

SEPHARDIC INSTITUTE

511 Ave. R Brooklyn, NY 11223-2093 718 998 8171 Fax: 718 375 3263
Rabbi Moshe Shamah, Director Rabbi Ronald Barry, Administrator

בס"ד

Parashat Vayishlah Part III Genesis 34

1. Returning Home

Upon taking leave of Esau, Jacob does not immediately proceed to his father, who dwelled in Hebron. The reader is surprised. After twenty years with Laban, G-d had instructed him, "Return to the land of your fathers and to your kinfolk and I will be with you" (Gen. 31:3). Upon leaving Laban, the Torah informed us that his intentions were specifically "to go to his father Isaac in the land of Canaan" (v. 18). Laban took for granted that Jacob was anxious to get to his father's home: "And now you are going because you greatly long for your father's house" (v. 30). However, after meeting Esau, there is no indication that he endeavors to go to his father. He "journeyed to Succoth, built himself a house and made stalls for his cattle" (33:17), evidently with the intention to remain there for an extended period of time. Succoth is slightly north of the site where he encountered Esau and east of the Jordan River, roughly at the latitude of Shechem, a distance of almost sixty miles from Hebron. The sages assume that he resided there for eighteen months, a reasonable minimal supposition based on the overall context.

He then moved to Shechem, returning at last to the promised land proper, where he settled at the city's outskirts and "purchased the parcel of land where he pitched his tent" (33:19). This again indicates a prolonged stay.

The roles played by Dinah, Simeon and Levi in the Shechem episode demonstrate that a significant amount of time had elapsed between their departure from Laban and this event. Consider the following: Jacob remained with Laban twenty years (31:38, 41). He married Leah and Rachel at the beginning of year 8. Leah's second son, Simeon, was not born before year 9. Dinah, her seventh child, cannot be assumed to

have been born before year 14, especially considering that after the birth of Judah, her fourth son, she had "ceased bearing children" for a time (30:9). Moreover, it is likely that the statement, "And afterwards she gave birth to a daughter" (v. 21) refers to a time later than that of the succeeding verses that relate Joseph's birth, but was reported earlier in the text to conclude the account of Leah's childbearing, a literary practice common in the Torah. Joseph's birth was apparently in year 14, given that at that point Jacob told Laban that it was time for him to return home since he had concluded his stipulated years of labor (30:25-26). Thus, at the time of their departure from Laban, Simeon and Dinah were, at the most, eleven and six years of age, respectively.

Each detail of the Dinah narrative – her "going out to see the girls of the land" by herself (34:1), Shechem's falling in love with her, and Hamor's request for her marriage to Shechem – bespeak a girl who is at least a goodly number of years older than six. Similarly, the facts that Hamor addressed his proposals to both Jacob and his sons, that the sons answered for the family without consulting with their father, as well as the massacre carried out by Simeon and Levi followed by the looting of the city by the other sons, are all indications that we are dealing with young adults.

Why then did Jacob delay returning to his father for so many years after his remarkable reconciliation with Esau? Sarna's conjecture that "Jacob's purpose may have been to utilize the natural resources of this fertile valley in order to recoup what he gave away to Esau" (JPS Commentary to Genesis p. 231) is unconvincing.

It appears more likely to assume that although he had a most friendly encounter with Esau, he now had a different perspective on his brother and on the import of his past interactions with him. His introspection on

the matter had brought about a new perception. Although contrite for what he did, he still feared that his previously exploited brother may not have fully forgiven him and might one day become hostile again. Such a fear appears indicated in the verses that conclude the account of the reconciliation (the topic that immediately precedes Jacob's move to Succoth). The description of Jacob's cordial but determined refusals of Esau's friendly suggestions that they travel together or that Esau leave a few men to accompany Jacob's entourage (33:12-15), reveals Jacob's doubts regarding Esau. Even had the latter forgiven him at the time of reconciliation, he was obviously worried about what might develop at a later time. Such suspicions may be a manifestation of the psychological aftereffects of his past iniquitous behavior toward Esau, a case of his conscience generating fears and suspicions beyond what was warranted, preventing him from moving forward in his relationship with his brother.

