

PARASHAT VAYECHI

Ya'akov's Last Bow:

A Retrospective Look at the Life of our Patriarch

By Rav Elchanan Samet

I. THE CHARACTER OF YA'AKOV IN THE BOOK OF BEREISHIT

The Yosef narrative (which occupies the last four parshiyot of Sefer Bereishit) revolves around a triangle of characters: Ya'akov, Yosef, and the brothers. While at certain points the pivotal character is Yosef or the brothers, with Parashat Vayechi the focus returns firmly to Ya'akov. In life (as his sons receive his blessing and rebuke) and in death (as they execute his last behest), Ya'akov is the undisputed protagonist.

In fact, if we take a retrospective look at Sefer Bereishit, we see that Ya'akov is the dominant force for more than half of it, from the beginning of Parashat Toledot until the end of Vayechi. His life is described in a continuous manner, from birth to death. We encounter his unique character in many dramatic situations throughout, from a youth in his parents' home, to an adult struggling to establish and protect his family, to an old man mourning for his son, and finally standing at the head of a reunified family and incipient nation, his namesake Yisrael. Arguably, Ya'akov is the Scriptural figure whom we know best.

Indeed, Ya'akov is described by our Sages as "bechir she-ba-avot," the chosen of the patriarchs, the culmination of a distinctive era in Jewish history. In Vayechi we take our leave of Ya'akov; therefore, we will devote this week's shiur not to an individual story, but rather to a theme which is integral to the seven parashiyot which describe his life.

II. THE DOUBLE IMPETUS OF YA'AKOV'S ACTIONS

The unique phenomenon of Ya'akov's life is that every significant move which he makes is motivated by two separate impetuses: the immediate, external, localized motive on one hand, and the more lofty motive on the other, which ties Ya'akov to his fellow patriarchs. The examples are many.

1. Ya'akov's Departure to Charan (27:41-28:22)

In this instance, Ya'akov's first motivation is his fear of Esav and his mother Rivka's grave injunction:

Behold, your brother Esav is consoling himself by planning to kill you. Now, my son, listen to me, and rise, flee for your sake to Lavan my brother, to Charan. (27:42-43)

The second impetus emerges from his father Yitzchak's command (which is in turn inspired by his wife Rivka):

Do not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan. Rise, go to Padan Aram, to the house of Betu'el, your mother's father, and take a wife for yourself from there, from among the daughters of Lavan, your mother's brother. (28:1-2)

The first impetus is an immediate outgrowth of the previous story, and a negative one. On the other hand, the second motivation has independent worth as a positive idea which calls to mind the previous parasha, Chayei Sara, in which Avraham gave a similar command concerning Yitzchak. Indeed, it is at this point that Yitzchak gives "the blessing of Avraham" to Ya'akov (v. 3-4). "Ya'akov listened to his father and to his mother," verse 7 tells us, but what follows seems to relate to his father's command exclusively.

Further complicating the situation, a third motivation abruptly appears and attaches itself to Ya'akov's journey: God's revelation to Ya'akov in Beit El. There are two parts of God's message to Ya'akov, and both are designated to strengthen Ya'akov and support him on his expedition.

Firstly, God Himself gives Ya'akov "the blessing of Avraham," emphatically approving Yitzchak's choice:

The land on which you lie, to you I will give it and to your seed. Your seed will be like the dust of the land, and you will spread forth, westward and eastward and northward and southward, and through you will all of the nations of the earth be blessed and through your descendants. (28:13-14)

The second part carries a more personal promise:

And behold, I will be with you, and I will guard you wherever you go, and I will return you to this land... (28:15)

Thus, as Ya'akov departs for Charan, he carries a three-fold impetus: the missions of his mother, his father, and his Creator.

2. Ya'akov's Flight from Charan to Canaan (Ch. 31)

The first motivation in this instance, the revealed impetus, relates to the changed attitude of Lavan: "Ya'akov saw Lavan's face, and behold, it was not toward him as yesterday and the day before" (31:1-2). Yet immediately afterwards (31:3), the second impetus appears: "God said to Ya'akov: 'Return...'"

