

# NORTHWEST YESHIVA HIGH SCHOOL

presents

## Thoughts on the Parasha

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### *Yaakov's Life as a Model for the Jewish People*

*And G-d appeared to him again upon his return from Padan Aram and He blessed him. G-d said to him: Your name Yaakov – you should no longer be called by the name Yaakov. Rather Yisrael should be your name. And He called him by the name “Yisrael”. (Beresheit 35:9-10)*

### The two prophecies of Bet El

Parshat VaYishlach continues the Torah's account of Yaakov's life. Yaakov became the focus of the Torah's narrative in Parshat VaYetze, and with the conclusion of Parshat VaYishlach, Yaakov recedes from the forefront of the Torah's narrative and is replaced by his sons. Yaakov will still play an important role in the Torah's account. However, he will no longer be the main character. The apparent message of the Torah's treatment of Yaakov is that with the birth of his final son – Binyamin – he completed the primary elements of his patriarchal mission and that his sons emerged as the primary focus of Hashem's providence. Therefore, with the conclusion of Parshat VaYishlach, it is appropriate to reflect upon the totality of the Torah's description of Yaakov's life and to extract from the narrative its fundamental message.

It is noteworthy that this account of Yaakov's life begins and ends with the Torah's descriptions of his prophecies at Bet El. Parshat VaYetze opens with Yaakov fleeing from Esav and arriving at Bet El. At Bet El, he has the vision of a ladder ascending to the heavens and the angels of Hashem ascending and descending the ladder. Hashem assures Yaakov that He will protect him during his exile from his father's home and that He will create from Yaakov's descendants a great nation that will possess the Land of Israel. Towards the end of Parshat VaYishlach, Yaakov returns to Bet El. There, he has another prophecy. Hashem changes Yaakov's name to Yisrael and renews the assurances of the prior prophecy.

The implication of this presentation is that Yaakov's experiences during the period intervening between the two Bet El prophecies were somehow formative and fundamental in securing the future described in the prophecies. In other words, the initial Bet El prophecy was somewhat tentative and it became finalized in the second prophecy.<sup>1</sup> The transition in these assurances from

<sup>1</sup> A discussion of the reasons that the initial prophecy was not an absolute assurance is beyond the scope of this presentation. However, it should be noted that the tentative nature of the initial assurances is evident from Yaakov's attitude towards them. Upon receiving the initial assurances, he gave expression to his understanding of the assurances as being tentative and vowed to take specific measures *if* they would be fulfilled. Later, before confronting Esav, he again expressed his uncertainty regarding whether the assurances would be fulfilled.

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their initial tentative status to their finalization was somehow facilitated by Yaakov's experiences during his exile from his father's home. Therefore, it is important to study these experiences and understand their significance in transforming these assurances.

### Yaakov's encounter with Lavan

Yaakov's experiences during his absence from his father's home were dominated by two adversarial encounters. The first encounter was with his uncle Lavan and the second was with his brother Esav. Although both of these relationships were adversarial, Yaakov responded to each differently.

Yaakov may not have initially realized that Lavan was an adversary. However, he certainly became aware of his uncle's character when Lavan substituted Leah for Rachel. Yaakov worked for Lavan seven years in order to secure Rachel as his wife. Upon completion of these years of service, Lavan deceived Yaakov and substituted Leah for Rachel. Despite this deception, Yaakov agreed to work an additional seven years, for the right to also marry Rachel. When Yaakov finally completed his fourteen years of service in exchange for his two wives, he agreed to work for Lavan an additional period. During this period, Lavan continued to treat Yaakov – his nephew and son-in-law – unfairly. Despite his frustration with Lavan, Yaakov persevered. Finally, Yaakov concluded that the time had arrived for him to leave Lavan and return home with his family. But apparently, even at this point, Yaakov exhibited ambivalence. Hashem appeared to Lavan in a dream and warned him against attempting to persuade Yaakov to return with him.<sup>2</sup> Hashem's warning can only be explained if Yaakov retained some ambivalence about leaving Lavan.

