarkable motion did not just end a drink; it began a new life.

Rabbi Yehuda Spitz

The New Complex

In Parshas Vayishlach, after Yaakov Avinu's epic battle with Eisav's guardian angel[1], where he got injured in his hip socket[2], we are given a Biblical commandment, the third and last of the whole sefer Bereishis, that Bnei Yisrael may not partake of the Gid Hanasheh, the sciatic nerve, of any animal. Additionally, there is a Rabbinic prohibition on eating from the outer sinew of the animal's thigh tendon[3]. The Sefer HaChinuch[4] writes that this mitzvah actually serves as a constant reminder that eventually we will be redeemed from this protracted exile.

To fulfill this mitzvah properly, every last trace of said nerves and the fat covering the sciatic nerve must be removed as well. This act is called nikkur, a.k.a. treibbering, deveining, or porging the forbidden nerves and fats, and it takes an expert to do it properly[5].

Trouble was the Traveling Treibberer

One of the most outstanding experts in hilchos nikkur known was Rav Yonason Eibeshutz zt"l (1690 - 1764), one of the greatest Torah giants of his period and famed author of 89(!) works[6], including the renowned Yaatos Devash, Urim V'Tumim, and Kreisi U'Pleisi. In the latter sefer, in his commentary to the laws of Gid Hanasheh[7], Rav Yonason recorded a fascinating historical incident, which posthumously sparked a raging halachic controversy.

He related that an expert porger came to town (Prague) claiming that the sinew that Jews have been removing for centuries was the wrong one! This treibberer alleged that a different sinew was the true Gid Hanasheh. The ramifications of his claim were gargantuan, for if it were deemed accurate, consequently all of World Jewry would have chas veshalom been eating non-kosher from time immemorial! Rav Yonason writes that he showed this fellow the error of his ways as the sinew this porger was referring to was found exclusively in male animals, and could therefore not possibly be the correct one, for it states in the "SMaG(ostensibly the Sefer Mitzvos Hagadol, written by Rav Moshe of Coucy in the 13th century, Negative Commandment 139) that the prohibition of Gid Hanasheh applies to both males and females". With his vast knowledge and expertise, Rav Eibeshutz thus averted potential communal disaster. He concludes his passage reiterating the importance and necessity of a porger's proficiency and capability.

Kreisi Controversy

However, as many puzzled people later pointed out, this logic seemed inherently flawed, as this quote does not actually appear in the SMaG! The SMaG in his actual quote (Mitzvos Lo Sa'aseh 139) was referring to people, not animals! In other words, he wrote that women were similarly obligated in keeping this prohibition as men do[8]. They wondered, is it possible the great Rav Eibeshutz could have made such a simple mistake? And, if so, what was it that the Kreisi U'Pleisi showed this traveling treibberer that refuted his taynos? Many scholars over the years searched for a proper solution to this perplexing conundrum.

One suggestion was that the porger was unlearned, and Rav Yonason wanted to expose his ignorance and therefore set a trap and easily refute him[9]. The issue with this is that, by Rav Yonason's own testimony, the porger was a "Talmid Chacham and expert", which would negate this solution.

The Pischei Teshuvah[10] cites the Toldos Adam, who takes a different approach and makes an example out of this story as proof that even Gedolim can err. Following this would mean that one may not partake in eating said meat without removing both sinews. Although the Toldos Adam's intent was merely to uncover the truth, he unwittingly fueled the fires of the Haskalah, as one of their primary goals was the undermining of Rabbinic authority[11]. In fact, this author personally heard noted historian Rabbi Berel Wein aver that the Haskalah used this story as propaganda to sway the masses.

On the other hand, many Rabbinic luminaries wrote responsae[12], including a tremendous pilpul by the Chasam Sofer[13], not only defending the Rav Eibeshutz's words from attack, but actually each citing different proofs and logic how his shittah is truly correct, that the Gid Hanasheh must be present in both male and female animals.

Several authorities[14] wrote that it must be a printing mistake and the correct point of reference was the S - H - G (שׁ-הַ-גּ), referring to the Sefer Halachos Gedolos, a ninth century Halachic code which contains a section on hilchos treifos[15], who actually does imply that the Gid Hanasheh is found in both male and female animals. Others[16] feel that he meant "a sefer mitzvos gadol", meaning a big book of mitzvos, possibly referring to the Sefer HaChinuch (Mitzva 3), who implies this as well.

"VeHetzdik es HaTzaddik"

However, the whole truth did not actually come out until 1930, when a rabbi in Los Angeles, Rabbi Shlomo Michoel Neches, wrote in the Shaarei Tzion Torah Journal[17] that he had in his possession an original manuscript of the Kreisi U'Pleisi, and the words SMAG were crossed out by Rav Yonason Eibeshutz himself, and written on top of them were the letters S - H - N (שׁ-הַ-נּ, which stood for Seder Hilchos Nikkur, referring to the Seder HaNikkur of the Baal Haltur[18]. There it was written explicitly that the Gid Ganash that both men and women are forbidden from consuming is found in both male and female animals. Finally and justly, a Gadol Hador was vindicated - 165 years after his death[19]!

Although we had to wait over a century and a half to attain clarity on this halachic mystery, it is imperative that we realize that our true mesorah (in this case - all the way back to Yaakov Avinu!) is rock solid and our chachamim are given special siyatta dishmaya to arrive at the correct halachic conclusions. It might take a century or even a millennium, but in the end we clearly see why our chachamim are called "Eunei HaEidah"[20].

Postscript: Interestingly, and quite apropos, this fascinating historical episode has had a recent, and equally fascinating, addendum. Apparently, Rabbi Neches' sefarim, including his original copy of the Kreisi U'Pleisi, were donated to the UCLA Research Library. Several scholars traveled there to see Rav Eibeshutz's original amendment and came upon an astonishing discovery. It turns out that it was not the handwritten correction of that renowned Rav Yonason Eibeshutz, but that of another, later Rav Yonason Eibeshutz, who lived at least a century after the first. This second Rav Eibeshutz, a Torah scholar of note, was the Av Beis Din of Lashitz, Poland, and author of Shu"t Tiferes Yonason. Apparently, this was his personal copy of Kreisi U'Pleisi, and he was the one who made the amendment which was later proven accurate in shedding light on the original Rav Yonason's puzzling citation, and not the author himself[21]. Either way, and whichever Rav Eibeshutz, we manifestly see the Divine orchestration involved in clearing up this complicated complexity of historical record.

[1] Bereishis (end of Ch. 32). This follows Rashi's understanding (ad loc. 25, end s.v. vayei'aveik ish), based on the Midrash Rabbah (ad loc. 77: 3) and Midrash Tanchuma (ad loc. 8; who adds that the guardian angel of Eisav was Sama-el). However, there is another opinion, cited in Otzar HaMidrashim (ad loc.), that it was really the ma'alach Michoel that Yaakov fought, and not Eisav's guardian angel, in order to prove to Yaakov that he had nothing to fear from Eisav.

[2] Due to the dictum of 'Maaseh Avos Siman L'banim' [see recent article titled 'Mysterious Omens and our Forefathers'] we are still feeling the repercussions of this act nowadays. See Chofetz Chaim al HaTorah to this parshah.

[3] Gemara Chullin (Ch. Gid Hanasheh, 91a - 93b); Shulchan Aruch (Yoreh Deah 65, 8).

[4] Sefer HaChinuch (Mitzvah 3). Several Rishonim, including the Ramban (Bereishis Ch. 32: 26), Rabbeinu Bachaya (ad loc.), Rashba (Chiddushei Aggados, Chullin 91a), and Ra'ah (Pekudas HaLeviim, Brachos 33b), as well as the Midrash Rabba (Parshas Vayishlach 78, 5), also imply this message. See the Machon Yerushalayim version of Sefer HaChinuch (Mitzvah 3, footnote 3) at length.

[5] See Shulchan Aruch and Rema (Yoreh Deah 65, 13 & 14), and their commentaries.

[6] See preface to sefer 'Chacham HaRazim - Rabbi Yonason Eibeshutz'.

[7] Kreisi U'Pleisi (Yoreh Deah 65, Kreisi 16).

[8] See for example, the Baruch Taam's glosses to the Kreisi U'Pleisi ad loc. Although others, including the Tzemach Hasadeh (on Yoreh Deah 65, pg. 41), assumed he meant the

SMaK, it is also not found there; neither is it in the Rambam's Sefer HaMitzvos (Mitzvos Lo Sa'aseh 183). See also Rav Shmuel Ashkenazi's Alpha Beta Tintycisa D'Shmuel Ze'ira (vol. 1, pg. 195 - 196).

[9] See Hegos B'Parshiyos HaTorah by Rabbi Yehuda Nachshoni, on Parshas Vayishlach, pg. 137.

[10] Pischei Teshuva (Yoreh Deah 65, 2), citing the Toldos Adam (Rav Yechezkel Feivel Wolfe of Vilna; vol. 2, Ch. 15, pg. 237).

[11] Paraphrase from Professor Shmayer Zalman Leiman's excellent "Rabbi Jonathon Eibeshutz and the Porger" (pg. 16). Thanks are due to Rabbi Eliezer Brodt, author of Bein Kesseh L'Essor and Lekutei Eliezer, for providing me with this important source.

[12] Including the Mahar'i Assad (Shu"t Yehuda Ya'aleh, Yoreh Deah 102), Rav Shlomo Kluger (Shu"t Tuv Taam V'Daas, Mahadura Kama vol. 1, 100) [neither of whom actually approved of the Chasam Sofer's pilpul], the Butchatcher Gaon (Daas Kedoshim, Yoreh Deah 65, Hilchos Giddin HaAssurin 4; see explanation in Gidulei HaKodesh there, 1), the Ginzei Yosef (Shu"t 96, 2, quoting the Eunei Yisrael), the Mahar'i HaLevi (Shu"t vol. 1, end 36, s.v. mah shetamah), and the Arugas Habosem (Shu"t Yoreh Deah 64, 4). See also Rav Moshe Yosef Shapiro of Prague's 'Bris Avraham' (Parshas Vayishlach) who, quite thoroughly argues on the whole premise of those who questioned Rav Eibeshutz, as once the Torah wrote that Bnei Yisroel may not partake of any Gid Hanasheh, it is patently obvious that it must occur in all kosher beheimos, with no differentiation between male and female. Additionally, as the Rambam writes in his preface to his Pirush HaMishnayos regarding the Torah's 'Pri Eitz Hadar' being identified as the Esrog, once we have a Mesorah L'Doros dating back to Moshe Rabbeinu, all other so-called 'proofs' to the contrary immediately fall off. Therefore, he avers, the same would apply here as well regarding the Gid Hanasheh.

[13] Shu"t Chasam Sofer (Yoreh Deah 69), cited approvingly by the Pischei Teshuva (ibid.) and Shu"t HaRava"z (Yoreh Deah 111). The Aruch Hashulchan (Yoreh Deah 65, 25, in the brackets) might be referring to this solution as well.

[14] Including the Mishmeres Shalom (Yoreh Deah 65, Mishbetzos Zahav); Rav Avraham Shimon Traub, the Kaidan Gaon, in a new edition of Sefer Halachos Gedolos (pg. 296) that he published; the Ginzei Yosef (ibid.); and Rav Yosef Adler (cited in Shu"t Mishnah Halachos vol. 3, 67). The Tzitz Eliezer (Shu"t vol. 8, 25, 2 and vol. 18, 63, 6 s.v.v'an) actually prefers this amending to the later one, opining that Rabbi Neches must not have been able to read Rav Yonason's handwriting clearly.

[15] BeHa"G (61, Hilchos Treifos pg 129a; exact location cited in Maadanei Hashulchan, Yoreh Deah 65, footnote 118). Still, others feel that the BeHa"G's words are also not entirely clear that he was referring to female animals; see Haggos Rav Ezriel Hildesheimer to the BeHa"G (ad loc.), Chadrei De'ah (ad loc. 8), Giluy Daas (ad loc. 7), and Daas Yonason (glosses on the recent Zichron Aharon version of the Kreisi U'Pleisi 65, 16).

[16] See Shu"t Mishnah Halachos (vol. 3, 68, s.v. u'mah). One can also infer this from the Minchas Chinuch's comments (Mitzva 3, 13).

[17] Shaarei Tzion Torah Journal (Choveret HaYovel 1930, 25) - under the title "VeHetzdik es HaTzaddik" - "The Tzaddik Was Justified" (Devarim Ch. 25, verse 1); also printed in HaPardes Journal (vol. 4, Journal 1: 10 pg. 18 - 19). This important historical tidbit is found in Pardes Yosef (Parshas Vayishlach, 33 s.v. uv'kru"p), as well as in Torah Shleimah (Parshas Vayishlach, 169), and Shu"t Tzitz Eliezer (ibid.). It is also added as an important footnote in many recent editions of the Shulchan Aruch, some printed with the words "mitzvah l'farsem".

[18] Seder HaNikkur (Shaar HaRishon, Hechsher HaBassar 8b - exact location cited in Maadanei Hashulchan Yoreh Deah 65, footnote 118), also brought in the Tur (end Yoreh Deah 65), as well as in Rabbeinu Yerucham (Nesiv 15, 14, pg. 128b). According to Professor Leiman (cited above) the version Rav Eibeshutz showed the porger was the 1577 version with the glosses of Rav Tzvi Bochner, a master treibberer and contemporary of the Rema, as there are those [see Prishah (Yoreh Deah 65, 56) and Shu"t Mishnah Halachos (vol. 3, 68 s.v. bram and s.v. mevuar)] who explain that in other versions, the words "male" and "female" are actually referring to types of muscles, not the gender of the animals.

[19] Also thereby proving that Rav Eibeshutz chose the right name for his sefer, Kreisi U'Pleisi - See Gemara Brachos (4a) and Rashi (ad loc. s.v. shekorsim).

[20] Parshas Shelach (Bamidbar Ch. 15, verse 24). Interestingly, this author has seen it averred that history has proven that in the whole sefer Kreisi U'Pleisi on all of Yorah Deah only one (!) actual mistake was found, but it turns out that it was clearly an error in Geometry - see Kreisi U'Pleisi (Tiferes Yisrael, Yoreh Deah 190, 14) and the Kitzur Shulchan Aruch's Lechem V'Simlah (ad loc. Simlah 11). This will Bezr"H be addressed fully in this author's upcoming maamar in Kovetz Eitz Chaim (vol. 25).