As in the previous case, the first impetus here is a direct - and negative - outgrowth of the previous episode, which concludes with Ya'akov's accumulation of tremendous wealth (30:43). God's command to Ya'akov, however, is based on positive reasons. The time has arrived for Ya'akov to return to his fathers' land, which is destined for him and his descendants. Perhaps a three-fold element is also hinted to here; as the Midrash puts it (Bereishit Rabba 74):

The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to him: "Return to the land of your fathers" - your father waits for you - "and to your birthplace," - your mother waits for you - "and I will be with you" - I Myself wait for you.

In his words to his wives, Ya'akov expresses the two elements which motivate him to flee: on the one hand, "I see your father's face, and it is not towards me as yesterday and the day before..." (31:5); on the other, "God's messenger said to me... 'I am the God of Beit El, where you anointed a monument and where you made a vow... Now rise, leave this land, and return to the land of your birthplace'" (31:11-13).

Similarly, at the moment of departure, the verse itself stresses the double motive. Verses 17-18 relate: "Ya'akov rose and picked up his sons and wives... to return to his father Yitzchak." Verses 20-21, at the same time, note that "Ya'akov deceived Lavan the Aramean by not telling him that he was fleeing. Yet he fled, he and all which he had..."

To this we should add the third impetus, Ya'akov's fulfillment of God's word (as Rachel and Leah say in v. 16, "Now, all that God has said to you, do it"), for it is He who commands Ya'akov to return to his land and his birthplace and reminds him of the need to fulfill his vow at Beit El.

3. The Journey from Shekhem to Beit El (Ch. 35)

In this case, the immediate motivation for this journey is not explicitly mentioned, but it is still abundantly clear: Ya'akov is fleeing from the now-dangerous area of Shekhem, where Shimon and Levi have committed their murderous act. This impetus is implied by Ya'akov's words to them at the end of the Dina episode (34:30): "You have brought trouble upon me, to make me odious before the inhabitants of the land... and I am few in number; they will gather upon me and strike me, and I will be destroyed, I and my house!" The verse almost expresses this as Ya'akov's camp leaves Shekhem (35:5): "They traveled, and God's fear was upon the cities surrounding them, and THEY DID NOT PURSUE the sons of Ya'akov."

In any case, it is clear that Ya'akov was fleeing. On the other hand, there is an additional reason stated in Scripture for Ya'akov's leaving Shekhem, namely, a divine command: "God said to Ya'akov: Rise, go up to Beit El and dwell there, and make there an altar to the God who appeared to you when you fled before your brother Esav" (35:1).

Here too, as in the previous two instances, the first impetus is a local one, an outgrowth of the previous episode of the rape of Dina and the punishment of the men of Shekhem. As in the previous two cases, this negative motivation turns Ya'akov to flight. However, the divine command is intertwined with a positive reason: the fulfillment of Ya'akov's vow. Indeed, his words to his family express solely the positive motive: "We shall arise and go up to Beit El, and I will make there an altar to the God who answered me in my day of distress, who has been with me on the path which I walked" (35:3).

At the journey's end, the verse records (3:27), "Ya'akov came to his father, [to] Mamrei, Kiryat Ha-arba; this is Chevron, where Avraham and Yitzchak lived;" this implies an additional reason for the journey.

4. Ya'akov's Descent to Egypt (45:1-46:7)

Yosef invites his father to come to Egypt for economic reasons:

Come down to me; do not stand still. You will dwell in the land of Goshen... and I will provide for you there. For there are yet five years of famine, lest you and your household and all you have be impoverished. (45:9-11)

Ya'akov, on the other hand, explains his journey to Egypt in other terms: "Yisrael said: It is enough! My son Yosef is still alive - I must go and see him before I die!" (45:28). However, when he reaches Be'er Sheva - the edge of settled Canaan - Ya'akov offers "sacrifices to the God of his father Yitzchak" (46:1). Why? The Radak (ibid.) explains:

Since his father Yitzchak wanted to go down to Egypt because of his famine, but God told him (26:2): "Do not go down to Egypt"... [Ya'akov], before he left the land, wanted to know God's will, if He would prevent him [from descending] as He had prevented his father Yitzchak or not, and he thus offered sacrifices in order that the spirit of prophecy might come upon him.

The Ramban offers a more frightening explanation: "When Ya'akov came to go down to Egypt, he saw that the exile would begin [then] with him and his seed, and he was afraid of it. He thus offered sacrifices... that the Attribute of Justice not be set against him." Indeed, God's first words to Ya'akov are, "Do not fear going down to Egypt" (46:3), and such a directive would be directed only to one who had been afraid.

