

PARSHAT VA'YISHLACH - additional shiur

YAAKOV'S RETURN TO BET EL

Upon his arrival in Eretz Canaan, why doesn't Yaakov go straight home to his parents in Hebron? After all, he has been away from his parents for over twenty years!

Secondly, why doesn't Yaakov return immediately to Bet-el to fulfill his "neder" [vow]? Hadn't he promised God that 'should he return home safely' he would establish a 'Bet Elokim' in Bet-el (see 28:21-22)?

However, instead of doing what we would have expected, it appears from Parshat Vayishlach that Yaakov prefers to settle down in Shechem. Then, only AFTER the incident with Dena, and only after God reminds him that he must do so, he finally returns to Bet-el. [See 33:18-35:1.

So what's going on in Parshat Va'yishlach?

In the following shiur we suggest a very simple (but daring) answer to these questions, based on a rather intricate analysis.

INTRODUCTION

To appreciate the analysis that follows, it is important to first pay attention to the division of 'parshiot' in Parshat Vayishlach. Using a Tanach Koren, or similar, note the topics of its first six 'parshiot' (i.e. up until the death of Yitzchak at the end of chapter 35).

The following table presents a short title for each section. As you study it, note the progression of topic from one 'parshia' to the next:

PSUKIM	- GENERAL TOPIC
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(A) 32:3-33:17	Yaakov's confrontation with Esav upon his return to Eretz Canaan.
(B) 33:18-20	Yaakov's arrival in Shechem.
(C) 34:1-31	The incident with Dena in Shechem.
(D) 35:1-8	Yaakov's ascent to Bet-el to flee from Shechem, and his building of a mizbayach.
(E) 35:9-22	God's blessing to Yaakov at Bet-el, followed by Rachel's death and Binyamin's birth.
(F) 35:23-29	A summary of Yaakov's children, followed by the death of Yitzchak.

We begin our shiur by making some observations concerning Yaakov's behavior in the progression of these events.

KEEPING PROMISES

When Yaakov first left Eretz Canaan on his way to Padan Aram, God promised to 'be with him' and see to his safe return (28:15). In response to this divine promise, Yaakov made a "neder" (vow) that should God keep His promise, he will return to Bet-el and establish a Bet-Elokim (see 28:18-22). Undoubtedly, Yaakov's safe return from Padan Aram requires his fulfillment of the neder. In fact, towards the end of last week's Parsha, God Himself mentions this promise when He commanded (and reminded) Yaakov that it was time to 'return home':

"I am the God of Bet-el, where you anointed a matzeyva, to whom you vowed a NEDER. Now get up and LEAVE this land and RETURN to the land of your fathers." (31:11-13)

Therefore, upon his return, we should expect Yaakov to go immediately to Bet-el to fulfill his "neder." However, for some reason, he first settles in Shechem.

HONOR THY FATHER...

Even more troubling is why Yaakov doesn't immediately go

home to Hebron, at least to say 'hello' to his parents whom he hasn't seen in over twenty years! Recall how the Torah had earlier informed us that was his original intention:

"Yaakov got up and took his children and wives on the camels. Then he led his sheep... and everything he acquired in Padan Aram to GO TO YITZCHAK HIS FATHER in the land of Canaan." (32:17-18)

Nonetheless, when Yaakov arrives in Eretz Canaan, the Torah tells us he settles down in Shechem. In fact, we only learn of Yaakov's return to his father's house incidentally, in the final pasuk before Yitzchak's death (see 35:27-29)!

For some reason, the Torah never informs us of the details (or the date) of this reunion.

JUST FOR A 'SHORT STOP'?

At first glance, one could answer that Shechem was nothing more than a short stop along the way to Bet-el. As we know, Yaakov's young children and immense cargo forced him to travel slowly (see 33:12-15). He may very well have needed a rest. Thus, Yaakov's 'brief stay' in Shechem could be considered no different than his 'brief stay' in Succot (see 33:17).

[See further iyun regarding Yaakov's stay in Succot.]

But this approach is difficult to accept for two reasons:

First of all, recall how Yaakov had traveled from Padan Aram to Har ha'Gilad in only seven days (see 31:21-23, read carefully). Now that journey is much longer than the trip from the Gilad to Bet-el. [Check it out on a map.] Therefore, there seems to be no reason why Yaakov cannot complete the remainder of this journey in two or three days - a week at most!

Secondly, if Yaakov's plan is just to 'rest up' in Shechem for a few days, why would he buy a parcel of land? Furthermore, the overall impression from chapter 34 is that Yaakov's family has pretty much settled down in Shechem (see 34:7, 34:10, 34:21 etc.).