[21] See Rabbi Yaakov Yitzchok HaKohen Miller's maamar in Kovetz Hama'yan (vol. 215; Tishrei 5776, pg 100 - 102), with pictures of the title page and amendment of Rabbi Neches's copy of Kreisi U'Pleisi. Thanks are due to R' Moshe Boruch Kaufman and R' Dovid Wasserlauf for pointing out this startling recent development in the saga of Rav Eibeshutz and the traveling treibberer.

לע"נ
יוחנן בן יקוטיאל יודא ע"ה
שרה משה בת ר' עקיבא אליעזר ע"ה
ביליא בת (אריה) ליב ע"ה
אנא מלכה בת ישראל

Parshas Vayishlach: Shim'on and Levi, Brothers of Dinah

By Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

I. "CURSED BE THEIR WRATH"

Chapter 34 of Sefer B'resheet records what is undoubtedly one of the most violent and morally troubling chapters in Biblical history. Here is a brief recap of the events which transpired in Sh'khem:

The family of Ya'akov enters the city of Sh'khem and Dinah, the one sister among eleven brothers, is forcibly taken by Sh'khem, the prince of the city-state after which he is named. Sh'khem rapes her and, through the august agency of his father, appeals to her brothers to allow her to become his proper wife. The brothers speak **b'Mirmah** (deceitfully? cunningly?) with Sh'khem and Hamor, his father, and convince them that the only way for Dinah to marry Sh'khem is if the prince and all of his townsfolk become circumcised. The townsfolk are convinced to undergo this painful operation - evidently motivated by economic gain (vv. 21-24). On the third day, with all the males in pain, Shim'on and Levi kill all of the males in town, after which the brothers pillage the town and take their sister back to safety. Ya'akov chastises them for their actions, which they defend on grounds of concern for their sister's honor.

As mentioned, this narrative is troubling on many levels. To paraphrase a contemporary writer, whereas Ya'akov's children had a golden opportunity to begin to fulfill their mission of teaching the world "the way of Hashem, to do justice and judgment;" (B'resheet 18:19), they squandered this chance and sullied their reputation in the eyes of the neighboring peoples by acting both deceitfully and violently, destroying an entire city in response to a crime committed by one citizen - albeit the prince. Avraham's protests of "will you also destroy the righteous with the wicked?" (ibid. v. 23) seem to have been inverted by his elect progeny. In addition, if we look further into the Torah, we see that rape of an unmarried woman is not considered a capital crime - rather it is a case of criminal assault (along with a fine, represented here by the word **Mohar**). How could Shim'on and Levi act in this manner?

Conventional understanding holds that Ya'akov's chastisement was directed against all of their actions - the deceit, the polis-cide and the pillage of the town. We are even more confident that Ya'akov was violently opposed to their behavior when we read of his deathbed charge, given to them nearly fifty years later in Egypt:

Shim'on and Levi are brothers; instruments of cruelty are their swords. O my soul, do not come into their council; to their assembly, let my honor not be united; for in their anger they slew a man, and in their wanton will they lamed an ox. Cursed be their anger, for it was fierce; and their wrath, for it was cruel; I will divide them in Ya'akov, and scatter them in Yisra'el. (B'resheet 49:5-7)

If we look into the analyses of the Rishonim, we will find that a much more complex picture unfolds before us; indeed, a careful read of both texts (Chapters 34 and 49) provides us with ample reason to reexamine our assessment of the behavior of Shim'on and Levi in Sh'khem. Due to space limitations, we will limit our reassessment of "the tragedy in Sh'khem" to information which can be inferred from the text itself. Interested readers are encouraged to look at the comments of the Rishonim through Ch. 34 (notably the Ramban at 34:13; note his critique of Rambam's explanation).

II. "HAKH'ZONAH...?"

There are several indications that Ya'akov was not opposed - in principle - to the decision (and its implementation) taken by Shim'on and Levi. In addition, we have several textual indications that the Torah itself gives their approach the stamp of approval.

First of all, let's look at Ya'akov's deathbed charge to these two brothers:

"... for in their anger they slew a man, and in their wanton will they lamed an ox..."

Although there are opinions in the Midrash which interpret this statement as a reference to Sh'khem, simple "P'shat" does not support this read. How could Ya'akov be referring to the death of dozens (or hundreds) of people as "they slew a man"? In addition, what is the reference to an "ox" here?

There is one statement in the Midrash which addresses this problem - but the solution offered there is hardly a critique of the brothers' behavior:

"Did they only slay one man? Doesn't Scripture state: 'they slew all the males'? Rather, they were only considered by haKadosh Barukh Hu as one person." (B'resheet Rabbah 99:6) In other words, if this is a reference to the slaying of the entire male population of Sh'khem, it isn't as grievous as all that, as their lives weren't worth much in the eyes of God (see the additional prooftexts brought in that selection).

Again, the straightforward reading is a reference to the killing of one man and an ox. We will soon discover who these might be.

"...Cursed be their anger, for it was fierce; and their wrath, for it was cruel..."

Note that Ya'akov does not curse their actions - rather, he curses their anger (or so it seems - but see the first comment of Hizkuni to 49:7.). If he were morally opposed to their behavior in Sh'khem, doesn't the actual slaying and pillage pale in significance next to their anger? Why mention that here?

[There is one other problem here, one which is beyond the scope of this shiur. Subsequent to Ya'akov's deathbed charge to his sons, the Torah states:

"All these are the twelve tribes of Israel; and this is it what their father spoke to them, and blessed them; every one according to his blessing he blessed them." (49:28) How can we understand Ya'akov's words to Shim'on and Levi - along with his harsh words for Re'uven - as part of a "blessing"? Perhaps we will take this up when we get to Parashat VaY'chi.]

Indeed, one comment in the Midrash Rabbah contrasts the violent act which earned them this curse (?) with their valor in Sh'khem!:

"...[Ya'akov] began calling out 'Shim'on and Levi are brothers...' you acted like brothers to Dinah, as it says: 'two of the sons of Jacob, Shim'on and Levi, Dinah's brothers, took each man his sword.' but you did not act like brothers to Yoseph when you sold him." (B. Rabbah 99:7 - this Midrash can be associated with the comment in Midrash Rabbati of R. Moshe haDarshan, to wit: the 'each man to his brother' mentioned in 37:19 at the sale of Yoseph refers to Shim'on and Levi; not coincidentally, Yoseph's abduction and sale took place in the Sh'khem region.)

Indeed, many Mefarshim maintain that the entire deathbed-charge of Ya'akov to Shim'on and Levi is only a reference to their role in the sale of Yoseph - who is also known as an "ox" (see D'varim 33:17).

BACK TO CHAPTER 34:

Now, let's look at Ya'akov's words when he confronted the brothers in the immediate aftermath of the events in Sh'khem:

And Ya'akov said to Shim'on and Levi, You have brought trouble on me to make me odious among the inhabitants of the land, among the K'na'ani and the P'rizzi; and I being few in number, they shall gather together against me, and slay me; and I shall be destroyed, I and my house. (v. 30)

Is there moral outrage here? Is there a challenge to their religious sensitivities? Ya'akov's response seems to be disapproval of their strategies, to wit: "As a result of your actions, I will now have problems with the locals. We will now be attacked by the surrounding K'na'ani and P'rizzi peoples."

Furthermore, the Torah seems to lend support to the brother's actions throughout the narrative, as follows:

Twice within the description of the brothers' interaction with the people of Sh'khem, the phrase **asher timei/tim'u et Dinah ahotam** is added to the objects of the verse. In verse 13:

And the sons of Ya'akov answered Sh'khem and Hamor his father deceitfully, and said, (*asher timei et Dinah ahotam* who had defiled Dinah their sister);

In verse 27:

The sons of Ya'akov came upon the slain, and plundered the city (*asher tim'u et Dinah ahotam*).

Why is the Torah twice repeating something which we already know?

In the second instance, we could argue that the text is anticipating a severe criticism of the brothers' behavior (addressed by nearly all Mefarshim): If Sh'khem was guilty for the rape of Dinah, why did all of the townsfolk have to die? By equating their culpability (*asher tim'u* - in the plural - v. 27) with his own (*asher timei* - in the singular - v. 13), we get one of two pictures of the participation of the citizens of Sh'khem in this heinous crime:

- Either they all participated physically in the defilement of Dinah, either by a S'dom-like orgy or else by abetting the criminal prince, (see the comments of R. Hayyim Paltiel on v. 31);
- Since they had the wherewithal to censure and/or punish him for his behavior - and failed to do so - it is considered their crime as well. (This seems to be the assumption underlying Rambam's approach, cited above). This seems to be borne out by the record of the plea of Sh'khem to his townspeople to accept the conditions of the sons of Ya'akov:

And Hamor and Sh'khem his son came to the gate of their city, and talked with the men of their city, saying, These men are peaceable with us; therefore let them live in the land, and trade in it; for the land, behold, is large enough for them; let us take their daughters to us

for wives, and let us give them our daughters. Only thus will the men consent to live with us, to be one people; if every male among us is circumcised, as they are circumcised. Shall not their cattle and their wealth and every beast of theirs be ours? only let us consent to them, and they will live with us. And to Hamor and to Sh'khem his son listened all who went out from the gate of his city; and every male was circumcised, all who went out of the gate of his city. (vv. 20-24)

If Sh'khem was truly an oligarch, would he need the people's consent - and would he have to appeal to their mercenary sensibilities - to forge this agreement? (see the insightful read of Rashi on this point in the Mishnat haLevi, p 307).

Besides these two (seemingly superfluous) pejorative references to the citizens of Sh'khem, note how the dialogue between Ya'akov and his sons is presented in the Torah:

And Ya'akov said to Shim'on and Levi, "You have brought trouble on me to make me odious among the inhabitants of the land, among the K'na'ani and the P'rizzi; and I being few in number, they shall gather together against me, and slay me; and I shall be destroyed, I and my house."

And they said, "*hakh'zonah ya'a seh et achoteinu?*" ("Should he deal with our sister as with a harlot?" - vv. 30-31)

The Torah gives the brothers the "last word" in their dispute with father Ya'akov. Furthermore, this "last word" is so terse and direct that it seems to leave Ya'akov "speechless" - indication that their argument held sway. The Torah seems to be giving approval to their actions - an observation strengthened by comparing the gist of Ya'akov's opposition with the "facts on the ground" in the subsequent narrative:

Compare:

"You have brought trouble on me to make me odious among the inhabitants of the land, among the K'na'ani and the P'rizzi; and I being few in number, they shall gather together against me, and slay me; and I shall be destroyed, I and my house." (a pragmatic concern that the violent vengeance wreaked by the brothers will lead to a lynching of Ya'akov's family)

With:

And they journeyed; and the terror of God was upon the cities that were around them, and they did not pursue after the sons of Ya'akov. (35:5 - only 5 verses after the dispute).

The Torah is emphatically assuaging Ya'akov's fears - the local people did not rise up in anger against his family as a result of their actions in Sh'khem; rather, they stood in fear of them and did not even pursue them.

There is one more piece of support for the contention that Ya'akov was not morally opposed to the action taken by the brothers. Just before the deathbed "blessing" given in Egypt to the brothers, Ya'akov accepts both of Yoseph's sons as members of his own family (earning them each a full portion in the Land) and then declares to Yoseph:

"And I have given to you one **Sh'khem** above your brothers, which I took from the hand of the Amorite with my sword and with my bow." (48:22)

This **Sh'khem** could mean portion, as Onkelos renders it. Alternatively, it may be a reference to the city of Sh'khem itself (see Rashi and Ibn Ezra ad loc.). If so, Ya'akov is not only accepting of the brothers' actions, he even "adopts" their war as his own. There are several Midrashim which indicate that Ya'akov himself participated in the war (see e.g. B. Rabbah 80:13). That would certainly take us very far from our original assumptions as presented at the beginning of this shiur.

[I am indebted to Binyamin Malek for his fine research which was utilized extensively in preparing the foregoing sections of the shiur - his article can be found in Megadim 23:9-29]

III. *AKHARTEM OTI*

If Ya'akov was not morally opposed to the slaying and pillage of the citizens of Sh'khem, catalyzed by an act of deception, we are left with three questions:

- a) Why didn't he himself lead the charge against the citizenry? As we pointed out in the recent two-part shiur, Ya'akov was a master at knowing how to utilize deception when appropriate.
- b) After the fact, why did he register opposition to their behavior - even if it was later dispelled?
- c) Once we have put Ya'akov and his sons on the same side of this moral dilemma, how can we make sense of their conclusion? Why were Sh'khem, his father and all of the townsfolk liable for murder and pillage? (While we are assessing their behavior, it is instructive to reflect on the size of the population of Sh'khem. See Avrabanel's comments here - he notes that the population was small. Documents uncovered at recent digs at Tel al-Amarna suggest that there were under one hundred citizens - male and female- all told - **vakma*!*)

A crime for which the Torah mandates payment to the young woman's family should certainly not warrant this sort of treatment? In addition, as noted above, such behavior would seem to regress the cause of the Avrahamic tradition. How do we justify their behavior?

IV. YA'AKOV AND HIS SONS

We will first address the dispute between Ya'akov and his sons regarding the proper tactics in response to the rape of Dinah; resolving this question will provide us an approach to the other two.

Although a full treatment of this topic is beyond the scope of this shiur, we have to approach any differences in attitude which surface between Ya'akov and his children against the backdrop of their substantially different backgrounds and experiential matrices.

Whereas Ya'akov grew up knowing grandfather Avraham (Yitzchak was 60 when Ya'akov was born; hence Avraham was 160 at the time; therefore Ya'akov was 15 when Avraham died) and, of course, knowing father Yitzhak (according to Seder Olam, Ya'akov was 63 when Yitzhak sent him away to Lavan). Conversely, Ya'akov's sons never knew great-grandfather Avraham - nor did they even meet Yitzhak until he was quite aged and, from all textual and Midrashic evidence, quite incapacitated (see, *inter alia*, Rashi at B'resheet 28:10).

Ya'akov grew up in Eretz K'ha'an, but had to spend the last twenty years (at least - see BT Megillah 17a) "on the run". In addition, before his fleeing to Aram, his life seems to be one of isolation, save his relationship with mother Rivkah. Our story (Ch. 34) rests somewhere along the continuum from **Galut** (exile) to **Shivah** (return) - and therein lies the rub. Ya'akov's children, although born and raised in what proved to be an environment of enmity, had a full family support system, as well as being brought up as the children of a wealthy and powerful member of Lavan's household.