This is analogous to the situation that obtained with Jacob's sons who for many years felt the aftereffects of their guilt for having sold their brother into slavery. Even after they passed Joseph's arduous test with flying colors, proving their contrition beyond a doubt and after Joseph's wholehearted forgiveness in a context of what appeared to be a complete reconciliation, they suffered from the fear that Joseph may still harbor an intention of revenge toward them and repay them according to what they deserved (50:15). That fear was expressed almost forty years after the transgression.

Moreover, Jacob may have realized that he and Esau could not long live in the same area, an eventuality that did, indeed, materialize, "as the land where they sojourned could not support them [both]" (36:7). By returning home, he would, in effect, be forcing Esau to totally relocate out of his father's land. Since this would recall the matter of the blessings, it may be understandable that he preferred to avoid possible confrontation as long as possible and grow into a bona fide tribe before returning home. Until his encounter with Esau he had not given these matters any thought.

In our next study we will present another consideration in explaining why Jacob was so tardy in returning home.

2. Jacob and the Dinah Episode

The events following the violation of Dinah further illustrate the subtle effects that Jacob's past deceitfulness continued to have on him for many years afterwards, even in cases that have no connection to Esau. Such consequences seem to result from the natural impact that deceitful behavior has upon the psyche of a truly contrite individual.

After sexually abusing Dinah, Shechem falls in love with her, engages in seductive talk and decides to marry her. He keeps her in his home, in effect holding her captive, while he has his father, Hamor, proceed to place a veneer of respectability on the situation by negotiating for her marriage. Hamor duly requests Dinah for his son and embellishes the offer by proposing that Jacob's family integrate into the town. At no point is there an apology or expression of guilt or remorse. By not allowing Dinah to return home before the negotiations it is understood that Shechem had no intention of returning her if her family so requested. He was the son of the chieftain of the land, as well as "the most distinguished of his father's family," and, in accordance with the practice of the time, one way or another he planned to get his way. It is a case of the subtle use of superior might to cover up a brutal act and coerce an innocent family, strangers in the land, who were obviously vulnerable and at a great disadvantage, to agree to a proposal presented to them.

Of course it was impossible for Jacob's family – with a mandate from G-d to establish a new nation based on values diametrically opposed to those manifest by the leaders they were dealing with – to truly agree to integrate with the local populace. Jacob was presented with a dilemma that could not be resolved by ordinary means. The situation called for craftiness of one sort or another.

When Jacob first heard of Dinah's defilement his sons were in the field, so he was silent, choosing to wait until they returned home before making a statement (34:5). It is understandable that he may have wanted to discuss the matter with them before making any decision as to what to do, but the text portrays him as immobilized, not even expressing his inner feelings. This is in sharp contrast to the personal reactions of his sons who, upon hearing of the incident, are

“distressed and very angry because an ignominy had been committed [by Shechem] in Israel” (v. 7). When Shechem’s father comes to speak to Jacob, again we are not informed of the latter having made any statement (v. 6). Did Jacob leave Hamor sitting around, waiting? Did he engage in small talk with him? Did he ask about Dinah?

When the brothers arrive home, Hamor presents his marriage proposal to both Jacob and his sons, modifying his original intention to speak to Jacob alone; it had become clear to him, as to the reader, that the patriarch was not functioning in the family leadership role (v. 8). Shechem, who apparently had not accompanied his father (and probably was wondering what was taking so long), was now on the scene. He too, in “sweetening” the proposition, addressed “her father and her brothers” (v. 11).

Thus, it fell upon the sons to respond. They did so בְּמַרְמָה (“with guile” v. 13), as they recognized their predicament and lack of a straightforward option. They made a condition for merging their family into the local population and enabling intermarriage: All males of the town must be circumcised.

