

## ***Va-yeitzei*: "Ramifications of the Jacob-Esau struggle"**

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Our opening verse relates that ‘Jacob departed (*va-yeitzei*) from Beer-sheva and went (*va-yeilech*) to Haran’ (Gen. 25:10). This simple statement nevertheless presents some difficulties. Primarily, the necessity for the Torah to have stated that Jacob departed from Beer-sheva, given that, since the days of Abraham, the family had lived there for some thirty years, with many of their experiences already recorded. It would have sufficed, therefore, to have stated, ‘And Jacob went to Haran.’ Secondly, the fact that the Torah had already stated that Jacob was instructed by his parents to flee to Haran and did so (27:43; 28:5, 6, 7).

To the first of the above problems *Rashi* offers two answers: the first, textual, or stylistic; the second, Midrashic, or exegetical:<sup>1</sup>

*Jacob departed*: The episode of Jacob and Esau’s blessing is interrupted with the statement that, ‘when Esau saw that the daughters of Canaan were evil in the estimation of his father, Isaac, Esau went to Ishmael and married Machalat, the daughter of Ishmael, son of Abraham, sister of Nevaïot, in addition to his other wives’ (28:6-9).

*And [Jacob] departed*: ...The Torah only required to state, ‘And Jacob went to Haran,’ why, then, did it include mention of his departure? But it comes to teach that the departure of a righteous person from a place creates a profound impression, for, so long as he remains in a place, he constitutes its glory, its splendour, and its beauty; but when he departs, its glory, splendour, and beauty depart with him.

Rashi’s first explanation clarifies that, with its opening *Va-yeitzei* verse, the sidrah picks up the thread of the Jacob-Esau episode that had been interrupted. The point of relating Esau’s new marital and domestic involvements was probably to explain his

This sidrah covers Jacob’s twenty-year exile from the land of Israel. From the time God told Abraham to leave his family home and travel “to the land that I shall show you” (Gen. 12:1), the patriarchs had determined to remain permanently in Canaan unless constrained to leave for circumstances beyond their control. And Esau’s enmity for Jacob was clearly such a circumstance. This, we suggest, may also provide an explanation for the repeat detail that constitutes our opening verse, namely, to emphasize the agony of the separation for both Jacob and his parents, as well as its implications in terms of the national and spiritual significance of leaving the Promised Land.

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The same play on the verb *y-tz-a* is found a little later, when Jacob leaves the presence of his father after receiving his blessing and almost bumps into Esau as he ran in to complain to his father - *vay'hiy ach yatzo yatza ya 'akov ... v'eisav achiv ba mitzeido* (v.30).

For Jacob, 'the mild man who stayed indoors' (25:27) – comfortable in the safe environment of his family tents – the term *va-yeitzei* to describe the stormy story of his life also represents a double entendre, referencing his 'departure' from his natural character and lifestyle and his forced alienation from a life governed by his family's values and traditions.

This also leads us to consider the inevitable effect of Jacob's 20-year absence from his home on those left behind – an aspect of the story not dealt with in the sidrah's narrative. The nearest we get is the Midrashic comment on the word *Vayeitzei*, as quoted in the second interpretation Rashi offers above: 'But it comes to teach that the departure of a righteous person from a place creates a profound impression...'

We may but guess at the effect on their parents of the absence of Jacob - and, for that matter, Esau. Modern psychology refers to 'empty nest syndrome.' And the silence of the home after Jacob fled and Esau had become preoccupied with his two families, Hittite and Ishmaelite, would have been palpable. Rebecca and Isaac began by taking sides in their attachment to Jacob and Esau, respectively, and, following Rebecca's deception of Isaac to help secure the firstborn's blessing for Jacob, that must have driven a coach and horses through their relationship. Given Isaac's closer relationship with Esau, his conscience must also have troubled him at having let him down so heavily. And this also would not have helped his relationship with Rebecca who contrived it.

Then, there was fear for the safety of Jacob on his solitary, and possibly perilous, journey to Laban's home in Haran. Until then, he'd hardly moved beyond the confines of his family homestead, and now he had to confront a five-hundred-mile journey! Also, Rebecca was in no illusions as to her brother, Laban's devious character, and she must have feared greatly at the advantage he might take of her guileless son. On that score, there were the inevitable self-doubts that both parents would have shared regarding the wisdom of the advice that they had given Jacob to undertake that uncertain course of action, and the niggling worry that he might have been safer remaining under their roof where they could keep an eye on him, watch out for, and frustrate, any violent intent on Esau's part, and, however unlikely, persuade him to make peace with Jacob.

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Our sidrah relates two encounters that Jacob had with angels. In the first he sees them ascending and descending on a ladder that links earth and heaven (Gen.28:10-15). In the second, they confront him on his journey back to his parental home after years of exile at the home of Laban (32:1-3). And, in the following sidrah (32:25-30), he has a third and most traumatic encounter with an angel that maims him, but from whom Jacob secures a blessing – perhaps a belated confirmation of the firstborn's blessing that was for so long at dispute between him and Esau. The aggression of that heavenly being must have given his conscience no little unease as to the subterfuge he had been constrained to employ to secure it and possibly also as to his true entitlement to it.

