

PARASHAH: Vayishlach (He sent)
ADDRESS: B'resheet (Genesis) 32:4-36:43
READING DATE: Shabbat
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(Note: all quotations are taken from the Complete Jewish Bible, translation by David H. Stern, Jewish New Testament Publications, Inc., unless otherwise noted)

Let's begin with the opening blessing for the Torah:

***“Baruch atah YHVH, Eloheynu, Melech ha-‘Olam,
asher bachar banu m’kol ha-amim,
v’natan lanu eht Torah-to.
Baruch atah YHVH, noteyn ha-Torah.
Ameyn.”***

(Blessed are you, O' LORD, our God, King of the Universe,
you have selected us from among all the peoples,
and have given us your Torah.
Blessed are you, LORD, giver of the Torah.
Ameyn.)

*“When we use our own “spiritual” achievements to measure our place with HaShem, we become callous to the real problem—a heart that is clouded by pride. Thanks be unto our God, that he knows our heart better than we know it ourselves! He knows exactly what remedy is needed to shatter our shallow, prideful image, and bring us to **the place** where we are ready to receive a genuine revelation from him. He lovingly places just the right individuals and circumstances in our lives, which will cause us to surrender our will into his Perfect Will. But like Ya’akov, we must be willing to stop running long enough to recognize them. Next week, we will see just where HaShem has brought him to.... And why.”*

These are the closing few statements of last week's parashah called **Vayetze**. This week's parashah, called **Vayishlach** picks up immediately where we left off. To strengthen the segue-way into the next section there is a play on words found only in the original Hebrew text. Verse two of chapter thirty-two from last week's portion reads,

“Ya’akov went on his way, and the angels of God met him.”

Verse four of chapter thirty-two, the opening verse of our current portion reads,

“Ya’akov sent messengers ahead of him to ‘Esav his brother toward the land of Se’ir, the country of Edom.”

The Hebrew words used for both “angels” and “messengers” share the exact same root: “malakh.” Ephraim and Rimona Frank give us these Hebrew insights concerning the opening words:

Then Ya'acov sent [va'yishlach] messengers - "mala'chim" before him to his brother Esav..." (32:3). These are the opening words of our Parasha. " Mal'achim " are angels, messengers or emissaries. Ya'acov had seen them in dreams (aside from the famous ladder scene in 28:12, an angel also addressed him in a dream in 31:11 ff.). He had also run into YHVH's messengers when he departed from Lah'van (32:1,2), and now he sends messengers, human "mal'achim," to his brother Esav. The root of " mal'ach " (singular form) is "la'a'ch" (lamed, alef, chaf), meaning, "to send." It is from this verb (which is not in use) that we get the noun: "m'la'cha," occupation, work, workmanship (such as the kind that was preformed in the Mishkan/Tabernacle), possession and more. Later on, when Esav proposes that Ya'acov come along with him with his entire entourage, the latter refuses, saying that he will move "according to the pace of the cattle that are before him..." (33:14). " Cattle " here is also " m'lacha ," as the herds were going out ahead, or being sent forth in front of the retinue.¹

I would like to make my own midrash (homiletic application) by playing with the sounds of the Hebrew word for messenger and the Hebrew word for king. The Hebrew word for king is “melekh.” This has a similar sound to our word for messenger “malakh.” Suppose the “malakh” was a “messenger” of a “melekh.” This would make the “malakh” someone “sent on behalf of royalty or leadership.” In verse two, the angels (“mal-akhey”) are sent from HaShem (the king) to meet Ya’akov. In verse four the messengers (“mal-akheem”) are sent from Ya’akov (the [soon to be] prince) to meet his brother ‘Esav. My midrash of these similarities shows the contrast between the ways of HaShem and the ways of Ya’akov. As the Great, Almighty Comforter, HaShem has twice sent supernatural messengers to Ya’akov in order to comfort and strengthen him as he journeyed on his way; Ya’akov on the other hand, out of fear, sent human messengers to obviously appease his brother ‘Esav, and to win his favor (vv.5, 6). Nevertheless, the response from the messengers invokes neither comfort nor strength to Ya’akov, but instead more fear, as they inform him that his brother is approaching with a large company of men with (possibly) less than friendly intentions.

