

Torah Thoughts Vayigash

5779:

We sometimes think of people as one-dimensional beings: Someone is kind, or intelligent, or a complainer, or lazy. But just as we would never describe ourselves in such limited ways, we should also know that everyone is as complicated as we are, that the sum of someone's character is always more than one part.

When we think about the life of Jacob, our first impulse is to think of him as the cunning young man who tricks his brother out of the right and blessing of the firstborn. Next, we remember his success in the employ of his father in law, during the years that he married and had a large family. Perhaps we would also recall his happy reunion with his brother later in life. Everything we remember about Jacob seems to support a picture of a man who gets what he wants and has reason for pride.

But there is another Jacob, whose woes are mentioned repeatedly, including this week in parshat Vayigash. Hearing that Pharaoh's second in command - actually Joseph - insists on seeing Benjamin, Jacob bewails his life, in which one son was torn apart by beasts - Joseph again - and now another is being taken from him. Later, when Jacob himself goes down to Egypt, he is introduced to Pharaoh, who asks how old he is; Jacob responds that his life has been shorter than his predecessors, that his days have been few and bad. We also recall an earlier episode, when his sons took revenge on the people of Shechem. Jacob is less upset about their violence than how he will be seen by neighboring peoples. Once his sons are adults, Jacob's demeanor seems to grow dark. He is plagued by feelings of failure and sometimes becomes upset in ways that are out of proportion to what is happening around him.

We would be well served by remembering these two Jacobs: the younger one, full of energy and expectation, and the older one, haunted by all he feels was left undone in his life. They are two people in one body, the one supplanting the other, complicated in ways known only to himself. As we remember him, or them, we will also acknowledge the complexity of every human being, and treat them with the respect that complex demands.