These three angelic episodes remain problematic, and many commentators view them as representative of an internal, psychological or spiritual, struggle within the soul of father, Jacob. Psychologically, it may be viewed as an encounter within the psyche; a

psychosomatic representation of the God whose existence was an ever-present reality to him, and whose guiding hand he so desperately needed to be assured of, on this dangerous and fateful journey into the unknown.

The angels were ascending and descending. They were moving away and out of sight at one moment and coming into view at another, emblematic of his own sense of uncertainty as to whether he was deserving or otherwise of God's protective presence. Had he committed the unpardonable sin in taking away his brother's birthright? Was God unprepared to place the sin on the debit account of his mother, notwithstanding that she had reassured him, *alai kil'latcha b'niy* - "upon me will be your curse, my son." He may have feared that a curse was a currency that could not so readily be redeemed by a third party. Perhaps it would adhere to Jacob forever! Perhaps this vision meant that the angels would be abandoning him and returning to their heavenly source, leaving him defenceless and at the mercy of Laban, Esau, and who knows who else?

*"But then, who knows? Perhaps it was indeed divinely ordained that I should get the blessing? After all, my father, Isaac, was his father's younger son, and yet it was clearly God's wish that the older brother, Ishmael, should be banished and disinherited in my father's favour. Furthermore, did not my brother readily agree to the sale, and even after he went weeping and complaining to father that I had seized his blessing, did not father confirm me as its rightful recipient, saying, gam baruch yihyeh, "May he, indeed, be blessed?"*

*"That must surely have been a prophetic revelation. Father must have known that my mother had referred to kil'latcha, my curse. It follows then that with that one phrase - gam baruch yihyeh – his intention was to neutralise it and converted it into a blessing. Now I see the angels again, and this time they are descending. They must be returning to reassure and protect me!"*

The angels were as enigmatic to Jacob as they are to us. Just as we cannot comprehend their essence, he could not comprehend their purpose nor how to relate to them.

For the entire twenty years he spent in exile in Laban's home he must have agonised over the mystery of the angels' upward and downward journey and their alternating distance from and proximity to him. And, to crown it all, as soon as he leaves Laban's home to return with his family to Canaan, he again encounters angels (32:2). But, this time, it is not merely uncertainty that grips him; it is terror. He is about to encounter his hostile brother. He fears for his life. He is gripped by existential doubt, by a feeling of his spiritual unworthiness. Perhaps the curse had not been neutralised after all, and these angels had come to impose it!

*Vayomer ya'akov ka'asher ra'am machaneh Elokim zeh – 'And Jacob said, when he saw them, "This is a heavenly camp. Not only are these not friendly angels, but they have formed themselves into 'a camp,' which presages hostility and retribution for my having deceived my father and supplanted my brother."*

The angel leaps on Jacob, and they wrestle the entire night. Neither can get the better of the other. Jacob oscillates between victory and defeat; between accepting his guilt and asserting his righteousness. Jacob's self-doubts begin to surface, and his thigh becomes dislocated in the struggle. But he clings tenaciously to his belief in his own righteousness, demanding that the angel confers the blessing on him: *Lo ashaleichacha kiy im beirachtani*, "I shall not let you go until you have blessed me."

Jacob's growing confidence in himself, and in his innocence and righteousness, gives him mastery over the hostile force. *Vay'varech otto sham*, "And he [the angel] blesses him there." At long last that potential curse is removed. Jacob is vindicated. Maimed, though vindicated.

But why was he maimed – or did he feel or dream that he was - just in the thigh?

Perhaps it was because there are no half measures in the act of exoneration. To satisfy his conscience, Jacob had to have every unworthy act purged. And there was one such act still outstanding, namely his imposition of an unnecessary oath on Esau. He had impugned his brother's honour; he had refused to accept his word that he was transferring to Jacob his birthright. He had demanded that Esau take a solemn oath – “Swear to me first.” And he swore unto him’ (Gen. 25:33) – one that would involve invoking the name of God.

In biblical times, taking a solemn oath involved placing one's hand upon the thigh of the one to whom one was swearing (See Gen. 24:2,9; 47:29). The oath was not to be imposed or regarded lightly. Its use was restricted, as were the conditions under which it could be annulled. It was certainly not to be employed merely to confirm a sale – even one as important as a birthright. So, Jacob's own thigh was dislocated as an act of ‘measure for measure’ purgation.

Despite having been maimed, Jacob now feels *shaleim* (Gen.33:18) – morally, emotionally, and spiritually, ‘whole’ – exonerated, at peace.

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## NOTES

1. Rashi frequently offers two interpretations of a phrase, with the first elucidating the *peshat*, or literal sense, and the second, a Midrashic, or exegetical, exposition.

Sometimes, this is also when the *peshat* elucidation does not, of itself, resolve all the textual difficulties.

