

There and Back Again:

The Exilic Journeys and Sojourns of Parashat Vayetze

By Rav Elchanan Samet

I: The Unity of Parashat Vayetze

Parashat Vayetze is unique in that it consists of a single Masoretic parasha, i.e., one paragraph of 148 uninterrupted consecutive verses.[1] Though Masoretic division of the parashiyot is based on sundry reasons, not all of which are always clear,[2] it sometimes indicates a literary unity. It appears that this is the case with our parasha: Parashat Vayetze is all one long story. The unity of the narrative may be seen on many planes:

1. Yaacov, the main character of the story, can be followed throughout it with unity of time and place. Every event in the parasha is footnoted, whether in terms of the place of presentation or the stretch of time it occupies.[3]
2. The plot flows continuously, each segment of it flowing from what precedes it and introducing what follows it.
3. The entire narrative has one topic: Yaacov's adventures in exile, from the moment he leaves until he returns.
4. Even though our story is prefaced already in the conclusion of Parashat Toledot with Yitzchak's command to Yaacov to go to Lavan and to marry one of his daughters, it is distinguished by a basic element: there is no mention of Eisav's name or Yitzchak's blessing in Vayetze.[4]
5. The story has a very clear chiasmic structure. Angels appear to Yaacov as he is about to leave the land and when he returns. There is also a linguistic chiasm:

"He encountered (vayifga) the place... he dreamt... behold, angels of God..." (28:11-12).

"He encountered (vayifgi'u) angels of God" (32:1).

"He said... 'This is none other than the house of God!'... and he called the name of the place Beit El" (28:17-19).

"Yaacov said: 'This is the camp of God!' and he called the name of the place Machanayim" (32:2).

Thus the narrative of Parashat Vayetze is separate from that which precedes it in Toledot and that which follows it in Parashat Vayishlach. In both of those parshiot, Eisav is Yaacov's antagonist, and they are tied to each other by the story of the taking of the blessing. In Vayetze, Lavan takes Eisav's place. In order to stress the uniqueness and independence of this story, the parasha opens with a restatement of the fact that we know already from the end of Toledot. Thus, 28:5 tells us: "Yitzchak sent Yaacov, and he went to Padan Aram, to Lavan;" 28:9, the first verse of Vayetze, notes, "Yaacov left Be'er Sheva, and he went to Charan."

What is the significance of Vayetze being one unified narrative? What is the difference if we read it as one story or as the interweaving of many shorter episodes? The distinction lies in the principle of thematic unity. The moral of a story or its aim are generally not stated explicitly, but rather they are hinted to in different ways. The plot which unites all of the scenes is a tool by which the Torah suggests the inner meaning of the narrative. Thus, we are driven by the unified structure to ask: what is the central theme of Parashat Vayetze?

II: The Axis of the Narrative

-

In a story the purpose of which is the description of a hero's exile and his adventures until he returns home, what would be the expected point of dramatic shift? Presumably, this point would be the decision to return home, as this is the axis of the entire narrative. The first part of the story, with its description of his departure and his sojourn in exile, builds up to this decision, while the second half, of the preparations for and execution of the return journey, is engendered by it.

This point appears to be found at 30:25-26: "When Rachel had given birth to Yoseif, Yaacov said to Lavan: Send me, and let me go to my place and to my land. Give me my wives and my children... and I will go..." These verses are at the virtual dead center of the story, as verse 26 is the 74th of Vayetze's 148 verses - but do they truly introduce the second half of the story? In fact, they do not begin Yaacov's return to Canaan, as there is no movement as a result of this declaration. This is due to the fact that the continuation of these verses presents a surprising event: Yaacov acquiesces, without any argument or opposition, to Lavan's idea that he remain by him, and he does this so that "I will do also for my house" (30:30).

Thus, the axis of our narrative is not in Yaacov's declaration of his intent to leave - a declaration which is not realized for another six years, and then in a vastly different manner - but rather in the dialogue that follows: Lavan's request in verses 27-28 and Yaacov's positive reply in 29-30. It is this shift that splits our narrative into two units.

Why is this shift so surprising? In the previous parasha, Yaacov lived in his father's house as an adult bachelor at the same time that his twin brother was marrying local women and starting a family. Why did Yaacov wait? It appears that while he was aware that the local women were not appropriate candidates for marriage, he felt that, like his father Yitzchak, he did not have the right to leave the land for the purpose of marriage. Yaacov did not see why this rule applied by Avraham to Yitzchak (23:5-8) should be subject to change, and so he decided that "to sit and do nothing is better." [5]

Yaacov agrees to leave only under the combined pressure of his father and mother. Yaacov consents, but only after his mother goes to great lengths emphasizing the danger from Eisav and minimizing the time which Yaacov will have to spend in exile: "Now, my son, listen to me, and rise; flee for yourself to Lavan my brother, to Charan. You will dwell there a few days until your brother's anger subsides... Then I will send and take you from there" (27:43-45).

