

PARSHAT VAYISHLACH -shiur #1

FROM YAAKOV TO YISRAEL

Was Eisav really planning to wipe out Yaakov's family with his four hundred men? Or was his intention all along simply to welcome his brother back 'home'?

When reading Parshat Vayishlach, it is difficult to reach a clear conclusion.

Similarly, when Yaakov crossed the Yabok River (with his wives and children), was he planning a secret escape from this confrontation? Or, was Yaakov's intention all along to confront his brother - face to face?

And finally, was God's purpose in sending a 'mal'ach' to struggle with Yaakov - simply to bless him at this critical time, or was it an attempt to thwart Yaakov's planned 'escape'?

When one reads Parshat Vayishlach, it is difficult to find precise answers to these (and many other) questions.

In Part One of this week's shiur, we'll suggest some answers to these questions, while offering a reason why the Torah's account of these events is intentionally so vague. Based on that analysis, Part Two will discuss the deeper meaning of Yaakov's name change to Yisrael.

INTRODUCTION

Before we begin our shiur, a short remark re: its methodology:

In our study of Sefer Breishit thus far, our goal has usually been to find the underlying meaning (or message) of each story, based on its details. However, when the story itself is difficult to understand, then it becomes even more difficult to uncover its message.

However, when we encounter ambiguity in a certain narrative - one can also entertain the possibility that its vagueness may be intentional, and hence its message may lie in that ambiguity.

With this in mind, we begin our shiur by considering the events that lead up to Yaakov's encounter with Eisav - in an attempt to better understand both the details and ambiguities of that encounter.

WAS THE 'COAST CLEAR' YET?

Recall, from the end of Parshat Toldot, how Yaakov ran away from Eretz Canaan in fear that Eisav would kill him. To verify this, let's quote the departing message that he heard from his mother:

"Your brother Eisav is consoling himself by planning to **kill you**. Now, my son - listen to me, get up and run away to Charan - to Lavan my brother. ...Until your brother's anger quells, and **he will forget what you did to him** - [then] **I will send someone** to call you to return..." (see 27:42-44).

Neither Rivka nor Yaakov know how long this will take, but clearly - Yaakov plans to stay by Lavan until 'the coast is clear'.

On his way to Charan, God appears to Yaakov at Bet-El, assuring him with Divine protection during his journey:
"Behold I will be with you, and guard you anywhere you go, and I will bring you back to this land..." (see 28:15).

Note however, that despite this promise of protection, God never told Yaakov **when** he was supposed to return.

Years pass, but Rivka never sent for Yaakov.

Finally, after some twenty years God tells Yaakov that it's time to return home - demanding:

"Return to the land of your fathers and birth - and [then] I will be with you" (31:3).

Does this imply that Eisav is no longer a threat?

If so, why didn't Rivka send for him? [Possibly she didn't know, even though God did.]

Could it be that God wanted Yaakov to return, knowing that Eisav was still a threat? Could it be that God **wanted** these two

brothers to confront one another? If so, did God want them to fight, or to make peace?

Clearly, God wants Yaakov to return home - yet He does not inform him concerning **how** he should deal with Eisav!

When Yaakov approaches the land of Israel, he sees (once again) a vision of angels [mal'achei Elokim] who come to greet him (see 32:2-3). As this vision parallels Yaakov's original vision of mal'achim (when God first promised protection - see 28:10-15), is God now telling Yaakov that the 'coast is clear' - and hence he need not worry about Eisav?

And how about Eisav himself? Certainly, Yaakov is still worried about him; but does Eisav still want to kill him- or has he put his past behind him?

As you may have guessed by now, it is very difficult to reach any definite conclusion about any of these questions, but Chumash certainly keeps us pondering.

YAAKOV SENDS AN ENVOY

Parshat Vayishlach begins as Yaakov sends messengers ahead, apparently to assess to what extent Eisav is still a danger. Note, how this decision comes immediately after his vision of God's angels at Machanayim, suggesting that this vision gave Yaakov the confidence to initiate an encounter - i.e. to make sure that it was truly now safe to return home (see 32:4-5).

However, to Yaakov's surprise, his messengers come back with a report that he most probably did not expect: Eisav, with four hundred men, was on his way to meet Yaakov! There can be no doubt concerning how Yaakov understood this report. Eisav is out for his head!

This explains Yaakov's sudden fear (see 32:7 -12 'va-yira Yaakov me'od...'), as well as his next course of action.

Expecting that Eisav was on his way to kill his entire family, he quickly divides his camp in two (to save at least half of them), then turns to God in prayer (see 32:7-12).

