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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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**PARASHAT VAYISHLACH**

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This week’s *parasha* *shiur* is dedicated in memory of Sam Seldon *z”l*

by Freda Rosenfeld

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**"For you have striven with God and with men" –**

**Yaakov's Dual Destiny**

**By Dr. Brachi Elitzur**

In our *shiur* on *Parashat Vayetze*, the point of departure of our discussion was the level of detail in Yaakov's family stories and the seeming absence of any activity on the national level, in comparison to the stories of Avraham and Yitzchak. We noted the important lesson for future generations represented specifically by these family stories, which offer tools for dealing with a situation of exile in foreign countries. The stories that appear in our *parasha*, covering 11 years of Yaakov's life,[[1]](#footnote-1) seem at first glance to be a continuation of the family-related challenges that befall Yaakov. However, a closer look reveals a fundamentally different approach on his part.

The events involving Yaakov from the moment he returns to *Eretz Yisrael* have the potential to become powerfully dramatic family stories:

* Yaakov has been away from his parents for twenty years. The excitement that should accompany his return to *Eretz Yisrael*, the reunion with his parents, their introduction to his wives and 11 children – all of this feeds our imagination. Yaakov's parents are old; his father had spoken of the day of his death even before Yaakov fled, and we therefore have the sense that every day is critical if this reunion is to happen.
* Dina, Yaakov's daughter, is raped by the son of the mayor of the town adjacent to the piece of land that Yaakov has just purchased. The mayor and his son arrive at Yaakov's home to negotiate the conditions for the release of his daughter, who is still in their captivity.
* Rachel, Yaakov's beloved wife, goes into labor on the way to the meeting with Yaakov's parents. She dies in childbirth, managing with her last breath to name Yaakov's long-awaited last son.
* While Yaakov is still in mourning for Rachel, Reuven, his eldest son, causes his father grave offense through his conduct involving Yaakov's concubine.
* Yaakov returns home and lives alongside his father for another 22 years.[[2]](#footnote-2) Is he reunited with Rivka as well? And what is the nature of his relationship with the wet-nurse whose passing is noted in the text when he comes to fulfill his vow in Beit El?

All of these remain dramatic stories in potential only, since the text makes no mention of the emotional storm surrounding them, leaving it to the reader's imagination. Instead, we find a description of an unusual response on Yaakov's part to the challenges he faces. The emotions familiar to us from his stay in Lavan's house – his great love for Rachel, his sharing of feelings with his wives concerning their father, and his anxiety in anticipation of the encounter with Esav – are neutralized here and replaced with a drier documentation of his responses. What is the reason for this change?

The last angel that reveals itself to Yaakov before his return to *Eretz* *Yisrael* informs him of his change of name, symbolizing the change that he is expected to undergo following his encounter with Esav:

And he said, “Your name will no longer be Yaakov, but rather Yisrael, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." (32:29)

The name Yaakov expresses the family challenges that Yaakov has faced since the moment of his birth ("*Ya'akov*" alluding to the word "*akev*,” the "heel" of Esav, which he grasped at birth). Throughout the 20 years since fleeing Esav, he has had to deal with those "biting at his heels." The name Yisrael signifies his new destiny, as Kli Yakar explains (on 32:29):

“And he said, ‘Your name will no longer be Yaakov, but rather Yisrael'” – This expression means *“yashar E-l*”(God is upright), for *“yashar”* indicates seeing, as in the verse “I see him (*ashurenu*) but not from close.” He is thereby telling him that Yaakov sees God's face, and the angel has not succeeded in blinding him to the reality of God. In declaring that he has "striven with God,” he uproots the name Yaakov from him, for “Yaakov” hints to “The heart is deceitful (*akuv*) above all, and weak” (*Yirmiyahu* 17:9), whereas “Yisrael” expresses the idea of *“mishor”* (a straight place), as it is said of the future (*Yishayahu* 40:4), “The crooked shall be made straight.” And not something that appears straight [only] in human eyes, but something that appears straight in the eyes of both God and man. Therefore, he says, “You have striven with God and with men” – for it is by virtue of your actions that you will be a prince and ruler with God and with men and you shall prevail. This is the meaning of “Yisrael” – *yashar E-l*; a *mishor* that appears straight in the eyes of God, as well.

Yaakov's actions, from the moment that he returns to *Eretz Yisrael*, take a sharp turn. It seems that the fulfillment of his vow and national destiny are now his priority, to the extent that family matters – as critical as they may be – are pushed aside.

