

# Parshat Vayetze

## Yaakov in Exile

When we see Jacob leaving his parental, he sets out with a dual purpose in mind. THE FIRST ASPECT of his leaving home is his flight from brother Esau. In the wake of the “blessings” incident, we hear Esau threatening to kill Jacob:

“ The moment my father dies and we will complete the mourning period for him, I will kill my brother Jacob; the sooner the better” (27:34).

Rebecca’s response is to send Jacob away from the homestead, to allow Esau to calm down a little:

“Your brother Esau is consoling himself by planning to kill you. Now, my son, listen to me, flee at once to Haran, to my brother Laban. Stay with him ... until your brother’s fury subsides...” (27:42- 44).

Indeed, at their next meeting- 22 years later - Jacob remains frantically worried that Esau will try to exact some sort of revenge. In “the greatest anticlimax of the Bible”<sup>1</sup> Esau simply runs to Jacob and embraces him. Apparently, time has eroded the animosity and the fury. They are, after all, both family men, they have moved on. The air has cleared.

THE SECOND REASON for leaving is not an escape. It is a mission; a quest to find a wife for Jacob. Like his father before him, the proposed address for looking for a suitable spouse, is Aram, home of Lavan. Jacob gives him the familiar patriarchal command:

“ You shall not take a wife from among the Canaanite women. Go to Padan Aram, to the house of Bethuel... and take a wife there from the daughters of Laban...” (28:1-2)

Let us focus on the defining features of the two motives.

### THE ESCAPE:

1. Is initiated by Rivka
2. She tells him to go to Haran
3. Length of stay: until Esav calms down

### TO GET MARRIED:

1. Sent by Yitzchak
2. To Padan Aram
3. Length of stay: as long as is necessary to find a wife!

### LEAVING TWICE?

It is interesting how the Torah itself manages to capture and transmit this dual dimension in Jacob’s departure. It does this by repeating the same detail - Jacob’s journey from Beer Sheva to Haran - twice but in a different way.

Jacob’s journey is mentioned twice in the Torah<sup>2</sup>. The first time, we are told:

“Then ISAAC sent Jacob off, and he went TO PADAN ARAM, to Laban the son of Bethuel the Aramean, the brother of Rebbeca, mother of Jacob and Esau” (28:5)

Here it is specifically Isaac who sees him off, and he is described as going to “Padan Aram”. Clearly he is fulfilling the “marriage” mission - Isaac’s mission. In addition, Laban is specifically referenced. We are told of Laban’s relationship to Betuel to emphasise that he is from the family of Abraham. We are also told that Rebecca came from Padan Aram and mothered two children. The underlying current here is stressing that Jacob is going to Padan Aram to marry and to set up a family.

But then we read a second time of Jacob’s departure in the opening line of our Parasha:

“Jacob left Beer-Sheva and set out for HARAN” (28:10)

Haran (rather than Padan Aram) is the place that his mother sent him to. The place from which he embarks is referenced, not his destination. That is because the focus is fleeing **from**, not travelling to. In this perspective, Yaakov is a penniless fugitive who must sleep in whatever place he can find. He ends up resting his head on a simple rock.

### THE DREAM

And reflecting this duality, Yaakov’s dream too is dual in nature. Certain aspects of the dream express God’s concern **with Yaakov’s personal safety** whereas other dimensions of the dream deal with Yaakov as a **covenantal patriarch**. Let us examine the evidence. Jacob goes to sleep and God appears to him in a vision. God’s first message is a covenantal message:

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<sup>2</sup> See Rashi on the opening verse of the parasha who wonders why Jacob’s leaving is mentioned twice. He suggests that due to the spotlight shifting to Esau, with his marriage to Ishmael’s daughter, the narrator needs to return to Jacob and the technique used is to **repeat** Jacob’s departure. But I am suggesting that these are two separate dimensions of Jacob’s journey: to/from, marriage/flight.

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Sacks

"I am Hashem, the God of Avraham your father and the God of Yitzchak. The land upon which you lie I will give to you and your offspring ...."