At any rate, as I mentioned in last week’s parashah, Ya’akov was headed towards his divinely appointed destiny, to become the covenant man that HaShem had promised he would be. But to Ya’akov, there was an absence of real peace, of genuine “shalom” in his life up to this point. Ya’akov had made no

¹ Ephraim and Rimona Frank, *Hebrew Insights into Parashat Va'yishlach, First-Born.com* (<http://www.1st-born.com/vayishlach.php>), as of December 12, 2005

small accomplishment for himself, acquiring wives, sons, one daughter, and a great number of livestock. Yet, he knew in himself, that he was not totally fulfilled. The reason was that despite his grand self-achievements, and clever actions in the past, he still had to face his greatest challenge: that of confronting the brother he wronged twenty years prior. I believe that Ya'akov became fearful for a number of reasons. First, as should be expected, he had come quite a long way since that time earlier in his life, growing from just he himself, to a large family complete with wives, children, and livestock. He was naturally concerned about the well being of his immediate home. Secondly, we find in verses 8, 9 that he is still operating under his own devices rather than fully trusting in the providence of HaShem, as he decides to divide them into two camps. Perhaps in this way, he thinks, at least one of them will escape the (potential) wrath of 'Esav and his men.

At this point in his life, a rather unusual, yet wonderful thing takes place: he cries out to HaShem for mercy and protection. Unlike his previous encounters with HaShem, this petition carries with it, the characteristics of a genuine plea to the One who can grant supernatural safety and protection from all of our enemies.

"Ya'akov said, "God of my father Avraham, and God of my father Yitzchak, the LORD, who said to me, 'Return to your country, and to your relatives, and I will do you good.' I am not worthy of the least of all the lovingkindnesses, and of all the truth, which you have shown to your servant; for with just my staff I passed over this Yarden; and now I have become two companies. Please deliver me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esav: for I fear him, lest he come and strike me, and the mothers with the children. You said, 'I will surely do you good, and make your seed as the sand of the sea, which can't be numbered because there are so many'" (32:10-13, Messianic KJV)

As can be seen, Ya'akov starts his prayer off with identifying his own unworthiness of HaShem's grace and protection thus far, yet he still pleads to HaShem to remember him and deliver him from harm. As a kind of reminder and guarantee that HaShem is obligated to do just this, Ya'akov restates the covenantal promise given to him in B'resheet 28, at the incident with the dream of the ladder (see opening part of **Parashat Vayetze**).

Ya'akov has not received his answer from HaShem, so he decides to spend the night there. The text seems to indicate that before daybreak, he orchestrates yet one last plan to protect what belongs to him. He sends his messengers again ahead of him in an elaborate echelon of gifts, in order to thwart the (possible) heat of 'Esav's anger. Remember, Ya'akov had not seen his brother since the incident involving the theft of the birthright blessing; he had every right to imagine the worst possible scenario surrounding this long anticipated reunion. He himself decides this time to stay on one side of the stream where he was camped, while his beloved family and possessions went on to face an uncertain fate.

This was the opportunity that HaShem was waiting for—the moment of truth! Ya’akov, operating under his own power for the majority of his life, had unknowingly brought himself (under the supernatural guiding of the Ruach HaKodesh of course) to **the place** where he was going to encounter the God of his grandfather Avraham, and of his father Yitz’chak—a place where he would learn to call HaShem HIS God! To be sure, this encounter was **the place** that HaShem had prepared Ya’akov for all of his life—a place where Ya’akov had nowhere else to run to, run from, or hide from—a place where he was all alone (32:25)!

