



PARSHAT VAYEITZEI - The Pathway of Yaakov: Finding Truth & Wisdom in Exile

Flight and Faith

Parshat Vayeitzei opens with Yaakov's flight from his parents' home and follows him through his exile in Lavan's house and his mission to build a family. Yaakov's quest was far from simple, and the constant tribulations that he faced come in sharp contrast to the ease and simplicity with which Eisav finds a suitable marriage partner. The final two verses of last week's *parshah* describe how, when Eisav realised that his parents did not approve of his wives, he simply went to the daughters of Yishmael and married one of them. Indeed, Rabbi Shmuel Salant (Jerusalem, d. 1909) posits that the Torah is deliberately highlighting the tests of Yaakov's life so that we can consider what is perhaps the most existential philosophical question of all: why is it that the righteous suffer? Specifically, though, Yaakov's reactions to the tests that he faced teach many lessons about how we can survive and even thrive through the trials and tribulations of exile.

We are introduced to this episode with Yaakov Avinu penniless and on the run from his murderous brother. We can imagine his despair as he rests his head on a pile of stones and falls asleep. The Midrash, in fact, reflects Yaakov's mood with a familiar chapter from *Tehillim* (ch. 121): '*Esa einai el heharim, me'ayin yavo ezri*—I lift my eyes to the mountains; from where will come my salvation.' Yaakov was wondering how he would manage to find a wife when he had not

a penny to his name. The next verse reveals to us the source of Yaakov's fortitude: '*Ezri me'im Hashem*—My salvation is from Hashem.' Yaakov, alone on this deserted mountaintop, found his faith in Hashem. How did Yaakov achieve that sense of unbroken faith?

The Prayer at Night

There is an unusual word used to describe Yaakov's arrival at *Har HaMoriah* (Mount Moriah). The verse says that '*vayifga bamakom*— he encountered the place.' What is the meaning behind this curious phrase? Our Sages explain that Yaakov had actually already reached his destination, Charan, when he realised that he had passed by the place of the Akeidah (The binding of Yitzchak) without stopping. Upset that he had overlooked the opportunity to pray at the place where his father and grandfather had prayed, he turned back in the direction that he had come. As soon as he did that, a miracle occurred and *Har HaMoriah* jumped towards him. In that way, he did not merely arrive there, but he miraculously encountered the place in an unexpected fashion. The prayer that Yaakov then offered was, according to our tradition, the nighttime prayer of *Maariv*.

In other words, Yaakov's prayer, unlike that of our other forefathers, was a prayer that required a certain mindset. Before he was ready to say this prayer, he had to come to the realisation that in his experience of darkness, he was not

alone; he could reach out to Hashem. And as soon as he did so, the mountain 'jumped' - Hashem came towards him. This is the meaning behind the *Maariv* prayer itself. Wherever we are, even in moments of despair, we are able to reach out to Hashem for help. And when we do so, Hashem meets us.

Essentially, Yaakov's story is a microcosm of the past two thousand years of the history of our people. Throughout our long journey through the darkness of exile, we take our strength from the faith of Yaakov Avinu. Holocaust survivor Zalman Noe, in his autobiography *Unbroken Faith* (2008, p.36), movingly describes his experience of a rollcall in Auschwitz. It was Shavuot morning, and the camp was lined up in the Appelplatz square. Suddenly, one person recited a line from *Akdamut*, the complicated liturgical poem that is said on Shavuot, and one-by-one, others joined in until the poem was finished. This gave them all a renewed burst of hope in the darkest of nights. Despite the challenges that we face, the Jewish people gains its strength through its faith.

United We Stand

There was another lesson that Yaakov learned on that same night. The Midrash tells us that Yaakov carefully set twelve stones around and beneath his head, and as he slept, he dreamed that they were arguing among themselves, each one demanding that the tzaddik should

rest his head on it. In the morning, Yaakov awoke to find that all twelve had fused together and he was sleeping on all of them at once. According to the interpretation of the *Kli Yakar* (d. 1619) of this Midrash, Yaakov's overarching concern was that he would be able to build a family that would be united in their service of Hashem. This dream was a sign for the future. Yaakov was being told that although each of his children would be very different from each other, he would be able to keep his family united if they maintained a single aim. If they remained resolutely focused on the ambitions of their parents, grandparents and great-grandparents, they would succeed in fulfilling the mission of the Jewish people.

A short but powerful comment from the *Ibn Ezra* underlines the extent to which Yaakov internalised this lesson. The verses tell us that Yaakov took that one stone and anointed it, setting it up as a monument. The *Ibn Ezra* (d.1167) says that he did this because he knew that one day, he would return to this place and use this stone as an altar upon which he would thank Hashem for his safe return from exile. At the outset of his journey, Yaakov wanted to remind himself that all of his children, however different they were from each other, would succeed if they were able to share a common goal in life.

Next week: Parshat Vayishlach - Antisemitism, Jewish Destiny & The Long View of History