

VaYishlach 5776

VaYishlach is Genesis 32:4-36:43

Many of the more important *parshot* of our Torah have a genealogy in them. Whether the portion is outwardly important, such as *Shemot* with the 10 plagues having Moses' genealogy in the middle of it, *Bereshit* with the lineage of the very first people, or *Noach* with the listing of Noah's descendents and the consequences for the descendents of his sons which violated him.

Similarly, this *parashah* ends in a genealogy of sorts. This tells us that it is not a light *parashah*, like any of them, really. It indicates there is more to look at than just the texts and outward facing ideas. It tells us that the actions performed inside affect all our descendents, just as the actions of *Moshe* affects all his descendants.

So what is it that happened? What do we need to learn to protect our future families from our actions today?

The first lesson we must learn is how to make the difficult apology. The apology for transgressions we feel guilty about, even if they were made before we knew better or weren't fully our fault. Jacob knew Esau felt jilted from the favor he received growing up. He also knew of Esau's tendency toward displays of strength and obstinance as a hunter and not an intellectual. With both of these pieces of knowledge, he rightly feared for his people when his long estranged brother, Esau, responded to his apology with a force of 400 men.

Jacob panicked, and we know he's strong because of this panic. Not only was his life threatened along with his people, but his wives, children, and other loved ones were at stake. Yet he pressed on and did what he knew was right.

He did the most Jewish act of not only preparing for the worst

by separating his camps into two groups so one could get away should the other be attacked, but by praying as well. Action combined with prayer is a wholly Jewish concept, just as the fledgling Israelite nation fleeing Pharaoh walked into the Red Sea before it split, just as Esther and Mordecai took action to preserve the people before they prayed for assistance. Jacob is a member in a long line of Hebrews who take action along with prayer.

Of course, Jacob was well rewarded with his actions. Whether the prayer was needed, whether the additional gifts presented to Esau were needed, whether the preparations were needed is all immaterial. What matters is that he was rewarded for doing the right thing. By facing the hardest apology he ever had to make, the one where if it was refused, he and his people could (note: I said *could*, not *would*, as we don't know Esau's intentions) be exterminated.

So why did Esau come with so many people? The easy answer, and the one I'm inclined to go with, is because of family history. Any time Esau put himself out there, usually while hunting for the family, Jacob, through his own initiative or another's, took something from him. The most notable of this was the birthright of the first born. Esau received a message saying Jacob wished to gain favor from Esau and Esau, growing up the less intellectual and more gullible, feared it was a trap.

We know, through the narrative, that Jacob had no intention of setting up a trap. Esau did not have the luxury of two kinds of text (Hebrew and English, written down) to tell the story that we have. He was going into this blind, so of course he needed to take a protective detail. He wasn't stupid, just less politically inclined in his youth than his brother.

This is the first lesson we must learn from this *parashah*: not only must we face down our fears from our most humiliating transgressions – those we made before we knew better yet still cringe at when we think of them –, we must prepare ourselves

from the fallout should that apology bring unintended consequences.

This is simple, though. And it's something taught to us constantly through our history, so much so that it's ingrained in not only our culture and heritage, but our literal DNA. Our ideals of doing the right thing, even if it might backfire, has gotten us in trouble more times that we can count, yet we still do it.

So there's a second part to that first lesson: when someone who has hurt us makes an apology, we must hear it. That's the absolute minimum we have to do, listen. Only after we listen and observe are we able to determine whether we are able to bring them back into our fold and, if so, the degree we are able to do so.

That is the full lesson of this first part: we must make apologies when warranted and listen to them, despite the ramifications.

The second lesson is harder. It involves something none of us like to think of. What happens when we do something that's horrible, that we know that we shouldn't do. What do we do if it's not us, but someone we're accountable for who does that horrible act?

Of course, I speak of the rape of Dinah.

This is not an easy part to understand. Dinah is violated in the worst way imaginable, something far too many women and men deal with. Not only was Dinah violated, but Jacob's sons, in the lust for vengeance, performed the same violence, without the sex, to the villagers. Jacob, upon hearing about this, is upset only that his sons made him look bad.

G-d is silent through this ordeal. While the Torah makes it abundantly clear the rape is to be condemned, it doesn't comment on the violence brought by Jacob's sons. In fact, it

doesn't even comment on the fact that Jacob's sons used Shechem's desperation to force the village to perform one of our most sacred *mitzvot*, the *brit milah*.

The first section of this *parashah* had G-d directly interfering, telling Jacob he was on the right path when the angel wrestled with him. This section has G-d being suspiciously silent. Why? Is it implicit agreement? Is it resolute disdain? Is it embarrassment? Perhaps Jacob has seen enough that he no longer needs G-d to tell him when he's on the right track. Perhaps Hashem bowed out because Jacob either didn't pray or didn't earn favor with these actions.

I think, for the purpose I'm looking at this, G-d's silence is pensive acceptance. It's him standing back, letting us realize something profound. Out of the darkest moments, out of our deepest despair, we can still create something good. Even our lowest, most painful moments can lead to holiness.

It also shows us that we must make actions for transgressions we knowingly commit. The first part of this *parashah* is about the pain we cause others when we don't know better, this one is when we do know better, but still do it anyway. It's an apology which requires preparation, sure, but also a different kind of fire in ourselves. Instead of wanting to fix the past, it's wanting to face your current fear, the one that's fresh in your mind and dragging you down. The one that self reinforces and scares you, deep in your core.

Shechem circumcised himself, along with his village, because they knew that not only blood, but a punishment of their transgressions was the only way to move on. It was fitting, really, because what he took from Dinah, he had to take from himself and was ultimately taken from him by force.

Finally, we come to this genealogy. It's a significantly shorter genealogy than many of the others, but it's still a listing of the descendents. It tells us the names of the

people affected by this – the amount of the people affected by the abusive violation of one single person. It tells us how much of the future was at stake simply with Jacob's apology to Esau.

It wasn't after wrestling with the divine being that Jacob was given the name Israel, "he who wrestles with G-d", but after witnessing his daughter go through the worst moments of her life and how his sons came to her defense, how he wrestled with his own emotions and morals.

We weigh our fears against our comforts every day, every hour, every minute. We form our lives, our hopes, and our actions on our history and our wants. Overcoming those blocks and doing what's right, not only in the eyes of G-d, but in vein of what's true to ourselves is the divine fight we each deal with.

I hope and pray that we take this fight with enthusiasm and tact. That we humbly accept our wins and we graciously accept our losses, but that our measured end does not affect the passion and enthusiasm with which we engage the struggle.