Suddenly—and without warning—a man leaps out of the darkness onto Ya’akov! There was no time to think—only to react, and fight back! As the struggle pressed on, I imagine Ya’akov eventually found time to contemplate: “Who is this?! Why is this happening to me?! Is this some rogue bounty hunter, sent by my brother ‘Esav, to exact a hefty sum of money for my head in return?! Is it a local desert thug?! Is it a demon?! Where is HaShem now?! Didn’t he promise to protect me?!” Clearly this was a physical, wrestling match, yet I believe as Ya’akov continued to wrestle, the spiritual aspects of the match came to the forefront.

The Torah says that when the unknown assailant failed to defeat Ya’akov, then he struck the socket of Ya’akov’s hip, causing it to go into disjunct.

“The man said, “Let me go, because it’s daybreak” (vs.27a)

But by now, Ya’akov had come to the realization that this was no ordinary man. It was not some desert robber, or bounty hunter, or even a demon—it was none other than a representative of the One who could see into his own hollow soul and cause the supernatural change that Ya’akov knew he so desperately needed! For this very reason, rather than let go of this man, Ya’akov clung to him for dear life! He had finally come to **the place** where he knew he could not—would not—run any further! He knew now inside of himself, that this was the only One who could rescue him from his own fearful self! So, despite the all-night struggle, he mustered up enough strength to say within himself, “I will not! I refuse to let you go! I have spent all of my life running in fear from the things that I could not control! I have nowhere else to turn for help! So I will NOT let you go! I will not let you go UNTIL YOU BLESS ME!”

This was the breaking of the man Ya’akov. This was the moment when HaShem recognized that he was genuinely a humbled man, in desperate need of a Savior. The messenger responded to Ya’akov’s plea:

“What is your name?” and he answered, Ya’akov.” Then the man said, “From now on, you will no longer be called Ya’akov, but Isra’el;

because you have shown your strength to both God and men and have prevailed” (vv. 28, 29)

No more would Ya’akov have to operate under his own strength, for he had come “face to face,” as it were, with the God of Beit-El! This personal encounter had changed him down to the core of his being, and finally supplied him with the inner “shalom” that he so desperately sought his entire life. The name “Isra’el” carries the Hebrew root word “sar,” meaning “prince.” Thus, his name change was a reflection of his own identity with HaShem—from “he who supplants” to that of “royalty”! When Ya’akov inquired about the man’s name, the man simply responded that Ya’akov needn’t know such details, and simply blessed him there. But to Ya’akov, there really was no doubt as to the identity of this messenger, despite his unwillingness to disclose his name. For Ya’akov decided to call the place “P’ni-El [face of God], because he recognized that he had seen HaShem face to face, yet his life was spared!

Ya’akov continued on to face his brother ‘Esav, but he knew now that he was a changed man. He could now carry himself with a renewed sense of purpose. Moreover, he was no longer operating under his own pretenses. This time he divides his camp again, only to launch out ahead of them, to meet his brother in meekness and humility. As he approaches ‘Esav, he bows himself to the ground seven times, but this time, it is not a ploy. There is no false bravado, or showmanship going on here. This was the display of a man who had yielded himself to the mercy and grace of the Almighty God, and who was now ready to make restitution for the wrongs he had committed.

‘Esav recognizes that this is not the same Ya’akov who stole his birthright twenty years ago. Instead, before him, was a man tender and vulnerable, waiting to be welcomed by his twin brother, his only brother—his own flesh and blood!

“Esav ran to meet him, hugged him, fell on his neck and kissed him; and they wept” (33:4)

‘Esav’s reaction to his brother is that of one responding to an individual, whose life has been supernaturally changed from the inside, by the power of the Ruach HaKodesh. There is no doubt that he sensed the change, and he himself was softened. This response of ‘Esav’s was only accomplished by the power of HaShem. To be sure, even though Ya’akov offers flocks of livestock as gifts to his brother, ‘Esav declines, explaining that he has more than enough to sustain him. Ya’akov’s language in verses 5, 8, 10, 13, 14, and 15 continues to display the servant heart that he now had, as he began the valuable process of restitution. In the end, ‘Esav eventually accepts his gratuitous gesture.

