

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

blame is understanding, empathy, and forgiveness.

To teach us this empathy, the Torah imprints upon our nation's psyche the trauma of being a refugee, of fleeing one's native land. Since Adam and Eve, we have all been immigrants, banished from the Garden. Our fathers and mothers had desperate journeys, escaping famine, poverty, violence, war, oppression, and slavery. From their suffering we learn to love the stranger; to treat all people with respect. We were strangers once.

Adam and Eve left their home. In a ship, Noah left his home and his whole world behind. Avraham came from Ur. Yitzhak fled his home when famine approached. When he returned, he dug up old, abandoned wells. Yaakov, too, was a refugee.

The experience of being foreigners, of having no rights or protections afforded by peoplehood, teaches us compassion for those who are dispossessed, stateless and homeless; tired huddled masses, vulnerable and afraid, seeking refuge and asylum; the widow, the poor and the orphan; all of those vulnerable to exploitation.

Yaakov learns this lesson the hard way. Dispossessed, stateless and homeless he was exploited. Not knowing the customs of the land, Lavan took advantage of him, tricking him into a life of unending servitude. Indentured and indebted, Yaakov experiences a form of economic slavery. He complained to Lavan of its unfairness only after he fled, after it had become unbearable. He increased Lavan's flock more than his own, paying for losses out of his own flock. He worked constantly. Day and night Lavan stole from him. "Often scorching heat-ravaged me by day and frost by night; and sleep fled from my eyes (Bereishit 31:40.)" He worked all the time for another man's benefit without rights and without a living wage.

The children of Israel were born in slavery. They had to seek freedom elsewhere. After twenty years of maltreatment and oppression, Yaakov uprooted his family to flee back home, again becoming a refugee, even at home.

Yaakov's servitude to Lavan taught him compassion for the stranger, for the plight of servants trapped in terminal debt, for the suffering of others enslaved. His redemption foreshadows the story of the people Israel's exodus from slavery. His experience, like that of our people, teaches us compassion for the stranger. Our history of persecution teaches us empathy for the persecuted.

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necessary for Jewish learning and spiritual growth as individuals and in their communities in North America, Israel, and around the world.



TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Vayetse

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Annual | Genesis 28:10-32:3 (Etz Hayim p. 166-187; Hertz p. 106-117)
Triennial Genesis 31:17-32:3 (Etz Hayim p. 181-187; Hertz p. 114-117)
Haftarah | Hosea 12:13-14:10 (Etz Hayim p. 188-193; Hertz p. 118-121)

D'var Torah: And Yaakov Left

Bill Shackman, Conservative Yeshiva Alum, 1996-1999

"Vayetse Yaakov" - Yaakov left. He was a refugee, an immigrant, a foreigner in Paddan Aram.

Parashat Vayetse, begins as Yaakov, our father, fearing for his life, sets off to Chaldea leaving his home behind. He is fleeing domestic violence. His brother wants to kill him. His father can no longer protect him. Yaakov is alone and has nothing left to lose. He flees for his life in search of a new place. An old uncle may take him in. He is afraid, vulnerable and at the mercy of strangers. He uses a rock as a pillow. He has nothing.

It is only in this vulnerable state, leaving home heartbroken, uncertain for the future, and dependent on the help of others that he can encounter the divine in a dream: a ladder connecting our world to a hidden one. He has this vision on the way, in flight. Does the heaven he dreams of represent more than just survival? It was a dream of a world we can almost touch, just out of reach; an image of a world as it could be. How far is that heaven from our world? Just steps away. We are moving towards or away from our goals, up or down the ladder. We advance towards shelter, towards justice, towards freedom and towards hope, though many obstacles cause us to tumble downwards. Angels go up and down sending help and hidden messages.

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When he wakes he knows that God was in this place, unknown. Each rung is connected to the next, linking all things together. Hidden in our world are signs of unity and compassion. Behind division is harmony. Behind fear is love. Behind

D'var Haftarah: Your Words Are Death

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Hosea's message, like that of many prophets, vacillates between castigation and encouragement. One might read this as some kind of intentional "good cop / bad cop" act, but it more likely reflects a wrestling within God between the desire to hold Israel accountable and the desire to encourage *teshuvah*. In other words, it reflects the competing impulses of *Din*/Judgement and *Rachamim*/Mercy.

