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בס"ד

## Parashat Vayishlah Part I Genesis 32-33

### 1. Toward Meeting Esav

Upon consummating a friendship covenant with Laban and taking leave of him, Jacob proceeded on his homeward journey. On the threshold of entering the promised land, finally free from the master deceiver who had constantly exploited him, he surely felt elated. A band of G-d's angels came upon him (Gen. 32:1-2). He named the location *Mahanayim*, connoting two camps, his and that of the accompanying angels, an expression of his feeling that G-d was with him. This experience complements the vision of angels he had at Bethel upon leaving Canaan (28:12-15) and closes an envelope comprising the phase of his life that began with that departure. It commemorates the successful completion of his venture to the East and points to G-d's fulfillment of His promise made on that earlier occasion that He will protect him on his journey and return him to his homeland safely. (It is noteworthy that Bethel and Mahanaim are both sites that play prominent roles as regional centers in Israel's biblical history.)

The Torah highlights the correspondence between the two visions by deployment of the same verb in both cases in usages that are unusual. Upon departing, it states *וַיִּפְגַּע בַּמְּקוֹם* (Jacob "hits" upon a place) while here, speaking of the angels, it states *וַיִּפְגְּעוּ בּוֹ* (the angels "hit" upon him). However, there is a significant difference between the two visions: on the present occasion there was no verbal communication, therefore no specific guarantee of G-d protecting him on his forthcoming venture as there was on the previous occasion. In general, G-d is with Jacob, caring for him while chastising and disciplining him. But there is a matter that is now relevant that Jacob is personally responsible to take care of.

Entering the proximity of his brother Esau, Jacob now turns his attention to the situation from which he had run away: Esau's declared intention to kill him. Confident of G-d's concern for him, so recently manifested through contact with the angels, at this point he is not particularly apprehensive of Esau.

The reader, however, senses cause for concern. Rebekah had told Jacob to remain with Laban *וְיָמִים קצרים*, a short time, until his brother's wrath had subsided, when she would send for him (27:44-45). More than twenty years had passed and she had not summoned him. She loved Jacob and would be eager to see him and his children; surely she would be interested in having him become established in the land of his designated patrimony, an important feature of the blessings and the continuation of the covenant. The oracle she had received from Hashem during her pregnancy cannot but have been weighing heavily on her. Hence, refraining from asking Jacob to return is a clear indication that she felt Esau remained in his vengeful disposition.

It is appropriate to assume that Rebekah was still alive when Jacob began his journey home, for her death prior to that would have been a relevant detail to report in the narrative. After her sons' reconciliation, reporting her death was unnecessary.

Jacob, in an exultant frame of mind, sends messengers to Esau, "to the land of Seir, the fields of Edom," to inform him of his return. Esau's activities had caused him to leave the promised land, confirming his indifference to it and to the promises of the future nation that was to be established in it. Perhaps he had not as yet completely relocated since the Torah subsequently describes that move as occurring after

Jacob's return, "For their possessions were too great for them to dwell together" (36:7).

Jacob's message to Esau was respectful and correct, neither apologetic nor subservient. It employed the deferential terms "my lord" and "your servant Jacob," as to be expected, and it contained the information that he had become a man of significant means and was interested in finding favor in Esau's eyes.

When the messengers report that Esau was traveling to meet him with four hundred men, Jacob became "very frightened and distressed" (32:8). People do not travel such long distances (more than eighty miles north of Seir) with such a large entourage of men – a regular militia in biblical times – for ordinary greeting purposes. And the messengers did not bring back a reciprocal greeting from Esau. Although the text does not provide an explicit statement regarding Esau's intention and the messengers' report is ambiguous on this point, we have no reason to doubt that Jacob interpreted it correctly. It appears that the Torah deliberately concealed Esau's hostile intention; perhaps this was done out of respect for the change of heart that came over him shortly afterwards, supporting the view that his later conciliatory feelings were genuine.

As Jacob has no hope of prevailing against Esau in case of an attack he divides his people and possessions into two camps with the thought that if Esau does attack, one camp would be able to escape. He then prays. He fervently pours out his supplication with expressions of his deepest fears in standard religious format. However, his words betray vexation and perplexity with his situation mixed with a tinge of complaint at G-d's apparent indifference to his plight.

