

Thinking Torah

By Rav Alex Israel – www.alexisrael.org

Parshat Vayishlach Yaakov Struggles

Chavruta

1. Read chs.32-33.

2. In your opinion, when Esav first left to meet Yaakov (see 32:6), was his original intention a violent one? Did he want to kill Yaakov? If not, what else is possible?

Relate to:

- 32:3-6
- 33:1-17, especially 33:4.
- See also to 27:41-45! (... how long has Yaakov been away?)
Why do chazal see Esav as so threatening in the opening lines of the parsha?

Compare Rashi on passuk 6-7 (also Radak- passuk 7) with Rashbam on the same pesukim. How do you explain the difference?

See also Radak (passuk 3) . Is the danger real, or is it a figment of Yaakov's imagination? Why would Yaakov feel this way?

3. The opening lines of our parsha quote a message that Yaakov sends to Esav.

- If you were Yaakov, are these the things that you would say to Esav? – which phrases seem in place, and which seem out of place?

4. Passuk 8-9 Yaakov divided his camp.

- What is the purpose of this move?
- What is Yaakov's battle plan according to a. Rashi; b. Rashbam?

5. Passuk 23. Why does Yaakov get up in the middle of the night?

- What is he doing all alone (passuk 25)?
- How does this fit in with the earlier plan? (see question 4)
- Why does the mysterious "ish" fight with him now?
See Rashi (25), Rashbam (23,25)

Shiur

Yaakov sent ahead delegation of messengers to his brother Esav, to the land of Se'ir. He sent them with a message: To my lord Esav – Your servant Yaakov says 'I stayed with Lavan and remained there until now. I have acquired cattle, asses, sheep, and male and female slaves. I send this message to my lord in the hope of gaining your favour.' The messengers returned to Yaakov, saying: We came to your brother Esav. He himself is coming to meet you with four hundred men. Jacob was greatly frightened and distressed. He divided the people with him, and the sheep, the cattle and the camels into two camps,

thinking, 'If Esav comes to the one camp and attacks it, the other camp may yet escape.' (32:4-9)

Twenty years have passed but Esav hasn't changed. Esav: hostile, eternally furious, dangerous, violent, indignant and unforgiving. Yaakov is understandably terrified. Wouldn't you be frozen in terror if you were faced with an armed militia of 400 men? And who exactly are they fighting? – a family with twelve small children, a few slaves, and a large number of animals. A defenceless civilian target! Esav clearly has not changed. The years have not faded his anger, his insult. He is uncompromising. He has no mercy.

"To your brother Esav: You see him as your brother, but he is acting towards you as the evil Esav. He is still filled with the same hate." (Rashi, Passuk 7.)

"... He (Yaakov) prepared in three directions: Diplomatic reconciliation, prayer, and for violent confrontation." (Rashi, v.9.)

This is the way in which we traditionally view our Parshat Hashavua. Esav is a threatening menace. Yaakov is the innocent victim. The atmosphere is one of impending tragedy. We read the pesukim tensely and nervously, certain that Yaakov will be able to escape only by the skin of his teeth, and by virtue of a large helping of divine assistance. It is, therefore, with a sense of incredulity and perplexity that we read of Esav's warm greeting to Yaakov. Esav's exuberant bear hug and kiss leaves us puzzled. How did this hunter, this monster, suddenly transform into a loving brother and a doting uncle? What changed Esav?

AN ALTERNATIVE READING.

The Rashbam reads this narrative in a very different way. In his view, the messengers return from their rendezvous with Esav with a very different feeling:

"We came to your brother, to Esav: And you gained his favour just as you wished! In fact he is so happy about your arrival that, in his love towards you he is coming to meet you with four hundred men in your honour. This is the focus of the text (Ikar peshuto.) Similar to this is the verse (in Shemot 4:14 which describes Aharon setting forth to meet his brother Moshe): 'Indeed he is coming to meet you and he will be happy to see you.'

And Yaakov was greatly frightened: in his heart. Even though Esav had expressed to the delegation his intention of honouring Yaakov, Yaakov did not believe that Esav's intentions were good."

So here we have a very different picture of Esav, and of Yaakov. But from where does the Rashbam develop this unorthodox reading? Does the text tolerate this reading? I believe that it does, quite clearly. Indeed, contrary to popular opinion, this might well be the p'shat (straightforward textual reading) of the parsha.

Let us examine the facts. We get the story from Yaakov's angle. All we know is that Yaakov has approached Esav with a conciliatory message. The messengers have returned with a simple fact. Esav is on his way to meet Yaakov with a group of 400 men. Is this bad or good? From the bare facts we know nothing of Esav's intentions. We have no information.

