

Vayishlach (And He Sent)

Yaakov is about to meet his brother Esau. Yaakov has just escaped from Laban and now Yaakov has to confront Esau and Esau's armed men. Yaakov could have attempted to rely on prayer. However, we know the principle: we are not supposed to rely on miracles. Instead, we have to do everything within our power to bring about the right result and then rely on G-d. Here, Yaakov prepared a triple defense of gifts, prayer and preparation for fighting. Tradition tells us that R. Yania use to read these chapters carefully when he was going to negotiate with the Roman authorities to intercede on behalf of the Jews.

Yet, does Yaakov actually have to confront Esau? Why does Yaakov go through Edom, Esau's territory? There was a different way to return to Canaan rather than through the territory of Edom. There was no need for Yaakov to rekindle the past passions and have to humble himself before Esau. So why did Yaakov do this?

The Zohar suggests that Yaakov felt that the reconciliation that he wanted with his brother could only take place while his father was alive. Thus, Yaakov goes while his father is still alive to seek reconciliation. But why did Yaakov want such a reconciliation? This is left unclear by the text as character motivation almost always is.

32:5 Why does Yaakov refer to Esau as his master and himself as Esau's servant?

Why does he tell Esau that he has just stayed with Laban? Presumably to suggest Yaakov's power. Not many would have been able to so successfully outwit Laban.

32:6 Why does Yaakov try to impress Esau with everything that Yaakov has? Does this show a lack of confidence in G-d?

32:8 Why does Yaakov suddenly become very fearful and distressed? Rashi states "he is fearful of being killed and distressed because he might have to kill others." But I am not sure that is a complete explanation of why Yaakov at this point gets fearful and distressed. Is it because he hears of over 400 men and believes that war is inevitable?

Once again, we see Yaakov turning to his own resources. He divides the camp into two. He not only divides the people but he divides his property as well.

Yaakov may be praying for peace, but he is preparing for war. He does not only rely upon G-d's help but does his best to everything he can within his power.

32:9 Yaakov actually holds out the possibility that Esau will come to one of the camps to attack and only the remaining camp will escape. Does this show a lack of confidence in G-d.

The idea that “the remaining camp will escape” is a prophecy of sorts regarding Jewish history. As the Talmud states “if, in the course of our exile, a king rises up to drive out or destroy our people, another king will have pity on us and welcome us.”

32:11 What is this concept of depletion of merit? Do we now have to worry that if G-d does good things for us it is like a withdrawal of a bank account? Must we worry in the face of having received good things?

32:12 Yaakov refers to G-d as the G-d of his father Avraham and the G-d of his father Yitzchak. He recognizes both of the fathers as his fathers. He also calls upon

G-d to remember His promise.

Why does Yaakov identify Esau as “his brother” to G-d? Both he and G-d know that Esau is his brother. Why does he say that he wants to be saved from his brother’s hand and from Esau hand? Why does he use “hand” twice? Why was he afraid of Esau? Why does he state “the mothers with children” will be smitten?

32:13 Here Yaakov makes a reference to G-d’s promise that his descendants would be “like the sands of sea”? This is in contradistinction to G-d’s promise that his descendants would be like the “dust of the earth”. Why does he use the metaphor of sands of the sea and not dust of the earth.

32:14 What did Yaakov do during the night that he spent there? Munk comments “Yaakov spent the whole night searching his mind, trying to listen to G-d for what transgression he might have committed that had caused the new ordeal to be imposed upon him.”

Yaakov had already sent gifts for his brother. What was the purpose of this gift? Why was he preparing a gift for his brother?

32:15 Why does the Torah tell us in such detail how many of each type of animal he sent?

32:17 Why does he separate each drove? The rabbis tell us that Yaakov was making a plea for the future “when troubles will rain down upon my descendants, do not send them one after another but put a space between them.” Our rabbis also say that this is a reference to the duties and taxes which

Esau's children will place on the Jews. Yaakov prays that these taxes will be spaced apart.

32:18 Why does he think that the groups will be asked by Esau whom they belong, to whom they are going and where they are going?

All this raises the issue of whether Yaakov is treating Esau properly. Must Yaakov seem so obedient to him? Must Yaakov constantly and repeatedly emphasize his servitude to Esau? And, if this is the appropriate role, what does that tell us about us and our relationship with the surrounding non-Jewish society?

