



## The Parsha in Practice

### When Can I Relax?

You would think that as the narrative of Parshat Vayeshev begins, Yaakov could deservedly put his feet up. He'd successfully navigated his difficult relationship with his brother Esav, he'd beaten the wily Lavan at his own game, he'd somehow overcome the abuse of his daughter and his sons' destruction of the city of Shechem, he'd prematurely lost his beloved Rachel, and now finally, he gets to settle down. After many years of separation, he has the closure of seeing his father Yitzchak again before his death and now, all that's left is to relax. Ahhh.



And so:

וַיֵּשֶׁב יַעֲקֹב בְּאֶרֶץ מְגֹרֵי אָבִיו בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן

*Now Jacob was settled in the land where his father had sojourned, the land of Canaan.*

Have his travails ended? Hardly. The saga of Yosef and the brothers begins and Yaakov "loses" his beloved son. The story continues into the coming weeks as we read of Yaakov's reaction to some foreign viceroy who seems to be picking on, and detaining his other sons. Things remain extremely complicated for Yaakov.

As Rashi quotes, the Midrash writes:

בְּקֶשׁ יַעֲקֹב לֵישֵׁב בְּשֵׁלוֹהוּ, קִפְּץ עָלָיו רְגָזוֹ שֶׁל יוֹסֵף – צְדִיקִים מְבַקְּשִׁים לֵישֵׁב בְּשֵׁלוֹהוּ, אָמַר הַקֹּדֶ"ה לֹא דַּיִן לְצְדִיקִים מֵה שְׂמֵתָקֵן לָהֶם לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא, אֲלֵא שְׂמֵבֻקְשִׁים לֵישֵׁב בְּשֵׁלוֹהוּ בְּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה

*Jacob wished to live at ease, but this trouble in connection with Joseph suddenly came upon him.*

*When the righteous wish to live at ease, the Holy one, blessed be He, says to them: "Are not the righteous satisfied with what is stored up for them in the world to come that they wish to live at ease in this world too!" (Genesis Rabbah 84:3)*

This is a difficult Midrash to understand. Was the drama with Yosef really a result of Yaakov's desire to retire and relax? Was Yaakov really looking for sandy beaches and umbrella drinks to

shirk his religious responsibilities? It is hard to imagine. The “ease” he was looking for was likely to pursue a life of study as he had when he was younger, only without the manifold distractions that had interrupted his pursuit. Now, finally, he could retire back into the tents of his youth. What could be wrong with that?

Instead of seeing this as a punishment, we might do better to see this as a reality check. One might think that Yaakov had been through enough already and had undergone all the tests that one could throw at a person and did indeed deserve some *שלום*, but that would not be accurate to what this world, the world of effort and accomplishment, is all about.

We minimally light one candle per household on Chanukah, but the Gemara teaches that a greater level of performance is for each member of the household to light. Even better is if we track the changing nights as we light. Many explain that this act of lighting and these degrees of observance closely mirror the realities of the personal and familial religious dynamic. First, there must be one in the home who takes responsibility for themselves. Then, if we succeed, we need to devolve that same responsibility on all the other individuals in our household as well so that they may all find their unique religious mission and purpose. But that’s not all. The last, and greatest step is realizing that we need to remember that our individual responsibility and mission is dynamic and might change of the course of years, or even from day to day.

Yaakov’s version of “tests” is not as discrete as were his grandfathers, which often took the form of single solitary acts of sacrifice or momentous decisions made in a... moment. Yaakov’s challenges were the challenges of living a complete and complex life, with all its chapters and all its vicissitudes. He would be forced to live up to his values throughout his youth, when he was just starting his family, when his children were young, when they grew, and now as they became adults. Every day provided a new obstacle to defeat and supplied a new candle to track and light.

If we are still alive, there is a challenge that we must overcome. Of course, most are not of the degree that Yaakov’s tests were, but while they might not be so severe, they are most definitely as sustained. There will never be a time in our life where we will be able to – with certainty – predict serenity and relaxation and be able to imagine ourselves free of the task of making the tough decision to choose the good.

Yesterday’s challenges will be replaced by today’s and might even increase. Or not. The unpredictable nature of life summons us to be at the ready at all stages, and however many candles are required that day.

The pandemic might be at its country-wide riskiest but thankfully, a vaccine is on the horizon. It’s easy – even fun – to imagine that when this is all over, life will be so much easier. In some ways, it certainly will. But that won’t mean that grueling personal experiences and demanding communal responsibility has ended. As so many times before, it will only have changed. Hopefully, we’ll be ready.

Shabbat Shalom,

Shmuel Ismach