How then, might we gain a glimpse of Esav's mindset here? Well, it's simple! Let us look at the actual meeting between the brothers and try to determine with what mood, what frame of mind, Esav has set out to meet his long-lost brother. Interestingly, the verses engender a spirit of brotherliness and closeness:

"Looking up, Yaakov saw Esav coming, accompanied by four hundred men. He divided the children among Leah, Rachel and the two maids ... he himself went on ahead and bowed low to the ground seven times until he was near his brother. Esav ran to greet him. He embraced him, and falling upon his neck, he kissed him; and they wept. Looking about, he saw the women and the children. 'Who', he asked, 'are those with you?' He answered, 'The children with whom God has favoured your servant.'" (33:1-5)

Later Esav tries to reject Yaakov's gift, saying:

"I have enough, my brother; let what you have remain yours." (33:9)

And finally Esav suggests that they unite their families:

"Let us travel on our journey; I will proceed at your pace." (33:12)

The atmosphere is calm, respectful, congenial, somewhat touching. Esav's big bear hug after Yaakov's formal hesitant approach signals a massive sigh of relief for all. But we cannot help but wonder whether Esav might have been friendly and conciliatory all the time. Esav would seem to have emancipated himself from his youthful feelings of sibling rivalry. He certainly doesn't mention the divisive arguments of yesteryear. Esav is prepared to move on, to forget the past.

And then we wonder. Was Yaakov's fear all misplaced? Could it be that Esav was positively disposed to Yaakov all the way along? Suddenly the Rashbam begins to come into focus. When we read the story backwards, we have no doubt that Esav was leading a friendly welcoming party rather than a band of bloodthirsty mercenaries. Maybe the Rashbam is correct?

But if the Rashbam is correct, then the questions pass over to Jacob's side. Why is Yaakov so paranoid? Why is he so distrustful? Could it be that Yaakov is still living in the past whereas Esav has got over it? What is fuelling Yaakov's fear?

THE QUESTIONS

If we can, at this stage, summarise our discussion thus far, we should frame our discussion in the following way.

For RASHI, Esav is a violent adversary who wants to kill Yaakov from the start. If this is true, we wonder why Esav eventually greets Yaakov so warmly. What happened to transform Esav? An obvious methodology here would be to locate the transformation point somewhere between Esav's threatening first appearance and his friendly greeting¹. We

¹ We should mention, that there is a further option that one could offer. We could claim that Esav's non-aggressive meeting is somehow not the true Esav. Bereshit Rabba 78:9 quotes an opinion of R. Yannai in this direction that truly Esav wished to attack Yaakov by biting his neck but that miraculously Yaakov's neck became as solid as granite. Hence Esav's tears at his meeting with Yaakov are not tears of reconciliation and the warm overtures are not what they seem. In this approach, Esav

would be interested to identify the moment in which Esav reverses his original intent.

For RASHBAM we also have a problem. Esav is positively disposed to Yaakov throughout the story. But the question points at Yaakov. Why is he so terrified? His fear is so genuine, so deep, if Esav is really not a threat, then we have to understand Yaakov.

A THIRD APPROACH

Rav Yoseph Bechor Shor² offers a middle approach, somewhere between Rashi and the Rashbam, which seems to be a very reasonable reading of the situation. Here is his commentary to the key verses:

"He himself is coming to meet you with four hundred men: ... We don't know what is his intent, for good, or bad. He didn't talk to us! Rather, he said, 'I will go to him. I want to talk to him in person. If I am going to talk to him personally, I don't need to tell you the content of the conversation.'

Jacob was greatly frightened and distressed: He didn't know what to do/ If he knew that Esav intended him harm, he would save himself by taking an escape route, or by protecting himself within a walled town somewhere ahead. But now, maybe Esav is coming to honour him, and if he will escape, Esav will take note and react with animosity. And if Esav intended to harm him, he could not fight four hundred men. Hence Yaakov was distressed; he didn't know what to do: to escape or to stay there."

In this approach, the textual ambivalence regarding Esav's intentions becomes the central drama of the narrative. Clearly, this confusion as to Esav's true motives is the motivating factor in Yaakov's complex preparations for their encounter. First (passuk 9-13) Yaakov engages in preparation for a violent confrontation, for war. But then the tone shifts away from the feelings of fear as we see (pesukim 13-20) Yaakov sending gifts to Esav in an attempt to ensure that the meeting is an amiable brotherly rendezvous³. Yaakov has to prepare for every eventuality. The Midrash portrays this in a beautifully crafted image as it pictures Yaakov's servants as they carry the gifts to Esav as dressed "in battle dress underneath, with white robes over them." (Tanchuma Buber 6) The Midrash

is evil to the very end. There is no turnaround. But Rashi does not adopt this approach.

