

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

In short, Jacob, in the beginning of his life, is an identity-hider. He pretends to help Esau by giving him nourishment, but his real intent is to strip his brother of his rights. He puts on Esau's clothes, although he seems to fail at imitating his brother's voice. Laban hides the identity of his daughters, but one must ask, how could Jacob not have noticed? Maybe he was so out of tune with the notion of identity that he could not see whom he was marrying before she lifted her veil? He switches the identity of the sheep and goats, as if to say that identity is so fluid that it really does not matter whether your parents had stripes or spots. Jacob can hide that too.

The critical moment in his life, one that will set him on the path to be the eponymous forefather of Israel, the tribe with the most stable identity in human history, is his wrestling with the some unknown figure before he reunites with his brother. But according to Genesis 32:25 Jacob is left alone—there is no one to hide from, and no one to hide anything from him. Yet in a move that has puzzled commentators for centuries, the verse describes a “man” with him, who wrestles with him until the morning. If Jacob is alone, then who is this man? One possibility is that Jacob is finally struggling to form his own identity. Jacob finally confronts himself, and asks himself who he is, what does his life mean, where does he want it to go? He is heading back to Canaan rich in possessions, with a large family including two wives, two concubines and at least thirteen children. But one project is left before he returns home—he needs to find out who he is. This is something he can only do alone.

People can live for a long time while still hiding their identity from others and even from themselves. We are awfully good at pretending to be who we are not. Sometimes we are so good at this, that even inside we no longer know who we really are. And determining one's identity involves wrestling; it is hard injurious work, as we see from Jacob's torn hip. Jacob will remain injured for the rest of his life.

But such spiritual work brings with it tremendous blessing and confidence. Jacob emerges from his struggle a new person, with a new name, his true name, the name he earns for himself, not the name given to him by someone else. Jacob has “prevailed,” the word used a few verses later, not over Esau or over Laban or over anyone else. He has prevailed over his own fear of showing his identity to the world. Jacob can now go back to Canaan “whole” (33:18) for the rupture between his inner identity and the face he shows the world is now repaired. He keeps the name Ya'akov, the one given to him by his parents, but in addition he is blessed with the name that he has earned on his own, Yisrael, the name destined to change the history of the world.



TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Vayishlach

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Annual | Genesis 32:4-36:43 (Etz Hayim p. 198-220; Hertz p. 122-134)
 Triennial | Genesis 34:1-35:15 (Etz Hayim p. 206-213; Hertz p. 127-130)
 Haftarah | Obadiah 1:1-21 (Etz Hayim p. 222-225; Hertz p. 135-137)

Dvar Torah

Dr. Joshua Kulp, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty & Rosh Yeshiva

*There are three names by which a person is called:
 one which their parents call them, one which people call them,
 and one which they earn for themselves.
 The last is the best one of all.*

- Midrash Tanhuma, Parashat Vayekhel 1

Jacob begins his life as a heel – the literal meaning of his name – given to him due to his grasping at his brother's heel. As he begins to go through life, nearly every episode in which we see him involved includes an act of deception, either on his part, or on the part of others. On his return from the field, Jacob takes advantage of his brother's fatigue and purchases from him his birthright. Later, Jacob secures his father's blessing by pretending to be Esau, cheating his brother and deceiving his father. In the wake of this event, he is forced into exile. At Laban's house, Jacob receives a dose of his own medicine when Laban switches his bride at the last moment. He strikes back at Laban by somehow genetically engineering his father-in-law's flocks such that they all now belong to Jacob.

Dvar Haftarah

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Jeremiah is most often thought of as the prophet of the destruction of the First Commonwealth and the First Temple, but he was not the only one. Obadiah also prophesied during that same period. Where Jeremiah prophesied at great length, with disappointment, anger and hopeful encouragement, about the total destructive experience and its aftermath, Obadiah's short, profoundly angry and vengeful prophecy addresses the nation of Edom's role in the destruction. But despite differences in tone and focus, obvious similarities between the two has scholars arguing over who borrowed from whom. Here are some examples:

Jeremiah 49

14. I have received tidings from the Lord. And an envoy is sent out among the nations. Assemble and move against her and rise up for war.

15. For I will make you least among the nations. Most despised among men.

16. Your horrible nature. Your arrogant heart has seduced you. You who dwell in clefts of the rock. Who occupy the height of the hill.

Should you nest as high as the eagle. For there I will bring you down, declares the Lord.

One Talmudic sage draws a thoughtful religious message from the slight differences in the messages of these two prophets which is totally unrelated to the harsh content of their prophecies: "Rabbi Yitzhak said: The same communication is revealed to many prophets, yet no two prophets prophesy using identical language. [So,] Obadiah said: 'Your arrogant heart has deceived you; while Jeremiah said: 'Your horrible nature, your arrogant heart has deceived you.'" (Sanhedrin 89a)

The bottom line of Rabbi Yitzhak messages is that no two prophets speak alike. This seems obvious but it is actually quite profound. We might assume that someone carrying God's message should deliver it verbatim. We see that is not the case.

Obadiah

1. We have received tidings from the Lord. An envoy has been sent out among the nations. Up! Let us rise up against her in battle. Thus said my Lord God concerning Edom.

2. I will make you least among the nations, shall be most despised.

3. Your arrogant heart has seduced you. You shall dwell in the clefts of the rock, in your lofty abode. You think in your heart, 'Who can pull me down to earth?'

4. Should you nest as high as an eagle. Should your nest be lodged among the stars, even from there I will pull you down, declared the Lord.

All of us, in some sense or another, are God's agents and each of us has a vital role in carrying out God's will in the world. Rabbi Yitzhak's message is that our service to God must necessarily take our individual uniqueness into account. That is what partnership is all about. And God would have it no other way.

Table Talk

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Yaakov (Jacob) is returning to his father's land, dreading the meeting with his brother Esau. As part of his journey he returns to Beth El, and receives a new name. Benjamin, the youngest of Yaakov's sons, is born in this parasha, and we wrap up Esau's story.

1) The first thing that Yaakov deals with going forward in his journey home to the land of Israel, is his brother Esau (32:4-6). Why do you think that this is at the top of his list? No one tells Yaakov that he has to work things out with Esau. What might have happened since he fled (20 years earlier) after taking Esau's blessing, that made Yaakov decide to try to reconcile?

2) Yaakov crosses the Jordan River and settles near Sh'chem (33:18-20). He buys the field in which he had pitched his tent. Why do you think that he decides to buy the land (it seems that he was allowed to stay without buying)? What does he place there (v.20) and what might this symbolize?

3) Only Benjamin (Binyamin), the youngest of Yaakov's 12 sons, was born in the land of Israel (35:16-20). Who is his mother? What happened during the birth? Where is her burial place? How do you expect Yaakov to react to the birth of this child, considering the tragic price?

4) When Yitzchak dies, both Yaakov and Esau bury him (35:28-29). What does this suggest about the family dynamics at this point?

5) We close with the story of Esau. He leaves the land of Canaan (36:6-8). What is the reason given for his relocation? Try to think of 2 other people who parted ways for similar reasons. (You can look at Bereshit 13:5-13.) In what way are the 2 departures similar, and how do they differ?

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We welcome your comments: torahsparks@uscj.org