

בראשית רבה פרשה עז ב

ר' חוניה אמר נדמה לו בדמות רועה לזה צאן ולזה צאן, לזה גמלים ולזה גמלים. אמר לו העבר את שלך ואחר כך אני מעביר את שלי. העביר יעקב אבינו שלו אמר נחזור ונחמי דילמא אנשינן כלום מן דחזר ויאבק איש עמו. רבי חייא רבה ורבי שמעון בר רבי נסבין ויהבון בפרגמטיא בהדין מטכסא עלון להדא צור ועבדון עבידייתהון מן דנפקי מן פילי אמרי נלך ונתפוס אומנות אבותינו נחזור ונחמי אי אנשינן כלום חזרון ואשכחן מחיילא דמטקסין, אמרין לון מן הן אית לכון אמרין מן דיעקב סבא דכתיב ויותר יעקב לבדו.

“And there wrestled a man with him.” (Genesis 32:25)

Rav Huna said: He appeared to him in the guise of a shepherd. Thus each had flocks, and each had camels. Said he to him: “Take yours across, and then I will take mine across.” Then he went back to see if he had left anything behind, when immediately, “there wrestled a man with him.”

Once Rabbi Hiyya the Elder and Rabbi Simeon ben Rabbi were trading silks at Tyre. After they had left the town, they said: Let us go and emulate the example of our ancestors; let us see if we have left anything behind. They went back and found a bale of silk. On being asked whence they had learned to do this, they replied: From the Patriarch Jacob, who likewise went back. (Genesis Rabbah 77:2)

The question of the recipe for Jewish identity and survival remains unanswered, but there are some ingredients upon which all agree. A certain degree of memory, flavored by adherence to traditions passed on by one’s forebears, and a carrying on of those memories and traditions in whatever new lands and circumstances form the present circumstances of contemporary Jews, are two of them. Here Rabbi Hiyya the Elder and Rabbi Simeon ben Rabbi, speaking in a foreign language (Aramaic) in a city outside their historic homeland, put it well: “Let us go back and emulate the example of our ancestors; let us see if we have left anything behind.” That they do go back into the treasure trove of ancestral memory and find something of value—a bale of silk—is redolent with symbolism for those of us, thousands of years later, who wish to dig into our roots in hopes of finding something of value that we can bring from the past into the present. *Teshuvah* is a multivalenced concept: most often translated as *repentance*, it literally means *return*; and of course, from the expulsion of the Jews from their land in 586 BCE and again in 70 CE, the theme of return carries not only spiritual but physical valence. As Jews we seek to return in order to move forward; we take three steps back before our *Amidah* prayers, and then three steps forward.

There is a blessing to be recited upon visiting a place where, earlier in life, one had experienced danger (like a car accident, a mugging or other personal attack, or a sudden health crisis): “Blessed are You, Lord our God, who performed a miracle for me at this place.” It is the going back which occasions the blessing, which is not recited at the time the “miracle” occurs. Even the bad things that happen to us must be revisited, and our survival of them considered miraculous. In our journeys—be it the daily intercourse of business, as the Rabbis in the midrash were engaged in, or the metaphysical journey for our spiritual and psychological selves—we go back in order to find meaning, and encounter bales full of blessings.

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Torah from JTS

Parashat Va-yishlah
Genesis 32:4–36:43
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Parashah Commentary

This week’s commentary was written by Dr. David Marcus, professor of Bible, JTS

Attentive readers may note that our Parashat Va-yishlah does not start at the beginning of its chapter (Genesis 32), rather it starts four verses down with the words “va-yishlah Yaakov malachim lefanav” (Now Jacob sent messengers ahead of him). The actual chapter starts with the words “vayashkem Lavan babboqer” (Early in the morning Laban arose) (see the enumeration in *Etz Hayim*), and some printed Hebrew editions, such as the Koren Tanakh before 1992, and English Bibles, such as the King James Version and the New Revised Standard Translation, start the chapter with the next verse, “veYaakov halach ledarko” (Now Jacob went on his way). From these three beginnings we see that there are various ways of starting the story of Jacob’s meeting with Esau, the story with which our parashah commences. All three emphasize different aspects: one, the standard chapter opening, begins with time, “early in the morning”; another, the alternate chapter opening, highlights a character, “Jacob”; and the third, our parashah, commences with action, “he sent.” Each of these different starting points is the result of different Hebrew manuscript traditions, and each allows us to interpret the text slightly differently.

The standard chapter division, which starts with “early in the morning,” demarcates the stories by time, the events of the previous story (that of Jacob and Laban and their concluding a treaty together) taking place in the evening, whereas the new events take place during the day. The new chapter then starts with a new day, with Laban rising up early, blessing his children, his departure home, and of Jacob’s meeting with the angels of God (verses 1–3).

The alternate chapter division, starting with “now Jacob went on his way,” places the point of demarcation between the characters involved. What happened in the previous story had to do with Laban, while the new story concerns Jacob exclusively. Laban’s activities would then conclude with the last verse of the previous chapter. There he gets up, kisses his children and grandchildren

goodbye, blesses them, and leaves for home. With Laban out of the picture, the new chapter then deals only with Jacob's activities. Indeed, the inversion of subject and predicate in Hebrew—*veYaakov halach*, "now Jacob went," as opposed to *vayeilech Yaakov*—is evidence for this change in subject matter with its emphasis on Jacob.

