

PARSHAT VA'YISHLACH

PART I - QUESTIONS FOR THE 'SHABBOS TABLE'

'TRICKERY' IN YAAKOV AVINU'S LIFE

1. Review the various stories about Yaakov Avinu in Parshat Toldot and Va'yetze, noting almost each one involves some sort of "trickery". [Note when Yaakov uses trickery, and when trickery is used against Yaakov.]

- Can you discern a pattern?
- In each of these stories, can the trickery be justified?
- In your opinion, is Yaakov Avinu later 'punished' for this trickery? If so, when and how?
- In your opinion, [if he indeed is later punished for this trickery] does this necessarily imply that Yaakov was 'wrong' in his actions? Explain!

2. Next, review the beginning of Parshat Vayishlach (32:4-32:25), noting how Yaakov prepares for his confrontation with Esav by telling his messengers not only to present a gift, but also to inform Esav that he [Yaakov] will be coming 'momentarily'. [To verify this, carefully review 32:18-22!]

Try to explain as well why Yaakov finds it necessary to leave 'gaps' between each flock that he sends.

In your opinion, does Yaakov truly plan to confront Esav, or is his plan a 'stall' to allow him extra time to 'run-away'. Base your answer on the other actions that Yaakov takes, as well as to the fears that he expresses in his prayer (to which God does not seem to provide an immediate reply)!

In your opinion, is Yaakov using trickery (once again) in an attempt to run away from his brother, or does he truly plan to confront him?

Then, review 32:24 (i.e. when Yaakov crosses the Yakob stream). In your opinion, is Yaakov crossing that stream to meet Esav or to run away from him? Now, see Rashbam on 32:23! [See other commentators as well (who disagree).]

3. Based on your answer to the above question, attempt to explain the deeper meaning of Yaakov's struggle with the "malach" (see 32:24-30), i.e. why does God send someone to wrestle with him. In your answer, relate as well to the blessing that Yaakov receives in the aftermath of that struggle.

Who does Yaakov meet immediately after this struggle is over, and what does he do (see 33:1-3)? Relate this fact to your answer to the above questions!

Based on the above questions, suggest a possible meaning for Yaakov's name change to Yisrael in the aftermath of this incident.

THE SHOWDOWN WITH ESAV

4. In your opinion, when Esav first left to meet Yaakov (see 32:6), was his original intention to fight against Yaakov, or did he just want to greet him? In your answer, relate to 33:1-17, especially 33:4. Relate also to 27:41-45.

Now see Rashi on 33:4 and then Ibn Ezra! [Note Seforno and Radak as well on 33:4.] Can you explain the reason for these different approaches to this 'open question'?

5. In your opinion, was it proper for Yaakov to bow down seven times in front of Esav? Was he simply trying to appease Esav, or was this an attempt to indicate something more significant?

Relate to 27:28-29, and see Ramban on 32:4 (and Radak).

[See also Rashbam on 32:29 and Chizkuni on 32:5.]

Finally, see Maharam on 32:5 (in Torat Chaim edition).

[Right wingers' will probably enjoy this commentary (at least more than Ramban's).]

PART II - QUESTIONS FOR PREPARATION (for weekly shiur)

For Shiur #1 - FROM YAAKOV TO YISRAEL

[Note: It would be helpful to answer the above 'Questions for the shabbos table' as additional preparation for this shiur.]

1. Recall how Parshat Va'yetze concluded with Yaakov meeting the "maalachei Elokim" [angels of God] - see 32:1-3. In your opinion, did this have any effect on his decision to send messengers to meet Esav (see 32:4-5).

In your answer, relate to the angels that Yaakov first saw in Bet El before leaving Eretz Canaan, and God's promise to him at that time (see 28:12-15). Relate as well to why Yaakov had to run away in the first place, and for how long his mother told him that he should stay away for (see 27:41-45).

In your opinion, does Yaakov expect to find that Esav still wants to kill him, or does he think that Esav is no longer so angry?

2. Next, review 32:9-12 - i.e. Yaakov's prayer that God save him from Esav - noting how he recalls several earlier promises that God had made. How does this prayer relate to his original assumption regarding Esav and the report he received from his messengers that Esav is approaching with four hundred men?

Try to find the 'sources' (in Chumash) for what Yaakov mentions in 32:9 and 32:12. Can you explain why Yaakov chose to relate to specifically these promises in his prayer? (Be sure to relate to 22:15-18.)