In sum, Ya'akov was an Eretz-Yisra'eli who had been in **galut** for a substantial time - and who had a clear and direct connection with Avraham and Yitzhak. His children were born in Aram and had never tasted the pain and loneliness of exile - and they had had no direct encounters with the first or second generations of the clan.

As such, Ya'akov's response to the rape of Dinah has to be understood against this background. Both grandfather Avraham and father Yitzhak had experienced similar difficulties with local chieftains: Sarah was taken to Pharaoh's palace (Ch. 12) and to Avimelekh's rooms (Ch. 20). Rivkah, although never taken from Yitzhak, was presented as his sister out of the same fear of the local ruler and the general lack of morality (Ch. 26).

Here, Ya'akov, who had not yet encountered such a threat, was faced with a hauntingly familiar scenario - with some significant differences. Dinah was not falsely presented as a sister - she really was an unmarried sister! She was taken to the house of the local ruler, just as in the cases with Avraham - but here's where the similarities end. Whereas God had intervened on behalf of Avraham both in Egypt and in G'rар, the rape of Dinah was carried out with bestial success.

Ya'akov had every reason to consider as follows:

If father Avraham, for whom God was prepared to intervene to spare Sarah, and who was only wandering through that land, was prepared to "play the game" and not belligerently confront the locals - how much more so in this case. After all, God has not intervened to help us here; and these are my permanent neighbors, with whom I must be able to get along. If it was important to exercise restraint in *galut* - as I have with Lavan and, just now, with Esav - how much more so in the Land where I intend to establish my roots.

The brothers (note that Shim'on and Levi are only singled out in describing the slaying; all of the brothers participated in the cunning negotiations as well as the pillage of the city), coming from their critically distinct upbringing and experiences, viewed the situation and the appropriate response quite differently. The non-confrontational attitude which both Avraham and Yitzhak had adopted while traveling (see our analysis of the role of deception while traveling in the last two shiurim - available in the B'resheet archives at <http://www.torah.org/advanced/mikra>) was only appropriate for a land you intend to leave - ultimately, if the locals think you weak, it will have no deleterious effect on your own well-being. That is not the case, they argued, in a land which you intend to settle. If the local peoples think of our daughters as "fair game", we will never gain their respect - or fear. Our lives will be a long series of attacks and oppression. It is better, goes the argument, to make our stand here and now and let everyone know that we are not to be trifled with.

We now understand why Ya'akov did not originally take up arms - and why he was perturbed by their approach. It was not a moral opposition, rather a disapproval of their tactics which lay at the heart of his chastisement.

Both of their positions are easily in their respective arguments:

Ya'akov:

You have brought trouble on me to make me odious among the inhabitants of the land, among the K'na'ani and the P'rizzi; and I being few in number, they shall gather together against me, and slay me; and I shall be destroyed, I and my house.

The brothers:

Should he deal with our sister as with a harlot?

When we are talking about an individual who violates a young woman, the Torah does not consider it a capital offense; it allows for recompense and amelioration of the situation with a large fine as appropriate for a case of criminal assault. When, on the other hand, we are dealing with an attack which challenges the dignity and honor of the people of Yisra'el, that is a different matter entirely.

The Torah not only provides support for the brothers' position in the description of the ensuing travels which were "trouble-free", the Halakhah itself seems to lend support to this position:

Rav Yehudah stated in the name of Rav: If foreigners besieged Israeli towns... with the intention of taking lives the people are permitted to sally forth against them with their weapons and to desecrate the Shabbat on their account. Where the attack, however, was made on a town that was close to a frontier, even though they did not come with any intention of taking lives but merely to plunder straw or stubble, the people are permitted to sally forth against them with their weapons and to desecrate the Shabbat on their account. (BT Eruvin 45a)

POSTSCRIPT

Much ink has been spilt over the analysis of the "double-identity" of Ya'akov/Yisra'el - perhaps we will, one day, add our own input to that discussion. In any case, it is curious to note that throughout this narrative, our patriarch is referred to by his "galut-name", Ya'akov. Yet, when he "adopts" the conquest of Sh'khem, he speaks as Yisra'el:

And Yisra'el said to Yoseph, "Behold, I die; but God shall be with you, and bring you back to the land of your fathers. And I have given to you one *Sh'khem* above your brothers, which I took from the hand of the Amorite with my sword and with my bow. (48:21-22)

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PARSHAT VAYISHLACH -

FROM YAAKOV TO YISRAEL - Part One

Was Eisav really planning to wipe out Yaakov's family with his four hundred men? Or was his intention all along simply to welcome his brother back 'home'?

When reading Parshat Vayishlach, it is difficult to reach a clear conclusion.

Similarly, when Yaakov crossed the Yabok River (with his wives and children), was he planning a secret escape from this confrontation? Or, was Yaakov's intention all along to confront his brother - face to face?

And finally, was God's purpose in sending a 'mal'ach' to struggle with Yaakov - simply to bless him at this critical time, or was it an attempt to thwart Yaakov's planned 'escape'?

When one reads Parshat Vayishlach, it is difficult to find precise answers to these (and many other) questions.

In Part One of this week's shiur, we'll suggest some answers to these questions, while offering a reason why the Torah's account of these events is intentionally so vague. Based on that analysis, Part Two will discuss the deeper meaning of Yaakov's name change to Yisrael.

INTRODUCTION

Before we begin our shiur, a short remark re: its methodology:

In our study of Sefer Breishit thus far, our goal has usually been to find the underlying meaning (or message) or each story, based on its details. However, when the story itself is difficult to understand, then it becomes even more difficult to uncover its message.

However, when we encounter ambiguity in a certain narrative - one can also entertain the possibility that its vagueness may be intentional, and hence its message may lie in that ambiguity.

With this in mind, we begin our shiur by considering the events that lead up to Yaakov's encounter with Eisav - in an attempt to better understand both the details and ambiguities of that encounter.

WAS THE 'COAST CLEAR' YET?

Recall, from the end of Parshat Toldot, how Yaakov ran away from Eretz Canaan in fear that Eisav would kill him. To verify this, let's quote the departing message that he heard from his mother:

"Your brother Eisav is consoling himself by planning to **kill you**. Now, my son - listen to me, get up and run away to Charan - to Lavan my brother. ...Until your brother's anger quells, and **he will forget what you did to him** - [then] I will send someone to call you to return..." (see 27:42-44).

Neither Rivka nor Yaakov know how long this will take, but clearly - Yaakov plans to stay by Lavan until 'the coast is clear'.

On his way to Charan, God appears to Yaakov at Bet-El, assuring him with Divine protection during his journey:

"Behold I will be with you, and guard you anywhere you go, and I will bring you back to this land..." (see 28:15).

Note however, that despite this promise of protection, God never told Yaakov **when** he was supposed to return.

Years pass, but Rivka never sent for Yaakov.

Finally, after some twenty years God tells Yaakov that it's time to return home - demanding:

"Return to the land of your fathers and birth - and [then] I will be with you" (31:3).

Does this imply that Eisav is no longer a threat?

If so, why didn't Rivka send for him? [Possibly she didn't know, even though God did.]

Could it be that God wanted Yaakov to return, knowing that

Eisav was still a threat? Could it be that God **wanted** these two brothers to confront one another? If so, did God want them to fight, or to make peace?

Clearly, God wants Yaakov to return home - yet He does not inform him concerning **how** he should deal with Eisav!

When Yaakov approaches the land of Israel, he sees (once again) a vision of angels ['mal'achei Elokim'] who come to greet him (see 32:2-3). As this vision parallels Yaakov's original vision of mal'achim (when God first promised protection - see 28:10-15), is God now telling Yaakov that the 'coast is clear' - and hence he need not worry about Eisav?

And how about Eisav himself? Certainly, Yaakov is still worried about him; but does Eisav still want to kill him- or has he put his past behind him?

As you may have guessed by now, it is very difficult to reach any definite conclusion about any of these questions, but Chumash certainly keeps us pondering.

YAAKOV SENDS AN ENVOY

Parshat Vayishlach begins as Yaakov sends messengers ahead, apparently to assess to what extent Eisav is still a danger. Note, how this decision comes immediately after his vision of God's angels at Machanayim, suggesting that this vision gave Yaakov the confidence to initiate an encounter - i.e. to make sure that it was truly now safe to return home (see 32:4-5).

However, to Yaakov's surprise, his messengers come back with a report that he most probably did not expect: Eisav, with four hundred men, was on his way to meet Yaakov! There can be no doubt concerning how Yaakov understood this report. Eisav is out for his head!

This explains Yaakov's sudden fear (see 32:7 -12 'va-yira Yaakov me'od...'), as well as his next course of action.

Expecting that Eisav was on his way to kill his entire family, he quickly divides his camp in two (to save at least half of them), then turns to God in prayer (see 32:7-12).

Yaakov's prayer (see 32:9-12) reflects this predicament. On the one hand, God told him to return and promised to protect him. Yet on the other hand, God never told him to initiate an encounter with Eisav. Did Yaakov think he had made a mistake? Maybe he was supposed to return to Canaan and avoid Eisav entirely?

Had he 'sinned' by sending messengers? Did God want him to stay clear of Eisav (and his bad influence)?

Note how Yaakov's prayer reflects our discussion. First, his opening appellation:

"And Yaakov said: The God of my father Avraham & the God of my father Yitzchak - the God who told me - Return to your homeland and I will be with you [i.e. protect you]" (see 32:10).

Note how Yaakov first reminds God that it was His idea for him to return, and that God had promised to protect him

Nonetheless, if Eisav remains a danger, it must not be God's fault, rather his own. Therefore, Yaakov concludes that maybe he has done something wrong, or possibly has 'used up' all of his 'protection' points, and God had already provided him with so much ('katonti...' / read 32:11!). Then, Yaakov states his precise fear:

"Save me from Eisav my brother, lest he come to kill me, mothers and children alike - but **You promised** me that you would be with me and that my offspring would be numerous like the sand of sea..." (see 32:12-13).

In the final line of his prayer, Yaakov may be 'hinting' that even if he deserves to die, God should at least save his children, as He had promised to his forefathers.

To our surprise, even though Yaakov prayed, God doesn't appear to provide Yaakov with an immediate answer!

WHAT SHOULD YAAKOV DO?

Yaakov now faces a predicament. After all, what does God want him to do?

Should he confront Eisav? If so, should he try to appease him, or should he stand up and fight for what is right? [And it may not be clear to him who is right - for it was Yaakov who stole the blessings!]

Should he run away directly to Eretz Canaan? Maybe that is what God originally wanted him to do? Maybe only there will he be worthy of divine protection! Alternatively, maybe he should hide his wife and children, and then face Eisav himself?

Let's take a look now, and see what he does.

After he prays, that evening Yaakov prepares an elaborate 'peace offering' for his brother (see 32:13-20). Hence, it appears that Yaakov has chosen the path of 'appeasement', hoping that his brother will be so impressed that he may change his mind (see 32:20).

Nevertheless, there is an interesting detail in these instructions that must not be overlooked. Note how Yaakov instructs his men to leave a gap between each flock of animals. In other words, he wants this 'offering' to be presented very slowly and staged. Then he commands each group to make the same statement:

"When Eisav will meet you [i.e. each group] and ask who are you and where are you going and who are these for? Answer him, they are a present from your servant Yaakov - and **he is right behind us**" [i.e. on his way to meet you as well] (see 32:17-18).

Then, Yaakov repeats this very same command to each group, emphasizing each time that each group should state - "Behold, Yaakov is right behind us..." (see 32:19-20).

What are the purpose of these 'gaps' and the repeated message of "Yaakov is right behind us"?

Either Yaakov is telling the truth - i.e. the purpose of these gaps is to gradually 'soften up' Eisav. Or possibly, Yaakov is trying something 'tricky' [again], and these gaps (and the entire offering) are part of a decoy, to stall Eisav's imminent attack, thus providing Yaakov with ample time to run away! [or at least to hide his wives and children].

As we will see, the story that ensues can be read either way.

WHAT DIRECTION IS HE CROSSING?

That very same evening, after he designates his offering and the men that will bring it to Eisav, Yaakov takes his two wives, two maidservants, and his eleven children; and crosses the Yabok River (see 32:21-23). [Re: Dina (child #12)- see Rashi on 32:23!]

But it's not clear why he is crossing this river, and what his intentions are! Is this simply part of his journey to meet Eisav (as most commentators understand), or possibly (as Rashbam suggests), Yaakov is **running away**!

If Rashbam's interpretation is correct (see Rashbam on 32:23-25) - then we have a wonderful explanation for the 'gaps'; the message that 'Yaakov is right behind us'; and the need for the Torah's detail of Yaakov crossing the Yabok! They all are part of Yaakov's plan to 'run away' from Eisav, to save his life. [Otherwise, all these details appear to be rather superfluous.]

[Alternately, if Yaakov is telling Eisav the truth, then we would have to explain that the 'gaps' are to increase the chance of 'appeasement', Yaakov plans to be right behind this offering, and the Torah tells us about the Yabok crossing as the background for Yaakov's struggle with the mal'ach.]

THE STRUGGLE

That evening, as Yaakov crosses the Yabok with his family, God sends a mal'ach who struggles with Yaakov until the morning (see 32:24-25). It would only be logical to assume that there is a divine reason for this struggle.

If we follow Rashbam's approach (that Yaakov is running away), then God's message seems to be quite clear. By keeping Yaakov engaged in battle all night long, God is not allowing Yaakov to run, thereby telling him that he shouldn't (or doesn't need to) run away. [See Rashbam 32:25.] In fact, Rashbam claims that Yaakov's injury is a punishment for his running away! [See Rashbam on 32:29.]

With this background, we could explain some additional details of this encounter. First of all, this could explain why the angel asks to leave at dawn. If his job was to keep Yaakov from running away at night so that he would meet Eisav; then as soon as dawn arrives his job is over (note that Eisav arrives immediately after sunrise - see 32:31-33:1!).

This also explains Yaakov's request for a blessing (which could also be understood as Yaakov looking for the meaning of this encounter). The angel blesses Yaakov by 'changing his name' from Yaakov to Yisrael. Considering that the name Yaakov implies some sort of 'trickery' [see Yirmiyahu 9:3 'ki kol ach akov yaakov'], while the name Yisrael implies the ability to 'stand up and fight' (see 32:28); then this 'blessing' is simply God's answer to Yaakov - don't run away, rather encounter your brother!