² 12 century. One of the Baalei HaTosaphot.

³ In an article many years ago in Yeshivat Har Etzion's "Daf Keshet", Rav Mordechai Sabbato charted this pattern as a classic example of the "shtei bechinot" methodology, whereby the Torah tells a single story twice, each time from a different vantage point. This method is used in order to distil individual strands within a single event. In our story, we find two parallel accounts of Yaakov's preparations for his encounter with Esav. Each story ends with a similar phrase relating to Yaakov going to sleep (see v.13 and v.2.0.) It is unlikely that he went to sleep twice! Instead Rav Sabbato suggests that we read both stories as happening simultaneously. Because they have very different themes, the Torah reports the stories as distinct. The most direct clue as to the difference between the two sections is this: In v.9-13 the leading word (leitwort – *milah mancha*) is MACHANEH giving a direct indication of a war atmosphere. Here Yaakov prepares for the possibility of a violent encounter via his splitting the camp, and his dramatic prayer. The second section (v.13-20) is characterised by the lead-word MINCHA – a very simple switch of letters from MACHANEH- which indicates a soft approach to Esav and the hope that the meeting will be peaceful. Rav Sabbato's approach suggests that the duality of war-peace is embedded into the very structure of the parsha.

understands Yaakov's complex situation as he ensures that his servants appear peaceful, but they are prepared for war if that is necessary.

SECTION II - RASHI AND METHODOLOGY

So let us return to Rashi. Rashi has to explain how Esav switches from an aggressive assailant into an affectionate brother. To make a point of learning methodology, let us just examine this problem from a theoretical perspective, before we read Rashi's comments.

If we assert that a change has taken place in Esav, something new in the story must prompt it. Now, where would we look for that pivotal moment? Obviously, we will scan the text somewhere between the news that Esav is coming with 400 men, and Esav's surprising hug and kiss. So what we want to do is to identify the options here, the sections of the story that might have reversed Esav's original intent. To my mind, there are five theoretical "candidates":

1. Yaakov's prayer (32:9-12)
2. The gift (32:13-21)
3. The fight with the "man" in the night (32:24-30)
4. Yaakov's seven-fold bowing to Esav (33:3)
5. The sight of Yaakov's wives and small children (33:1-2,5)

On an *a priori* basis, all these events are potential reasons for a change in Esav's intent. If it's (1) Yaakov's prayer, God might have answered it. Or maybe (2) the gift worked. Possibly Yaakov's bowing (4), or the sight of his children (5) might have softened Esav a little. The most enigmatic option of all is the nighttime wrestling contest with the mysterious stranger. Does this story really fit in?

From a methodological perspective, we will clearly want to examine each of the options above and to ask ourselves to what degree they contribute to the transformation of the situation.

But let us return to Rashi. In our parsha, Rashi in at least one approach⁴, suggests that the enigmatic episode of the night-time fight with the man/angel is the key to Esav's metamorphosis. Many of us are familiar with his point of view. He suggests (see comments to 32:25,27,29) that Yaakov's wrestling partner is an angel, and not just any angel, but "*Saro shel Esav*": Esav's alter ego, Esav's representative angel, or his metaphysical manifestation.

How are we to understand this approach? What does it mean for Yaakov to wrestle with Esav's spirit? One thing that we might say is that this approach presents us with a sense of symmetry. Yaakov's daytime reunion with Esav is parallel to his meeting with Esav's angel at night. In fact, the first provides the resolution to the latter. Yaakov battles Esav's soul during the night. Yaakov wins. As a result, the meeting the next morning is emptied of all its tension, and this for a very clear reason. Because the fate of the morning encounter has been resolved during the night before.

But can the text even begin to support such an approach. After all, the Torah talks of an "Ish" a man who fights with Yaakov. How do we see this anonymous assailant as an angel, let alone

⁴ Rashi seems to offer multiple options here. In 33:4 Rashi indicates that it was Yaakov prostrating himself before Esav that precipitated Esav's change of heart.

Esav's personal angel? Is there any textual basis for such a theory?

1.&2. PANIM EL PANIM and ELOHIM:

In the course of the Parsha, Yaakov repeatedly refers to his meeting Esav "face to face." This is particularly prominent in 32:20 where the root PANAV/PANAY is used four times in a single sentence.