But there is also a promise of protection and reassurance:

"I am with you: I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you..." (28:15)

Why does Yaakov need this reassurance? This message is clearly directed to Yaakov's fear from Esav. In this frame of mind, the promise that Yaakov will indeed return home safely is comfort indeed. God does not tell him that he will find a good wife. He tells him that he will be protected and that he will eventually return home. This is what a man on the run needs to hear. Yaakov can rest easy with the knowledge that this nightmare will be over some day.

However, even the promise of return might relate to the second, covenantal dimension of Yaakov's story; not to trickery and death-threats, but to family and covenant. Let us remember that Yaakov is leaving the land of Canaan. In this family of Abraham, the "outsiders" (eg. Lot, Yishmael) are the ones who have been known to leave the family homestead abandoning their part in the covenant, as the covenantal family remains in Canaan, the promised land. Isaac, the covenantal son, was instructed never to leave the land. But now Esau is staying at home; Jacob is leaving, and possible, as a response to his deceit, he is being ejected, rejected. We can be sure that Yaakov is gravely concerned about his covenantal status. To allay Yaakov's fears, God arrives to re-affirm the covenantal promise to Jacob, that he is the continuation of his father and grandfathers line. In this dimension too, the promise of return to Canaan and to his father's house must provide some well needed security.

This dual story continues as a double theme throughout the parasha. It is relevant to subsequent events. Are his escapades in the house of Lavan a reflection of his family-building role or a product of his fugitive status?

## YAAKOV IN EXILE

The Midrash Tanchuma to our Parsha opens with an intriguing but seemingly off-topic question:

"Someone who kills accidentally, to where is he exiled? ... to the city of Refuge (ir miklat) ... and Yaakov Avinu escapes from Esav to Haran"

Now Yaakov has not killed anyone; he has cheated his

brother out of a blessing. But the Midrash paints Yaakov as a desperate fugitive on the run. There are certain parallels with the accidental murderer:

- in both cases someone has done a wrong act
- in both cases the fugitive is fleeing a person who is trying to kill him (Yaakov from Esav, and the accidental killer from the relative of his victim - the *goel hadam*.)
- in both cases the person goes into exile.

The Midrash continues to use criminal comparisons as it likens the 7 years of service to Lavan that Yaakov works for Rachel's hand in marriage to the Jewish slave who is purchased for seven years. In the mind-eye of the midrash, Yaakov is not just acquiring a wife! He is selling himself to slavery! – subjecting himself to cathartic punishment. Indeed, by his own admission, it is a grueling life: "scorching heat ravaged me by day and frost by night and my eyes new no sleep" (31:40)

So Yaakov is in exile.

But it would seem that exile is not all bad. Yaakov establishes a large family in Haran, marrying two wives (and their handmaids) and having 12 children. He leaves Lavan a wealthy man (although in a somewhat ironic twist he will soon give all his wealth to Esav).

In this way, we can see the two aspects of Yaakov's sojourn in Haran being developed. The suffering of the fugitive and the building of family.

## DEPARTURE

It should not surprise us then that there are two stages to Yaakov's departure from Lavan. The first time relates to family:

"After Rachel had borne Joseph, Yaakov said to Lavan, 'Give me my wives and my children, for whom I served you, that I may go ...'" (30:25-6)

Yaakov has a family. Even Rachel, his favourite wife has borne a child. He has 12 children<sup>3</sup>. His "family" mission is over. It is time to go home.

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<sup>3</sup> It is interesting to think about how the Avot might have been aware of this "twelve sons" thing. The first time that it surfaces is with Yishmael, who is promised "12 princes" (17:20) and indeed this is fulfilled; see 25:17. There are those who note that 12 male progeny and one daughter (!) are listed at the end of ch.22 as the offspring of Betuel (you can count them up and see Rashi 22:20), indicating that this branch of the family also has a twelve-children unit. Rashi in our parsha relates explicitly to the notion that the Imahot – Rachel and Leah – were fully cognizant of the "twelve son"

But Lavan persuades him to stay, and Yaakov gets stuck there for another 6 years. It is at the end of this period during which he amasses large herds:

"That Lavan's sons were saying, 'Jacob has taken all that was our father's and from that which was our father's he has built up all this wealth.' Jacob also saw that Lavan's manner towards him was not as it had been in the past. Then the Lord said to Jacob, 'Return to the land of your fathers where you were born and I will be with you.'" (31:1-2)

When Lavan turns with suspicion to Yaakov, we might presume that Yaakov returns to a mindset of fear and suspicion. It is too familiar! Now Yaakov will have to flee Lavan, just like Yaakov fled from Esav! So we see that even Yaakov's return, reflects the dual dimension of his journey to Haran.

