

Parshat Vayeshev: On Seeking Serenity

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Parshat VaYeshev opens with a devastating midrash. On the rather benign verses:

1 Yaacov dwelt in the land of his father's sojournings, in the land of Canaan. **2** These are the generations of Jacob: when Joseph was seventeen years old, being a shepherd, he was with his brothers with the flocks. . . . (Bereishit 37:1-2)

א וַיֵּשֶׁב יַעֲקֹב בְּאֶרֶץ מִגֹּרֵי אָבִיו בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן:
ב אֵלֶּה הַדּוֹרוֹת יַעֲקֹב יוֹסֵף בֶּן־שִׁבְעֵ-עָשָׂרָה
שָׁנָה הָיָה רֹעֵה אֶת־אֶחָיו בְּצֹאן... (בראשית
לז: א-ב)

Rashi writes:

[On the word "dwelt" (from verse 1):] When Jacob sought to dwell in tranquility, the troubles of Joseph sprang upon him. The righteous seek to dwell in tranquility. Said the Holy One, blessed be He, "What is prepared for the righteous in the world to come is not sufficient for them, but they seek [also] to dwell in tranquility in this world?!"

וישב. ביקש יעקב לישב בשלוה, קפץ עליו רוגזו של יוסף. צדיקים מבקשים לישב בשלוה אומר הקב"ה לא דיין לצדיקים מה שמתוקן להם לעולם הבא, אלא שמבקשים לישב בשלוה בעולם הזה:

The great sin of Yaacov, indeed the force that set in motion the greatest tragedy of his life (the loss of Yosef), was his very desire for respite from tragedy. After decades of trouble with Esav and Lavan, internal pain and external pressure, he just wanted a little bit of peace. He wanted to rest, to find stillness and tranquility, leshev b'shalva. But alas, this was not to be. This pursuit of peace itself ensured the impossibility of peace, argues the midrash. God met this longing for quiet with the crash of crisis to teach Yaacov the error of his aspirations. To be righteous is to be unsettled. Tranquility is only for the next world. For the pious, this world must be marked by restless pain. And so, Yaacov is afflicted once again. By the end of the chapter, Yosef is sold, his famous coat soaked in blood, and Yaacov, presuming him dead, is ravaged.

34 And Jacob rent his garments, and he put sackcloth on his loins, and he mourned for his son many days. **35** And all his sons and all his daughters arose to console him, but he refused to be consoled, for he said, "I will go to my grave mourning for my son"; and his father wept for him. (Bereishit 37:34-35)

לד וַיִּקְרַע יַעֲקֹב שָׂמֵלְתָיו וַיִּשֶׂם שָׁק בְּמַתְנָיו
וַיִּתְאַבֵּל עַל־בְּנוֹ יָמִים רַבִּים: לָהּ וַיִּקְמוּ כָל־בְּנָיו
וְכָל־בָּנֹתָיו לְנַחֲמוֹ וַיִּמָּאֵן לְהִתְנַחֵם וַיֹּאמֶר כִּי־אֲרֹד
אֶל־בְּנֵי אֲבִי שְׂאֵלָה וַיִּבְרַךְ אֹתוֹ אָבִיו: (בראשית
לז: לד-לה)

Could this image of a father wailing for his lost son really be the symbol of righteousness?

Could it really be that in order to be pious one must be in pain? At this moment of history, when too many fathers and mothers are crying for their sons and daughters, could we ever affirm this spiritual vision? Would that we could all find a little bit of shalva to soothe our souls! How then can we make sense of this search for serenity?

In sharp contrast to this midrash which so thoroughly condemns Yaacov's attempt to dwell (leshev) peacefully, there is another foundational source that praises him precisely for his ability to do just that. Indeed, our very first introduction to Yaacov invokes this term:

... And Yaacov was an innocent man, dwelling ("yoshev") in tents. (Bereishit 25:27)

... וַיֵּקֶב אִישׁ תָּם יֹשֵׁב אֹהֲלִים: (בראשית כה:כז)

Unlike his brother Esav who favored the fields, Yaacov was a quiet man who sat. Perhaps he was a homebody, favoring domestic life. Or perhaps, as the midrash says, he was a yeshiva boy, studying in the beit midrash of Shem and Ever. But there is yet another interpretation of this praiseworthy form of dwelling, found in kabbalistic literature, that focuses on where it took place. Yaacov is presented as a person seated between two tents, the tent of Avraham and the tent of Yitzchak, between the powers of chesed (loving kindness) and din (judgement).

R. Yosef Gikatilla, a 13th century Spanish Kabbalist, puts this beautifully in his book Shaarei Orah:

"And Yaacov was an innocent man, dwelling in tents." This is to say that Yaacov represents the middle way. Like the tie of the lulav that holds the two sides [of hadasim and aravot] together in the middle, so Yaaacov held together two tents, the tent of Avraham, which was one of chesed, and the tent of Yitzchak, which was one of din. This is the secret of "And Yaacov was an innocent man, dwelling in tents." For what reason did the text use [the plural] "tents"? It should have said that he dwelled in a [single] tent. This teaches that Yaacov's essential characteristic was to stand [or sit] between two tents and to hold them together, the right and the left, such that Avraham and Yitzchak were bound together in him. (Shaarei Orah, Shaar 5, Sefirah 6)

וַיֵּקֶב אִישׁ תָּם יֹשֵׁב אֹהֲלִים. כלומר יעקב הוא סוד המידה האמצעית, כמו התימות שבלולב שמתיים שני הצדדים באמצע כך יעקב מתיים שני האוהלים, שהם אוהל אברהם שהוא חסד ואוהל יצחק שהוא דין. וזהו סוד "וַיֵּקֶב אִישׁ תָּם יֹשֵׁב אֹהֲלִים". כי מה צורך לומר יושב אוהלים? היה לו לומר יושב אוהל. אלא מידת יעקב עומדת בין שני אוהלים ומתיימת ומאחזת ימין ושמאל במידה האמצעית, עד שנמצאו אברהם ויצחק נאחזים ביעקב. (שערי אורה, שער ה, ספריה ו)

Yaacov, known as the consummate struggler, was actually, at his core, a quiet, inward, integrated balancer. He existed between competing pulls, varied ways of being, conflicting legacies, turmoil with God and with human beings. And he sat between them. He held paradox, united opposites, and maintained trusting commitment, even when it left him wounded and limping. The yishuv daat, the inner peace, that Yaacov cultivated from his earliest days was hardly a simple complaisance. It was a dynamic striving toward integration, toward a "yeshiva," a stillness precariously and preciously perched between camps.

Perhaps, then, the "sin" of Yaacov in our parsha was not the pursuit of peace itself, but the definition of that peace. ביקש יעקב לישב בשלום. After years and years of challenge, Yaacov yearned to experience a static calm, to enter into a state of serenity and stay there. To that God could not accede. The life of the spiritual striver must stay on the move. But the alternative to that need not be pain, God forbid. It is, rather, a more active, laborious form of sitting--more conscious, more integrative, more mindfully meditative, more alive to ways that we always dwell between ohalim (tents).



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