In this *shiur*, we will try to clarify the message arising from the neutralizing of emotions in the description of Yaakov's dealing with family matters. We will give attention to the significance of the links that connect these stories and address the issue of Yaakov's dual destiny.

**The Story of Dina**

The first action that Yaakov takes upon reaching the land is to purchase a field in Shekhem:

And Yaakov came to Shalem, a city of Shekhem, which is in the land of Cana'an, when he came from Padan Aram, and he encamped before the city. And he purchased the piece of land upon which he had spread his tent from the sons of Chamor, father of Shekhem, for a hundred kesita. And he made an altar there and called it El Elo-hei Yisrael. (33:18-19)

Yaakov, like Avraham, goes about acquiring legal rights to the land, building altars, and calling in God's Name.

*Chazal* discuss the profundity of Yaakov's first national action, and add a description of further projects to his credit in the institutionalization of public works and concern for the welfare of the inhabitants of the land:

“And he encamped before the city” – Rav taught: He instituted a currency for them. Shmuel taught: He instituted markets for them. R. Yochanan taught: He instituted bathhouses for them. (*Shabbat* 33b)

Were it not for the debacle concerning Dina, it seems that Yaakov would have gone directly on to remove foreign gods and ascended to Beit El to fulfill his vow – which is what the Torah describes immediately after the episode of Dina. However, Yaakov's national enthusiasm is cooled somewhat in view of the need to deal once again with problems at home.

The story of Dina is recorded at great length and seems to place the question of a positive or negative evaluation of the actions of Yaakov's sons at center stage. However, despite the value of the discussion as to the justice of killing the men of Shekhem, Yaakov's conduct is actually the main message of the story.

First, his conduct raises some questions:

1. What is the meaning of Yaakov's forgiving attitude towards Shekhem and Chamor, while his daughter is still captive in her rapist's house?
2. Why does Yaakov display no involvement in the drawing up of the conditions of the covenant with Shekhem and Chamor?
3. What is the meaning of Yaakov's rebuke of his sons following their attack on the city?

Close examination of Yaakov's angry rebuke addressed to his sons may teach us something about the circumstances of his actions:

And Yaakov said to Shimon and to Levi, “You have sullied (*akhartem*) me, making me odious to the inhabitants of the land, the Cana'ani and the Perizi. For I am but few in number, and they will gather against me and strike me, and I shall be destroyed, me and my household." (34:30)

In *Tanakh* the root "*a-kh-r*" is used to denote a situation of real or potential desecration of God's Name caused by a public violation of a religious or moral law. Examples include:

1. Yehoshua's command concerning the spoils of the city of Yericho: "As for you – keep away from the devoted things, lest you make yourselves accursed in taking from the devoted things and making the camp of Israel a curse, and sullying (***va-akhartem***) it." (*Yehoshua* 6:18)
2. Akhan's appropriation of some of the spoils is defined as an act of *“akhira”*: "And Yehoshua said: ‘Why have you sullied us (***akhartanu***)? God will sully you (***yakerkha***) this day.’ And all of Israel stoned him with stones, and they burned them with fire, after they had stoned them with stones." (ibid. 7:25)
3. Yiftach's mourning and his concern as to the potential outcome if he fails to fulfill his vow to sacrifice his daughter: "And it was, when he saw her, that he tore his garments and said, ‘Alas, my daughter, you have brought me low, and you have sullied me (***at hayit be-okhrai***), for I opened my mouth to God and I cannot go back.’" (*Shoftim* 11:35)
4. Yonatan's accusation of Shaul as issuing a decree that might not reach everyone, such that there is a threat of the land being sullied: "And Yonatan said, ‘My father has sullied (***akhar***) the land; see, now, how my eyes have brightened because I tasted a little of this honey’" (*Shmuel* *I* 14:29).
5. The argument between Eliyahu and Achav as to who answers to the definition of "***okher yisrael***," “one who sullies Israel:” "And it was, when Achav saw Eliyahu, then Achav said to him: ‘Is that you, O sullier (***okhar***) of Israel?’ And he said, ‘It is not I who have sullied (***akharti***) Israel, but rather you and your father's house, by abandoning God's commandments and going after the Ba'al.’" (*Melakhim* *I* 18:17-18)

More than the honor of his own family, Yaakov is concerned for the ramifications of the massacre on the project of calling in God's Name throughout the land. In not fulfilling the obligations of the covenant, his sons have caused damage to the national cause of the forefathers, and this may have a fateful effect on the continued enterprise of inculcating moral values in the land.

