

Sorrow into Strength: Parashat Vayishlach

Any good theater nerd will know the origin story of Elphaba, the so-called “bad witch” in the popular Broadway musical, *Wicked*. Her mother, Melena, having been given a green elixir before conceiving, Elphaba is born with emerald-colored skin that makes her an outcast amongst peers. Her unusual coloring also eventually causes Elphaba to be shunned within her own family for when Melena takes medicine during her subsequent pregnancy in order to prevent such a birth defect from occurring again, the drug ultimately causes Elphaba’s sister, Nessarose, to be born unable to walk and Melena to die during childbirth. Nessarose’s father blames Elphaba for having brought about such catastrophic events and favors her sister instead. Elphaba, too, feels tremendous responsibility for the younger girl and tends to both coddle and resent her at various times.

A story of Biblical proportions is *Wicked* – with parental favoritism, sibling rivalry, and the unlikely rise of the underdog all being familiar themes of Torah, not to mention the idea of a young mother dying while in labor. In fact, in this week’s Torah portion, *Parashat Vayishlach*, we witness the premature passing of matriarch Rachel who perishes while giving birth to Jacob’s youngest son, Benjamin, while they are all in the midst of travel. As it says in Genesis (35:16-19): “They set out from Bethel; but when they were still some distance short of Ephrath, Rachel was in childbirth, and she had hard labor. When her labor was at its hardest, the midwife said to her, ‘Have no fear, for it is another boy for you.’ But as she breathed her last – for she was dying – she named him Ben-oni, but his father called him Benjamin. Thus Rachel died.”

Aside from the terrible heartbreak of this episode - and the fact that we know that it will lead Jacob to ultimately favor both Joseph and Benjamin, the sons of this tragic, cherished, gone-too-soon wife –

there are a number of other interesting details worth noting about the events just described. First, it is generally the mother who names children in the Biblical tradition as Rachel originally does here. But then Jacob changes his son's name from Ben-oni to *Binyamin* (Benjamin in English), an act that seems most curious. As his wife lies dying, might we not expect that Jacob would have bigger things on his mind than to micro-manage his son's naming? Might we not wish that Jacob would honor Rachel's literal last wish and call the child as she had hoped rather than change things after her passing? And if Jacob were going to change his son's name, why not call Benjamin after his late mother –as we so often do in Judaism, naming our children for beloved relatives now departed – rather than simply tweaking Rachel's choice ever-so slightly? The Torah tells us that after Rachel's death, Jacob buried his wife and set up a pillar in her memory. He also, somehow, found it necessary to negate her selection of what to call her son.

Before we consider further why Jacob wished to switch Ben-oni to Benjamin, we might first look at the meanings of these two different names. Ben-oni is more straightforward – it means “son of my affliction” or “son of my suffering.” The 19th century German commentator Samson Raphael Hirsch describes the name as reflecting “the first feelings of pain and grief at a bitter loss. It is the feeling of having a right to the possession of somebody of whom you have been robbed, which is felt most keenly at the first moments when somebody has been taken from you” (Hirsch on Genesis 35:18). Seen in this way, Ben-oni is a most poignant and fitting name for Rachel to select it as she lies dying, knowing that she will not live to see this beloved, long-awaited for baby boy grow into a man, knowing that this tiny, vulnerable, newborn infant will be immediately robbed of his mother. Son of my suffering indeed! There is so much pain and loss that accompanies the birth of this child.

And what of the name Benjamin? This one, it turns out, is far less clear leading interpreters throughout the ages to offer different possibilities. The great scholar Rashi understands *Binyamin* as meaning “son of the south,” quoting a verse from Psalms in which *yamin* indicates this direction and pointing at Canaan’s location to the south of Aram-Naharaim in which Abraham briefly sojourned. Rashi’s grandson, Rashbam, rather indicates that *yamin* here should be read as *yamim*, “days,” in which case Benjamin essentially would mean “son of my old age” a description that rings true for Jacob as he welcomes the infant already quite advanced in years. Modern scholar Robert Alter suggests that *yamin* here means “right hand,” pointing to Benjamin’s favored status, the son who is imbued with special affection and standing. In a similar vein, the 11th century Spanish commentator Ramban understands *yamin* as pointing to vigor, translating the boy’s name as “son of my strength,” an auspicious sign for future success.