God continues with a twofold reassurance: "For I will make you a great nation there... and Yosef will put his hand on your eyes" (v. 3-4). In terms of the nation, the promises of Beit El will be fulfilled specifically in Egypt; as for Ya'akov's personal, emotional journey, that will also find its successful conclusion in Egypt.

Yet, despite these words, Ya'akov is discouraged. Though he is called by the name Yisrael on the way to Be'er Sheva, on the journey from there to Egypt he is called Ya'akov. The change of name is triggered by the divine call (46:2), "Ya'akov, Ya'akov!" The Ramban explains:

He should have been called by the honorable name [Yisrael], and so he is referred to thrice in this unit. However, he is here called Ya'akov to hint that he will no longer "contend with God and with men and prevail" (32:29), but rather he will be in the house of slavery until "I will certainly bring you up" (46:4), for now the exile will begin... he is now 'Ya'akov' in his descent.

The joy of "Yisrael" as he goes to see his long-lost son is expressed by his position at the head of the family: "YISRAEL traveled, and all that was his..." (46:1). On the other hand, the frailty and fear of "Ya'akov," who descends to initiate a long and torturous period of exile, is epitomized by his diminution almost to a passive object (46:5): "The sons of Yisrael carried YA'AKOV their father and their children and their wives in the wagons which Pharaoh had sent."

Here, as opposed to the three previous instances, the first motive - to see Yosef, which is a natural outgrowth of the preceding story - is positive, while the divine impetus - which links Ya'akov's journey to the ominous pronouncement of two centuries prior: "You shall surely know that your seed will be strangers in a land which is not theirs, and they will enslave them and mistreat them for four hundred years" (15:13) - crushes his spirit. This obligation, voiced to Avraham at the Brit bein Ha-betarim, has now come due.

III. THE SUBCONSCIOUS ELEMENT

We must explain this double-motive phenomenon, one which is unique to Ya'akov. We will first deal with the first three instances, in which Ya'akov is brought to action not by the deeper impetus, which should have compelled him to movement long before, but rather by the immediate local cause. God still appears in each instance to emphasize the spiritual motive, so that Ya'akov may act also (or even primarily) with the higher goal in mind.

1. Ya'akov's Departure to Charan

The selection of an appropriate wife is not a tangent in the lives of the patriarchs; nearly a full parasha is dedicated to the search for Yitzchak's mate. As they are charged with the establishment of a great nation, bearing God's covenant, the partner of each of the patriarchs also must be capable of fulfilling this awesome task.

Ya'akov, however, procrastinates in this important endeavor, and even when he is of marriageable age (and his twin Esav has already taken two wives), Ya'akov does not bother to set out towards his mother's family to look for his spouse. It is possible to defend Ya'akov and to say that he did not want to leave the Holy Land; perhaps he thought that he had the same injunction regarding this as did his father (23:5-8). Regardless, he did not inquire about the situation, but rather simply satisfied himself, complacently, with the status quo.

Thus, events arise that force Ya'akov to flee from his brother, as per his mother's command; his father, however, emphasizes the true purpose of his journey: to find a wife. The same expedition which Ya'akov should have undertaken willingly and happily becomes a desperate race for his life.

God's revelation authorizes the journey which Ya'akov was so hesitant to undertake, but it is more than a stamp of approval. Indeed, God expands

Yitzchak's command: finding a wife is not only a personal imperative, but it will effect the fulfillment of God's promise to Avraham; it is this journey which will bring God's nation into being. Thus, finally, after vowing to pay homage when he returns, "Ya'akov picked up his feet, and he went to the land of the easterners" (29:1).

2. Ya'akov's Flight from Lavan

Ya'akov spends fourteen years in Lavan's house against his will in order to fulfill his destiny by establishing a dynasty. However, at the end of this period, Ya'akov agrees to stay in exile in order to "do for [his] house" (30:30), and he sets no time limit for this endeavor. He thus delays his return, and thereby his chance to fulfill his vow and honor his aged parents, for no good reason.

Six years later, Ya'akov is forced out of Lavan's house by a change in his circumstances - namely, the changed attitude of Lavan. He must now flee under cover of guile, instead of openly informing Lavan of his intentions, as he had at the end of the fourteen years of indentured servitude (30:25-26), when he consented to stay on at his father-in-law's request instead of persevering and departing with "joy and songs, drum and harp" (31:27).