Yaakov is not apathetic as to what is happening to his daughter. On the contrary, his choice not to negotiate with Shekhem and Chamor may perhaps arise from his emotional involvement and the concern lest this override his better judgment and harm his family's image. Yaakov behaves as his fathers did when their wives were taken from them – he waits for Divine intervention, which indeed comes swiftly: "And they journeyed, and the fear of God was upon the cities that were around them, and they did not pursue after Yaakov's sons" (35:5). However, he is forced to deal with the possible fallout of his sons' strong family emotions, and instead of maintaining his land holdings in Shekhem and continued inculcation of religious and moral values among his neighbors, he is forced to abandon his inheritance and seek a place of refuge until the storm passes.

**Reuven's Act**

What it is exactly that Reuven did with Bilha, as well as the severity of his act, are a matter of exegetical debate. Explanations range from those that elaborate in their description of the sin, citing licentious desire as a motivation,[[3]](#footnote-3) to the well-known defense of R. Shmuel bar Nachmani in the name of R. Yochanan: “Anyone who says that Reuven sinned is mistaken” (*Shabbat* 55b), clearing him of the accusation of adultery and depicting his offense as nothing more than involving himself in his father's sleeping arrangements.

The broad range of exegetical possibilities is created by a range of factors:

1. Reuven's act is mentioned in one sole verse, which itself seems incomplete.
2. The absence of a harsh response on Yaakov's part to such a grave insult.
3. The continuation of the family stories, in which not only is Reuven not suddenly absent as a result of violating his family's honor, but he displays confidence in his ability to influence his brothers' actions without fear of them rejecting his words and humiliating him.
4. The unique treatment given to this verse in the Masora, which inserts a *piska* (paragraph break) in the middle, and a doubled system of cantillation marks for the first part of the verse (a phenomenon that exists only in one other place – the Ten Commandments). This intensifies the riddle of the story and offers the possibility of joining the list of Yaakov's sons, with Reuven among them, as a direct continuation of the description of his act.
5. There are two other places where mention is made of Reuven's act: in Yaakov's parting words to his sons and in *Divrei Ha-yamim*. Instead of the hoped-for clarification, these sources only increase the opacity surrounding the act:

"Unstable as water, you shall not excel, because you went up to your father's bed, and then defiled it; he went up to my couch." (49:4)

And the sons of Reuven, the firstborn of Yisrael – for he was the firstborn, but since he defiled his father's couch, his birthright was given to the sons of Yosef, son of Yisrael – but not for attribution of the birthright by genealogy. (*Divrei Ha-yamim* *I* 5:1)

Why is the son's intercourse with his father's wife – an explicit prohibition in the Torah – referred to as a "defilement of his father's couch"? Is this not a staggering understatement of his misdeed? And why is Reuven's punishment merely the loss of his firstborn status, rather than a far more serious response, as we would expect for this sort of sin? Does the attribution of the quality of "instability" to Reuven as motivation for his sin not let him too easily off the hook? Does his act not reflect an inability to control his impulses?

It would seem that the obscurity of the textual description of Reuven's act is meant to deflect the focus from Reuven to Yaakov, in such a way that the details of the event are relegated to the margins while Yaakov's response – or more accurately, his lack of response – are the story's main message.

The words, "And Yisrael heard,” which are appended to the narrative, create tension in anticipation of his response, and its absence is the important part of the story. The appellation "Yisrael" that accompanies the act of hearing divulges the reason for the lack of response: Yaakov is preoccupied with his national mission, the continuation of the enterprise embarked upon by his fathers, and in this reality the handling of family matters is postponed until the appropriate time.

**The Longing for Realization of Spiritual Destiny and its Results**

The series of events in the *parasha* thus describes Yaakov's national and religious activity – the purchase of a piece of land, the removal of foreign gods, the building of altars, and the calling in God's Name. These ideological actions are constantly interrupted by family issues that demand responses and treatment, but Yaakov gives them only brief and minimal attention, setting himself a goal of national activity and acting upon it for 11 years, until the fateful day when he sends Yosef to check on his brothers in Shekhem.

The unbearable sight of the coat stained with the blood of his beloved son, and the obvious conclusion – "Yosef has surely been torn apart" – upsets the entire picture. Yaakov sinks into anguished mourning for his son, refusing to be comforted:

From the day that Yosef was taken, the Divine spirit was removed from Yaakov; he would see without seeing, and hear without hearing. (*Bereishit Rabba* 91:5)

The piece of land in Shekhem is abandoned; Chevron is neglected; the wells of Gerar and Beer Sheva are most likely blocked up by the Pelishtim; and the enterprise of holding onto the land and calling in God's Name is frozen. *Eretz* *Yisrael* will now return to the cultural and religious hegemony of its Canaanite inhabitants, until the return of the fourth generation when the sin of the Emorites is complete.

