

וישלח **Vayishlach**
(Genesis 32:4–36:43)

Vayishlach

Rabbi Stephen Wylen, 2010

"Thus Rachel died. She was buried on the road to Efrat—now Bethlehem. Over her grave Jacob set up a pillar; it is the pillar at Rachel's grave to this day" (Gen. 35:19–20).

Despite a commitment to direct prayer, Jews have also prayed intercessory prayers. We often invoke the merits of the *Avot v'Imahot* ("Patriarchs and Matriarchs") when praying for others. As reported in *Eichah Rabbah*, the tears of Rachel are especially noted by God, even when the gates of heaven are closed to other pleas.

Thirteen and a half years ago, a woman in my congregation asked me to pray for her and her husband, because they were trying to have a child after many years of waiting. I promised that I would pray for them. A few weeks later I was standing at Kever Rachel (Rachel's Tomb) just north of Bethlehem. This is where Jews go to pray for fertility. I prayed. Two weeks and nine months later, a child was born to that couple. Thirteen years later, this past May, that child became bat mitzvah.

Reform Judaism is the religion of reason. We do not believe in miracles. But sometimes they happen whether we believe in them or not.

Vayishlach

Rabbi Louis Rieser, 2011

We see the corrosive power of violence at work in the story of Dinah, Jacob's daughter.

Simon and Levi believe they are acting justly by avenging the honor of their sister, but Jacob berates them, "You have brought trouble on me, making me odious among the inhabitants of the land" (Gen. 34:30). Jacob will never forgive his sons. At the end of his life, he says about them, "Simon and Levi are a pair. . . . Let not my person be included in their council. . . . Cursed be their anger so fierce. . . . I will divide them in Jacob, scatter them in Israel" (Gen. 49:5–7). The Torah's judgment emerges more subtly. It is in the longer term that we see their fate. Simon has disappeared from the list of tribes (Deuteronomy 33). Levi inherits the priesthood, only to spend his days with blood-soaked hands. His descendants expend their time and energy on sanctified killing, over which they have no choice and from which they have no escape. They spend their days watching the life force depart from every animal led to the altar.

Within our congregations and communities, we know people who have been stained by violence. Veterans of war have stories they tell only to other veterans; who else would understand? Victims of abuse carry the imprint of that violence with them for life. In what ways might we learn to offer support to those who carry this legacy within their souls? Can we embrace those who suffer from PTSD with *rachmanut* (compassion)? Can we guide those in need through a process of *t'shuvah* (repentance)? Can we point out a path of redemption that can counteract the corrosive power of violence?

Vayishlach

Rabbi David Novak, 2012

"Now Dinah, the daughter whom Leah had borne to Jacob, went out to see the women of the land" (Gen. 34:1).

Dinah, whose very name means "justice," should be one of the heroes of the Torah. As the only daughter of both Jacob and Leah, Dinah goes out one day to see the local women. She does not seek anyone's permis-

sion. Acting independently, Dinah sets out from a family and society dominated by male actors to specifically see the women of the land. She is curious and perhaps wishes to learn more about women in societies different from her own. What might she expect to find? The text is silent, leaving it to our imagination to ponder what might have happened had the story not taken its tragic turn, focusing as it does on the local men who encountered Dinah.

Would she have found other women like herself, with whom she could relate and share stories, and from whom she could learn and grow? Dinah does not get that opportunity, and we are left with a story that establishes her as a victim rather than a hero, like many others of the strong women in our sacred texts—Tamar, Rebekah, Sarah, Ruth, and Esther.

Let us pause when reading the first verses of Genesis 34 to think for a while about Dinah. In the very act of exploring her curiosity about the women of societies not her own, we are reestablishing some of her dignity and heroism.

Vayishlach

Rabbi Amy Scheinerman, 2013

"Jacob was left alone. And a man [*ish*] wrestled with him until the break of dawn" (Genesis 32:25).

Who is that masked man? Is he a manifestation of evil intended to weaken or frighten Jacob? *B'reishit Rabbah* 77:3 suggests he is Esau's guardian angel. Rashbam sees him as God's messenger sent to prevent Jacob from fleeing from what he must do. Many have suggested he is Jacob's conscience, supported by the Torah's unequivocal claim that Jacob was alone that night. The wound the *ish* inflicts is that which afflicts those of conscience.

In the *Babylonian Talmud Chulin* 91a, amidst an attempt to prove that the injured thigh was on the right side, we find an attempt to identify the *ish*:

Rabbi Sh'muel bar Nachmani said: "He appeared to [Jacob] as an idolater, and the Master has said (*Babylonian Talmud Avodah Zarah* 25b): 'If an Israelite is joined by an idolater on the way, he should let him walk on his right.'" Rav Sh'muel bar Acha said in the name of Rava bar Ulla in the

presence of Rav Papa: "He appeared to [Jacob] as a disciple of the Sages, and the Master has said: "'Whoever walks at the right side of his teacher is uncultured'" (*Babylonian Talmud Yoma 37a*).