Yaakov's prayer (see 32:9-12) reflects this predicament. On the one hand, God told him to return and promised to protect him. Yet on the other hand, God never told him to initiate an encounter with Eisav. Did Yaakov think he had made a mistake? Maybe he was supposed to return to Canaan and avoid Eisav entirely?

Had he 'sinned' by sending messengers? Did God want him to stay clear of Eisav (and his bad influence)?

Note how Yaakov's prayer reflects our discussion. First, his opening appellation:

"And Yaakov said: The God of my father Avraham & the God of my father Yitzchak - the God who told me - Return to your homeland and I will be with you [i.e. protect you]" (see 32:10).

Note how Yaakov first reminds God that it was His idea for him to return, and that God had promised to protect him

Nonetheless, if Eisav remains a danger, it must not be God's fault, rather his own. Therefore, Yaakov concludes that maybe he has done something wrong, or possibly has 'used up' all of his 'protection' points, and God had already provided him with so much ('katonti...' / read 32:11!). Then, Yaakov states his precise fear:

"Save me from Eisav my brother, lest he come to kill me, mothers and children alike - but **You promised** me that you would be with me and that my offspring would be numerous like the sand of sea..." (see 32:12-13).

In the final line of his prayer, Yaakov may be 'hinting' that even if he deserves to die, God should at least save his children, as He had promised to his forefathers.

To our surprise, even though Yaakov prayed, God doesn't appear to provide Yaakov with an immediate answer!

WHAT SHOULD YAAKOV DO?

Yaakov now faces a predicament. After all, what does God want him to do?

Should he confront Eisav? If so, should he try to appease him, or should he stand up and fight for what is right? [And it may not be clear to him who is right - for it was Yaakov who stole the blessings!]

Should he run away directly to Eretz Canaan? Maybe that is what God originally wanted him to do? Maybe only there will he be

worthy of divine protection! Alternatively, maybe he should hide his wife and children, and then face Eisav himself?

Let's take a look now, and see what he does.

After he prays, that evening Yaakov prepares an elaborate 'peace offering' for his brother (see 32:13-20). Hence, it appears that Yaakov has chosen the path of 'appeasement', hoping that his brother will be so impressed that he may change his mind (see 32:20).

Nevertheless, there is an interesting detail in these instructions that must not be overlooked. Note how Yaakov instructs his men to leave a gap between each flock of animals. In other words, he wants this 'offering' to be presented very slowly and staged. Then he commands each group to make the same statement:

"When Eisav will meet you [i.e. each group] and ask who are you and where are you going and who are these for? Answer him, they are a present from your servant Yaakov - and **he is right behind us**" [i.e. on his way to meet you as well] (see 32:17-18).

Then, Yaakov repeats this very same command to each group, emphasizing each time that each group should state - "Behold, Yaakov is right behind us..." (see 32:19-20).

What are the purpose of these 'gaps' and the repeated message of "Yaakov is right behind us"?

Either Yaakov is telling the truth - i.e. the purpose of these gaps is to gradually 'soften up' Eisav. Or possibly, Yaakov is trying something 'tricky' [again], and these gaps (and the entire offering) are part of a decoy, to stall Eisav's imminent attack, thus providing Yaakov with ample time to run away! [or at least to hide his wives and children].

As we will see, the story that ensues can be read either way.

WHAT DIRECTION IS HE CROSSING?

That very same evening, after he designates his offering and the men that will bring it to Eisav, Yaakov takes his two wives, two maidservants, and his eleven children; and crosses the Yabok River (see 32:21-23). [Re: Dina (child #12)- see Rashi on 32:23!]

But it's not clear why he is crossing this river, and what his intentions are! Is this simply part of his journey to meet Eisav (as most commentators understand), or possibly (as Rashbam suggests), Yaakov is **running away!**

If Rashbam's interpretation is correct (see Rashbam on 32:23-25) - then we have a wonderful explanation for the 'gaps'; the message that 'Yaakov is right behind us'; and the need for the Torah's detail of Yaakov crossing the Yabok! They all are part of Yaakov's plan to 'run away' from Eisav, to save his life. [Otherwise, all these details appear to be rather superfluous.]

[Alternately, if Yaakov is telling Eisav the truth, then we would have to explain that the 'gaps' are to increase the chance of 'appeasement', Yaakov plans to be right behind this offering, and the Torah tells us about the Yabok crossing as the background for Yaakov's struggle with the mal'ach.]

THE STRUGGLE

That evening, as Yaakov crosses the Yabok with his family, God sends a mal'ach who struggles with Yaakov until the morning (see 32:24-25). It would only be logical to assume that there is a divine reason for this struggle.

