

Vayishlach Genesis 32:4-36:43

This week's Torah portion is called Vayishlach from the book of Genesis Chapter 32:4-36:43. Vayishlach means "and he sent" and refers to Jacob sending messengers to his brother Esau before their meeting after twenty years of separation. Jacob is fearful of seeing his brother again because he had stolen Esau's birthright and his brother had wanted to kill him because of it. So Jacob divides his community into two camps. The evening before he meets Esau, he goes and lies down to sleep but he ends up wrestling with a man-angel who changes Jacob's Hebrew name from Ya'akov, which can mean "usurper" or "birthright stealer" to the name Yisrael or Israel, a name meaning "one who struggles with God". In Plaut's commentary, he says that at first, Jacob believes he is wrestling with Satan, but when morning comes he realizes that it is God whom he has resisted and now he sees his own past and present struggle in a new light and asks his adversary for a blessing. This struggle may be seen as a re-enactment of the Eden theme: God wants man to conform to His will, yet He also wants him to be free even to oppose and struggle with Him. Jacob becomes Israel only

after he has wrestled with God. Following that struggle, Jacob and Esau meet and part peacefully, each going his separate way. It is interesting that not only Jacob changes in this encounter, but his brother Esau has also changed. Since Esau has come with 400 armed men, we must assume that he did not originally come with peaceful intentions. Esau expected to meet the old Jacob, the hated sibling who had overtaken him with cleverness and deceit. The reconciliation is possible now because it is Israel, and not Jacob that Esau meets, and Jacob is a new man who asks forgiveness, if not in words then in manner, who limps toward him with repentant air and not deceitful arrogance.

After Jacob and his community settle in Shechem, Dinah, the daughter of Leah and Jacob, is raped by Shechem, son of Hamor the Hivite. Jacob's sons take revenge by murdering all the males of Shechem and plundering the city. Jacob is critical of his sons for what they have done. Rachel dies giving birth to Benjamin and is buried near Bethlehem. Isaac dies and is buried in Hebron near Abraham and Sarah. The Torah portion then concludes with the genealogy of Jacob and Esau.

In Jacob, we see how inner turmoil marked his life of deceitfulness through his encounters

with his father, his brother and his sons. We see how he changes and learns from his mistakes, although, unfortunately, his sons have fallen into a similar pattern in this portion. The rape of Dinah is very disturbing on many levels. First of all, we do not hear anything from Dinah, so we don't know what her feelings were about the man who raped her. He was Shechem, the son of Hamor, the chief of the country. Some see this story as a love story, similar to Romeo and Juliet as the star-crossed lovers. In Biblical days, it was actually a law that a ravisher must marry the unbetrothed victim, unless her father objects: In Exodus 22:15-16. it states that: "If a man seduces a virgin for whom the bride-price has not been paid, and lies with her, he must make her his wife by payment of a bride-price." Shechem did what was considered the "honorable" thing and went to Jacob, saying he loved Dinah, and offered a bride price asking for Dinah's hand in marriage. Hearing this, it certainly seems as if Shechem had seen and somewhat known Dinah beforehand, so it is possible that the two were attracted to each other before the rape.

There is an interesting verse in Genesis 34:1 which says: "Dina went out to see the women of the locality", but there is no

explanation of this text. Some commentators actually suggest that Dina invited the crime of which she became the victim. In today's world, we would find placing the blame on the victim for a crime she didn't commit completely unacceptable! We still hear these comments today, when men will say that it was the woman's fault because of what she wore or how she acted, or because she allowed herself to be in a vulnerable position.

Regardless to whether Dinah was forced or was attracted to Shechem, it was a fact in those days that a woman who was no longer a virgin had no future happiness in store for her and was shamed for the rest of her life. The new Jacob or Yisrael, realizing this, was probably in favor of the union and a bond with the wealthy and powerful Hivites could have proven beneficial, especially when they all the men agreed to circumcising themselves, technically making them all Jewish. It certainly must have seemed like a good idea, rather than having his daughter live in disgrace. Instead of thinking about his "honor" and "pride", he did what he felt was best for his daughter.

His sons, though, could not see through their anger and took revenge on the Hivites by

killing all the men while they lay ill after having circumcised themselves.

Of course, as I said, we don't know how Dinah felt about any of this. Making a woman marry her rapist could have been as traumatic as the rape itself, and if she loathed Shechem, that may have been why the brothers were so incensed. As often happens though, the Torah only gives us the basic story and it is up to us to fill in the blanks. Although Dinah's name means "justice", she receives none in this portion. We never hear from Dinah again in the Torah, though, and I can only imagine that she had a very sad, lonely and difficult life after this episode.

Jacob's sons, Simon and Levi were the ones who led the brothers to bring dishonor to Jacob's clan. Jacob was now seen by the neighboring communities as a murderer and untrustworthy. This time it was his own sons who acted deceitfully and dishonored Jacob and his family.

I will be chanting Chapter 33:1-5 which is the section where Jacob and Esau meet. In the section I am reading, there is an interesting decoration on the word Vayishakeyhu, which means "and he kissed him". There are dots above each letter on this word. One tradition explains these dots as meaning that Esau's kiss

was not genuine, while another holds that it was because in the meeting Esau's latent love broke through. Another tradition, which is strongly condemned by Ibn Ezra, states that Esau "bit" Jacob- a word play on nashak (kiss) and Nashach (bite). After learning about this portion, I'll let you come to your own conclusion of what you think these dots above the letters mean. Being somewhat of an optimist, I would like to think that the dots were little sobs of happiness after so many years apart, finally letting themselves love their brother and forgive each other.

We see in this evening's portion that people can learn from their mistakes, change for the better, and become a "new" person. Jacob becomes Israel only after he has wrestled with God.

This portion teaches us that we can change in our relationships with one another and see how important those relationships are. How many times do we see evidence of sibling rivalry, jealousy and hatred in families? I believe that as much as Jacob was wrestling with God, he was also wrestling with himself. We wrestle with our pride, our material desires, our wanting to be loved the most by a parent, and many other things in life.

We recently celebrated Thanksgiving, and many of us had to do that virtually. Even so, let us take this time to be thankful for all that we have been given and for the precious relationships we have with our loved ones. May this Shabbat be filled with peace and harmony for all of you. Shabbat Shalom.

It is my pleasure to call upon Adrian Richfield for the Aliyah: Taamod Tziporah bat