Was this what the angel had in mind when he drew a distinction between Yaakov's two destinies – "Your name shall no longer be Yaakov, but rather Yisrael"? Was it God's message concerning his change of name – "And God said to him, ‘Your name Yaakov – your name shall no longer be Yaakov, for Yisrael shall be your name’" (35:10) – that led Yaakov to realize his national destiny at the expense of attention to family matters? Could the two roles not be integrated?

Yaakov, the "simple man dwelling in tents,” had been destined from the start to realize the national vision. Yaakov, like his grandfather Avraham, was destined for the role of a man of the spirit, spreading religious and moral values throughout the land with Divine aid – "The voice is the voice of Yaakov." The realization of this goal would be facilitated through the cooperation of the hunter, Esav, who would take care of subsistence, material needs, and dealing with foreign neighbors. His mother's urging that Yaakov should take from his father the blessings meant for Esav imposed a double mission on Yaakov; he would now have to take responsibility for the spiritual, national level as well as the practical, material level. Yaakov, the innocent dweller of tents, would have to undergo a 20-year training period in the house of Lavan, during which time he would neglect his spiritual role in order to acquire the tools needed for dealings with society, with all its perversions and crookedness.

The 20 years of exile and the mantle of foreign mentality that Yaakov took upon himself during that time are slowly dismantled during the journey back to *Eretz Yisrael*. The first layer of this artificial guise is removed with the construction of the pillar and the heap symbolizing a boundary between Yaakov's sphere and that of his father-in-law. The encounter with the angel and the message about his change of name and mission are another step in Yaakov's severance from the past and aspiration for the future. Then comes the encounter with Esav and his four hundred escorts, which once again – like 20 years ago – places Yaakov in the position of the younger brother who acknowledges the power of his red-headed older brother. He understands that while the past 20 years have hardened him and forged his character, he will never reach the level of a "hunter." Yaakov's enthusiasm to return to his original role causes him to gloss over the significance of the angel's words, "You have striven with God **and with men**, and have prevailed." The angel speaks of Yaakov's double success – with God and with men – but Yaakov draws encouragement only from the first part of the promise, and this is what goads him on in his activities.

Yaakov is busy building up the land, and he fails to notice how the edifice of his family is beginning to crack and crumble in the absence of a protective, reproaching father and as a result of the overt favoritism towards one son while ignoring the poisonous hatred that is fermenting among the brothers as they observe the striped coat and hear the grandiose dreams that Yosef recounts.

Was the elderly, blind Yitzchak then correct in his perception of his two sons and correct in his decision to equip them with blessings that would allow for optimal and cooperative control in *Eretz Yisrael*? On the worldly level, it would seem that he had indeed sized up the situation correctly. Yitzchak had set his sights on having Yaakov continue the enterprise of his father Avraham, spreading monotheistic values throughout the land, while Esav would take care of the family estate, the sources of water necessary for its survival, and peaceful relations within and without. On the level of Divine Providence, however, there hovered the cloud of the decree, "Know with certainty that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not their own,” which demanded to be realized. The family schism would bring in its wake a long and troubling severance, and this would have to be healed before the count of the years of exile necessary for the future inheritance of the land could begin, but it was inevitable. It was Yaakov's unconscious choice to leave off dealing with family troubles – leading, ultimately, to jealousy, hatred, and the despicable selling of a brother – that eventually led to the realization of the prophecy and the return of the fourth generation.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. This is based on the following calculation: Yosef was 6 years old when Yaakov fled from Lavan and 17 when he was cast into the pit by his brothers at the beginning of *Parashat Vayeshev*. The same conclusion is reached by calculating Yaakov's age. However, there is a discrepancy of 14 years between the events recounted in the Torah and the age he tells to Pharaoh. It is for this reason that the *midrash* proposes the 14 years that Yaakov spent with Shem and Ever before continuing on to Aram Naharayim. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Based on *Seder Olam*, chapter 2, which suggests that Yitzchak died 13 years after the sale of Yosef, even though his death is noted at an earlier stage in the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This approach is developed mainly in the work *Tzeva’ot ha-Shevatim*, where it is formulated as Reuven's last will that he leaves for his sons. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)