

VA YISHLACH

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Today's parashah, VaYishlach, is a story of teshuvah, which means both repentance and return, which can be both physical and spiritual. In Jacob's case it refers to repentance for past sins and his return home. At the opening of our reading, Jacob is on his way back to his native Canaan after a twenty-year exile in Mesopotamia. During his years there, he lived with his uncle Laban, married his two daughters, Leah and Rachel and raised a family. He also acquired great wealth in the form of livestock while in Laban's employ. As he departs from Laban surreptitiously, Jacob is very apprehensive in the face of a potentially serious obstacle which stands in his way, his brother Esau.

The first phrase of the parashah sets the action in motion: v'yishlach ya'acov malachim l'fonov el esov achiv. Then Jacob sent messengers ahead to his brother Esau. His apprehension was heightened when the messengers informed him that Esau was accompanied by 400 armed men. This tells us that sheikhs with private armies have predominated in the Middle East since the time of the patriarchs. Along with the messengers, Jacob sent a very lavish peace offering made up of hundreds of animals from his flocks. My parents taught me that family history often repeats, and so it does here. Jacob's departure from Laban's household is a reprise of his actions twenty years earlier. Once again, he deceives a father, Laban, and leaves behind the angry brothers of Leah and Rachel, who feel that he has enriched himself at their expense.

As our story progresses, we encounter one of the most famous passages in the Torah and one of the most mysterious. The night before his meeting with Esau, Jacob crossed the Jabbok River, and while he was alone on the opposite river bank, a man assaulted him and wrestled with him until dawn. The scene ends with the unnamed man blessing Jacob and telling him that henceforth he would not be called Yaakov but rather Yisroel.

A close reading of this passage reveals linguistic cue and philosophical resonances which inform us that this is a momentous event, a turning point in Jacob's life. First, the name of the river, Yavok in Hebrew, is a reordering of the name Yaakov. This is also true of the word v'yayavek, which means "he wrestled". Furthermore, river crossings in the ancient world were fraught with symbolism, signifying transitional moments in a person's life. The River Styx leading to the underworld and Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon are two familiar examples. So, the crossing of the Yavok marked a spiritual watershed in Jacob's life. Finally, since the Bible mentions the Yavok as a frontier of Eretz Yisroel, its crossing also marked a physical transition, a return from Mesopotamia to the Jewish homeland, which mirrored the original journey of Abraham.

Now let's turn to the mysterious wrestling episode. I interpret this as a dream in which Jacob wrestles with his conscience. The fact that it happened at night while he was alone, reinforces my thought that this was a dream. During this dream, Jacob had a struggle between the negative and positive sides of his nature. In our tradition, we speak

of the struggle between “yetzer hara” and “yetzer hatov”, evil and good desires or inclinations—in Freud’s terms, the id and the superego. Or, as Flannery O’Connor wrote, “In every culture, good and evil are joined at the spine”. Twenty years earlier, Jacob’s evil instinct, his “yetzer hara” triumphed over his “yetzer hatov” when, through manipulation and deceit, he stole the birthright and parental blessing from Esau. This time, Jacob emerged physically impaired but spiritually triumphant. He came to grips with his lingering guilt for deceiving his father and his brother. When he woke in the morning, he was prepared to greet Esau honestly and lovingly for the first time in his adult life. He became a true baal teshuvah, by reconnecting with his “yetzer hatov”, the divine aspect of himself, and returning to the values of his father Isaac and his grandfather Abraham.

Jacob’s successful struggle culminates in a change of name, from Yaakov to Yisroel. The first name change in the Torah occurred when Abram and Sarai became Abraham and Sarah. Because of their faith in God, they went from being the heads of a clan to the progenitors of the Jewish people. Similarly, Jacob, because of his teshuvah, earned a new name which became the name of a people, “Am Yisroel” and their homeland, Eretz Yisroel. The name Yisroel means: “He who has striven with man and God and has prevailed.” The man whom Jacob struggles with can be seen as a stand-in for Esau, the brother whom he had wronged. He prevailed, because he repented and sought atonement for his previous sins. The language of atonement is found in the sentence describing the gift he sent to Esau. The word used is achaprah which is translated “propitiate”, but the root is kof, peh, resh the same as Yom Kippur, Day of

Atonement. Because of his atonement, Jacob also prevailed with God, that is, he was now in harmony with God's teachings.

