

Vayishlach

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In *Vayishlach*, [this week's Torah portion] Jacob returns to Canaan after 20 years in Padan-Aram. He's traveling with two wives, two concubines, 11 sons, and one daughter, along with servants, cattle, goats, sheep, camels, and donkeys. He ferries his whole party and all his possessions across the Yabok River and then recrosses to spend the night by himself.

Alone, he wrestles the whole night. His opponent is unnamed: the text calls the adversary *ish* (a man); he refers to himself as *elohim* (God or gods); and he is usually thought of as an angel. Some commentators infer that it was Esau himself, and Rashi suggests that it was Esau's guardian angel. We moderns may take the struggle to be internal, as Jacob contends with the lies he has told, the wrongs he has done, and the fear that Esau will kill him.

The struggle is famously engaging, and not only to Jews. Eugène Delacroix, for example, painted a vivid version of the match in his 1861 fresco in Saint-Sulpice, Paris. In it we see Jacob thoroughly engaged in combat with every muscle straining, fighting against a calm and unbothered angel, who nonetheless is being pushed nearly out of the picture. Jacob's determination prevails over the angel's placidity.

Here as elsewhere, Jacob's story compels our attention: he is ambitious and crafty, smart and powerful. He wins the match and receives his demanded blessing, but he has wrenched his hip, and he limps away. His wound, however, is just the beginning of his fall, and he soon begins to limp in spirit as well as in gait.

Vayishlach describes both Jacob's ascent—his being renamed as *Yisrael* [Israel]—and his descent—his inability to manage his offspring. In the Dina story, as we will see, Jacob fails to deal directly with Hamor, nor do Jacob's sons seek his counsel about their vengeful retribution. Soon, his oldest son

¹ I am grateful to Théo Klein, author of *Le Rire d'Isaac*, for stimulating conversations and correspondence about the patriarchal family, including some of the issues addressed in this drasha.

Reuben begins to bed Bilhah, Rachel's maid and Jacob's concubine, then the older brothers plot to kill Joseph, and they lie about his sudden disappearance. Finally, Jacob is unable to provide for his family in the face of famine, and he goes down to Egypt, a broken man. In Egypt he self-pityingly summarizes his life for Pharaoh, "Few and evil have been the days of the years of my life."²

Let's look at the beginnings of Jacob's decline.

In Padan-Aram, Jacob has learned to observe, to calculate, and to bide his time. Even after Laban substitutes Leah for Rachel, even after Laban changes Jacob's wages ten times, Jacob continues to work, to plan, and to prosper. He masters genetics and animal husbandry, and his flocks abound with spotted goats and black sheep. Knowing that his economic success has depended on isolating his flocks from Laban's livestock, Jacob resolves also to isolate his family from Laban's influence. He sets out for the Land settled by his grandfather and father.

When Esau arrives in force at the Yabok ford, Jacob is frightened, but he thinks clearly. He presents his elder brother with some 550 animals—an excessive gift that Esau refuses. Jacob speaks to him respectfully and calculatedly, addressing him as *adoni* [my lord], while Esau calls him *akhi* [my brother]. Still wily or maybe only cautious, Jacob ducks Esau's invitation to ride along together, saying that he'll meet him later in Seir. He never does—their next and final meeting appears to be at Isaac's death in Kiryat Arba.

Jacob settles for a while in Succoth, just north of the Yabok ford. Finally, he crosses the Jordan and buys land from Hamor, the ruler of the walled city of Shechem and its adjoining lands, and the father of a young man also named Shechem.

Jacob clearly means to settle there, but his plans soon run amok. His only daughter Dina—maybe 14 or 15, maybe stir-crazy or just starved for female company—decides to “go seeing among the

² English translations throughout are from Robert Alter's *The Five Books of Moses: Translation with Commentary*, W.W. Norton, New York, 2004.

daughters of the land.” Shechem “saw her and took her and lay with her and abused her.” But then Shechem fell in love with Dina, and “his very self clung” to her. Shechem asks his father Hamor to “take me this girl [*yaldah*] as wife.” Hamor then goes to Jacob, to try to arrange the marriage.

Jacob does not speak directly to Hamor. Instead he awaits his sons’ return from the fields, and it is they who do the talking. On the surface, what ensues is a peaceful negotiation about a bride price between the men of two clans with differing customs.