Therefore, it seems as though Yaakov had settled down in Shechem for quite a while. In fact, we can prove that Yaakov may have stayed even several years in Shechem - by simply considering the ages of his children at that time. Let's explain:

BAR-MITZVAH BOYS OR GROWN UPS?

Recall that Yaakov left Lavan after working for him for twenty years (see 31:41). Therefore, when he began his journey back to Eretz Canaan, his oldest child could not have been more than 13 years old (see 29:18-23), for he first married Leah only after completing his seven years of work. That would make Shimon & Levi etc. 11 or 12 years old, etc.

Yet, from the Torah's description of the incident with Dena in Shechem (see 34:1-31) it appears that Shimon & Levi (and the rest of the brothers) must have been at least in their late teens. After all, they go to war against an entire city!

Furthermore, Dena - Leah's seventh child - could not have been older than six and most probably even younger! [Remember there was a break between Yehuda and Yisachar/ see 30:9.] However, from the story in chapter 34, Dena appears to be at least twelve, if not older. Even though Shechem does refer to her once as a "yaldah" (see 34:4), the Torah consistently refers to her as a "na'arah" (see 34:3,12).

If these assumptions are correct, then it appears that Yaakov remained in Shechem for at least several years prior to the story of Dena's abduction.

Even if Yaakov stayed in Succot for 18 months, as the Midrash claims (see Rashi 33:17), it still doesn't make sense that the incident with Dena have taken place when she is in 'first grade' and Shimon & Levi had just celebrated their 'bar-mitzvahs'?

Thus, according to "pshat", the incident at Shechem must have taken place at least five years later! This conclusion strengthens our original question. Why would Yaakov remain in Shechem for over FIVE years without first returning to Bet-el, and without going home to visit his elderly parents!

'A CALL TO ORDER'

Whenever we arrive at this kind of dilemma the temptation is to 'tamper' with the chronological order of the narrative. In Chazal, this is better known as the principle of "ein mukdam u'muchar ba'Torah" - the narrative in Chumash does not necessarily progress in chronological order. Clearly, the principle of "ein mukdam u'muchar" does not mean that the stories in Chumash are recorded in purely random sequence. Nor should it be understood as just a 'wildcard' solution for difficulties in "peshat". Instead, the Torah often records certain parshiot out of their chronological order for thematic considerations.

[It should also be noted that the principle of "ein mukdam u'muchar" usually only applies at the 'parshia' level. In other words, that events WITHIN a given 'parshia' are always recorded in chronological sequence. Only a 'parshia' in its entirety may be presented before an earlier event or vice-versa. [This style is sometimes referred to as "smichut parshiot."]

Let's see now if this principle can help us solve the problems raised in our shiur thus far.

We'll start by taking a closer look at the various stages of Yaakov's journey, and how they relate to the division into 'parshiot' of Parshat Va'yishlach.

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF AVRAHAM AVINU

We really should have begun our shiur with a more basic question: why does Yaakov stop in Shechem at all? Why doesn't he go directly from Succot to Bet-el or Hebron?

The answer lies in the obvious parallel between Yaakov's return to Canaan and Avraham Avinu's initial journey from Aram to Eretz Canaan. He, too, first stopped in Shechem and built a MIZBAYACH:

"And Avram passed through the land, to the place of SHECHEM... and God appeared to Avram and said: I am giving this land to your offspring; and he built there a MIZBAYACH to the Lord who appeared to him." (12:6-7)
[Compare also 12:5 with 31:17-18!!]

Correspondingly, Yaakov also makes Shechem his first stop, and he builds a MIZBAYACH specifically in that region (see 33:18-20). In contrast to Avraham, however, Yaakov ALSO invests in some real estate - he buys a field (see 33:19). Soon we will suggest a logical reason for this purchase.

If Yaakov is indeed following his grandfather's footsteps (as his arrival in Shechem suggests), then he too should continue directly to Bet-el, just as Avraham Avinu did (see 12:7-8). Of course, Yaakov had another reason to proceed directly to Bet-el - to fulfill his "neder." Then, we would have expected him to continue from Bet-el on to Hebron to see his parents.

So why does he stay in Shechem?

One could suggest that exactly the opposite happened, i.e. Yaakov DID NOT STAY IN SHECHEM for more than several days! Instead, he stopped there only to build a MIZBAYACH, thanking God for his safe arrival, just as Avraham had done. To support this, note how the Torah describes his arrival in 33:18: "va'yavo Yaakov SHALEM". This most probably reflects the phrase in his original "neder" of: "v'shavti b'SHALOM et beit avi" (see 28:21).