However, in order that Ya'akov may recall the true reason for his departure, God reveals Himself to Ya'akov, commanding him to return and reminding him of his vow.

We dealt with this issue in depth in our analysis of Parashat Vayetze, pointing out the textual indications that are critical of Ya'akov's delay. We mentioned also that it is possible to defend Ya'akov, to argue that he stayed in Charan to delay his confrontation with Esav, but this is only an educated guess. Regardless, we see once again the procrastination that Ya'akov seems to be unable to overcome.

3. Ya'akov's Journey from Shekhem to Beit El

One who analyzes the text from the end of chapter 33 through the beginning of chapter 35 cannot help but notice that Ya'akov and his family are not simply passing through Shekhem, but rather taking up residence in the city. Ya'akov purchases land there (33:18-19), his sons work there (34:5), and they conduct business regarding their candidacy for citizenship (34:8-24). Even if they were not honest in their declaration "and we shall dwell among you; we shall be one nation" (34:10), the fact that Chamor accepts it demonstrates that they were viewed as permanent residents. The Ibn Ezra proves this in a different way (33:19): "I believe they stayed in the city of Shekhem many years, for Dina was not [even] seven years old [when they arrived, and far from sexual maturity]; Shimon and Levi were also minors [at that time, and incapable of wipinout a city]."

It is clear that once aYa'akov is delaying his destiny - to fulfill his vow at Beit El and to return to his father in Chevron - until circumstances force him to flee. Yet again, the divine command comes to remind him of the deeper purpose of this journey, as well as of the fact that it could have been undertaken appropriately in its time, but Ya'akov's procrastination has once again forced him into the indignity of flight. Here, however, it is difficult to find a justification of Ya'akov's delay, unless he was still afraid of the threat of Esav (compare 33:14-17 to 36:6-8).

We see a pattern emerging. In all of these delays, Ya'akov pays a similar price: he is forced to flee in haste, and often in mortal danger, instead of traveling easily and pleasantly. Yet there are other costs. Firstly, in his hasty flight from Be'er Sheva, Ya'akov must travel as quickly and lightly as possible - effectively, as a pauper. His penniless status when he arrives at Lavan's house forces him into fourteen years of indentured servitude. His flight from Charan two decades later forces an unpleasant confrontation with his father-in-law. Furthermore, Rachel's theft of the "terafim" causes Ya'akov to unwittingly curse her and to take the wrong side of the moral argument with Lavan. Finally, his elongated stay in Shekhem (instead of proceeding quickly to Beit El and Chevron) engenders many unfortunate results:

1. The incident of Shekhem, in which his daughter is raped, his sons slaughter a city, and a bitter inter-generational confrontation ensues.
2. The death of Rivka; the verse (35:8) notes, when Ya'akov finally arrives at Beit El, "Devora, Rivka's nurse, died, and she was buried under Beit El, under the oak, and it was named the Oak of Weeping." The Sages (Bereishit Rabba 81:5) see this as a reference to the death of Rivka, of which Ya'akov was then informed; as the Ramban explains, "He therefore named that place the Oak of Weeping ... Ya'akov wept and mourned over his righteous mother who loved him and sent him there, yet did not merit to see him in his return." Yet even if we do not accept this view, it is clear that when Ya'akov returns to Kiryat Arba (35:27), his mother is no longer alive. She might have seen her beloved son one last time had Ya'akov not delayed so stubbornly.
3. The death of Rachel; on the final leg of their journey, Ya'akov's beloved wife dies, and he must bury her on the side of the road, rather than in Chevron's Cave of Machpela. This insult to Ya'akov's only love was so great that it still haunted him on his deathbed half a century later (48:7). This too might have been avoided had Ya'akov come to Yitzchak sooner.

It seems that a great deal of the grief in Ya'akov's life was a result of his procrastination in the face of destiny.

IV. THE DESCENT TO EGYPT

This last journey of Ya'akov, unlike the three others, carries no indictment of the patriarch: he did not tarry, and even if he had, the destiny that awaited him was a dark one. Yet there is still a link in terms of the double impetus. Here too, the immediate, local motive forces Ya'akov to fulfill the deeper, hidden historical motive. Furthermore, God once again reveals this second motivation to Ya'akov.

