

PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT VAYETZE

The Parallel Between Yaakov and Avraham

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This week's parasha features one of the great surprises of the Book of Bereishit: Yaakov, the third of our patriarchs, leaves Canaan, the Promised Land, and heads towards Charan, to the family of his mother, Rivka.

This is quite a surprise, indeed, given the heretofore unrelenting resolve of Avraham's family to remain in Canaan. Avraham strictly and repeatedly warned his servant not to bring Yitzchak to Charan under any circumstances. Similarly, when Yitzchak considers the option of temporarily moving to Egypt to escape the debilitating famine in Canaan, God admonishes him, "Do not go down to Egypt - live in this land." One would have expected that Yaakov, Yitzchak's son destined to follow his lead and continue his legacy, would be subject to this same prohibition, that he, like his father, would be required to remain in Canaan.

Why, then, does God not only allow Yaakov to leave his homeland, but even encourages him to do so by appearing to him in a dream upon his departure? (It seems that the text itself wishes to emphasize the peculiarity of the situation: "Yaakov left Be'er Sheva, and went to Charan." Not only does he go to Charan, but he leaves Be'er Sheva!)

Upon carefully examining the episode of Yaakov's departure, we are reminded of his grandfather, Avraham. This association emerges from two basic similarities between the two:

1) God's initial appearance to Avraham involves a clear, unconditional command: "Go ('lekh-lekha') from your land, your birthplace and your father's home to the land which I will show you" (12:10). Avraham must detach himself from his past; he is bidden to uproot himself from his family and homeland. This element of detachment from one's family finds clear expression with regard to Yaakov's journey, as well, already from the outset. When his parents order him to flee from Canaan, they employ expressions reminiscent of God's memorable charge to Avraham, "lekh-lekha:" "Now, my son, listen to me, get up and flee ('berach-lekha') to Lavan" (27:43). The verses continue, "Get up and go ('lekh') to Padan Aram ... and take for you ('kach-lekha') a wife from there" (28:2).

[It should be emphasized in this context that both the expressions, "berach-lekha" - in the context of Yaakov's journey - and "lekh-lekha" - in the context of Avraham's trip - are grammatically both unique and difficult. In both instances, the word "lekha" - "for you" - modifies a verb - "flee," and "go," respectively - rather than a noun. See the commentaries of Rashi, Ramban and Radak.)

2) Beyond this comparison which seems, admittedly, as just a subtle allusion, another common feature binds these two journeys together even more convincingly. Immediately preceding the departure of each of these two patriarchs, a special blessing is bestowed. Avraham's departure from his homeland was instructed by the Almighty Himself, and the blessing is given, in turn, by God. Yaakov, before his journey, receives a blessing both from the one ordering him to leave - his father, Yitzchak - as well as from God. Significantly, God's blessing to Yaakov constitutes Yaakov's first divine revelation, parallel to God's first appearance to Avraham, in which his command that Avraham leave his homeland is accompanied by the divine blessing. These two blessings - the one to Avraham prior to his departure and that of Yaakov prior to his journey - share a common expression which appears nowhere else in Tanakh. God promises Avraham, "I will make you a great nation...and all the families of the earth will be blessed through you" (12:3). Similarly, God declares to Yaakov in his dream, "Your offspring will be like the dust of the earth...and all the families of the earth will be blessed through you and your offspring" (28:14). This unique expression, which, as stated, appears only in these two places, requires explanation beyond the purview of our discussion. More specifically, though, this phrase reminds us of Avraham's detachment from his past as we read about Yaakov's imminent detachment from his.

The Torah seems to link these two patriarchs once again, in the context of Yaakov's return to Canaan. Just as God had originally commanded Avraham, "Go from your land, your birthplace and your father's home" (12:10), so does He urge Yaakov, "Return to the land of your fathers and your birthplace" (31:3). Furthermore, if we carefully examine the routes taken by each upon their arrival in Canaan, we will discover, surprisingly, that these two journeys are almost identical. The Torah records three stages in Avraham's entry. The first is his arrival in Shekhem, where he constructs an altar. He then embarks on another stage of travel, this time reaching Bet-El, where he once again builds an altar. Finally, he heads southward towards Chevron, where the third and final altar is erected. All these altars involve the same purpose, Avraham's "calling in the name of God." (The altar constructed on Mt. Moriah at the "akeida" is of a different nature entirely and not relevant in this context.)