Jacob’s sons—as guileful as their father had been—agree to the marriage, but on the condition that Shechem, Hamor, and all the men of the town be circumcised—the defining sign of the covenant between God and Abraham’s progeny. Hamor and Shechem agree. Both sides talk about intermarriage, the sharing of land, and the prospect of becoming “one folk.” Since Hamor is evidently not an absolute monarch, however, he and Shechem must then convince the other men of the town. Which they do.

Three days later, however, while all the Shechemite men are in pain from their circumcisions, Shimon and Levi slaughter them all. Jacob’s other sons then loot the town, taking women, children, cattle, sheep, donkeys, and all other wealth.

God is silent throughout the entire narrative. Jacob, however, finally is not: he berates Shimon and Levi for the massacre, “you have made me stink among the land’s inhabitants...I am a handful of men. If they gather against me, I shall be destroyed.” Years later, Jacob is still angry, and he curses Shimon and Levi on his deathbed. Jacob understands that wherever he is to live in the Land, he will have to deal with other clans and tribes. To him, the slaughter was inexcusable, but he was unable to temper his sons’ righteous rage.

Shimon and Levi retort: “Like a whore should our sister be treated?” Neither God nor Jacob argues against collective punishment or questions the killing the innocent along with the guilty—

the arguments that Abraham advanced during his verbal struggle with God about Sodom's destruction.

While Shechem's actions must certainly appall the reader, the situation may not have been so uncommon, since the Torah exactly specifies a bride price of 50 shekels of silver for a virgin who has been raped, also ruling that the man may never divorce her.³ At least by the time of *Dvarim* [Deuteronomy], the remedy for rape is not wholesale murder.

God finally speaks again only after the killing and the pillaging. God orders Jacob and his household to depart south for Bethel, and Jacob abandons his plan to settle near Shechem.

According to one reading of *Vayishlach*, God's command—*kum aleh bet el*—to move the family to Bethel, is a rebuke to Jacob for having tried to settle in Shechem in the first place and also for having erected an alter with the ambiguous name, "*El Elohey-Yisrael*," a possible evocation of the Canaanite *El*.⁴ Rather than condemning the brothers, many commentators instead expound on the wickedness of the victims. Rashi, for example, notes the subtle duplicity of Hamor's dialogue, contrasting his ingratiating replies to Jacob with his explicit appeals to the Shechemites' desire for Jacob's livestock. Rambam notes that, according to the Noachide laws, all the men of Shechem were subject to the death penalty for not bringing the young Shechem to justice.

Jacob's initial intention was certainly to seek and to maintain peace with his neighbors. Even as Abraham willingly overpaid Ephron 400 shekels of silver for the Cave of Machpelah, and as Isaac abandoned Gerar in deference to Abimelech, we suspect that 100 *ksitahs* may have been a generous price for the land facing Shechem. Moreover, Ramban (Nachmanides) suggests that once the Shechemites had accepted circumcision and the proposal that they would live together as one covenantal people, "perhaps they might have indeed returned to God."⁵

³ Deuteronomy 22: 28-29

⁴ Leon Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis*, Free Press, Simon & Schuster, New York, p. 100.

⁵ Ramban (Nachmanides), *Commentary on the Torah*, translated and annotated by Charles B. Chavel. Shilo, New York, 1999, p. 419.

The departure from Shechem foreshadows the abandonment of *Eretz Yisrael*, the ultimate conclusion of *Breishit*. The tearful reunion with Joseph in Egypt—wonderful as it is—signals a tragic ending for the patriarchal project and the beginning of 400 years of exile. Jacob's inability to control his own family and to lead the tough task of coexistence ultimately results in the failure of the first Zionist dream. As Théo Klein suggests in his book *Le Rire d'Isaac* [Isaac's Laughter], it was at Shechem that Jacob lost the battle for the country of Israel.⁶

Israel's Vice Premier Moshe Ya'alon recently said that Jews have an "unassailable right" to "settle anywhere, particularly here, the land of the Bible."⁷ Similar contemporary statements, often repeated, remind us for how long *bnei yisrael* [the children of Israel] have had to contemplate our relationship to the land, to members of other tribes, and to exile. Conversely, in the very old text of *Breishit*, [Genesis] Jacob's conflicts with his neighbors, as well as his decline and exile, are disquietingly familiar. *Vayishlach* and its associated commentaries may still have much to teach us about the problems of neighborly coexistence.



⁶ Théo Klein, *Le Rire d'Isaac*, Éditions de Fallois, Paris, 2006.

⁷ *Ha'aretz*, September 9, 2009.