What then of the Masoretic division with which our parashah starts? The most noticeable effect of the starting of our parashah at verse four is that it transfers the episode of Jacob meeting the angels of God (verses 1–3) to the preceding parashah of Va-yetzei. From a literary point of view such a division has the effect of creating an *inclusio* (a literary device that creates a frame by placing similar material at the beginning and end of a passage) with the previous parashah, since at the very beginning of that parashah Jacob, about to leave Canaan, also has an encounter with angels of God (*malachei elohim*, 28:12). The attaching of this episode of Jacob's meeting the angels of God on his way to Canaan (32:1–3) to the previous parashah has the direct effect of placing two occurrences of meeting angels at both ends of the parashah. One occurrence is at Bethel when Jacob is leaving Canaan and the second one is at Mahanaim when he is about to reenter Canaan, a magnificent literary envelope figure.

The second noticeable effect of the parashah division is that it stresses Jacob's actions in sending messengers to Esau. Our sages (in Genesis Rabbah) long ago noticed the literary connection of the episode of Jacob's encountering the *malachei elohim*, "angels of God," in the immediately preceding parashah and Jacob's sending out his own *malachim*, "messengers." The earlier occurrences of *malachim* sent to Jacob foreshadowed Jacob's sending of his own *malachim*. The sages interpreted the presence of what is seemingly an unnecessary preposition, *lefanav* (before him), in the phrase "va-yishlah Yaakov malachim lefanav" (and Jacob sent messengers before him), as evidence that the messengers sent by Jacob were actually divine because elsewhere *lefanav* is actually used in contexts of the sending of divine messengers.

One can see from just this one example how alternate modes of division can lead to different hermeneutics (methods of interpretation). The standard chapter division demarcates the stories by time, the events of the previous story taking place in the evening whereas the new events take place during the day. The alternate chapter division places the point of demarcation between the characters involved. What occurred in the previous story had to do with Laban, while the new story concerns Jacob exclusively. The Masoretic division allows for an envelope structure with the previous unit and stresses Jacob's actions in sending messengers to Esau. All three of these divisions are the result of different Hebrew manuscript traditions, and all three allow us to interpret the text slightly differently.

In three weeks' time, when we reach Parashat Va-yiggash, we will have another opportunity to ponder why a parashah does not start at the beginning of a chapter.

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A Taste of Torah

A Commentary by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, director of Israel Programs, JTS

Genesis 32:27–30 Then he [the mysterious assailant] said, "Let me go for dawn is breaking." But he answered, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." Said the other, "What is your name?" He replied, "Jacob." Said he, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed." Jacob asked, "Pray tell me your name." But he said, "You must not ask my name!" And he took leave of him there.

B'khor Shor, "Jacob asked, 'Pray tell me your name.' But he said, 'You must not ask my name!'" For I have asked your name because a victor wants to promote his name so that his heroism will be recalled by others. But the vanquished does not want the loss publicized, for it is an embarrassment to him that people will say, "so and so lost the match." And also, it is not the style of divine messengers to mention their names, as we see in the case of Manoach (Judg. 13:18). There are also those that say divine messengers do not have fixed names. And some say they do not want human beings to know their names, lest they entreat them.

Having left Lavan's home *en route* back to the Land of Israel, Jacob is given the news that his brother Esau is awaiting his return—with four hundred men. Not knowing Esau's intentions, Jacob is faced with radical uncertainty. More than that, he takes steps to endear himself to Esau by sending both messengers and gifts. As a precaution, Jacob divides his family in the event of an attack so that there will be a surviving remnant. And then one of the most pivotal episodes of Tanakh occurs—Jacob is left alone and wrestles with a "mysterious assailant." While this assailant has been identified in numerous guises (the Hebrew is ambiguous and lends itself to a number of possibilities: divine messenger, Esau's guardian angel, or even Jacob himself), one wonders why the issue of identity and names take a central role in this episode. How may we best decipher this encounter?

Joseph B'khor Shor presents a number of reasons why the divine messenger refuses to identify himself. Perhaps such beings do not have fixed names, or it is simply not customary for messengers to disclose them. Moreover, the B'khor Shor identifies an issue related to *kavod* (honor). He argues that although it is reasonable and indeed desirable for Jacob to know his assailant's name, it would be embarrassing to the one who was defeated. For Jacob, this then becomes an instance of sensitivity training lesson in sensitivity.

To know someone's name is to demonstrate power over that individual and to have a means of grasping their essence. Although Jacob "won" the battle, he has not triumphed in the war. That is to say, this fateful wrestling episode is about humbling the victor a few notches. Jacob, who absconded with the birthright and blessing, must now realize that though he is "chosen," he is not the center of the universe. He needs to heal, and more importantly, he must attend to repairing the relationship between himself and Esau. Only then will he truly become worthy of the name "Israel."

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