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בס"ד

Parashat Vayishlah Part I Genesis 32-33

1. Toward Meeting Esav

As Yaaqob, upon taking leave of Laban, proceeded on his journey, he encountered a group of G-d's angels (Gen. 32:1-2). On this occasion there was no verbal communication. Free of Laban and on the threshold of returning to the Promised Land, he felt spiritually elated. He named the location "Maḥanayim," 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 and return him to his homeland safely. The Torah highlights the correspondence between the two visions by deployment of the same verb in a usage that is unusual in both cases, וַיִּפְגַּע בְּמַקְלוֹ (he "hits" upon a place) there and וַיִּפְגְּעוּ בוֹ (they "hit" upon him) here. (It is noteworthy that both Bethel and Maḥanayim play prominent roles as regional centers in Israel's biblical history.)

Entering the proximity of his brother Esav, Yaaqob now turns his attention to the situation that he had run away from, Esav's declared intention to kill him. Confident of G-d's concern for him, so recently expressed, at this point it appears he is not particularly apprehensive of Esav.

The reader, however, senses cause for concern. Ribqah had told Yaaqob to remain with Laban יָמִים 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 Yaaqob and would want to see him; 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 Yaaqob to return is a clear indication that she felt Esav remained in his vengeful disposition.

It is appropriate to assume that Ribqah was still alive, for her death prior to Yaaqob's return would have been a relevant matter to report in the narrative. After her sons' reconciliation the reporting of her death was unnecessary. (The Torah does not provide details for merely human-interest purposes. It reports events that are relevant to the points it is making. Thus, it records the deaths of the patriarchs because they each mark the end of an era with the passing of leadership to their heirs. It mentions the deaths of the matriarchs only when connected to a detail that is necessary to the narrative.)

Yaaqob, in an exultant frame of mind, sent messengers to Esav, "to the Land of Seir, the fields of Edom," to inform him of his return. Esav's activities had caused him to leave the Promised Land, confirming his indifference to it and to the future of the family in it. Perhaps he had not as yet completely relocated, for that move is later described as occurring after Yaaqob's return, "For their possessions were too great for them to dwell together..." (36:7). Yaaqob's message was respectful and correct, neither apologetic nor subservient. It employed the deferential terms "my lord" and "your servant Yaaqob," as to be expected,

and it contained the information that he had become a man of means and was interested in finding favor in Esav's eyes.

When the messengers reported that Esav was traveling to meet him with four hundred men "Yaaqob is very frightened and distressed" (32:8). People do not travel such long distances (over eighty miles north of Seir) with such a large entourage of men – a regular militia in Biblical times – for ordinary greeting purposes. Although no explicit statement regarding Esav's intention is provided we have no reason to doubt that Yaaqob interpreted the messengers' report correctly. The wording of the report is ambiguous and appears to indicate that the Torah deliberately concealed Esav'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.

Yaaqob prepares for the possibility of attack. He has no hope of prevailing against Esav so he divides his people and possessions into two camps with the thought that if Esav does attack, one camp would be able to escape. He then prays. He fervently pours out his supplication and expression of his deepest fears in standard religious format, but his words betray his feelings of immense vexation with his situation and perplexity with G-d's apparent indifference to his plight.

2. The Prayer

Yaaqob begins his four-verse prayer with an invocation of the G-d of his father Abraham and of his father Yishaq. This expresses personal humility and alludes to ancestral merit as well as to family destiny. It implies the possibility of receiving Divine assistance aside from any consideration 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 formal, core, daily prayer of Israel.)

Yaaqob expands the invocation with an adjectival clause. However, contrary to protocol, it is a self-serving statement: "Hashem, who instructed me 'return to your land and to that of your kinfolk and I

will do good things for you'." Even while citing Hashem as the addressee of his supplication he reveals his bewildered disposition toward his situation. The implication of his statement is: 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 had previously done for him, for when he exited the land "I crossed this Jordan with [nothing more than] my staff and now I have become two camps." Here, the assertion of "two camps," which denotes great wealth, is only fitting on a surface level. Surely, the ironic implication is clear: the reason he was now "two camps" was precisely because of the danger he was facing and represents his anticipation of disaster! In addition, the term "two camps" is a double entendre; it recalls the name he had so recently given to the place at which he was located, namely, Maḥanayim. 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, he alludes to the thought of his unfair plight.

The third prayer verse contains the supplication: "Save me from my brother, from Esav... lest he come and smite me mother upon child." Citing the cause of the danger as being his "brother" Esav, especially with a reference to "my brother" in a separate clause, calls to mind that it was his own non-brotherly conduct toward Esav 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 – happen to him. He feels entitled to

better treatment from Him. By his incessant focus on the same basic thought we see that he felt something is not right, that things did not make sense. The breakthrough in his understanding had yet to come.

Although Divine promises are contingent on the recipient's acting properly and remaining worthy of the promises, a principle Yaaqob acknowledged early on when he made his vow at Bethel following G-d's pledges to him (28:20), he had no reason to think he had recently become unworthy. During his years by 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. And here he was in a crisis in which disaster was 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 onto Yaaqob's thinking. Together with the immediately following verses we are provided a glimpse into the process of his transformation to 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, a matter particularly relevant to his own past relationship with Esav. 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 must realize that His relationship with G-d, deserving as he may be of Divine favor in many respects, is altogether multi-dimensional. (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 with his prayer, Yaaqob attempted to sleep for the night.

3. A New Disposition

However, he could not sleep. He finally realized that a conciliatory peace overture to Esav before meeting with him was in order and he immediately began preparing it. It would be an overture based on recognition of Esav'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 small 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 Esav.

It is noteworthy that the Torah indicates that initiation of the gift idea occurred to Yaaqob 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 Yaaqob was going to sleep – וַיֵּלֶךְ לִישׁוֹן בְּלֵילָה הַהוּא – the narrative abruptly changes the subject in mid-verse to relate the account of the gift – וַיִּקַּח מִן הַבָּאָרְדוּ מִנְהָה לְעֵשָׂו אֶת־יוֹ. In this way the Torah focuses the reader's attention on Yaaqob's change of heart concerning his relationship with his brother 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 activities, when certain mental faculties are given broader reign. Especially as it immediately succeeds the account of the impassioned prayer of his vexation, which he must have sensed was inadequate, it appears that Yaaqob finally came to the realization that he had been wrong in his behavior toward Esav and that it was incumbent upon him to make amends to him.

The number of goats and sheep included in the gift was 220 each. A feature of 220, when taken together with 284, is that they comprise a pair of “amicable numbers,” wherein 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. 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 grantor 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 Yaaqob's new perspective regarding the brotherly relationship and the material blessing of their father. *

Yaaqob 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 followed by another pleasant surprise time and time again. The servants were to act in a most deferential manner toward Esav. 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. In an unusual flourish the Torah cites Yaaqob's inner reasoning as regards his intentions as well as his hope as to the outcome. He said אֶכְפְּרָהּ פָּנָיו בַּמִּנְחָה ("I will appease him with a gift," using a verbal derivative of "atonement") followed by אִילֵּי יִשְׂאָא 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, Yaaqob 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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