

Short Comments on Vayishlach
Rabbi Eliot Malomet November 20, 2021 16 Kislev 5782

בראשית ל"ב:ח' ויירא יעקב מאד ויפזר לו ביסוד את העם
אשר-אלו ואת-הצאן ואת-הבקר והגמלים לשני מחנות:

Genesis 32:8 Jacob was greatly frightened; in his anxiety, he divided the people with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two camps.

Jacob is afraid for his life and anxious over what may happen. Rashi: he was *afraid* of being killed and *anxious* that he might kill. Jacob has the most richly developed emotional life of all the patriarchs. He loves, he cries, he demonstrates anger, he experiences catharsis. Here he fears. Does he ever experience joy?

ל"ב:י"ב הציילני גא מנד אחי מנד עשו כייירא אנכי אתו פן
יבוא והפני אם על-בנים:

32:12 Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; else, I fear, he may come and strike me down, mothers and children alike. This expression occurs in Deut. 22:6 regarding the procurement of eggs from a bird's nest: *do not take the mother with the young.* You are commanded to *send the mother* before taking the eggs to prevent cruelty and cultivate kindness to all creatures. Jacob is not only afraid of annihilation, he fears Esau's barbaric cruelty. The fear is unjustified given how Esau behaves in the ensuing encounter.

ל"ב:כ"ג ויגא בלילה הוא ויקח את-שתי נשיו ואת-שתי
שפחתיו ואת-אתד עשר ילדיו ויפזר את מעבר יבק:

32:23 That same night he arose, and taking his two wives, his two maidservants, and his eleven children, he crossed the ford of the Jabbok. The crossing of river signals the end of this phase of Jacob's journey back to Canaan, and marks a turning point of his life. Having escaped to a temporary exile, having married and created a family, he crosses into a new chapter of his life.

ל"ב:ל"ב ויזרח-לו השמש כאשר עבר את-פנואל והוא צלע
על-ירכו:

32:32 The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping on his hip. Quite literally, it's a new day for him! But that limp! The limp is a reminder of the encounter with the mysterious assailant. A wound that he will carry with him for who-knows-how-long, and which will be remembered by his descendants whenever they eat meat. Jacob's struggle finds its way to the butcher's bench, the kitchen table, and the diner's plate.

ל"ג:ה' וישא את-עיניו וירא את-הנשים ואת-הילדים ויאמר
מי-אלה לך ויאמר הילדים אשר-הגנו אליהם את-עבדך:

33:5 Looking about, he saw the women and the children. "Who," he asked, "are these with you?" He answered, "The children with whom God has favored your servant." What could be more illustrative of the contrast between Jacob and Esau: Esau with his minions and Jacob with his *minyan*! But at the end of the parasha we will learn that Esau also has quite a large family, with tribes and kings. Esau evidently, is also a family man, something that we tend to overlook.

ל"ג:י"א קח-נא את-ברכתי אשר הבאת לך כייסגני אליהם
וכי ישלי-לך ויפצרו-בו ויקח:

33:11 Please accept my blessing which has been brought to you, for God has favored me and I have plenty. And when he urged him, he accepted. This is an emotional moment. The delicate dance of reconciliation and the reset of a deeply wounded relationship. Outside the context of this story, this verse teaches us to accept the blessings of our lives, from whatever their source. To see a moving illustration of this, watch this video from the Pasuk Lahayyim Series at www.929.org/tag/752 or <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4vKFb-BHz-Q>.

ל"ד:ט' והתחמנו אתנו בנתיכם ותגור-לנו ואת-בנותינו ותקחו
לכם:

34:9 Intermarry with us: give your daughters to us, and take our daughters for yourselves: This Rape of Dina is such a disturbing story from all angles. Located within the larger question of how the tribes of Israel live with the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites propose that the ravishing of Dina be justified by enabling the intermarriage of the Israelites and the Canaanites. The Israelites present circumcision as their "pre-condition" and in the end they will lose more than their foreskins. The proposal is for *daughters* to leave their own families and intermarry while the sons stay put; ironic because it's the *man* who is supposed to *leave his father and mother and cling to his wife* (Gen. 2:23), not the other way around. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all leave their parents and cling to their wives. When the sons of Jacob marry, their Canaanite wives will have to leave their own families and cling to their Israelite husbands.