This root resurfaces with a clear parallel. In the morning, after Yaakov has vanquished his adversary, it states:

"Yaakov called the place Peniel: 'for I have seen ELOKIM FACE TO FACE and my life has been saved

After Yaakov meets Esav, he makes a comment which is highly reflective of this:

"...accept from me this gift, for seeing your FACE is like seeing the FACE of ELOHIM" (33:11)

Esav's face is reminiscent of the face of Yaakov's night-time attacker! And the nighttime attacker is described as ELOHIM – godly in some way.

Indeed, Yaakov's name is changed because:

"You have struggled with ELOHIM and man and yet prevailed." (32:28)

But are the "man" and the ELOHIM connected? They seem to be! Maybe Rashi's suggestion that Yaakov's attacker is somehow a (spiritual) reflection of Esav is nearer to the p'shat than we might imagine at first glance.

3. "VatiNAZEL nafshi" (32:30) – Yaakov is spared from his struggle with the "man" in the night. This same word is used for Yaakov when he pleads with God to save him "HAZILEINI na miyad achi, mi-yad Esav." (32:11)

Yaakov pleads for salvation from Esav. He is saved from the man/angel. The same phrase is used for both.

4. VAYE'AVEK – VAYECHABEK

Rav Yissachar Yaakobson (in his excellent work, Bina BaMikra) suggests a powerful visual (and possibly linguistic) parallel. Yaakov wrestles with the angel – the metaphysical Esav. He hugs the real Esav. The visual impression is virtually identical! The image of two people wrestling or of two people hugging is not very different. It is the same posture. Even the words are similar: CH-B-K and A-V-K are almost identical roots. And it would seem that the two incidents are connected by a causal link. The hug is the outcome of the struggle.

5. BRACHA

Rashi deepens the connection with a further focus on wording: In the case of the fight with the ish/angel one of the central details of the story is the BRACHA⁵ – Yaakov's request that the angel bless him:

⁵ This is a key word in the entire Yaakov-Esav story, especially with its twin word connection: BRACHA-BECHORA. This connection that has been noted by many, especially in the word-play (paronomasia) of similar sounds between the words. Take for example Esav's words of protest (27:36): "Is his name Yaakov not appropriate! He has tricked me

"He said: 'I will not let you go until you bless me.' Said the other: 'What is your name?' He replied, 'Yaakov.' Said he, 'Your name shall no longer be Yaakov, but Yisrael...'" (32:28-9)

Rashi identifies this word as a connection point with the entire Esav-Yaakov saga. After all, their last incident together was a fight over blessings. It is those blessings that constitute the source of the Esav-Yaakov tension. Now that word re-surfaces, does it create a particular connection? Rashi's comments:

"Bless me: Admit to me that my father's blessings - that Esav contests - are rightfully mine.

Your name shall no longer be Yaakov: It shall not be said that the you received the blessings via trickery (from the root AKV – Yaakov) and deceit, but rather through seniority and openness (gilui PANIM!)"

The drama of the nighttime struggle is essentially the final chapter of the struggle over the BECHORA-BRACHA. In that nighttime struggle, Esav's metaphysical identity concedes the blessings to Jacob. Now that this argument is settled, the brothers can reunite peacefully.

SECTION III - THE TRANSFORMATION OF YAAKOV

Let us return to the alternative approach offered by Rashbam, whereby Esav remains consistently friendly throughout the story. What might be the central drama of the story according to this perspective? If Esav is positively disposed to Yaakov throughout, then we are not looking to him as the subject of the entire narrative. Esav is constant. Yaakov is not.

If we adopt a reading of the opening pesukim as indicating that Esav is most certainly friendly, then the spotlight shifts over to none other than Yaakov. What is the Yaakov story about? Maybe we can suggest that it is not Esav but Yaakov who is to undergo a transformation within this chapter. After all, names in the Bible indicate deeper character identity⁶ and Yaakov is given a new name in this chapter indicative of a new identity.

What is this new identity? At a basic level it would seem that his name is changed from Yaakov, the one who holds on to the heels of others (see 25:26) to Yisrael, one "who struggles with God and man and prevails." (32:28) Are we just being told that Yaakov is now a "winner" rather than a "loser"? And has Yaakov always been a loser? After all, he does succeed against Esav in his struggle for the birthright and for the blessings although he has to resort to a certain degree of deceit. Even with Lavan he succeeds against all odds, albeit using trickery.

