

**Vayishlach: Jacob Goes to his Father Isaac in Hebron**  
**Rabbi Eliot Malomet    December 6, 2025    16 Kislev 5786**

Towards the end of the parasha we read a verse that surprisingly gets very little attention from commentators:

וַיָּבֹא יַעֲקֹב אֶל יִצְחָק אָבִיו מִמָּרָא קִרְיַת הָאַרְבַּע הוּא הֵבְרֹן אֲשֶׁר בְּ  
שֵׁם אֲבִרָהָם וַיִּצְחָק. (בר' לה:כז)

***Jacob came home to Isaac his father at Mamre, in the city of Arba—that is Hebron, where Abraham and Isaac had sojourned.*** (Gen. 35:27)

Let's place this moment in the context of Jacob's life. A recap: Jacob purloined his brother Esau's birthright. He deceived his father and stole his brother's blessing. He escaped to Paddan Aram. He settled with his uncle Lavan and married Lavan's daughter after seven years of labor. Except, wrong daughter. He pledges another seven years to marry the love of his life, Rachel. With the two wives and their maidservants he fathers eleven sons and one daughter and then returns to Canaan. That's where our parasha begins. Jacob dispatches messengers to Esau only to discover that Esau is coming to greet him with a gang of 400 men. In fear, Jacob divides his camp prays to God and dispatches a parade of animals to Esau as a gift.<sup>1</sup> He fords the Jabbok River with his family, but tarries behind alone. He wrestles with a mysterious assailant until dawn. Upon separating from the assailant, Jacob receives a new name, Israel. Jacob and Esau reunite with great emotion and then go their own ways. In the meantime, Isaac is still alive and living in Hebron (in the south) **and it will be some time yet before Jacob goes to see him.** Jacob establishes his own holding in the land near Shechem (in the north). His daughter Dinah is raped and taken hostage by the son of one of the town's leading citizens. When marriage is proposed between the clans, Jacob's sons demand that the men of Shechem be circumcised. The men of Shechem agree. On the third day post-circumcision, Shimon and Levi kill everyone in the

town and the other brothers despoil it. Jacob and his family move southward, first to Beit El where Rebekah's nurse, D'vora dies, and then even further south, towards Beit Lehem where his beloved Rachel dies while giving birth to Benjamin. Following that ordeal, the family moves further south to Migdal Eder, where Reuben cohabits with Bilha.<sup>2</sup>

**That is when Jacob finally arrives at his father's dwelling in Hebron.**

**How old would Jacob have been when he got to Hebron?**

We don't know. But it would have to be sometime after all of the events listed above took place. We can approximate the answer from the evidence scattered throughout the stories of Genesis. In the chart below we list the ages of Isaac, Jacob and Joseph at important moments in their lives. Ages shaded in **blue** are noted clearly in a biblical verse. Ages shaded in **green** are deduced by arithmetic in the footnotes.

Event	Isaac	Jacob	Joseph	Source
Birth of Jacob	60	0		Gen. 25:26
Abraham's death	75 <sup>3</sup>	15 <sup>4</sup>		21:7, 25:7
Joseph's birth	151 <sup>5</sup>	91 <sup>*</sup>	0	
Jacob's return to Canaan	157 <sup>*</sup>	97 <sup>*</sup>	6 <sup>*</sup>	31:41
Rachel's death/ Benjamin's birth	?	?	?	35:18-19
Jacob's arrival in Hebron	?	?	?	35:27
Joseph's abduction	168 <sup>*</sup>	108 <sup>*</sup>	17	37:2
Isaac's death	180	120 <sup>*</sup>	29 <sup>*</sup>	35:28
Joseph before Pharaoh		121 <sup>*</sup>	30	41:46
Jacob's descent to Egypt		130	39 <sup>6</sup>	47:9
Jacob's death		147	56	47:28

**Jacob would have had to be somewhere close to 108 when he arrived in Hebron because the family is living in Hebron**

<sup>1</sup> The ratio of female to male animals is nod to Esau's masculine prowess. But in practice, the animals function as a kind of "starter herd" for him, a subtle way of encouraging him to pursue the life of a pastoral nomad.

<sup>2</sup> There are various interpretations of Reuben's act. One of the most compelling is that he was acting on behalf of his mother. **For his whole life Reuben witnessed his father living in his aunt's (Rachel's) tent, and throughout his youth he saw his mother abandoned alone in her own tent...** (Y. Grossman). By having relations with Bilha, Rachel's handmaiden, the one who most likely adopted Joseph and Benjamin and in whose tent Jacob was most likely to reside, Reuben made her inaccessible to Jacob. This raised the status of Leah and likely meant that Jacob would cohabit with her from now on. (Yonatan Grossman, **Jacob - The Story of a Family**, Hebrew. p. 471)

<sup>3</sup> Abraham died at 175 and was 100 when Isaac was born. 175-100=75. Isaac was 75 when Abraham died.

<sup>4</sup> Isaac was 75 when Abraham died and 60 when Jacob was born. 75-60=15. Jacob was 15 when Abraham died.

<sup>5-\*</sup> For all these ages see note 6.

<sup>6</sup> This number, 39, (Joseph's age when Jacob arrives in Egypt) is the key to figuring out all of the ages. How do we get to 39? Joseph was 30 when he went before Pharaoh to interpret the dreams. There were 7 years of plenty. And then, 2 years into the famine, Jacob comes to Egypt. 30+7+2=39. But, the Torah specifically says that Jacob was 130 when he came to Egypt. Then how old was Jacob when Joseph was born? Answer: 91. Why? Because 130-39=91. Joseph was born at the end of Jacob's 14 years of work for Lavan. But Jacob stayed on another 6 years to assemble a large flock of his own. That is when he breaks with Lavan and returns to Canaan. Jacob would have been 97. The Torah makes no mention of anyone's age at Rachel's death or Jacob's arrival in Hebron. But we can figure out how old Jacob was when Joseph was abducted. If Joseph was 17 when he was abducted Jacob would have been 108. (91+17=108). And then how old was Isaac? 168, since Isaac was 60 years older than Jacob (108+60=168).

when the Joseph story takes place,<sup>7</sup> and Joseph is 17 as his story begins.<sup>8</sup> This raises some interesting questions.