Both *Amoraim* agree that Jacob was wounded on the right side, but for very different reasons. One walks with an idolater on one's right so that if attacked, one can respond more quickly and effectively. One walks on his teacher's left as a sign of deference and respect. If Jacob is alone, perhaps the idolater and disciple represent two sides of Jacob himself. Jacob has acted in ways unworthy of Torah too numerous to count, from childhood onward. He is a consummate deceiver. But now, as he stands on the threshold of reuniting with Esau, he is a disciple of the Sages, risking much to make amends and establish peace. Jacob splintered his family, but he now repairs the breach. We all have two sides, and we, like Jacob, wrestle with both.

Vayishlach

Rabbi Amy Scheinerman, 2014

"Jacob was left alone. And a man [*ish*] wrestled with him. . . . He wrenched Jacob's hip at its socket, so that the socket of his hip was strained as he wrestled with him" (Gen. 32:25–26).

Who is that masked man? Discussing the prohibition against eating *gid hanaseh* ("sciatic nerve") of an animal, the only provision of *kashrut* that is linked to an event in Torah, the *Bavli* (*Babylonian Talmud Chulin* 91a) offers us three opinions:

Rabbi Y'hoshua ben Levi said: "Scripture says: "When he struggled with him" (Gen. 32:25)—like a person who embraces his fellow, his hand reaching to the right-hand thigh-hollow of his fellow. Rabbi Sh'muel bar Nachmani said: "He appeared to him in the guise of an idolater." . . . Rav Sh'muel bar Acha [said] before Rav Papa in the name of Raba bar Ulla: "He appeared to him in the form of a disciple of the Sages."

An average fellow (someone like me), an idolater, and a *talmid chacham* ("Jewish scholar") cover a remarkably wide spectrum of personages evoked by the *ish* who wrestles with Jacob. Yet it is just one *ish* who challenges him that night. Perhaps the *ish* is a mirror: Jacob is wrestling with a wide range of his own familiar (fellow) feelings, proclivities, and potential choices, coming to recognize both his inner demons (the

idolater) and his better angels (the *talmid chacham*). In the end, Jacob's better angels lead the way, and he effects if not reconciliation, at least a truce with Esau.

The ability to distinguish between our better angels and our inner demons and to identify and evaluate our comfort zone will stand us all in good stead.

Vayishlach

Rabbi Michael Boyden, 2015

Our *parashah* deals primarily with Jacob's life: how his name is changed to Israel, and his reconciliation with his brother Esau. It concludes with a list of their progeny. However, there is one child missing—Leah's daughter, Dinah.

Whereas the Torah provides interpretations for the names of each of Leah's children, when it comes to Dinah, all we are told is that "afterward [Leah] bore a daughter and called her Dinah" (Gen. 30:21).

And then Dinah is raped by Shechem. But no one cares about Dinah. All that concerns her family is the shame the rape has brought upon them.

Dinah has no independent identity. She is "Leah's daughter" (Gen. 34:1); she is "Jacob's daughter" (34:3); she is her brothers' "sister" (34:13). Even Shechem refers to her as "a girl" (34:12) or "a child" (34:4).

Dinah only finally appears in her own right in the list of Jacob's descendants who go down to Egypt (Gen. 46:15). This gives the midrash *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* (37) grounds to suggest that Potiphar's wife raised Dinah's daughter, whom Joseph would later marry. That may be poetic justice on the part of the midrash, but it fails to excuse the behavior of a society unwilling or unable to respond to the needs of a rape victim.

Vayishlach

Rabbi Amy Scheinerman, 2016

Who is Jacob's mystery man?

The master of deceit, trickery, and manipulation has burned one too many bridges. He left *Eretz Yisrael*, fleeing from his brother Esau. He left Paddan-Aram when he had nothing more to gain from Laban, though

not until he had fleeced him of his flocks. In returning to *Eretz Yisrael*, Jacob must face Esau, and even more fundamentally, he must face himself. In eight verses, Torah describes the complete transformation of Jacob from audacious and hubristic bully to vulnerable, injured, and humble human. Who is the *ish* whose face Jacob identifies as the face of God? Is this an angel? Is this his conscience?

Dara Horn suggests that Jacob does, indeed, encounter an *ish*: It is Jacob's brother, Esau, and the wrestling match is "a physical re-enactment of Jacob's first moments when . . . Jacob and Esau wrestled with each other in their mother Rebecca's womb. Now Esau has his opportunity to finish that first wrestling match, knowing all that Jacob has done to wrong him, but also knowing how time and life can change what matters most to us." (Dara Horn, "Jacob: Some Notes on Character Development and Repentance," in *Reading Genesis: Beginnings*, pp. 175–176. Jacob sees the face of God because he faces the one he has most wronged: Esau. And in facing Esau, he faces himself and he changes. As Jacob says to Esau when they meet the following day, "To see your face is like seeing the face of God, and you have received me favorably" (Gen. 33:10).