## 2. The Prayer

Jacob begins his four-verse prayer with an invocation of the G-d of his father Abraham and of his father Isaac. This expresses personal humility and invokes ancestral merit as well as family destiny. It implies the possibility of receiving divine assistance aside from considerations of personal worthiness. (These are themes that the sages acknowledged to be appropriate for the opening portion of all prayers and which they

established for the opening blessing of the core, daily formal prayer of Israel, the *shemoneh 'esreh*.)

Jacob expands the invocation with an adjectival clause concerning G-d. Contrary to protocol, however, it is not a straightforward description of some aspect of G-d's greatness but an obliquely self-serving statement: "Hashem, who instructed me 'Return to your land and to your kinfolk and I will do good by you.'" Even while citing Hashem as the addressee of his supplication he cannot free himself from his fixation and reveals his bewildered disposition toward his situation. The implication of his statement is this: G-d, you instructed me to return home and I am complying with Your will, so why am I confronting such grave danger? You caused this predicament so it is Your responsibility to do something about it. This is unfair!

In the second prayer verse, he humbly acknowledges his lack of merit for the many favors G-d has previously done for him since he departed from home: "I crossed this Jordan with [nothing more than] my staff and now I have become two camps." Here also, his choice of words betrays a deeper intention. The assertion of "two camps," which denotes great material success, contains the ironic implication that the only reason he was now "two camps" was precisely because of the danger he was facing. It represents his anticipation of disaster! In addition, the term "two camps" is a double entendre; it also recalls the name he had so recently given to the place at which he was located, namely, Mahanaim. To him, it signified the association of the "camp" of G-d's protective angels with his own camp. Even in expressing his gratefulness for G-d's magnanimous provision in the past, he alludes to the thought of his unfair plight.

The third prayer verse contains the supplication: "Save me from my brother, from Esau... lest he come and smite me mother upon child." Citing the cause of the danger as being "my brother" Esau, especially with a reference to "my brother" in a separate clause, calls to mind that it was his own non-brotherly behavior toward Esau that is the true and sole cause of his problem, rendering the prayer a totally misplaced effort. That thought seems to pass him right by.

In the prayer's fourth and concluding verse, he returns to its opening theme. He further vents his frustration by again recalling G-d's promises to deal well with him and to greatly multiply his posterity. He cannot extricate himself from this fixation. Throughout, the prayer discloses his perspective. He recognizes that G-d has been good to him but he does not yet formally recognize personal responsibility for his plight. He does not understand why G-d is allowing the mortal threat that is besetting him – a threat that is almost at the striking point – to happen to him. He feels entitled to better treatment from Him. By his incessant focus on the same basic thought we can see that he sensed something was not right, that things did not make sense. As he acutely focused on his relationship with Esau thoughts began percolating inside him, but the breakthrough in his understanding had yet to come.

Of course divine promises are contingent on the recipient's acting properly and being worthy of the promises' fulfillment. Jacob acknowledged this principle early on when he made his vow at Bethel: After G-d's pledges to him he made his vow on virtually the same items that G-d had pledged (28:20). At that point the matter had nothing to do with his relationship with Esau. G-d acknowledged Jacob's great potential as well as his great failings; He chose to be protective of him in one sphere while He provided him chastisements for correction in another sphere. In any event, Jacob, still oblivious of his responsibility to make amends to Esau, had no reason to think he had recently become unworthy of G-d's promises. During his years with Laban he conducted himself with praiseworthy integrity. He was returning home at G-d's behest. Only a short while before he had been the recipient of a divine manifestation. (True, the latter was without any specific pledge.) And here he was in a crisis with disaster looming! He thought that in all fairness he had every right to receive special consideration from G-d who instructed him to return home. His allowing such a situation to develop and to progress to the critical point indicates something was amiss for which he had no explanation.

The prayer thus opens a window into Jacob's thinking. Together with the immediately following verses we are provided a glimpse into the process of his transformation to genuine religious maturity. We

observe the emergence in him of an insight regarding G-d's attitude toward man's responsibility in his interaction with fellow human beings. G-d cannot be expected to intervene on behalf of a person concerning a problem that is of his own making, which is his responsibility to address, and which is within his power to rectify! In such a situation, requesting that G-d intervene to solve the problem is a misplaced religious service. A human being, even one who has mightily striven to serve G-d, must realize that His relationship with G-d, deserving as he may be of divine favor in many respects, is altogether multidimensional. (In its subtle manner the Torah here comments upon an aspect of the weighty theological issue concerning G-d's governance of the world.)