Yaakov's return to Canaan reflects the duality of his outward journey. On one hand, the covenantal return to the land, the emphasis on his wives and children, and on the other hand, the flight from a powerful and threatening adversary. Clearly, the meeting of angels at the border -32:1 - reflects his outward journey.<sup>4</sup>

Yaakov's return to the place of his vision - Beit El (in ch.35) – clearly closes this theme by telling a story twice and hence emphasizing the duality of the texture of this story.

First, the personal:

"Then Jacob came to Luz – that is Beit-El – in the Land of Canaan ... there he built an altar and named the site El-Beit-El for it was there that God had revealed himself to him **when he was fleeing from his brother.**" (35:4-8)

Of course, Jacob's sacrifices at Beit-El are a fulfillment of Yaakov's promise – in ch.28 – to establish Beit El as a house for God.

But there is the familial-covenantal return to Beit-El too!

"God appeared again to Jacob on his arrival from

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destiny of the family: see his comments to 29:34,35; 30:22,24.

<sup>4</sup> In this regard, please see the masterful chiasmic analysis of Rabbis Elchanan Samet

<https://haretzion.linnovate.co.il/en/tanakh/torah/sefer-bereishit/parashat-vayetze-there-and-back-again-exilic-journeys-and> and Hanoch Waxman

<https://www.etzion.org.il/en/tanakh/torah/sefer-bereishit/parashat-vayetze-there-and-back-again-exilic-journeys-and>

**Padan Aram** and He blessed him. God said to him: ... **You shall be called Jacob no more, but Israel is your name** ... I am El Shaddai, **be fruitful and multiply, an assembly of nations shall descend from you... The land** that I assigned to Abraham and Isaac, I assign to you and to your **offspring** ... Yaakov set up a pillar at the site where He had spoken to him ..." (35:9-14)

This is the classic covenantal promise and deeply reflective of the words stated earlier, on his journey to Padan Aram.

Let us add a few comments. It is here that God acknowledges and affirms Jacob's new name – Israel, emphasizing a new stage in Yaakov's covenantal status. He is no longer an individual, or even a family. He is now a nation!

Second, this second revelation is immediately followed by the birth of the twelfth son and the completion of the family unit, giving greater covenantal emphasis to Yaakov's return

#### **EXILE - POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE?**

In this shiur we have attempted to focus our attention on two themes that are threaded throughout the Parsha : the flight of Yaakov, and his quest to build the covenantal family. These themes recur repeatedly in different guises but in many ways form the backbone of the Yaakov-exile narrative.

*Maaseh avot siman lebanim.* This schema raises certain questions as regards our exile of 2000 years. Like Yaakov, we were exiled "for our sins", and indeed we fled for our lives from country to country! Our Diaspora has not simply been a mere dispersion of Jewish communities, but also a chain of unending persecution and hatred. On the other hand, our centuries of exile have seen a tremendous growth in Jewish culture. Where would we be today without the incredible fruits of our sojourns in Spain, Germany, Poland and also the USA? Without the Babylonian Talmud, the poetry of Ibn Ezra and Yehuda Halevi, the riches of Eastern European Hassidut, the Halakhic codes from each and every community?

Is exile a refuge, a shelter when the going gets tough in the Holy Land and we are chased out? (...and note how it is precisely when Yaakov gets rich and becomes a subject of suspicion!) Or is exile not so much exile, but rather a place to build; a greenhouse, an environment in which to find new opportunities which cannot be found at home, and to use that as a place to grow and flourish?<sup>5</sup>

Shabbat Shalom!

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<sup>5</sup> Egypt too may be viewed as a greenhouse to grow from 70 to 600,000 souls, or alternatively a place of persecution and death