

## Parashat Vayeshev Tranquility and Turbulence

*"When will you understand that a beautiful answer is nothing? Nothing more than illusion! Man defines himself by what disturbs him and not by what reassures him. When will you understand that you are living and searching in error, because God means movement and not explanation."*

[The Wandering Jew. Elie Wiesel. Legends of Our Time pg.126]

Rashi quotes a disturbing Midrash in the opening lines of the Parsha:

"Vayeshev Yaakov - Yaakov wished to dwell in calm and tranquillity. The trouble (lit. rage) of Joseph pounced upon him. God says: Tzaddikim want a peaceful life? Is the good that awaits them in the World To Come not sufficient that they desire calm and tranquillity in this world?"

I say that it is disturbing, because if we are to take the message of this midrashic comment to heart, then what is being demanded from the righteous is to expel all aspirations of personal calm and harmony, and to set forth on a path of torment and self denial. Is this the ideology which is recommended by the Midrash? We shall return to the theology in a few minutes.

But for now, let us attempt to examine the midrashic method itself. How is this Midrash created? From where does it draw its ideas?

### THE TEXTUAL BASIS

The opening line of our parsha creates a number of difficulties. The passuk reads:

"Yaakov settled (vayeShev) in the land in which his father had sojourned (meGURei); in the land of Canaan." (37:1)

At first glance, this is a pretty simple passuk. The verse seems to be informing us that Jacob is living in the same land as his father, somehow imitating him, walking in his footsteps. He has returned to the Land of Canaan after his exile to the house of Lavan. Now he returns to live in the same land as his father. Clearly there is a sense of covenantal continuity here. Yaakov expresses his status as heir to the covenant by his living in Canaan, following and deepening his father's tradition. Interestingly, Rashi himself (on 37:1) contrasts this to an earlier verse (36:8) that uses similar terminology:

"Esav married wives from the daughter's of Canaan ... Esav took his wives, sons and daughters, and all his household, his livestock and cattle and all his possessions that he had acquired in the Land of Canaan and he went to (another) land because of his brother Yaakov ... Esav settled (VAYESHEV) in Mt Seir ... And these are the generations (ELEH TOLDOT) of Esav.." (36:2-9)

The contrast is clear. In Chapter 36 we read how Esav leaves the land of Canaan in order to settle elsewhere, in the Land of Se'ir. Here the, we see that Jacob is following the path of the covenant whereas Esav has chosen to leave the land of Canaan<sup>1</sup> in a manner reflective of his non-covenantal status. So we have a contrast between Yaakov and Esav, and we have a statement regarding the sense of unity that links Yaakov to his father Isaac.

However, several problems present themselves in this passuk. The first relates to its placement. This is the introductory line to the Joseph saga. In the very next verse, the Torah begins the painful story of family jealousy, attempted murder, the sale of a brother; in short, the epic narrative of Joseph and his brothers. The first question is why this verse acts as an introduction to that story.

Second, the use of language within the verse beckons our attention. Two verbs are used which, in a way, are synonymous. However they do not share an identical meaning. It shall be upon this wordplay that our midrash is based. One verb, "SHUV," has the connotation of "sitting" or "dwelling". The other, "GUR," has a resonance of unsettled wandering; an unending movement from place to place as if one cannot find one's place.

If we accept this difference in language, we then reach the conclusion that Yaakov is settling down in a place that his father was not settled. Yaakov seeks stability and a status in permanence in a land in which his father was a transitory outsider. If this is true, then we shall have to reverse our earlier understanding. Now, it would appear that Yaakov is not imitating his father. He is acting in a manner which is the very opposite of his father's way. His father "sojourned;" he "settles down."<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the entire phrase is superfluous. Could the verse not have read "And Jacob lived in the Land of Canaan"? Why add the phrase, "in the land in which his father sojourned"?

This is precisely the imagery that the Midrash develops. Yaakov's desire for tranquillity is shattered by the pain and torment of the loss of his beloved son. Yaakov sought an ordinary calm family life, but he was to be denied this from God.

### YAAKOV SOJOURNING.

It is interesting to track the reappearance of the word MEGUREI in Yaakov's life it resurfaces in a later conversation. Jacob and his family move to Egypt and Jacob is presented to Pharaoh:

"Pharaoh asked Yaakov, 'How many are the years of your life?' Jacob answered Pharaoh, 'The years of my sojourn (MEGURAI) are one hundred and thirty. Few and bad have been the years of my life, nor do they come up to the life spans of my fathers during their sojourns (MEGUREIHEM).'" (47:8-9)

Towards the end of his life, Yaakov realises that his life has been a life of sojourning and not a settled life. In retrospect he has experienced a series of painful episodes which have given him anything but tranquillity and peace.