3. Does God answer Yaakov's prayer? If so, when; and in what manner?

It appears that God did not provide Yaakov with an immediate answer to this prayer. In your opinion, did this affect (in any manner) Yaakov's plan for confronting (or running away) from Esav? If so, explain how.

4. Based on everything that Yaakov does between 32:4 and 32:23, how does Yaakov plan to save his family?

Note how the next event is his struggle in 32:24-30. In your opinion, was this confrontation simply 'incidental', or did God send this person? If the latter, can you suggest a reason why? Relate your reason to the above questions.

5. At the end of this struggle, Yaakov asks for a blessing, and the angel changes his name from Yaakov to Yisrael (see 32:28). Attempt to relate this name change to all the previous events. Explain as well why this should be considered a 'blessing'!

6. In what manner is Yaakov's name change to Yisrael different than Avram's name change to AvraHam? [Be sure to note at least two distinctions.]

Based on your answer, why do you think that Yaakov continues to be called Yaakov, even after this name change? Relate your answer to the above questions.

In your opinion, what does each name represent?

See the commentaries of Ibn Ezra, Rashbam, and Chizkuni on 35:10, noting how they relate to this question.

7. Review 35:9-16, noting how we find once again that Yaakov's name is changed to Yisrael. In your opinion, does the story in 25:9-16 CONTRADICT the story in 32:27-29? Or, is this simply a REPETITION, or possibly a CONFIRMATION, or maybe an ADDITION? Explain.

Next, review 28:3-4, i.e. Yitzchak's blessing to Yaakov before he first left Eretz Canaan, noting the purpose of that blessing as well as God's Name [i.e. Elokim] that Yitzchak invokes at that time. In what manner is that blessing similar to the blessing that Yaakov receives from God at this time? Can you explain why?

8. If you follow the commentaries of Ramban and Seforno in chapter 32, you'll notice how they find numerous parallels between these events in Yaakov's life and the history of Am Yisrael. Can you explain what leads them to this conclusion?

Why may we have thought otherwise (i.e. that not ALL of Yaakov's children would be chosen)?

PART III - PARSHANUT

Shalem, Shalom, Shchem

1. Read 33:18 "va'yavo Yaakov SHALEM ir Shchem..."
a) In your opinion is "SHALEM" the NAME of the city at which Ya'akov arrived, or is it an ADJECTIVE describing HOW Yaakov arrived? (In your answer, be sure to relate to both Breishit 14:18 and 28:21!)
b) If "SHALEM" is the name of a city, then what is "SHCHEM" the name of?
c) If "SHALEM" implies that he "arrived safely", would this be proper Hebrew? Based on the context of this pasuk, in your opinion which explanation makes the most sense?

2. Now, see how the various commentators approach this enigmatic pasuk.

a) First, see Rashi and Ibn Ezra. In your opinion, which approach is "pschat", and which is "drash"?
b) Next, see Ramban, who quotes Rashi and Ibn Ezra, and argues with both of them. In what general manner is his pirush similar to theirs?
c) Why do you think Ramban argues with Rashi & Ibn Ezra? Is his approach closer to "pschat"?
d) Now, see Seforno. How is his explanation different from all the above? In your opinion, is this closer to pschat?
e) Next, see Rashbam. How is his pirush totally different? (Why is Rashbam so adamant that his pirush is the ONLY 'real' pschat? Do you agree?)
f) Finally see Chizkuni. Does he agree totally with Rashbam? What other problem does Chizkuni deal with? [Note how he proves that this cannot be the same city of SHALEM as in 14:18!]

3. In your opinion, why did Esav originally move from Eretz Canaan to Har Seir? [See 32:3, 33:14-17]

Now, see 36:5-9!! [Compare also with 13:5-15!]
Now, see Rashi, Rashbam, Ramban, Seforno, Radak & Chizkuni! How does each "parshan" solve this problem. According to each, WHEN did 36:6-8 take place?
Be sure to see Ramban inside. [It is a classic example of his magnificent approach to parshanut.]

4. Review 35:22, noting how the pasuk (and the story) end abruptly with: "va'yishma Yisrael". In your opinion, what does this phrase imply, i.e. what did Yaakov 'hear', or what did he do?