When Yaakov and Lavan met in their final encounter, a dispute erupts between them. Lavan accuses Yaakov or someone in his camp of stealing a valued item from his home. Yaakov invites Lavan to search his possessions for the missing treasure. Lavan finds nothing and Yaakov concludes that Lavan's accusation was nothing more than a subterfuge designed to afford him the opportunity to search Yaakov's possessions. It is unlikely that this final divisive encounter was merely an unfortunate but accidental misunderstanding. More likely, its inclusion in the Torah's narrative is intended to communicate that this conflict was engineered by providence. Its purpose was to seal Yaakov's decision and assure that last minute remorse did not induce Yaakov to reconsider his decision to return home.

Throughout his many years with Lavan, Yaakov does not express fear or become discouraged. As each challenge arises, he formulates an appropriate response. Yaakov understands that he and Lavan are adversaries. But he has confidence that he can ultimately best Lavan and emerge the victor. Therefore, despite the challenges he faces in Lavan's home, Yaakov does not flee or seek to return to the peaceful refuge of his father's home.

**And Yaakov sent messengers before him to his brother Esav, to the Land of Se'ir to the Fields of Edom. Beresheit 32:4)**

### Yaakov's encounter with Esav

Parshat VaYishlach begins by describing Yaakov's encounter with his brother Esav. Yaakov sends messengers to his brother bearing his greetings. The messengers are rebuffed and Yaakov is seized with fear and anxiety. He questions whether he will survive the encounter unscathed. He prepares an elaborate gift for his brother, designed to assuage his anger. But he also prepares for the possibility of a violent conflict. In this encounter, Yaakov does not have the confidence or self-assuredness that he exhibited in his dealings with Lavan. Instead, he is plagued with fear and doubt.

Yaakov's strategy is effective and his sizeable gift has its intended effect. Esav is reconciled with his brother and offers to aid him on his journey. But Yaakov demurs. Despite his success in reforming his brother from his violent intentions, he is not confident that he can

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<sup>2</sup> Rabbaynu Avraham ibn Ezra, *Commentary on Sefer Beresheit* 31:25.



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maintain control over Esav's mood and attitude for an indefinite period. Instead, he persuades Esav to depart and allow him to travel without accompaniment. The contrast in Yaakov's attitude and behavior towards these two adversaries demands explanation.

### **Lavan and Esav – a comparison**

Yaakov's treatment of his two adversaries indicates that he understood that although he was engaged in conflict with each, the nature of these conflicts were very different from one another. Lavan did not hate Yaakov. Lavan was greedy. His greed led him to act dishonestly and deceitfully. But Lavan's treatment of Yaakov was not an expression of personal animosity. He treated Yaakov no better or worse than he would treat any other person with whom he engaged in business. Yaakov felt that he could survive and even prosper with Lavan. He realized that he must be cautious in his dealings with Lavan. Sometimes, Lavan would outmaneuver him, but he would learn from these mistakes and become shrewder through the experience. Yaakov was confident in his ability to adapt, learn, persevere, and ultimately triumph.

However, Esav's attitude was dominated by a deeply personal animosity and hatred. He viewed Yaakov as a usurper. Yaakov had taken the birthright and blessings that Esav believed were justly his own. Yaakov knew that he could – at best – achieve a temporary fraternity with his brother. But the fraternal would ultimately be erased by the reemergence of the more intense hatred. In other words, whereas the encounter with Lavan was challenging, the encounter with Esav was fundamentally dangerous.

### **Lavan and Esav and prototypes**

These two encounters emerged as prototypes for his children and their descendants. As a nation, Yaakov's descendants would be confronted with the challenge of exile and interaction with adversarial nations. Like their patriarch Yaakov, these descendants would be required to understand their adversaries and differentiate between the Lavan-types and the Esav-type. The Lavan-type nations would tolerate, and at times, even welcome the Jewish people. But the Esav-type nations would pose an insurmountable danger in their hatred and animosity for the Jewish people. The Esav-type resents the status of the Jewish people as Chosen and believes that it should be the Select and Chosen of G-d.

Through these two encounters, Yaakov came to understand the world that existed outside of the protection of his father's home. He came to understand which challenges should be embraced and which dangers are insurmountable and must be avoided. His life and experiences emerged as a paradigm and as a lesson for his children and their descendants. These lessons and the prototype relationships that they defined would provide the guidance that his descendants would need to survive in exile – an environment that is at best adversarial and sometimes terribly dangerous. These lessons would guide the Jewish people through the dark years of exile and help preserve them until the time of redemption and fulfillment of the promises of Bet El.