Remarkably, Yaakov's return to Canaan corresponds exactly to the initial entry of his grandfather. He first purchases a plot of land near Shekhem and builds an altar. He then proceeds to Bet-El where he constructs a second altar, and from there he continues to Chevron. These three stages comprise his entire return to Canaan as recorded in the Chumash, and the two altars are the only two he erects. (Apparently, there was no need for Yaakov to construct a third altar in Chevron, since his father, Yitzchak, still lived there, and thus the original altar in Chevron was still operative.)

Thus, Yaakov's departure from Canaan and the accompanying blessing from God are presented off the background of Avraham's abandoning his birthplace, and, correspondingly, Yaakov's return to Canaan parallels his grandfather's initial arrival.

To complete the picture, two other comparisons between Avraham and Yaakov should be noted:

1) As opposed to Yitzchak, who was named by Hashem even prior to his birth, Avraham receives his God-given name ("Avraham" in place of "Avram") much later in life, as is Yaakov's name changed to "Yisrael" during his adulthood. Both these name-changes, Avram to Avraham and Yaakov to Yisrael, occur in the context of physical wounds: Avraham's name is presented together with the commandment of circumcision, and Yaakov receives his new name as he limps in the aftermath of his fight with the mysterious angel. Both these "defects" have ramifications for future generations. All Avraham's male descendants must be circumcised, and as a result of Yaakov's dislocated hip, his progeny may not partake of the "gid ha-nasheh."

Furthermore, the blessings accompanying these events bear striking resemblance:

To Avraham (17:1-7):

God appeared to Avraham and said to him,

I am 'E-l Sha-dai'

Your name will no longer be called Avram

Your name will be Avraham

I will make you very fruitful, and I will make you into nations

And kings will emerge from you

To Yaakov (35:10-11):

God said to him, I am 'E-l Sha-dai'

Your name will no longer be called Yaakov

Your name will be Yisrael

Be fruitful and multiply, a nation and a group of nations will emerge from you

And kings will emerge from your loins

2) Avraham is bidden to sacrifice his son, Yitzchak, who was born to him and his barren wife after many bitter and frustrating years of waiting. Likewise, Yaakov loses his beloved son, Yosef, who was born to Rachel only after many years of infertility. Many literary parallels link the episode of Yosef's descent to Egypt with that of Yitzchak's ascent to Mt. Moriah, onto the altar prepared by his father. These similarities point to a strong connection between Yaakov's loss of his son and Avraham's near loss of his.

The story of the "akeida" opens with God turning to Avraham at the latter's enthusiastic response: "He [God] said to him [Avraham], 'Avraham!' and he said, 'Here I am!'" (22:1). The incident of Yosef and his brothers begins the same way: "Yisrael said to Yosef ... and he said to him, 'Here I am!'" (37:13). In both instances, the relevant instruction immediately follows: Regarding Avraham - "Please take your son...and go" (22:2), and regarding Yaakov - "Please go" (37:14). Avraham follows God's command, and on the third day, we are told, "He saw the place from afar" (22:4). Yosef, too, obeys his father's wish, and upon arriving in Dotan, "They saw him from afar" (37:18). As Avraham prepares to slaughter his son, a heavenly angel calls out, "Do not cast your hand unto the boy" (22:12), reminiscent of Reuven's admonishment to his brothers just as they were prepared to kill Yosef - "Do not cast a hand unto him" (37:22). Avraham slaughters a ram instead of his Yitzchak, and Yosef's brothers slaughter a goat in his stead. After the akeidah, we are told, "Avraham returned to his lads" (22:19), and, after Yosef is sold, Reuven notices Yosef's absence and "He returned to his brothers." In his dramatic intervention to prevent Yitzchak's slaughter, the angel says to Avraham, "Do not cast your hand unto the boy and do nothing to him, for now I know that you are God-fearing, and you did not spare your only son from me" (22:12). Similar expressions appear later in Chumash, as Yosef resists the advances of Potifar's wife: "He spared nothing from me except you...I will have sinned to God" (39:9).

Thus, two incidents of sons leaving their fathers are linked by the Chumash. Yitzchak was almost taken from his father, and Yosef was, in fact, lost, though even this loss proved only temporary, as father and son are later reunited.

These aforementioned parallels between Avraham and Yaakov require explanation. Specifically, the fundamental question of Yaakov's leaving Canaan must be addressed on the basis of his similarity to his grandfather.