Finally, it explains what happens immediately after the angel leaves. Note how the next pasuk informs us that the sun rises, and sure enough - Yaakov looks up and sees that Eisav and his four hundred men have already arrived [see 33:1]. What should happen now? It's too late to run!

As we would expect, still fearing his brother, he tries to save at least some of his family by splitting them into groups (see 33:1). Then, he runs to the front to encounter Eisav directly, bowing down seven times in a last effort to 'appease' his brother [see 33:2-3].

Most likely to Yaakov's total surprise, Eisav greets him with hugs and kisses - in what appears to be a very friendly (and brotherly) manner [see 33:4].

Was it Yaakov's efforts to achieve appeasement that caused Eisav to change his mind, or was Eisav planning all along for this friendly encounter? I suppose we'll never know, as the Bible is intentionally ambiguous in this regard. [Maybe those little dots over 'va-yishakehu' (see 33:4) are hinting to something. See Rashi & Radak who quote two opposite opinions in Breishit Rabba (which should not surprise us the least!).] In fact, Ibn Ezra (33:4) claims that the simple 'pshat' is that Eisav had never planned to harm Yaakov, as proven by the fact that he cried during this encounter.

Eisav even invites his brother to join him on his return trip to Se'ir. Yaakov prefers to travel slowly at his own pace, 'promising' to arrive in Se'ir at a later time (see 33:12-14).

THE PAST & THE FUTURE

What should we learn from this story? One could follow Rashbam's approach, and arrive at a very 'right wing' conclusion. But if one studies Ramban's interpretation to these events, one would arrive at a very 'left wing' conclusion (i.e. there are times when Am Yisrael must first attempt to appease their enemies in any manner possible).

One could suggest that the Bible's ambiguity is intentional, as there are times in Jewish History when a 'right wing' approach is correct, and there are times when a 'left wing' approach is preferable. Similarly, there are times when we must take action, even when we are in doubt in regard to the true intentions of our enemies. While at other times, it may be better to remain passive.

Just as life is not a 'fairy tale', neither is Chumash. Nevertheless, we should learn that in every encounter that we face, we must both act (i.e. turn to ourselves) and pray (i.e. turn to God). We must make every effort to understand our predicament in order to arrive at the approach that would best follow the path that God has set. However, when that path is not clear, we must pray that God will not only assist us, but that He should send some sort of an 'angel' to assure that we follow the proper direction.

Yaakov leaves this encounter not only limping, but also 'contemplating' and 'wondering'. But he continues on his journey, on his way to Bet-El, ready to face any future encounter with prayer, wisdom, action, faith, and resolve.

So too, in the history of the Jewish people - there are times that we must stand up and fight, and there are times that we attempt appeasement. There are also times when we struggle, and remain limping. Yet we continue to pray, to study, to contemplate, and persevere with an unyielding resolve to achieve our goals.

shabbat shalom,
menachem

In Part Two, iy'H we'll continue our discussion of Yaakov's name change to Yisrael,

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PARSHAT VAYISHLACH -

FROM YAakov TO YISRAEL - shiur #2

There must be something important about names in Parshat Vayishlach, for we find that Yaakov's name is changed to Yisrael; and it happens twice!

In the following shiur, we attempt to understand why, by considering its connection to the theme of 'bechira' in Sefer Breishit.

INTRODUCTION

Yaakov's name change to **Yisrael** is very different than Avram's name change to **Avraham**. In regard to Avraham - a single letter ["heh"] is added to his existing name (see 17:1-5); in contrast - **Yisrael** constitutes an entirely **new** name. Furthermore, Yisrael serves as an alternate name for Yaakov, while the name **Avraham** serves as a replacement.

What is even more peculiar about Yaakov's name change - is that it happens twice:

Once, in the aftermath of his struggle at Pni'el, prior to his confrontation with Eisav (see 32:24-30);

And later, at God's revelation to him at Bet El (see 35:9-13).

With this in mind, we begin our study with a comparison of those two stories; afterward, we will discuss why Yaakov's name change is both similar and different than Avraham's.

YAakov's RETURN TO BET EL

Let's begin our discussion with the second time when Yaakov's name is changed to Yisrael; for it contains some rather obvious textual parallels to the key psukim that describe how Avraham Avinu was first chosen. Those parallels will help us understand how his name change relates to a key stage in the bechira process. Our conclusions will then help us appreciate the meaning of the first time Yaakov's name is changed, i.e. the site of Pni'el.

Yaakov's return to Bet El, as described in 35:9-15, could be considered as the prophetic 'highlight' of his return to Eretz Canaan. Recall that this it was at this very site where God first appeared to him, promising him that he was indeed the 'chosen' son (see 28:12-14). Furthermore, it was at Bet-El where God had promised to look after his needs during his journey to (and stay in) Charan.

[Recall as well from our shiur on Parshat Lech Lecha that Bet El was also the focal point of Avraham's 'aliya', where he built a mizbeach and 'called out in God's Name'.]

Let's take a look at the Torah's description of this 'hitgalut', noting how God not only confirms Yaakov's bechira but also changes his name to Yisrael:

"And God appeared again to Yaakov on his arrival from Padan Aram, and blessed him: You, whose name is Yaakov, shall be called Yaakov no more, but **Yisrael** shall be **your name**.

Thus He named him Yisrael, and God said to him: I am **Kel Shakai**, be fertile and increase... The **land** that I have given to Avraham and Yitzchak I give to **you** and to **your offspring** to come... (35:9-16).

God's confirmation of 'zera' [offspring] and 'aretz' (the Land) echoes His numerous earlier blessings of bechira to Avraham and Yitzchak. [See 12:1-7, 13:14-16, 15:18, 17:7-8, 26:1-5, 28:13.] In fact, these seem to be the key two words in just about every hitgalut when God discusses any aspect of the 'bechira' process with the avot.

However, this particular blessing carries additional significance, for it is the **last** time that we find it in Sefer Breishit, thus suggesting that the bechira process has finally come to an end!

Therefore, the fact that this blessing also includes Yaakov's

name change to Yisrael suggests a thematic connection between this name change and the **conclusion** of the bechira process!

If indeed the 'filtering' stage of the bechira process is finally over, then this name change reflects the fact that now **all** of Yaakov's children (and grandchildren etc.) are chosen.

[In contrast to the children of Avraham and Yitzchak, where only **one** child was chosen.]

In other words, from this point onward, all the children of Yaakov will become the nation of Israel- and hence the name change to Yisrael.

With this in mind, let's discuss the incident at Peniel, when his name is **first** changed to Yisrael - to appreciate the thematic significance of specifically this name - i.e. **Yisrael**.

THE EVENTS BEFORE THE STRUGGLE

Even though the Torah only tells us that a 'man' ['ish'] struggles with Yaakov at Peniel (see 32:25), the continuation of this story [when this 'man' blesses Yaakov etc / see 32:26-30] certainly supports the Midrashic interpretation that he was the 'angelic minister of Eisav' - intentionally sent by God to confront Yaakov.

[Note that the Hebrew word *ish* is often used to describe an important and/or powerful man, and not only the male gender / see Shmot 2:12 & Bamidbar 13:3.]

But why would God send this *ish* at this critical time?

To appreciate why, we must consider the events in the life of Yaakov that lead up to this final 'showdown' with Eisav.

1. Yaakov, using 'trickery', buys the 'bechora' from Eisav.
 2. Yitzchak plans to bless Eisav with prosperity and power; using 'trickery', Yaakov 'steals' that blessing..
 3. Yaakov must 'run away' to Padan Aram (in fear of Eisav).
 4. Yaakov spends twenty years with Lavan; often suffering from Lavan's 'trickiness'.
 5. Yaakov 'runs away' from Padan Aram (in fear of Lavan).
 6. Yaakov prepares for his confrontation with Eisav.
- [Note how he plans a total subjugation to his brother.]

7. God sends an *ish* to confront Yaakov.

While reviewing this progression, note how Yaakov's life was replete with a need to either employ trickery or 'run away' in order to either survive, or to attain what he felt was necessary (to become the 'chosen son'). Indeed, Yaakov had become an expert at survival; but appears to have lacked experience in 'frontal combat' - a trait that Eisav was best at.

As we explained in our shiur on Parshat Toldot, it may have been for this very reason that Yitzchak had originally intended to bless Eisav, for he understood that in order to establish a nation, the traits of an 'ish sadeh' are essential, i.e. the qualities necessary to provide leadership in worldly matters. In contrast to his brother, Yaakov, the 'ish tam', certainly lacked this character.

However, now that it had been divinely determined that Yaakov was to be the **only** chosen son, one could suggest that God found it necessary for Yaakov himself to develop those traits as well.

This may explain why upon his return to Eretz Canaan, God intentionally initiates a direct confrontation between Yaakov and Eisav. [Recall from the fact that Rivka never sent for him, it may be that Eisav is indeed still planning to take revenge.]

However, when we analyze Yaakov's apparent strategy - as he prepares to meet Eisav (see 32:13-21), we find once again that he was not quite ready for this direct confrontation.

One could even suggest (as Rashbam does), that Yaakov's original plan was to run away from Eisav, taking his own family in one direction, while sending several 'staged' messengers to Eisav as a decoy to 'slow his advance'! If so, then God's purpose in sending this *ish* to struggle with Yaakov, was to stop him from running away - stalling his retreat until Eisav arrives.

And when Yaakov does see Eisav at dawn (after his struggle with the 'ish'), again he plans 'capitalization' - bowing down profusely before his brother - showing him that in reality, he never received the blessing that he had tried to steal.

[By bowing down to Eisav, Yaakov wishes to show his brother

that the 'stolen blessing' of power and dominion over his brother ("hevei gvir le-achecha, yishtachavu lecha bnei imecha...27:29) was indeed awarded to Eisav. Ironically, Yaakov resorts to trickery once again; this time to show his brother that his original trickery used to 'steal' the brachot was meaningless.]

REALISM OR LAZINESS

Note how Yaakov's struggle with the ish takes place at a very critical point in his life; i.e. **after** his preparation to bow down to (or run away from) Eisav, but **before** the actual confrontation. Let's explain why this may be significant.

A controversy exists among the commentators as to whether Yaakov was correct in this total subjugation to his brother. Some hold that Yaakov should have openly confronted his brother while putting his total faith in God (see Rashbam on 32:29), while others maintain that due to the circumstances, his timid strategy was appropriate (see Seforno on 33:4). [Note how this 'hashkafic' controversy continues until this very day!]

Regardless of the 'political correctness' of his actions, the situation remains that Yaakov is unable to openly confront Eisav. Nevertheless, God finds it necessary that Yaakov prove himself capable of fighting, should such a situation arise in the future. Yaakov must now demonstrate that his subjugation to Eisav stems from political realism rather than spiritual laziness. He must prove that, when necessary, he will be capable of fighting.

[Sooner or later in Jewish history, confrontations with the likes of Eisav will be encountered when establishing a nation.]

Possibly for this reason, God must first 'test' Yaakov's potential to engage in battle with his enemy **before** he meets Eisav. Yaakov finds this struggle difficult, for he is untrained; the contest continues all night until the 'break of dawn'. [Possibly, night represents 'galut'; 'dawn' redemption. See Ramban 'al atar'.] Although wounded and limping, Yaakov emerges victorious from this confrontation, thus earning his new name:

"Your name shall no longer be Yaakov, but Yisrael, for you have **fought** with beings divine ('Elokim') and human ('anashim') and **triumphed**" (32:29).

Thus, the name Yisrael may reflect the character of one triumphant in battle. Yaakov's new name is significant for it reflects his capability to engage head on in battle. In order to become a nation, this trait - represented by the name 'Yisrael' - is crucial.

Yet his name also remains Yaakov, for there may be times as well when 'passiveness' will be the proper avenue.

WHY TWICE?

For some reasons, receiving this 'new name' from this mal'ach did not appear to be sufficient; for God Himself found it necessary to later confirm that name - Yisrael, together with his bechira, at Bet El (the very site where he was first promised the bechira). Thus, it appears as though the blessings that Yaakov received throughout that entire episode of his trickery must now be bestowed upon him properly (and formally).

First, God names Yaakov - 'Yisrael', symbolizing the traits of worldly leadership (see 35:9- 10). Afterwards, God confirms the blessing that Yitzchak had given him (see 25:11-12 / compare with 28:1-4).

Note the obvious parallel between these two blessings:

FROM YITZCHAK

(before departing)
(28:3-4)

May "kel Shakai" bless you,
make you fertile and multiply,
to become an **assembly** of peoples
May He grant you the -
blessing of Avraham
to you and your offspring
that you may possess the Land

FROM GOD

(upon arriving)
(35:11-12)

I am 'kel Shakai':
Be fertile and multiply,
An **assembly** of nations
shall descend from you...
The Land I gave Avraham...
to you and to your offspring
to come, I assign the Land.

This comparison clearly shows that God's blessing to Yaakov at

Bet El constitutes a confirmation of Yitzchak's blessing to him after the incident of the stolen brachot. Hence, we may conclude that the name of Yisrael marks the conclusion of the bechira process, as includes the necessary character that Am Yisrael will require to later become God's special nation.

THE FUTURE

Although Yaakov's worldly traits may lie dormant for several generations, it must be inherent to his character before his bechira receives final Divine confirmation. [Later, Yaakov will bless his two most able sons, Yehuda and Yosef, with the leadership in this realm (see 49:8-26).]

Throughout the rest of Chumash, the name Yaakov interchanges with Yisrael. This suggests that each name reflects a different aspect of his character. There are times when 'Am Yisrael' must act as Yaakov, the ish tam, and there are times when the more active and nationalistic characteristics of Yisrael must be employed. Ultimately, as the prophet Ovadia proclaims, the day will come when:

"Liberators shall march up on Har Zion to wreak judgement on Har **Eisav**; and the **kingdom** shall be that of **God**" (1:21).

Based on this understanding of the significance of the special name of Yisrael, one could suggest a reason for the necessity of the 'bechira' process to continue one generation past Yitzchak. [Or rephrased, why was it necessary for Eisav to be rejected, given the importance of his worldly traits?]

Our original assumption, that both the traits of an ish sadeh and an ish tam are necessary in order to establish a nation, remains correct. Nevertheless, it is important that they are not perceived as equally important. As we explained in our shiur on Parshat Toldot, the fundamental character of Am Yisrael must be that of an ish tam (Yaakov). Only once that characteristic becomes rooted, the traits of an ish sadeh can be added. Had Eisav been included in Am Yisrael, our perception of the relative importance of an ish sadeh may have become distorted. A disproportionate emphasis on 'nationalism' and strength - despite their importance - would have tainted mankind's perception of God's special nation.

