

Parashat VaYishlach
December 2, 2023
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David and I flew to DC on Thanksgiving Day. As you might expect, we saw the usual collection of stressed traveling families, including a family of three young boys, one of whom muttered repeatedly, “I’m gonna kill my brother.” His mother responded, “Violence is never the answer.” Her response was, frankly, tepid. It sounded like maybe not the first time she said those words, there was a phoning it in quality. I wonder how many mothers in how many generations have said this.

Violence marks almost every generation of brothers in Tanakh. It lurks beneath the surface of every encounter between Jacob and his brother Esau. What then is Jacob feeling ahead of his meeting with Esau? Our parsha opens with Jacob sending messengers ahead of his first meeting with Esau after 20 years of exile.

And here’s the message they bring back: We saw your brother Esau, and he’s coming to meet you. Also, he’s bringing 400 men with him. ויירא יעקב מאד ויצר לו. “Jacob was greatly afraid and he was distressed. And he



divided the people with him (that is, his wives and children) and the flocks and herds and camels into two camps thinking, ‘If Esau comes to the one camp and attacks it, the other camp may yet escape.’” (32:8-9).

Let’s live for a moment with his emotional reaction, *he was greatly afraid and he was distressed*. The first question when we read Torah has to be, why this formulation? In this case, why are we told that Jacob is greatly afraid **and** distressed? What does *vayetzer lo* – distressed -- add to knowing he was greatly afraid? Or asked another way, what is the difference between *afraid* and *distressed*?

Breishit Rabba: “Jacob was greatly afraid lest he be killed, and he was distressed lest he kill others.”

Let’s say, for the moment anyway, that Jacob’s fear lest he be killed needs no explanation. Maybe you remember Esau’s last words about his brother, 20 years earlier, “יקרבו ימי אבל אבי ואהרגה את יעקב אחי”: Let but the mourning period for my father come and I will kill my brother Ya’akov. (27:41).” (Rivka did not blandly remind her son, “violence is not the answer.” She packed Jacob up and sent him to safety in her brother Lavan’s house.)

For all our discomfort with the character of Jacob, our father of blessed memory, we know he is not a man of violence. He bests Esau twice, but never lifts

a hand in combat. He outsmarts Lavan, and escapes the wrath of his father-in-law and resentful brothers-in-law.

And later in today's parsha he rejects unequivocally the gruesome violence perpetrated by his sons Shimon and Levi after their sister Dina is assaulted. On his deathbed he addresses each of his sons in a final testament. About Shimon and Levi he says, "...Their weapons are tools of lawlessness....Let me not be counted in their assembly. For when angry they slay men, and when pleased maim oxen. Cursed be their anger so fierce and their wrath so relentless. I will divide them in Jacob, scatter them in Israel."

From our forefather Jacob we have inherited this aversion to violence. דרכיה דרכיה שלום we sing each time we return the Sefer Torah to the ark. As we read in the Talmud, "The entire Torah is for the sake of the ways of shalom".

But distress at the thought of perpetrating violence does not equate to pacificism. The Talmud famously teaches, "If your enemy comes to kill you, hasten to kill him first". Our texts -- ancient and modern -- are not shy in their praise of military heroes: The list is long and includes King David, Gideon, Joshua, King Saul and his son Jonathan, Moshe Dayan and Yitzhak Rabin. In a passage often overlooked, even Arvaham Avinu, our forefather Avraham who

modeled hesed, lovingkindness, rallied his troop to participate in and emerge victorious from the battle of the four kingdoms against five.

Israeli author and journalist Yossi Klein Halevi wrote this week of the corollary shame Israelis feel following the failure to prevent the Hamas attack of Oct. 7: “Israelis in enemy captivity are an unbearable reminder of the helplessness of exile, a threat to the Zionist promise of Jewish self-defense. Israel’s covenant with the Jewish people was to provide it with safe refuge. But on Oct. 7, we failed to save more than a thousand Israelis within our own borders.” In other words, the very goal of Zionism is to provide safe haven for any Jew, even at the cost of taking arms.

From Jacob’s encounter with Esau, עד היום הזה, to this very day, we Jacob’s children, b’nai Yisrael, continue to occupy this murky space. We bear the dual burden: a fear of dying and a concurrent sense of distress at the taking of a life. We are encumbered, weighed down by both our fear and our distress.

Our enemy has the advantage here. Hamas comes at us unencumbered by either of these impulses. A worldview that glorifies martyrdom is not impeded by fear of death. **We** fear death because we value life. Martyrdom holds no allure. We would rather come home to our families sound, and whole, that we might rebuild our homes, tend to our vines and dwell unafraid under our fig trees.

Nor do we wish to divest from our distress at the thought of killing another. We will never glorify or celebrate the death even of our enemy, as we read in Proverbs,(24:17) “Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and let not your heart be glad when he stumbles, lest the Lord see it and be displeased.” Philo captures Torah’s ambivalence about even justified warfare. Commenting on the requirement for any soldier who has killed an enemy to remain outside the camp and purify himself, he writes, "For though the slaughter of enemies is lawful, yet one who kills a man, even if he does so justly and in self-defense and under compulsion, has something to answer for, in view of the primal common kinship of mankind. And therefore, purification was needed for the slayers, to absolve them from what was held to have been a pollution."

In the years leading to Statehood, Chief Rabbi Abraham Israel Kook noted the challenge is how to engage in evil without becoming so. His solution requires even the righteous to be constantly involved in repentance. Since there is no war without evil -- because war inevitably entails unnecessary killing -- there is no war that does not require penance.

And though it may be common knowledge and a commonly held belief in this sanctuary, I will say explicitly that we will ache and suffer for every innocent

Palestinian life taken. The pain of loss of life is a burden that we will carry and never set down.

Our enemy may delight in bringing death – they may record their murderous acts to share as entertainment and inspiration. But we will never be untouched, never be without distress for the death we reluctantly bring.

When faced with existential fear and distress, Jacob divides his family into two camps. He then offers what has been deemed Torah's first prayer: "O God of my father Avraham and God of my father Isaac... Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; else I fear he may come and strike me down, mothers and children alike."

Finally he selects... for his brother Esau: goats, sheep, camels, cattle all sent by his servants drove by drove as propitiating gifts to soften his brother's rage. Rashi comments on this preparation, "He prepared himself for three eventualities: gifts, prayer and battle." Arama notes that while faith in G. is not only commendable, but necessary, we are not to sit idle when faced with danger. The gifts may strike some as obsequious, but Jacob would rather suffer a measure of humiliation than be brought to violence. And he must prepare for battle, should the other methods prove insufficient.

Today we are witnessing these exact three responses: To redeem the hostages Israel offered a generous prisoner swap, knowing that someday in the future some of those we release may extract a terribly high cost. We pray – many of us with an unparalleled frequency and intensity, many of us for the first time in our lives. And we steel ourselves for battle. Again yesterday we took up arms with the ferocity needed to finally extinguish our enemy.

Israel's battle against Hamas will be longer, costlier, more difficult to bear than any in our lifetime. This battle likely would unfold more quickly, more expeditiously, were we not so concerned, were we not so **encumbered** by the fear of dying or distress at killing others. But we will not be spared terrible fear or distress. We will not lay down that burden. As Jacob's children, we have no other way to battle.