The scene where Jacob receives his new name resonates with an earlier turning point in his life. Before blessing Jacob with his new name, the man asks him what his name is. The last person to ask him his name was his father Isaac, and Jacob answered that he was Esau. This time he answers truthfully: "I am Yaakov." In a wonderful irony, at that moment he stops being Yaakov, the deceiver, and becomes Yisroel, the triumphant striver. This time he deserves the blessing.

What are we to make of the fact that Jacob was limping after he received his new name Israel? I was wrestling with that question when I asked my teacher, Rabbi Alan Ullman his opinion, and he came up with an insightful interpretation. When God appeared to Avram to give him his new name Avraham, He said "Hithalech l'fonei"—"Walk in my ways." The word used for "walk"—"hithalech" is not the normal word for walk, but rather the reflexive form of the verb. This tells us that henceforth Abraham will not walk in his former unthinking way, but rather in a manner that is self-conscious and purposeful, the way of Torah. This is the meaning of Israel's limp. It is a reminder that he too can no longer walk in his former way. As Israel, he is now the father of "Am Yisroel, goy kadosh", a people set apart, whose destiny is to walk in a different way, on the path of "halachah", a path foreshadowed by God's original admonition to Abraham: "Hithalech l'fonei."

I have argued that Jacob was a "baal teshuvah", but what about Esau? Does he also deserve credit for the reconciliation of the brothers? From the very beginning, the

name Esau has had perjorative connotations. Today's haftarah is a good example, where the prophet Obadiah says that Edom, a synonym for Esau is despised among the nations. There are many other negative associations with the name Esau. He is known as the ancestor of the accursed Amalekites and in the post-biblical era Esau became a code word for the Roman Empire and the Church of Rome, both oppressors of the Jewish people. Today I want to present a positive brief on behalf of Esau based on what the Torah tells us about him. First let's take a look at what we know about Esau from an earlier parashah. This includes the famous scene where Esau trades his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of lentil soup, an act which was harshly criticized by our ancient sages. Esau deserves criticism for his cavalier treatment of the birthright, but Jacob deserves more criticism for demanding payment for sharing a meal with his brother. When it comes to the lack of warmth between the brothers, Elie Wiesel and other commentators have placed the blame appropriately on parental favoritism, a mistake which Jacob repeated with his own sons, with even graver consequences. The other negative mark against Esau is his marriage to two Hittite women, which greatly upset his parents. Esau might have argued in his defense that there were not many Jewish girls living in Canaan at that time which led to widespread intermarriage among our ancient ancestors. But, at least from the standpoint of the author of our story, Esau should have deferred to his parents and allowed them to arrange a shidduch within the kinship group as they did with Jacob. The last and most important issue regarding our judgment of Esau is whether he was able, in the end, to overcome his overwhelming anger towards Jacob for stealing Isaac's blessing. The last words spoken by Esau twenty years earlier were: "At the end of the mourning period after my father's death, I will kill my brother Jacob". We need to ask whether

Esau truly repented and overcame his anger. In other words, was the reconciliation described in our story sincere on the part of both brothers? I answer this question in the affirmative based on a close reading of the sentence which describes the face-to-face meeting of the two brothers: v'yaratz esov l'krato v'yachavkayhu v'yipol al tzavaro v'yishakayhu v'yevchu. This sentence contains five verbs escalating in intensity: he ran, he embraced, he fell (on his neck), he kissed, and the climactic verb, they wept. The words v'yaratz l'krato "he ran to greet him" are the same words used to describe how Abraham ran to greet the three strangers to offer them his hospitality. This linguistic connection shows us that Esau had absorbed the positive values of Abraham. Esau "fell" on Jacob's neck and "embraced" him. These are positive terms of affection but not yet conclusive. Then Esau upped the ante with a "kiss". Finally the two brothers seal the deal as they share the final word: v'yevchu, "they cried". In the words of the 19th century commentator Samson Raphael Hirsch: "This one word assures us that Esau was overcome with true human emotion. A kiss or a hug can be an affected gesture, but not tears which emanate from the depths of the soul. The embrace combined with the tears tells us that Esau is a true descendant of Abraham." For achieving this redemptive moment of shalom bayit, both Esau and Jacob deserve to be measured "b'kaf z'chut", on the side of merit and to be called "baal teshuvah".