In the formative stage of our national development, our outward appearance as 'Yisrael' must stem from our inner character as 'Yaakov'. We must first speak with the 'voice of Yaakov' (see Rashi 27:22), only then may we don the 'hands of Eisav'.

shabbat shalom
menachem

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FOR FURTHER IYUN

A. TOLDOT EISAV
A. There is a Midrash telling us 'Yaakov avinu lo met' - Yaakov never died. Relate this Midrash to the fact that the bechira process concludes with Yaakov, and that all of his offspring have been chosen. Relate this also to 49:33 in comparison to 35:29 and 25:8.

B. TOLDOT EISAV

Yitzchak was chosen. Therefore, we need to follow the toldot of Eisav, just as we needed to follow the toldot of Yishmael & Lot.

Based on this assumption, explain perek 36.

Based on the above shiur, why do you think there is an emphasis on the kings who ruled in Edom before a king ruled over Bnei Yisrael (see 36:31)!

C. BRIT MILA & GOD'S BLESSING TO YAAKOV

A quick analysis of God's final blessing to Yaakov at Bet El (35:9-15) immediately shows that it is reflective of brit mila (Breishit perek 17). The name of Kel Shakai; 'pru u-revu'; 'kehul goyim & melachim'; 'shem Elokim'; and the concept of 'lihiyot lecha le-Elokim' can all be found at brit mila. Note that the bracha of brit mila which began in perek 17 with Kel Shakai telling Avraham 'hithalech lefanai - ve-heyeh tamim' is being given now to Yaakov - the **ish tam**.

Try to explain the significance of this.

Carefully compare Yitzchak's bracha to Yaakov before he departs to Padan Aram (28:3-4) to God's blessing of Yaakov at Bet El (35:9-13)! Note that they are almost identical.

Relate this to the last two shiurim.

Note that God's name 'be-shem Havaya' does not appear unto Yaakov from the time that he arrives in Eretz Canaan! Note also God's promise to Yaakov at Bet El, before he left to Padan Aram, (28:13-15) which was given be-shem Havaya. Are any aspects of that bracha repeated in Bet El when Yaakov returned? If so, which?

Note the single use by Yaakov of shem Havaya in his prayer prior to his confrontation with Eisav (32:9-12). What promise does he remind God of at that time? Where is the source of that promise.

Relate to the relationship (be-shem Havaya) between brit bein ha-btarim, the bracha at the akeida, and this tefilla. Note - 'kochvei ha-shamayim' and 'asher lo yisafer me-rov'.

How does this relate to the nationalistic aspect of these revelations, i.e. the concept of 'yerushat ha-aretz'.

Could one consider from a nationalistic perspective that even though Yaakov returned from Galut Aram, his stay in Eretz Canaan was only a short stopover on his way down to Galut Mitzrayim? Relate this to 'arami oved avi, va-yered mitzrayim...' (Devarim 36:3-10). Compare the language there to brit bein ha-btarim! Why do Chazal interpret this pasuk as referring to Yaakov? Could the fact that Yaakov understood that the time for the fulfillment of brit bein ha-btarim had not yet come, explain his timid behavior when he confronts Eisav?

FOR FURTHER IYUN - for Shiur #1

A. Chazal tell us that the mal'ach was the 'sar shel Eisav' - Eisav's guardian angel. Explain this Midrash, based on the above shiur.

If this ish was actually a mal'ach, why do you think the Torah insists on referring to him as an ish? [Note the use of ish in Shmot perek bet.] Why, do you think, there is significance in the fact that Yaakov was wounded in this encounter? Why must we remember this encounter whenever we eat meat (mitzvat gid-ha-nasheh)? [Could this relate back to the traits of an ish sadeh?] See Rashbam 32:29.

Explain the argument between Yaakov and his sons regarding their militant reaction to the act of Chamor ben Shchem in relation to the main point of the above shiur.

PARSHAT VA'YISHLACH - additional shiur

YAAKOV'S RETURN TO BET EL

Upon his arrival in Eretz Canaan, why doesn't Yaakov go straight home to his parents in Hebron? After all, he has been away from his parents for over twenty years!

Secondly, why doesn't Yaakov return immediately to Bet-el to fulfill his "neder" [vow]? Hadn't he promised God that 'should he return home safely' he would establish a 'Bet Elokim' in Bet-el (see 28:21-22)?

However, instead of doing what we would have expected, it appears from Parshat Vayishlach that Yaakov prefers to settle down in Shechem. Then, only AFTER the incident with Dena, and only after God reminds him that he must do so, he finally returns to Bet-el. [See 33:18-35:1.]

So what's going on in Parshat Va'yishlach?

In the following shiur we suggest a very simple (but daring) answer to these questions, based on a rather intricate analysis.

INTRODUCTION

To appreciate the analysis that follows, it is important to first pay attention to the division of 'parshiot' in Parshat Vayishlach. Using a Tanach Koren, or similar, note the topics of its first six 'parshiot' (i.e. up until the death of Yitzchak at the end of chapter 35).

The following table presents a short title for each section. As you study it, note the progression of topic from one 'parshia' to the next:

PSUKIM - GENERAL TOPIC

- (A) 32:3-33:17 Yaakov's confrontation with Esav upon his return to Eretz Canaan.
- (B) 33:18-20 Yaakov's arrival in Shechem.
- (C) 34:1-31 The incident with Dena in Shechem.
- (D) 35:1-8 Yaakov's ascent to Bet-el to flee from Shechem, and his building of a mizbayach.
- (E) 35:9-22 God's blessing to Yaakov at Bet-el, followed by Rachel's death and Binyamin's birth.
- (F) 35:23-29 A summary of Yaakov's children, followed by the death of Yitzchak.

We begin our shiur by making some observations concerning Yaakov's behavior in the progression of these events.

KEEPING PROMISES

When Yaakov first left Eretz Canaan on his way to Padan Aram, God promised to 'be with him' and see to his safe return (28:15). In response to this divine promise, Yaakov made a "neder" (vow) that should God keep His promise, he will return to Bet-el and establish a Bet-Elokim (see 28:18-22). Undoubtedly, Yaakov's safe return from Padan Aram requires his fulfillment of the neder. In fact, towards the end of last week's Parsha, God Himself mentions this promise when He commanded (and reminded) Yaakov that it was time to 'return home':

"I am the God of Bet-el, where you anointed a matzeyva, to whom you vowed a NEDER. Now get up and LEAVE this land and RETURN to the land of your fathers." (31:11-13)

Therefore, upon his return, we should expect Yaakov to go immediately to Bet-el to fulfill his "neder." However, for some reason, he first settles in Shechem.

HONOR THY FATHER...

Even more troubling is why Yaakov doesn't immediately go home to Hebron, at least to say 'hello' to his parents whom he hasn't seen in over twenty years! Recall how the Torah had earlier informed us that was his original intention:

"Yaakov got up and took his children and wives on the camels. Then he led his sheep... and everything he acquired in Padan Aram to GO TO YITZCHAK HIS FATHER in the land of Canaan." (32:17-18)

Nonetheless, when Yaakov arrives in Eretz Canaan, the Torah tells us he settles down in Shechem. In fact, we only learn of Yaakov's return to his father's house incidentally, in the final pasuk before Yitzchak's death (see 35:27-29)!

For some reason, the Torah never informs us of the details (or the date) of this reunion.

JUST FOR A 'SHORT STOP'?

At first glance, one could answer that Shechem was nothing more than a short stop along the way to Bet-el. As we know, Yaakov's young children and immense cargo forced him to travel slowly (see 33:12-15). He may very well have needed a rest. Thus, Yaakov's 'brief stay' in Shechem could be considered no different than his 'brief stay' in Succot (see 33:17).

[See further iyun regarding Yaakov's stay in Succot.]

But this approach is difficult to accept for two reasons:

First of all, recall how Yaakov had traveled from Padan Aram to Har ha'Gilad in only seven days (see 31:21-23, read carefully). Now that journey is much longer than the trip from the Gilad to Bet-el. [Check it out on a map.] Therefore, there seems to be no reason why Yaakov cannot complete the remainder of this journey in two or three days - a week at most!

Secondly, if Yaakov's plan is just to 'rest up' in Shechem for a few days, why would he buy a parcel of land? Furthermore, the overall impression from chapter 34 is that Yaakov's family has pretty much settled down in Shechem (see 34:7, 34:10, 34:21 etc.).

Therefore, it seems at thought Yaakov had settled down in Shechem for quite a while. In fact, we can prove that Yaakov may have stayed even several years in Shechem - by simply

considering the ages of his children at that time. Let's explain:

BAR-MITZVAH BOYS OR GROWN UPS?

Recall that Yaakov left Lavan after working for him for twenty years (see 31:41). Therefore, when he began his journey back to Eretz Canaan, his oldest child could not have been more than 13 years old (see 29:18-23), for he first married Leah only after completing his seven years of work. That would make Shimon & Levi etc. 11 or 12 years old, etc.

Yet, from the Torah's description of the incident with Dena in Shechem (see 34:1-31) it appears that Shimon & Levi (and the rest of the brothers) must have been at least in their late teens. After all, they go to war against an entire city!

Furthermore, Dena - Leah's seventh child - could not have been older than six and most probably even younger! [Remember there was a break between Yehuda and Yisachar/ see 30:9.] However, from the story in chapter 34, Dena appears to be at least twelve, if not older. Even though Shechem does refer to her once as a "yaldah" (see 34:4), the Torah consistently refers to her as a "na'arah" (see 34:3,12).

If these assumptions are correct, then it appears that Yaakov remained in Shechem for at least several years prior to the story of Dena's abduction.

Even if Yaakov stayed in Succot for 18 months, as the Midrash claims (see Rashi 33:17), it still doesn't make sense that the incident with Dena have taken place when she is in 'first grade' and Shimon & Levi had just celebrated their 'bar-mitzvahs'?

Thus, according to "pshat", the incident at Shechem must have taken place at least five years later! This conclusion strengthens our original question. Why would Yaakov remain in Shechem for over FIVE years without first returning to Bet-el, and without going home to visit his elderly parents!

'A CALL TO ORDER'

Whenever we arrive at this kind of dilemma the temptation is to 'tamper' with the chronological order of the narrative. In Chazal, this is better known as the principle of "ein mukdam u'muchar ba'Torah" - the narrative in Chumash does not necessarily progress in chronological order. Clearly, the principle of "ein mukdam u'muchar" does not mean that the stories in Chumash are recorded in purely random sequence. Nor should it be understood as just a 'wildcard' solution for difficulties in "peshat". Instead, the Torah often records certain parshiot out of their chronological order for thematic considerations.

[It should also be noted that the principle of "ein mukdam u'muchar" usually only applies at the 'parshia' level. In other words, that events WITHIN a given 'parshia' are always recorded in chronological sequence. Only a 'parshia' in its entirety may be presented before an earlier event or vice-versa. [This style is sometimes referred to as "smichut parshiot".]

Let's see now if this principle can help us solve the problems raised in our shiur thus far.

We'll start by taking a closer look at the various stages of Yaakov's journey, and how they relate to the division into 'parshiot' of Parshat Va'yishlach.

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF AVRAHAM AVINU

We really should have begun our shiur with a more basic question: why does Yaakov stop in Shechem at all? Why doesn't he go directly from Succot to Bet-el or Hebron?

The answer lies in the obvious parallel between Yaakov's return to Canaan and Avraham Avinu's initial journey from Aram to Eretz Canaan. He, too, first stopped in Shechem and built a MIZBAYACH:

"And Avram passed through the land, to the place of SHECHEM... and God appeared to Avram and said: I am giving this land to your offspring; and he built there a MIZBAYACH to the Lord who appeared to him." (12:6-7)

[Compare also 12:5 with 31:17-18!!]

Correspondingly, Yaakov also makes Shechem his first stop, and he builds a MIZBAYACH specifically in that region (see 33:18-20). In contrast to Avraham, however, Yaakov ALSO invests in some real estate - he buys a field (see 33:19). Soon we will suggest a logical reason for this purchase.

If Yaakov is indeed following his grandfather's footsteps (as his arrival in Shechem suggests), then he too should continue directly to Bet-el, just as Avraham Avinu did (see 12:7-8). Of course, Yaakov had another reason to proceed directly to Bet-el - to fulfill his "neder." Then, we would have expected him to continue from Bet-el on to Hebron to see his parents.

So why does he stay in Shechem?

One could suggest that exactly the opposite happened, i.e. Yaakov DID NOT STAY IN SHECHEM for more than several days! Instead, he stopped there only to build a MIZBAYACH, thanking God for his safe arrival, just as Avraham had done. To support this, note how the Torah describes his arrival in 33:18: "va'yavo Yaakov SHALEM". This most probably reflects the phrase in his original "neder" of: "v'shavti b'SHALOM et beit avi" (see 28:21).

Furthermore, in 33:20 he calls this mizbayach: "Kel Elokei Yisrael", most likely relating to the phrases in his "neder" of: "im y'hiyah ELOKIM imadi..." (28:20) and "v'haya Hashem li ELOKIM" (28:21).

A WISE INVESTMENT

At that time, he also purchased a plot of land. This was a wise investment, for Yaakov is traveling with a large family, and realizes that sooner or later, he'll need to settle down in Canaan, and build a house of his own. Planning an option for his future, he buys a parcel of land, a 'security' investment should he decide one day to return.

At this point, we posit, Yaakov really does continue his journey from Shechem to Bet El - and then on to Hebron - after only a very short stay. However, the Torah records the details of this 'first' ascent to Bet-el - at a later time (see 35:9), while 'inserting' the details of the Dena event in between (i.e. in chapter 34), even though that event took place at a later time! [Later in the shiur, we will suggest a reason why this story is 'inserted'.]

[To appreciate this theory, it is recommended that you review those parshiot, especially noting the new 'parshia' that begins in 35:9.]