If we follow Rashbam's approach (that Yaakov is running away), then God's message seems to be quite clear. By keeping Yaakov engaged in battle all night long, God is not allowing Yaakov to run, thereby telling him that he shouldn't (or doesn't need to) run away. [See Rashbam 32:25.] In fact, Rashbam claims that Yaakov's injury is a punishment for his running away! [See Rashbam on 32:29.]

With this background, we could explain some additional details of this encounter. First of all, this could explain why the angel asks to leave at dawn. If his job was to keep Yaakov from running away at night so that he would meet Eisav; then as soon as dawn arrives his job is over (note that Eisav arrives immediately after sunrise - see 32:31-33:1!).

This also explains Yaakov's request for a blessing (which could also be understood as Yaakov looking for the meaning of this encounter). The angel blesses Yaakov by 'changing his name' from

Yaakov to Yisrael. Considering that the name Yaakov implies some sort of 'trickery' [see Yirmiyahu 9:3 'ki kol ach akov yaakov'], while the name Yisrael implies the ability to 'stand up and fight' (see 32:28); then this 'blessing' is simply God's answer to Yaakov - don't run away, rather encounter your brother!

Finally, it explains what happens immediately after the angel leaves. Note how the next pasuk informs us that the sun rises, and - sure enough - Yaakov looks up and sees that Eisav and his four hundred men have already arrived [see 33:1]. What should happen now? It's too late to run!

As we would expect, still fearing his brother, he tries to save at least some of his family by splitting them into groups (see 33:1). Then, he runs to the front to encounter Eisav directly, bowing down seven times in a last effort to 'appease' his brother [see 33:2-3].

Most likely to Yaakov's total surprise, Eisav greets him with hugs and kisses - in what appears to be a very friendly (and brotherly) manner [see 33:4].

Was it Yaakov's efforts to achieve appeasement that caused Eisav to change his mind, or was Eisav planning all along for this friendly encounter? I suppose we'll never know, as the Bible is intentionally ambiguous in this regard. [Maybe those little dots over 'va-yishakehu' (see 33:4) are hinting to something. See Rashi & Radak who quote two opposite opinions in Breishit Rabba (which should not surprise us the least!)] In fact, Ibn Ezra (33:4) claims that the simple 'psbat' is that Eisav had never planned to harm Yaakov, as proven by the fact that he cried during this encounter.

Eisav even invites his brother to join him on his return trip to Se'ir. Yaakov prefers to travel slowly at his own pace, 'promising' to arrive in Se'ir at a later time (see 33:12-14).

THE PAST & THE FUTURE

What should we learn from this story? One could follow Rashbam's approach, and arrive at a very 'right wing' conclusion. But if one studies Ramban's interpretation to these events, one would arrive at a very 'left wing' conclusion (i.e. there are times when Am Yisrael must first attempt to appease their enemies in any manner possible).

One could suggest that the Bible's ambiguity is intentional, as there are times in Jewish History when a 'right wing' approach is correct, and there are times when a 'left wing' approach is preferable. Similarly, there are times when we must take action, even when we are in doubt in regard to the true intentions of our enemies. While at other times, it may be better to remain passive.

Just as life is not a 'fairy tale', neither is Chumash. Nevertheless, we should learn that in every encounter that we face, we must both act (i.e. turn to ourselves) and pray (i.e. turn to God). We must make every effort to understand our predicament in order to arrive at the approach that would best follow the path that God has set. However, when that path is not clear, we must pray that God will not only assist us, but that He should send some sort of an 'angel' to assure that we follow the proper direction.

Yaakov leaves this encounter not only limping, but also 'contemplating' and 'wondering'. But he continues on his journey, on his way to Bet-El, ready to face any future encounter with prayer, wisdom, action, faith, and resolve.

So too, in the history of the Jewish people - there are times that we must stand up and fight, and there are times that we attempt appeasement. There are also times when we struggle, and remain limping. Yet we continue to pray, to study, to contemplate, and persevere with an unyielding resolve to achieve our goals.

shabbat shalom, menachem

FOR FURTHER IYUN - for Shiur #1

A. Chazal tell us that the mal'ach was the 'sar shel Eisav' - Eisav's guardian angel. Relate this Midrash to the above shiur.

If this ish was actually a mal'ach, why do you think the Torah insists on referring to him as an ish? What is the significance of Yaakov being wounded in this encounter? Why must we remember this encounter whenever we eat meat (mitzvat gid-ha-nasheh)? [See Rashbam 32:29.]

Explain the argument between Yaakov and his sons regarding their militant reaction to the act of Chamor ben Shchem in relation to the main point of the above shiur.