Furthermore, in 33:20 he calls this mizbayach: "Kel Elokei Yisrael", most likely relating to the phrases in his "neder" of: "im y'hiyeh ELOKIM imadi..." (28:20) and "v'haya Hashem li I'ELOKIM" (28:21).

A WISE INVESTMENT

At that time, he also purchased a plot of land. This was a wise investment, for Yaakov is traveling with a large family, and realizes that sooner or later, he'll need to settle down in Canaan, and build a house of his own. Planning an option for his future, he buys a parcel of land, a 'security' investment should he decide one day to return.

At this point, we posit, Yaakov really does continue his journey from Shechem to Bet El - and then on to Hebron - after

only a very short stay. However, the Torah records the details of this 'first' ascent to Bet-el - at a later time (see 35:9), while 'inserting' the details the Dena event in between (i.e. in chapter 34), even though that event took place at a later time! [Later in the shiur, we will suggest a reason why this story in 'inserted'.]
[To appreciate this theory, it is recommended that you review those parshiot, especially noting the new 'parshia' that begins in 35:9.]

Let's take a look at the special wording of the 'parshia' that begins in 35:9 - which we claim took place BEFORE the events in chapter 34:

"And God [had already /"od"? / or 'again'] appeared unto Yaakov UPON HIS ARRIVAL from Padan Aram, and blessed him ... then Yaakov set up a MATZEYVA at this site... and called the name of this site BET-EL. Then they traveled towards Efrat" [i.e. on the way toward Hebron], and Rachel gave birth with complications [& then died]..." (see 35:9-19)

Our contention is that this entire 'parshia' (35:9-22) actually took place immediately upon Yaakov's arrival from Padan Aram (as its opening pasuk suggests/ compare 33:18!), several years BEFORE the incident with Dena in Shechem (i.e. 34:1-35:8).

A very strong proof to this claim may be drawn from the words of Yaakov himself (to Yosef) before his death:

"... when I was RETURNING FROM PADAN, Rachel died on the road, while still a long distance from Efrat, and I buried her on the way..." (see 48:7)

Yaakov himself states that Rachel died during his original journey from Padan to Eretz Canaan. He would not have spoken of her death as having occurred "when I was returning from Padan" if she died only AFTER Yaakov had spent several years in Shechem.

Furthermore, why was Yaakov traveling from Bet-el southward, towards Efrat? Most likely, he was on the way home to his father in Hebron! In other words, it may very well have been that Yaakov DID return immediately to visit his father, just as we expected him to.

[For some reason, the Torah never records the details of this encounter. But this question begs itself no matter how we explain the order of the 'parshiot.' Only in the final summary psukim (i.e. 35:27-19) are we told that Yaakov had returned to Yitzchak, and even there it appears to be only for Yitzchak's burial. It would only be logical to assume that Yaakov must have gone to visit his father much earlier.]

THE NEW ORDER

Before we continue, let's review the order of events (and hence the order of the 'parshiot') according to this interpretation:

After successfully confronting Esav, Yaakov continues on to Eretz Canaan, stopping first in Shechem to build a MIZBAYACH and thank God, just as Avraham Avinu had done. While in Shechem, he buys a parcel of land for 'future use,' planning possibly to later return to this area with his family. [Recall that Yaakov owns many sheep, and Shechem is a prime area for grazing cattle, just as Yaakov's children later return many years later to the Shechem area to graze their cattle (see 37:13).]

After buying a field in Shechem and building a mizbayach, Yaakov continues to Bet-el, where God appears to him, and Yaakov re-states his intention to ultimately fulfill his "neder" to make a 'bet Elokim' at that site (even though he isn't quite ready yet to begin its construction).

There, God confirms the blessing of "bechira" and changes his name from Yaakov to Yisrael (see 35:9-12). [According to this interpretation, Yaakov had been blessed and had his name changed by the "malach" only several days earlier! see 32:26-28]. Even though he cannot at this point build the actual Bet-Elokim that he promised, he re-affirms his promise by once again anointing the MATZEYVA and calling that site Bet-el (see 35:14-15).

Next, Yaakov travels toward Hebron to see his parents. Along the way, Rachel dies and is buried on the roadside. Yaakov

then sets up tent in Migdal Eder (see 35:21). Even though we do not know its precise location, it would be safe to assume that Migdal Eder is located in an area not too far from Yitzchak's home in Hebron. It is here where the incident with Reuven & Bilha takes place. Although we may reasonably assume that Yaakov sharply criticized Reuven, the Torah for some reason abruptly curtails this story, right in the middle of a sentence! [See 35:22! / see also 49:4!]