At the beginning of Vayetze, God himself joins in the campaign. God's revelation to Yaacov at Beit El (his first prophetic vision) and what follows contain not only an insistence that Yaacov leave with faith and hope, but also a promise of his quick return: "The ground on which you sleep, I will give it to you and your seed... I am with you, and I will watch you wherever you go, and I will return you to this land, for I will not abandon you until I have done what I have told you" (28:13,15). Yaacov responds to this revelation and takes a vow that when God fulfills His word "and I will return in peace to my father's house, then this stone which I have placed as a monument will be God's house..." (v. 21-22).

Now, with a feeling of lightness, Yaacov sets off for Charan to satisfy his obligation to establish a family, on the condition of returning speedily to his destined land, to his parents' house, and to the fulfillment of his vow at Beit El.

When he reaches Lavan, Yaacov at first stays in his house for a month without a defined aim (29:14), and afterwards he begins his seven years of indentured servitude for Rachel. Nevertheless, we are still within Rivka's conception of "and you will dwell there A FEW DAYS," as verse 20 notes: "and they were in his eyes like A FEW DAYS, in his love for her." As it turns out (v. 25), "it was in the morning, and behold, she was Leah!" A week later, Yaacov is able to celebrate his marriage to his beloved, Rachel, but he is forced to undertake seven more years of hard labor in order to earn her hand. Within those seven years, twelve children are born to Yaacov. His purpose of journeying to Charan has been fulfilled, above and beyond all expectations, and his stay has also gone above and beyond the plan. With the end of Yaacov's fourteen years of servitude to his father-in-law, we expect Yaacov to leave. His return journey has been delayed more than long enough, and it is time to return to his land, his vow, and his parents.

Indeed, with the end of the first half of the narrative, we hear from Yaacov the long-awaited words: "Send me, and I will go to my place and to my land." We anticipate that the continuation of the narrative - second part - will be Yaacov's return journey at the head of a large family.

Yet at the beginning of this second part we encounter the surprising fact that Yaacov is still willing to stay with Lavan, for the sake of "doing for his house." This "doing" is the accumulation of wealth via sheep, as we see from the rest of this scene. How much time, we must wonder, did Yaacov intend to spend in Charan? A year? Two? How much time is necessary to "do for his house," and what will indicate that Yaacov has amassed sufficient wealth? The reasons which compelled Yaacov to remain in exile no longer apply. From here on, the parasha describes Yaacov in exile under very different circumstances. [6]

III: Unable or Unwilling to Leave?

-

At this point, we must ask: what is the general relationship between these two halves of the narrative? How are they similar? How are they different?

Despite the fact that this is a story of leaving the land and returning to it, neither a geographical crux nor the dimension of movement define the distinction between the two parts. This is particularly striking if we compare the beginning and the end: Yaacov does not return in Vayetze to his point of origin; he leaves the heart of Eretz Yisra'el proper, on the western bank of the Yardein, and returns only to the eastern side, not to return to his father until the end of Parashat Vayishlach, and to Beit El only a few verses earlier.

Can we then employ a chronological reason for splitting the narrative? This idea does not pan out either, as fourteen years pass in the first part, while the second part details the events of six years, less than half of the other's total.

Apparently, the halves relate to each other in terms of a very different dimension of the narrative: the evaluation of Yaacov's actions. The first section describes a mandatory and reluctant sojourn, which is justified throughout; the second part, on the other hand, describes a superfluous and unaccountable delay. The two halves are thus diametrically opposed.

Indeed, marriage was Yaacov's goal in his journey to Charan, and Providence saw to it that it turned out that Yaacov married not one wife, but "two who are really four,"[7] and thus was created the tribal unit that would be the foundation of an embryonic nation. To this end, Yaacov had to work for fourteen years. However, the further economic delay has no justification: the accumulation of wealth does not justify a delay in returning to his birthplace, fulfilling his vow, and honoring his father and mother. It is particularly damning that Yaacov does not set any limit for these activities, and only external matters and a divine command following them cut his extra stay to six years.

What does this second delay yield? First, let us note what does not happen: no additional son is born to Yaacov during these six years. It is as if Yaacov's four wives stop giving birth simultaneously. There is a hint here that the lone reason for Yaacov's staying in Charan - building a family - has been fulfilled, and more time will not add to this.

