

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

Yaakov took “his two wives, his two maidservants, and his eleven children” across the Yabok. The problem, however, is that Yaakov had 12 children at this point, not 11, and the verse’s explicit use of the word “children” as opposed to “sons” all the more so leads one to the conclusion that we’re missing one soon-to-be important figure of Yaakov’s progeny, Dinah.

We know from earlier in Genesis that Dinah was born prior to this happening at Yabok, so our Sages in Midrash Bereshit Rabbah ask the important question: “Where was Dinah?” Could it be that fastidious Yaakov simply left her behind? In a heartbreaking retelling of this narrative, the Midrash explains that “Yaakov placed her in a box and locked her inside, saying, ‘This wicked man (Esav) has a wandering eye, and if he catches sight of her, he will take her away from me.’” In many ways, this move is in line with the scrupulous nature of Yaakov that was mentioned above, and yet, it feels distinctive and painfully familiar. This goes beyond meticulous preparation. Yaakov is caging in his daughter, restricting her movement and her body on an assumption of what might happen if she is free, thus disregarding the trauma that Dinah will actively experience while she is confined.

We can understand and potentially even justify Yaakov’s reasoning behind doing what he did, but instead of going down the path of apologetics, we should instead choose the path of our Sages, speaking up and calling out injustice. Our Midrash continues: “You (Yaakov) would not give her in marriage to a circumcised person (Esav), behold she is now married to an uncircumcised one (Shechem)! You would not give her through legitimate means of marriage, behold she is now taken in an illegitimate fashion! Thus it is written, ‘And Dinah the daughter of Leah went out’” (Genesis 34:1).

Our Sages don’t just inquire into Yaakov’s behavior, they spell out its consequences. By withholding and reducing Dinah down to a precious commodity for his own sake, not hers, Yaakov ultimately creates the conditions necessary for Dinah to “go out” in Chapter 34, encountering the exact situation that Yaakov wished to protect her from.

Preparation and attention to detail will always be an important and relevant step in becoming who we want to be, but we must continually ask ourselves, am I perceiving the full picture? How can I account for both myself and the ones I love? Our Sages warn against the experience of being so caught up in one future iteration of the self (“He will take her away **from me**”), that we lose sight of the implications our actions have on others (“And Dinah the daughter of Leah **went out**”). Much like our Sages speak up for Dinah, so too is it incumbent upon us to do the same.



TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Vayishlah

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Annual | Genesis 32:4-36:43 (Etz Hayim p. 198-220; Hertz p. 122-134)
 Triennial Genesis 35:16-36:43 (Etz Hayim p. 214-220; Hertz p. 130-134)
 Haftarah Obadiah 1:1-21 (Etz Hayim p. 221-225; Hertz p. 137-140)

D’var Torah: And Dinah Went Out

Max Edwards, Conservative Yeshiva & Hebrew College Rabbinical Student

Remember that last job interview? That planned meeting with a friend or family member who has fallen out of touch? It’s often the case that the days leading up to these big, expected life events are more stressful and emotionally burdensome than the event itself. Indeed, a quick google search for “job interview tips” is rather telling: the tips for preparation often outnumber the tips for the actual interview.

In this week’s parashah we encounter our forebearer Yaakov, the ancestral master planner (schemer?). The parasha picks up with Yaakov on his way to see Esav, his estranged brother. According to the text, the last thing Yaakov heard about Esav was this cloudy warning from his mother Rivka back in Chapter 27: “When the words of her older son Esav were reported to Rebekah, she sent for her younger son Yaakov and said to him, ‘Your brother Esav is consoling himself by planning to kill you’” (Genesis 27:42).

Skipping forward to our parashah in Chapter 32, it makes sense that we find Yaakov meticulously running around to prepare for this potentially life-threatening encounter. Yaakov divides his family and his flocks strategically into two camps, prepares hundreds of animals with which to propitiate Esav, and even instructs his servants on exactly what to say to Esav if they are the first to encounter him.