It appears as though Yaakov repeats virtually all of his grandfather's actions, thus rendering him, if you will, a new Avraham. Clearly, there exist critical differences between the two (most obviously, the activism and public involvement which characterize Avraham, as opposed to the humble passivity of Yaakov), but the basic series of events are shared by both. Perhaps the most significant and noteworthy of these events is Yaakov's departure to Charan. He returns to his grandfather's birthplace, Aram Naharayim, as if to relive the process of Avraham's relocation from Charan to Canaan. As we have seen, the places where he encamps and offers sacrifices reflect the precise same journey as was taken by his grandfather.

Apparently, then, Yaakov should be seen as a new beginning of the process of the establishment of the Nation of Israel. Like Avraham two generations earlier, he becomes the initiator of the process, not its perpetuator.

To properly understand this dimension of Yaakov, we need to carefully examine the "choosing" process through Avraham's family. First, Lot separates from his uncle and decides to settle in Sedom. In this way, he demonstrates his unwillingness to continue with Avraham on his journey, preferring instead to reside in Sedom, which was "...like the garden of God, like the land of Egypt" (13:8-12).

A generation later, Yishmael is discarded, as it were, in favor of Yitzchak. Significantly, however, these two brothers never actually compete for the cultural and spiritual inheritance of their father. Already before Yitzchak's birth, God makes it absolutely clear that Yitzchak, the son of Avraham and his primary wife, would succeed Avraham, and not Yishmael, the son of Sarah's maidservant: "I will fulfill My covenant with him [Yishmael] as an eternal covenant...and I will fulfill My covenant with Yitzchak, to whom Sarah will give birth..." (17:15-21).

The son with whom the Almighty would continue His covenant is Yitzchak, and the covenant would continue with his progeny after him. As this is determined already prior to Yitzchak's birth, we never find a significant struggle between him and his brother over the continuation rights of their father's legacy. Yishmael was never a realistic alternative to Yitzchak (except in Avraham's mind).

Regarding the next generation, however, an actual confrontation erupts. Yaakov and Esav are both sons of the same parents - Yitzchak and Rivka - and, what more, they are twins. There exists no a priori factor to determine the preference of one over the other, and furthermore, there seems, at first, no reason to choose in the first place. After all, Avraham's legacy was to be perpetuated by the offspring of Yitzchak; the eternal covenant with the Almighty applied to all of Yitzchak's descendants. Just as all twelve sons of Yaakov would eventually build together the final "Family of Avraham" (despite the ensuing conflicts therein), so would we have expected that both of Yitzchak's sons would be included in the promise to Avraham and Yitzchak, i.e., the inheritance of the land of Canaan and the establishment of a large, powerful nation.

This seems to be the intent of Rabbi Nechemia in the Midrash:

"It was learnt in the name of Rabbi Nechemia: Rivka was worthy to have twelve tribes emerge from her. This is what is meant by the verse, 'God said to her, there are two peoples in your stomach, etc.' The expression 'two nations' equals two; 'two peoples' makes four; 'and one people will overpower the other' makes six; 'the older will serve the younger' makes eight; 'her days of gestation were completed' makes ten; 'the first came out red' makes eleven; 'and afterwards his brother came out' makes twelve..." (Bereishit Rabba, Toldot, Parasha 63, 22).

Rivka was to establish the nation of Avraham. Essentially, her two sons correspond to the twelve sons of Yaakov, who successfully built the Nation of Israel, despite the friction and hostility within the family. However, a crisis surfaces between Rivka's two sons, resulting in a rupture which brings to a halt the entire process, still in its early, formative stages.

With regard to the inheritance of the land and the fulfillment of the divine blessing, Esav was considered as much a natural continuation of Yitzchak as Yaakov, who was a "dweller of tents" like his father and grandfather. Only a merging of these two disparate personalities could actualize the potential latent in the divine blessings to Avraham, the settlement in the land and yielding blessing "to all families of the Earth."

Whether we point to Esav's personality and temperament or to Yaakov's sly manipulation - the purchase of the birthright and the seizing of Yitzchak's blessing - as the cause of the crisis and the cessation of the process as planned, either way, the magnitude of the crisis cannot be overlooked. The separation between these brothers was a difficult and painful one. It signified the collapse of the process and thus required that the patriarchs initiate the development once again.