Indeed, Yaacov acquires a great deal of wealth in those years, but it becomes clear that this was "wealth guarded to the detriment of its owner" (*Kohelet* 5:12). This prosperity arouses the jealousy of Lavan's sons and of Lavan himself, and in the end it causes Yaacov to run away from his father-in-law's house

like a thief.[8] This wealth is what entangles Yaacov in Lavan's pursuit and, ultimately, in a bitter confrontation. There are serious and disturbing consequences of this action: when they flee, Rachel steals her father's sacred images, his "terafim" (31:19). This brings Yaacov to unwittingly curse his beloved wife (31:32). He takes a morally questionable position in the denouement with Lavan, denying absolutely the accusation of theft; to the eyes of the reader, this gives Lavan the upper hand, as we know that his suspicions are essentially correct. The same wealth requires Yaacov to appease Eisav's envy in Parashat Vayishlach.

These unnecessary entanglements of the second half do not add a bit to the building of Yaacov's house. If Yaacov had, at the end of the first half, realized the original goal of his journey, Lavan might have truly executed the intention that he falsely claimed after the chase (31:27): "Why... did you not tell me? I would have sent you with joy and song, with drum and harp!" This leave-taking would have concluded honorably the fourteen years in his father-in-law's house, and Yaacov would have returned to his land, poor and penniless, but with a clear conscience. In the land of Canaan, Yaacov would have begun to build up his bank account, and then it would have been permanent wealth. That which compelled Yaacov to leave exile was the impression that "the ground was burning beneath his feet." The picture is a familiar one from Jewish history: "He heard the words of the sons of Lavan, saying, 'Yaacov took everything which was our father's; and from that which was our father's, he made all of this honor.' Yaacov saw Lavan's face, and behold, he was not with him as previously" (31:1-2). Yaacov feels the exilic kick in the shins.

Immediately afterwards, God appears to him and reminds him of the reasons which should have motivated him to return already: "God said to Yaacov: Return to the land of your fathers and to your birthplace, and I will be with you" (31:3). "I am the God of Beit El that you set up a monument there, that you vowed to Me there a vow. Now, rise, leave this land, and go back to the land of your birthplace" (30:13).[9]

Concerning God's words to Yaacov in the first verse, the Sages interpret it as follows in [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. Rav Ami said in the name of Reish Lakish: The property of the Diaspora carries no blessing, but when you return to the land of your fathers - then I will be with you.

It appears that the basis for this aggadic interpretation is the distinction between God's promise in Beit El, "Behold, I am with you, and I will guard you WHEREVER YOU GO" (28:15), and his assurance here, that "IN THE LAND OF YOUR FATHERS" (and nowhere else) "I will be with you." The first answer of the midrash is that at the time that God says these last words to Yaacov, there was no good reason for his dwelling in exile. God's promise in Beit El was to be with him wherever he might be forced to wander, but at this point He, along with Yitzchak and Rivka, are waiting for Yaacov to fulfill his promise - both his vow and his potential. Rav Ami responds to this that the intent of God in his last words to Yaacov is that "[He] will be with [him]" is limited only as regards guarding Yaacov's wealth; there was never a promise to protect the riches he might accumulate in exile, because no blessing rests on them, and it was not to accumulate them that Yaacov left. Only when he will return to his fathers' land will God "be with [him]" to guard his possessions as well.

IV: The Mark of Exile

In both of these halves, there is a description of Yaacov's adventures in two states: travelling and during his extended stay in Lavan's house.

Let us first examine the parallelism between the two segments that describe Yaacov's stay in the house of Lavan. Yaacov's actions are described in both as regards the terms of service he agrees to with Lavan. The general order of both descriptions is strikingly similar, each being composed of six elements:

- 1) Lavan's amenable opening,
- 2) Yaacov's conditions,
- 3) Lavan's consent,
- 4) chicanery in the application of the agreement,
- 5) the results for Yaacov of the agreement, and
- 6) the decision to return to the land.

Most striking is the similarity between the halves in elements (1) (in 29:15 and 30:28) and (3) (in 29:19 and 30:35). Elements (2) and (5), Yaacov's conditions and results, which consist of "I

will work for you seven years for Rachel..." and the birth of twelve children in the first half (29:18; 29:31-30:24), paralleled by "I will pthrough all of your stoday, remove from there... and this will be my wage," and "And he had many sheep, maidservants, slaves, camels, and donkeys," also share a common point. In both, Yaacov appropriates that which Lavan has but does not deserve: his daughters and his marked flocks; as a result, Yaacov is blessed with a multitude of offspring, the first time human, and the second time sheep.

The other two elements are reversed between the two halves of the story. In (4), this is as regards the issue of who tricks whom: in the first half, Lavan deceives Yaacov by exchanging Rachel for Leah; in the second, Yaacov outsmarts Lavan by encouraging the sheep to give birth to marked offspring. Yaacov's questionable conduct in the second half of the story will be revealed as a direct reaction to and protection from Lavan's own fraud (31:7, 12, 41); however, at this stage the reader does not know this, and Yaacov's actions seem unjustified. This reinforces the idea that Yaacov's extended stay has affected him. The victim of deceit now becomes its perpetrator.