The narrative’s use of בְּמַרְמָה recalls Jacob’s deception of Isaac. When explaining to Esau what obviously happened, Isaac’s words were, “your brother came בְּמַרְמָה (with guile) and took your blessing” (27:35). These are the only two attestations of the word מַרְמָה (in that form) in the Five Books, apparently pointing to an association. It is striking that in our narrative Jacob does not utter a single word throughout the unfolding of events. Only after the massacre and looting does he speak, at which time he was critical of Simeon and Levi! He had misused deception in the past and suffered its negative consequences. He had struggled with his conscience, symbolized by his wrestling with “the minister of Esau,” and had mightily labored toward rectification of his wrongdoing. He could not now stir himself to use deception even when a degree of it was called for. He thus abdicated leadership of his family in a crisis situation, leading to an unsatisfactory result of mass slaughter.

The reader may assume that it might have been possible to rescue Dinah while all the males were in their immobilized state without resorting to killing.

Had they enacted such a scenario, the townspeople would have acknowledged that the exploited family had no option and that justice was served – and poetic justice at that. The thwarting of the leader’s plans and his comeuppance were brought about through circumcision of the organ that performed the rape of the maiden! The townsmen, who circumcised themselves in order to despoil the family of its wealth (“Shall not their cattle, possessions and animals be ours? Let us just agree” [v. 23]), would also acknowledge that it was their greed that caused them their pain.

Such an outcome would have brought moral respect to the family, as they acted within the realm of natural rights and caused no irreparable damage. There would probably not have been any attempt at retaliation; doing so would violate the code such societies live by, given that the exploited outwitted their would-be exploiters and spared their lives. It may even be that the legends and lore of the region contained stories with such lessons, as was the case in other cultures, teaching that in such cases the would-be perpetrators must endure their shame in having been outsmarted. People would say that Shechem’s liaison with a stranger brought about the town’s humiliation. They would be critical of his actions and embarrassed at their own foolishness for heeding his request.

Something along these lines was apparently the original plan of the brothers; Simeon and Levi, however, in their rage, expanded upon it (v. 25). The text provides the basis to some such interpretation as it attributes the deceitful response demanding mass circumcision to “the sons of Jacob” (v. 13), indicating a broad consensus for the original plan. Subsequently, Simeon and Levi, in the emotion of the moment, preempted their brothers: “And it was on the third day, when they were in pain, the two sons of Jacob, Simeon and Levi, the brothers of Dinah, each took his sword... and killed all the males...and took Dinah from the house of Shechem and left” (vv. 25-26). Only then do the other brothers go into action: “The sons of Jacob came upon the slain and despoiled the town” (v. 27).

Simeon and Levi, here conspicuously termed “the brothers of Dinah,” acted out of a feeling of zealotry for their sister’s honor. In the manner of zealots, they had no interest in enriching themselves

from their deed and, with the males all slain, took their sister and departed the town without any spoils. The intention of the original plan was apparently limited to the main goal confronting the family, the rescue of Dinah. Jacob criticizes only Simeon and Levy. At that point, he stresses the danger they caused the family, perhaps encouraging the neighboring cities to unite against the small, stranger clan they were. They respond like true zealots, not fully considering the value of personal safety, “Shall our sister be treated like a harlot?” Many years later, however, on his deathbed, Jacob castigates these two for their killing of people in their anger, apparently referring to this episode (49:6-7). Jacob’s inability to lead the family in planning a strategy was a major handicap.

3. Other Instances of Behavioral Inertia

This case recalls Jacob’s inability to protest Laban’s constant trickery, a reticence that seemed to have resulted from guilty feelings about his own past doings. When Jacob protested the marriage trickery with לָמָּה רָמִיתָנִי (“Why did you deceive me?”), Laban silenced him with, “It is not so done in our place, to give the later-born before the firstborn” (29:26). Subsequently, there is no mention of Jacob complaining to Laban until after his departure thirteen years later. Only then, under pressure of Laban’s criticism of his behavior, does he describe his ongoing, silent suffering and do we discover how extensive was Laban’s exploitation.