Not having yet forthrightly faced the critical implication of his overall circumstances, and superficially having thought that he had done all he could do to alleviate his plight with his prayer, Jacob attempted to sleep for the night.

### 3. A New Disposition

However, he could not sleep. Surely mulling over his situation, he finally realized that a conciliatory peace overture to Esau before meeting with him was in order and he immediately began preparing it. It would be an overture based on recognition of Esau's rights, specifically, that he was to be acknowledged the senior of the brothers and deserving of the blessings that their father had prepared for him. Accordingly, he arranged the sending of a truly magnificent gift – one that literally constituted a fortune – comprising a series of many individual droves of various species of animals. He incorporated amicable number symbolism (which we will soon describe) in which he tangibly ceded elder status to Esau.

It is noteworthy that the Torah indicates that initiation of the gift idea occurred to Jacob after he retired to go to sleep for the night but was not able to do so. This is accomplished through the unusual structure of verse 32:13. After mentioning that Jacob was going to sleep – וַיֵּלֶן שָׁם בְּלַיְלָה הַהוּא – the narrative abruptly changes the subject in mid-verse to relate the account of the gift: וַיִּקַּח מִן הַבָּא בְּיָדוֹ מִנְחָה לְעֵשָׂו אָחִיו (“he took from what had come to him a tribute to Esau his brother”). In this way the Torah focuses the reader's attention on

Jacob's new disposition as resulting from considerations associated with going to sleep. This points to the working of human conscience, universally understood to speak to a person most forcefully when he retires to bed, getting respite from his day's activities, when certain mental faculties are released from their daytime constrictions and given broader reign. Especially as it immediately succeeds the account of the impassioned prayer of his vexation, which he must have sensed was inadequate, Jacob finally came to the realization that he had been wrong in his behavior toward Esau and that it was incumbent upon him to make amends to him.

The numbers of goats and sheep he included in the gift were 220 each, a significant number. The number 220 together with 284 constitute a pair of "amicable numbers," that is, a pair of numbers that possesses the feature that the whole number factors of each member of the pair adds up to the other member of the pair. (Factors of 220: 1, 2, 4, 5, 10, 11, 20, 22, 44, 55, 110 = 284; factors of 284: 1, 2, 4, 71, 142 = 220). Such pairs are rare occurrences in the number system and this is the first such pair that occurs in it. In certain areas of the ancient world a gift of such a number was a symbol of a friendly gesture; presenting the smaller number signaled that the granter considered himself to be the subservient party of the pair. In our case the amicable number transformed what would on its own have been considered a huge gift into a historic statement of Jacob's new perspective regarding the brotherly relationship and the material blessing of their father.\*

Jacob sent the many droves as individual units. Each had its own group of servants who were instructed to leave a space between each drove, each time creating

the impression that the gift was now complete, but time and time again was followed by another pleasant surprise. The servants were to act in a most deferential manner toward Esau. Although calculated to maximize the psychological impact upon his brother, the larger context indicates that the gift should not be thought of as a mere tactical ploy. Rather, Jacob realized that he must use every effort to achieve reconciliation. In an unusual flourish, the Torah cites his inner reasoning as regards his intentions as well as his hope as to the outcome. He said אֶכְפֹּרָה פָּנָיו בַּמִּנְחָה ("I will appease him with a gift," using a verbal derivative of "atonement") followed by אִילֵּי? שָׂא פָּנָי ("perhaps he will then accept me," using a derivative of "forgiveness"). The gift was intended as a meaningful gesture of reconciliation.

After reviewing the gift and sending it on its way, Jacob finally got to sleep. However, despite his new disposition and the conciliatory gift, he could not sleep long. He apparently sensed that things were not completely in order, that there was more to do.

#### Endnote

\* L.E. Dickson in his *History of the Theory of Numbers*, p. 39, quotes Rabbi Abraham Azulai (1570–1643) from his *Baale Brith Abraham*, who states that he found the following statement written in the name of Rab Nahshon Gaon (Gaon of Sura, 871–879): "This number 220 is a hidden secret, being one of a pair of numbers such that the parts of it are equal to the other one, 284, and conversely. And Jacob had this in mind; this has been tried by the ancients in securing the love of kings and dignitaries."

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