This is even more striking in element (6). In the first half, Yaacov reaches the conclusion that he must return home because his goal in coming to Charan has been achieved. This is his autonomous decision. In the second half, however Yaacov is compelled by Lavan's conduct and by divine command.

It thus turns out that the Yaacov's second period in Lavan's house, though it bears similarities to the first, is distinct in two aspects: Yaacov's involvement in questionable activities and the reasons for his decisions to leave. Both of these developments are negative.

Now let us turn to the descriptions of Yaacov's journeys, found at the extremes of our narrative. Normally, we would expect the departure to exile to be depressing, while the return journey should be a happy one. For Yaacov, however, the reverse is true, even though he set out alone and returns with a huge household. The element stressed at Yaacov's return is not his family, but the abundance of material possessions that he brings back with him; 32:18 mentions "accumulation" and "acquisition" three times each. When Yaacov leaves Canaan, at the beginning of the parasha, the term "going" appears three times, but never "fleeing" (even though it does appear at the end of Toledot). Yet, Yaacov's return journey is described four times as "flight."

Certain motives appear in both segments, almost always in opposite contexts. For example, the angelic dream is sublime in 28:12, but in 31:10-11, it is set amid sheep in heat. Similarly, the stones and the monument of Beit El are a symbol of the bond between God and Yaacov, while those in Gal Eid (31:45-46) mark the covenant between Lavan and Yaacov. Additionally, on the way to Charan, at the well, Yaacov finds his soul-mate, in an encounter full of innocent love. After that encounter, Lavan runs to greet Yaacov. On the way back, Lavan chases Yaacov, and because of the confrontation, Yaacov curses his beloved unwittingly and loses her forever.

With these reversals between the two halves, the narrative expresses its disapproval of Yaacov's delay in Charan. Every relationship of Yaacov is damaged by it, and nevertheless, even at that time, Yaacov has God's protection, whether in Lavan's house or in flight. "For He will command His angels for you, to guard you on all your paths" ([Tehillim 91:11](#)).

Notes:

1] As is true of Parashat Miketz. Note that the Tosafists and others refer to our parasha as "closed," and many different explanations are given. It is clear that they saw Vayetze as attached to the end of Parashat Toledot without any true break, as Parashat Vayechi is attached to Parashat Vayigash (which prompts the Sages and Rashi to ask there: "Why is this parasha closed?"). However, between Toledot and Vayetze is a "closed" break, i.e., a space of a word, with the latter beginning on the same line as the former ends; no variation is found among manuscripts or midrashic sources. See Hagahot Maimoniyot, Laws of Sefer Torah 8:3. Minchat Shai suggests that Vayetze is referred to as "closed" because it runs uninterrupted, but Chizkunni seems to see that as a separate idea.

2] A more general reason, which does not explain specific parshiot, is given in Torat Kohanim (1): "What purpose did the interruptions serve? To give Moshe a break in order to contemplate between each parasha and between each topic."

3] "He dwelt with him a month of days" (29:14); "Yaacov worked for Rachel seven years" (ibid. 20); "He worked... another seven years" (ibid. 30); "These twenty years in your house - I worked fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for your sheep" (31:41).

4] There is a hint in 29:13: "And he told Lavan all of these things," to which Rashi comments, "that he came only because of his brother's compulsion;" Radak and Seforno explain similarly.

5] To borrow a famous Talmudic phrase; see Eiruvin 100a, among others.

6] Indeed, Rav Ovadya Seforno in his commentary to Yaacov's words in verse 25 (s.v. Shalecheini), rejects the notion that Yaacov was destitute; if he did not have provisions for a journey a) he never would have endangered his family; b) Lavan, a notable of his city, would not have let him; c) Lavan would not have asked Yaacov to stay for Lavan's sake (30:27).

7] To borrow another Talmudic phrase; see Shevu'ot 2a, among many.

8] "Ganav" in Hebrew; the root g-n-v appears seven times in the scene.

9] The claim becomes so damning that we must find a defense for our patriarch. Psychologically, perhaps he tarried so long for fear of Eisav; Yaacov may have wanted to delay the inevitable confrontation. On the other hand, one may argue that the delay is rational, as in the meantime Yaacov will amass wealth that will help in the confrontation with Eisav as a "tribute" to appease his brother (even though the reverse is also feasible: a penniless Yaacov might arouse pity rather than envy). Also in the meanwhile, Yaacov's first sons will approach fighting age (See Rashi 32:9, s.v. Ve-haya). These are only hypotheses. Yaacov may have believed them, but the fact that the Torah ignores them indicates that they are insufficient.

[Translated and edited by Yoseif Bloch]

Visit our website: <http://etzion.org.il/en>