

TIMELESS TORAH

VAYEITZEI: The Journey of Exile & Return

Voices of Exile: The Lachish Letters

The Lachish letters are a series of letters written towards the end of the First Temple Era on clay ostraca, excavated near Lachish in central Israel in 1935. Letter No. 4 seems to have been addressed to the governor of the city of Lachish, and contains a request for the city of Lachish to send a signal as 'we can no longer see the signals from Azekah'. Referencing to Jeremiah 34:7, we can assume that this letter was written as the Babylonian army was advancing towards Jerusalem. The fortified cities of Azekah and Lachish were the last remaining strongholds before Jerusalem, and the message was now being sent that Azekah may have fallen. In this incredibly powerful moment in history, a mere breath before the darkness of the Destruction of the Temple and subsequent Exile, the Jewish people were asking for a sign of hope.

As Yaakov prepares to embark on his journey into exile, the first Jew to do so for a lengthy period of time, he too faces a desperate moment and pleads with Hashem for a sign of hope: 'If Hashem will be with me and protect me on the path upon which I go' (28:20). By nature, Yaakov was a 'dweller of tents', but he was now being forced to flee far from his comfort zone towards an unknown future. Vulnerable and lonely, Yaakov prays that Hashem will protect him along his journey. But curiously, this prayer comes immediately *after* Yaakov's prophetic vision in which Hashem promised that He would not forsake him, assuring him that he would return to his homeland. Why, then, was Yaakov afraid? The Seforno (d.1549) links Yaakov's prayer to a teaching of the Sages (Eiruvim 41b): 'Three things cause a person to leave his mind and the Mind of his Creator – the nations of the world, depressive and negative thought patterns, and poverty'.

These three elements, the Sages taught, can prevent us from thinking clearly and immobilise us from fulfilling our duties. Yaakov now stood at the cusp of a frightening new era in his life, and he prayed that Hashem would save him from falling prey to circumstances beyond his control.

Analysing Yaakov's sojourn in Padan Aram, we find that these three elements form a theme throughout the narrative that can help us gain a perspective on Jewish exile in subsequent generations.

Insidious Opposition

The first challenge that Yaakov faced in Lavan's house was the switching of the bride on his wedding night. That night, Yaakov was certain that he had married Rachel, and it was only in the morning that he discovered that he had really married Leah. In distress, Yaakov complained to Lavan, 'What is this that you have done to me, and why have you deceived me?' (29:25) The Ohr HaChaim (d.1743), commenting on the repetition in Yaakov's complaint, explains that more than the fact that his bride was switched, what disturbed Yaakov so greatly was the deceitful manner in which it was carried out. Firstly, this trickery brought about profound spiritual damage to Yaakov, undermining the purity that should have been present in the hallowed union of marriage. Secondly, Yaakov was concerned about the long-term personal damage inflicted on Leah: having married her, he intended to remain with her, but he feared that their marriage would now forever carry the stigma of Lavan's duplicity.

Here, we encounter the first of the elements that challenge us in exile: the insidious effects of the nations who oppose the Jewish people.



Contemporary Perspectives on the Weekly Parsha with Rabbi Dr Yoni Birnbaum

Wednesdays - 8.00-8.45pm | In-person at Kinloss

The true trial of exile is not merely being subjugated by others but the subtle effect of those who seek to undermine our values.

Prayer From the Depths of Despair

Yaakov's reaction to the second of the elements that are particularly challenging in exile – depressive thought patterns – can be seen in a painful dialogue between him and Rachel. Rachel watches her sister bear child after child, while she remains barren. In her anguish, she turns to Yaakov and begs him to pray for her, telling him dramatically that if she does not have a child, 'it is like she is dead' (30:1). Yaakov, however, responds with surprising harshness, saying that he has no Divine powers and he cannot help her. Rashi explains that Yaakov was pointing out that it was Rachel who was childless while he himself had children from Leah. It was Rachel, then, Yaakov was saying, who had to pray.

Of course, Rashi cannot be taken at face value. After all, would a tzaddik like Yaakov not pray for another person, let alone for his beloved wife? How could he turn Rachel away with such insensitivity? According to the Ramban (d.1270), at the core of Yaakov's message to Rachel was a plea never to despair. Yaakov certainly intended to pray for her with all his heart, but he was telling his wife that after all their supplications, only Hashem could grant her children. Lacking the will to live is a tragic manifestation of *ruach ra'ah*, the negative thought patterns that disturb our life's mission. Understood this way, this dialogue is in fact a message of faith and hope; when we feel trapped in exile, the response is to dig deeper within ourselves and have hope in Hashem.

The Privilege to Keep Mitzvot

At the turn of the century, many Jews emigrated from Europe to America, but unfortunately, a large number of them very soon gave up their adherence to Judaism. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein (d.1986) would comment that those who glorified themselves for succeeding in observing Shabbat despite the hardships involved often found themselves unable to encourage their children to follow in their ways. Only those who felt it was their privilege to give up their jobs and the comforts of America for the sake of the mitzvot were able to imbue these values in the next generation.

This idea is reflected in another interaction between Yaakov and his wives. Having been instructed by Hashem to leave Padan Aram and return home, Yaakov knew that he would have to encourage his wives to follow him. Interestingly, though, Rachel and Leah did not appear to agree simply because they wanted to follow the word of Hashem but instead explained to Yaakov that they had no good reason in any event to stay in their father's home. This, too, was a message for eternity: keeping mitzvot while complaining at the loss involved in doing so will make it difficult to continue. Our task is to find ways to understand that keeping mitzvot is a privilege. In this way, we will be able to make the Torah become part of us.

This is the response to the third element of exile enumerated by the Sages. External pressures might threaten our adherence to the Torah, but the way to overcome them is by reframing them and discovering the ultimate spiritual gains that perseverance brings.

Next Week - VAYISHLACH: Navigating complexity & commitment in Family Dynamics