Some time later, maybe a year or two (or even five) later, Yaakov moves with his family to Shechem - after all, he did purchase a parcel of land there specifically for that purpose. By now, the children are older - old enough for the incident with Dena (as detailed in chapter 34) to occur. It also stands to reason that at this point the people of Shechem see Yaakov as a permanent neighbor, rather than a transient; and therefore - they seek marital and economic ties with Yaakov's family. Finally, this also explains why specifically Shimon & Levi take leadership roles at this time. Reuven had most likely been 'demoted' from his position of 'family leader' after the incident with Bilha.

After the brothers wipe out Shechem, Yaakov fears the revenge of the neighboring population. God therefore commands him to MOVE from Shechem to Bet-el for PROTECTION (see 35:1-7, read carefully). Just as Bet-el had protected Yaakov when he was faced with the threat of his brother Esav, so will Bet-el protect Yaakov now from his latest crisis. [Note how specifically this point - danger from Esav - is mentioned over and over again in this 'parshia' (i.e. 35:1-8, see 35:1,3,7!).]

Note also that these psukim imply a recent, immense expansion of Yaakov's family and possessions (see 35:6 - "v'chol ha'AM asher imo" & 35:2 - "v'et kol ashe imo"). This may also explain why Yaakov must remind these 'newcomers' to rid themselves of their idols before ascending to Bet-el. (see 35:3-4).

So Yaakov now moves his permanent residence to Bet-el, which had already been established as the site for his future Bet Elokim, and accordingly builds a MIZBAYACH (see 35:1,3,7).

Let's use a chart once again to show the 'new order' of the parshiot:

PSUKIM	- GENERAL TOPIC
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(A) 32:3-33:17	Yaakov's confrontation with Esav upon his return to Eretz Canaan.
(B) 33:18-20	Yaakov's arrival in Shechem [& buys a field].
(E) 35:9-22	Yaakov arrives in Bet-el, receives his blessing and fulfills his "neder"; Rachel dies along the way to see Yitzchak near Hebron.
(C) 34:1-31	Yaakov returns to Shechem, Dena is abducted, and Shimon & Levi wipe out the city.
(D) 35:1-8	Yaakov flees from Shechem to Bet-el, where he builds a mizbayach.
(F) 35:23-29	A summary of Yaakov's children, followed by the death of Yitzchak.

Thus, by simply changing the location of a single 'parshia,' nearly all our questions are solved. However, our approach raises a much bigger question: WHY isn't this 'parshia' (35:9-22) recorded where it belongs?

As stated above, the Torah will present events out of chronological sequence only when there is a compelling reason to do so. Therefore, we must look for a thematic reason for this 'change' in order.

As usual, we will return to the primary theme of Sefer Breishit - the process of "bechira" & "dechiya" - to suggest an answer to this question.

A THEMATIC REASON

Recall from previous shiurim that the theme of Sefer Breishit progresses with each set of Sifrei TOLADOT. Throughout the progression, someone from among the "toladot" is 'chosen' while the others are 'rejected.' Recall also that in Parshat Va'yishlach we are still under the 'header' of "toldot Yitzchak" (see 25:19). The story of "toldot Yitzchak" clearly reaches its conclusion with the 'parshia' of 35:23-29 [(F) in the above chart], which describes Yitzchak's death. [Note also that "toldot Esav" (36:1) follow

immediately afterward.]

This 'parshia' 35:23-29 (F) MUST therefore appear at the conclusion of "toldot Yitzchak."

But why was 'parshia' (E) transplanted from its chronological location to here, immediately preceding 'parshia' (F)?

One could suggest several 'thematic' reasons:

One answer could be alluded to in the somewhat innocuous though very telling statement that introduces (F):

"And the children of Yaakov were TWELVE..."

(see 35:23-26, noting the 'parshia' in the middle of a pasuk)

Unlike Avraham and Yitzchak, ALL of Yaakov's children are 'chosen' - EVEN his children from the maidservants, EVEN Reuven who had most likely been berated, etc. One could suggest that the Torah takes this entire 'parshia' (E) - which ends with the incident with Reuven & Bilha (which most likely had taken place much earlier) - from its chronological location and intentionally places it here - NEXT to the concluding statement of 35:23 - to stress that ALL of Yaakov's children are chosen - EVEN Reuven! [See Ramban 35:22! See also Rashi, Chizkuni & Radak 35:22.]

