

Parshat Vayeitzei:
Losing Yourself, Finding Yourself: Jacob's Psychological Journey
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Parashat VaYetzei is the story of a man in search of his identity. Last week, in Parashat Tolodot, Jacob obeyed his mother's command and impersonated his older brother in order to steal the latter's blessing. Jacob's disguise works well enough, but Jacob gets caught between the person he is pretending to be and the person he actually is. If, as the verse says, "the voice is the voice of Jacob and the hands are the hands of Esau," then the man beneath the disguise is neither. Last week's Parashah tells of Jacob's disappearance from his own story, and R' Shmuel Klitsner, in the book entitled *Wrestling Jacob*, the book that inspired this d'var torah, speaks extensively about the dissolution of self necessary for Jacob to pass as Esau and deceive his father. Jacob, at the end of Tolodot, has so thoroughly taken himself apart that he cannot even act to save his own life until Rebekah makes him run away.

Our Parashah, VaYetzei, opens with a turning point. Jacob's dream is most famous for the imagery of angels ascending and descending a ladder to heaven, but the most crucial element for Jacob's shattered sense of self is the promise that God makes him. God appears to Jacob as the God of Abraham and Isaac, already situating Jacob in the same tradition as his ancestors and affirming Jacob's place in the world. And the promises that God makes, though they echo those made to Abraham, are carefully tailored to Jacob and his needs.

"Behold," says God, "I am with you and I will guard you everywhere you go and return you to this land, for I shall not leave you until I have done what I have said."
(Bereishit 28:15)

וְהִנֵּה אֲנִי עִמָּךְ וְשָׁמַרְתִּיךָ בְּכָל אֲשֶׁר-תֵּלֵךְ
וְהִשְׁבַּתְתִּיךָ אֶל-הָאָדָמָה הַזֹּאת כִּי לֹא אֶעְזָבְךָ עַד
אֲשֶׁר אִם-עָשִׂיתִי אֶת אֲשֶׁר-דִּבַּרְתִּי לְךָ:
(בראשית כח:טו)

God promises Jacob precisely what he lacks in this moment: a sense of security, a home, and a future. He provides Jacob with the stability needed to rebuild his identity by reminding him of his past, securing his future and protecting his present.

Of course, even the word of God is not enough to immediately create a sense of stability and identity for Jacob. To return to *Wrestling Jacob*, R' Klitsner notes how Jacob repeats God's promise back to God, but with certain notable changes.

"If God remains with me, if He protects me on this journey that I am making, and gives me bread to eat and clothing to wear, and if I return safe to my father's house—the LORD shall be my God." (Bereishit, 28:20-21)

אִם-יְהִי אִתִּי אֱלֹהִים עִמָּדִי וְשָׁמַרְנִי בַדֶּרֶךְ הַזֶּה
אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי הוֹלֵךְ וְנָתַן-לִי לֶחֶם לֶאֱכֹל וּבִגְדֵי
לְלִבָּשׁ: וְשָׁבַתִּי בְשָׁלוֹם אֶל-בֵּית אָבִי וְיְהִי יְקִוּק
לִי לֵאלֹהִים: (בראשית כח: כ-כא)

While God promises protection everywhere that Jacob goes, Jacob asks merely for protection “on this way”. God promises generations as numerous as the sands of the sea and Jacob asks for food and clothing. God promises to return him to the land; Jacob merely wants safe passage to his father’s house. In his willingness to speak for himself and make an accord with God, we see Jacob taking his first steps towards claiming his own identity. In the paucity of his requests in the face God’s beneficence, however, we see Jacob’s inability to take even that which has already been freely offered.

Great change does not happen overnight. In Jacob’s case, it takes twenty years of working for his uncle to become a new man. But by the end of this week’s parsha, Jacob is a husband, a father, and a man of wealth and means. In a reversal of his passivity in Toldot, Jacob is the one who devises the plan to leave Laban’s house. And unlike Rebekah, who gives her son no option but to join in her scheme, Jacob asks Rachel and Leah what they think and invites them to participate in the decision-making process. Jacob is a man shaped by his earlier experiences, but no longer held captive by them. The parasha ends the same way it begins when, in chapter 32, verse 2, Jacob reaches a camp site and recognizes that God is in that place. The Torah is showing us that Jacob’s story has come full circle and that he has found himself over the course of the story’s unfolding.

I am tempted to end here and leave Jacob with this moment of triumph, but I would be remiss if I did not note that next week’s parsha tells of Jacob’s struggle with an angel and subsequent renaming. Jacob, now Israel, discovers that even a stable sense of self is subject to change and that the work of becoming who we are is always a work in progress. Having successfully become Jacob, God sees that he is ready to become Israel. Having found himself, Jacob is called to found a nation. Jacob’s story is a reminder to us to not only recognize our successes, but also celebrate the new challenges that arise from those successes. The reward for a job well done, after all, is another job. May we merit success in the works of our lives and use those achievements to inspire us to even greater heights.



Rabbanit Dr. Elizabeth Shayne came to Maharat after receiving her Ph.D from University of California, Santa Barbara, where she studied the past, present, and future of digital reading. Rabbanit Liz writes and teaches about everything from the hypertext history of the Talmud to the future of robots in halakha, while also innovating new ways to teach Torah online. She is a Wexner Graduate Fellow/Davidson Scholar, and interned at the Hebrew Institute of White Plains, Skokie Valley Agudath Jacob, and Sefaria. Rabbanit Liz plans to use her expertise to create more and better learning opportunities for all those who study and love Torah.