32:21 Why did Yaakov think his giving of gifts would cool Esau's anger? Might it have made him even greedier? Why did it matter to Yaakov that Esau received him well? Why was he so worried when he had G-d on his side?

32:22 Why did Yaakov spend the night in the camp?

32:23 Where was Dina? Rashi explains, "Yaakov had hidden her in a chest so that Esau could not set eyes upon her. And Yaakov was punished for this as Dina might have had a good influence on Esau. Accordingly, she later fell into the hands of Shechem."

Of course, Rashi's explanation raises a fundamental question: how far must we go in our attempt to bring back those who have not found G-d or those who are far from Him? Are we supposed to give them our children in marriage in an attempt to win them back into the fold? And if not, why is Yaakov punished for withholding his daughter?

Munk notes "each event occurring in the life of the righteous ultimately goes back to a moral cause, and it is up to us to seek it out when the Torah does not explicitly mention it. Using this example, Rabbi E. Dessler shows us the scope, complexity and subtlety, of problems of a moral nature. It is the duty of the righteous person to weigh the positive and negative aspects of all of his proposals, and to choose among the alternatives in order to reach the one adequate solution – a task which demands an acute sense of moral responsibility."

32:24 Why does Yaakov make his family cross the stream in the middle of the night? Why does the text tell us that he took his possessions?

32:25 Why does Yaakov remain alone on the other side of the river after he had already led his family across with all his possessions?

The Talmud explains that Yaakov "had forgotten some small pots and come back to fetch them. This teaches you that whatever the righteous possess

is very dear to them. This is explained by the fact that they take care never to be guilty of even the slightest theft.” (Chullin 91a).

Not surprisingly, the issue of the nature of this wrestling match is the subject of enormous commentary and controversy. There are two major views of the nature of the struggle. Rambam believes that the struggle and dialogue took place only in a prophetic vision. But Ramban believes that the struggle did in fact take place and was not at all imagined. His view is supported by the fact that Yaakov’s thigh was strained. It is difficult to understand such a strain taking place from an imaginary struggle. On the other hand, the defenders of Rambam argue that the strain was caused by self suggestion or psychosomatic injury as a result of the prophetic vision.

This argument between the literal and symbolic views of the episode is reflected in the many interpretations given to this passage. Some see the struggle as symbolizing the righteous person’s inner struggle against the forces of evil. Others see this as a fight between Yaakov’s and Esau’s guardian angel. In this interpretation, the fight symbolizes the struggle between Judaism and the nations and the trials and hurts which the Jews will have to endure until Messianic times. Thus, Yaakov’s struggle is a forerunner of those which his descendants will be involved in all throughout their history.

As Munk notes, “Jewry will force the enemy to yield to its great heroism. When the struggle is over, when day breaks on the long hours of the ‘night of exile’, the adversary will bless Jewry and will acknowledge their worth. He will pay homage to Jewry’s divine message of monotheistic ideals. The account of Yaakov’s struggle with the angel of Esau thus harbors the profound confidence of the Jewish people who, despite many tribulations and much suffering, never lose hope of final victory.”

The obvious questions here are who this man was that Jacob wrestled with and why did the wrestling occurred until dawn.

32:26 How did the wrestler see that he could not beat Yaakov? When he saw that he could not beat Yaakov, why did he choose to injure him? Why didn’t he just give up?

How did Yaakov win this physical struggle? Why a physical struggle?

32:27 What value was there to the blessing of this man (or angel)?

It is interesting how much emphasis is spent on blessings. Yaakov and Rivka go through an entire charade to make sure that Yaakov gets the blessing. Here, Yaakov fights and demands the blessing as his victory. Rashi sees this as forcing Esau’s angel to “acknowledge my right to my father’s blessing which Esau disputes.”

32:28 Why does the man ask Yaakov for his name? Doesn't he know what Yaakov's name is?