Let's take a look at the special wording of the 'parshia' that begins in 35:9 - which we claim took place BEFORE the events in chapter 34:

"And God [had already /"od"? / or 'again'] appeared unto Yaakov UPON HIS ARRIVAL from Padan Aram, and blessed him ... then Yaakov set up a MATZEYVA at this site... and called the name of this site BET-EL. Then they traveled towards Efrat" [i.e. on the way toward Hebron], and Rachel gave birth with complications [& then died]..." (see 35:9-19)

Our contention is that this entire 'parshia' (35:9-22) actually took place immediately upon Yaakov's arrival from Padan Aram (as its opening pasuk suggests/ compare 33:18!), several years BEFORE the incident with Dena in Shechem (i.e. 34:1-35:8).

A very strong proof to this claim may be drawn from the words of Yaakov himself (to Yosef) before his death:

"... when I was RETURNING FROM PADAN, Rachel died on the road, while still a long distance from Efrat, and I buried her on the way..." (see 48:7)

Yaakov himself states that Rachel died during his original journey from Padan to Eretz Canaan. He would not have spoken of her death as having occurred "when I was returning from Padan" if she died only AFTER Yaakov had spent several years in Shechem.

Furthermore, why was Yaakov traveling from Bet-el southward, towards Efrat? Most likely, he was on the way home to his father in Hebron! In other words, it may very well have been that Yaakov DID return immediately to visit his father, just as we expected him to.

[For some reason, the Torah never records the details of this encounter. But this question begs itself no matter how we explain the order of the 'parshiot.' Only in the final summary psukim (i.e. 35:27-19) are we told that Yaakov had returned to Yitzchak, and even there it appears to be only for Yitzchak's burial. It would only be logical to assume that Yaakov must have gone to visit his father much earlier.]

THE NEW ORDER

Before we continue, let's review the order of events (and hence the order of the 'parshiot') according to this interpretation:

After successfully confronting Esav, Yaakov continues on to Eretz Canaan, stopping first in Shechem to build a MIZBAYACH and thank God, just as Avraham Avinu had done. While in Shechem, he buys a parcel of land for 'future use,' planning possibly to later return to this area with his family. [Recall that Yaakov owns many sheep, and Shechem is a prime area for grazing cattle, just as Yaakov's children later return many years later to the Shechem area to graze their cattle (see 37:13).]

After buying a field in Shechem and building a mizbayach, Yaakov continues to Bet-el, where God appears to him, and Yaakov re-states his intention to ultimately fulfill his "neder" to make a 'bet Elokim' at that site (even though he isn't quite ready yet to begin its construction).

There, God confirms the blessing of "bechira" and changes his name from Yaakov to Yisrael (see 35:9-12). [According to this interpretation, Yaakov had been blessed and had his name changed by the "malach" only several days earlier! see 32:26-28]. Even though he cannot at this point build the actual Bet-Elokim that he promised, he re-affirms his promise by once again anointing the MATZEYVA and calling that site Bet-el (see 35:14-15).

Next, Yaakov travels toward Hebron to see his parents. Along the way, Rachel dies and is buried on the roadside. Yaakov then sets up tent in Migdal Eder (see 35:21). Even though we do not know its precise location, it would be safe to assume that Migdal Eder is located in an area not too far from Yitzchak's home in Hebron. It is here where the incident with Reuven & Bilha takes place. Although we may reasonably assume that Yaakov sharply criticized Reuven, the Torah for some reason abruptly curtails this story, right in the middle of a sentence! [See 35:22! / see also 49:4!]

Some time later, maybe a year or two (or even five) later, Yaakov moves with his family to Shechem - after all, he did purchase a parcel of land there specifically for that purpose. By now, the children are older - old enough for the incident with Dena (as detailed in chapter 34) to occur. It also stands to reason that at this point the people of Shechem see Yaakov as a permanent neighbor, rather than a transient; and therefore - they seek marital and economic ties with Yaakov's family. Finally, this also explains why specifically Shimon & Levi take leadership roles at this time. Reuven had most likely been 'demoted' from his position of 'family leader' after the incident with Bilha.

After the brothers wipe out Shechem, Yaakov fears the revenge of the neighboring population. God therefore commands him to MOVE from Shechem to Bet-el for PROTECTION (see 35:1-7, read carefully). Just as Bet-el had protected Yaakov when he was faced with the threat of his brother Esav, so will Bet-el protect Yaakov now from his latest crisis. [Note how specifically this point - danger from Esav - is mentioned over and over again in this 'parshia' (i.e. 35:1-8, see 35:1,3,7!).]

Note also that these psukim imply a recent, immense expansion of Yaakov's family and possessions (see 35:6 - "v'chol ha'AM asher imo" & 35:2 - "v'et kol ashe imo"). This may also explain why Yaakov must remind these 'newcomers' to rid themselves of their idols before ascending to Bet-el. (see 35:3-4).

So Yaakov now moves his permanent residence to Bet-el, which had already been established as the site for his future Bet Elokim, and accordingly builds a MIZBAYACH (see 35:1,3,7).

Let's use a chart once again to show the 'new order' of the parshiot:

PSUKIM - GENERAL TOPIC

- | | |
|----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| (A) 32:3-33:17 | Yaakov's confrontation with Esav upon his return to Eretz Canaan. |
| (B) 33:18-20 | Yaakov's arrival in Shechem [& buys a field]. |
| (E) 35:9-22 | Yaakov arrives in Bet-el, receives his blessing and fulfills his "neder"; Rachel dies along the way to see Yitzchak near Hebron. |
| (C) 34:1-31 | Yaakov returns to Shechem, Dena is abducted, and Shimon & Levi wipe out the city. |
| (D) 35:1-8 | Yaakov flees from Shechem to Bet-el, where he builds a mizbayach. |
| (F) 35:23-29 | A summary of Yaakov's children, followed by the death of Yitzchak. |

Thus, by simply changing the location of a single 'parshia,' nearly all our questions are solved. However, our approach raises a much bigger question: WHY isn't this 'parshia' (35:9-22) recorded where it belongs?

As stated above, the Torah will present events out of chronological sequence only when there is a compelling reason to do so. Therefore, we must look for a thematic reason for this 'change' in order.

As usual, we will return to the primary theme of Sefer Breishit - the process of "bechira" & "dechiya" - to suggest an answer to this question.

A THEMATIC REASON

Recall from previous shiurim that the theme of Sefer Breishit progresses with each set of Sifrei TOLADOT. Throughout the progression, someone from among the "toladot" is 'chosen' while the others are 'rejected.' Recall also that in Parshat Va'yishlach we are still under the 'header' of "toldot Yitzchak" (see 25:19). The story of "toldot Yitzchak" clearly reaches its conclusion with the 'parshia' of 35:23-29 [(F) in the above chart], which describes Yitzchak's death. [Note also that "toldot Esav" (36:1) follow immediately afterward.]

This 'parshia' 35:23-29 (F) MUST therefore appear at the conclusion of "toldot Yitzchak."

But why was 'parshia' (E) transplanted from its chronological location to here, immediately preceding 'parshia' (F)?

One could suggest several 'thematic' reasons:

One answer could be alluded to in the somewhat innocuous though very telling statement that introduces (F):

"And the children of Yaakov were TWELVE..."

(see 35:23-26, noting the 'parshia' in the middle of a pasuk)

Unlike Avraham and Yitzchak, ALL of Yaakov's children are 'chosen' - EVEN his children from the maidservants, EVEN Reuven who had most likely been berated, etc. One could suggest that the Torah takes this entire 'parshia' (E) - which ends with the incident with Reuven & Bilha (which most likely had taken place much earlier) - from its chronological location and intentionally places it here - NEXT to the concluding statement of 35:23 - to stress that ALL of Yaakov's children are chosen - EVEN Reuven! [See Ramban 35:22! See also Rashi, Chizkuni & Radak 35:22.]

This interpretation may also explain why 35:22 ends mid-sentence. It would seem that the pasuk should end with Yaakov's curse of Reuven, which becomes apparent in 49:4. However, because the whole point is to show that Reuven remains part of the 'chosen family,' the second half of the sentence is 'cut off.' Instead, the entire 'parshia' is attached to the statement, "and the children of Yaakov were twelve - the children of Leah: the firstborn of Yaakov = REUVEN, and Shimon, Levi..." (35:23-24).

An alternate (and more simple) explanation could be that the Torah is simply keeping all of the stories relating to Shechem together. Hence, once the Torah informs us that Yaakov purchased a parcel of land in Shechem (33:19), Chumash continues with what later took place in Shechem as a result of this purchase (34:1-35:8). Then, after completing that story, Chumash returns to the story of Yaakov's first return to Bet-el (35:9-22), even though it in fact took place much earlier.

Finally, one could suggest a very significant thematic reason

for this 're-arrangement' of the 'parshiot'. Recall our explanation that Yaakov's naming of 'Bet-El' reflected his conviction to one-day establish a 'Bet-Elokim' [a house for God] on this site. The first time Yaakov stated this intention (see 28:19), he could not build a Bet-Elokim at that time for he was a fugitive on his way to Padam Aram. The second time he arrives at Bet-El (see 35:9-15), he once again only states his intention. It appears that it is still pre-mature to actually begin that project, as he has not yet established a name for himself in Eretz Canaan. After all, the success of his planned Bet-Elokim would depend on his ability to 'reach out' to the neighboring people, just as Avraham and Yitzchak had done when they built "mizbachot" and 'called out in God's Name'.

However, after the 'Dena incident' at Shechem, and the actions of Shimon and Levi, Yaakov's status among the neighboring people has dropped to an 'all time low'. As Yaakov himself stated in the aftermath of those events: "achartem oti..." - you have made me look ugly by embarrassing me in the eyes of inhabitants of the land..." (see 34:30). Given this situation, tragically Bet-El becomes a place a refuge for Yaakov, instead of becoming a Bet-Elokim. Certainly, in the aftermath of those events, Yaakov will be unable to establish a functioning Bet-Elokim in the foreseeable future.

From this perspective, one could understand the Torah's detail of the 'Dena incident' as a thematic explanation for why Yaakov was unable to ultimately fulfill his "neder" to build a Bet-Elokim.

Despite Yaakov's resolve to establish a Bet Elokim, unfortunately an opportunity for him to do so never materialized in his own lifetime. Instead, Yaakov would have to pass that goal on to his children, who would only have the opportunity to achieve it several hundred years later.

shabbat shalom,
menachem

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FOR FURTHER IYUN

A. Rashi on 33:17 quotes the Midrash that Yaakov spent 18 months in Succot! This is based on the fact that the pasuk states that Yaakov built a HOUSE there, and set up tents for his sheep and cattle. Should this be true, then in any event, this pirush only strengthens the question of why Yaakov did not return earlier. It does, however, slightly raise the age of Yaakov's children by the time the Shechem episode occurs, rendering this story a bit more feasible.

B. It is unclear whether Yaakov ever builds the Bet-Elokim as he had promised in 28:21. See the meforshim on that pasuk who deal with this question, as well as the meforshim here on 35:14.

Nonetheless, anointing the MATZEYVA and calling that site Bet-el (see 35:14-15) clearly reveal Yaakov's intention to eventually build the Bet-Elokim, even though the final goal may not be realized until Bnei Yisrael conquer Eretz Canaan in the time of Yehoshua. See Devarim 12:8-12, "v'akmal".

C. In closing, it is important to note that there always remains the possibility that the parshiot are in chronological order. If so, we would either have to explain that these events indeed took place when Yaakov's children were indeed quite young, or that Yaakov intentionally did not return to Bet-el, either because he felt that the time was not yet ripe, or possibly because he was waiting for Hashem to command him to go there.

D. Note 34:30, and Yaakov's final statement in his rebuke of Shimon and Levi:

"And Jacob said to Simeon and Levi: 'Ye have troubled me, to make me odious unto the inhabitants of the land, even unto the Canaanites and the Perizzites; and, I being few in number, they will gather themselves together against me and smite me; **and I shall be destroyed, I and my house**'

Even though simple "pshat" would explain that the phrase 'my house' in Yaakov's statement refers to his family, one could

suggest (based on the above shiur) that Yaakov is referring to 'his house' that he plans to build for God - for now that Shimon & Levi have made him look so bad, Yaakov's plans for building a House for God in Bet-el have now been 'destroyed'.

E. Comments from Rabbi David Silverberg, who has researched this topic, and found a number of sources which seem to explicitly indicate that Yaakov traveled to Beit-El before the story of Dina and Shekhem.

The Gemara in Masekhet Megila (17a) asserts that Yaakov reunited with his father in Chevron two years after his departure from Lavan. Along his return from Padan Aram, the Gemara claims, he spent eighteen months in Sukkot (see Bereishit 33:16), and another six months in Beit-El. Rashi, commenting on this Gemara, explains, "He spent six months in Beit-El when he left Shekhem..." Meaning, the six month-period to which the Gemara refers occurred after the story of Dina and Shekhem, and the Gemara held a tradition that when Yaakov traveled to Beit-El after the story of Dina (35:1), he lived there for six months.

Elsewhere, however, Rashi writes that Yaakov lived for a period in Beit-El before the incident of Shekhem. In his commentary to Avot (5:21), Rashi cites the Midrashic tradition that Levi was thirteen years of age when he and his brother Shimon killed the male population of Shekhem. To support this tradition, Rashi comments that "when you take into account the two years Yaakov spent in Beit-El," it indeed emerges that Levi was thirteen years old at the time of his attack on Shekhem. Yaakov left Padan Aram thirteen years after his marriage to Leah, and, according to Seder Olam (chapter 2), Leah delivered each of her children after just seventh months of pregnancy. Levi, Leah's third son, was thus born just about two years after her marriage to Yaakov, and hence Levi was eleven years of age when Yaakov left Padan Aram. After the two years that "Yaakov spent in Beit-El," Levi was thirteen years of age, and it was at that point, Rashi claims, that Shimon and Levi killed the people of Shekhem.

Rashi thus clearly held that Yaakov spent time in Beit-El before settling near Shekhem, as Rabbi Leibtag contended.

The Midrash Lekach Tov, commenting on the story of Shekhem (34:25), likewise calculates the age of Shimon and Levi at the time of their assault on Shekhem, and claims that Levi was eleven when the family left the home of Lavan. The story of Shekhem, the Midrash claims, occurred after the period of "two years when he [Yaakov] was offering sacrifices in Beit-El." Like Rashi, the Midrash Lekach Tov held that Yaakov first proceeded to Beit-El upon returning from Canaan, before settling near Shekhem, and he spent two years "offering sacrifices."