We have studied the Midrash via Rashi. The original midrash is certainly interesting. It appears in Bereshit Rabba 84:3:

Rav Acha said: When the righteous sit in tranquillity and desire to sit in tranquillity in this world, the Satan acts as

<sup>1</sup> The phraseology here is strongly reminiscent of the split between Abraham and Lot. Compare 36: 6-8 with 13:5-11.

<sup>2</sup> If we look again (see last footnote) at the passuk in 36:7, we can see the way that Yaakov is described along with Esav as "sojourning" in Canaan. Yaakov's "dwelling" takes on a stronger significance as we realise that it is a contrast, not only to his father's life, but to his own manner of living earlier on!

accuser<sup>3</sup>. He exclaims "Is that which is set for (the righteous) in the World to Come not enough that they seek serenity in this world?" This is certainly the case – Yaakov Avinu sought to dwell in serenity in this world and the "Satan" of Yoseph attached himself to Yaakov – "And Yaakov dwelt ... etc."(Gen 37:1)

"I had no repose, no quiet, no rest, and trouble came." (Job 3:26)

I had no repose – from Esav,  
No quiet – from Lavan,  
No rest - from Dinah,  
And trouble (lit. anger) came – the trouble of Joseph.

This is the original Midrash. Note the way in which this Midrash utilises the metaphor of *lyov* – Job – the long-suffering servant of God as a model for Yaakov: The support verse of the midrash is from *lyov*. The appearance of the Satan as the accuser of Yaakov mirrors the story of *lyov* as well.

The Midrash portrays Yaakov as endlessly afflicted by suffering, yearning for respite but not receiving it. Indeed, we might feel that Yaakov deserves some rest! After all, he has been struggling all his life. In-utero, he struggles with his twin brother, a struggle that continues until he flees to Lava. There in Padan Aram he must contend with Lavan, until he returns... to struggle again with Esav. And no sooner is he finished with Esav, we hear of the rape of Dinah and the events at Shechem. Yes! Yaakov is in sore need of some calm. Maybe it is then, not surprising that in the midrash, Yaakov is portrayed as a reflection of the Biblical personality *lyov*. He is his partner in travail and endless suffering. Indeed, Yaakov might have wished himself a reprieve from his troubles. It never came. What with the pain of Yosef, and the torment of life in Egypt, we are witness to a rather sad image as we watch the elderly Yaakov reflecting retrospectively upon his life describing it as "bad". Indeed it has been one long "sojourn."

#### MOVEMENT vs. STAGNATION

Let us return, however to our focus upon the words of our Midrash: "*yeshiva* - dwelling" as opposed to "*megurim* - wandering;" The notion of rooted-ness as opposed to mobility, stability in contrast to insecurity.

First let us note that all the Avot are described as wanderers rather than settlers: God tells Avraham that he will give him, "the land of your sojourn, the entire land of Canaan" (17:8). God instructs Yitzchak: (26:30) "Sojourn in the land," and indeed, we find the Avot incessantly travelling, moving from place to place: Beit El, Hebron, Beer Sheva, Gerar. They are constantly in transit.

Our Midrash draws our attention to the unsettled, transient, portable dimension of the man of faith. Interestingly, we do find the notion of walking in association with righteous figures in Sefer Bereshit:

5:10 : "And Chanoch walked with God"

6:9 : "Noach walked with God"

17:1 Abraham is instructed: "Walk before me and be perfect."

We have already noted this focus in an earlier shiur, but let us remind ourselves of the words of the Sefat Emet (5656):

" Lech Lecha - Go forth : Man is defined by his walking, and indeed man must always move up, level by level. One must always aim to extract oneself from habit, from the state of the normal. Even if one has reached a certain standard of Avodat Hashem (religious intensity and practise), that too becomes second nature after a time and becomes the norm. Therefore at all times one must renew one's soul and one's religious direction.

Is this the key? Sojourning is walking, mobility, progress, growth. The settled life is a life of complacency, compromise, spiritual paralysis, stagnation. Routine is the nemesis of the individual who is to be constantly infused by self-examination and self improvement. Personal comfort and the obsession with secure surroundings will hinder free spirited searching for God and goodness.

If this is so, then even at the cost of great suffering, the Avot are forced to be in a constant state of non-settlement, of fluidity, of insecurity. This is a powerful, if difficult, idea.