### 1. What took Jacob so long to see his father?

It's one thing to be afraid of your brother, but perhaps he was also afraid to re-encounter his father. After all, he had deceived him. Or perhaps Jacob felt let down by both his father and his mother. When Rebekah told him to run away to her brother Lavan, she promised him that after a few days when Esau's anger would subside, *I will send for you and have you taken from there* (Gen. 27:35). But that never happened. The days turned to years, 20 years, and he never heard a word from either of them. He does not even know if they are still alive. Or perhaps, Jacob simply wants to establish himself in the land. God has now spoken to him directly several times and he is very much his own man, a partner in God's covenant in his own right not on the merit of his father. But then again, life is not kind to Jacob. From the moment after his re-encounter with Esau, things go terribly awry for him. His daughter is raped. He believes his foothold in the land is in jeopardy because of his sons' violence. Most significantly, he loses his wife in childbirth. And as if things couldn't get any worse, his firstborn sleeps with his concubine. Who would not feel crushed by all of that? Who does Jacob have to turn to? Nobody. Esau is gone, and let's face it, probably not an ideal choice for him. There is, however, one person left in his family who survived a terrible ordeal and possessed some wisdom born of life: his father. (We assume that his mother is no longer alive). Perhaps he simply wanted to go home, to see his father, to gain comfort and wisdom from the place *where Abraham and Isaac had lived*.

### 2. What transpired during this reunion?

We don't know. Yonatan Grossman asks: *Did they talk about the stolen blessings? How did Isaac react when he heard that his*



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*son's beloved wife had recently died? Did they go together to visit her grave?*<sup>9</sup>

A midrash:

*Jacob took his sons, his grandsons, and his wives, and he went to Kiryat Arba (so as to*

*be) near Isaac his father. And he found Esau there with his sons and his wives dwelling in the tents of Isaac. And he (Jacob) spread his tent apart from him; and Isaac saw Jacob, his wives, his daughters, and all that belonged to him, and he rejoiced in his heart exceedingly.* Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer 38:4  
Nice. Lovely. Beautiful. But um...debatable.

<sup>7</sup> Jacob dispatches Joseph from the **Valley of Hebron** where they were living, to check up on his brothers. (Gen. 37:14).

For a different approach, it might be useful to compare this moment with the two other father-son reunions in Genesis. We have long noted that following the Akedah, Abraham and Isaac do not speak. And yet the Torah tells us that *Abraham gave all of his possessions to Isaac* (Gen. 25:5). We assume that it took place in person, but there is silence. At the other end of the spectrum, we have Jacob reuniting with Joseph. *Joseph had his chariot harnessed and went up to meet Israel his father, to Goshen. [When] he caught sight of him, and he flung himself upon his neck and wept upon his neck continually. Israel said to Joseph: Now I can die, since I have seen your face, that you are still alive!* (Gen. 46:29-30)

That's quite the reunion! But note that Joseph is emotional and Jacob is silent. Isaac's reunion with Jacob is silent, but the location, the ancestral home, gives it a potentially rich emotional texture.

### 3. What do the ages of Isaac and Jacob add to our understanding of the story?

One thing that emerges from this analysis is *that Isaac is still alive when the whole story of Joseph unfolds*. When the Jacob sees the bloody tunic and thinks that Joseph has been killed by a wild animal (Gen. 37:33) he refuses to be comforted. He says, *No, I will go down to my son in mourning, to Sheol!* And then the narrator adds - enigmatically: *Thus his father wept for him.* (Gen. 37:35) Who is the *father* here? Is it Jacob weeping for Joseph, or Isaac weeping for Jacob? The midrash (BR 84:21) claims that it's Isaac weeping for Jacob: *His father wept for him – this ("father") refers to Isaac(!). Rabbi Levi and Rabbi Simon said: When Jacob was with Isaac, Isaac would weep, but when Isaac went away (back to his home), he (Isaac) would bathe, and anoint himself with oil (because he knew the truth: that Joseph was still alive, and he was only pretending to mourn!)* Isaac was a prophet according to the rabbis. With cruel irony, he is now the one deceiving his own son! Sorry, that's too much. Ovadiah Sforno offers us a more emotionally resonant comment: *Isaac wept over Jacob's decision to remain in mourning for the rest of his life. As a result of his being in mourning, the divine presence would not be with him.* Jacob returns to his father after a series of catastrophes: the rape of his daughter; the loss of his wife; Reuben's insurrection. When Jacob presumes that Joseph has been killed, he is near his father, and they mourn together. It is for us to wonder whether or not Isaac, a man who knew a thing or two about pain, could transcend his own emotional wounds in order to become the comforting father that Jacob needed during the last 12 years of his life when they lived close to one another. Shabbat Shalom!

**This Parasha Sheet is sponsored by Sue Kheel in honor of her 80th Birthday. Mazel Tov!**

**We remember Ran Gvili, whose body has yet to be returned to Israel for burial.**

<sup>8</sup> *These are the generations of Jacob. Joseph, seventeen years old, used to tend the sheep along with his brothers...* (Gen. 37:2).

<sup>9</sup> Yonatan Grossman, Jacob, p. 474.