

Parshat Vayetze
There's No Place Like Home
Miriam Lorie - Class of 2024

When my husband and I watch Netflix, it's generally in ten minute chunks, snatched here and there amidst busy lives. On the odd occasion where we're able to watch an entire episode, we've noticed that it's a better story-telling experience. The narrative arc of an episode and the thematic connections both emerge more brightly.

The same can be said of most Parshiot, but none, I would argue, more notably than Parshat Vayetze. Vayetze is a perfect unit, framed in the Torah klaf by a single setuma division at its start and a petucha at its end. There is only one other sidra in the Torah which functions as a single literary unit like this - Miketz. It has the effect of reading a chapter without paragraph breaks - a single, breathless flow.

Breathless feels like an appropriate word for Vayetze, for it begins with Yaakov on the run from his biological brother Eisav, and ends with him on the run from his "brother" Lavan (see 29:12-15 where אָחִי is repeated over and over to describe their relationship). And in the middle? It is one long complex and painful negotiation for first a wife, then wives and children, work and property. We get the impression that he's on the run throughout Vayetze.

The sidra has a stunning chiasmatic structure.

- Yaakov leaves Canaan, escaping Esav
 - He encounters angels in a dream 'ויפגה'
 - Sets up a matzevah
 - Meets the people of Padan Aram
 - Association with Lavan
 - A 20 year long "night" in Charan
 - "Debrothering" (R. Chanoch Waxman's term) with Lavan
 - Yaakov speaks to "his brothers"
 - They set up a matzevah
 - Yaakov encounters angels again with 'ויפגה'
 - Heads back to Canaan to face Esav

To compound this, the sun is described as *setting* as Yaakov leaves for Charan. It is described as *rising* on his journey 20 years later. In the middle, as Aviva Zornberg puts it, "there is darkness, the Dark Night of the Soul". Yaakov is associated with Maariv, and much later when he meets Pharaoh, he says "מְעַט וְרַעִים הָיוּ יָמֵי שְׁנֵי חַיַּי" "few and hard have been the days of the years of my life". Yaakov's life is one of darkness and struggle and his 20 year stay with Lavan is a particularly dark chapter.

Despite 20 years living with Lavan, Yaakov is never really *at home*. Arguably, he spends his entire life searching restlessly, breathlessly, for "home". The chiasmatic structure indeed shows

developments in Yaakov's personality, but starkly points to the fact that he is no more settled at the end of the sedra than he was at its start.

Ironically, of all our Avot, he ends up with a *house* - Beit Yaakov is a phrase repeated twice in the Torah, frequently in the rest of Tanakh and other texts, and is a familiar name and movement today. But Yaakov's *bayyit* comprises the children who came after him. Yaakov's own life is a staccato series of nomadic moves. Canaan, Charan, Sukkot, Shechem, Luz / Betel, Bethlehem, Migdal-eder. He eventually settles in Canaan but ends his life in Mitzrayim. He is only ever described as having a home of his own in Bereishit 33:17 - which is markedly after our sidra and which itself feels a short-lived episode.

Instead, the house which accompanies Yaakov is God's - In his famous ladder dream Yaakov encounters "Beit Elokim" and names the place Beit El:

Shaken, he said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of God, and that is the gateway to heaven." וַיִּרְא וַיֹּאמֶר מֵהַנּוֹרָא הַמְּקוֹם הַזֶּה אֵין זֶה כִּי אִם-בַּיִת אֱלֹהִים וְזֶה שַׁעַר הַשָּׁמַיִם

So Yaakov, despite the wealth and family he ammasses during his time with Lavan, remains "homeless". We can perhaps speak of him having a peripatetic spiritual home, but no such luck in the physical world. By the time he leaves Charan he is wealthy, has more wives than is comfortable, at least 12 children, and vast flocks of sheep, goats and cattle. But he is no closer to *home*. No Talmudic wife = house association for Yaakov.

An early conversation with Lavan emphasises Yaakov's otherness in Lavan's home:

Lavan said, "It is not the practice in our place to marry off the younger before the older." וַיֹּאמֶר לָבָן לֹא-יַעֲשֶׂה כֵן בְּמִקְוָמֵנוּ לִיתֵת הַצְעִירָה לְפָנֵי הַבְּכִירָה:

Even as Yaakov marries Lavan's daughter, doubling his family connection, he is made to feel alien. This does not change during his 20 years sojourn. In next week's parasha, in prayer with God before meeting Esav, he says

And now I have become two camps וַעֲתָה הֵייתִי לְשְׁנֵי מַחֲנֹת

In this one deft phrase, Yaakov sums up the simultaneous abundance and impermanence of his living arrangements.

What *is* a home? This is a question which 2020 has thrown our way forcefully. When "stay home" equals "save lives", home unavoidably becomes our physical centre. And more than ever before, home has needed to play multiple functions - our homes have become offices, schools, gyms, playgrounds, cafes and batei midrash. Whether we've seen lockdowns as home isolation or home refuge, home has taken on new levels of importance.

No doubt the sense of home that eluded Yaakov is not exactly the same as the sense of home we need in 2020. But here are four principles for home in 2020, based on the very factors which Yaakov lacked during the 20 year stay in Charan in our parasha. Whether you live alone, with a partner, room mate/s, children or other family, these seem to be important factors.

- **Create a place you can call your own.** Even if it's your own bedroom, desk or corner of a garden. Even after 20 years, Lavan felt an unreasonable ownership over Yaakov, his property and his family (31:43).
- **Secure sufficient autonomy.** Home life often involves negotiation, but it's important to have areas you can direct, and to have an equal say in what goes on. Blurred boundaries in Yaakov and Lavan's relationship meant that Yaakov's wages were changed ten times (31:41) - he lacked autonomy and authority.
- **Create a space where you feel comfortable.** A comfortable home has little to do with material wealth and everything to do with arranging a space to be your solid base. Yaakov had everything and was still a restless wanderer.
- **Work for shalom bayyit.** Endlessly work towards peaceful relationships with those you live with. Nip comparisons in the bud (Yaakov conspicuously absents himself from involvement in his four wives' baby wars - perhaps with more attentiveness he could have averted the competition from the outset). De-escalate conflict. Work for the people you live with - as much as the space you exist in - to be your home.

May we all merit - in 2020 and beyond - to have a place we can call home, and to support others who are, like Yaakov, still searching for their *bayyit*.



Miriam Lorie studied at Midreshet Harova and the Pardes Centre for Jewish Educators, as well as co-founded a local Partnership Minyan in 2013 - the first such minyan to regularly meet in the UK. She has worked at Lead, developing Jewish leaders for the UK Jewish community, where she collaborated with the London School of Jewish Studies to develop an online Jewish literacy course for community leaders, which she continues to run. Miriam was named one of the Jewish Chronicle's "Sixteen under 30's to watch in 2016" and in the Jewish News' "40 under 40" in 2020. Miriam lives in Borehamwood UK with her husband and two small boys.