This latter idea is captured rhetorically in this statement by God [translated based on input from Rashi and Ibn Ezra]: "From Sheol I would have redeemed them, from death I would have saved them. Where, O death are your plagues; your pestilence, O Sheol? Consolation will be far from My eyes." (13:14) While in a previous prophecy God asserts the profound idea that God will overlook wrongdoing out of love for His subjects, here, God has seemingly closed the doors to reconciliation. The fate of the northern kingdom has been sealed.

As quoted above, this verse is voiced by God whose anger is aimed at Israel. Midrash Tanchuma (composed in the Land of Israel in the 6-7th century) however, places this same verse in the mouth of Yaakov, the representative of the Jewish people, as he addresses Esav, who the rabbinic tradition associates with Rome:

And in the world to come, when the Holy One, blessed be He, comes to exact retribution from Esav, what [will] Esav do? Wrapped in a prayer shawl like an elder, he comes and takes his seat beside Yaakov...

Esav will try to draw close to Yaakov. But Yaakov will challenge him, saying:

"My brother, you shall not be like me. Thus it is stated (in Hosea 13:14), 'My brother, your words are death; my brother, your descent is to Sheol (The netherworld)'"

This reading requires some incredible rabbinic linguistic acrobatics. By changing a *heh* to a *chet*, the word אֵלֶיךָ (*where*) becomes אחי (*my brother*). דְּבַרְיֶיךָ (*your plagues*) is re-read as דְּבַרֶיךָ (*your words*). And קִטְוֹנָה (*pestilence*) is read as "descent" because of a Greek word meaning "descend" that sounds similar! Yaakov then continues:

You decreed two-edged decrees against me, that I should serve idols. If I had done so, I would have been condemned to death at the hands of Heaven; and if I had not served them, you would have killed me. Ergo (in Hosea 13:14), "my brother, your words are death." When Esav descends to Sheol, Yaakov will remain by himself... (Midrash Tanchuma, Tzav, Siman 2)

Although Esav/Rome will try to play buddy-buddy with Israel, neither Israel nor God will forgive the centuries of abuse and coercion.

Historically, Jews lacked the power to resist Rome publicly. As the midrash says, those who did were often killed. This midrash was a form of literary resistance - a way for the Sages to reassure the common Jew that their oppressors would ultimately be cast down. And this would have to be enough to sustain them as a minority in the midst of a coercive majority. Despite our no longer facing religious coercion, the challenge nevertheless remains for us to maintain our faith, even when Esav's methods have changed.

Parashat Vayetse Self-Study

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

In this parashah, as Yaakov leaves the country (he will return at the end of the parashah), he has a vision of a ladder with angels ascending and descending and is promised by God to receive the land of Israel. He arrives at his uncle Lavan (Laban), marries Lavan's 2 daughters and their 2 handmaids, and sires 12 children. He also proves to be a very knowledgeable and hard-working shepherd.

1) In this parashah, Yaakov takes his first steps as a patriarch. In the process, he leaves his country, and potentially the connection to his family. Compare him to his father (Yitzhak) and grandfather (Avraham). What similarities and differences have you noticed? Why do you think that the Torah gave us different models of Patriarchs?

2) When Yaakov heads to Haran, the land of his uncle Lavan, the Torah tells us that he "*leaves Beer Sheva*", and only then are we told that he is heading to Haran (28:10). What does this extra information do for the story? What might it tell us about Yaakov at this point?

3) Arriving by the well in Haran (after a riveting dream in Beit El) Yaakov notices that several flocks are there waiting for everyone to gather to remove the big stone that covers the well. He tries to strike up a conversation with the shepherds, but they are not interested. He suggests that they water the sheep and get back to work. They explain that the stone is too big, but Yaakov removes it by himself when Rachel arrives (29:1-10). How do you think the shepherds felt about him at this point? What do the exchange and its content tell us about Yaakov?

4) Yaakov intends to marry Rachel, is cheated into marrying Leah her older sister, and ends up with 2 wives. Then we are told that God sees that Leah is despised, and so He opens her womb, but Rachel is barren (29:31). In this light, what is the role(s) of the children in this family? Where is Yaakov in this family picture?

5) After about 20 years of having worked for Lavan, his father in law, and having his pay changed time and again, Yaakov is told by God to leave. Despite that, he

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does not make the decision alone, but rather consults with his wives. He lists all the abuse he has suffered from Lavan (31:3-16). Why do you think that he feels a need to explain that? What might Yaakov fear?