Apparently, there was a Midrashic tradition that disputed the chronology espoused by the Gemara in Megila, according to which Yaakov spent eighteen months in Sukkot and then six months in Beit-El after the incident in Shekhem. This tradition, which Rashi appears to have adopted in his commentary to Avot, and was accepted by the author of the Midrash Lekach Tov, held that the Torah's narrative does not follow chronological sequence, and Yaakov's pilgrimage to Beit-El occurred before he settled near Shekhem. Immediately upon returning to Canaan, Yaakov proceeded to Beit-El and spent two years offering sacrifices in fulfillment of his vow. Only thereafter did he settle near the city of Shekhem.

We should note, however, one important difference between the position reflected in these sources and Rabbi Leibtag's theory. According to Rashi in Avot and the Midrash Lekach Tov, Yaakov spent two years in Beit-El and then settled near Shekhem before reuniting with his father in Chevron. Rabbi Leibtag suggested that Yaakov proceeded to Beit-El to fulfill his vow, and then continued southward to Chevron to see his parents. He remained there for several years, and then moved with his family to Shekhem, at which point Shimon and Levi were in their late teens. These sources provide a basis for the contention that Yaakov first visited Beit-El before settling near Shekhem, but not for the theory that he reunited with his parents before moving to Shekhem.

David Silverberg [S.A.L.T. 5767]

Parshat Vayishlach: How We Struggle

by Rabbi Eitan Mayer

PREPARATION QUESTIONS:

1. Parashat VaYishlah is where Ya'akov rises from "Ya'akov" to "Yisrael." What events of this week's parasha show Ya'akov's transformation? Considering the personal challenges Ya'akov has faced (or failed to face) so far, how does he overcome those challenges in this parasha?
2. In what ways does Hashem facilitate, encourage, and confirm this transformation?
3. As this week's parasha comes to a close, so does a major chapter in Ya'akov's life. This makes it a good time for a retrospective. What lessons have we learned from Ya'akov's life?

CLOSING THE CIRCLE OF VISIONS:

Last week, we left Ya'akov at Gil'ad, the place where Lavan confronts Ya'akov and searches his belongings to find his stolen "terafim" (idols or oracles). After Lavan departs, Ya'akov sees a vision of angels and realizes that the place he has come to is a "camp of Hashem."

This should remind us of something.

In the *beginning* of last week's parasha, Ya'akov leaves home (Be'er Sheva) fleeing Eisav, arrives at a place somewhere along the road to Haran, and goes to sleep. His dream shows him a vision of a ladder with the angels ascending and descending, with Hashem at the top. When he awakens, he realizes that the place he has been sleeping is "Beit Elokim," the house of Hashem, and "sha'ar ha-shamayim," the gate of heaven.

By the time we arrive at this week's parasha, we have come to the end of Ya'akov's sojourn in Haran with Lavan, as he returns home to Cana'an. Ya'akov has come full circle, and the vision of angels he sees at the end of VaYeitzei symbolizes the completion of an important stage of his life and the beginning of the next stage. The stage of his life just completed was examined last week. What we are looking at now is the new stage. In that context, this vision of angels provokes certain questions:

- * What is the significance of the new vision?
- * Why have the angels appeared to him now? Since the angels don't say anything, what is their message?
- * What does it mean that this place is a "camp of Hashem"?
- * What is the difference between a "camp of Hashem" and a "house of Hashem / gate of heaven"?

There are many explanations of this vision, but perhaps the one that fits best into context is that the angels appear specifically as a camp (as opposed to a fixed structure like a "house of Hashem" or "gate of heaven") to signal that the angels are *traveling.* Unlike the vision at the beginning of VaYeitzei, with its "house of Hashem" and "gate of heaven," structures which don't move from place to place, these angels may be here to reassure Ya'akov that they will be traveling with him; their camp will be traveling with his camp to protect him. The angels appear now, assuring him of protection, in order to encourage him to do what he does next -- sending messengers to his brother Eisav.

FACING THE MUSIC:

Our parasha opens with Ya'akov's sending messengers toward Eisav. Many of us reading the parasha assume that Ya'akov sends messengers to Eisav only as a defensive measure: he believes Eisav is still eager to kill him for stealing his berakha, so he sends scouts ahead to check if Eisav has learned of his return to Cana'an.

But there is no evidence for this assumption. In fact, the simple reading of the text makes it sound like Ya'akov takes the *initiative* of sending messengers to Eisav! Eisav does not know that Ya'akov is on the way: Ya'akov has to send the messengers to "artz Se'ir, sedei Edom" -- all the way to Eisav's doorstep -- because Eisav has no inkling of Ya'akov's whereabouts and his impending arrival in Cana'an. Ya'akov takes this bold step because he wants to meet Eisav. He sends messengers to Eisav, he says, to "find favor in his eyes."

Why? Wouldn't it be safer to steer clear of Eisav forever? Why go looking for trouble?

Perhaps we will have answers as we move further. But one thing is clear already: this is not the same Ya'akov as before.

* The Ya'akov who now goes looking for Eisav is not the same Ya'akov who sneaked away from Lavan's house eight days ago, seeking

to avoid confrontation.

- * He is also not the same Ya'akov who fled from Eisav twenty years ago, seeking to avoid a confrontation.
- * He is also not the same Ya'akov who usurped Eisav's blessing through deception.
- * He is also not the same Ya'akov who took advantage of Eisav's impulsiveness and lack of foresight by buying the birthright from him for a bowl of soup.
- * And he is also not the same Ya'akov who tried to be first out of the womb by grabbing his brother Eisav's heel, committing the symbolic act of underhanded competition which earned him the name "Ya'akov," "he who grabs the heel."

BRACE YOURSELF:

The messengers return to Ya'akov with bad news: they have arrived at Eisav's court and given him Ya'akov's message of greeting, but Eisav has apparently reacted badly. He, too, is eager to meet his long-lost brother, and he is bringing four hundred of his closest friends -- his closest heavily armed friends -- with him to the "reunion." Ya'akov, of course, is terrified. Hazal note that he prepares for battle in three ways:

- * Militarily: he splits his camp, hoping that if one camp is attacked, the other may escape.
- * Religiously: he turns to Hashem and asks for His protection from Eisav.
- * Psychologically: he sends a huge bribe to brother Eisav, hoping to gain his favor.

These three forms of preparation have stood as an example to centuries of Jewish communities facing impending violence: Jews have long utilized all three strategies at once. As we will see, Ya'akov's preparations seem to pay off when Eisav eventually arrives and only tears flow, instead of blood. But we will also see that these strategies may not be exactly what they appear to be.

YA'AKOV BEGS HASHEM:

Let us take a look at one aspect of Ya'akov's preparation for conflict: his tefila (prayer). Let us first deal with an internal contradiction: why does Ya'akov keep asking for Hashem's protection and at the same time insist that he doesn't deserve His kindness? Does it make sense to ask for something and keep emphasizing that you really don't deserve it?

The question itself is the answer: Ya'akov emphasizes that he deserves nothing, that all the kindness Hashem has already shown him is undeserved. In justifying his desperate request, he focuses completely on Hashem's promises and on the relationship Hashem had established with Ya'akov's father and grandfather. The humility of this prayer is obvious -- "I do not deserve the kindness and support . . .", but is implicit as well in the fact that Ya'akov places all of the stress of this tefila on the promises Hashem has made to him, and on the fact that his fathers have an established relationship with Hashem.

This pattern is reflected later in the Torah, when Bnei Yisrael are told by Moshe that Hashem favors them not because they are so wonderfully righteous, but because He loves them (a statement which requires explanation) and because of the promises He made to their forefathers. In similar fashion, Ya'akov adopts a posture of humility by spotlighting the promises made to him and the relationship Hashem established with his fathers.

Note also that this tefila is not Ya'akov's first recorded tefila: that prayer took place at the beginning of VaYetzei. Back then, during Ya'akov's dream of the ladder ascending heavenward, Hashem promised him that he would produce a great nation, inherit the Land of Cana'an, be a source of blessing, and that Hashem would protect him while he was away from home (and return him safely home). When Ya'akov awoke in the morning, he realized that he had slept in a special place. He then made a promise to Hashem: if Hashem would keep His side of the deal -- if He would come through on all of the promises He had made during the dream -- then Ya'akov would do something for Hashem in return: he would make the spot in which he had slept into a "Beit Elokim," and he would give to Hashem a tenth of anything he acquired (ma'aser).

By now, Ya'akov realizes that he cannot make deals with Hashem. There is no such thing as "holding up your end of the deal" with Hashem, because nothing you have to offer Him can ever equal what He gives to you; no matter what you offer, you will never deserve what He gives you. Ya'akov now recognizes the futility and inappropriateness of the deal he had made, and changes his tone entirely: now, he deserves nothing, has nothing to offer. He bases his claim solely on Hashem's promises, the fact that Hashem was the God of his fathers -- and the fact that he is terribly, terribly afraid.

BUTTERING UP BROTHER EISAV?:

Ya'akov's next activity is to engage in that time-honored Jewish tradition, "Preparing The Bribe." He instructs his servants to lead flocks of animals to Eisav and to offer them to him as gifts from Ya'akov. The Torah then summarizes Ya'akov's thoughts as he instructs his servants:

BERESHIT 32:21-22 --

"You [the servants] should say, 'Your servant, Ya'akov, is behind us,'" because he said [to himself], "I shall atone before him [akhaper panav] with the gift which precedes me [le-fanai], and then I will see his face [panav], so that perhaps he will forgive me [yisa panai]."

The gifts passed before him [al panav]

A friend of mine, Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh, pointed out to me the startling repetition of the word "panim," meaning "face," in Ya'akov's words. In different forms, "panim" appears five times in this brief space. Why so much emphasis on the face?

It is apparent that the Torah means to emphasize the confrontational nature of what Ya'akov is up to, the face-to-face nature of what he has initiated. The Torah means to highlight that Ya'akov is seeking a direct and open meeting. This, of course, stands in clear contrast with Ya'akov's previous tendency to avoid challenges, employ deceit, and run away to avoid consequences. Now, breaking his pattern, he seeks Eisav out for a meeting "panim el panim," face to face! That this is a reversal of Ya'akov's old pattern is also hinted by Ya'akov's name -- literally, "heel" -- the diametric opposite of "panim" -- "face." As we will see, this pattern of "panim" continues to play a central role. And, as we will see, "Ya'akov" is soon replaced by a name which describes his new strength.

HEDGING HIS BETS:

As night falls, Ya'akov moves his wives and children across a river. Abravanel explains that he is splitting his camp by placing his family in one camp (the one across the river from Eisav) and leaving the servants in the forward camp. When Eisav shows up, the first camp he encounters will be that of the servants, and if he attacks it, the family camp will escape. This seems like classic Ya'akov behavior . . . facing a challenge by hoping to avoid it.

But this is not how the Torah seems to tell the story at all! It does indeed seem that Ya'akov splits the camps, but the split is not family/servants! The Torah says that after moving his family and possessions over the river, "Ya'akov remained alone." What was he doing by himself?

Hasal suggest that Ya'akov went back over the river to get some small things he had left there from the previous trips. But the Torah itself says nothing about this at all. The simple reading of the Torah tells us that Ya'akov put his wives and children in one camp, and he himself "remained alone" -- he HIMSELF was the other camp! Ya'akov puts himself in the forward camp, the one more exposed to Eisav's approaching forces. And, as we all know, Ya'akov is indeed the first to clash with the forces of Eisav -- but not his *physical* forces. Ya'akov is attacked by a mysterious "ish," an unnamed "man," who wrestles with him through the night. Again, we see Ya'akov, the "heel," turning to "face" a challenge. He no longer squirms to avoid facing the consequences of his actions; instead, he courageously risks his own safety to protect his family, putting himself in the vanguard.

THE ANONYMOUS WRESTLER:

Ya'akov's plan to split the camps pays off when an unnamed "man" attacks him as he awaits Eisav alone. Let us take a closer look at this wrestling match and at the very strange conversation which goes on during the match:

BERESHIT 32:26-30 --

He [the angel] saw that he could not best him [Ya'akov], so he touched the hollow of his thigh; the hollow of Ya'akov's thigh became dislocated as they wrestled. He [the angel] said, "Let me go, for the dawn has risen!" He said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." He said to him, "What is your name?" He said, "Ya'akov." He said, "No longer 'Ya'akov' shall your name be called, but instead 'Yisrael,' for you have fought with Hashem and with men, and you have won." Ya'akov asked and said, "Please tell me your name!" He said, "Why do you want to know my name?" And he blessed him there.

Clearly, we have a lot of explaining to do:

* Who is this angel-man?

* Why does he wrestle with Ya'akov? Why does he underhandedly injure Ya'akov?

* What sort of blessing is it to change someone's name? Why not promise riches, or children, or land, or divine protection? And why does Ya'akov want a blessing anyway?

* What is the significance of the change from "Ya'akov" to "Yisrael"?

* The angel asks a good question -- which we must answer -- why does Ya'akov want to know the name of the angel?

NOT JUST FOR SPORT:

What could possibly be the point of this wrestling match? Clearly, Hashem could have programmed the angel to simply overpower Ya'akov, so the match cannot be a test of Ya'akov's physical strength. Instead, it is a test of his moral strength: *how* he will face the challenge, not whether he can overcome it. If he fights face to face, strength against strength, nothing "below the belt" -- then he wins, because the angel-man has been programmed not to physically overpower Ya'akov, and must take his leave when daybreak arrives. But if Ya'akov, seeing that he cannot achieve a quick and easy victory, turns to deception and underhandedness as before -- for example, by trying to dislocate the thigh of the enemy! -- then he has lost even if he "wins," because by being dishonest, he will have failed the test.

Not only does the new Ya'akov of our parasha (the one who has initiated open, honest confrontation with Eisav) play fair, he even continues to play fair when the angel-man, seeing his own lack of success, plays a dirty trick (an old-Ya'akov-type trick) and dislocates Ya'akov's thigh. Ya'akov continues to fight fair even though the stakes are incredibly high -- even when he has every reason to believe his life is at stake. Yes, Hashem Himself had helped Ya'akov use a "deception" of sorts to beat the despicably treacherous Lavan, but Ya'akov aspires to be more than "Ya'akov" -- he aspires to be "Yisrael." Only "Ya'akov" grabs at the heel of his enemy, hoping to trip him; but "Yisrael" meets his challenges face to face.

NAME GAMES:

Why does Ya'akov seem so eager for a blessing from his sparring partner? And why is he so eager to know the name of the angel? Why is this important? It seems clear from Ya'akov's actions after the angel leaves -- which we will examine soon -- that Ya'akov is well aware that his opponent is an angel. So what does he hope to learn from knowing the angel's name?

