

MORASHAH
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Parashat HaShavuah Series

Parashat Vayishlach

When Jacob hears of his brother Esau's approach with a significant military force, the Torah tells us that he is afraid:

ויירא יעקב מאד ויצר לו

"Jacob became very frightened and he was distressed..." Gen. 32:8

What can this mean, that Jacob, to whom God had personally promised security, success, and blessing, was afraid? And, as we are taught that the deeds of the Patriarchs are a paradigm, a guide to their descendants, what does Jacob's fear teach us about our fears? In our world, buffeted by economic crisis and terrorism, in addition to the small fears of daily life – the little foxes that ruin our vineyards – an approach to fear is all too relevant.

A classic *midrashic* approach (*Mechilta*) is that Jacob's fear was that he was undeserving of God's promise. *"Woe is me, perhaps my sins have made me forfeit God's protection!"*

Jewish history bears out Jacob's fear – if not for himself, then for his descendants – as over and over, tradition tells us, our sins have cost us Divine assistance, leading to the destruction of our Temples and exile from our land.

This perspective provides real guidance, if seen not as despairing self-recrimination but as a call to act. If we examine our own actions in relation to those situations where we fear, perhaps we will find that greater attachment to *mitzvot*, a closer adherence to our *middot*, Jewish values, in our interpersonal, economic and political lives may lessen the danger. Like Jacob – how much more so than Jacob! – we can never assume ourselves worthy of miraculous salvation, but as Jews we continue to work toward our holy goal. Even if this does not allay our fears, it enables us to face them as *menschen*.

Rashi, focusing on the doubling of the expression of fear (*vayira / vayetzer lo*) follows the *Midrash (Tanchuma, Bereshit Rabbah)* in discovering two separate fears:

"vayira: perhaps he will be killed, and vayetzer lo: perhaps he will be forced to kill others."

The first fear is a natural one. Most of us, even if prepared to give our lives, still seek to live, if possible. The second fear, the one that "distresses" Jacob, is a moral one. Jacob is concerned about being placed in a situation in which he will have to act against his nature, against his code. Many of us remember the famous words of Golda Meir to that

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effect – resenting the Arabs more for making us kill their children than for their killing ours.

Note: even if Jacob had to kill in this un-brotherly meeting, he would be doing so in self-defense. He could be considered justified in so doing, to save his life and the lives of his family. Still, Jacob is tortured by the idea of taking up the sword, of becoming, in effect, like Esau. His sensitivity is so high that even that which he may be permitted to do – perhaps must do – is abhorrent to him, as it runs against his perception of the higher Divine values.

There are, then, real things that it is reasonable to fear. But beyond that, we should accustom ourselves to fear doing that which is wrong, which is not our best, our holiest and highest behavior. Especially in a time of fear, when emotions rage, it is all too easy to succumb to baser instincts. Jacob would not succumb; we, his descendants, have the challenge of living through our fears in a way of which we will not be ashamed.

The explanation of the Netziv adds another layer. In *Haamek Davar*, he understands

the first phrase (*vayira*) to refer to the real fear of Esau that fell on Jacob's heart, and the second phrase (*vayetzer lo*) to mean that Jacob was distressed by the fact that such fear had come upon him, as he realized that it meant that evil was on the way.

Perhaps, as some have suggested, the Netziv felt that Jacob, a *tzaddik*, knew that if he were experiencing such terror despite God's promise, it was a sign of potential ill to come.

But there is another way to understand his comments, more pertinent, perhaps, to our situation. Jacob indeed knew that evil would follow his feeling of fear – not the evil of Esau's potential war-making, but rather the evil caused by the fear itself. Like Franklin D. Roosevelt, the Netziv saw that fear itself is the worst enemy, most to be feared. Jacob, according to this reading, knew that extreme fear can paralyze people, distort their thinking processes, bend their moral values. It would be the effects of fear that would keep him only Jacob – Ya'akov, the heel-grabber – and not allow him to be the spiritual Israel – Yisrael. Small wonder that his fear distressed him, and he sought to manage it.

We, too, need to manage our fears lest they destroy us, for fear deafens a person to the voice of the *neshamah* just as rage does. We see that Jacob did so. He strengthened his faith with prayer, and prepared both physically and spiritually for meeting his fear face to face. And he did so as himself, his best self.

As we face our fears, whatever they may be, we can try to do no less. In controlling our terror lest it control us, in striving to act in ways consonant with our highest nature – with Torah's dictates – even at the scariest of moments, we stand in the shade of our great ancestor, and partake of his courage.

Shabbat Shalom!

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