32:29 The angel changes his name from Yaakov (the supplanter) to a name indicating fighting openly and with dignity. Thus, Yisrael, which we have as the name of Jewish people today, represents an open struggle. But it is a complicated, open struggle. It is a struggle between Israel and G-d. We do not accept G-d in an unquestioning manner. Rather, we struggle with Him on an ongoing basis. Munk comments "after refusing throughout his life to pay homage to the integrity and sincere piety of his brother as a fighter for G-d, the hostile Esau finally gives him his blessing and so acknowledges the words of his father ... so too, in Messianic times, the nations which have for so long struggled against Jewry will come to pay homage to Yisrael's ideal and historic mission ... "

There are those who interpret Yisrael to mean a fighter before or fighter for G-d. As Munk notes, "Jewry's millennial struggle is within society and its goal is to establish the kingdom of G-d on earth. But in this struggle, Jewry fights only with spiritual weapons. It fights for ideals and principles for ideals and principles. Jewry fight is never directed against human beings."

If he is no longer to be called Yaakov but rather Yisrael, then why does the text hereafter not call him exclusively Yisrael? When Avraham's name is changed from Avram to Avraham, the text from that point on calls him only Avraham. The text here though was sometimes called Yaakov Yaakov and sometimes calls him Yisrael. What is the difference between them?

32:30 Why does Yaakov want the man's name? Why does the man ask Yaakov why Yaakov wants his name? The man does not tell Yaakov that he cannot have the man's name but rather just asks why Yaakov wants the name. Why does he bless Yaakov after this interchange?

Ramban responds that "knowing my name will be of no use to you for the powers are solely in G-d himself. If you call on me, I will not reply nor will I be able to help you in your distress."

There is enormous emphasis played on names in the Torah. They always have meaning. Here, the dialog about the angel's name occurs in the context of changing Yaakov's name.

32:31 How does Yaakov know that this is G-d's angel? Why does he refer to it as G-d's angel as opposed to Esau's angel? Why does he now believe his life was saved?

Munk notes "had Jewry as a people not heard the divine voice speak to them 'face to face' on Mount Sinai ... They would not have been able to endure martyrdom of centuries of persecution."

If G-d want Yaakov to win this battle, why is Yaakov limping on his thigh? Why does he continue to show the scars of his battle?

Why is this so important, that to this date, Jews don't eat of this portion of the animal? Does this constitute a command at this point in the Torah or is this rather just an observation?

Munk brings down a variety of explanations of this injury. The Sefer Hachinuch comments "it does make us aware that Yaakov could not be defeated by this adversary, but only wounded in his thigh. This injury has a symbolic value: Yaakov's descendants too will be protected by G-d in struggles against their enemies. They may be wounded and shaken but they will never be vanquished."

Munk also brings down Rabbi Hirsch who "points out that Yaakov's physical weakness is necessary to open Esau's eyes to the real power which makes Yaakov an invincible. To be sure, the descendants of Yaakov limp through history. But at the table they willingly give up thigh muscle for Jewry realizes that its historical mission does not depend on the presence or absence of this muscle."

CHAPTER 33

33:1 Why does the text tell us that Yaakov looked up and saw? Was he looking down before? At what? Munk explains, "when a righteous person raises his eyes to fix his gaze upon an object, he does so with intentions that are noble and ideal ... but the wicked raise their eyes to admire and covet material riches" ... (compare Genesis 22:4, 22:13 and 24:63 with Genesis 13:10 and 39:7).

Why does Yaakov change the division that he previously established in Chapter 32:8, 9?

33:2 Yaakov places the maidservant and their children first, then Leah and her children and then Rivka and Yosef. Even when facing death Rivka is still Yaakov's favorite over Leah.

33:3 Why does Yaakov bow before Esau seven times? This may be seen as overkill to a brother who is really a scoundrel.

33:4 Why does Esau run towards Yaakov?

The text has dots over the Hebrew word for "and he [Esau] kissed him [Yaakov]". Some say that these dots are an indication that Esau did not kiss Yaakov with his whole heart. Another, related explanation, is that Esau attempted to bite Yaakov on the neck and that these dots represent the teeth that

Esau broke when G-d hardened Yaakov's neck and Esau broke his teeth. Children love this explanation.

Why did each brother weep? Was this really a sign of affection on either of their parts?

33:5 Why is Esau unsure as to who the people are that are accompanying Yaakov?

Yaakov, representing the religious person, sees children as a gift from G-d.

33:7 Why do all the wives prostrate themselves before Esau? Isn't it enough that Yaakov has bowed? Must it be compounded with the bowing of the wives?