What matters most to you? What will you need to change in yourself to reach that goal? Jacob shows us the path and inspires us to walk it.

Vayishlach

Rabbi Joshua Minkin, DMin, 2017

"Jacob's sons answered Shechem and his father Hamor—speaking with guile" (Gen. 34:13).

Although Genesis 34 tells the story of the abduction of Dinah, we never hear her voice—she is silent. Does she fall in love with Shechem, as suggested by Anita Diamant in *The Red Tent*, or is she held against her will and ashamed, as traditional commentaries imply? Her brothers act in her name, contracting a sham marriage, but then slaughtering and plundering the town while *rescuing* her. On his deathbed, Jacob makes his view of his sons' actions clear: "Let not my person be included in their council, let not my being be counted in their assembly" (Gen. 49:6).

Currently, world Jewry is reacting to the Israeli government's decision to abrogate the agreement creating a pluralistic prayer space at the Kotel. This agreement, three years in the making, was viewed as an answer to the bitter struggle for egalitarian worship at the holiest site in Judaism. The Israeli government had long dragged its feet in fulfilling its commitments, often acting only when forced by the Supreme Court. One wonders if there was ever any intention of fulfilling the agreement, or was it just a ploy to allow the emotional fires of the moment to die down, hoping the problem would fade away?

The duplicity of Dinah's brothers is being reenacted in modern times. This time around, Dinah's voice must not be silenced. Women's voices, and religious needs, must be clearly heard and addressed in Israel.

Vayishlach

Rabbi Louis Rieser, 2018

Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Piaseczner Rebbe, wrote about faith under duress during the Holocaust. He described the war's assault on the faith of Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto. In his *Derech HaMelech*, he focuses on Jacob's prayer the night before his reunion with Esau: *Katont mikol bachasadim*, "I am unworthy of all the proofs of mercy" (Gen. 32:11). For the Piaseczner Rebbe, the words of prayer are not enough to make prayer meaningful. Passion is required.

Citing *Mishnah Pirkei Avot* 4:4—"Rabbi Levitas of Yavneh taught: Be exceedingly humble, for a mortal's only prospect is the grave"—Shapira notes that the trials and tribulations of life can inspire in us a need that we can transform into passion. "And this is the essence of matters of worship: to strengthen his passion and his power, and this always depends on internal strength. And this strength is greater than all the [physical] powers of the body [to overcome] all the obstacles and trials [of life], because this desire is the inner passion that God's holiness spreads over him."

Jacob has passion, but it is his alone, and that is not enough. If one says, "I've got this passion and it's all mine," then they really have nothing. As essential as passion is for worship, to be powerful and transformative it must form a conduit to God, a connection with the Divine. Passion should go both ways: you to God, and God to you. Shapira

is saying, in essence: Make your prayer with God, not merely to God. That is what Jacob comes to realize. He connects with God: *katonti mikol bachasadim* bespeaks the channel Jacob has opened with God.

We are not Jacob and therefore might doubt the quality and depth of our efforts and passion. Therefore, Shapira assures us, "It is much easier to devote many years to diligent learning and even to engage in maximum self-denial than it is to devote one day of your life to serve God honestly, sincerely, and properly even according to your own understanding. . . . Still, this is no cause for despair or even to be lax. On the contrary: this best service that we can do for today, this is our unique life work. And the effort we put in, together with our yearning for higher, is the aim of our life work. Let us devote these to our Creator" (*To Heal the Soul: The Spiritual Journal of a Chasidic Rebbe*, p. 89.)

וישב **Vayeishev** (Genesis 37:1–40:23)

Vayeishev

Rabbi Janice Garfunkel, z"l, 2010

It is easy to point a finger at Jacob for favoring Joseph over the others. But favoritism is endemic to our society and worthy of some serious thought.

I was a guest at an Orthodox shul, and a friend who is a member complained to me that the rabbi has never invited him for a Shabbat meal. I thought his criticism was unfair, but then, I was not in a position to judge him inasmuch as I was going to that rabbi's home for lunch! I was the one with the *k'tonet pasim* (coat of many colors) that day.

Wherever there is a winner, there are losers. Whenever we honor someone with an award, a dinner, an accolade in the newsletter, we are putting a *k'tonet pasim* on one person and not on everyone else. Our world is filled with Jews who have failed, those who have no great accomplishments, and those whose accomplishments are of the everyday variety and go unnoticed and who never receive awards or recognition.

The teachers at my children's Montessori school have a gift for being able to see the magnificence of each child. I am in the process of reading a book called *You Are Oprah: Igniting the Fires of Greatness*, by Howard Glasser, in which he argues for seeing the greatness in oneself and all others.