Maybe this leads us to a different assessment of the name "Yisrael" as opposed to "Yaakov". The name Yaakov is not only reminiscent of Yaakov's birth. It has a later meaning (27:36) – that of trickery and underhand methods. In this sense, the name Yisrael might come from the root YASHAR indicating a more straight open approach. Not crooked but rather straight.

(vaYAAKVen) twice; He took away my BECHORA and now he has taken my BRACHA."

⁶ The instances of connection between name and meaning are too numerous to list here, but our two proponents, Esav and Yaakov, are good cases in point. See the verses in chap 25:26, 30. For examples of figures whose names are changed, see Abraham (17:3) whose new name bears the connotation of significant offspring. Gidon's name is changed to Yerubaal (Book of Judges ch.6) – he who fights with Ba'al.

The twinning of these two verbs with this meaning is found in a passuk in Yishiyahu 40:4: "Vahaya haAKOV lemiSHOR - And the crooked will become straightened."

FEAR OF CONFRONTATION

In this vein let me maybe suggest an additional angle on the Yaakov transformation. One of the aspects of Yaakov's personality would seem to be his avoidance of direct confrontation. In certain of the stories so far Yaakov prefers to act secretly, even stealthily in order to achieve his goals, rather than engaging in direct confrontation. This is certainly the case in the episode of the blessings where rather than talking things through with his father Yaakov engages in subterfuge and deceit in order to achieve the desired objective. Likewise with Lavan, Yaakov avoids direct accusation (until Lavan accuses him.) He gains the flocks that are rightfully his by trickery and he tries to leave Lavan without even saying goodbye! Yaakov avoids direct confrontation, and this forces Yaakov to engage in meticulous planning, but planning that often involves a dimension of deception.

Now Yaakov initiates contact with Esav. It would appear that Yaakov's fears of conflict are subsiding. It would appear that Yaakov has decided that he and Esav need to meet in order to overcome their past. But, on a closer look, we realize that Yaakov is once again attempting to avoid Esav. Yaakov prepares for battle, prayer and gifts, but none of these really entertain the notion of a real reunion. After all, Yaakov's "battle plan" is that one of the camps should escape! Likewise, the whole purpose of the gift is that Yaakov NOT confront an angry Esav. The phrase that is repeated to Esav over and over by Yaakov's servants is that: "your servant Jacob is behind us." Jacob is hiding again.

It is in this light that we should dwell upon the circumstances in which Yaakov is assaulted by the nighttime adversary. The text tells us that:

"That same night, he arose, and taking his two wives, his two maidservants, and his eleven children, he crossed the ford of Yabbok. After taking them across the stream, he sent across all his possessions. Yaakov was left alone. A man wrestled with him until the break of dawn." (32:23-5)

Now, where is Yaakov going in the middle of the night?

According to Rashbam,

"He intended to escape an alternative route and hence he crossed the wadi at night ... he intended to avoid Esav entirely AND AN angel WRESTLED WITH HIM to prevent his escape so that he would see the fulfilment of God's promise, that Esav not harm him."

Yaakov is running away; avoiding the meeting with Esav. And it is precisely because of this that God sends an angel to intervene. We might say that God comes to teach Yaakov a lesson. God orchestrates a fight "face to face" after which Yaakov can receive the accolade "Yisrael – for you struggled with God and man, and you prevailed." Yaakov can move from trickery to the straight path, because his experience here teaches him not to be fearful. He CAN fight face to face, and win.

In this vein we might wonder what became of all Yaakov's elaborate preparations for his rendezvous with Esav.

“And Yaakov looked up and suddenly Esav was coming.”
(33:1)

When Esav actually arrives, Yaakov (after his fighting all night) is totally taken by surprise⁷. Yaakov quickly organises his children. The word used is VaYACHATZ, reflecting Yaakov’s original intent to split his camp (see 32:8). But we all realise that this family arrangement is a feeble shadow of what had been earlier planned. He attempts to salvage some of his planning but to no avail. Once again, the real meeting with Esav mirrors the nighttime struggle. It is a direct meeting that cannot be prepared for.

When it comes down to it, Yaakov has to deal with Esav “face to face” and to realise that he doesn’t need props, or bribes, or prayers, or war strategies. Yaakov must have the confidence that he can face Esav and assert his covenantal status unchallenged. This is the change of Yaakov to Yisrael. And this is the transformation of Yaakov from fear to confidence. Yaakov is a covenantal leader of a future nation. As such, he must lead the nation with openness and a sense of self security. That is Yisrael!

Shabbat Shalom

⁷ In this context, see the poignant Midrash in Bereshit Rabba 78:7.