Yet the usual relationship between the two motives is turned on its head, as expressed by Rabbi Yochanan (Shabbat 89b):

It would have been fitting for our patriarch Ya'akov to descend to Egypt in iron chains, but his merit caused him [to be spared this,] as it is written (Hoshea 11:4): "With human ropes I will pull them, with bonds of love."

This statement demonstrates the conceptual inverse of the previous cases: it would have been fitting for Ya'akov to go to Charan to find a wife, to return quickly to Canaan (and especially Beit El), and to journey back to his parents in joy and song; but his demerit - his procrastination - caused him to forfeit this chance and to flee in terror and mortal danger. Nevertheless, in each instance God reveals Himself to Ya'akov and underscores the honorable deeper reason for the journey, injecting a strain of credit into the indignity of flight.

Indeed, we might here recall another statement of Rabbi Yochanan (Sukka 57a): "A person's legs are his guarantors; to the place where he is demanded, they bring him." If an individual will not act out of free will and an awareness of the fate designated by God, Providence manipulates circumstances so that one will be forced to it by other concerns. Yet, if the divine destiny is one of punishment (though its ultimate purpose may still be productive), such as exile, one is not compelled to actualize it. When the individual is righteous, such as Ya'akov, God delays and softens the harsh blow. Thus, Ya'akov is drawn "with human ropes, with bonds of love," like a cow after its calf, to see his son Yosef once more. At the same time, God does not conceal the initial outcome of the journey; instead, He declares unequivocally that the sojourn of Yisrael in Egypt will not be a short one, but as such it will also provide the setting for the realization of God's blessing, the creation of His nation.

V. "THE RIGHTEOUS WISH TO DWELL IN TRANQUILLITY"

Procrastination is so central and so seminal a phenomenon in Ya'akov's life that we must ask: from where does it come? Why can he not leave a place until he is forced to do so?

Rav Acha's explanation in Bereishit Rabba (84:3), cited by Rashi at the start of the Yosef narrative (37:1), is an eye-opening one:

Ya'akov wished to dwell in tranquillity, but the wrath of Yosef pounced upon him. The righteous wish to dwell in tranquillity; [however] the Holy One, Blessed be He, says: "Are not the righteous satisfied by what is prepared for them in the World to Come, that they wish to dwell in tranquillity in this world?"

The desire "to dwell in tranquillity" is perhaps the most central facet of Ya'akov's character. It compels him to remain wherever he has reached relative peace, consistently ignoring any change, which implies uncertainty and danger. Ya'akov reveals himself as a zealot for tranquillity time after time, most strikingly as he confronts Shimon and Levi, proponents of a different type of zealotry.

The desire for peace and tranquillity is characteristic of the righteous, as opposed to "the wicked, who are like the troubled sea, incapable of serenity" (Yeshayahu 57:20). The righteous fear any disturbance in their lives, and they merely wish to safeguard themselves and their families. They do not look for greatness, and they are content when their lot contains simple peace and quiet.

However, great men like our patriarch Ya'akov are not designated by their Creator for lives of tranquillity, but rather for lives of destiny and continual ascent. They reach tranquillity only in the World to Come, as a reward for those struggles and storms which beset them in this world as they attempt to actualize the divine plan. When the desire for peace and serenity - befitting the righteous - comes into conflict with the dictates of their destiny, which often entails struggle and disquietude, the results can be disastrous. Paradoxically, this desire for calm is what wreaks upon the righteous individual the worst havoc of a turbulent life.

When Ya'akov comes down to Egypt to see his beloved son, from whom he has been separated for twenty-two years, and to unite his entire family around him in socioeconomic security, long before the signs of exile become noticeable, we might think that Ya'akov has finally reached his long-sought rest and tranquillity - but this is not so. Specifically then, in the grip of his final illness, our aged patriarch rouses himself to give his last command and succeeds, of his own initiative, in leaving Egypt and returning to the land of his fathers, to lie in rest among them.

The burial of Ya'akov in the land of Canaan, in the Cave of Machpela, is his final journey, and the only one which is wholly realized by his initiative alone. With it, he realizes his goal, to dwell in the tranquillity which God prepares for the righteous in the World to Come. It is a fitting conclusion to the tulife of the most conflicted of our patriarchs.

[Translatedby Yoseif Bloch]

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