

Vayishlach

December 2022

Two weeks ago, I stood on this bimah and shared with you a story about a potato, an egg, coffee beans, and a knife. Now, I know not everyone was here that week, and I know that even for those of us who were here, a refresher can be helpful, so here's the long and the short version: Each of these items was exposed to the same substance--boiling water-- and each was affected in a different way. The potato went from firm to soft, the egg went from soft to firm, the beans became a delicious drink, and the knife, though visibly and texturally unchanged, emerged kosher.

This story, we said, could also be read as a metaphor for living a life of Torah. Being immersed in Torah, like being immersed in boiling water, can affect different people, and different moments, in different ways, making us stronger, or more vulnerable, or more holy. We concluded that, to an extent, we can choose to what level we let Torah transform us.

Two weeks ago, we also looked at the stories of Rebekah and Isaac and their embattled sons Jacob and Esau. We talked about the metaphorical boiled water they were placed in-- about the prophecy God gave Rebekah before Jacob and Esau were born, predicting that the younger son would rule over the older son-- and then we examined the choices that each character made, independent of the prophecy, that affected the story's outcome.

What we discovered was that even though Jacob and Esau didn't get to choose the unhealthy family dynamics they were raised in, or the prophecy their parents were given, they did get to choose how they would act when they met again as adults years later.

And in this week's Torah portion, Vayishlach, we get to zoom in on the end of that story, to zoom in on that moment of choice, and see that transformation and sanctification play out in front of us.

The scene in today's Parashah opens with Jacob, nervous at the prospect of seeing his brother Esau again, the brother whom he had wronged years ago. Jacob is clearly still carrying years-old guilt with him over the incident, and is preparing to humble himself before his brother. He sends messengers and gifts ahead of him-- a first volley of communication, in which he names himself his brother's servant, and states his desire for reconciliation. He says that he hopes that his apology will be met with *chen*, with grace, by Esau.

Upon learning, however, that his brother is approaching with a small army in tow, Jacob's nerves turn to panic. Frantically, he makes the decision to split his family and flocks in half, putting one portion closer to Esau's troops than the other in the hopes that if Esau attacks, as Jacob apparently thinks is a real possibility, perhaps at least a portion of Jacob's entourage might escape alive.

In his panic, Jacob also reaches out to God, praying, reminding God of God's promises of protection, and

supplicating himself, saying: קִטַּנְתִּי מִכָּל הַחַסְדִּים וּמִכָּל-הָאֱמָת :אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתָ אֶת-עַבְדְּךָ... וְעַתָּה הָיִיתִי לְשֹׁנִי מִחַנּוֹת

“O God, I have become small-- I have become humbled-- from all of the goodness and truth you have done with me, your servant.... And now, I have become two camps.”

God, he says, help me. I have become two camps.

From our perspective today, with the whole Torah in front of us, we know how Jacob and Esau's story ends. We know how it plays out. We know that Esau isn't going to attack, and that in the end, the two brothers will reconcile and will bring their best selves to that crucial moment, embracing each other, weeping.

But in that moment of truth at the beginning of our Parashah today, Jacob himself doesn't have the benefit of foresight. He doesn't know how it's all going to play out. All he knows is that he feels, both emotionally and in a very literal physical way, split in two. He is torn.

Literally and physically, he has split his family and herds into two groups, two camps, and one camp is more vulnerable, out in front, ready to face whatever is coming-- while the other is holding back, keeping at a safer distance, watching, waiting, protecting itself against a worst-case scenario.

Emotionally, he has become two camps in the sense that part of him wants to reconcile with his brother, and part of him is scared and defensive. Part of him, the first camp, wants to trust in goodness, trust in forgiveness, trust in mercy, and trust in what God has promised for him. That part is ready to be vulnerable. And the other part, the second camp, still holds the pain of his past mistakes, the voice that keeps piping up inside of him and saying “maybe this will all crash and burn.” That part is ready to cut his losses and run.

Have any of you ever had the experience of feeling like this? Of feeling like you, inside of your own head, inside of your own heart, have become two camps instead of one?

How many moments have we all had in life where we stood at a tipping point, a point of change, where we had multiple voices inside of ourselves, and we weren't sure which voice to listen to?

