

On a Shabbat of wrestling, I am rising this morning to share aloud about a personal challenge I have been wrestling with. It's not the most important challenge I – or we – face, but it is subtle and important, and infuses my relationship with people and God – and myself.

I might say it is the challenge of Yaakov Avinu's essential identity. A man who was born just a second after his brother, trying to arrive at the right moment and being just a drop late, and that's where all the trouble began.

And now this morning he arrives back to encounter his brother and he sends him messengers saying, **עַד עַתָּה**. "I have been living with Lavan, and I was delayed until now". Or, I tarried until now. I was just detained until now, as many of the commentaries and translations take it. But none of these is the most apt translation.

Va-ehar. An active verb. I wasn't held up by Lavan, says Yaakov. I wasn't slowed by some external force. *I am late*. I have been hiding from you, fleeing from you, Esav, says Yaakov, and I am finally showing up. 20-something years later, or perhaps 20-something years late, I am here. **עַתָּה**. Now.

What we encounter at the beginning of this parashah is the struggle of a man who has been perpetually hanging back, avoiding, being late, who now says, "**עַד עַתָּה**". I have been a latecomer. But no more.

It's strange. Why *does* Yaakov take responsibility for his lateness? Couldn't - shouldn't - he actually have said – Lavan switched my wages so I had to work longer to support my family. And he switched my wives at the outset and that cost me seven years! And not only that – I only had to flee because you were so angry. If we could've sorted things out and you acknowledged that the birthright was truly mine, I wouldn't have had to leave home to begin with. So my delay in seeing you here, now, has very little to do with me. I wasn't late – I *was* detained!

But Yaakov doesn't say that. He says, I showed up late. In some way, I recognize my complicitness in this whole journey. I cannot just see myself as a victim. In some cases of course I can, but if I tell my whole life's story of lateness as one of being subject to external forces, what kind of life is it?

So it is with lateness. I often am running a little late, and then something else happens to make me later, and when I arrive at my meeting or appointment, I conveniently only mention the external

circumstance that made me later, and conceal from the other person, and maybe more importantly from myself, my own role in my lateness.

Now I know there are some people in this room who are basically always on time for things. I don't understand you, and you probably don't understand me, but if you've got this figured out already, maybe you can still listen and offer me some advice after this drashah.

I recently realized that I struggle with lateness. I only recently realized because I basically always tell myself that I am close enough to on time, or that it's not my fault. But once I noticed that I was essentially *always* 1-10 minutes late for everything – appointments, yes, for tefillah, for picking Shira up from the train, you name it – I started to think that I have a little problem. *Perhaps this affliction affects others in this room.*

I want to make two points about lateness. The first – it *is* a problem. The second, something can be done – when we realize that our reasons for lateness are often varied and need to be dealt with one at a time.

Those of us who come late to things usually genuinely believe it is not a big deal. Most people and events run a few minutes late anyway; we tried to come on time; everyone, especially in this age, has something else they can be doing while they're waiting. But if I genuinely respected someone else's time as much as my own, wouldn't I want to arrive on time? And in some small way, isn't an appointment a commitment – to ourselves, to God, or to another person – or to all three? So if I'm late, haven't I, in a small way, lied? Or broken a promise?

One of the only instances where lateness as a verb appears in the Torah is the verse in Devarim 23 (v. 21) לא תאחר לשלמו א-לקיך לה' – when you make a vow, don't be late in fulfilling it. I would've expected the Torah to say – when you make a vow, don't break it! But the Torah is telling us that there is keeping our word, and then there is keeping our word on time. I am going to show to our meeting like I promised, but I'm just going to quickly shoot off one more email before I leave the office. No, says the Torah! לא תאחר לשלמו – it's not just about showing up, but about *not being late*.

Bad things happen when people even *think* you are late. Arguably our greatest national sin, the sin of the Golden Calf, happened either because Mosheh was late coming down the mountain or just because the nation thought he was late.

This problem of lateness fans out into all kinds of areas, like procrastination, not replying to invitations to events in a timely fashion - and this is a real challenge in our Bayit, when the deadline for RSVPs passes with just a few people signed up, and then in the last days before an event the replies begin to flood in. How can we plan events effectively when that happens? And lateness goes even into a lot of other areas, but for now I simply want to talk about showing up late to things. What am I planning to do about this problem for myself?

I begin by recognizing that lateness stems from different places in different cases. Sometimes it is about needing to be busy every second and being afraid to be early and be stuck without something to do. Or in other cases it is about needing to try to get one more thing done before leaving where we are, and not leaving enough time to get somewhere. But if I do plan my time better in advance, and if I am honest with myself about what I can reasonably accomplish, and if I am willing to arrive a few minutes early and then just sit and think, or rest, or meditate, I can fix this problem.

Sometimes my lateness has more to do with not actually wanting to go to the thing I am now going to be late for. I act out my resistance in a small way, through lateness. If I can either address that problem head-on and deal with the reason I don't want to go to this thing, or at the very least, if I am going, find a way to come to peace with it, I can help myself arrive on time.

Now I am the first to admit that this is not easy. It isn't resolved in a day, and I am still working on it.

And we learn this from Yaakov – on the one hand he begins his message to Esav by saying, **ואחר עד עתה** – I have been late, I own it, and no more.

But listen in the next few psukim in describing his approach to Esav, Yaakov uses the root **א.ח.ר.**, the root of lateness or behindness, 5 times, and the root **פ.ג.ה.** – approach the face of – or essentially be on time to – 7 times (Wrestling Jacob pp.119-120)! So he is still struggling. Am I behind? Am I late? Or am I present? Ready to confront? This transition takes time.

And so it is in our Bayit.

You know the joke: So what does a yekke do who arrives late for Mincha?

Starts at “yoshvei”.

I suppose the Bayit version would be: what does a Bayit member do who arrives late for Mincha?

Has a seat, waits a few more minutes, and then we'll begin!

Our culture of beginning late is a part of who we are, and it is in some way a very Jewish thing – the whole notion of “Jewish time” is fascinating to me, and amazing to see it trace its roots back to Yaakov. And of course there are benefits to flexibility, to making room for latecomers, and to not being overly rigid. It is not my goal this morning to be overly harsh, but rather to work through my own challenge, to express my commitment to better timeliness for myself and in the ways that I can within our Bayit culture, and reflect that if we turn inward to consider the impact of this attribute in our own lives, perhaps we can find the ways it challenges us, and grow in not breaking our commitments, even little ones, to ourselves, to each other, and to God.

ואחר עד עתה. Yaakov owns his lateness. He surfaces his struggle. And he opens the door for himself to turn the corner, that עקב, to Yisrael – an upright – up-front, on-time person. That is *our* challenge as a Jewish people, and as a Bayit, and for me as an individual.