All is going according to plan; Yaakov and his family journey onward until they reach the River Yabok, when, in all of the tumult back and forth across the river,

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Fuchsberg Jerusalem Center for Conservative Judaism

Agron Street 8 • P. O. Box 7456 • Jerusalem, Israel 94265

Tel: 972-2-625-6386 • israel@uscj.org • uscj.org • conservativeyeshiva.org

our Sages pick up on a peculiar textual inconsistency that rubs up against our understanding of Yaakov as preparer-in-chief. In Genesis 34:23, we read that

D'var Haftarah: Esav, Edom, & Rome

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

People often ask how Esav came to be characterized as evil. While it is clear that Yaakov and Esav were adversaries, the Torah's storyline does not leave us with this impression. Only in later biblical and post-biblical literature does this picture emerge. Its roots are in historical experience. Esav, who was also referred to as Edom, was seen as the progenitor of the Edomites, a nation which dwelled on the other side of Yam Hamelakh (the Dead Sea). During the Babylonian conquest of Judea and Jerusalem in 586 BCE, the Edomites allied themselves with the Babylonian enemy, whom they aided and abetted in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. From the vantage point of the Judeans, the Edomites prospered on their account. The book of Ovadiah, a prophecy of a single chapter, reflects the Judeans' pent-up animosity over this betrayal.

Ironically, during the period of the Hasmonaeans, the Edomites were driven into the Negev and were absorbed into the Jewish people. With the demise of the actual Edomites, the negative imagery associated with Esav and Edom became associated with Rome, who, towards the beginning of the Common Era, conquered the land of Israel. The upshot of this was that the book of Ovadiah in rabbinic times became associated with Jewish bitterness over Roman oppression. Hence, the verse: "For the violence (*me-hamas*) done to your brother Yaakov, disgrace shall engulf you [Edom] and you shall perish forever" (1:10) never lost its bite.

What object lesson should we tease from this pent-up bitterness? In one midrash, the sages took a counterintuitive approach. Instead of focusing on their anger, they expressed their concern that the oppressed people might seek to emulate the "successful" behavior of their Roman oppressors: "And so said the Holy Spirit through Solomon - 'Do not envy the man of violence (Esav/Rome) and choose none of his ways' (Proverbs 3:31) 'Do not envy' the peace which Esav (Rome) enjoys and 'do not choose its ways', namely, do not imitate their deeds. Why? Look to the end of the matter. For a day will come when God will scorn those who scoff at His commandments, as it is written: 'The Lord abhors the man of blood and deceit' (Psalms 5:7)." (adapted from Bamidbar Rabbah 11:1)

The sages who composed this midrash expressed a fear that people might see oppression as a means for attaining an end and it frightened them. Their answer is definitive - God will not abide such an idea.

Parashat Vayishlah Self-Study

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Yaakov returns to his father's land, dreading the meeting with his brother Esav. As part of his journey he returns to Beth El, and receives a new name. Binyamin, the youngest of Yaakov's sons, is born in this parashah, and we wrap up Esav's story.

- 1) As Yaakov approaches home in the land of Canaan, the potential meeting with his estranged brother Esav, whose blessing he took, looms large. Yaakov decides to send gifts to Esav (32:4-22). He sends plenty of livestock: 350 animals. Imagine the sight of all these goats, sheep, camels, cows, and donkeys. He spreads them out, leaving plenty of space between the flocks. What has Yaakov understood about the type of gift that he should give Esav?
- 2) At night, after Yaakov has safely taken his family across the Yabok River, he remains alone. A man struggles with him, but neither one wins (32:25-30). Why does Yaakov need to be alone during this struggle? What/who is he struggling with? At the end of the struggle he is changed both physically (his leg is injured) and mentally – he receives a new name. Why do you think that this night struggle was significant for Yaakov at this point?
- 3) Yaakov settles outside Sh'chem and buys a field there. Yaakov's daughter, Dinah, is raped by the prince of the land, who decides that he wishes to marry her (chapter 34). The negotiations are taking place among the men of both families. The voice of Dinah is not heard. What do you think that she would have said?
- 4) As Yaakov's entire family travels south towards a meeting with Yitzhak, Rachel gives birth. The birth proves too difficult and Rachel dies shortly after the child is born (35:16-20). How do you think Yaakov will feel about this child that cost the life of his beloved Rachel? He names him Binyamin– child of strength. How might Yaakov be dealing with his ambivalent and difficult feelings through that name?
- 5) The parashah ends by listing the descendants of Esav and future leaders of Edom. The various branches seem to be divided according to the wife/mother. What might that tell us about the determining factor in identity in that culture? How is this related to the culture his mother Rivka came from and Yaakov went to?

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