On that occasion, it seems that Jacob’s desire to correct himself from his past involvement in stealing the blessing prompted him to overreact to an accusation of theft and respond rashly and wrongly to Laban’s accusation of “Why did you steal my idols?” (31:30). (See our study *The Torah’s Judgment on Jacob’s Early Actions Part I*.)

Jacob’s attempt to influence the characteristics of the animals born under his care was not an attempt at deception. Laban removed from the flock that was under Jacob’s charge all speckled and spotted sheep and goats, as well as all dark sheep, to greatly minimize the number of offspring that would go to Jacob for his agreed-upon wages. That was an act of indirect thievery. Jacob then tried to restore the possibility of getting speckled and spotted offspring by peeling white strips in the barks of shoots and

placing them in the water troughs during the mating season. This was not a case of employing deceit or exploiting Laban but a defensive strategy to prevent Laban’s unscrupulous actions from succeeding. (Of course Jacob’s machinations are totally ineffective and it was divine providence that came to his aid, as G-d subsequently reveals to him through His angel [31:12]: “Lift your eyes and see, all the rams mounting the flocks are streaked, speckled and mottled, for I have noted all that Laban is doing to you.”)

Another instance in the Book of Genesis in which the play of conscience immobilized capable individuals in the sphere related to their transgression, is the case of Joseph’s brothers. During the famine they did not take the initiative to go to Egypt for food even though “the whole land was going to Egypt to buy” (41:57 ff.). They had sold Joseph as a slave to be taken to Egypt and simply could not energize themselves to go there, although everybody was going, until their father pressed them.

Again and again the Torah makes the point that deceiving and mistreating one’s fellowman are transgressions of profound proportions and they have serious consequences.

4. Regarding the City of Shechem

In the Shechem episode, the narrative makes clear the abject corruption that prevailed in a prominent Canaanite town. A leader rapes, kidnaps and seeks to subtly coerce the hostage’s family to agree to a proposal and cover it all up with respectability. The townsmen acquiesce in the injustice being perpetrated, agreeing to circumcise themselves by the lure of “their cattle, their possessions, their animals, will they not all become ours?” (34:23). No compassion is shown. The victimized strangers have no recourse to a legal justice system. The leaders represent the culture. Rape, kidnap, extortion, deceitful proposals, cover-up, and ultimately greed in order to appropriate the wronged strangers’ possessions are all manifest in the case. There was neither apology nor a sense of regret. This helps explain why G-d chose to supplant the local inhabitants of Canaan with the new nation that would bring a program for a righteous and just society.

That Jacob purchased land in Shechem, as Abraham did in Hebron, two of the major cities in the land, signifies that Israel was becoming permanently established in these regions.

Shechem was a preeminent city in the history of Israel. It is there that Abraham made his first stop in Canaan and built his first altar, at which time G-d promised the land to his descendants. It is in the Shechem area that Jacob cleanses his household and retinue from idolatrous connections, preparing for the Bethel visit, which marks a religious milestone in his life. Joseph is buried in Shechem, in the portion of land Jacob had purchased (Josh. 24:32). Joshua gathers the nation's leaders there and performs a covenant renewal ceremony (Josh. 24). It is noteworthy that in the Books of Joshua and Judges there is no record of Israel having taken the city militarily. Abimelech attempted to establish a kingdom centered in Shechem (Judg. 9) and Jeroboam

made it the first capital of the northern kingdom of Israel (1 Kings 12).

In the ceremony at Shechem wherein Jacob cleansed his assemblage from idolatrous associations, he used the phrase **הִסְרֵוּ אֶת אֱלֹהֵי הַנִּזְכָּר אֲשֶׁר בְּתוֹכְכֶם**, “remove the alien gods that are in your midst” (Gen. 35:2). That is virtually the identical formula Joshua used at virtually the identical location when he demanded the removal of idolatrous items from the nation **הִסְרֵוּ אֶת אֱלֹהֵי הַנִּזְכָּר אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבְּכֶם** (Josh. 24:23).

In reading these chapters one may wonder concerning the application of the rabbinical adage, “Doings of the fathers are a sign for the children.” How much and in what ways are details in Israel's history connected with what is here reflected?

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