

D'var Torah Nidhe Israel

Vayishlach: “And Jacob sent messengers before him to Esau his brother unto the land of Seir, the field of Edom;” (Genesis 32:4).

This particular portion is concentrating on notions of faith, mercy, forgiveness, justice and human frailty.

It is remarkable how the Torah and indeed the Hebrew Bible does not shirk from telling us the truth about each individual. It does not hide human weaknesses or strengths and at the same time teaches us - through showing us the true colours of the individuals and their families - how either to behave (or not to behave) and what to do in the many circumstances in which the individuals find themselves.

In *Vayishlach* which means ‘sent’, Jacob and Esau are reunited after two decades. Forgetting his past enmity towards his sibling, Esau runs towards his brother Jacob, falls upon his neck, embraces and kisses him, and they both weep tears of joy. Jacob offers lavish presents to his brother, explaining that they represent the blessing that he had stolen from his brother and that he is now returning. He asks to be accepted in forgiveness. A beautiful verse reveals Jacob’s inner thoughts as he says to himself, “If I request atonement with this gift, perhaps he will forgive me.”

The notion of **faith** comes through the faith of Jacob that he will prevail after his struggle with the angel, and his own conscience. The text says this figure is a “man,” but most of the commentators assume it was some kind of angel or a holy vision. The messenger seems to want Jacob to think deeply about the meaning of his name, which we learned at his birth would represent the depth of his troubled relationship with his brother. He’s asking if Jacob has wrestled sufficiently with his own identity. “What is your name?” in this context, can be understood as, “Are you still Jacob, the deceiver, or are you ready to become Israel, the person of conscience who has struggled with God.” As we were created in the image of God, we too are often struggling with ourselves before we can or are able to understand God and His intentions or indeed ourselves.

Esau accepts both the gift and his brother’s penitence. Now, each of the brothers is able to recognise how much they have; secure in themselves, they have no need to

envy each other. In the end Esau said to his brother -*'I have enough....'* and both had enough. What a statement where a person can and is willing to say that what he has is good and satisfying and he does not need more. If in life we can do that perhaps the world will have a different dimension enabling all of us to enjoy and eat what we have, and share with others be it material or spiritual. Only when we learn to value what we have and who we are we can live at ease with others. Esau and Jacob can be reconciled when they realise in the words of Pirkei Avot, the Ethics of the Fathers, *"Who is rich? One who is happy with his portion."*

Mercy is represented through the decision of the two brothers not to fight. It is also found later in the portion when we read about the cruel murder committed by the brothers, Simon and Levi, who decided to avenge the alleged rape of their sister Dinah. It was their father Jacob, who when he was speaking about his children, has singled out the brothers and expressed his anger and dissatisfaction with their behaviour because mercy and lovingkindness should be the guiding light in all of our actions. After all the world is based on three fundamentals 'Torah, Worship and Lovingkindness - *Torah, Avodah, and Gemilut Hasadim*".

Just as Esau was able to **forgive** his brother we should have it in us to be able to do that. Even if we are unable to forget, we surely can still forgive. This portion also points us towards reconciliation, showing us that when we have the inner courage and strength to reach out to the other, we can be surprised as we find reciprocity.

Justice and **human frailty** go hand in hand as we recognise how fragile we are and how we need to reach an understanding in many areas of our lives which includes family, country, politics and religion. Importantly, our religion seeks justice and mercy as we read in Jeremiah 9:23 *"But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth, and knoweth Me, that I am the LORD who exercise mercy, justice, and righteousness, in the earth; for in these things I delight, saith the LORD."*

As we can see through this portion, Jacob was a man surrounded by conflict: with his brother Esau, his father-in-law Laban, his wives, Leah and Rachel, and his children, whose sibling rivalry eventually brought the whole family into exile in Egypt. His life seems to have been a field of tensions, but he and others were able to overcome. The Torah is delivering, here as elsewhere, an extraordinary message: that if we can truly relate to God as God in His full transcendence and majesty, then we can relate to humans as humans in all their fallibility.

What is particularly remarkable in the Hebrew Bible and the Jewish religion that the heroes are not idealised but are utterly human. It was through Jacob's

wrestling-match with the mysterious man and then his eventual destiny to be one of the fathers of the Jewish people.

This is the reason that in the Amida prayer we repeat the words 'God of' for each of the generations - the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. Each one of them understood God in their own way and stood up to Him to have an argument, debate or bargain and each has represented and shown a different face of their personality as well as an approach to life. Each needed to change or grow and each was unique just like we as individuals are all different, unique but at the same time all made in the image of God.

Renee and I are looking forward to seeing you ALL-Please come to Bridgetown to services on Friday, let us celebrate Chanukah, life, peace, kindness and let us do them all Together.

Shabbat shalom,

B'Shalom

Rabbi Thomas