This interpretation may also explain why 35:22 ends mid-sentence. It would seem that the pasuk should end with Yaakov's curse of Reuven, which becomes apparent in 49:4. However, because the whole point is to show that Reuven remains part of the 'chosen family,' the second half of the sentence is 'cut off.' Instead, the entire 'parshia' is attached to the statement, "and the children of Yaakov were twelve - the children of Leah: the firstborn of Yaakov = REUVEN, and Shimon, Levi..." (35:23-24).

An alternate (and more simple) explanation could be that the Torah is simply keeping all of the stories relating to Shechem together. Hence, once the Torah informs us that Yaakov purchased a parcel of land in Shechem (33:19), Chumash continues with what later took place in Shechem as a result of this purchase (34:1-35:8). Then, after completing that story, Chumash returns to the story of Yaakov's first return to Bet-el (35:9-22), even though it in fact took place much earlier.

Finally, one could suggest a very significant thematic reason for this 're-arrangement' of the 'parshiot'. Recall our explanation that Yaakov's naming of 'Bet-El' reflection his conviction to one-day establish a 'Bet-Elokim' [a house for God] on this site. The first time Yaakov stated this intention (see 28:19), he could not build a Bet-Elokim at that time for he was a fugitive on his way to Padam Aram. The second time he arrives at Bet-El (see 35:9-15), he once again only states his intention. It appears that it is still pre-mature to actually begin that project, as he has not yet established a name for himself in Eretz Canaan. After all, the success of his planned Bet-Elokim would depend on his ability to 'reach out' to the neighboring people, just as Avraham and Yitzchak had done when they built "mizbachot" and 'called out in God's Name'.

However, after the 'Dena incident' at Shechem, and the actions of Shimon and Levi, Yaakov's status among the neighboring people has dropped to an 'all time low'. As Yaakov himself stated in the aftermath of those events: "achartem oti..." - you have made me look ugly by embarrassing me in the eyes of inhabitants of the land..." (see 34:30). Given this situation, tragically Bet-El becomes a place a refuge for Yaakov, instead of becoming a Bet-Elokim. Certainly, in the aftermath of those events, Yaakov will be unable to establish a functioning Bet-Elokim in the foreseeable future.

From this perspective, one could understand the Torah's detail of the 'Dena incident' as a thematic explanation for why Yaakov was unable to ultimately fulfill his "neder" to build a Bet-Elokim.

Despite Yaakov's resolve to establish a Bet Elokim, unfortunately an opportunity for him to do so never materialized in his own lifetime. Instead, Yaakov would have to pass that goal on to his children, who would only have the opportunity to achieve it several hundred years later.

shabbat shalom,
menachem

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FOR FURTHER IYUN

A. Rashi on 33:17 quotes the Midrash that Yaakov spent 18 months in Succot! This is based on the fact that the pasuk states that Yaakov built a HOUSE there, and set up tents for his sheep and cattle. Should this be true, then in any event, this pirush only strengthens the question of why Yaakov did not return earlier. It does, however, slightly raise the age of Yaakov's children by the time the Shechem episode occurs, rendering this story a bit more feasible.

B. It is unclear whether Yaakov ever builds the Bet-Elokim as he had promised in 28:21. See the meforshim on that pasuk who deal with this question, as well as the meforshim here on 35:14.

Nonetheless, anointing the MATZEYVA and calling that site Bet-el (see 35:14-15) clearly reveal Yaakov's intention to eventually build the Bet-Elokim, even though the final goal may not be realized until Bnei Yisrael conquer Eretz Canaan in the time of Yehoshua. See Devarim 12:8-12, "v'akmal".

C. In closing, it is important to note that there always remains the possibility that the parshiot are in chronological order. If so, we would either have to explain that these events indeed took place when Yaakov's children were indeed quite young, or that Yaakov intentionally did not return to Bet-el, either because he felt that the time was not yet ripe, or possibly because he was waiting for Hashem to command him to go there.

D. Note 34:30, and Yaakov's final statement in his rebuke of Shimon and Levi:

"And Jacob said to Simeon and Levi: 'Ye have troubled me, to make me odious unto the inhabitants of the land, even unto the Canaanites and the Perizzites; and, I being few in number, they will gather themselves together against me and smite me; **and I shall be destroyed, I and my house**'"

Even though simple "pshat" would explain that the phrase 'my house' in Yaakov's statement refers to his family, one could suggest (based on the above shiur) that Yaakov is referring to 'his house' that he plans to build for God - for now that Shimon & Levi have made him look so bad, Yaakov's plans for building a House for God in Bet-el have now been 'destroyed'.