Vayishlach: Bereshit (Genesis)

What's it all about?



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After 20 years in Charan, **Jacob finally returns home**. He sends a messenger to Esau, hoping for a reconciliation, **but learns that his brother hasn't forgotten or forgiven**, and that Esau is on the warpath with hundreds of armed men. Jacob prays and sends Esau a large gift.

That night, after ferrying his family off to safety, **Jacob encounters an angel who wrestles with him until daybreak**. Jacob suffers an injury, but prevails and earns himself the name Israel, meaning "he who prevails over the divine."

When the brothers finally meet, they kiss but part ways. Jacob buys himself a plot of land, and a neighboring prince, Shechem, kidnaps and rapes Jacob's daughter Dinah. Her brothers, Jacob's sons Simeon and Levi, take vengeance by first convincing all of the city's males to circumcise themselves and then, when they're vulnerable, killing them all.

Jacob travels along. Rachel, giving birth to her second son, Benjamin, dies and is buried in a roadside grave. Jacob arrives in Hebron to see his father, Isaac, who then passes away at the age of 180.

> "I crossed this Jordan River on my way to Charan with nothing to my name but my staff, and now, thanks to Your kindness, I have become the head of two camps."

Take a deeper dive

This week's parsha begins on an ominous note: Jacob is heading home, towards an almost certain confrontation with Esau. So, naturally, he's afraid. But afraid how, exactly? The verse tells us only this: "Jacob became very frightened and was distressed." This, the great commentator Rashi explains, is no mere repetition: "He was frightened," Rashi writes, "lest he be killed, and he was distressed that he might kill others."

Right here, then, we have Jewish morality in a nutshell: **taking someone else's life is just as troublesome to the righteous Jacob as losing his own**. But it's how he deals with his fear that is truly exemplary: "Jacob," Rashi continues, "prepared himself for three things: for a gift, for war, and for prayer."

It's a beautiful life lesson: **when we face hardships, Jacob teaches us, we must remember that we've three options available to us.** We can try gifts, meaning charity or appeasement to make the problem go away. We can try prayer, or trusting in the Almighty. Or we can try war, or standing up and fighting. **It's not always an either/or:** usually, each difficult situation calls for some combination of the three abovementioned options.

But Jacob's wisdom runs even deeper. He divides his camp into two, arguing that even if Esau somehow manages to kill Jacob and some of his men, others, at least, would survive. **Jacob wasn't just being strategic; he was teaching us a deep spiritual lesson,** which the Hassidic master, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, captured in a famous saying: Gam Ktzat Ze Tov. "Even a little is good." In other words, even if just a small remnant of Jacob's camp would've escaped, he would've still given thanks for his portion.

Why? **Because Jacob knows the meaning of true gratitude.** As he prepares to cross the river and face the inevitable showdown with Esau, he prays to God and gives thanks. His words are among the Torah's most moving: "I have become small from all the kindnesses and from all the truth that You have rendered Your servant, for with my staff I cross this Jordan, and now I have become two camps."

Twenty-one years ago, Jacob tells God, I ran away from home with nothing but my stick. And now, I'm prosperous enough to stand here with so many wives and children and property that I can divide my crew into two camps. And as I contemplate all these blessings, I become small, realizing how great and good God truly is in giving someone as small and humble as me so much.

The Sfat Emes, the founder of the Gur Hassidus, teaches us that Jacob's attitude is precisely the prerequisite for accepting divine blessings: **Only when we acknowledge that we are small and worthless**, only when we concede that the blessings were never meant as a celebration of our own glories and strengths but rather as a tribute to God's goodness, **do we truly deserve HaShem's grace.**

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