Ya’akov’s life is such a lesson for us today, that I want to skip past most of the details with Dinah of chapter 34 and look to chapter 35 to apply some practical lessons for us. I don’t mean to minimize the atrocious events of chapter 34,

rather, I encourage you to go back and examine it for your personal study. Even so, the change in Ya'akov's life continued to supply him with the strength and encouragement that he, like so many of us, so desperately needed at times. Briefly, in chapter 35, HaShem again instructs him to return to Beit-El to build another altar. Ya'akov took the initiative and had his family put away all of the foreign gods that they possessed. They purified themselves and even put on a fresh change of garments. Then, as one unit, they made their way to Beit-El to worship HaShem. This speaks volumes about the situation facing many families today. If the leader of the house would humble himself under the power of the Almighty God, put away all of the things that separate his family from the holiness of HaShem, and seek his face and worship him, then I believe God will answer him and bring about a real change in his personal life and in the lives of his family as well.

D'vorah, Rivkah's handmaid dies here and is buried at Beit-El. After this, HaShem again restates the name change and the covenant promises to Ya'akov/Isra'el. Rachel herself goes into labor for the second time and she gives birth to Isra'el's second son by her. Earlier on, Isra'el had foolishly pronounced a curse on the one in possession of his uncle Lavan's family idols (31:32). Rachel had stolen them and then lied to her father about it. I believe at this time, Isra'el's vow took effect and sadly she died giving birth to a baby boy, whom she named "Ben-Oni," meaning, "son of my grief." But Isra'el renamed him "Binyamin," meaning, "son of the right hand, son of the south." So they buried Isra'el's beloved Rachel there on the way, which is the way to Beit-Lechem. Sadly, we also read of the death of father Yitz'chak in 35:28, 29. The "son of laughter" had lived to be 180 years old, and then the Torah informs us that his two sons, 'Esav and Ya'akov buried him. The parashah concludes in chapter 36 with a genealogical listing of the offspring of 'Esav and (presumably) his death.

The lessons for us today are clear: Isra'el must become the "Isra'el of God," in order to become the nation that she is, by covenant, ordained to be! **She must cease to be Ya'akov and become Isra'el!** She has, in the past, run from her oppressors, run from responsibility and under the power of her own selfish intentions. She has been clever and in many cases, out-witted her would-be greedy "uncles." Having set her tents up in many a foreign country over the course of history, she was used for the obvious blessing that supernaturally and graciously rested upon her, until she outlived her usefulness. At this time, she took to flight again—running into the arms of country after country—running from herself. She has wrestled with the angel of the LORD and seemingly prevailed. Yet, she still struggles with her own emptiness and lack of genuine "shalom."

She will wrestle with the messenger of ADONAI, until HaShem decrees that she can no longer avoid him! One day (and may it come soon) she will again face the messenger of ADONAI, and finally surrender her fight. Just like her patriarchal counter part, she will inquire about his name. Only this time, his response will not be,

“Why are you asking about my name?” (32:30)

But rather he will respond as he did to Rav Sha’ul (Acts 9:5) on the road to Dammesek,

“I am Yeshua!”

The closing blessing is as follows:

***“Baruch atah YHVH, Eloheynu, Melech ha-‘Olam,
asher natan lanu Toraht-emet,
v’chay-yeh o’lam nata-b’tochenu.
Baruch atah YHVH, noteyn ha-Torah.
Ameyn.”***

(Blessed are you O’ LORD, our God, King of the Universe,
you have given us your Torah of truth,
and have planted everlasting life within our midst.
Blessed are you, LORD, giver of the Torah.
Ameyn.)

“Shabbat Shalom!”

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