No matter what your answer is, why do you think that this pasuk is so ambiguous?
First see Rashbam (35:22) on this phrase. Note how he relates this pasuk to what is later written in 49:4. Can you explain why? Next, see Seforno. How is his pirush different than Rashbam? Note as well how it is similar, in regard to the fact that this phrase can only be understood in light of another pasuk in Chumash.

Finally see Radak. Note how radical his approach is! Note how he relates in his pirush to Yaakov's "neder" in 28:21! Can you explain why? In your opinion, is Radak's interpretation based on that pasuk, or does that pasuk simply provide support?

MAASE AVOT SIMAN LA'BANIM

1. In his introduction to the Parasha (before 32:4) - Ramban explains how these events relate to Jewish history. As your study Ramban on chapter 32, note how he follows this approach.

According to this Ramban, can (or should) we apply these events to our decisions in later generations concerning how to react to provocations against the Jewish people?

If so, are the answers 'clear-cut'; or do these stories help us appreciate the events after they take place?

As you study other commentators on chapter 32, note how they also find parallels between these events and other events in Jewish history. In what manner are their conclusions similar to Ramban's and in what manner are they different?

For Shiur #2 - WHEN DOES YAAKOV RETURN TO BET EL?

1. In your opinion, how much time elapses between the events recorded in 32:27-29, and those recorded in 35:9-15? [Or at least what events took place in the interim?] How would this affect your understanding of the connection between these two events?

2. Recall that Yaakov had made a "neder" before his departure to Padan Aram (see 28:18-22).

Based on that promise, what would you expect Yaakov to do immediately upon his return to Eretz Canaan?

Does he do fulfill that promise? If so, when, and why then? If not, can you explain why he doesn't?

3. Review 30:25, 31:1-3, 31:13, 31:18. Based on those psukim, would you expect Yaakov to return immediately upon his arrival to his father and/or to Bet-El?

Can you explain why he doesn't?

4. Make a list of all of the events that take place in Parshat Va'yishlach. As you do so, make special note of its division into 'parshiot'. Attempt to determine the amount of time that elapses from one event to the next. In your opinion, does the progression of these events make sense?

5. Based on 31:41, 29:20-32, and 31:23, approximately how old are Yaakov's children when he first returns to Eretz Canaan? How old is Dina (maximum)? How old are Levi & Shimon?

When you read the story about Dina and Shchem in chapter 34, how old do Dina, Shimon & Levi seem to be during this incident? Based on the above, attempt to reach a conclusion concerning how many years elapsed between Yaakov's arrival at Shchem and the incident with Dina?

6. In your opinion, does it make sense that until that time he had never yet gone to visit his father, or to fulfill his "neder" at Bet-el? If he did, then why does the text not indicate so? If he had not, can you explain why he didn't?

7. Read 35:1-8 carefully, noting how it forms its own "parshia" (and hence it is separate from 35:9-22).

What is the thematic connection between 35:1-8 and the story of 'Dina & Shchem' in chapter 34? Could it be considered part of the same story?

Note carefully why God instructs Yaakov to go to Bet-el in 35:1-3, i.e. for what purpose. Is there a precedent for this purpose at this site of Bet El? Does this relate in any manner to Yaakov's "neder" in 28:15-22?

Review once again 35:1-8, noting the "mizbayach" that Yaakov builds and its purpose. Does this relate in any manner to his "neder"? If so, explain how; if not explain why it doesn't - and why he does build this mizbayach.

8. Now read 35:9-22 carefully. Does it make sense that this story takes place immediately afterward (i.e. after 35:1-8), or could one entertain the possibility that it took place much earlier?

In answer, relate to the textual parallels between 35:9 and 33:18 -"b'vo'oh m'Padan Aram...". If so, what problems raised above (regarding the story of Dina in Shchem) would be solved?

If this 'parshia' indeed did take place earlier, can you explain why the Torah records these events not according to their chronological sequence. In your answer, relate to strange wording in 35:22 and its thematic connection to 35:23.

9. Note that 36:1 begins a new unit of "toladot" (Toldot Esav).

Where did the last unit of "toldot" begin? (See 25:19.) Where does it end? (Relate to 35:23-29.)

How is the conclusion of this unit of "toldot" different than the conclusions of the earlier units of "toldot" in Sefer Breishit (i.e. how many sons are 'chosen' and who is 'rejected')?

Explain why this observation is significant to the overall theme of Sefer Breishit (of "bechira")?