Along with offering an explanation for Benjamin’s name, Ramban also offers an interpretation for his father’s changing of it when he writes, “Jacob fully intended to call him by the name his mother gave him, as is normally done, but he translated the name into a more favorable one” (Ramban on Genesis 35:18). For Ramban, far from opposing Rachel’s choice of name, Jacob was actually trying to honor it by calling the boy Benjamin while also being concerned that “son of my suffering” was quite a burden with which to saddle a newborn baby boy. Already Benjamin would grow up knowing his mother had died while delivering him, already he might feel some amount of unnecessary guilt or shame; already others would always look at Benjamin finding it impossible not to separate the miracle of the child from the terrible circumstances of his birth. As it was in *Wicked*, we know full well that children can sometimes be blamed for things absolutely outside of their control. For the boy’s name, in addition to his very being, to actively evoke memories of tragedy would be far too much. Hence, Jacob called the boy Benjamin – turning sorrow into strength.

The *Etz Hayim Humash* adds to Ramban's beautiful interpretation when it indicates that Benjamin's name was not only designed to downplay this theme of suffering but also to celebrate his late mother and her gifts. It writes, "[Jacob] wants the child to remind him of Rachel's strength and courage, not of her pain and death, and does not want Benjamin to grow up feeling responsible for his mother's [passing]" (*Etz Hayim Humash* on Genesis 35:18). The *humash* explains that the strength being expressed here is not Jacob's or even Benjamin's but rather Rachel's – she is the one who watched her sister take her place on wedding night; she is the one who struggled with infertility, even as she watched Leah conceive many times over. She is the one who traveled while nine months pregnant, who delivered along the way, who pushed out a baby boy as the last act of her very life. Son of my strength indeed! Her resilience, bravery, and sheer force of will are unparalleled.

I love this interpretation of Ramban and the *Etz Hayim Humash*, not only because it redeems what might otherwise look like an unkind act on Jacob's part and honors the blessing of Rachel's extraordinary life, but also because it leaves us with a powerful lesson about facing pain and difficulty in our own day. By choosing the name Benjamin, Jacob was asserting that tragedy should not define the boy, that his sole identity should not be one of "victim," that resiliency and hope can ultimately triumph over loss, that sorrow can eventually yield to strength. We can only imagine the enormity of Jacob's anxiety and grief at this particular moment – his favorite wife dying unexpectedly just as she's borne him a son, this tiny baby reliant upon him alone at a time when fathers knew little about raising children, the entire circumstances of his life having changed forever in an instant. And yet, Jacob has always been a fighter – the one who emerged from the womb holding his brother's heel, the one who duped Esau of both birthright and blessing, who negotiated constantly with father-in-law Laban and always came out on top, who wrestled with God's angel and emerged victorious. Just like his own second name, Yisrael, which points at both struggle and blessing, Jacob knows that pain may not always be deserved or

welcome but that it does bring with it opportunity. Most of us would never, ever choose the most difficult circumstances of our lives – and would be very happy to sacrifice any growth gained through undergoing them in order to reverse their heartbreaking course. And still, most of us have learned from suffering the very depth and nature of strength – whether it be our own, that of a loved one, or the strength of community that pulls us through life’s darkest moments.

Jacob took Ben-oni and made him *Binyamin* in order to teach his son, and by extension all of us, that times of sorrow are precisely those moments in which to muster will. Unfortunately, none of us has all that much control over what life has to offer and, regrettably, illness, struggle, pain, loss, disappointment and grief will accompany every human being at some point, no matter how blessed. When we hit the difficult moments, sometimes the only choice we really have left is how to respond – by becoming paralyzed by fear and sorrow or by looking towards strength and healing. Jacob reminds us that this latter path is the far better way!

Benjamin, as we know, grows up to face his own challenges in life – thought to have lost his one full brother, facing long stretches alone with Jacob as the rest of the family goes down to Egypt for food, falsely accused by Joseph as having stolen from the royal household. I can only imagine that in these moments, too, Benjamin was able to draw upon inner reserves and remember the strength for which he was named, the strength of both his mother and his father. As Ben-Oni, perhaps the boy would have crumbled in the wake of his mother’s death, felt forever guilty she gave her life for his, grown to be fearful and sad and ashamed. As Benjamin, however, he is able to grow up confident and proud, sure in his ability to handle life’s setbacks. While borne in sadness, he comes to embody might.

“Vatikra shmo ben-oni v’aviv kara lo Binyamin – She named him Ben-Oni but his father called him Benjamin” – May we, too, always have the courage to transform sorrow into strength.

Shabbat Shalom!