ל"ד:כ"ג מקנהם וקננתם וכל־בהמתם הלוא לנו הם אך
באותה להם וישבו אתנו:

34:23 *Their cattle and substance and all their beasts will be ours, if we only agree to their terms, so that they will settle among us.*” In the original negotiations between the Israelites and the Canaanites, nothing was mentioned about the livestock. Shechem and Hamor want to sweeten the deal to their kinsmen, so they add a detail that in the end, shows the degree to which they have totally duped, to put it mildly.

ל"ד:כ"ו ואת־חמור ואת־שכם בנו הרגו לפי־קרב ויקחו את־
דינה מבית שכם ויגזרו:

34:26 *They put Hamor and his son Shechem to the sword, took Dinah out of Shechem's house, and went away.* The story leaves us with so many questions: is their act of vengeance a badge of honor or a moral stain? Jacob rebukes Simeon and Levi for destabilizing his standing in the land; their retort, *Should our sister be treated like a whore* is a stinging rebuke to him. Is this about violent and non-violent conflict resolution? What would were lingering effects of this massacre? On the Canaanites? On the Israelites? Is there a political motive for this story in light of later biblical history in the northern kingdom? Levi goes on to play a prominent role in the cultic life of Israel: to suppress or to reward their violence?
ל"ה:ט"ז ויסעל מבית אל ויהי־עוד פברת־הארץ לבוא
אפרתה ותלד רחל ותקש בלדתה:

35:16 *They set out from Bethel; but when they were still some distance short of Ephrath, Rachel was in childbirth, and she had hard labor.* It's hard not to read this story without just a little bit of confusion. Was Jacob, a man who has witnessed (at least) 12 previous pregnancies, not aware that his beloved Rachel was about to give birth any second and that it might not be a good idea to subject her to a bumpy ride? Why the rush to get to Hebron? Is this an inversion of the Joseph story: a powerful son rushing to his aged frail father, as opposed to an aged frail father rushing to his powerful son? He will end up seeing his father again, but at the tragic cost of Rachel's life.

ל"ה:כ"ו ויצב יעקב מצבה על־קברתה הוא מצבת קברת־רחל
עד־היום:

35:20 *Over her grave Jacob set up a pillar; it is the pillar at Rachel's grave to this day.* Jacob's motif is stones. But this moment begs so many questions: why is she buried there and not in the Cave of Machpelah? And why doesn't the Torah

elaborate on his emotional reaction to her death? Was Jacob, the most emotional of all the patriarchs, not able to respond? Why no details? Even Abraham who was estranged from Sarah at her death summons some tears and mourns for her. Jacob's reaction to Rachel's tragic death? Crickets. Maybe it was too overwhelming. Maybe he felt guilty. Maybe he was numb. Or maybe the man whose life was so involved with stones, himself turned into stone. הוא התאבן.

ל"ה:כ"ז-כ"ט ויבא יעקב אל־יעקב אביו ממרא קרנת
הארבעה הוא חבון אשר־גרשם אברהם ויעקב: ויהיו ימי
יעקב מאת שנה ושמונים שנה: ויגוע יעקב וימת ויאסף אל־
עמיו זקן וישבע ימים ויקברו אלו עשו ויעקב בגו:

35:27-29 *And Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre, at Kiriath-arba—now Hebron—where Abraham and Isaac had sojourned. Isaac was a hundred and eighty years old when he breathed his last and died. He was gathered to his kin in ripe old age; and he was buried by his sons Esau and Jacob.* This is the first account of Jacob seeing his father after all these years of exile. Rebekah: where is she? We witnessed Jacob's emotional reaction when he reunited with Esau, but where is his emotional reaction here when he sees his father for the first time and faces the reality (presumably) that his mother is dead? When Joseph's bloody coat is brought to him in tatters, Jacob is inconsolable. But when he is told Joseph is alive, he is stunned into silence. When he finally sees him, who is the emotional one? Hint: it's not Jacob. Remember that when Jacob comes to Haran there is a big *rock on the well*. When he lifted it off, he uncorked all his welled up emotions. But slowly, slowly over the course of a tumultuous, exuberant and also tragic life, a life filled with upheavals, duplicities, reconciliation, sexual violence perpetrated against his child, a massacre perpetrated by his sons to avenge it, a wife who dies in childhood, a son who “usurps” him, and more to come, the rock that he lifted ever so slowly goes back over the well. Jacob, the most complex of the patriarchs, the one who is up all night wrestling a mysterious assailant – maybe he was wrestling himself! – will always leave us puzzled and perplexed. The death of Isaac at 180 (5x6x6) signals a generational shift; so too, the genealogies of Edom that follow. The family transitions to a new generation with its own tragic conflicts and stunning reconciliations, that will shape the destiny of Israel. Shabbat Shalom!