33:8 Yaakov attempts to pacify Esau with physical wealth. Munk comments: "in Jewry's millennial struggle against its oppressors, material goods are provided as a means of pacifying their feelings of hatred."

33:9 What motivates Esau to make Yaakov keep what is Yaakov's? Does this represent, as some see it, an admission of Yaakov's right to the blessings?

33:10 How can Yaakov possibly compare his seeing of the evil Esau to his seeing of an angel of G-d? This of course raises the question as to whether one is allowed to flatter the wicked in this world. Others though solve the problem by indicating that the reason Yaakov told Esau he had seen an angel was that Esau would fear Yaakov knowing that Yaakov had seen angels and survived. Esau would believe that Esau would be powerless before Yaakov.

33:11 Again we see Jacob acknowledging G-d's role in his life ("since G-d has been generous to me").

Why is that the text keeps referring to "he"? Isn't the use of he without the name confusing?

33:12 Was Esau's desire to move at Yaakov's pace a kind desire of brotherhood or something else?

Is Yaakov really afraid that his children are frail or is this a pretext?

33:14: Munk sees this dialogue, as the rest of the dialogue, as symbolic. According to Munk "let Esau continue on his route towards new conquests. As for Yaakov, his only thought is to direct his attention to the progress of his children. Raising them properly is his main preoccupation. To Esau go the

honors and glories of this world. For Yaakov what comes first is the moral and spiritual perfection of his children. They should never be 'pushed' but instead should 'be led along slowly'. They are to progress slowly but surely, going constantly forward with unfaltering steps, far from the influence of Esau."

Yaakov suggests that he is going to go to his brother's camp. But he never ended up there. Was this intentional at the time he made these statements (in which case he certainly deceived his brother) or did his intentions change as time went on? The text does not tell us.

33:16 Why does the text tell us that Esau was going back to Seir?

Munk offers an explanation continuing the theme of Esau being the progenitor of Rome and Rome being the foundation for Christianity: "For Esau, the destination, the goal to aim for is Seir; for Yaakov it is Succa. These two names reveal a divergence between Christian thought ... and Jewish thought. The former sees the highest expression of religious ideal in the notion of Seir i.e., the scapegoat ... this idea includes the principles of redemption absolution, appearing as acts of grace which emanate from divine love... Judaism ... springs forth the state of moral purity acquired during the Days of Awe ... to the joy of performing religious duties."

33:18 What does the text mean when it says Yaakov arrived intact? (or Shalem) Some say Shalem was the name of the city in the province of Schechem. Others suggest that Yaakov arrives at the border of Canaan physically whole, his dislocation healed; whole financially, despite the gifts he has given his brother; whole in Torah none of his knowledge forgotten when he was at Lavan.

The triple protection (physical, material and spiritual) which Yaakov had prayed for in Chapter 28:20-21 he had received. Yaakov had safely returned to his native land. However, instead of heading Beth-El to build an altar, Yaakov delays before keeping his word to G-d. As Munk comments "now rich and successful, Yaakov is severely criticized for having forgotten to make good the vow which he had uttered in a moment of distress."

33:19 Yaakov buys a parcel of land. And this is one of this is one of the three places that the Jewish people bought (the Cave of Machpelah in Hebron, the site of the temple in Jerusalem and Schechem, the tomb of Yosef).

33:20 Why does Yaakov build an altar at this place?

CHAPTER 34

Why is Dina identified here as the daughter of Leah whom she had borne to Yaakov? We know who her parents are.

Dina could only get in trouble because she goes out to see what is going on. Perhaps this is something that Dina should not have done. On the other hand, this certainly does not enable us to blame the victim and not condemn the one who raped her. Nevertheless, our rabbis comment that her parents should have forbidden her to go out.

There is, of course, a moral lesson here for all of us. We often think that there are no consequences from letting our children go and look at the pleasures of our land. As long as they do not engage in these pleasures, we think everything will be okay. This is a myth. Merely by going out to look at the things that are forbidden our children lose some of their purity. By looking at forbidden things, which look like so much fun, which may seem to look so decent and permitted, our children suffer a taint.

34:5 Why does Yaakov keep quiet until his sons come? We learn from this that it took twenty years before he boys were born. Yitzchak stood by his wife for these twenty years and, unlike his father, never took a concubine.