If you think back, this isn't the first time that we have seen Jacob at a crossroads like this, with a significant choice in front of him. Following his betrayal of his brother Esau and his theft of his father's blessing, Jacob has a choice--do I stay, and own up to what I did, or do I run away? And what does he do? He runs away. He doesn't stay to face the music.

Later in life, after Jacob has grown and wandered and met Laban, been tricked into a marriage he didn't intend to enter into, worked for years for his father-in-law and felt mistreated throughout, he also has a choice of how to

respond: to raise the issue, to call Laban out, or to run away. And what choice does he make? He runs away again!

And now, this week, we see Jacob, yet again, facing a crucial choice, and feeling torn. “I am two camps”, he cries out plaintively to God.

But something is different, this time. Something allows Jacob to stand his ground, instead of running, enables him to own up to his past mistakes. Something allows him to say: this time, I will choose the path that leads, at least, to the possibility of peace. This time, I choose the path with the greater possibility for love, and connection.

Somewhere in these precious few verses, a third voice-- perhaps, the still small voice inside of Jacob-- begins to speak. And this still, small voice says: “Hey, that Jacob you were before, maybe that’s not who you want to be anymore. Maybe this time, let’s try acting like the Jacob you want to be.”

And that brave and habit-breaking decision changes Jacob's life, and changes our people's story, for the better.

I love that we get to see this growth, this character arc as it were, for one of our greatest patriarchs. I love that in today's story, we get to see Jacob embodying and role modeling one of the most beautiful and crucial and difficult parts of being a human, and frankly, being a Jew: he learns. He grows. He apologizes. He makes teshuvah. He stops running from his past, and instead starts running towards his future.

So. I ask us all, here, today: What are we, in our hearts, still running from?

What might we perhaps want to run towards, instead?

Because, this story could apply to all kinds of situations in our personal and communal lives, to our relationships.

The divisions in this story can apply to us as individual people, and they can apply to us collectively, as Jews.

The Ramban asserts that the situation facing Jacob in this week's parashah, and his decision to split himself into two camps, one at greater risk and the other ready to flee, plays out metaphorically throughout the history of the Jewish people. He writes, "Our Rabbis... saw that this chapter alludes also to the future generations [of our people]."

That is to say that, just as Jacob splits himself in two, so too the Jewish people would go on to split ourselves: some of us would stay in Eretz Yisrael and face a multitude of dangers in order to be in the Promised Land, and others leave, journeying into the Diaspora, surviving at a distance.

Inevitable tensions, both political and cultural, have erupted from this distance, from this split existence. In some ways, in the Diaspora, modern Jewish life and

culture is richer and more full of possibility than ever before-- and in other ways, as a result of us being spread out around the globe, a unified sense of Jewish identity might be more challenging to feel than ever before.

We, like Jacob, have divided into camps.

And those divisions keep multiplying-- Orthodox and liberal, egalitarian and non-egalitarian, one-State and two-State solutions, the list goes on. We can't even agree on who counts as a Jew in specific situations. We are divided.

We all share a common past, but we aren't sure what the future is that we want to move towards, together.

And just like it was for Jacob, in that moment of truth on the road, it might be nerve-wracking for us at this moment in our history, or even scary, to think about possible outcomes for the Jewish people, should our divisions only

deepen over time, and should the distance between our camps only become farther and farther apart.

So where is our still, small voice? Where is the voice that isn't telling us to stand our ground-- and isn't telling us to run-- but is instead encouraging us as a people, and telling us to work towards becoming the best version of ourselves that we can be?

I don't honestly know.

But. Thanks to Jacob and Esau, I have hope. Thanks to Jacob and Esau, I know that our people has faced deep, deep divisions before, and we have come out of the other side renewed. I have hope that, following Jacob and Esau's example, our people will learn from our past decisions, the good and the bad, and learn from everything we have gained over our decades spread across the globe, at a distance from one another.

I have hope that we will never lose sight of the past that binds us together, of our common roots and our common bond.

I have hope that, just like Jacob and Esau, we are moving closer and closer to a day of reconciliation, whatever that reconciliation might look like: that one day, on a desert road, the camps of our people will choose courage, and choose peace: that we will meet, and embrace, and move forward, together, supporting and celebrating one another, as family.

Shabbat shalom.