The answer to this question will take us back to the end of Parashat Toledot and forward to the end of Parashat VaYishlah. But first, it will require a deeper understanding of what Ya'akov demands from the angel -- a berakha. What is a berakha?

The place to look for the answer is, of course, the Torah itself. And the answer, as Abravanel points out (in Parashat Toledot), is that there are several different types of berakhot, all included under the name "berakha" because they are similar in important respects (Abravanel identifies only two categories). The first category of berakhot are those offered by Hashem Himself (there may be more than those listed here):

BERAKHOT FROM HASHEM:

1) Berakha as a command: Hashem blesses the first human beings [1:28 -- "va-ye-varekh otam Elokim va-yomer la-hem Elokim"] with the command to "be fruitful and multiply, fill the land and conquer it" Implied in the blessing/command is that Hashem also gives the recipient the *ability* to achieve the command; this is the "blessing" part of this blessing, along with another, more subtle gift: knowing what one's mission is. Everyone at some time has felt the anxiety and frustration of not knowing what his task is, what he or she is here for; that knowledge is a welcome gift.

2) Berakha as gift: this is a very common usage of "berakha" in Sefer Bereishit, as we find Hashem blessing the avot every time we turn a page.

The next category of berakhot are those offered by people. There are two types:

BERAKHOT OFFERED BY PEOPLE:

1) Berakha as prayer: the person giving the berakha is really composing a special tefila to Hashem on behalf of the recipient of the berakha; since Hashem has given the blesser the power to bless (as He gave to the avot), this prayer has much more power than your garden-variety prayer.

2) Berakha as revelation of the future: the other type of berakha which people give to other people is the predictive berakha, which does not actually ask Hashem for anything, but instead tells the recipient what good things are in store for him (if he lives up to them).

The classic example of this type of berakha is the series of berakhot which Ya'akov gives to his sons at the end of Sefer Beresheit. On the one hand, the Torah describes what Ya'akov does as "blessing":

BERESHIT 49:28 --

This is how their father spoke to them and BLESSED them, each man according to the BLESSING that he BLESSED them.

On the other hand, Ya'akov himself characterizes what he does as prediction of the future:

BERESHIT 49:1 --

Ya'akov called to his sons and said, "Gather together, and I will tell you what shall happen to you in the end of days."

AND NOW BACK TO OUR SHOW:

Let us now look at the *two* berakhot Ya'akov received in Parashat Toledot: the berakha he received by tricking his father, and the berakha his father gave him with full knowledge at the end of Parashat Toledot.

The berakha really meant for Eisav:

BERESHIT 27:28-29 --

"May Hashem give you from the dew of the heaven and the fat of the land, and much grain and wine. May nations serve you, and peoples bow to you; be master of your brother, and may the children of your mother bow to you; those who curse you are cursed, those who bless you are blessed."

This sounds a lot like a tefila-berakha, i.e., Yitzhak is praying that these good things should come to Eisav (really Ya'akov disguised, of course). It does not sound like a prediction-berakha, especially since part of the berakha ("be master . . . those who curse you . . .") seems to be in unambiguous present tense. This means it can only be a tefila, not a prediction.

On the other hand, here is the berakha given to Ya'akov at the end of Parashat Toledot:

BERESHIT 28:3-4 --

"E-I Shad-dai SHALL BLESS YOU [ye-varekh] and increase you and multiply you, and you shall become a throng of nations. And He SHALL GIVE YOU the blessing of Avraham, to you and your children, so that you shall inherit the land in which you live, which Hashem gave to Avraham."

This berakha is clearly very different than the previous one: instead of naming some good thing that Ya'akov will receive, as in the first berakha (i.e., dew of the heavens, fat of the land, grain, wine, leadership), it is a step removed from that: it states that Ya'akov will receive *blessings*, and only then does it go on to say what these blessings will entail -- many children, nationhood, the land:

BLESSING CONTENT OF BLESSING

First blessing -----> Dew, fat of land, grain, wine, leadership

Second blessing -----> Future Blessing (by Ke-I Shad-dai)

As we saw when we looked at Parashat Toledot, Yitzhak gave this second blessing -- the blessing of spiritual leadership -- to Ya'akov reluctantly. It was clear to him that Eisav was not at all a candidate for this berakha (because he had already taken wives from among the spiritually corrupt Cana'anites), but he was also reluctant to pass spiritual leadership to Ya'akov, who had just deceived him into giving him the blessings meant for Eisav.

NOW WE UNDERSTAND . . .

We see now that Yitzhak did not pass the spiritual leadership to Ya'akov at that time at all! The spiritual berakha Yitzhak gave to Ya'akov was only a *prediction* that in the *future,* the aspect of Hashem called "Ke-I Shad-dai" would come to Ya'akov and bless him with the blessing of Avraham -- the Land, Eretz Cana'an, nationhood, and an everlasting relationship with Hashem. Yitzhak, as we saw when we looked at Toledot, was not at all "blind," except in the physical sense. He saw that Ya'akov was flawed and that he was not yet ready to lead Hashem's nation, but he also saw that Ya'akov had enormous potential. So what he passed to Ya'akov was the prediction/prayer that Ya'akov would eventually be worthy of this blessing, and that at the point when that occurred, "Ke-I Shad-dai" would come to Ya'akov and officially give to him these berakhot, the Birkat Avraham.

In effect, then, Yitzhak's berakha was that Ya'akov should eventually be worthy of the spiritual berakhot to be delivered by Ke-I Shad-dai.

AN UNUSUAL NAME OF GOD:

Who is this "Ke-I Shad-dai"? Obviously, it is Hashem, but why does Yitzhak refer to Him specifically as Ke-I Shad-dai? Where have we seen Ke-I Shad-dai before?

The first time Ke-I Shad-dai appears is in Parashat Lekh Lekha, in chapter 17. Hashem comes to Avraham and says, "I am Ke-I Shad-dai," and proceeds to make an everlasting covenant with Avraham: Avraham will become a great nation, and Hashem will be the God of the nation forever; Avraham's descendants will also receive the Land of Cana'an as an everlasting possession. As a sign of this covenant, Hashem commands the berit milah, the mitzvah of circumcision.

"Ke-I Shad-dai" is the source of the berakha given to Avraham to found the nation which will have a special relationship with Hashem and inherit the Land. Significantly, Ke-I Shad-dai also redefines the individuals He blesses: He renames Avram and Sarai (Avraham and Sara), and as we will see, He also renames Ya'akov.

Ya'akov is aware of all this. He understood that his father was holding back the spiritual leadership, giving it to him only in potential -- Yitzhak's language was unmistakably not the language of blessing, but the language of prediction that Ya'akov would one day receive

this blessing. Ya'akov understood that he had to earn it. And now, having learned hard lessons at the hands of Lavan, he has 'reinvented' himself and resolved to face the brother he cheated out of a different blessing long ago. He knows that his symbolic struggle with the angel has demonstrated his new approach to challenges. He believes he now deserves to assume the spiritual leadership. And so, when the angel renames him -- and he knows that Ke-l Shad-dai renamed Avraham and Sara! -- he is desperate to know whether the angel comes in the name of Ke-l Shad-dai. If so, it will mean that he has finally become worthy of the blessings and has received them!

But the angel refuses to tell him its name. Ya'akov understands that it is too early, that work still must be done before he deserves the berakhot of spiritual leadership signified by the appearance and blessing of Ke-l Shad-dai. We will soon see what that work is, and then we will see that Ke-l Shad-dai does indeed come and does indeed deliver the blessings promised by Yitzhak (almost word for word!).

Ya'akov's reaction to the struggle with the angel shows that he understands this experience as a symbolic confrontation:

BERESHIT 32:31 --

Ya'akov called the name of the place 'Peniel' [=Penei E-l, "face of the powerful one," or "face of God"], "For I have seen a powerful one face to face, and my soul was saved."

He again emphasizes that things are now "face to face," that he no longer meets his challenges by running or deceiving. Although the language he uses here ("elohim") is also used to refer to Hashem, it will become clear as we go on that here it refers to "the powerful one," meaning the representative of Edom, not to Hashem.

A BROTHERLY REUNION: THE SAME OLD YA'AKOV?

It is now morning, and Eisav approaches. Note that Ya'akov's camp is no longer split into two camps, for he has already faced the great danger: last night, he faced up to (and bested) the angel who attacked him representing Eisav, so he now faces Eisav without fear. He has already beaten his internal foe, overcome his tendency to avoid trouble through deception; he has nothing more to fear from Eisav, and indeed, eagerly awaits his opportunity to greet Eisav. Ya'akov arranges his family and goes out ahead toward Eisav, bowing seven times on the way. Every time he refers to himself, he calls himself Eisav's "servant." Ya'akov is not just putting on a show of self-subordination and humility, trying to flatter Eisav into leaving him alone; as we will see, he is acknowledging Eisav as the true bekhor, the true firstborn, head of the family.

Eisav meets Ya'akov's family and then he asks about the animals Ya'akov has sent him as a gift. Eisav wants to know what they are for, so Ya'akov repeats what he has said before: they are to find favor in Eisav's eyes. Eisav, who has plenty of his own animals, politely refuses the gift, but Ya'akov insists:

BERESHIT 33:10 --

Ya'akov said, "Please do not [refuse]; if I have found favor in your eyes, take the gift from my hands, because SEEING YOUR FACE IS LIKE SEEING THAT OF A POWERFUL ONE ["elokim"], and you have accepted me."

Ya'akov explains that seeing Eisav is a privilege for him, one worth paying for with a gift. He uses almost the exact same words to describe the confrontation with Eisav as he used to describe the confrontation the previous night with the angel-representative of Eisav. Just as "my soul was saved" despite that encounter, "you have accepted me" in this encounter. Last night, he saw "the powerful one face to face," and now he "sees the powerful one" again.

PLEASE TAKE MY BRIBE?

But why is it important to Ya'akov that Eisav accept the gift of the animals? If the whole purpose of the gift is to bribe Eisav into docility, then why does Ya'akov keep insisting that Eisav take it even once it becomes clear that Eisav has decided not to kill him? Ya'akov himself tells us the answer . . . and then we understand that this gift of animals has never been a bribe in Ya'akov's mind at all. It serves a much nobler purpose. Ya'akov begs Eisav to accept the gift with the following explanation:

BERESHIT 33:11 --

"Please TAKE MY BLESSING [birkhati], which has been brought to you, for Hashem has been generous to me, and I have everything." He [Ya'akov] insisted, and he [Eisav] took it.

The whole purpose of this confrontation, the reason Ya'akov risks his life for this moment, is so that he can say the lines above -- so that he can return to Eisav the berakha that he stole twenty years before. Ya'akov may have made an internal decision to face his challenges squarely from now on, but in order to clear the record and to deserve the spiritual leadership, he must right this old wrong. Of course, he cannot literally return the berakha, but by this symbolic gift, he admits to Eisav that what he did was wrong and asks Eisav's forgiveness. For this reason, it is crucial that Eisav accept the gift; Ya'akov wants to

walk away not only with his life intact, but also his conscience restored. Eisav understands the gesture and accepts the gift. He forgives Ya'akov.

All that remains is for Ya'akov to perform an act of leadership, guiding others to discover what he has discovered: that challenges must be faced, no matter how how painful. The opportunity to demonstrate this arrives with the rape of Ya'akov's daughter, Dina: Shekhem, prince of a Cana'anite town, rapes Dina and wants to marry her. Ya'akov's sons agree, provided that all the men of Shekhem undergo circumcision. The people of Shekhem undergo circumcision, and, taking advantage of the recuperating men's weakness, Shimon and Levi massacre the town. Ya'akov reacts in horror:

BERESHIT 34:30 --

Ya'akov said to Shimon and Levi, "You have befouled me, sullying me among the people of the land, the Cana'ani and the Perizi, and I am few in number; they will gather against me and strike me, and I and my household will be destroyed."

Shimon and Levi protest, unable to accept their father's criticism in the face of the injustice done their sister. But Ya'akov has learned that no matter what is at stake, whether leadership of the family (which he acquired through deceit), his wives, children, and wealth (which he protected by deceiving Lavan and running away), or even his own life (which he saved by running from Eisav and then risked by confronting him), deceit is unacceptable. Ya'akov expects revenge for this deceit to be visited on him by the neighboring nations.

The nations never bother Ya'akov. In fact, we hear later that they are afraid of Ya'akov and his family. But the reason Ya'akov's family is spared the consequences of this deceit is because Ya'akov has spoken out against it, not because the nations fear the fierceness of Ya'akov's sons:

BERESHIT 35:5 --

They traveled, and the FEAR OF HASHEM was upon the cities around them, and they did not chase after the children of Ya'akov.

The Torah is telling us that the reason they did not pursue the children of Ya'akov -- i.e., those responsible for the massacre -- is because Hashem placed fear upon them, not because they were impressed with the ferocity and craftiness of Ya'akov's sons.

At this point, Hashem signals to Ya'akov that he has merited the spiritual berakhot. Hashem commands him to go to Beit El and make an altar to Hashem. Hashem appears to Ya'akov there and delivers the following message:

BERESHIT 35:9-12 --

Hashem appeared to Ya'akov as he came from Padan Aram, and blessed him. Hashem said to him, "Your name, 'Ya'akov,' shall no longer be your name; instead, 'Yisrael' shall be your name," and He called his name Yisrael. Hashem said to him, "I am E-l Shad-dai; be fruitful and multiply. A nation, a throng of nations shall come from you, and kings shall emerge from your loins. And the land I gave to Avraham and to Yitzhak, to you I shall give it, and to your children after you, I shall give the land."

Hashem changes Ya'akov's name to Yisrael ["One Who Struggles with the Powerful," or "Powerful Righteous One"], symbolizing the finality of Ya'akov's personal transformation, and then informs him that He comes as Ke-l Shad-dai, the Powerful Provider, the One who grants Ya'akov the destiny of nationhood and the gift of the holy land given to Ya'akov's fathers.

With this, Ya'akov receives the berakhot which Yitzhak knew he had the potential to earn. And with this, his major challenge is completed, his great test passed. From this point, Ya'akov begins to share authority with his sons, although he remains the final power in the family. Ya'akov has become Yisrael.

Shabbat Shalom

[Emphasis added at various points and name of H' changed to add K to avoid pronouncing and writing the Holy Name]