

Dvar Torah

Parshat Vayishlach:

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Hedging Our Risk

By Gidi Grinstein

Parshat Vayishlach sets the stage for one of the greatest secrets of the Jewish People's survival and recurring prosperity, which is our unconditional love for the Land of Israel, our conditional existence in and out of it, in exile as a Diaspora, and how these two conditions ensure the longevity of the Jewish People.

The story of Jacob's return to the Land of Israel is a dramatic one. He is about to re-meet Esau after having deprived him of Isaac's blessing and after having been on the run and in exile for many years. At that moment, he is struck with fear of Esau's revenge that could eliminate his family and terminate the journey that began by his grandfather Avraham in his brit with God.

Jacob then decides to split his camp into two sections, so that if one is obliterated, the other will live. The Torah reads (Bereshit 32: 8-11): "Jacob became very frightened and was distressed; so he divided the people who were with him and the flocks and the cattle and the camels into two camps; And he said, "If Esau comes to one camp and strikes it down, the remaining camp will escape."; and Jacob said, "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, the Lord, Who said to me, 'Return to your land and to your birthplace, and I will do good to you; I have become small from all the kindnesses and from all the truth that You have rendered Your servant, for with my staff I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps.'"

In two important manners, the framework of the relationship of the Jewish People to the Land of Israel is being established by this story. The first is about the ideal of the 'promised land' on the one hand, and the reality of life in it and in the Diaspora, on the other hand. By this point, the Land of Israel has already proven itself to be a challenging place of residence due to its politics and climate. Indeed, both Avraham and Isaac were forced to leave the land to Egypt and to Haran.

Yet, in the same way that the Land of Israel is not all good, it is also not all bad; while it has its challenges, it also has its merits. Both Avraham and Jacob experience powerlessness and face great risks, imagined and real, yet they return to the Land of Israel with great fortunes.

The second important idea that is seeded in this Parsha is the division of the camp, to ensure that at least one part survived. Jacob divides the camp to ensure the collective resilience of his family.

These two ideas are closely intertwined: Diasporic existence and life in the Land of Israel are permanently intertwined as two essential conditions of Jewish life. They not only feed off each other and are mutually reinforcing, but also together create the supreme resilience of the Jewish People and a whole that is larger than the sum of its two parts. (Continued on back)

Some of the golden periods of Jewish history took place outside of the Land of Israel and some of the greatest breakthrough ideas of Judaism were crystallized in the Diaspora. In the late Second Temple era, the Land of Israel experienced deep crisis of ethics and politics. Against that backdrop, Hillel the Elder travels from the greatest Diaspora of his time in Babylon with his breakthrough ideas that would eventually irreversibly transform the Jewish People and give rise to Rabbinical Judaism. Many centuries later, the ideas of modern Zionism were crystallized in Europe, against the backdrop of modern nationalism.

Furthermore, the idea of spreading out to hedge risks has repeatedly proven itself. Giant Jewish communities declined and even decimated – in the Land of Israel, Alexandria, Babylon, Spain, Poland and Germany –but the Jewish People were able to survive and thrive through the rise of other communities. In other words, being organized as a world-wide-web of communities has been one of the true secrets of Jewish resilience, recurring prosperity and permanent leadership.

There is a very important message in this Parsha to all Zionists among us. Since its inception, Zionism negated the Diaspora, and called for all Jews to congregate in the Land of Israel and within the State of Israel. Its quest was to serve the long-term survival of the Jewish People, however, in doing so, it challenged one of the pillars of the Jewish resilience.

The practical implications are profound: The national security of Israel is only part of the overall resilience of the Jewish People, and as much as Israel is a safe-haven for Diaspora Jews, Diaspora Jewry is a safety-net for Zionism and Israel. If Israel is true to its mission of serving the resilience and vitality of the Jewish People, then a vibrant Diaspora is a Zionist imperative, not a compromise.

The good news is that in recent years, the Government of Israel has been gravitating in this direction, according formal legitimacy to Diaspora Jewish life, with projects like Birthright Israel and by underwriting extensive activities to strengthen Jewish life in the Diaspora. For those who need to anchor this outlook in the Torah, Parshat Veysihlach may be a good place to start.