Yaakov leaves Canaan, despite his grandfather's insistence that his descendants, the perpetuators of his blessing, remain, because the original plan has now been foiled. It has tragically been determined that one of Yitzchak's sons is not to be included in the Almighty's covenant with Avraham's descendants. This necessitates Yaakov's departure from Canaan to begin the process anew, to reenter Canaan and trace the steps taken by his grandfather. He must now suffer the same frustration of his wife's infertility as Avraham had experienced, for he must become the new Avraham, the father of the Nation of Israel.

The Torah focuses on Yitzchak only after Avraham dies, for the "Shekhina" resides with Avraham throughout his lifetime (from a literary, though not necessarily historical, standpoint). Yitzchak ascends the stage of Jewish history only after his father's passing: "It was, after the death of Avraham, God blessed his son, Yitzchak" (25:11). Yaakov, by contrast, takes center stage well before Yitzchak's passing. Once Yaakov packs his bags and heads towards Charan, thus embarking on new beginning of God's covenant, the Torah "leaves" Yitzchak and brings us along with Yaakov throughout his journey. The focus of the Torah signifies the focus of the Shekhinah, as it were. Thus, from here on, the Almighty reveals Himself to Yaakov, no longer to Yitzchak!

If Yaakov and Esav were meant to comprise the joint continuation of Yitzchak's legacy, but, due to the necessity to alter the original plan, Yaakov must begin the work of planting the seeds of the nation which will ultimately inherit the Land of Canaan, it becomes clear why this work deviates so drastically from our expectations. Yitzchak leaves the stage prematurely. Commenting on the verse, "Yaakov left Beer Sheva," Chazal note, "The righteous person in a city is its glory, he is its splendor, he is its pride. When he leaves, its glory, splendor and pride leave" (Bereishit Rabba Vayetze, Parasha 68, 12). Yaakov's abandonment had such an effect on his hometown, despite the ongoing

presence of yet another luminary in the city - Yitzchak! Indeed, the Shekhina leaves Beer Sheva and accompanies Yaakov on his way to establish the foundations of the Nation of Israel.

In light of our discussion, we can better understand the reason behind the dearth of narrative relating to Yitzchak in comparison with the other patriarchs. This should be seen not as reflective of any inferiority on his part, Heaven forbid, but quite to the contrary: Yitzchak is the "normal" patriarch. He is the son who continues the work of his father, with no further choosing required between children. He lives his life guided by the principles and providence of the Almighty - this constitutes his central function. Indeed, this constitutes the central function of all descendants of Avraham, as it was supposed to have been the central function of Yaakov, were it not for tragic rupture between him and his brother.

In this context, it is worthwhile to cite several verses in Tanakh which list the patriarchs but, for some reason, omit Yitzchak:

1. "Who has wrought and achieved this? He Who announced the generations from the start – I, God, Who was first and will be with the last as well... But you, Israel, My servant, Yaakov, whom I have chosen, seed of Avraham My beloved, you whom I drew from the ends of the earth and called from its far corners, to whom I said: You are My servant, I chose you, I have not rejected you." (Yeshayahu 41:4-9).

2. Similarly, the prophet Mikha declares: "Shepherd Your people with Your staff, Your very own flock. May they who dwell isolated in a woodland surrounded by farmland graze Bashan and Gilad as in olden days. I will show him wondrous deeds as in the days when You sallied forth from the land of Egypt. Let nations behold and be ashamed despite all their might... You will keep faith with Yaakov, Loyalty to Avraham, as You promised on oath to our fathers in days gone by."

On the basis of our discussion, we can perhaps understand why these and other verses list only Avraham and Yaakov as our patriarchs. As we have seen, Avraham and Yaakov share the title of "father of the nation." Yaakov, like Avraham, initiates the process of establishing God's nation, as necessitated by the disruption of the original process. In the Book of Bereishit we thus encounter two founding fathers - Avraham and Yaakov. Yitzchak, by contrast, serves merely as the source of continuity of Avraham's heritage. God did not choose him over anyone else. Yitzchak, is, undoubtedly, "Yitzchak avinu," our forefather, but his contribution lies, first and foremost, in his being the son of Avraham. He is our forefather only through his being a son, through his loyal adherence to the path paved by his father. As stated, Yaakov, like his grandfather, was the initiator, the second of the two ultimate "forefathers" of our people.

(Translated by David Silverberg.

This shiur is an abridged version of a more expansive article by this author, "A Comparison Between Avraham and Yaakov in Sefer Bereishit," Megadim, vol. 27.)

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