#### THE MOUNTAIN FOOTWAY

It would seem to me that the centrality of a sense of non-complacency, and the absence of serenity in the religious experience, is powerfully expressed in the following celebrated passage by Rav Soloveitchik. There he writes of the faulty ideology:

"...that is prevalent nowadays in religious circles ... that the religious experience is of a very simple nature-that is, devoid of the spiritual tortuousness present in the secular cultural consciousness, of psychic upheavals, and of pangs and torments that are inextricably connected with the development and refinement of man's spiritual personality. This popular ideology contends that the religious experience is tranquil and neatly ordered, tender and delicate; it is an enchanted stream for bitter souls and still waters for troubled spirits.

...this ideology is intrinsically false and deceptive. That religious consciousness in man's experience which is most profound and elevated, which penetrates to the very depths and ascends to the very heights, is not that simple or comfortable. On the contrary, it is exceptionally complex, rigorous and tortuous. Where you find complexity, there you find its greatness. The religious experience, from beginning to end, is antinomic and antithetic. ... It is a condition of spiritual crisis, of psychic ascent and descent, of contradiction arising from affirmation and negation, self-abnegation and self-appreciation....

Religion is not, at the outset, a refuge of grace and mercy for the despondent and desperate, an enchanted stream for crushed spirits, but a raging, clamorous torrent of man's consciousness with all its crises, pangs and torments. Yes, it is true that during the third Sabbath meal at dusk, as the day of rest declines and man's soul yearns for its Creator and is afraid to depart the realm of holiness whose name is Sabbath into the dark and frightening, secular workaday week, we sing the psalm 'The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; He leadeth me beside still waters.'(Ps. 23) etc., etc., and we believe with our entire hearts

<sup>3</sup> The appearance of Satan in times of calm is expressed here and also in another Midrash in Bereshit Rabba 38:7 – "Rabbi Yitzchak said: Every place in which there is "sitting - yeshiva" the Satan pounces." This comment is certainly similar to ours. Of course there are other ideas regarding circumstances in which we open ourselves up to the Satan (God's critique?) For example: "And a tragedy befell him (Benjamin) on the journey: R. Eliezer b. Yaakov said - the Satan only accuses in moments of danger." (Bereshit Rabba 91:38) So for one opinion, idle stability invites criticism, and for another, it is a choice to personally endanger one's life.

in the words of the psalmist. However, this psalm only describes the ultimate destination of the *homo religiosus*, not the path leading to that destination. For the path that eventually will lead to the “green pastures” is not the royal road, but a narrow, twisting footway that threads its course along the steep mountain slope, as the terrible abyss yawns at the traveller’s feet.” (Halakhic Man. JPS. Translation-Lawrence Kaplan. Footnote no.4)

## IN CONCLUSION

This philosophy is a troubling one. Maybe that is why I am attracted to it. This philosophy demands that a person be constantly moving, constantly growing. Stagnation is the enemy.

I believe that this is an extremely difficult level to be at. Especially in our 21<sup>st</sup> Century world that values harmony and comfort as essential commodities, the notion of a war against complacency and an ideology of incessant personal striving is certainly unusual. This is difficult emotionally as well. We all want to feel that we have reached our goal, that we have found our destination and now we can rest. But, I do believe that the truly religious soul is the restless soul; always striving, groping, reaching higher and higher, searching for new avenues of expression, nourishment and good deeds.

## A CHANNUKA CONNECTION

The Sefat Emet, the Gerrer Rebbe, in connection to Channuka presents this idea elegantly complementing this theme. The Sefat Emet comments on the Gemara in Shabbat. There the Gemara is determining the correct timeframe in which to light Channuka Candles. The Gemara defines it:

“From sunset until the marketplace is empty.” (Shabbat 21b)

A straightforward Halakhic reading of this statement informs us that one may light candles from dusk and that candles may be lit later in the evening, as long as there is a potential for some passer-by to view our Channuka lights. Indeed this is the Halakha.

But the Sefat Emet<sup>4</sup> creates a Midrash of sorts on the words here. He twists them around and creates something new. The Hebrew phrase here is, “*Ad sheTicleh HAREGEL min haShuk*,” Until the foot (REGEL) has left the marketplace. The Sefat Emet plays with the vowel sounds and rephrases it as “*Ad sheTichleh HERGEL min Hashuk*.” Not *Ha-Regel* – the feet of the passers-by – but *Hergel*, meaning routine, habit, learned behaviours. Chanuka for him, is the festival of constant renewal. The existence of a flame is dependent on a steady flow of fuel, the light shining in the darkness. All of this represents the need to constantly rejuvenate our spiritual lives, to fight the drudgery of routine, and to be constantly letting the lights increase.

Shabbat Shalom and happy latkes!

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<sup>4</sup> Sefat Emet 5631 and 5632